

said we need to have a shared sense of what it means to be an American. That includes English as a common language.”

Agrees Daphne Magnuson of U.S. English, a 640,000-member group dedicated to making English the only official language in the U.S. “To participate in the democratic process, people must know English. By allowing these tests in other languages, the government is sending a destructive message.”

But those arguments mean little to the applicants, who often stand in line for hours before taking their tests.

“I see that if I don’t become a citizen, they may take away some of my rights,” said Guatemalan native Arturo Gonzales, a self-employed sheet-metal

worker waiting to take the test in Spanish in Los Angeles. “I have lived here 27 years and I speak English. But I think I understand the questions better in Spanish.”

Because the INS doesn’t even keep track of how many non-English tests it gives, no one knows precisely how many of the new citizenship applicants speak passable English.

But a 1993 survey by the state’s Research Bureau found that fully 70 percent of all immigrants in California, both legal and illegal, claimed they were proficient in English.

“That still leaves 30 percent, most of whom have paid taxes for many years,” said Murray. “If they now want to participate by being citizens why should we let language get in the way?” □

# Discomforting Truths About Bilingual Ballots

by George Will

**J**ohn Silber, the sandpapery president of Boston University, might have been elected governor of Massachusetts in 1990 were he not given to speaking his formidable mind as bluntly as he did when a voter asked what we should teach our children. “Teach them that they are going to die,” he said. And have a nice day.

His point was that children need a sense of reality, beginning with the fact that life is short and that living nobly may depend on an early understanding of that brevity.

Recently he was in Washington among the politicians, displaying his penchant for uttering discomforting truths. He is a philosopher by academic training and his testimony in favor of repealing bilingual ballot requirements was a model dissection of ill-conceived compassion.

The 1965 Voting Rights Act, as amended in 1975 and subsequently, requires bilingual ballots in

jurisdictions with certain demographic characteristics pertaining to linguistic minorities, English deficiency, illiteracy and low voter turnout. But as Representative John Porter (R-IL), another advocate of repeal, noted in testimony, all this is patently peculiar because since 1906 any immigrant seeking citizenship has been required to demonstrate oral English literacy, and since 1950 has been required to “demonstrate an understanding of English, including an ability to read, write and speak words in ordinary English.” Applicants over 55 who have lived here at least 15 years are exempted.

Deval Patrick, assistant attorney general for civil rights, testified against repeal of the bilingual ballot requirement, warning of “the pernicious disenfranchisement resulting from lack of English proficiency.” He regards bilingual ballots as instruments of compassion for people who are “limited-English proficient” and exhorted one and all to “recognize, respect and celebrate the linguistic and cultural variety of our society.” He said repeal would “resurrect barriers to equal access to and participation in the democratic process for American citizens who do not speak English very well.”

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*George Will is a syndicated columnist. This article is reprinted by permission of the Washington Post Writers Group.*

How can bilingual ballots produce “equal access to and participation in the democratic process?” What is at issue is accommodations for people who cannot read English language ballots, and the law of the land is supposed to be a barrier between such people and citizenship.

It fell to Silber to say why bilingual ballots are of “constitutional consequence, amending in effect the very concept of United States citizenship.” The naturalization statutes clearly presuppose that English is the language indispensable for life in America, where all the founding documents, and all the laws and all the proceedings of legislatures are in English. Citizens not proficient in English are, Silber said, “citizens in name only” because they cannot follow a political campaign, talk with a candidate, or petition a representative, and providing them with a bilingual ballot merely makes a mockery of civic life.

Silber stressed that in no other nation do so many people, spread over so large an area, speak the same language. This nation is a creedal nation, founded on shared affirmations, not on ethnicity. Here, Silber said, ethnicity is “a private matter.” Various ethnic groups celebrate their saints and other sources of communal pride. However, the government properly recognizes only Americans, not ethnic groups. In opposition to that principle, bilingual ballots “represent a dangerous experiment in deconstructing our American identity.”

But of course. For some of the diversity-mongers who advocate bilingual ballots, such deconstruction is precisely the point. They think it is oppression for one American identity to be “privileged.”

Silber says such deconstruction is how nations die.

Have a nice day. □

# Immigrants and the Language Issue

## *What should our policy be?*

By Richard Estrada

**L**ike it or not, Sen. Bob Dole is the linguistic if not the political reincarnation of George Bush: No habla bold vision.

However Dole has been anything but tongue-tied when it comes to articulating his position on an issue of vital importance to American nationhood: the necessary primacy of the English language.

“Lacking the centuries-old bonds of other nations,” he wrote in a *Washington Post* opinion piece in December, “we have used not only our history and values but our language, English, to make the American experiment work.”

Because the language issue is of widespread

concern to the American people, President Clinton should take note. Polls routinely find enormous voter support for making English the nation’s official language. A survey conducted last year by Luntz Research Companies on behalf of the Washington-based lobbying organization U.S. English found no less than 86 percent support for such a law.

Broad­sides were fired anew recently after the release last week of voluntary national standards for standard English. Crafted by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association — organizations whose efforts to establish English standards were initially encouraged and funded by the federal government — the new “standards” instantly earned the scorn of everyone from conservative Republican education expert Diane Ravitch to Michael Cohen, a senior adviser to Clinton’s education secretary, Richard W. Riley.

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*Richard Estrada is a columnist with the Dallas Morning News. This March 11, 1996 article is ©1996 by the Washington Post Writers Group and is reprinted with permission.*