

This testimony was submitted to the Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, House Committee on the Judiciary in regard to the reauthorization of the bilingual voting provisions of the Voting Rights Act. It was presented by Gerda Bikales, President of E PLURIBUS UNUM and formerly Executive Director of U.S. ENGLISH.

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON CIVIL AND CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS

By Gerda Bikales

We appreciate the opportunity to present our views on the reauthorization of the Bilingual Voting Provisions of the Voting Rights Act.

E PLURIBUS UNUM is a national public interest organization, dedicated to strengthening the cultural bridges that connect Americans of all origins into a national community. It is these vital links among citizens — a common language, a shared civic culture, the special bond of citizenship — that make our nationhood possible.

We strongly urge the Committee not to reauthorize Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act, the Bilingual Voting Provisions. We vigorously oppose any expansion of the practice of voting in foreign languages, as has been proposed in H.R. 4312. The principal reasons for our opposition are these:

1. Much has happened since the Act's last reauthorization in 1982, to prove conclusively that the American people do not wish to dilute the power of our common language to keep us together as a cohesive society, and that they consider the Congress' mandate to provide ballots and voting materials in foreign languages to be deeply misguided and dangerous.

In 1983, the first national public interest organization was started around the issue of maintaining the primacy of English in public life. It rapidly built up a membership in the hundreds of thousands. Still another national organization, and several local groups, formed around this issue, with equal success.

Beginning in November 1983, the people of the United States have demonstrated repeatedly their strong support for legal protections for the English language, and against the acceptance of rival languages in official usage.

It cannot be said that the issue of voting in foreign languages has not been addressed by the American electorate. On the contrary: it has been very specifically addressed.

Those of you who were in the House in 1983 received a letter from San Francisco then-Mayor Diane Feinstein, conveying to you the feelings of the voters in America's most liberal and tolerant city on the subject of foreign language ballots. In a referendum initiated at the grass-roots level, San Franciscans had

voted decisively for Proposition O, against the provision of ballots and election materials in languages other than English. Some 64% of the voters had required the reluctant Mayor to notify each member of Congress of their rejection of bilingual voting, and to ask you to repeal the law that mandates it.

***"...voters in Colorado, Florida
and Arizona [voted] decisively for
popular initiatives declaring English
the language of their states."***

A year later, in 1984, you received a letter from the Governor of California, informing you that the voters of his State, in an initiative that qualified through the collection of nearly a million signatures, had voted three to one against bilingual ballots. As part of the initiative, the voters had directed the Governor to notify each and every member of Congress of their vote, and to ask you to remove the bilingual voting provisions from the Voting Rights Act. In 1986, Californians used the popular initiative process again to amend their State Constitution to declare English their official language.

The Chairman of this Subcommittee, the Hon. Don Edwards, is very familiar with all these successful initiatives, as he represents a California constituency that voted for them.

In 1988, voters in three States — Colorado, Florida and Arizona — also expressed their deep concern about the ongoing erosion of the common language, voting decisively for popular initiatives declaring English the language of their states. In 1990, voters in Alabama voted 9 to 1 for a constitutional amendment to make English their official language.

In all these campaigns, the issue of foreign language ballots was discussed, and the outcome expressed the American people's conviction that encouraging voting in foreign languages is a serious mistake, that this most symbolic act of American democracy at work should be exercised only in the nation's traditional language.

In short, whenever American voters have been given an opportunity to express themselves on the

subject, they have overwhelmingly seized the opportunity to uphold the principles that foreign language ballots are wrong, and that English must be given exclusive legal standing.

All in all, through direct voting or through pressure on the legislatures, eighteen states now have declared English their official language.

It would be an exercise in extreme political cynicism for members of Congress to pretend now that these votes have never taken place, and ignore the evidence of powerful support for our common language among their own constituents. The American people *have* indeed spoken, repeatedly, and they expect Congress to listen to them.

2. There are other compelling reasons for letting this section of the Act expire — and certainly for opposing its further expansion. We have witnessed, these past two years, the awesome power of supercharged ethnic assertiveness unleashed. Before our eyes, we have seen Yugoslavia disintegrate into warring provinces, and the Soviet Union balkanized into antagonistic Republics. We have seen Canada come close to the brink of dissolution — a tragic event that is sure to be finalized before the next reauthorization of bilingual ballots comes around under the terms proposed in H.R. 4312.

The break-up of whole nations under the stress of ethnic conflict and language divisions is cause enough to reconsider our own language policies. Encouraging people to vote in a language other than English uses the government's strong hand to fan the flames of ethnic separatism. It leads to intergroup antagonisms that poison political life, and make consensus-building impossible. It spreads ill-will among Americans.

***"Ballots and voting materials
in other languages are a
high visibility, high impact message
that this nation is giving up
on its common language."***

3. Bilingual ballots have not changed the pattern of low voter-turnout among Hispanic voters. On the contrary. Recently released U.S. Census data show that in 1974, 34.9% of Hispanics of voting age were registered to vote. In 1990, that figure was down to 32.3%. In 1974, 22.9% of Hispanics of voting age actually voted. In 1990, only 21% actually voted.¹

These data are interpreted by advocates of bilingual ballots to make the case for their extension and wider usage. Actually, these figures do not reflect a need to furnish translated ballots to American citizens. Rather, they bespeak serious failures in our immigration policies, in our naturalization policies, and in our education policies with respect to the

teaching of English to immigrant school children.

Clearly, we are receiving immigrants much faster than we can integrate them into our country, including into our political system. We are using foreign language ballots as a substitute for meaningful language requirements for naturalization, and for teaching English effectively to newcomers in our schools. It is those policies we must look at, those policies we must revise, so as to avoid amassing a growing body of citizens so ill prepared for life in this country that they claim they can only vote in a foreign language.

More and more, Americans everywhere perceive that our social fabric is unraveling fast. A few weeks ago, *TIME* magazine's feature cover story (February 3, 92) focused on "The Fraying of America." Of all the symbols of this fraying, none are more telling, more unsettling, more bitterly resented than the voting ballot printed in foreign languages.

Ballots and voting materials in other languages are a high visibility, high impact message that this nation is giving up on its common language, that we no longer prize our sense of nationhood, that we have stopped trying to gather the great American family together around a core of civic values.

It should be understood that *E PLURIBUS UNUM* is strongly opposed to disenfranchising any citizen because of deficiencies in English. We believe that citizens who are otherwise qualified to vote but don't know our language should indeed be welcomed at the polls, in the language of our country. Their efforts to participate in shaping our common future, despite language limitations, should be appreciated. No tests should be administered to any qualified voter to check his or her level of proficiency in English.

We recognize that voting in English may be an inconvenience for some people, but it should not be an immutable legal or cultural barrier. The law permits people who want help to take someone with them into the voting booth, and that practice should be retained. Ethnic advocacy groups, instead of badgering the Congress for ever more quasi-official acceptance of their language, could opt to provide a public service by publishing translations of the ballot in the foreign language press, and making copies of such translations available at neighborhood gathering spots, perhaps even including polling places.

Experience with generations of immigrants tells us that the person who may have trouble understanding the ballot this year may very well have an easier time next year. Learning English is an option open to virtually all citizens, and it is one that leads to full participation in the life of this nation.

Congress cannot ignore what has happened since it last reauthorized the law on bilingual voting. The American people have forcefully rejected it. Nations have disintegrated in ethnic and language rivalries. The failures of our immigration, naturalization and

education policies have become transparent, for all to see, in the clamor for expansion of the bilingual ballot provisions.

We urge you to let the law expire next August.■

¹ Source: *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, Nos. 174, 228, 293, 344, 383, 414 and 453.