

Letters to the Editor

Editor:

The bilingual-ballot provision [of the Voting Rights Act] expires this year. In Congress the Hispanic Caucus is already hard at work to secure its renewal — this time for fifteen, not ten years. It's high time President Bush and Congress together called a halt to this piece of political nonsense, which dates back to the Minority Language Rights Provision of 1975.

Enough is enough!

For two centuries immigrants have come here and assimilated into the mainstream. Learning English for them, an essential to true assimilation into American society, was no easier than it is for Hispanics and Asians today.

Why is it that recent immigrants into this country have so little respect for American history and culture as to expect us to provide them ballots in their native language? After all, they renounced their former national loyalty, and embraced the United States of America when they became American citizens.

The reason for their disrespect is that we have not demanded their respect as a nation.

Think of the absurdity of the following scenario: You and I, American citizens, move to Mexico and become naturalized Mexicans. We then ask for bilingual ballots so that we can vote in English. We would not only be the butt of innumerable jokes but the term "dumb Americans" would acquire new meaning in Mexican circles.

Bilingual ballots divorce a knowledge of our common language from a citizen's most basic duty and right — voting. The message they clearly convey is that ethnic differences outweigh guarding our national unity and heritage.

A command of English is all but a *sine qua non* for enlightened participation in public life here. In our form of representative democracy no vote at all is preferable to an uninformed or misinformed vote, or one dictated by a self-serving political boss.

To acquire American citizenship, legal immigrants must — with a few exceptions — pass an English-language test and a Civics test administered by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. That's what the law *says*.

But that's not what the law does. Had the INS properly enforced the law — which it has not in recent years — we could assume that all new citizens, except for rare exceptions, would be able to at least read a simple ballot in English. Though an exception to the English test is made for those immigrants over fifty years of age who have lived here for twenty years or more, might one not reasonably assume that even these American residents would have learned enough English to read a simple ballot?

If so, can we not expect them to distinguish names of political parties and candidates on an English ballot?

How can illiterate American citizens vote? Well, they can use an absentee ballot, take it home with them or wherever, get all the help they can from relatives and friends, then mail or take the ballot to the county clerk. Or they can take a "crib sheet" with them into the polling booth along with a trusted friend or relative or election official to help them mark a ballot.

Why can't citizens of foreign backgrounds who are deficient in English use the same means that English-speaking Americans who are illiterate use?

Answer: They can. Let's tell our congressmembers not to renew provisions for bilingual ballots.

Charles L. King
Professor Emeritus of Spanish
University of Colorado
Boulder, CO

[EDITOR'S NOTE: We welcome your letters as an opportunity to widen the debate on matters of population growth, immigration, and the future of American culture. Address *The Social Contract* at 316½ E. Mitchell Street, Suite 4, Petoskey, Michigan 49770.]