Foreign Language Ballots Are a Bad Idea

Federal law requires that if more than 5 percent (or 10,000 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. Foreign language ballots are a terrible idea and, furthermore, they don't make any sense.

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.

How did we get foreign language ballots? 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.

In the 2002 election, the Department of Justice ordered more than 335 jurisdictions in 30 states to provide ballots, signs, registration forms, and informational brochures in foreign languages. This unfunded mandate cost the states at least $27 million.

Denver and seven other Colorado counties were required to 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 had to provide language services for Navajo and Ute residents.

Counties required to provide Vietnamese ballots in 2002 included Harris County, Texas, and three in California: Los Angeles, Orange and Santa Clara. Santa Clara County printed ballots in Vietnamese, Chinese, Spanish and Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines. San Mateo County printed ballots in Spanish and Chinese. Alameda County printed ballots in Spanish and Chinese.

Queens, New York provided ballots in Korean. Ballots in Chinese and Spanish were used in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. Cook County, Illinois must provide ballots in Chinese as well as Spanish.

Los Angeles printed ballots in seven languages: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese, as well as English. Montgomery County, Maryland offered ballots in Spanish. Counties with percentages of Hispanics that may have to provide Spanish-language ballots in 2004 include Prince George's in Maryland and Arlington and Fairfax in Virginia.

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."

The requirement for foreign language ballots is always aggressively monitored and enforced by the Department of Justice. I wish the Department would be just as aggressive in making sure that votes are not cast by persons ineligible, such as those who are dead, non-citizens, 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 coopted and cast by someone else.