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The English-Only Movement and the Linguistic Future of the United States

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English Only Movements and the Linguistic Future of the United States

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Abstract

This descriptive study investigates the opinions of proposed English-Only legislation and how the opinions of the current college generation will affect the future of this country's language laws. The English-Only Movement, also known as the Official English Movement, refers to a political movement to establish the English language as the only official language in the United States and in government operations. The data will be collected from university students via an online questionnaire focusing on the opinions of the use of English as the country's legal language versus the presence of Spanish and other languages. Investigative questions regarding different demographics and background information will be used to determine if there is a collective consciousness or pattern within certain communities or groups, such as common birthplace, academic major, or specific ethnic group. Understanding a sampling of students' opinions on this topic is important since they will have the responsibility regarding the linguistic and educational future of the Spanish-speaking population.

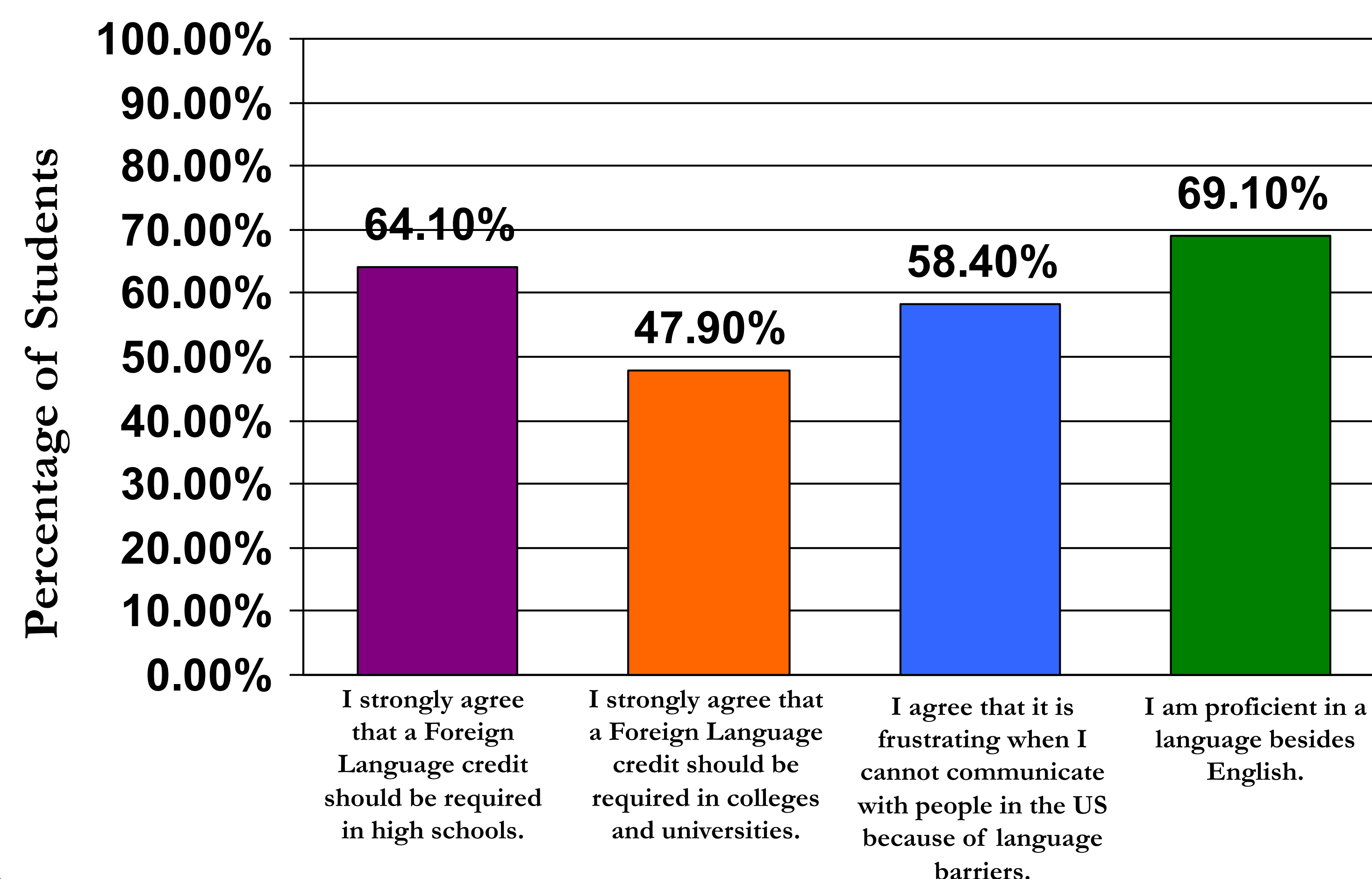
Research Questions

- What are the current attitudes towards an English Only Movement among Illinois Wesleyan Students?
- How do students' academic majors affect their opinions regarding English Only Movements?
- Does having a foreign language background or proficiency affect the attitudes of a diverse sociolinguistic country?
- Do current students feel that language is an important part of education and their future careers?

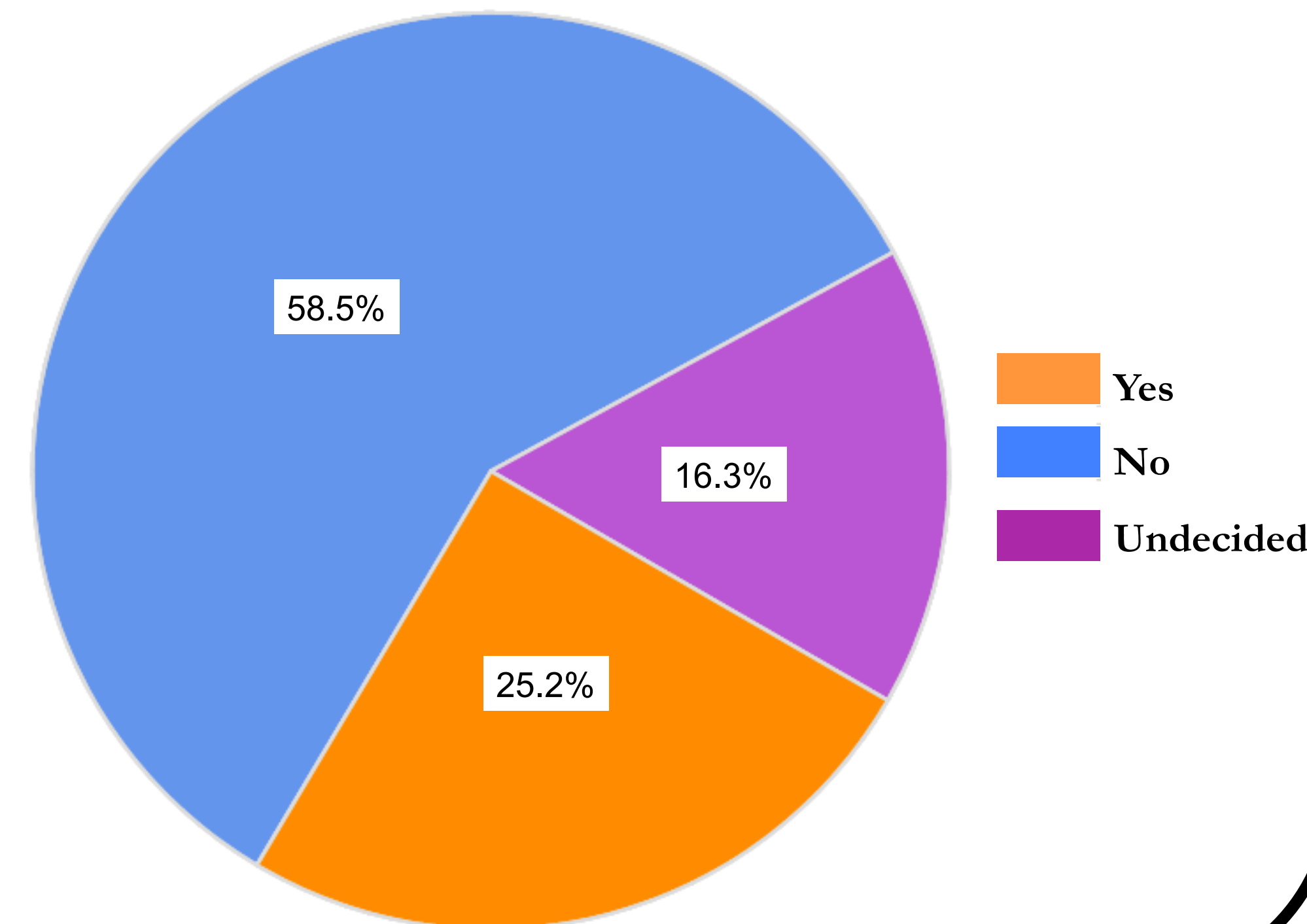
Methodology

A survey was conducted using an online questionnaire available to the current Illinois Wesleyan student community. Students were asked questions regarding their personal background information, language experience, and opinions of English Only Movements and linguistic diversity.

Selected Responses of Students



Would you vote to APPROVE an English Only Movement?



Results

- Overall, the majority of students (58.5%) would vote NO to an English Only Movement. However, the YES and UNDECIDED options are popular choices as well, and the votes are closely divided. There is no outstanding majority vote.
- Students within particular academic majors displayed common trends regarding their opinions of English Only Movements and the importance of linguistic diversity.
- Of the respondents, 82.6% stated that English is their first language.
- 69.1% of the respondents claim to be proficient in a foreign language, including 10 respondents who specified that they grew up speaking a foreign language and are considered native speakers of that language.
- While more than 2/3 of IWU students claim foreign language proficiency through past language courses, only 47.9% feel that foreign language studies should be a part of the General Education requirements of higher education.
- When asked if language was a strong part of identity, the response were very scattered, the most popular answer being "Neutral" with only 31.6%.

Conclusions

If an English Only Movement were to be approved within the United States, many changes would occur within our current educational systems and the resources offered to both native English speakers and foreign language speakers. If Wesleyan students represent the opinions of the current educated college generation, then the results are quite scattered. While the statistics show that the majority of students would vote NO, the numbers of students choosing YES or UNDECIDED are very close and represent an important population of voters.

With regard to foreign language studies, it appears that many IWU students have had the opportunity and privilege to study a foreign language, yet the majority would prefer to drop foreign language studies in college. Once again, the numbers are close but it can be concluded that students have studied a foreign language because it was *required* rather than a strong interest. In addition, the majority of students do not consider language to be an important aspect of identity, proving that their studies stem from a forced language requirement. This data is interesting because while the majority wants to create and accept a linguistically diverse country, they also do not want to study the foreign languages themselves. This mentality perpetuates the division of people through languages; immigrant families are using language to uphold cultural identity, yet the current, young generations are not personally desiring to be linguistically diverse.

Because it is difficult to determine any correlation between second language proficiency and the opinions of an English Only Movement, academic interests were researched as well. According to the responses, academic majors have a large effect on the responses and the opinions of an English Only Movement. While foreign language studies are part of the IWU General Education requirements, an academic major is a personal decision reflecting the individual interests of the student. Majors that focus more on human interaction and the study of people such as Elementary Education, Psychology, and Political Science, disapproved the English Only proposal whereas majors that are based more on fact and business such as Accounting, Economics, and Physics had a majority of YES votes, but also accounted for the majority of undecided responses as well.