United States Citizens' Perceptions about the Language Requirements for U. S. Citizenship

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Abstract / Introduction

Immigration has become *the* buzz-word in populist politics around the world in recent years. This independent, quantitative study collected the perceptions of U. S. citizens about the language requirements for becoming a U. S. citizen. It was hypothesized that perceptions may differ from actual facts about government policy and about the tests given to immigrants. This could impact the perceptions of U. S. citizens about immigration and even their voting behavior. An online 5-point Likert type questionnaire was used to collect perceptions about the language requirements for citizenship. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Results were then compared with the actual facts about the citizenship test, and showed that more of the collected perceptions were incorrect than correct.

Keywords : language, assessment, citizenship.

Background

A nationwide law requiring English ability was introduced in 1906, but new citizens in the United States were only made to demonstrate this ability after 1952, and a standardized testing system has only been in place since 1991 (Kunnan, 2009). However, when citizenship tests were subcontracted out by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), widespread test fraud was exposed by a TV exposé. Regardless of the issues with fraud, by today's standards, the original (1991) version of the test was fraught with problems with consistency, reliability, validity, fairness, and social justice. To put it simply, the test was administered in

completely different ways by different officers in different locations (Kunnan, 2009). This lack of standardization meant that candidates' proficiency in English was only one out of many factors contributing to the likelihood that they would pass the test. In 2008, after extensive consultation with experts from a variety of related fields, the test was updated.　The new test was a shortened, simplified, and standardized version of the old test.

　　This current version of the test, according to the official United States Citizenship and Immigration Services website (USCIS, 2019a) consists of reading, writing, and speaking sections which are conducted by a USCIS Officer.　Test-takers are given three sentences to read out loud and three to write, of which they must read one and write one correctly.　These two parts of the test are conducted with the use of a digital tablet (Boundless, 2019).　Speaking ability is assessed by the Officer, but few details are given about this on the website.　However, USCIS goes on to explains that not all new citizens are made to take the English language test, and that whether to test the language requirement is decided on a case by case basis (USCIS, 2019a).　The English language requirement is just one component, along with a test of "knowledge of U. S. history, principles, and form of government" (Kunnan, 2009 : 89) of the citizenship test that immigrants must take in order to become citizens of the United States.　The entire naturalization (language and civics) test currently costs 640 dollars (USCIS, 2018).　Vocabulary necessary for the English writing (USCIS, 2019b) and reading (USCIS, 2019c) tests is provided by USCIS on their website and includes names, places, national holidays, and verbs, among other words.　USCIS advertise a national pass rate of 90% (USCIS, 2019d).

　　Opinions on the topic of language requirements for citizenship have long been polarized ; some believe that English language proficiency should not be demanded of immigrants, while others have established organizations specifically to lobby the

government to pass a bill to make English the official national language（ProEnglish, 2019）. Currently, although nine States have enacted official English language Bills, there is no official one-language policy in the United States（Center for Applied Linguistics, 2019）. Arguments in favor of an English-only policy include predicted benefits in cultural integration and cutting the great expense of translation services in medical, financial, and legal institutions（ProEnglish, 2019）.

Despite the often passionate opinions that exist on both sides of this debate, it is hypothesized by this researcher that actual public knowledge about the citizenship language test is limited. This study aims to collect public perceptions of the test.

Literature Review

Research has been of paramount importance in shedding light on the use of language by the immigration authorities of what might loosely be called first-world western governments. This literature review will examine global policy trends, justifications, effects, and public perceptions that have been identified in previous studies.

Policy

In recent years, refugees, asylum-seekers, and economic immigrants, as well as those applying for citizenship around the world have been subjected to a variety of increasingly strict gatekeeping measures. A points-based system has been introduced for skilled workers in Canada, Australia and New Zealand where applicants receive points for age, education, work experience, and English proficiency, among other things（Government of Canada Immigration and Citizenship, 2019）,（Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2019）,（New Zealand Immigration,

2020）． The United States allows entry by immigrants who are sponsored by an employer or a family member who is already in the country（USA. Gov, 2019）． The UK has not yet introduced a points-based system but this is one of the pledges that led to the election of Boris Johnson and the Conservative party in 2019.

In terms of language, all of the countries mentioned above have subjected immigrants to more and more stringent language testing barriers. The British government, for example, has moved English language testing forward in the process of application, from the citizenship test to initial visa application, meaning that potential immigrants have to pass an English test before they are even allowed to step foot on British soil（Blackledge, 2009）． Some non-English speaking countries such as the Netherlands have also introduced language-based requirements for immigration． In essence, proficiency in what is considered officially or unofficially to be the national language is used as a gatekeeping tool in the selection or rejection of new members of the nation（Blackledge, 2005 ; Mar-Molinero, 2006 ; Maryns & Blommaert, 2006 ; Stevenson, 2006）．

Justifications

The requirement of these language testing regimes is a display of proficiency in the language which indicate to some a necessary amount of patriotism and a desire to be a part of the national identity（Shohamy, 2006a）． However, various alternative justifications have been given by governments for the introduction of policy enforcing language testing． In the UK, politicians publicly linked a lack of English proficiency, with marginalization and rioting among ethnic minorities in 2001（Blackledge, 2009）． In addition to this, UK government policy documents cite 'integration' and 'confidence in participating in employment' and 'social cohesion' as key benefits of English proficiency for newcomers to the country

（Home Office, 2007）.

Criticisms

Despite the fact that the impact of the U. S. naturalization test is high in terms of the effect it has on test-takers' lives, researchers have identified multiple ways in which it may be deficient.　USCIS does not conform to any of the widely accepted testing standards laid out by highly respected organizations such as the American Education Research Association （AERA） and the American Psychological Association （APA）, which includes making certain information about the test publicly available.　Furthermore, USCIS's conformity or non-conformity to any of the other testing standards is essentially impossible to determine due to this lack of transparency.　This situation leads to the following uncertainties regarding the trustworthiness of the test.　Firstly, USCIS has never released results of any studies into the test （Winke, 2011）, nor divulged how the language aspect of the test is scored or how the scores are interpreted （Kunnan, 2009）.　This means that neither the reliability nor validity of the test are open to outside scrutiny.　As this is the case, it is necessary for decisions about the development and improvement of the test to be made by policymakers behind closed doors ; hopefully with advice from testing and assessment professionals.　However, as the following study shows, this is far from a guarantee of competent, informed policymaking.

A study was carried out into the decision-making process regarding language testing for immigration purposes.　Pill & Harding （2013） examined the understanding of Australian policymakers about the English language tests they were tasked with making policy for.　Data collected via unusually privileged access to government committee discussions showed that, in Australia at least, members of parliament were possibly not sufficiently knowledgeable to make informed decisions about the

language test and procedures required pass grades for residency.　This display of transparency and openness to constructive criticism is admirable and unfortunately rare among democratic western governments.　Such practices might lead to improvements in the policymaking, fairness, and social justice associated with English testing for immigration purposes, and should therefore be encouraged.

Other major points of contention about the U. S. test are that the demands that are made of immigrants are not made of those born into the country, which is therefore discriminatory.　The test also delays and discourages immigrants from achieving citizenship（Osler, 2009）, which perhaps gives the impression that the government is actively trying to reduce the number of new citizens.　Researchers （Cox, 2010）,（Burke, Thapliyal & Baker, 2018）have also argued that the testing of language proficiency as a gatekeeping tool should be replaced with the provision of free language courses in order to assist immigrant integration rather than create further obstacles.

A solution to all of these criticisms is offered by Saville（2009）, who suggests that language testing professionals be included in the decision-making process behind the use of language proficiency tests for immigration and citizenship purposes. If this were to happen, then it may be possible to develop and introduce 'better language tests, i. e. fit for purpose, with sound validity arguments supported by evidence'（Saville, 2009 : 19）.　However, it is unclear whether the authorities both in the U. S. and elsewhere would welcome more transparency and more scrutiny of their immigration and citizenship tests and testing policies.

Public Perceptions of Immigration

Rodrik,（1995）conceptualized public opinion on immigration as demand, and government policy on immigration as supplying this public demand.　In this sense,

public perceptions of immigration might be seen as important in dictating future immigration policy and therefore future immigration trends.

In the United States, there has been a centuries-long trend of successful immigrants wanting to make immigration regulations stricter for others once they themselves have been accepted into the country (Espenshade & Hempstead, 1996). One might expect that anti-immigration sentiment would be higher in States which receive the most immigrants; New York (22. 9% foreign born) and California (26. 9% foreign born) being the frontrunners (Migration Policy Institute, 2017). However, it has been shown that this is not the case and that perceptions in these States often tend to be in line with nationwide developments (Espenshade & Hempstead, 1996).

In addition, it seems that attitudes to immigration fluctuate according to situational factors such as military conflicts and the economic climate (Harwood 1986), (Tarrance & Associates, 1989), and some previous studies have sought to both determine and explain citizens' perceptions of immigration. Data from a multi-nation study conducted by Mayda (2006) showed that non-economic factors, such as concerns about rising crime rates or loss of national identity, were not the sole criteria used by the public in forming judgements, but that economic considerations always contributed to the judgement. Furthermore, Hainmueller & Hiscox (2010) found that economic factors such as the perceived burden on social welfare services, or whether immigrants were likely to create more competition in the job market for that respondent on an individual level, played a role in attitudes to immigration in the U. S. However, economic self-interest was not the only factor and non-economic considerations were also found to be important factors. Together, these studies showed that a range of factors influence perceptions about immigration.

Unfortunately, there is also a growing body of evidence to suggest that public perceptions about immigration are incorrect. Cornelius & Rosenblum believe that

'public attitudes about immigration reflect substantial misconceptions' (2005 : 103), while Blinder & Jeannet (2018), and Burke, Thapliyal & Baker (2018) have highlighted the importance of the media in swaying public opinion on this divisive topic.

Burke, Thapliyal & Baker (2018) highlighted the importance of the media in influencing public opinion on immigration in Australia. They found that both politicians and newspapers used emotive language and even invoked national security and terrorism threats to support tightening language requirements for immigrants. Such arguments were criticized for making a connection between an immigrant's potential for being a morally upstanding citizen and their proficiency in English, as if one were reliant on the other. The bill to tighten language requirements that was referred to in this study was not passed, but it is clear that the media plays a strong role in influencing public opinion on immigration in all countries where this is a current news issue.

Similarly, Blinder & Jeannet (2018) studied the role of the media in *immigration innumeracy* in the United Kingdom. This is a phenomenon whereby citizens overestimate the percentage of the population that are immigrants (Gallagher, 2014). The 2018 study used an online system which allowed access to a representative sample of U. K. citizens. They found that responses to their questions about the percentage of the population who are immigrants were influenced by specific language, such as 'illegal' and 'highly-skilled' used to describe immigrants in newspaper reports read by participants before they were asked the questions.

It can be seen from the examples of research studies described above that not only are public perceptions of immigration sometimes incorrect, they are also malleable by the media. In the current political climate, where populist candidates use anti-immigration rhetoric to increase support, the electoral impact of this situation may have already been and may continue to be significant.

Public Perceptions of the U. S. English Language Test for Citizenship

As far as I am aware, there has not yet been a study into public perceptions into the English language component of the U. S. citizenship test. The research methods used in the current study, and described below, are relatively newly available and add to the originality of this project.

Research Questions & Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that U. S. citizens' perceptions would be contrary to the actual facts about the language requirements for citizenship displayed on the government website.

RQ : Are U. S. citizens' perceptions in line with reality regarding the language requirements for citizenship ?

Approach

This research was conducted from a critical language testing (CLT) perspective which was developed by Elana Shohamy (1982, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008, 2014). CLT questions the motives of those who introduce, administer, and oversee language tests and language testing policies. Although it is not possible to argue here that the U. S. citizenship English language test should be redesigned, there are considerable issues with transparency which affect not only test-takers but wider public opinion. This lack of transparency also means that it is not possible to evaluate the test for validity or reliability and the impact on test-takers. Although the researcher is from a language testing background, the results of this

research have more potential impact in the socio-political sphere than on education or language.

Method

Sampling

In order to make the findings of this research as robust as possible, a random sample of United States citizens was required.　However, this is very expensive and difficult for an independent researcher to achieve.　When reviewing the options closest to the aim of a random sample, a variety of providers were considered. While both Pollfish (No date) and Survey Monkey (No date), provide something approaching random sampling, it was decided that Google Surveys was the best option.　There were several reasons for this.　Firstly, due to its position as the world's foremost internet browser, it was thought that Google has considerably more reach and access to netizens than the other providers.　Secondly, the explanation of the sampling methods provided seemed to indicate that Google is able to provide sampling that is the most random and representative of the desired population.

According to the explanation of the methodology used on the Google Surveys website (Google Surveys Methodology, No date), this study used : "internet users reading content on a network of web publisher sites using Google Opinion Rewards for Publishers" and "uses inferred demographics".　It also says that steps are taken to optimize "the representativeness of a survey by balancing its sample demographics to match the demographics of the target population : adult (18 or older) internet users" and "In the US, we use estimates for the national internet population from the US Census Bureau's 2017 Current Population Survey (CPS) Computer and Internet Use Supplement" (US Census Bureau, 2017).

According to the explanation of the Google Surveys sampling methodology

（Google Surveys White Paper）, representative sampling is achieved by utilizing stratified sampling by gender, age, and location, and then "applying post-stratification weighting". A clear indication of the sample bias for each sub-population for each question is provided in the form of Root Mean Squared Error （RMSE）. So, while the sampling method used in this study is not entirely random in the strictest sense of the word, I believe that this is just about the closest to random sampling achievable with the resources of an individual independent researcher.

To summarize the sampling method used, it included 387 respondents from any gender, any age over 18, and any location within the U. S. All participants claimed to be a "U. S. Citizen who is eligible to vote". All of them were "Users on websites in the Google Surveys Publisher Network" （Google Surveys, No date）. Finally, this method of questionnaire distribution means that responses were collected from among "tens of millions of possible respondents per day" （Google Surveys White Paper, No date）.

Questionnaire Design

A five-point Likert format was selected in order to provide respondents with a neutral option when unsure or undecided. The questionnaire （Appendix 1） was designed to include four items. These items, when combined, form a Likert construct. A Likert construct is a concept or variable, such as love, which cannot be directly measured （Westen & Rosenthal, 2003）, but the intention is that by measuring responses to four or more items, the composite results produced can come close to measuring the construct （Carifio & Perla, 2007）. Four is thought to be the minimum number of items necessary for a construct in terms of validity and reliability （Boone & Boone, 2012）. This form of quantitative data collection was

selected on the assumption that participants possess existing perceptions about the U. S. citizenship test which can be collected（De Vaus, 2013）.　This form of data collection is also replicable.　In order to ensure that responses were collected from U. S. citizens only, a screening question, which appeared first, asked respondents to confirm their status.　Only participants who selected the option "（I am）a U. S. citizen who is eligible to vote" were asked to answer the four Likert type items.

Pilot

Once the Likert questionnaire had been developed, a pilot was carried out. There were several reasons for this.　Firstly, a confirmatory factor analysis was required in order to gauge whether the Likert items and construct actually measure what they were designed to measure.　This is also known as construct validity （Oppenheim, 2000）,（Talandis, 2017）.　Secondly, the pilot aimed to gather feedback from the participants, many of whom are also educational researchers and teachers.　Any issues with the wording of the explanation or the questions would become evident.　Finally, a trial run was required for the statistical procedures to be carried out on the resulting quantitative data.

The pilot was conducted using the differential-group（two separate groups of respondents）format, often used for confirmatory factor analysis and for testing construct validity.　Ten citizens of countries other than the United States and known to the researcher were contacted by email.　The email included a brief explanation of the research and a link to the Likert items which has been designed using the Google Forms website（Google Forms, No date）.　The explanation specifically asked respondents to give their existing perceptions without checking the facts on the internet.　Only eight citizens responded.　Two of the respondents also included constructive criticism of the survey in emailed replies.　Both commented that

knowledge of actual facts related to the citizenship test was not made distinct from perceptions of the test in the explanation. This advice was acknowledged, but unfortunately the format that the questions were to be presented in by Google Surveys did not allow for a lengthy explanation to respondents.

Following this, the same survey was sent to ten U. S. citizens, with brief information about U. S. language policy and the language requirements for citizenship included in the introductory explanation. This essentially gave respondents the facts about language policy and the citizenship test before they completed the survey. Again, eight responses were collected.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The resulting data consisted of responses from eight participants for four questions in the 'without knowledge' group and the same number in the 'with knowledge' group, giving a total of 64 observations. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to see whether the perceptions of people who know nothing about the U. S. citizenship test are significantly different from the perceptions of people who have the facts. If the CFA proves inconclusive or ineffective, then possible options would be to reword, remove, or replace certain items, or to repeat the CFA.

Excel was used to calculate the analysis of variance (ANOVA) for both the 'without knowledge' and 'with knowledge' sets of data. SPSS was used to double-check the calculation results. Results showed that there was a significant difference between the responses given by participants without prior knowledge and those with prior knowledge (a mean of 3. 28 with a standard deviation of 1. 26, versus a mean of 1. 84 with a standard deviation of 1. 34). The F-score calculated was 21. 0684 with a probability of 0. 9999, which was considerably over the critical value of 4. 0

according to the F-ratio table for a significance level of 0.05.

Data Collection

This was the simplest stage of the research project because the data collection was done for me.　The survey was launched by Google Surveys on 17th January and completed on 20th January with 387 full responses collected during this three-day period.　Clear explanations and visual representations of the data were provided.

Results

For the purposes of statistical analysis, responses to the four Likert items were combined to measure the construct of 'perceptions of the citizenship test matching reality'.　The mean and standard deviation of the responses to all four items were calculated.　This gave a mean of 2.89 and standard deviation of 1.46（Illustrated in Figure 1）.　To put this in perspective, the mid-point of the Likert scale was 3, and the questions were all written so that '1 Strongly disagree' was the correct answer and '5 Strongly agree' was incorrect.　This indicated that overall, perceptions were marginally closer to the true end of the scale than the false end.
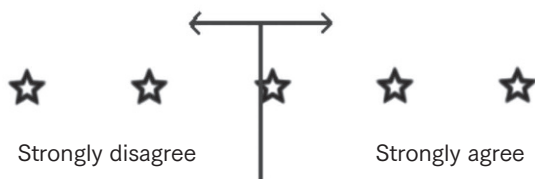

Figure 1 : Illustration of the mean（2.89）and standard deviation（1.46）
of the 1548 responses collected.

For the purpose of statistical calculations, it is not recommended to analyze Likert items individually. However, it is interesting to note that 86.9% of respondents to the screening question answered that they were U. S. Citizens who are eligible to vote, and therefore went on to answer the four Likert items. For the combined Likert items, the majority of responses were correct as the mean and standard deviation illustration in Figure 1 shows. However, the responses to individual items were not all in keeping with this trend.

For item 2 (Figure 2) : 'Everyone trying to become a U. S. citizen is required to speak English well', the mean answer (3.13) was above the midpoint of 3, with a standard deviation of 1.38. The mode and median were both 3, with 110 out of 340 respondents answering that they were 'unsure'.
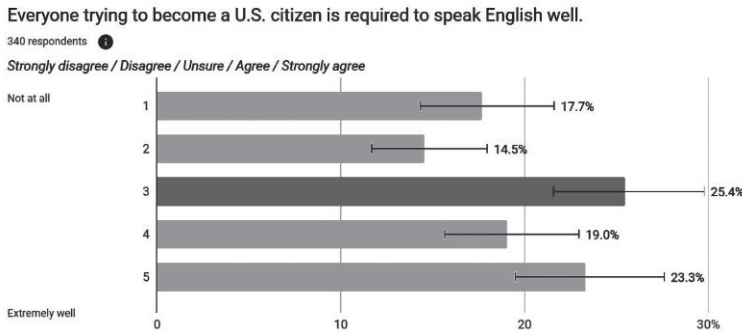

Figure 2 : Percentages of responses for item 2.

For item 3 (Figure 3) : 'The United States has an official one-language policy', the mean response was 2.49, with a standard deviation of 1.49. The mode was 1 and median was 2, with 150 out of 415 respondents answering that they 'Strongly disagree' which is statistically significant as the most popular response at the 95% level.
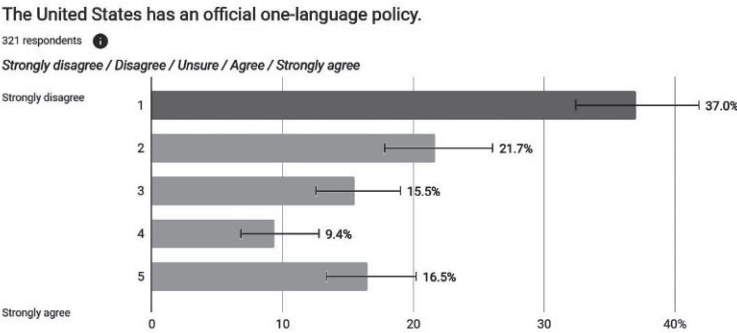
The United States has an official one-language policy.

321 respondents ⓘ

Strongly disagree / Disagree / Unsure / Agree / Strongly agree

Figure 3 : Percentages of responses for item 3.

For item 4 (Figure 4) : 'Everyone trying to become a U. S. citizen is required to take an English test.', the mean answer (3. 12) was above the midpoint of 3, with a standard deviation of 1. 45.　The mode was 5 and median was 3, with 103 out of 407 respondents answering that they 'Strongly agree'.
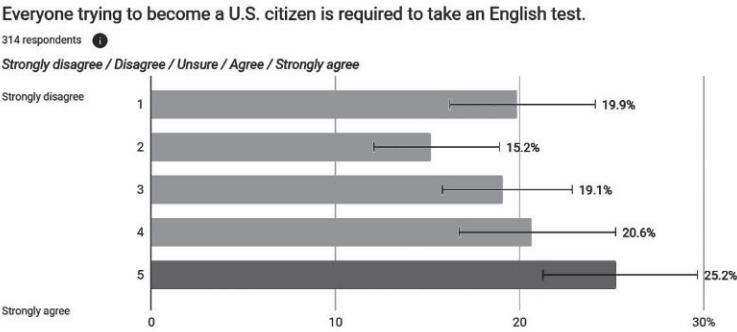
Everyone trying to become a U.S. citizen is required to take an English test.

314 respondents ⓘ

Strongly disagree / Disagree / Unsure / Agree / Strongly agree

Figure 4 : Percentages of responses for item 4.

For item 5 (Figure 5) : 'There is a universal, nationwide policy regarding the English ability required to achieve U. S. citizenship', the mean answer (2. 83) was

below the midpoint of 3, with a standard deviation of 1. 43. The mode was 1 and median was 3, with 97 out of 387 respondents answering that they 'Strongly disagree'.
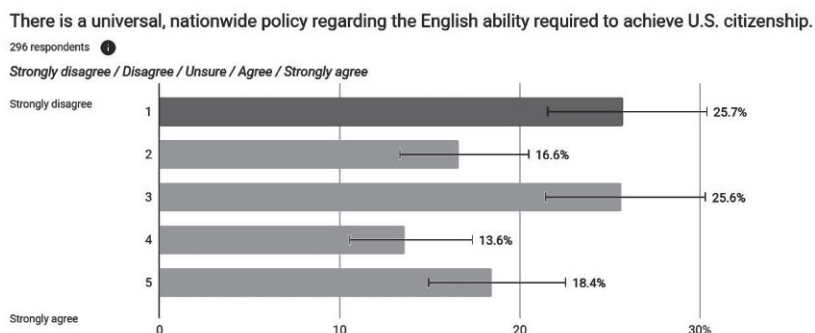

Figure 5 : Percentages of responses for item 5.

Interpretation of Results

Although according to some sources individual Likert items are not meant to be statistically analyzed individually (Carifio and Perla, 2007), they provide a closer insight into the range of responses than the mean of the items combined into a construct. It is interesting to note that the mode (most common) response ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 representing the reality or the correct answer. For both items 2 and 4, the mean was above the midpoint, meaning that the majority of respondents had incorrect perceptions about the English component of the citizenship test. Overall, the wide spread of correct and incorrect perceptions that were displayed indicates that this representative sample of U. S. citizens are not well-informed or are incorrectly informed about the English test. In fact, 36. 5% of the perceptions were not aligned with reality, and 21. 4% of responses were for the 'unsure' option.

Just 42% of responses aligned with actual facts about the English component of the citizenship test.

Limitations

The sampling method, while as robust as possible with the available resources, was far from perfect.　Firstly, Google Surveys is able to collect responses only from those online and who have signed up and agreed to answer questions in exchange for Google Rewards (discounts on Google products and services).　A 2016 survey by the U. S. Census Bureau concluded that around 10% of households in the nation do not have any form of internet access (Camille, 2017).　So, it can be concluded from this that the data collected is at best representative only of the U. S. population who have access to the internet.

The screening question is another point of possible limitation.　There was no practical way to check whether respondents were U. S. citizens other than to ask them.　Although responses were collected only from within the U. S., it is possible that some may have been non-citizens who answered the question dishonestly in order to answer the questions and to access the rewards.

It was deemed desirable to only include respondents over the age of 18 because U. S. citizens' perceptions about the language requirements for U. S. citizenship may have an influence on voting behavior.　However, this means that the results are not representative of the entire population, which would include those under 18.

Another possible weakness of this type of data collection is that the audience is possibly not motivated to assist the researcher in achieving their goal.　The respondents in this research were surfing the internet when the questions appeared on their screen.　They had to answer the questions in order to access the content that they were already trying to access.　In such a situation, it is possible that

respondents would be motivated mostly by a desire to access the content and to therefore answer the questions as quickly as possible. Indeed, it can be seen from the data provided by Google Surveys that although most response times were around 8-12 seconds, some were as low as 3 seconds. This includes the time taken to supposedly read the question.

The format that the survey was presented in meant that there was no opportunity for the researcher to provide an explanation of the research to respondents at any point during the process. As a result, it was not possible to incorporate suggestions from the constructive feedback provided by participants in the pilot study, and the main respondents were unaware of the aim or context of the research.

Discussion & Conclusions

With reference to the research question 'Are U. S. citizens' perceptions in line with reality regarding the language requirements for citizenship ?', it would appear that the figure of 42% which was calculated and mentioned above would indicate a negative result. This was in keeping with the hypothesis 'that U. S. citizens' perceptions would be contrary to the actual facts about the language requirements for citizenship displayed on the government website'.

In terms of explanations, it is impossible to say whether U. S. citizens are under -informed or ill-informed about the language requirements of the citizenship test. It is possible that the influence of the media and right-wing orators who are commonly broadcast on television, radio, and through the internet may play a role in public perceptions. However, it is equally possible that citizens are just not aware of the facts. Further research would have to be conducted to determine possible causes for the results produced by the current study.

It is possible to conclude that a lack of knowledge about the English language component of the citizenship test might have some impact on the voting behavior of U. S. citizens.　Also, the lack of transparency regarding the measures utilized by the U. S. Government as a gatekeeping tool to restrict citizenship is concerning and is more fitting of an authoritarian regime.　This lack of transparency means that prospective new citizens may be being treated unfairly in terms of psychological impacts such as stress, social justice, and fairness.　In order to rectify this, USCIS should release information on how the test was developed, the criteria used to judge test-takers, how scores are calculated, and any research that has been conducted by USCIS into the reliability and validity of the test.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Screening question :

1）Which of these describes you ?

- A U. S. citizen who is eligible to vote.
- Not a U. S. citizen / not eligible to vote.
- Other

Questionnaire（possible answers : *Strongly disagree / Disagree / Unsure / Agree / Strongly agree*）:

2）Everyone trying to become a U. S. citizen is required to speak English well.
3）The United States has an official one-language policy.
4）Everyone trying to become a U. S. citizen is required to take an English test.
5）There is a universal, nationwide policy regarding the English ability required to achieve U. S. citizenship.