Foreign Language Ballots Are A Bad Idea

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The U.S. Department of Justice took time out from its war on terrorists this month to order local election boards all across the country to publish ballots for the November election in various foreign languages. The law requires that if more than 5 percent or more than 10,000 of voting-age citizens in a county don't speak English, the county must follow the language-access provisions of the Voting Rights Act and translate election materials into their language.
The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was one of the big achievements of the civil rights movement of the sixties, but the black Americans who were supposed to be the beneficiaries of that movement all speak English. The act was hijacked by a 1975 amendment that added a "language minority" section.

Only U.S. citizens may legally vote. In order to become a naturalized American citizen, our laws require that you demonstrate "an understanding of the English language, including an ability to read, write and speak . . . simple words and phrases . . . in ordinary usage in the English language."

Printing ballots in foreign languages is fundamentally anti- democratic because fair elections depend on public debate on the issues and candidates. People who don't understand the public debate are subject to manipulation by political-action groups that can mislead them in language translations and then tell them how to vote.

Nevertheless, the Department of Justice has ordered more than 335 jurisdictions in 30 states to provide ballots, signs, registration forms, and informational brochures in foreign languages. This unfunded mandate will cost the states at least $27 million.

Denver and seven other Colorado counties must print election ballots in Spanish (as well as English) at a cost to Denver of an additional $80,000 to $100,000 for ballots and translators. Two Colorado counties must provide language services for Navajo and Ute residents.

Counties required to provide Vietnamese ballots include Harris County, Texas, and three in California: Los Angeles, Orange and Santa Clara. Santa Clara County prints ballots in Vietnamese, Chinese, Spanish and Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines.

San Mateo County must print ballots in Spanish and Chinese. Alameda County prints ballots in Spanish and Chinese and may have to add Tagalog, Dari and Punjabi.

Los Angeles prints ballots in seven languages: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese, as well as English. The registrar says she is preparing to add Cambodian.

Montgomery County, Maryland must offer ballots in Spanish. Counties with percentages of Hispanics that will soon trigger this mandate include Prince George's in Maryland and Arlington and Fairfax in Virginia.

For the first time this year, voters in Queens, New York must provide ballots in Korean. Ballots in Chinese and Spanish have already been in use in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens.

Cook County, Illinois must provide ballots in Chinese as well as Spanish. There is some concern about which Chinese language the ballots should be written in because there are many languages in China.

Nationwide, more than 220 jurisdictions must provide election materials in Spanish, more than 100 in the languages of American Indians or Alaskan natives, and more than 15 in Asian languages.

The Voting Rights Act is actually very discriminatory. It doesn't cover all immigrants who don't speak English; it applies only to "those language minorities that have suffered a history of exclusion from the political process: Spanish, Asian, Native American, and Alaskan Native."

Assistant U.S. Attorney General Ralph F. Boyd said that "the Department of Justice is now engaged in an aggressive campaign to make sure citizens who require language assistance to vote receive the assistance they need." It's unfortunate that the Justice Department isn't just as aggressive in making sure that votes are not cast by persons ineligible, such as those who are dead, noncitizens, not registered, moved away, registered in more than one jurisdiction (in 2000, hundreds voted in both Florida and New York), felons, mentally incompetent, or living in nursing homes where their vote is co-opted and cast by someone else.

Alabama has pointed the way to making a state's election process more honest and fair. It has just completed a 13-year project to clean up the voter rolls by removing more than 150,000 persons who are dead and 50,000 who have moved away.

When the Alabama project started, more than a dozen counties had more registered voters listed than adult inhabitants. The clean-up project removed about 10 percent of names from Alabama's voter rolls, more than enough to determine many an election result.

Failure to purge ineligible persons from the voter lists is an open door to fraud. In the primary for Pennsylvania Governor on May 21, Philadelphia Democrats handed out a record $450,000 in election-day "street money."