

Underlying racism

Philip Carrasco is president of Grupo Latino Acción Directa (GLAD), a Lane County-area Latino group dedicated to increasing the participation and visibility of Latinos in conversations surrounding the issues that affect them. Carrasco says these new measures are hateful and divisive.

“We’re no longer going to stay on the sidelines of political activity,” Carrasco says. “We’re being proactive in asking people to decline to sign, united against hate.”

Carrasco says that because blatant racism in politics is no longer as successful as it once was, groups like Oregonians for Immigration Reform (OFIR) are attempting to expel Latino citizens through attrition, by using neutral terms to pass seemingly innocent laws that make life more difficult for immigrant communities.

“This reeks of white supremacy,” Carrasco adds. “It’s an outright attack on immigrants.”

When asked if he thinks these initiatives are intolerant of immigrant communities, Nearman says he doesn’t think he’s being intolerant. He does, however, accuse his opposition of intolerance for allegedly defacing a sign promoting the initiative and booing him at a public forum.

“I really don’t think I’m the intolerant one,” Nearman says. “I think the people I’m dealing with sometimes are intolerant.”

to more environmentally, economically and socially sustainable level.”

Supporters of Initiative Petition 40 claim the initiative will promote the learning of English by making it more difficult for immigrants to rely on their native languages.

“We have people that have emigrated here legally and have been here for years and years and years and have never learned the language,” OFIR president Cynthia Kendoll says. “And the more we do, the more we pander to keeping them within their own language, the less likely they are to attempt to learn our language.”

While translation services help individuals not proficient in English, Crawford says the fact isn’t that people aren’t learning the language; rather, it’s that immigrant families are losing their native language more rapidly than ever before.

The Children of Immigrants Longitude Study, which looks at the children of immigrants with language through the scope of language and assimilation, shows more than 70 percent of the kids prefer to use English all the time.

“Large numbers of these kids are learning English rapidly,” Crawford says, “and losing the language of their parents and grandparents.”

A member of the local Latino community, who asked to remain anonymous due to fear of repercussion, says this has happened in her own family. As the eldest, she’s more fluent in Spanish than her younger siblings, and her youngest

Miller of Causa argues that it isn’t that immigrants don’t want to learn English, but that as adults with jobs and families, their time is limited. “In fact,” she says, “there are longer wait lists for English classes among ESL (English as a second language) learners than there are available.”

Ultimately, Nearman says, it isn’t that he doesn’t want to help those who don’t speak English, but rather, those who are here legally and don’t speak the language, like refugees, are a very small percentage of the population.

“Now, for somebody who maybe is here illegally, that might be a difficulty for them,” Nearman says. “I’m not all that interested in providing services for that person.”

Right to work

IP 52, titled the “Oregon Employment Protection Act,” would mandate all employers must obtain an Oregon employment license to be able to employ anyone, and employers would be required to verify a person’s eligibility through the federal E-Verify system.

The initiative also puts pressure on employers by proposing a non-compliant employer be put on probation by the secretary of state, requiring quarterly reports demonstrating compliance. For any subsequent violation a business would lose its employment license for at least 30 days and up to a year.

‘Taking away the language is the last blow of colonialism.’

— PHILIP CARRASCO,
PRESIDENT OF GRUPO LATINO ACCIÓN DIRECTA



PHOTO: MOHAMMED ALKHADHER

English-only legislation first appeared in Oregon in 1981 as a constitutional English Language Amendment. The proposal would have banned all uses of languages other than English by federal, state and local governments, but the measure never came to a congressional vote, says James Crawford, an author who writes about language and policy issues.

“In the early 1990s, English-only advocates changed their strategy,” Crawford says. “Recognizing the long odds against ratifying a constitutional amendment, they began to promote a statutory form of official English.”

The push for language-policy reform in Oregon and nationwide was initially proposed by an organization called U.S. English, which Crawford says was a spin-off from an immigration-restriction group targeting migrants from Southeast Asia and South America.

“It appealed to a lot of racists who didn’t like Latinos and Asians,” Crawford says. “It doesn’t mean everyone in the movement is doing it out of racial motive. Some think it’s innocent.”

Nearman says IP 40 and 52 were proposed in collaboration with OFIR. OFIR is an organization aiming to stop illegal immigration and “reduce legal immigration

sibling speaks the least Spanish, often responding to Spanish in English.

“English-only is a bunch of B.S.,” she adds. “They’re imposing the imperialistic, colonialist idea.”

Carrasco of GLAD echoes the same sentiment: “It’s the idea of supremacy. It’s still alive and well.”

In defending the initiative, Kendoll says that there are 138 languages spoken in Oregon, and it would be impossible to provide services in all spoken languages. She also claims that the opposition has tried to cast negative light on OFIR’s attempt to establish an official language for the state of Oregon.

In comments published by the Oregon secretary of state on drafts of the petition, Kendoll is repeatedly quoted as objecting to the title, saying it should state that the initiative’s purpose is to “prohibit government discrimination against English-only speakers.”

In Oregon’s IP process, after chief petitioners gather and submit 1,000 sponsorship signatures, the secretary of state’s elections division forwards the text of the prospective petition to the attorney general for the drafting of a ballot title, which “impartially summarizes the petition and its major effect.”

Kendoll says the E-Verify system runs any potential employee’s information through the social security and homeland security databases to ensure they’re eligible to work in the United States.

“I think citizens are concerned about the number of people that are working in our state that are not legally supposed to be working here,” Kendoll says.

Miller of Causa says that there’s already a workable system in place — the I-9 form — to ensure workers are eligible for employment.

Federal immigration law requires that employers review certain documents such as a social security card, birth certificate or passport to establish an employee’s eligibility. It also makes it illegal for employers to knowingly hire unauthorized persons.

“It would require that in order to hire employees for your business of any size, you would have to acquire this business license that allows you to employ employees,” Miller says. In addition, she says, the bill would also require employers to use E-Verify, which she calls a flawed system.

Kendoll contends that the E-Verify system is not flawed, noting that stories claiming this will keep Americans from getting jobs is “just bogus.”