

English Is Broken Here

JOHN MILLER

Here we present two arguments for making English the United States' official language. The first is English Is Broken Here, a 1996 article by John Miller. It originally appeared in Policy Review, a journal of the Heritage Foundation, a public policy think-tank whose mission is to "formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense." Miller also writes for the National Review, a conservative weekly magazine. His book, *The Unmaking of Americans: How Multiculturalism Has Undermined the Assimilation Ethic*, was published in 1998. We also include here a USA Today analysis of the Bureau's 1990 Census language data, compiled by ProEnglish, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to "educate the public about the need to protect English as our common language and to make it the official language of the United States." (You can access ProEnglish's Web site through <www.norton.com/writelanguage>.) As you read, think about how these selections use different rhetorical formats to make similar arguments.

CALIFORNIA'S YUBA COUNTY is getting ready to spend \$12,000 this November on election materials that nobody will use. That's because the federal government forces local officials to print voting information in Spanish for every election. "Bilingual ballots are an enormous waste of county resources," says Frances Fairley, Yuba County's registrar of voters. In last March's primary election, this county north of Sacramento was forced to spend \$17,411 on Spanish-language election materials. But, according to Fairley, "In my 16 years on this job, I have received only one request for Spanish literature from any of my constituents." The biggest problem with bilingual ballots, however, is not that they go unused in Yuba County, but that they are used in so many other places. Thousands of Americans are voting in foreign languages, even though naturalized citizens are required to know English. The National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium estimates, for instance, that 31 percent of Chi-

nese-American voters in some form of bilingual these figures may be over are devastating to democracy noted in congressional testimony acceptable cost by degradation lost in a country whose is incomprehensible to him. A nation noted for its certain instruments of unity from overturning the unimportant, is the English multireligious society together, but it must be the one of the vital places in must be the official language. It is not, however, an to New York City can pin tion. The Voting Rights Act places, particularly the S from electoral participation But as Manhattan Institute comprehensive book *Which* tant piece of civil rights legislation. After the Act's passage, when the law can tions argued that English tests. People whose first in order to vote, they claim sheer quackery. Literacy pose of keeping blacks mainly due to the fact that intelligible to vote. Nevertheless, Congress ballots in any political di-

I, plinius/unum Latin word "one,"

hese-American voters in New York City and 14 percent in San Francisco used some form of bilingual assistance in the November 1994 elections. Though these figures may be overstated, proportions anywhere near this magnitude are devastating to democracy. As Boston University president John Silber noted in congressional testimony last April, bilingual ballots "impose an unacceptable cost by degrading the very concept of the citizen to that of some-

one lost in a country whose public discourse is incomprehensible to him."

A nation noted for its diversity needs certain instruments of unity to keep the pluribus from overturning the unum.¹ Our common

citizenship is one such tool. Another, equally important, is the English language. It binds our multiethnic, multiracial, and multireligious society together. Not everyone need speak English all of the time, but it must be the lingua franca of civic life. Since the voting booth is one of the vital places in which citizens directly participate in democracy, it must be the official language of the election process.

It is not, however, and political jurisdictions ranging from Yuba County to New York City can pin this mess on the perversion of voting-rights legislation. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 guaranteed blacks the right to vote in places, particularly the South, where they had been systematically blocked from electoral participation, often through the use of bogus "literacy tests." But as Manhattan Institute scholar Abigail Thernstrom has shown in her comprehensive book *Whose Votes Count?*, it did not take long for this important piece of civil rights legislation to expand in dangerous ways.

After the Act's passage in 1965, civil rights groups toiled to expand its authority. When the law came up for reauthorization in 1975, Hispanic organizations argued that English-language ballots were the equivalent of literacy tests. People whose first language was Spanish needed special protections in order to vote, they claimed, citing low turnout among Hispanics. This was sheer quackery. Literacy tests in the South were used for the fraudulent purpose of keeping blacks away from elections. Low Hispanic turnout was mainly due to the fact that so many Hispanics were not citizens and therefore ineligible to vote.

Nevertheless, Congress sided with the activists. It required bilingual ballots in any political district where "language minorities" made up at least 1. pluribus/unum Latin words from the national motto of the United States, *E pluribus unum*, which means "from the many, one." *Pluribus* means "many," and *unum* means "one."

United States' official language. It originally appeared in Miller. It originally appeared in public policy think-tank whose ilic policies based on the principles of National Review, a conservative ns: How Multiculturalism Has 998. We also include here a USA data, compiled by ProEnglish, a public about the need to protect official language of the United States (www.norton.com/writelle/language>). renl rhetorical formats to make

ady to spend \$12,000 this No- dy will use. ment forces local officials to election. of county resources," says rs. ny north of Sacramento was ection materials. But, accord- received only one request for , however, is not that they go ed in so many other places. anguages, even though natu- . The National Asian Pacific ance, that 31 percent of Chi-

pass the test. So why do we Day? Meanwhile, foreign-l grants that assimilation is r A popular antidote to l language of the United Stat ficial bird—it's essentially advocates in Congress hav lot laws or federal funding Alaska opened hearing proudly announced that "th bilingual and native langu of our national language p going to change a thing. In a speech to the 1995 publican presidential candc recognized as America's of gual ballots. As a senator i In August, the House o the federal government's i the Voting Rights Act. It w non-English voting materi Nor would it stop voters fr companion bill, however, l There is a long tradit often printed in languages to their readers in the for how to vote. In the absenc and expand. Perhaps we s into the booth, just as blir open to people who have t that English—or even br can democracy.

pass the test. So why do we assume they lose their English skills on Election Day? Meanwhile, foreign-language voting sends one more message to immigrants that assimilation is not an important part of civil society.

A popular antidote to bilingual ballots is declaring English the official language of the United States. But that is like declaring the bald eagle its official bird—it's essentially symbolic. Many self-proclaimed official-English advocates in Congress have no intention of repealing foreign-language ballot laws or federal funding of bilingual education. When Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska opened hearings on an official-English bill last December, he proudly announced that "the bill does not affect existing laws which provide bilingual and native language instruction. Those statutes are integral parts of our national language policy." Message to civil rights activists: We're not going to change a thing.

In a speech to the 1995 American Legion convention in Indianapolis, Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole announced that "English must be recognized as America's official language." But he said nothing about bilingual ballots. As a senator in 1992, Dole voted to expand their use.

In August, the House of Representatives passed a bill that would repeal the federal government's unfunded bilingual ballot mandate by amending the Voting Rights Act. It would not deny local communities the right to print non-English voting materials, should they choose to pay for it themselves. Nor would it stop voters from taking punch cards into the election booth. No companion bill, however, has been introduced in the Senate.

There is a long tradition in the United States of ethnic newspapers—often printed in languages other than English—providing political guidance to their readers in the form of sample ballots and visual aids that explain how to vote. In the absence of bilingual ballots, this practice could continue and expand. Perhaps we should also allow voters to bring a friend or relative into the booth, just as blind voters can do. The polling place would remain open to people who have trouble with English, but it also would remind them that English—or even broken English—is the common language of America. can democracy.

of the district's citizens
2 presidential election. It
made available to voters
nation had an "illiteracy
e," a trait that includes
interestingly, "language
characteristic), but by
"persons who are Amer-
of Spanish heritage."
Little Italy in New York
social assistance. By the
of federal voting-rights

ther in 1992, when Con-
nts who speak the same
st provide bilingual vot-
ss than 5 percent of the
d areas with large num-
ago, New York City, and
urchase new voting ma-
igh space for all the Chi-
os Angeles County now
ish, Tagalog, and Viet-
993 and November 1994,
ig materials in these for-
and Education Fund has
'small price" could have
residents.
ly. Will translations al-
of every initiative? In a
rk ballot question, trans-
t should have said "yes."
ed bilingual ballots. We
to demonstrate English-
nd thus gain the right to
ility to speak, read, and
exemptions. Naturaliza-
ived in the United States
ment. But they only make
other 93 percent have to

Making English Our Official Language

PROENGLISH

Languages of non-English speakers (1990 Census)

| Language | Number w/ Limited English (in thousands) | Highest concentration | Percent of speakers with limited English | Language |
|------------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--|
| | | | | |
| 1. Spanish | 8,306 | New Mexico | 48 | 28. Hebrew |
| 2. Chinese | 753 | Hawaii | 60 | 29. Dutch |
| 3. French | 476 | Maine | 28 | 30. Romanian |
| 4. Italian | 735 | New York | 33 | 31. Serbo-Croatian |
| 5. German | 386 | North Dakota | 25 | 32. Czech |
| 6. Korean | 384 | Hawaii | 61 | 33. Formosan |
| 7. Vietnamese | 321 | California | 63 | 34. Ilocano |
| 8. Tagalog (Filipino) | 287 | Hawaii | 34 | 35. Slovak |
| 9. Polish | 268 | Illinois | 37 | 36. Punjabi (C. Asia) |
| 10. Japanese | 224 | Hawaii | 52 | 37. Norwegian |
| 11. Portuguese | 195 | Rhode Island | 45 | 38. Lithuanian |
| 12. Russian | 131 | New York | 54 | 39. Turkish |
| 13. Thai/Lao | 128 | California | 62 | 40. Croat |
| 14. Greek | 122 | Massachusetts | 31 | 41. Swedish |
| 15. Arabic | 120 | Michigan | 34 | 42. Syrian |
| 16. French Creole | 99 | Louisiana | 53 | 43. Indonesian |
| 17. Hindi/Urdu | 97 | New Jersey | 29 | 44. Finnish |
| 18. Mon-Khmer (Cambodian) | 93 | Rhode Island | 73 | 45. Amharic |
| 19. Persian | 77 | California | 38 | 46. Malayalam |
| 20. Armenian | 75 | California | 50 | 47. Bengali |
| 21. Navaho | 66 | New Mexico | 45 | 48. Kru |
| 22. Miao | 64 | Minnesota | 78 | 49. Mandarin |
| 23. Yiddish | 62 | New York | 29 | 50. Samoan |
| 24. Hungarian | 52 | New Jersey | 35 | Source: ProEnglish, USA Today who speak a given language ing self-assessment. Highest who do not speak English "ver guage in their home. |
| 25. "Penn." Dutch | 36 | Pennsylvania | 43 | |
| 26. Ukrainian | 36 | New Jersey | 37 | |
| 27. Gujarathi | 35 | New Jersey | 34 | |

Percent of speakers with limited English

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 48 | 28 | 33 | 25 | 61 | 63 | 34 | 37 | 52 | 45 | 54 | 62 | 31 | 34 | 34 | 53 | 29 | 73 | 38 | 50 | 45 | 78 | 29 | 35 | 43 | 37 | 34 |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|

Languages of non-English speakers (1990 Census) (cont.)

| Language | Number w/ Limited English (in thousands) | Highest concentration | Percent of speakers with limited English |
|-----------------------|--|-----------------------|--|
| 28. Hebrew | 34 | New York | 23 |
| 29. Dutch | 34 | Utah | 24 |
| 30. Romanian | 32 | New York | 49 |
| 31. Serbo-Croatian | 28 | New York | 39 |
| 32. Czech | 27 | Nebraska | 29 |
| 33. Formosan | 25 | California | 55 |
| 34. Ilocano | 23 | Hawaii | 56 |
| 35. Slovak | 22 | Pennsylvania | 28 |
| 36. Punjabi (C. Asia) | 18 | California | 36 |
| 37. Norwegian | 17 | North Dakota | 21 |
| 38. Lithuanian | 10 | Illinois | 30 |
| 39. Turkish | 16 | New Jersey | 39 |
| 40. Croat | 15 | Illinois | 34 |
| 41. Swedish | 15 | Minnesota | 19 |
| 42. Syrian | 15 | Michigan | 41 |
| 43. Indonesian | 13 | n/a | 54 |
| 44. Finnish | 13 | Minnesota | 25 |
| 45. Amharic | 13 | D.C. | 41 |
| 46. Malayalam | 13 | New York | 38 |
| 47. Bengali | 13 | New York | 33 |
| 48. Kru | 12 | D.C. | 19 |
| 49. Mandarin | 12 | n/a | 50 |
| 50. Samoan | 11 | Hawaii | 32 |

Source: ProEnglish, USA Today analysis of Census Bureau data. Based on Census Bureau questions allowing self-assessment. Highest concentration is based on the state with the highest total number of people who speak a given language as the primary home language in their household. Percentage is of speakers who do not speak English "very well" as a portion of people who use minority languages as a primary language in their home.