Foreign Language Ballots Cause a Rebellion

by Phyllis Schlafly July 5, 2006

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The Washington Establishment is shocked at the discovery that Americans don't like the idea of the federal government forcing local governments to provide foreign language ballots. That's one more indication of how out of touch our leaders are with grassroots America.

For many months, the Establishment had planned a legislative coup to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act for a whopping 25 years (even though it isn't due to expire until 2007). Passage had been confidently announced on May 2 in a bipartisan photo-op news conference on the Capitol steps.

The media were on board. The President was in sync. No need, the powers-that-be thought, to have hearings or public debate.

No need, even, to allow Members of Congress to offer amendments to the bill. So the Rules Committee, exercising its presumed wisdom, ruled against such impertinence.

The Washington Post described the reaction as a "GOP rebellion" that surprised people with its "intensity." Those of us in the hinterland are not surprised by the intensity of feeling on this subject, but we are pleasantly encouraged that Republican Members had the gumption to stage a rebellion.

For that, we can credit Rep. Steve King (R-IA) who got 80 House Republicans to sign his letter demanding deletion of the sections of the Voting Rights Act that require state and local governments to print ballots in foreign languages. The letter said in part, "The multilingual ballot mandate encourages the linguistic division of our nation and contradicts the Melting Pot ideal that has made us the most successful multi-ethnic nation on earth."

On May 18, the usually pompous Senate, by 62 to 35, passed the Inhofe amendment to make English our official language and declare that no one has an affirmative right to receive government services in a language other than English. Remarkably, this happened in the midst of the Senate's consideration of the Kennedy-McCain bill to import 66 million foreigners who don't speak English.

Public opinion is clearly on the side of the English language: 27 states have adopted English language laws. A Zogby poll reported that 79 percent of Americans favor making English our official language.

Foreign language ballots make no sense since only U.S. citizens can vote, and foreigners can't be naturalized unless they demonstrate "the ability to read, write, and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language."

The Voting Rights Act, first passed in 1965 and reauthorized several times, is a civil rights landmark whose purpose was to assure that blacks will not be denied the right to vote. Although blacks do not need, and never needed, foreign language ballots, the law was hijacked during its 1975 reauthorization by foreign-language pressure groups who had other political goals.

We have many problems with election machinery, but preventing blacks from voting is no longer one of them. The Voting Rights Act has long since served its original purpose and today is anachronistic and highly discriminatory against nine states that are still required to get Justice Department approval if they make the slightest change in any voting procedure.

Some make the argument that we need to provide foreign language ballots in order to accommodate native-born Americans who don't speak English. But that argument actually cuts in favor of Rep. King's amendment.

To any extent that it is true that we have large numbers of native-born Americans who don't speak English, this means that immigrants are not assimilating into the American culture but instead are keeping their native tongue into the second and third generations. All the more reason why we should provide inducements to learning English such as printing ballots only in English.

America should not become a nation where immigrants continue to live in neighborhoods where they only associate with and do business with others who speak a foreign language, and let their children grow up without learning English. The result is that young people grow up isolated both from the country their parents left behind and from the culture of their adopted country.

The public schools used to be the vehicle by which the children of millions of immigrants from all over the world became Americanized into good and valuable citizens. In recent generations, the public schools have failed miserably in their duty to teach English to the children of immigrants, instead allowing them to speak their native tongue in a system of language apartheid (a.k.a. bilingual education).

Those who demand foreign language ballots are having a petty tantrum like French President Chirac who, although he speaks fluent English, deliberately spoke only French in a one-to-one interview with President Bush last year, requiring Bush to have an interpreter.

Congress will make a terrible mistake if the leadership doesn't allow Members to vote on Steve King's amendment to delete the requirement for foreign language ballots from the Voting Rights Act. We don't want to be a bilingual nation and suffer the problems of other countries with "linguistic division."