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LATINO VOICE AND POLITICS: HOW SPANISH ACCENT AFFECTS FIRST-
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LATINO VOICE AND POLITICS: HOW SPANISH ACCENT AFFECTS FIRST-
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Abstract

This thesis examines how Spanish-accented English influences political candidate evaluations among first-generation Latino voters in the United States. Drawing from Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, this experimental study exposed participants ($N = 605$) to audio recordings of fictional political candidates speaking with either a Spanish accent or Standard American English. Results show that first-generation Latino voters rated Spanish-accented candidates significantly more likable than Standard American English accented candidates, particularly among liberal voters and those who perceive Spanish as having high ethnolinguistic vitality. However, Spanish-accented candidates were rated lower on competence and goodwill, and no difference emerged in trustworthiness, revealing a divide between affective and evaluative judgements. While political ideology and vitality perceptions moderated the accent effect, self-perceived ethnic identity strength did not. These findings underscore the nuanced role of linguistic cues in political communication and highlight how accent functions as a cultural signal that can shape voter impressions in both expected and unexpected ways.

Keywords: Spanish accent, first-generation Latinos, candidate evaluations, political communication, ethnolinguistic identity

Chapter 1: Introduction

*Language is the roadmap of a culture.
It tells you where its people come from and where they are going.*

– Rita Mae Brown

The population of the United States is increasing in diversity. The political landscape evolves and reflects this, as evident in demographic changes within the American electorate. Among these demographic shifts, the Spanish-speaking population is growing as a voting bloc, becoming the largest minority group of eligible voters in the country (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020), with the potential to disrupt the shape of electoral outcomes from local to national levels (Abrajano et al., 2010). As political candidates aim to garner support from this population, understanding the factors influencing Latino¹ voters' perceptions and evaluations of political candidates becomes a capital issue. One of these factors, usually overlooked by political communication scholars, is the role linguistic markers play in attitudes and perceptions; specifically, how first-generation² Latino (FGL) voters may be influenced when a candidate has a Spanish accent.

Language and accent are powerful markers attached to our identity, steeped in a range of social and cultural associations (Lippi-Green, 2012). In the context of political elections, a candidate's accent can serve as a cue for voters, influencing perceptions of their competence, trustworthiness, among other characteristics (Dragojevic et al., 2018). In the case of FGL voters, they might have divisive feelings in relation to their cultural and linguistic heritage between their heritage from their family's country of origin and the country they were born

¹ Because the U.S. Census Bureau defines "Latino or Latinx" as individuals of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture of origin regardless of race, this thesis employs the term Latino to refer to this demographic group. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/note/US/RHI725222>

² This thesis categorizes a first-generation Latino as any person with Spanish-speaking immigrant parents from Latin America and is the first in their family to be a United States citizen.

and/or raised. First-generation immigrants in the United States tend to maintain ties with their cultural heritage, while also adapting to U.S. culture where the dominant culture is different (Berry, 1997). This double cultural identity may influence and modulate attitudinal effects when FGL evaluate political candidates who share, or do not share, linguistic markers (i.e., accent) linked to their heritage. Thus, the presence of a political candidate with a Spanish accent when speaking in English may carry a particular significance in their decision-making and attitudinal processes, yet the effects of it have been understudied. Guided by ethnolinguistic identity theory (ELIT; Giles et al., 1987), this thesis examines how the presence of a Spanish accent in political candidates affects evaluations by FGL voters in the United States.

The main contribution of this study lies in the potential to uncover the overlooked connection between linguistic identity, cultural affiliation, and political candidate evaluations among one of the most influential segments of the U.S. electorate. While most research on language attitudes has largely not focused on Spanish-speaking accents and the Latino population, this study directly addresses this gap by focusing on how FGL perceive political candidates based on linguistic cues, making an advancement in our knowledge of Latino voters, language, identity, and political behavior, that is missing in communication literature. By building a novel conceptual framework, integrating linguistic cues, political communication, and ELIT, this study can provide a more comprehensive understanding of Latino political preferences. As the Latino population in the United States continues to grow, being projected by the U.S. Census Bureau (2018) to reach 26% of the total population by 2050, understanding the nuanced factors that shape this electoral segment's political preferences becomes increasingly necessary for both communication scholars and those working in the political arena.

This study also addresses the gap in the existing literature on political communication, language accent and Latino voters. While previous research has examined the effects of accent and perceptions in different contexts (Cristia et al., 2012; Kinzler et al., 2009; Lev-Ari et al., 2010), few studies have specifically focused on how Spanish accents influence political candidate evaluations, and even fewer with an emphasis on FGL. This investigation fills this gap by providing answers based on scientific research into the influence of accent on attitudes towards political candidates within a specific demographic group. Furthermore, this study's focus on FGL voters offers new insights into America's evolving democracy and how linguistic and cultural identities shape political engagement. Issues such as immigration, cultural integration and diversity, among others, are pressing matters in the United States, which may influence attitudes towards politicians and, ultimately, potentially condition vote behavior among Spanish-speaking communities. Given the potential complexity in FGL voters' decision-making processes, as well as their growing electoral vote share, it is imperative to expand previous scholarship and apply theories in new contexts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory and Latino Voters

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT) provides a robust framework to understand the relationship between language, identity, and group dynamics in diverse cultural settings (Giles et al., 1987). Rooted in Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), ELIT shares the fundamental assumption that individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships and those intergroup dynamics shape identity and social behavior. While SIT emphasizes categorization, group comparison, and identity salience, ELIT extends these principles to the linguistic domain, highlighting how language functions as a key marker of group belonging and differentiation. ELIT posits that language is a vital marker of identity within a group, influencing attitudes and perceptions. For the purpose of this study, ELIT offers valuable insights into how FGL voters may evaluate political candidates based on linguistic cues, particularly accents.

A key component of ELIT is ethnolinguistic vitality, which describes the perceived strength of a language group within a broader social context (Giles et al., 1977). Ethnolinguistic vitality is not a static measure but a dynamic construct that influences how language serves as an identity marker. It is shaped by three interrelated dimensions: (1) the perceived prestige of a language and its speakers, (2) demographic presence of the language group in a given society, and (3) the level of institutional support the language receives in domains such as media, education, and government. The perceived prestige of a language and its speakers refers to how society values a language in relation to socioeconomic mobility, cultural capital, and perceived intelligence or sophistication of its speakers (Giles & Marlow, 2011). Prestige is often assessed through its association with high-status occupations, media representation, and its use in formal settings such as government or academia (Bourdieu, 1991). Demographic presence goes beyond sheer population size; it includes geographic

concentration, intergenerational transmission, and the extent to which a language group participates in societal institutions (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). A language may have a large number of speakers but limited visibility or influence if it lacks institutional backing or political representation. Institutional support manifests in policies and resources that reinforce a language's public use, such as bilingual education programs, government services offered in the language, media broadcasts, and legal protections for linguistic rights (Bourhis, 2001). Strong institutional support helps maintain linguistic vitality, while its absence can contribute to language erosion or shift toward dominant languages (Fishman, 1991).

These three interrelated factors influence how speakers of a language evaluate their own group and how they perceive others who use the same language markers. When ethnolinguistic vitality is high, members of the language group tend to positively value their linguistic identity and see it as a source of strength and authenticity (Giles et al., 1977). When vitality is low, language markers—such as a foreign or non-standard accent—can be perceived negatively, leading to internalized stigma, assimilation pressures, or a preference for linguistic conformity (Giles & Johnson, 1987; Bourhis et al., 1997).

In the case of Spanish-speaking communities in the United States, Spanish language maintenance and the presence of Spanish accents in English can be seen as indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality, playing a crucial role in shaping intergroup dynamics (Rumbaut et al., 2006; Zentella, 2017). Groups with high vitality are more likely to maintain their language and cultural traits in multilingual contexts, while those with low vitality may be more susceptible to assimilation pressures (Giles et al., 1977). This aspect is particularly relevant when examining linguistic cues of political candidates and the attitudes and perceptions of voters, especially among the Latino community, who coexist in a predominantly anglophone context.

For FGL voters, their perception of the vitality of Spanish in the U.S. context likely influences their response to political candidates who speak English with a Spanish accent. This perception is shaped by the three interrelated dimensions of ethnolinguistic vitality: perceived prestige, demographic presence, and institutional support (Giles et al., 1977). If Spanish is perceived as a strong, valued, and accepted language within their community—reflected in its prestige through positive media representation and its association with political influence—then a Spanish-accented politician may be evaluated positively as someone who embodies authenticity and represents their shared identity (Ehala, 2010). Similarly, if Spanish has demographic strength, meaning it is widely spoken and actively transmitted across generations, it may reinforce a positive evaluation of a Spanish-accented candidate as a legitimate in-group member (Bourhis et al., 1981). However, if Spanish is perceived as having lower institutional support—being marginalized in political and public discourse, lacking policy protections, or facing exclusion in governmental and educational settings—then a Spanish-accented candidate may be viewed with skepticism or even as an outsider rather than an in-group member (Noels & Giles, 2009). This variability in attitudes aligns with ELIT’s assertion that language cues serve as powerful social markers that reflect deeper group dynamics rather than being interpreted in isolation, as this variability in attitudes means that the vitality dimensions named before are subjective and can differ among Latino individuals in the U.S.

ELIT also suggests that these attitudes are shaped by intergroup dynamics and sociopolitical context (Giles & Johnson, 1987; Bourhis et al., 1997). If a group perceives itself as under threat—whether socially, politically, or in terms of language rights—individuals may respond in divergent ways (Stephan et al., 2009). Some may emphasize their linguistic distinctiveness as an act of solidarity and group cohesion, reinforcing positive

attitudes toward those who share their linguistic traits (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1997). Others, however, may seek to distance themselves from those markers to align with dominant societal norms, seeing linguistic distinctiveness as a liability rather than an asset (Bourhis et al., 1997). This means that the impact of a Spanish accent on candidate evaluations is not uniform across all FGL voters but instead shaped by their internalized sense of ethnolinguistic vitality and how they interpret their own cultural and linguistic positioning in the broader political landscape.

By grounding this study in ELIT, a more comprehensive understanding emerges of how language, identity, and political perceptions intersect. Rather than treating Spanish accents as neutral linguistic variations, ELIT reveals why they carry social meaning, how they function as signals of inclusion or exclusion, and why different Latino voters may respond to them in distinct ways depending on how they perceive the strength and legitimacy of their linguistic group. This theoretical framework allows for an analysis that moves beyond simple language attitudes, delving into the deeper mechanisms of identity and intergroup relations, providing a more nuanced perspective on how FGL evaluate political candidates who signal linguistic affiliation with their heritage.

Latino Identity and Political Engagement in U.S. Politics

The Latino population in the United States has experienced large growth, becoming the largest minority group in the country and, therefore, a growing socio-political influence. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2024), Latinos now constitute 19.5% of the U.S. population, up from 12.5% in 2000 (Guzman, 2001). While this increase might seem modest in relation to the overall population growth, the Latino population itself nearly doubled, going from 35.6 million in 2000 to 63.6 million in 2022 (Korhonn, 2024). This demographic shift is significant because African Americans were the largest minority group until the early

2000s, when it changed, representing 12.3% of the population compared to Latinos at 12.6% (Guzman, 2001). Over the next two decades, the gap expanded, and by 2024, African Americans made up to 13.7% of the population, while Latinos reached 19.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). As noted previously, these demographic shifts impact Latinos' socio-political capital and incentivize candidates to actively appeal to Latinos.

An important thing to take into account is that Latino voter turnout has historically been lower compared to other demographic groups. In the 2020 U.S. presidential election, 55% of eligible Latino voters cast a ballot, compared to 63% of eligible African American voters, and 71% of eligible white voters (Fabina, 2021). But it is also key to see that since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Latino vote increased by 30.9% (Voto Latino, 2024), while for African Americans the rate has stayed steady across presidential elections since the 2000s (Krogstad et al., 2024). With their growing numbers in population and voter turnout, Latino voters have a greater potential to influence national electoral outcomes than compared to last century (Abrajano et al., 2010).

Ethnic identity is a salient identity among Latinos, especially for FGL who are much more likely to select the country of origin of their parents to describe themselves (68%) as compared to second-generation Latinos (38%) (Pew Research Center, 2004). Sánchez (2006) argues the strength of ethnic identity significantly influences Latinos' political engagement and preferences. By considering ethnic identity strength, we can account for the diversity among Latino community members and acknowledge that not all individuals with Latino heritage have the same level of connection to their ethnic background. Valdez (2011) points out that Latinos with stronger ethnic identities were more likely to participate in multiple forms of political activities, including voting and community organizing. This reinforces the importance of considering ethnic identity when analyzing political behavior and preferences within the Latino community. García Bedolla (2005) suggests that the Latino identity can be

used as a mobilizing force, especially when issues relate more towards the Latino community. García Bedolla (2005) uses the term ‘mobilizing force’ to express how Latino identity strength can positively impact an increase in political participation, civic engagement, and foster collective actions. The effectiveness of the mobilization normally connects with those whose identity is strongly linked with their Latino heritage, often shaped by past experiences on immigration and the acculturation process. In the case of FGL voters, this mobilization can take place because of different issue salience and events. For example, Barreto (2007) indicates that when campaigns emphasize shared Latino interests and identity, this normally leads to an increase in voter turnout and political engagement.

Part of what may be a driving factor is a political science concept known as linked fate, which initially was used by Dawson (1994) for the case of African Americans and politics. Linked fate helps explain how feelings of connection and belonging as a member relative to a group identity, such as based on race/ethnic, leads to a political cohesion of that group. In the context of politics, group cohesion refers to the tendency of group members to act collectively in political matters, where individuals perceive their future as tied to those of the group. Sánchez et al. (2010) connects linked fate to Latino politics. He suggests that a pan-ethnic group identity of being Latinos could lead to political cohesion, prompting support for a candidate showing ethnic group markers, such as Spanish accent while speaking in English. Moore et al. (2008) conducted a longitudinal study on Mexican Americans and found that while ethnic identity remains relevant across generations, its political implications can change over time. This could be because of more recent immigration experiences, strong cultural and linguistic connections, among other factors that reinforce their group identity. The generational perspective and experiences among FGL may have more immediate connection to their ethnic heritage, maintaining stronger ties to their ethnic identity as

compared to later generations, and potentially making the concept of linked fate more salient in their political decision-making.

Linked fate could also be higher for FGL because they constitute the bridge between their immigrant family and the American political system, culture and norms, and have a higher rate of political participation compared to their naturalized immigrant parents (Pantoja et al., 2001). DeSipio (2006) points out the relevance of the process of political socialization for FGL, influencing their political engagement and participation, with a mix between their cultural heritage and political culture from what their parents' experiences shared to them. By acting as a bridge between generations, FGLs' ethnic identity may be more present and salient.

Other factors also distinguish Latinos from other demographic groups in the United States when it comes to voting. Hajnal et al. (2011) noted the difference in the political behaviors between Latino voters and African Americans in the United States concerning party identification. Contrary to the case of African Americans who have primarily supported the Democratic Party for several decades, many Latino voters remain independent or unaffiliated with political parties, which is reflected by their divided support to both Democratic and Republican parties: in 2020, 63% voted Democrat and 35% Republican; in 2024, 55% voted Democrat, 43% voted Republican (Lodhi et al., 2024). As a comparison, African Americans voted Democrat at 91% and 83% in 2020 and 2024, respectively (Lodhi et al., 2024) showing a much higher party affiliation. The weaker partisan tie among Latinos leads to a unique political landscape. For example, Latino voters may be more inclined to evaluate candidates based on individual merits rather than party affiliation. DeSipio (1996) argues this party detachment allows voters more flexibility in their political choices. Latino voters can be more responsive to targeted appeals and cultural messaging, opening the possibility for swing voting among those less partisan voters, enabling them to switch their support from one party

to the other depending on the election. This indicates that the support might be more conditioned based on candidate-specific qualities and issue salience.

As Abrajano (2010) stressed above, the relevance of ethnic cues for Latino voters could be a heavier marker when evaluating candidates. A shared ethnic identity and language markers might play a key role in voters' decision-making. This means that candidate-specific factors, such as accent, have the potential to play a larger role for FGL voters when it comes to their attitudes and evaluation of political candidates if it connects with their ethnic heritage. As Barreto (2007) suggests, this might be effective among Latino voters and generate more mobilization. Comparatively-speaking, then, candidate-specific factors such as a Spanish accent when speaking in English may have a heavier impact on FGL voters' attitudes, putting more weight on it than party affiliation compared to other demographic groups of the American electorate.

Language Accent and Political Candidate Evaluations

Language plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes and evaluations toward political candidates, particularly in a diverse and multilingual context such as the United States. When assessing candidates, voters rely on a combination of cognitive heuristics and affective judgments, meaning that certain personal traits become central to their evaluations. Among these, competence, trustworthiness, and likability have been widely recognized as key determinants of voter decision-making (Kinder, 1986; Funk, 1999; Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009). These attributes serve as shortcuts for voters, guiding their perceptions of a candidate's leadership ability, credibility, and overall electability (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011; Todorov et al., 2005).

Research in political psychology has long established that competence, trustworthiness, goodwill, and likability play critical roles in voter decision-making and

electoral outcomes. While political candidate evaluation and language attitudes research have often developed in parallel, they converge around shared concerns about how individuals form impressions of others based on limited cues. For example, both fields rely on traits such as likability, competence, and trustworthiness to assess evaluations—traits visible in the semantic differential items used in Appendix C’s speaker evaluation measures. In candidate evaluation research, these traits are seen as central psychological dimensions of candidate credibility and voter perception (McGraw, 2011; Funk, 1999), while in sociolinguistics, they are commonly used to measure listener reactions to different speech styles and accents (Giles & Coupland, 1991; Dragojevic & Giles, 2016). Although terminology and underlying assumptions may differ—such as "competence" being linked to policy expertise in political science, versus signaling intelligence in language attitude studies—the constructs often tap into overlapping perceptions of speaker quality.

Acknowledging these overlaps allows this study to bridge the two fields and offer a more comprehensive framework for understanding the effects of linguistic cues in political contexts. The distinct emphases of each tradition also enrich the analysis. Political communication highlights how these traits affect voting behavior and democratic decision-making, while sociolinguistics focuses on the social indexing of group identity and status through speech. By integrating both, this thesis emphasizes that accent-based candidate evaluations are not merely aesthetic judgments but reflect deeper social and political processes. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how linguistic variation—such as accent—operates in the formation of candidate impressions.

Competence, for instance, is one of the most influential traits in candidate evaluations. Voters associate competence with intelligence, experience, and problem-solving abilities, viewing competent candidates as more capable of governance and policy execution (Miller et

al., 1986; Lenz & Lawson, 2011). Studies have consistently demonstrated that competence-based perceptions strongly correlate with electoral success, with voters often prioritizing this trait over ideological agreement (Todorov et al., 2005). However, competence perceptions are not formed in isolation; audience characteristics and social cues such as accent, may play a role. While non-native accents can sometimes lower perceived competence due to bias or processing fluency difficulty (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010), FGL voters may interpret a Spanish accent more favorably. For some, it may signal authenticity and lived experience, enhancing a candidate's perceived ability to represent their interests (Giles et al., 1987; Ocampo, 2018). Because some FGL voters may not internalize mainstream norms that link professionalism to SAE, the negative effect of a non-standard accent on perceived competence may not be as strong as its effects on other traits, such as trust or goodwill.

Trustworthiness is another fundamental heuristic in voter decision-making. A candidate perceived as trustworthy is more likely to be seen as ethical, honest, and acting in the public's interest. Trustworthiness has been shown to influence not only general candidate evaluations but also voter engagement and political participation (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011). When voters doubt a candidate's trustworthiness, they are more likely to disengage politically or seek alternative candidates who better align with their ethical expectations.

Goodwill or caring reflects the extent to which a candidate is perceived as having the audience's best interests in mind and prioritizing those interests over their own (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). This includes judgements such as whether the candidate "cares about people like me" or is concerned with the public's well-being. Goodwill captures perceptions of empathy, interpersonal warmth, and advocacy. In political contexts, it can serve as a powerful connector among minority or underrepresented groups, by signaling that the candidate sees

and values the voter as an individual. Goodwill is key to the broader concept of persuasive appeal through speeches and other forms of communication.

Likability is also a significant factor in electoral success. Voters tend to gravitate toward candidates who appear warm, relatable, and personable, even when their political positions are not entirely aligned (Marcus, 2010; Lodge & Taber, 2013). Research suggests that likability fosters positive emotional engagement with candidates, making voters more receptive to their messages and increasing the likelihood of electoral support (Redlawsk et al., 2002; Funk, 1996). Likability, in many cases, helps moderate ideological differences, allowing candidates to appeal to a broader range of voters (Antonakis et al., 2016).

Because voter decision-making integrates both cognitive and affective dimensions, these traits form the foundation of how voters assess political candidates (Lenz & Lawson, 2011). Given that accents serve as nonverbal cues that trigger these evaluative heuristics, examining the effect of Spanish-accented English on perceptions of competence, trustworthiness, goodwill, and likability is essential for understanding how linguistic variation influences political attitudes. The presence of a Spanish accent may either enhance or diminish these traits, depending on the listener's biases, expectations, and cultural background. This study investigates how first-generation Latino (FGL) voters assess candidates with Spanish accents compared to those who speak Standard American English (SAE), expanding our understanding of language-based heuristics in political candidate evaluations.

Latino Voters, Political Ideology, and Language Markers

While Latinos have lower partisanship than other groups, such as African Americans, this does not mean that political ideology is not present or that it is unimportant in their

decision-making processes. Rather, the intersection between liberal ideology and ethnic identity among Latino voters creates a key evaluative framework that needs to be addressed. Garcia Bedolla's (2005) analysis shows that progressive Latino voters tend to show stronger support for cultural diversity markers in political representation. This ideological predisposition is also addressed by Hopkins (2015), showing that progressive ideology moderates traditional negative effects of non-standard accent on candidate evaluations. Ocampo (2018) also shows how shared linguistic background enhances political trust and candidate support among Latino voters, especially those identifying as politically progressive.

Research on politics, language, and ethnicity or race have indicated this connection between ideology and candidate evaluations. Fraga et al. (2006) show how linguistic consciousness among Latino voters intersects with progressive ideology and creates a stronger in-group candidate preference. Spanish-language markers in political candidates serve as a language marker among those who identify as politically liberal. This connects with what Wong et al. (2011) posits in a study on political participation among Asian Americans: progressive political orientation amplifies the positive effects on cultural markers. As such, a Spanish accent can have a positive effect on candidate evaluations for more progressive voters. Collingwood et al. (2014) found that liberal Latino voters are significantly more likely to positively evaluate candidates who demonstrate cultural competency through linguistic means, thus viewing Spanish accent as an indicator of authentic representation of their ethnic group.

Likability as a Primary Affective Outcome of Candidate Evaluation

While this study examines multiple dimensions of candidate evaluation, including competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill, likability is selected as the dependent variable for moderation analyses for some of the following hypothesis due to its theoretical and empirical

prominence in electors' decision-making. Likability represents a core affective judgement reflecting warmth, personal appeal, and heuristic processing (Funk, 1999; Marcus, 2010). Compared to competence or trustworthiness, which may require more deliberate evaluation or issue familiarity, likability is more likely to be influenced by social identity cues such as accent, especially in low-information contexts or when candidates are fictional or unknown (Redlawsk et al., 2002; Lodge & Taber, 2013) as in the case of the present experiment. Research shows that likability not only shapes general impressions but also conditions other judgements, thus serving as a foundational lens through which voters perceive candidates (Cuddy et al., 2007).

Because the present thesis examines the role of accent as a signal of in-group membership and cultural closeness, and because FGL voters may respond emotionally to linguistic identity cues, likability offers a theoretically-appropriate and affect-sensitive outcome variable. A focus on likability is consistent with prior studies emphasizing emotional affinity and interpersonal warmth over rational evaluations (Dragojevic et al., 2018). Based on the discussed argument above, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: FGL voters evaluate political candidates with a Spanish accent as more likable than a candidate with a SAE accent.

H2: FGL voters evaluate candidates with a Spanish accent more highly on competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill than candidates with SAE accents.

H3: The effect of a candidate's accent on likability is moderated by political ideology, such that politically liberal FGL voters evaluate a Spanish accented candidate as more likable than a candidate with a SAE accent.

H4: The effect of a candidate's accent on likability is moderated by ethnic identity strength, such that FGL voters with a strong ethnic identity evaluate

candidates with a Spanish accent as more likable than a candidate with a SAE accent.

H5: The effect of a candidate's accent on likability is moderated by perceived ethnolinguistic vitality, such that FGL voters who perceive Spanish as having higher ethnolinguistic vitality evaluate a candidate with a Spanish accent as more likable than those who perceive Spanish as having lower vitality.

Chapter 3: Method

The study employed an experimental design to investigate how language accents impact evaluations of political candidates among FGL United States citizens. The experiment entails exposing FGL to audio stimuli of a hypothetical politician speaking with a Spanish accent or SAE accent. Using an experimental design allows for controlled manipulation of the accent stimuli, while minimizing potential confounding variables such as familiarity with real political figures (Boudreau et al. 2014; Medeiros et al. 2020). The experimental approach has been largely used in political communication research to assess attitudes towards candidates, as it offers a robust framework for causally linking linguistic markers to participants' attitudes and perceptions (Zarate et al., 2024).

Participants

As discussed in greater later, this study was conducted in two stages: one pilot study and one main study. The participants for each stage were distinct and their inclusion criteria and demographics are presented in the subsequent sections.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they listened to one male politician speaking with either a Spanish accent or Standard American English (SAE). This design introduces variability by using recordings for each accent condition, ensuring that participants' perceptions are not influenced by the unique characteristics of a single speaker's voice but rather by accent itself. This approach results in treatment groups, where participants were randomly assigned to hear one stimulus.

A male speaker was chosen instead of a female speaker to maintain consistency and reduce potential gender-based variation in evaluations. While gender biases influence political candidate perceptions, prior research suggests that male politicians are generally evaluated more consistently across dimensions such as trustworthiness and competence, whereas female candidates often face more varied or polarized assessments due to gendered expectations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Selecting male speakers helps control for this variability, allowing the study to isolate the effects of accent on candidate evaluations.

Participants were exposed to audio recordings of fictional political candidates. Using real candidates with recognizable accents, whom participants could identify, would introduce confounding variables. In turn, using hypothetical candidates strengthens the internal validity of the experiment. Additionally, the candidate did not discuss polarizing issues in American politics to control for potential extraneous influences on participant evaluations.

The audio recording and transcript (see Appendix A) were based on a similar study (Zarate et al., 2024) with an average duration of 45 seconds. Zarate et al. (2024) investigated how Spanish-language appeals impact candidate evaluations both on Anglo and native Spanish-speakers in the United States. Their study utilized neutral stimuli, with the audio transcript and recording achieving a reliability alpha coefficient of .89 for candidate evaluation measures. In a controlled experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to hear either the Spanish or English appeal, allowing for focused measurement of language effects on candidate perception. Results from their study demonstrate the efficacy of controlled audio stimuli assessing the linguistic influence on candidate evaluations. The present

experimental design uses some of Zarate et al.'s (2024) design and audio transcript to maintain neutrality and control for the accent effects.

To further ensure that accent is the primary language marker influencing participants' attitudes and perceptions, the experiment includes three different speakers per accent condition (three with a Spanish accent and three with SAE). This variability prevents responses from being driven by a single speaker's voice and strengthens the robustness of the experimental design.

After the stimuli exposure, participants were asked to complete questions on the likability, competence, trustworthiness, and relatability of the candidate. Specifically, the study presented them with six blocks of questions following this order: questions on the participant's (1) likability of the speaker, (2) credibility, (3) ethnolinguistic vitality, (4) political ideology, (5) ethnic identity, and lastly (6) demographic questions.

Measures

Likability

To test H1, a likability scale was included to measure overall positive or negative evaluations of the candidate using Reysen's Likability Scale (2005). This scale, based on a 7-point Likert format (Appendix B), assesses participants' agreement with statements such as *This person is friendly, I would ask this person for advice*, and *This person is approachable*. Higher scores indicate greater likability. The

scale was reliable, with a Cronbach's alpha of .944³. The average likability score was $M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.11$.⁴

Likability is a critical affective dimension in political candidate evaluation, influencing how voters connect emotionally with a candidate. Voters often use likability as a heuristic cue, forming impressions based on perceived warmth, friendliness, and interpersonal appeal rather than policy or ideological alignment (Funk, 1999; Marcus, 2010). Likeable candidates tend to elicit stronger support and trust, particularly in mediated or low-information contexts where affective judgments can dominate decision-making (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009). Research has also shown that likability can indirectly shape evaluations of other candidate traits, such as trustworthiness and competence, reinforcing its importance in shaping overall candidate impressions.

In sociolinguistic and language attitude research, language cues such as accent play a significant role in shaping affective evaluations by influencing perceptions of warmth, relatability, and social closeness. Prior studies have demonstrated that listeners' reactions to accents are not neutral but are shaped by social and cultural expectations, often tied to group identity and perceived similarity (Giles & Billings, 2004; Ryan et al., 1982; Dragojevic et al., 2018). Speakers with non-standard or foreign accents may be perceived more or less favorably depending on the listener's background, the social meaning of the accent, and contextual cues. In political contexts, these perceptions can influence how emotionally resonant and relatable a candidate appears to voters.

By examining whether a Spanish-accented English speaker is rated as more or less likable than a Standard American English (SAE) speaker, this study investigates

³ All reported Cronbach's alpha values are based on the main study sample. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency reliability for the scales. According to Johnson (2017), alpha values of .70 or higher are generally considered acceptable, with values above .90 indicating excellent reliability.

⁴ All reported means and standard deviations in this section are based on the main study sample.

how linguistic variation—particularly accent as a cultural identity marker—shapes voters' affective responses to political candidates. Since likability has been shown to be a predictor of both voter engagement and electoral outcomes, understanding how it is shaped by accent contributes valuable insight into the broader dynamics of language, identity, and political communication.

Credibility Source

To test H2 and measure participants' perceptions of the political candidate, this study employed a 7-point semantic differential scale based on McCroskey and Teven's Source Credibility Scale (1999), which assesses perceptions of competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill (see Appendix C). This scale has been widely validated and used in communication research to evaluate how speakers are judged on key credibility dimensions that influence persuasion and interpersonal evaluations. The subscales in this study demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .856 for competence, .813 for trustworthiness, and .859 for goodwill. Participants' average scores were: competence $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.05$; trustworthiness $M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.10$; and goodwill $M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.07$.

These credibility dimensions reflect core heuristics in political candidate evaluation. Competence captures judgments of intelligence, expertise, and leadership ability, while trustworthiness assesses integrity and ethical character (Kinder, 1986; Berinsky & Lenz, 2011). Goodwill reflects the perception that the candidate cares about the audience and has their best interests in mind, contributing to feelings of empathy and interpersonal closeness (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Although the scale does not directly assess language attitudes, these credibility judgments are especially relevant in the context of accented speech, as accents can trigger perceptions related to social identity, professionalism, and authenticity (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Dragojevic et al., 2018).

The scale includes semantic differential pairs such as *intelligent–unintelligent*, *cares about me–doesn't care about me*, and *inexpert–expert*, among others. Participants rated each item using a 1-to-7 scale, and some of the items were recoded so that all higher values reflected more favorable evaluations on each dimension.

Political Ideology

To capture political ideology and test H3, this study employed the self-placement ideology scale (American National Election Studies, n.d.), which is measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative) (Appendix D). This measure is widely used in political psychology and communication research to assess an individual's ideological orientation without assuming direct partisan affiliation. Participants' average political ideology score was $M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.45$.

Political ideology is included in this study because it serves as a key factor in shaping candidate evaluations, as voters' ideological leanings often influence how they perceive political figures, their policies, and even nonverbal or linguistic cues (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Carmines & D'Amico, 2015). Research suggests that ideological orientations function as cognitive filters that shape how individuals interpret political messages, influencing evaluations of a candidate's trustworthiness, competence, and alignment with voter preferences (Lodge & Taber, 2013). Additionally, ideology structures political attitudes beyond policy positions, affecting how voters process information related to linguistic and stylistic cues such as speech patterns, accents, and rhetoric (Carmines & D'Amico, 2015).

Given that H3 focuses specifically on ideology rather than party affiliation, this study does not include additional measures of partisanship, ensuring a clear distinction between ideological self-placement and partisan identity. This approach allows for a more precise

examination of how ideological biases influence candidate evaluations without making party loyalty salient.

Ethnic Identity Scale Brief

To test H4, the Ethnic Identity Scale Brief version (EIS-B) created by Douglass et al. (2015) was used as it tests the strength of participants' identity with their ethnic group (see Appendix E). The scale uses nine items to measure exploration, resolution, and affirmation on the pertinence to the ethnic group, with alpha coefficients among Latino participants of .81, and average scores of $M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.53$. The scale is based on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 4 (describes me very well), thus higher scores indicate greater ethnic strength. Items ask participants' level of agreement with statements such as *I am clear about what my ethnicity means to me; I wish I were from a different ethnicity; I have participated in activities that have taught me about my ethnicity*, among others.

Ethnolinguistic Vitality

To test H5, the ethnolinguistic vitality scale (Bourhis et al., 1981) was used to measure participants' subjective perceptions of the status, strength, and resilience of their linguistic group within the broader U.S. context. Ethnolinguistic vitality assesses the likelihood that a language community will maintain its linguistic and cultural identity over time, influencing members' behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions towards ingroup and outgroup members.

Participants responded to a series of items evaluating the perceived status, demographic strength, and institutional support of both the English and Spanish language within the United States context. The questionnaire items used were adapted from Bourhis et

al. (1981), which assesses subjective perceptions of ethnolinguistic vitality along three dimensions: (1) status, (2) demographic factors, and (3) institutional support (see Appendix F).

The ethnolinguistic vitality measure utilized a 7-point Likert scale, where participants rated their level of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding the strength, status, and support of Spanish compared to English. Items included agreement with statements applied to English or Spanish language such as *Spanish is highly regarded in the United States*, *Spanish speakers have considerable political power*, *Spanish is frequently represented in U.S. media*, among others. Higher scores indicated higher perceived vitality of the language.

This scale was adapted from Bourhis et al.'s (1981) demonstrated a robust reliability with Cronbach's alpha of .876. The average vitality score for Spanish was $M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.92$. The average vitality score for English was $M = 5.89$, $SD = 0.76$. The validity of this measure in capturing subjective ethnolinguistic perceptions makes it particularly suitable for exploring linguistic dynamics and candidate evaluations among first-generation Latino voters in the U.S.

Finally, demographic information was asked towards the end of the survey, focusing on participants' gender, age, level of education, income, employment status, and party affiliation (Appendix G).

Pilot Study and Stimuli Validation

To ensure the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation and the clarity of the audio stimuli, a pilot study was conducted prior to the main survey experiment. This study was a necessary step to test the quality, validity, and functionality of the recordings that

would represent the stimuli in the experiment: the political candidate's spoken accent, either Spanish accented or Standard American English (SAE). Because accent perception is subjective and varies across listeners (Lippi-Green, 2012), it was essential to confirm that participants could reliably detect the intended differences and understand the content of each audio recording.

The pilot served as a preliminary check of the stimulus materials, enabling selection of the stimuli that worked best before launching the full survey experiment. The goal was to determine which stimuli were best suited for each condition, based on participants' perceptions of the speaker's country of origin, the perceived thickness of the accent, and the overall comprehensibility of the message. The outcomes of this process directly informed the final selection of stimuli for the experimental phase of the thesis.

Stimuli Generation

The audio stimuli used in the pilot study consisted of a short, standardized campaign message voiced by bilingual Latino male speakers. These recordings were developed with the goal of producing two versions of the same message: one spoken in a Standard American English (SAE) accent and the other with a Spanish accent. To ensure consistency across recordings, all speakers were given the same script (see Appendix A) and were instructed to maintain a natural tone as they were delivering the speech in a neutral setting, i.e., a setting without any other audio cues.

Speakers were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Purposive sampling was used within the researcher network to identify bilingual Latino males who could produce both SAE and Spanish accents for the same script, as these individuals met the specific criteria needed for the study's experimental manipulation (Yin,

2015). In some cases, snowball sampling was also used; the researcher asked individuals in their network if they knew someone who met the criteria, and some contacts referred the request to others, who then were in contact with the researcher and submitted the recordings. This recruitment approach helped ensure both targeted selection and wide reach within social networks. Each participant recorded the script twice: once in their SAE voice and once while applying a Spanish accent. Recordings were made in quiet environments using personal devices such as smartphones or laptops. The researcher and three faculty members pre-screened all recordings before launching the survey to ensure acceptable sound quality and accent variation. Those who had barely to no-accent were not included in the pilot study survey due to concerns that their vocals would not be sufficiently distinct in representing SAE and Spanish-speaking accents.

In total, recordings were collected from seven individuals, providing an initial sample of sixteen recordings as some individuals provided variations on an accent. Four of these recordings came from a single speaker who produced both accent versions with distinct intonation and speed variations. After a pre-screening, eight recordings from three different speakers were included in the survey (*Latino2*⁵, *Latino3*, *Latino4*, and *Latino7*; along with their *SAE* versions). These recordings were included in the pilot to test their validity, with the understanding that only those meeting specific criteria (e.g., perceived accent thickness, country of origin, and comprehensibility) would move forward to the main experiment. Four recordings would later become the selected stimuli for the final survey, as detailed in subsequent subsections.

⁵ To maintain anonymity and confidentiality of the speakers, recording samples were named based on type of stimuli and numbers instead of speaker names.

All individuals who recorded voice stimuli provided written consent to participate in the research and granted permission for their recordings to be used for academic purposes related to this study, always keeping their confidentiality. They were informed that their voices would be used exclusively for research and not associated with any personally identifying information. These content forms were included as part of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol for the pilot study and the main study.

Instrument

The pilot study was administered through Qualtrics, an online survey platform that allowed for seamless integration of audio files and collection of participant responses. The central component of the instrument was a short experimental exposure to a single audio recording of a campaign-style message, delivered by one of the bilingual Latino male speakers. Each speaker read the same scripted message (see Appendix A), which was taken from Zarate et al. (2024), and designed to resemble a neutral and broadly appealing political camping statement.

Recordings varied in length, ranging from 30 to 49 seconds, with an average duration of 39.38 seconds ($SD = 7.73$). The accent varied depending on whether the speaker was using Standard American English (SAE) or a Spanish accent. Each participant was randomly assigned to listen to and evaluate one of the eight recordings using the randomizer function in Qualtrics, which ensured an even distribution of the conditions across participants.

After listening to the audio, participants completed a brief set of questions. These included items asking participants where they believed the speaker was from, with options such as America, Colombia, Spain, India, Russia, and others. They were then asked to rate how thick or noticeable they perceived the speaker's accent to be on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicated "not at all thick" and 7 indicated "extremely thick." Finally, they rated how easy it

was to understand the speaker on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely difficult) to 9 (extremely easy), following methods consistent with established research on accent perception (Derwing & Munro, 2005). The manipulation check items were designed to determine whether participants noticed and interpreted the accent differences as intended, and whether the speech was comprehensible regardless of accent condition, which is in line with best practices for experimental validation (Perdue & Summers, 1986).

Participants also completed a brief demographic section at the end of the survey, which included items on age, gender, race/ethnicity, income, and language background.

Procedure and Participants

The pilot study was conducted between February 28 and April 4, 2025. Participants were recruited through the SONA research pool of the Department of Communication at the University of Oklahoma. The study was listed on SONA as eligible for research credit, and students who completed the survey in full were awarded 0.25 SONA credits, which could be applied toward extra credit in participating communication courses. Before launching the study on SONA, IRB approval was obtained to ensure compliance with ethical standards on human research. After accessing the survey, participants were shown an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and information regarding the voluntary nature of their participation. Only those who were 18 years or older were eligible, and participants could end their participation at any time.

A total of 173 undergraduate students participated in the study. The majority of participants were 19 or 20 years old, with these groups representing 35.1% and 29.5% of the sample, respectively. The sample was predominantly female (62.0%), followed by male (37.4%), and one participant (0.6%) who identified with another gender. The majority of respondents identified as White (71.3%), while others identified as Hispanic or Latino

(10.5%), Asian (4.7%), Black or African American (4.1%), American Indian or Alaska Native (4.1%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1.2%), or Other (4.1%). Most participants (92.4%) reported English as their first language. Household income varied widely among participants: 7.0% reported earning less than \$19,999, 3.5% between \$20,000 and \$39,999, 5.3% between \$40,000 and \$59,999, 6.4% between \$60,000 and \$79,999, 8.8% between \$80,000 and \$99,999, 15.8% between \$100,000 and \$149,999, and 20.5% over \$150,000. Additionally, 21.1% of respondents indicated they did not know their household income, and 11.7% preferred not to disclose.

The study was administered online using Qualtrics. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight audio conditions and completed the survey independently on their own devices. The survey began with the experimental stimuli, followed afterwards with manipulation check items, which entailed questions on assessing perceived speaker origin, accent thickness, and ease to understand. These items appeared before any demographic questions to reduce potential bias. The survey ended with a brief set of demographic questions. Most participants completed the pilot survey in approximately 5.23 minutes ($M = 313.61$ seconds, $SD = 106.66$, $Range = 88\text{--}594$ seconds).

Results

The following results summarize participants' evaluations of the eight audio recordings tested in the pilot study. Key variables of interest included perceptions of the speaker's country of origin, the thickness of their accent, and the ease with which the message was understood (see Appendix H). These measures were used to determine which recordings would serve as the most effective and valid stimuli for the main survey experiment. A total of 173 responses were analyzed, with inclusion limited to participants who passed at least one of two attention checks.

Perceived Speaker Origin

Participants were asked to identify where they believed the speaker was from. This question was adapted based on methods used in prior research on accent perception and speaker categorization (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010). For Spanish-accented recordings, responses of “Colombia” or “Spain” were considered accurate identifications. For Standard American English (SAE) recordings, “America” was the correct response. Among Spanish recordings, *Latino2* was correctly identified as Latino by 75% of participants, followed by *Latino3* at 65%. In contrast, only 54.2% of participants identified *Latino7* as Latino, and 47.8% correctly identified *Latino4*. All SAE recordings were identified as American by a clear majority of participants. *SAE2* had the highest identification rate (90.9%), followed by *SAE3* (85.7%), *SAE4* (83.3%), and *SAE7* (78.9%).

Accent Thickness

Participants rated the speaker’s accent on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all thick, 7 = extremely thick), following the approach and scale used in accent perception research (Darwin & Munro, 2005; Carlson & McHenry, 2006). In the context of this scale regarding the Spanish stimuli, higher accent thickness scores were desirable for Spanish accented recordings as they indicate that the accent manipulation was noticeable for participants, which is essential for validating each of the Spanish conditions. Among the Spanish accented stimuli, *Latino4* received the highest mean rating ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.54$), followed by *Latino3* ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.20$), *Latino7* ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.14$), and *Latino2* ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.39$).

Accent thickness ratings for SAE recordings were low. Lower scores on this scale on accent thickness were desirable, as they indicate that participants perceived this condition as

barely accented, which is consistent with a Standard American English accent.

Comparatively lower scores for SAE indicate the least linguistic markers, enabling it to act as a check for the manipulation of accent in the Spanish condition. *SAE2* was rated lowest in thickness ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 1.01$), followed by *SAE7* ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 1.49$), *SAE3* ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.09$), and *SAE4* ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.35$).

Ease of Understanding

Ease of understanding was measured on a 9-point scale (1 = extremely difficult, 9 = extremely easy), using it from a similar prior intelligibility and comprehensibility study by Derwin et al. (2005). *Latino2* received the highest mean score among Spanish recordings ($M = 7.45$, $SD = 1.28$), followed by *Latino3* ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 1.49$), *Latino4* ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 1.67$), and *Latino7* ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 1.68$). For SAE recordings, *SAE2* and *SAE3* both received the highest scores ($M = 7.95$), with *SAE7* closely behind ($M = 7.89$, $SD = 2.03$), and *SAE4* slightly lower ($M = 6.92$, $SD = 1.98$).

Tests of Differences Across Recordings

To assess whether perceived differences across the recordings were statistically significant, two separate multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted—one for the Spanish accented conditions and one for the SAE conditions. The dependent variables were perceived accent thickness and ease of understanding.

For the Spanish accented recordings, the MANOVA revealed a significant multivariate effect of condition on the combined dependent variables. Wilk's Λ was .753, with $F(6, 126) = 3.21$, $p = .006$, and partial $\eta^2 = .13$. Follow-up univariate analyses showed significant differences across recordings in both accent thickness, $F(3, 64) = 3.52$, $p = .020$, and ease of understanding, $F(3, 64) = 4.26$, $p = .008$. Post hoc Tukey tests indicated that for

accent thickness, *Latino4* was rated significantly thicker than both *Latino2* ($p = .018$) and *Latino7* ($p = .042$), but not significantly different from *Latino 3* ($p = .154$). For ease of understanding, *Latino2* was rated as significantly easier to understand than *Latino4* ($p = .006$). No other comparison, including *Latino2* versus *Latino3* ($p = .118$), *Latino3* versus *Latino4* ($p = .311$), or *Latino7* versus other speaker, showed statistical significance. These results indicate that participants perceived the Latino recordings differently in terms of both accent and clarity. Table 1 provides descriptive means and accuracy rates by condition.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by Condition

	Accent Thickness		Ease of Understanding		Correct Origin ID
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%
Latino2	3.85 ^{ab}	1.39	7.45 ^c	1.28	75.0
Latino3	4.20	1.20	6.30	1.49	65.0
Latino4	5.00 ^a	1.14	6.04 ^c	1.67	47.8
Latino7	3.92 ^b	1.14	5.96	1.68	54.2
SAE2	1.50	1.01	7.95	0.00	90.9
SAE3	1.90	1.09	7.95	0.00	85.7
SAE4	2.50	1.35	6.92	1.98	83.3
SAE7	1.89	1.49	7.89	2.03	78.9

^{a,b} Means within columns differed by $p < .05$

^c Means within columns differed by $p < .01$

Note. Higher values indicate greater perceived accent thickness or greater ease of understanding. Origin identification accuracy represents the percentage of participants who correctly identified the speaker's country of origin.

For the SAE recordings, the MANOVA revealed no significant multivariate effect, Wilk's Λ was .920, with $F(6, 170) = 1.21$, $p = .302$, and partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Univariate tests also indicated no significant differences in accent thickness, $F(3, 86) = 1.75$, $p = .162$, or ease of understanding, $F(3, 86) = 1.57$, $p = .204$, across the four SAE recordings. These results suggest a very similar perception among the SAE recordings.

To further evaluate origin identification accuracy, two cross-tabulations were conducted as well as chi-square tests. For the Latino recordings, 59.8% of participants correctly identified the speaker as being from a Spanish-speaking country (i.e., Spain,

Colombia). There was no significant difference in identification accuracy across the four Latino recordings, $\chi^2 (3, N = 87) = 3.84, p = .280$. While 59.8% may seem low, it is possible that some participants may be from places in the United States with heavy Spanish-speaking populations, e.g., Texas, and therefore do not necessarily equate this accent with being from outside the United States. For the SAE recordings, 84.9% of participants correctly identified the speaker as American. The chi-square test was non-significant, $\chi^2 (3, N = 86) = 1.20, p = .753$.

Stimulus Selection

Based on participant responses, *Latino2* and *Latino3* were selected as the final Spanish accented stimuli. These recordings demonstrated the highest accuracy in both perceived country of origin and comprehensibility, and moderate in accent thickness. While the accent thickness ratings are moderate in the 7-point scale range, they were the most consistent overall compared with the other Spanish recordings. While *Latino2* and *Latino3* were recorded by the same speaker, the variation in intonation and speed, as evidenced by the different results from participant responses, indicate they are perceived as distinct. Specifically, the univariate tests showed statistical differences across these Spanish recordings.

For the SAE-accented condition, *SAE2* and *SAE3* were selected due to their highest comprehensibility and country identification accuracy, and minimal accent thickness. These recordings best match the role of SAE because of being consistently recognized as unaccented or as standard American English, which provides a strong stimulus for the experimental manipulation. Together, these four recordings were the most effective for representing the Spanish and SAE conditions in the final survey experiment.

Chapter 4: Results of the Main Study

With the pilot study confirms the reliability of the stimuli, the main experiment was conducted to test the hypotheses presented earlier. The following sections report the results from the full sample of 605 participants, analyzing how the presence or absence of a Latino accent influenced candidate evaluations among first-generation Latino voters. Statistical tests were performed to assess accent effects on likability, competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill, as well as potential moderation effects by political ideology, ethnic identity strength, and perceived ethnolinguistic vitality.

Participants

Participants for this study were U.S. citizens who are at least 18 years of age and identify as first-generation U.S. residents with Latino heritage. The experiment was conducted using the survey company Qualtrics, and recruitment was through the company CloudResearch, as it offers fair prices and good quality data (Litman et al., 2017). The sample included FGL with representativeness based on gender according to the American Community Survey (2023) on the U.S. Hispanic population. Focusing on it ensures that the sample accurately reflects the gender composition of this demographic group, which is important for analyzing potential differences in perspectives and behaviors across genders within the Latino community (Bejarano, 2014).

Each participant was compensated 1.70 USD per successful completion, a fair rate established by CloudResearch. A total of $N = 632$ participants initially completed the study. However, 27 responses were excluded during data cleaning because they failed every attention check or their completion times were below the minimum 240 seconds, resulting in a final valid sample of $N = 605$. The average time to complete the survey was $M = 658.62$

seconds ($SD = 291.04$), with a minimum duration of 247 seconds and a maximum of 1,770 seconds. These times were determined based on a mean of 2 standard deviations to identify those who responded too quickly or took hours to complete the survey. Responses below 240 seconds were considered too fast to reflect a meaningful engagement in completing the survey, while longer times were retained unless other quality concerns were flagged, taking into consideration that the average completion time was of approximately 11 minutes.

Participants' age was measured using ordinal ranges, from 18–24 years to 85 or older. The greatest percent of participants were aged 25 – 34 at 43.2%, indicating a predominantly young adult sample. Regarding gender, 52.5% identified as male ($n = 315$), 45.0% as female ($n = 270$), 1.7% as non-binary or third gender ($n = 10$), 0.5% selected “Other” ($n = 3$), and 0.3% preferred not to say ($n = 2$). For education level, 0.2% had less than a high school diploma ($n = 1$), 15.0% completed high school ($n = 90$), 2.2% had vocational or technical training ($n = 13$), 18.2% had attended some college without earning a degree ($n = 109$), and 11.8% held an associate’s degree ($n = 71$). A substantial portion of the sample had higher education credentials, with 40.2% holding a bachelor’s degree ($n = 241$), 10.0% holding a master’s degree ($n = 60$), and 2.5% reporting a Ph.D. or J.D. ($n = 15$). In terms of employment status, 60.0% were employed full-time ($n = 360$), 19.2% were employed part-time ($n = 115$), and 17.8% were unemployed ($n = 107$). An additional 3.0% ($n = 18$) preferred not to disclose their employment status. Finally, political identification showed that 57.5% of respondents reported feeling closest to the Democratic Party ($n = 345$), 19.8% to the Republican Party ($n = 119$), 21.8% selected “Neither” ($n = 131$), and 0.8% chose “Other” ($n = 5$).

Results

Accent Condition and Candidate Likability

Hypothesis 1 predicted that first-generation Latino voters would evaluate a Spanish-accented candidate more positively than a candidate with a Standard American English (SAE) accent. An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare mean likability ratings between the two accent conditions. The result was statistically significant, $t(602) = 7.79, p < .001$, with a moderate to large effect size ($d = 0.64$). Participants who heard the Spanish-accented candidate reported significantly higher likability ($M = 4.80, SD = 1.30$) than those who heard the SAE-accented candidate ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.39$). These findings support H1 and indicate that accent alone—when no other information varies—can significantly shape political candidate evaluations among this population (see Table 2).

Table 2. Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Likability Ratings by Accent Condition

Condition	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (602)	<i>p</i>	95% CI		Cohen's <i>d</i>
						<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Spanish-accent	302	4.80	1.30					—
English accent	302	3.95	1.39	7.79	<.001	0.64	1.07	0.64

Note. *N* = 604. Higher scores indicate more likability. CI = Confidence Interval.

Accent Effects on Competence, Trustworthiness and Goodwill

Hypothesis 2 stated that Spanish-accented candidates would be perceived as more competent, trustworthy and more caring (goodwill) than SAE-accented candidates. Three independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to assess these three evaluation dimensions.

For competence, participants rated the SAE-accented candidate ($M = 4.05, SD = 0.41$) as slightly more competence than the Spanish-accented candidates ($M = 3.99, SD = 0.38$). This difference was statistically not significant using a two-tailed test, $t(602) = -1.83, p =$

.067, though the effect was in the expected direction with a small to moderate effect size (*Cohen's d* = 0.40). These results suggest that, despite potential identity alignment, FGL voters perceived the SAE-accented candidate as somewhat more capable or competent than the Spanish-accented candidate. While the difference was not statistically significant, the small to moderate effect size indicated a possible link favoring speakers of SAE.

For trustworthiness, the results showed no statistically significant difference between the two conditions, $t(602) = 0.74, p = .462$. Participants rated the Spanish-accented candidate ($M = 3.99, SD = 0.37$) and the SAE-accented candidate ($M = 3.96, SD = 0.42$) similarly. This suggests that the candidate's accent did not influence perceptions of trust or ethical character among FGL voters.

For goodwill, results revealed a statistically significant effect, $t(602) = -2.86, p = .004$, with a small effect size ($d = 0.23$). Participants evaluated the SAE-accented candidate as more caring ($M = 3.92, SD = 0.60$) than the Spanish-accented candidate ($M = 3.79, SD = 0.57$). These findings do not support H2. Accent did influence goodwill but in the opposite direction than predicted, with the SAE-accented candidate rated as more relatable (see Table 3).

These findings provide no support for H2. Across all three dimensions, competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill/care, participants did not evaluate the Spanish-accented candidate more positively. The SAE-accented candidate received significantly higher ratings on both goodwill and competence, while trustworthiness ratings did not statistically differ between conditions.

Table 3. Independent Samples t-Tests Comparing Competence, Trustworthiness and Goodwill by Accent Condition

Variable	Condition	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI		<i>Cohen's d</i>
						<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Competence	Spanish	3.99	0.38	-1.83	0.067	-0.12	0.00	0.40
	SAE	4.05	0.41					
Trust	Spanish	3.99	0.37	0.74	.462	-0.05	0.11	0.07
	SAE	3.96	0.42					
Goodwill	Spanish	3.79	0.57	-2.86	.004	-0.22	0.04	0.23
	SAE	3.92	0.60					

Note. *N* = 604. Participant count per condition *n* = 302. *df* = 602. Scores range from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater competence, trust, and goodwill.

Political Ideology as a Moderator of Accent Effects on Candidate's Likability

Hypothesis 3 predicted that political ideology would moderate the effect of accent on candidate evaluations, such that FGL voters with more liberal views would evaluate Spanish-accented candidates more positively than those with SAE accents. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of accent condition, centered political ideology⁶, and their interaction on likability. The model was statistically significant, $F(3, 597) = 21.96, p < .001$, and explained 9.9% of the variance, $R^2 = .099$.

Accent condition ($b = -0.85, p < .001$), political ideology ($b = -0.20, p = .004$), and the interaction term ($b = 0.15, p = .028$) were all statistically significant. To further probe this interaction, subgroup analyses were conducted. Among liberal participants (ideology ≤ 2.0), those who evaluated the Spanish-accented candidate reported significantly higher likability ($M = 5.01, SD = 1.26$) than those in the SAE condition ($M = 3.87, SD = 1.45$), $t(253) =$

⁶ Political ideology was mean-centered to facilitate interpretation of interaction terms in the regression model and reduce multicollinearity between predictors and their interaction.

6.67, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$. Among conservative participants (ideology ≥ 4.0), the same pattern emerged, albeit to a lesser extent: $t(250) = 4.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.52$. These findings support H3 and indicate that while liberal voters exhibit a stronger preference for the Spanish-accented candidate, the positive effect of accent is evident across the ideological spectrum (see Table 4).

Table 4. Regression Analysis Predicting Likability with Moderation by Political Ideology

Variable	Beta	SE	95% CI		β	p
			LL	UL		
Intercept	4.590	0.174	4.248	4.932	–	<.001
Accent Condition	-0.552	0.110	-0.767	-0.337	-0.294	<.001
Ideology (Centered)	-0.202	0.067	-0.334	-0.070	-0.130	.004
Accent x Ideology (Interaction)	0.147	0.067	0.016	0.278	0.099	.028

Note. $N = 601$. Accent Condition coded as 1 = Spanish-accented candidate, 2 = SAE. Ideology was mean-centered. Higher likability scores reflect more positive evaluations.

Ethnic Identity Strength as a Moderator on Accent Effects

Hypothesis 4 proposed that strength of ethnic identity would moderate the relationship between accent and likability, such that participants with stronger ethnic identity would rate the Spanish-accented candidate more favorably. A multiple regression analysis was conducted with accent condition, centered ethnic identity⁷, and their interaction entered as predictors of likability. The model was statistically significant, $F(3, 595) = 24.62$, $p <$

⁷ Ethnic identity scores were centered around the mean prior to analysis to improve the interpretability of the interaction with accent condition and to minimize multicollinearity.

.001, $R^2 = .110$. The main effect of accent remained significant, $b = -0.87$, $p < .001$.

However, neither ethnic identity ($b = 0.49$, $p = .129$) nor the interaction term ($b = -0.08$, $p = .706$) were statistically significant.

These results do not support H4 and suggest that participants' strength of ethnic identity did not influence how accent affected their evaluations. While one might expect that a strong sense of ethnic belonging would enhance positive evaluations of a speaker perceived as "in-group" due to accent, this relationship did not emerge in this case (see Table 5).

Table 5. Regression Analysis Predicting Likability with Moderation by self-Ethnic Identification

Variable	Beta	SE	95% CI		β	p
			LL	UL		
Intercept	5.675	0.173	5.335	6.015	–	<.001
Accent Condition	-0.868	0.110	-1.083	-0.653	-0.307	<.001
Ethnic self-ID (Centered)	0.492	0.323	-0.143	1.127	0.184	.129
Accent x Ethnic ID (Interaction)	-0.078	0.207	-0.484	0.328	-0.046	.706

Note. $N = 599$. Ethnic identity scores were mean-centered. Accent Condition coded as 1 = Spanish-accented candidate, 2 = SAE.

Perceived Ethnolinguistic Vitality as a Moderator on Accent Effects on Candidates

Hypothesis 5 predicted that perceived ethnolinguistic vitality—participants' beliefs about the status and presence of the Spanish language and Latino group in the United States—would moderate the effect of accent on candidate likability. A regression model

including accent condition, centered Spanish vitality score⁸, and their interaction was tested. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(3, 600) = 23.21, p < .001, R^2 = .104$. While vitality alone did not significantly predict likability ($b = -0.33, p = .132$), the interaction between accent and vitality was statistically significant, $b = 0.31, SE = 0.14, p = .027$. These results offer support for H5, showing that those who perceive the Spanish language and Latino identity as more socially and institutionally supported are more likely to evaluate Spanish-accented candidates positively. This finding aligns with theoretical expectations from Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT), which suggests that vitality perceptions shape intergroup evaluations based on language cues (see Table 6).

To further probe this dynamic, an additional model tested English vitality as a moderator. While the overall model remained significant ($F(3,600) = 23.28, p < .001, R^2 = .104$), the interaction between accent condition and English vitality was not significant ($b = 0.115, SE = 0.114, p = .311$), and English vitality itself did not predict likability of candidates ($b = -0.015, p = .935$). These findings suggest that perceived strength of English among FGL voters does not affect evaluations of Spanish-accented candidates, reinforcing that Spanish vitality—rather than English—drives in-group candidate preference.

⁸ Vitality scores were centered before creating the interaction term with accent, allowing the regression intercept to represent the expected outcome at the average level of perceived vitality.

Table 6. Regression Analysis Predicting Likability with Moderation by Perceived Ethnolinguistic Vitality

Variable	Beta	SE	95% CI		β	p
			LL	UL		
Intercept (Spanish)	5.648	0.173	5.308	5.988	—	<.001
Accent Condition	-0.845	0.109	-1.059	-0.631	-0.299	<.001
Vitality (Spanish Centered)	-0.330	0.219	-0.760	0.100	-0.182	.132
Accent x Spanish Vitality (Interaction)	0.310	0.140	0.036	0.584	0.268	.027
Intercept (English)	5.647	0.173	5.308	5.986	—	<.001
Vitality (English Centered)	-0.015	0.222	-0.451	0.422	-0.009	.935
Accent x English Vitality (Interaction)	0.115	0.114	-0.109	0.338	0.103	.311

Note. $N = 603$. Vitality scores were mean-centered. Accent Condition coded as 1 = Spanish-accented candidate, 2 = SAE.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This thesis examined how political candidates' accents influence the evaluations of first-generation Latino (FGL) voters in the United States. Guided by Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT; Giles et al., 1977, 1987), the study assessed whether a Spanish-accented English speaker would be evaluated more favorably than a Standard American English (SAE) speaker, especially in relation to key candidate traits—likability, competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill—and whether these effects were moderated by political ideology, ethnic identity, or perceived ethnolinguistic vitality. The study used an experimental design, including a pilot-tested set of accent stimuli, to test five hypotheses on a large, national sample of FGL voters ($N = 605$). The findings offer both expected and unexpected results that reveal the nuanced role of accent as a linguistic identity cue in political communication.

Consistent with hypothesis 1, FGL participants rated Spanish-accented candidates as significantly more likable than the SAE candidates. This aligns with previous work showing that language cues, in this case accents, can signal cultural proximity and rise favorable affective responses for in-group members (Dragojevic et al., 2018; Ocampo, 2018). Likability—a core affective trait linked to warmth, emotional resonance, and perceived relatability—appears particularly salient, reinforcing earlier findings that accent-based evaluations operate through heuristic, identity-driven pathways (Funk, 1999; Redlawsk et al., 2002). The strong statistical support for this effect ($d = 0.64$) confirms the importance of accent as an expressive, non-policy cue in shaping FGL voters' evaluations of a political candidate.

Contrary to predictions (H2), the Spanish-accented candidate was rated lower than the SAE-accented candidate on both competence and goodwill, while no significant difference emerged in trustworthiness. However, only the difference in goodwill reached statistical significance. For competence, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .067$),

though the small-to-moderate effect size ($d = 0.40$) suggests a possible bias in favor of SAE speakers. These findings complicate key assumptions from ethnolinguistic identity theory (ELIT) and political psychology, which predict that sharing a group identity—such as a Spanish accent among FGL voters—would lead to uniformly higher evaluations across traits (McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). While likability increased for the Spanish-accented candidate, competence and goodwill may have activated distinct evaluative heuristics. One possible explanation is that language-based stereotypes associating Standard American English with credibility, intelligence, or professionalism influenced how voters judged those traits (Lippi-Green, 2012; Dragojevic & Giles, 2016). These findings underscore that linguistic cues may not have uniform effects across all candidate evaluations and that traits like competence may be more vulnerable to social status expectations embedded in dominant language ideologies.

Hypothesis 3 was supported because political ideology moderated the effect of accent on candidate likability. Liberal participants rated Spanish-accented candidates more favorably than conservatives, which supports work showing that ideological orientation influences how open people are when it comes to cultural and linguistic diversity in political candidates (Hopkins, 2015; Collingwood et al., 2014). This interaction aligns with earlier studies indicating that progressive voters tend to value inclusivity markers such as language use and ethnic representation (Bedolla, 2005; Fraga et al., 2006). Still, it is worthy to mention that the Spanish-accented candidate was rated more likable than the SAE-accented candidate even among conservatives, suggesting that accent-based heuristics may carry affective weight even when ideological alignment is weaker.

Hypothesis 4, which predicted that ethnic identity strength would moderate the relationship between accent and candidate evaluations, was not supported. Despite prior findings linking ethnic identification to increased political engagement and in-group

preference (Hero et al., 1996; Shaw et al., 2000; Sánchez, 2006; Valdez, 2011), no significant interaction emerged. This null finding may reflect that identity salience was already high among FGL voters, leaving no room for differences to emerge, or it may indicate that accent cues are evaluated through more situational or context-specific mechanisms than previously theorized. It is also possible that the ethnic identity scale captured a broader personal orientation, whereas accent salience operates more situationally as a judgment cue. For instance, a participant might strongly affirm their ethnic identity in general (e.g., feeling proud of being Latino), but in the context of evaluating a political candidate, they might prioritize cues like accent only if those cues feel relevant in that specific moment—such as when the speaker reminds them of a family member, someone from their community, or when the speaker addressed Latino-salient issues.

Finally, Hypothesis 5 was supported: Perceived ethnolinguistic vitality of the Spanish language moderated the relationship between accent and likability, such that those who viewed Spanish as more socially valued and institutionally supported were more likely to rate the Spanish-accented candidate favorably. This finding reinforces one of ELIT's central claims: the strength of one's perceived group vitality influences not only identity salience but also evaluative processes (Giles et al., 1987; Bourhis et al., 1997). It also validates the use of a multi-item scale, Spanish-centered vitality measure, adapted from Bourhis et al. (1981), as a moderator of language-based candidate perceptions. In contrast, perceived vitality of English showed no such effect, further highlighting the specificity of Spanish-language group identity in shaping evaluative heuristics in the U.S. context.

Together, these results affirm that accent operates as a meaningful identity cue among FGL voters, but its influence varies depending on trait dimension and individual-level perceptions of language prestige and group identity. The Spanish accent increased likability—an affective, intuitive trait—more than it shifted credibility traits such as

competence or goodwill. Additionally, political ideology and perceived Spanish vitality enhanced the accent effect, while ethnic identity strength did not. These patterns offer a complex but revealing portrait of how linguistic identity influences political judgment in the United States' fastest-growing electoral demographic.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results of this study offer several implications for both theory and practice in political communication, particularly concerning the role of linguistic identity cues in voter evaluations and language minority groups. The findings reinforce key propositions of ELIT (Giles et al., 1977, 1987), especially in how perceived group vitality and language-based identity markers shape social judgments. The fact that a Spanish accent increased likability—particularly among liberal FGL voters and those who perceive Spanish as a socially valued and institutionally supported language—demonstrates that accent functions as a salient cue of in-group membership and social proximity. These patterns validate ELIT's central claim that language is more than a functional tool, it is a symbolic marker of affiliation, belonging, and group status.

At the same time, the inconsistent effects across speaker traits suggest that ELIT's assumptions may need refinement when applied to political candidate evaluations. While affective traits like likability responded to accent cues in theoretically predictable ways, evaluative traits such as competence and goodwill did not. This implies that accent may influence emotional judgments more readily than deliberative assessments of capability or caring, which is supported by dual-processing models of political cognition (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Redlawsk et al., 2002). Although goodwill reflects empathy and care, it is included as part of credibility in McCorskey and Teven's (1999) model, and goodwill may require more thinking about the speaker's values and intentions—unlike likability, which can be judged

quickly based on emotional reaction. For example, voters may use accent as a heuristic in low-information contexts to infer familiarity or warmth but rely more cautiously on other cognitive cues when forming judgments about trust or competence. In relation to Elaboration Likelihood Model, it is possible that likability is processed via more peripheral routes, whereas trust and competence require more central processing. Thus, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of ELIT's application by showing that linguistic identity cues may activate different evaluative pathways depending on the trait being assessed.

Moreover, the non-significant role of ethnic identity as a moderator challenges widely accepted assumptions that identity strength directly predicts favorable in-group evaluations. While prior work has found that strong ethnic identity among Latinos is associated with increased political engagement and responsiveness to co-ethnic cues (Sánchez, 2006; Valdez, 2011), much of this research operationalizes identity based on group membership labels (e.g., identifying as Latino or Mexican American), rather than measuring self-reported strength of ethnic identification. This distinction is crucial. Rather than asking participants to evaluate how important their ethnicity is to them personally, studies often infer ethnic identity from demographic variables, treating group membership as a proxy for identity salience. In contrast, the present study used a validated scale of self-ethnic identification, capturing subjective feelings of belonging, affirmation, and identity clarity. That no moderating effect emerged suggests that simply identifying as Latino is not equivalent to feeling a strong, salient ethnic identity in a way that affects political judgment. This may help explain why prior work and the current findings diverge and underscores the importance of differentiating between externally categorized group identity and self-reported identity strength when testing political communication effects.

From a practical standpoint, the results carry meaningful implications for campaign communication and minority candidate strategy. As the Latino electorate continues to grow,

understanding how FGL voters evaluate linguistic cues is critical for crafting inclusive and resonate political messaging. The finding that a Spanish-accent increased likability—especially among liberal voters—suggests that accent can serve as a bridge to signal shared background and authenticity. In media interviews, campaign ads, and public speaking, Latino candidates may find that preserving some elements of their Spanish-accented English could enhance emotional connection with FGL voters. These findings align with political messaging strategies that encourage culturally grounded appeals and in-group signaling to increase support and mobilization (Barreto, 2007; Holland & Gentry, 1999).

However, the unexpected findings—particularly the significant difference in goodwill and the non-significant trend in competence—point to a communication dilemma: while accent may build warmth and likability, it might simultaneously raise doubts about credibility or effectiveness in certain voter segments. Candidates navigating bicultural spaces may need to strategically balance authenticity and perceived professionalism, depending on the electoral context. This relates to prior work in sociolinguistics and minority representation that point to the tension between expressing cultural identity and adapting to dominant norms in political speech (Lippi-Green, 2012; Zentella, 2017). For political practitioners, these findings underscore the importance of tailoring messages not only by ethnicity, but also by linguistic variation, as accent salience may resonate more strongly than policy positions in certain contexts—and may carry more weight than simply identifying a candidate as Latino. In this thesis, how strongly participants identified with their ethnic background did not predict more likable evaluations, suggesting that linguistic cues like accent may operate more powerfully than ethnic labels alone when shaping candidate impressions. Future work may explore whether a Spanish accent could serve as a strategic tool for candidates already perceived as competence but struggling with likability. In such cases, signaling warmth or

shared identity through accent may enhance emotional connection with voters without harming credibility, especially if competence perceptions are already strong.

Ultimately, this study expands the toolkit for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand and engage first-generation Latino voters. It suggests that accents are not neutral—nor are they universally empowering or discrediting. Their political impact depends on voters’ ideological orientations, their perceptions of language group status, and the specific traits being evaluated in a candidate. These insights highlight the intersection of language, identity, and political communication as a growing area of scholarly and applied importance in an increasingly multilingual United States.

Unexpected Patterns and Alternative Explanations

While several hypotheses were supported in this study, other results did not match expectations. These unexpected outcomes—especially for competence, goodwill, and the role of ethnic identity strength—highlight the complex ways that accent and identity work together in how voters evaluate political candidates.

The most surprising finding came from hypothesis 2 because it challenged core aspects of ELIT. Although the Spanish-accented candidate was expected to be rated more positively across all traits—including competence and goodwill—participants rated the SAE-accented candidate higher on both traits. There was no significant difference in trustworthiness. This challenges the idea, grounded in ELIT, that accent as a group identity marker would always lead to more favorable evaluations, especially on traits like trusting the person, perceiving them having more goodwill, and being more competent in, for example, representing their interests as a group.

One possible explanation is that affective judgments like likability are more easily shaped by accent, while more deliberative traits such as competence and goodwill may

involve different standards or expectations from the listener. A key reason may be the influence of dominant language ideologies. Even for bilingual or bicultural voters, there may be a strong link between SAE and traits like professionalism, clarity, or education. These associations may not be conscious, but they reflect broader social messages that define SAE as the “correct” or “neutral” way to speak in public settings (Lippi-Green, 2012). While FGL voters may feel a cultural connection to the Spanish-accented speakers, they might still evaluate SAE speakers as more competent or capable, especially when judging leadership traits, such as for a person running for public office. Similar patterns have been found in previous work on language bias and accent perception (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Derwing & Munro, 2005). Therefore, while in-group accent cues may signal warmth, as manifested via likability, social expectations for the role of politician may trigger a need for candidates to adhere more to professional role expectations.

Another unexpected result came from hypothesis 4, which tested whether strength of ethnic identity would change how accent affected candidate evaluations. While earlier studies suggest that Latinos with strong ethnic identity are more likely to respond positively to in-group cues (Hero et al., 1996; Shaw et al., 2000; Sánchez, 2006; Valdez, 2011) like accent, no moderation effect appeared here. As discussed before, part of the reason may be how identity has been measured in past studies—often based on group labels instead of how participants actually feel and self-identify with their ethnicity. But another possibility is that ethnic identity is already important and active for most FGL voters, regardless of how high they score on a scale, creating a ceiling effect. In that case, it is important to consider the possibility that there may not have been enough variation for it to influence how accent was judged.

It is also possible that other factors not measured in this study played a role in how participants reacted to accent. For instance, political experience, bilingual fluency, or how

often someone hears Spanish-accented English in their community could shape their reactions to a candidate. Some voters may be more accustomed to different kinds of accents and judge based on message clarity or tone. Others might still expect “neutral” speech in politics, even if the speaker shares their background. These kinds of influences point to the need for future studies to examine how language experience, not just identity or ideology, affects political judgment.

A deeper explanation for the divergence in candidate trait evaluations may lie in individual differences in acculturation. Acculturation refers to how individuals adapt to and engage with a dominant host culture while managing their own cultural heritage (Berry, 1997). For FGL voters, those who have internalized dominant U.S. cultural norms may associate Standard American English with authority, professionalism, or “fitting in.” This may partly explain the small-to-moderate trend favoring the SAE-accented candidate in competence evaluations. Meanwhile, voters who more strongly maintain heritage ties may see the Spanish accent as a cue of shared experience, enhancing emotional evaluations like likability. These varying orientations toward cultural identity could affect which candidate traits—competence, goodwill, or likability—are prioritized when making judgments.

These interpretations are further supported by Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which argues that individuals adapt their communication to align with others based on identity, group norms, and context (Giles et al., 1991). In political contexts, accommodation can be perceived not only in how candidates speak, but in whether they seem to match communicative expectations tied to leadership and public credibility. For some FGL voters, SAE may represent upward mobility or cultural alignment with dominant institutions, enhancing perceptions of competence or trust. For others, maintaining a Spanish accent may be interpreted as resisting assimilation and affirming group solidarity. Thus, reactions to accent are not simply about in-group identification (as predicted by ELIT), but also about

perceived alignment with cultural and communicative norms. Together, acculturation and accommodation offer a more layered framework for understanding why accent may boost likability while producing weaker or even reverse effects on traits like competence.

Political ideology among FGL voters may also shape how they interpret and respond to accent cues. Ideological leanings influence not just policy preferences but also broader orientations toward diversity, cultural inclusion, and norms of assimilation (Hopkins, 2015; Jost et al., 2003). Liberal-leaning FGL voters may be more receptive to linguistic diversity and interpret a Spanish accent as a sign of cultural authenticity or social solidarity, especially on traits like likability. In contrast, because conservatism is typically linked with maintaining the status quo and social order (Back & Lindholm, 2014), conservative-leaning FGL voters may place greater emphasis on assimilation to dominant norms, including standardized speech, which could reinforce a preference for SAE-accented speakers on traits associated with competence or credibility. This ideological lens may intersect with acculturation and language identity in meaningful ways, helping explain why accent effects vary depending on the trait and the listener's evaluative framework.

Overall, these results remind us that accent is not a simple cue. It can create warmth and connection for some traits, but not necessarily for others. Accent effects are shaped by what is being judged and by the broader social and cultural context. Rather than seeing these null or reversed results as failures, they help scholars and practitioners better understand when and how accent matters—and why voters might respond in different ways depending on what they are listening for, which is important in a more multilingual and multicultural American society.

Contributions to Political Communication and Language Research

This study contributes to both political communication and sociolinguistic research by providing new insights into how accent cues influence candidate evaluations among first-generation Latino (FGL) voters in the United States. While much of the existing research has explored ethnicity, language, or identity separately, this thesis integrates these factors through an experimental framework grounded in Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT). The study's findings reinforce the idea that accent is not a peripheral feature of speech, but rather a central identity signal with the capacity to shape affective and trait-based evaluations in political contexts.

A key contribution is the use of experimentally validated audio stimuli that isolated accent from content, allowing a cleaner test of how voters react to a Spanish accent versus a SAE accent. This methodological approach builds on and extends earlier studies on language-based candidate perceptions by offering experimental control and focusing specifically on FGL voters—a group that has been understudied in this domain despite their growing electoral influence among the Latino demographic in the United States. By testing five different hypotheses and using moderation models tied to political ideology, ethnic identity, and perceived ethnolinguistic vitality, the study expands the empirical application of ELIT into political psychology and campaign communication research.

This research also contributes to an evolving understanding of bilingual and bicultural voter behavior. Rather than assuming that ethnic group membership alone predicts attitudes toward candidates, this study shows that the social meaning of linguistic cues—such as accent—is filtered through voters' ideology and language perceptions. In particular, the role of perceived Spanish vitality in moderating accent effects highlights the importance of how voters perceive the social status and future strength of their linguistic group. This offers a more dynamic and context-aware view of identity-based political judgment, building on and moving beyond traditional demographic predictors.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings support and refine ELIT by demonstrating that accent cues may differentially affect warmth-related traits (likability) versus credibility-related traits (competence, trust, goodwill), and that these effects are contingent upon individual-level variables. Rather than treating ELIT as a one-size-fits-all model, this thesis emphasizes the conditional nature of language cue processing and illustrates how linguistic identity interacts with broader political and social factors. These insights suggest new directions for theorizing about group identity and language in democratic decision-making.

Practically, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how candidates might strategically manage or express their linguistic identity in public communication. Given the increasing ethnic and linguistic diversity of the U.S. electorate, understanding how accent functions in political messaging has real implications for outreach, mobilization, and representation. The finding that accent can increase likability while raising questions about competence and goodwill highlights the importance of situational and audience-based adaptation—especially for minority candidates operating in bilingual or bicultural environments trying to win over Latino voters.

Overall, this thesis offers a new perspective at the intersection of language, identity, and political behavior. It advances experimental research in communication and provides a platform for future studies to explore multilingual campaign environments, language minority voter groups, and more nuanced conceptualizations of linguistic and ethnic identity. As the field of political communication continues to reckon with diversity and representation, the contributions of this work help clarify the role of linguistic cues in shaping voter attitudes in increasingly multicultural political landscapes in the United States and abroad.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with any research, this thesis has limitations that should be acknowledged to frame the findings accurately and guide future lines of research. These limitations reflect the nature of the design, sample, and context, and recognizing these limitations strengthen the contributions of the work as any social science survey experiment.

First, this research was conducted using an experimental design, which allows for strong internal validity by isolating the manipulation but limits the ability to generalize the findings to broader real-world contexts. Participants evaluated fictional candidates based on carefully controlled audio stimuli in an online survey setting. While this control enabled isolation of the accent variable, it does not fully reflect the complexity of real political campaigns, where voters are exposed to multiple overlapping cues—such as party affiliation, policy stances, media coverage, knowledge of each candidate, among others. Future studies could incorporate some of these elements in multimedia formats to more closely emulate the context in which political judgments are formed.

Second, based on pilot testing, one speaker's four recordings (two recordings each for Spanish accent and SAE conditions) advanced to the main study. The study relied on one speaker to produce both accent conditions. Although the audio recordings were tested for accent thickness, comprehensibility, and country of origin in a pilot study, and produced distinct scores, ultimately the use of a single speaker means the main study recordings may have lacked a broader range of voice quality, tone, or delivery. These factors limit, to some extent, the linguistic variation across conditions, since only one speaker ultimately provided recordings that met the quality standards for inclusion in the main study. While having the same speaker voice both accent conditions allowed for a clean comparison and reflects real world code-switching of bilinguals, the limitation lies in the lack of speaker diversity. Ideally, the final stimuli would have included multiple speakers per accent condition, offering broader representation of voice characteristics and speech patterns. Future research should replicate

the design using multiple speakers and vocal styles to assess whether findings hold across different voices. In particular, future research could benefit from manipulating combinations of speaker origin (e.g., Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican) and accent to examine their independent and interactive effects. One speaker could be U.S. born of Latino descent speaking with a Spanish accented English, while another could be a Spanish-born speaker with SAE accent. Including a more diverse sample of audio from different speakers and country backgrounds could help researchers understand how perceived nativeness, regional variation on Spanish speaking countries, and ethnic background influence candidate evaluations. Additionally, the inclusion of both male and female speakers would allow researchers to examine potential gender-accent and candidate evaluation interactions. These expanded additions to a survey experiment would help test whether observed effects are speaker-specific or if they generalize across a diversity of sociolinguistic profiles.

Third, this thesis focused on four candidate traits—likability, competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill—based on their relevance in political communication research. While these measures are well-established and meaningful, they do not capture the full range of cognitive and emotional responses that may be triggered by linguistic cues. Future studies could expand outcome variables to include behavioral intentions, such as vote choice, or sociolinguistic measures looking at language attitudes to better understand perceptions of language superiority, attractiveness, and dynamism (Zahn & Hopper, 1985)

Fourth, although the sample was sizeable and geographically diverse, it focused solely on self-identified first-generation Latino voters in the United States. This demographic choice was intentional, given the study's interest in accent perception within this group. However, results may not generalize to second- or third-generation Latinos, or other bilingual groups in the United States. Follow-up research could examine how language attitudes vary across generational status, educational background, or level of Spanish/English proficiency. Prior

research shows that ethnic identity and political behavior often shifts across generations, with FGL typically maintaining stronger linguistic and cultural ties than later generations (Pantoja et al., 2001; Pew Research Center, 2004; Moore et al., 2008). Generational effects will be particularly important as more FGL have children and as the proportion of Latinos in the United States continues to increase.

Finally, while Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (ELIT) served as a guiding framework, future work may benefit from integrating other theories related to social identity, Communication Accommodation theory, or political psychology. Accent is a multi-layered cue, and voter responses are likely shaped by more than one framework or orientation. Additional theoretical perspectives could deepen the field's understanding of how language and identity shape political attitudes.

Overall, acknowledging these limitations provides a clearer view of the strengths and boundaries of this research. By pointing out where additional work is needed, this thesis opens up new questions and lines of inquiry that can contribute to a more complete understanding of language, identity, and political candidate evaluation in an increasingly multilingual and diverse electorate in the United States and abroad.

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Appendix A – Audio Recording Transcript from Zárate et al., (2024)

[AUDIO TRANSCRIPT] “Thank you all for being here. As your state representative I have worked tirelessly to represent your interests. I am here to listen to your concerns and make sure the government addresses your needs. You can trust me for this job. Together, we can keep up the work of improving our schools, rebuilding our infrastructure, and bringing this great community closer together. If given the opportunity, I would be honored to continue representing you. I’m counting on each one of you so that we can forge ahead and make our vision for our district and our great state a reality”.

Appendix B – Reyesen Likability Scale

Instructions: In a scale from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree), indicate your level of agreement with the following statement in relation to the audio you hear before.

This person is friendly

This person is likeable

This person is warm

This person is approachable

I would ask this person for advice

I would like this person as a coworker

I would like to be friends with this person

This person is similar to me

This person is knowledgeable

Appendix C – Source Credibility Measures

Instructions: On the scales below, indicate your feelings about the speaker you just listen to.

Numbers 1 and 7 indicate a very strong feeling. Numbers 2 and 6 indicate a strong feeling.

Numbers 3 and 5 indicate a fairly weak feeling. Number 4 indicates you are undecided.

Intelligent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Unintelligent

Untrained 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trained

Cares about me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Doesn't care about me

Honest 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Dishonest

Has my interests at heart 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Doesn't have my interests at heart

Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy

Inexpert 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Expert

Self-centered 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Not self-centered

Concerned with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Not concerned with me

Honorable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Dishonorable

Informed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Uninformed

Moral 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Immoral

Incompetent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Competent

Unethical 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Ethical

Insensitive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Sensitive

Bright 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Stupid

Phony 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Genuine

Not understanding 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Understanding

Passive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Active

Shy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Talkative

Aggressive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Unaggressive

Hesitant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Enthusiastic

Weak 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strong

Unsure 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Confident

Lazy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Energetic

Appendix D – Political Ideology

Please, indicate where you identify yourself regarding your political ideology in a scale from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative).

Very liberal	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Very conservative
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Appendix E – Ethnic Identity Scale-Brief

Instructions: The next questions focus on your experiences related to your ethnicity in the past 30 days. As you answer these questions, think about the ethnic group that you feel most a part of. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions, we just want to know more about your opinions and experiences. Please fill in one response for each item.

	Does not describe me at all	Describes me a little	Describes me well	Describes me very well
1. I am clear about what my ethnicity means to me.	1	2	3	4
2. I have attended events that have helped me learn more about my ethnicity.	1	2	3	4
3. I have read books/magazines/newspapers or other materials that have taught me about my ethnicity.	1	2	3	4
4. I feel negatively about my ethnicity.	1	2	3	4
5. I wish I were of a different ethnicity.	1	2	3	4
6. I know what my ethnicity means to me.	1	2	3	4
7. I have participated in activities that have taught me about my ethnicity.	1	2	3	4
8. I dislike my ethnicity.	1	2	3	4
9. I have a clear sense of what my ethnicity means to me.	1	2	3	4

Appendix F – Ethnolinguistic Vitality Scale

The following questionnaire asks what you know about certain groups in the United States. You may feel that you have insufficient information at your immediate disposal to answer the questions, yet it is your own *impressions* that I am interested in. This will be a comparison between groups. Please answer each item based on *your impressions*.

European descendant means: Individuals of European descent trace their ancestry primarily to countries in continental Europe, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Ireland, Italy, among others.

Latino descendant refers to: Individuals whose ancestry originates from countries in Latin America or Spanish and Portuguese origins—including Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

1) How highly regarded English language is in the United States?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 5 7 Extremely high

2) How highly regarded Spanish language is in the United States?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 5 7 Extremely high

3) How highly regarded is each language *internationally*?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Extremely high

English Speakers

Spanish Speakers

4) How often are the following languages used in the United States *government services* (e.g., health clinics, Social Security offices)?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Exclusive

English Speakers

Spanish Speakers

5) Estimate the **birth rates** of the following group is in the United States:

Well below the replacement rate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Well above the replacement rate

People of European descent

People of Latino descent

6) How much control do the following groups have over **economic** and **business** matters in the United States?

None at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Exclusive

People of Latino descent

People of European descent

7) How well-represented are the following languages in the United States **media** (eg., TV, radio, newspapers)?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Extremely well

English

Spanish

8) How highly regarded are the following groups in the United States?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Extremely high

People of European descent

People of Latino descent

9) In all parts of the United States where the following groups live, to what extent are they in majority or minority?

Very small minority 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very high majority

People of Latino descent

People of European descent

10) How much are the following language taught in U.S. *schools*?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Exclusively

English

Spanish

11) How many of the following groups *immigrate* into the United States each year?

None at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Exclusively

People of Latino descent

People of European descent

12) To what extent do the following *marry only* within their own groups?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Exclusively

People of European descent

People of Latino descent

13) How well-represented are the following languages in U.S. *business* institutions?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Exclusively

English

Spanish

14) How many of the following groups emigrate from the United States to other countries each year?

None at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very many

People of Latino descent

People of European descent

15) How proud of their cultural history and achievements are the following groups in the United States?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Extremely

People of European descent

People of Latino descent

16) How frequently are the following languages used in the U.S. **churches** and places of religious worship?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Exclusively

English

Spanish

17) How well-represented are the following groups in the cultural life of the United States (eg., festivals, concerts, art exhibitions)?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Extremely

People of Latino descent

People of English descent

18) How **societal influence** do you feel the following groups are in the United States?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Extremely

People of European descent

People of Latino descent

19) How **wealthy** do you feel the following groups are in the United States?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Extremely

People of Latino descent

People of European descent

20) How **societal influence** do you feel the following groups will be 20 to 30 years from now?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Extremely

People of European descent

People of Latino descent

21) In general, how much contact is there between people of European and Latino descent?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much

Appendix G – Demographic Questions

Now you are going to be asked about your demographic information.

1) With which gender do you identify?

Male

Female

Non-binary

Prefer not to say

Other (Please specify)

2) Please select your age range:

18 to 24 years old

25 to 34 years old

35 to 44 years old

45 to 54 years old

55 to 64 years old

65 to 74 years olds

75 to 84 years old

85 and older

3) Which is the highest education level you have earned?

Less than high school

High school graduate

Vocational or technical training

College university (no degree completed)

Associate's degree

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Ph.D. or J.D.

4) What was the estimated annual income in your household during 2024?

Less than \$20,000

\$20,000 - \$39,000

\$40,000 - \$59,000

\$60,000 - \$79,000

\$80,000 - \$99,000

\$100,000 - \$150,000

More than \$150,000

I don't know

I prefer not to answer

5) What is your employment status?

Full-time

Part-time

Unemployed

Prefer not to answer

6) Please, among the following political parties with political representation in the United States, select the one you feel closer to:

Democratic Party

Republican Party

Neither

Other (please indicate below)

Appendix H – Manipulation Check Items

1. Where is the speaker from?

Colombia

Spain

America

Russia

England

India

South Africa

Australia

2. Consider the speaker's accent. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 = not at all and 7 = extremely thick. How thick or noticeable was the speaker's accent?

1, not at all thick or noticeable

2, marginally

3, somewhat

4, moderately thick and noticeable

5, markedly

6, very

7, extremely thick and noticeable

3. How easy was to understand the speaker? 1 = extremely difficult. 9=extremely easy

Extremely difficult 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Extremely easy