Time To Terminate Foreign-Language Ballots

by Phyllis Schlafly Mar. 22, 2006

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Led by the two House Kings, Peter King (R-NY) and Steve King (R-IA), 56 House members are urging Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) to oppose the renewal of the section of the Voting Rights Act that mandates foreign-language ballots. The Kings say that these ballots "divide our country, increase the risk of voter error and fraud, and burden local taxpayers."

Their letter correctly explains that foreign-language ballots encourage linguistic separatism (which would give us problems like Canada has with the French language) and "contradict the Melting Pot ideal that has made us the most successful multi-ethnic nation on earth."

Foreign-language ballots don't make civic sense. You can't vote unless you are a citizen (at least you are not supposed to). To become a naturalized American citizen, our law requires 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."

Foreign-speaking citizens have the same legal protection of their right to vote as have millions of English-speaking American illiterates. They can request

assistance in the polling place, or take a crib sheet or interpreter into the booth, or get an absentee ballot and use help in translating it.

The use of ballots in multiple languages greatly increases the likelihood of errors because of difficulty in translations. In a 1993 election, New York City mistakenly printed Chinese language ballots with "no" in place of "yes," and in a 2000 election, six polling places in Queens, NY, reversed "Democratic" and "Republican."

Foreign-language ballots are an open invitation to fraud because the Voting Rights Act requires foreign-language election information, notices, forms, instructions, and assistance in addition to ballots. This, plus the widespread availability of voter pamphlets and absentee ballot applications, gives unscrupulous party operatives countless ways to deceive voters about the issues and the candidates, and increases the likelihood that non-citizens will vote illegally.

Foreign-language ballots are a direct attack on our "civic unity," which the late Honorable Barbara Jordan said must be promoted by public policies that override the problems posed by our cultural and religious diversity. She added, "Such policies should help people learn to speak, read, and write English effectively." The right to vote should function as a motivation to immigrants to learn English.

The 56 Congressmen are also correct that foreign-language ballots are a burden on local taxpayers. Remember how the new Republican Congress elected in 1994 promised to rid us of unfunded mandates?

Foreign-language ballots are a good place to start because they function like a tax that Congress imposes on state and local taxpayers in the 466 local jurisdiction across 31 states that must provide foreign-language ballots.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that Los Angeles County taxpayers spent $1.1 million to provide ballots and election materials in five languages in 1996, escalating to $3.3 million in seven languages in March 2002. In several counties, the cost of foreign-language ballots is more than half the entire election expense.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which is coming up for reauthorization next year, was an important civil rights law because it eliminated barriers that historically had kept many black citizens from voting. The blacks didn't and don't need foreign-language ballots but, during the law's reauthorization in 1975, it was hijacked by those who wanted to pander to foreign-speaking minorities.

The choice of minorities is very discriminatory. The foreign-language mandate was limited to Americans of "Spanish Heritage," Asian Americans, American Indians, and Alaskan Natives, while Italian, German, French and other languages are excluded from the law.

Before each election, the Department of Justice issues regulations that require states and counties to provide foreign-language ballots if more than 5 percent or more than 10,000 of voting-age citizens belong to one of the favored language groups.

The number and the complexity of languages makes the mandate for foreign-language ballots completely impractical. For example, there might be enough Filipinos to meet the threshold for foreign-language ballots, but the Filipinos themselves may speak any one of mutually unintelligible languages.

The self-proclaimed National Commission on the Voting Rights Act (a private group), which includes such partisan activists as Bill Lann Lee, John H. Buchanan, and Harvard Professor Charles Ogletree, slyly admits that it doesn't want Congress to make the foreign-language section permanent because it would be vulnerable to

constitutional challenge as "race conscious." These partisans just want to continue the fiction that this section is "temporary."

The foreign-language sections of the Voting Rights Act should be allowed to expire next year. This will be a major step toward more honest elections and the achievement of our national motto, e pluribus unum.

Letter from 56 House Members. (PDF)

Further reading: English Language