



Bilingual Ballots and Language Assistance for Asian Americans

Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act

In the early 1970s, the U.S. Congress found that Asian Americans, Latinos, Alaska Natives, and Native Americans faced significant barriers to electoral participation because many were not fully proficient in English. In response, Congress enacted the Language Assistance Provisions under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act.

Mandates of Section 203

Under Section 203 certain local jurisdictions must translate ballots, voter registration forms, voting instructions, and all other voting materials and provide interpreters at election districts/precincts. Under the law, voters also have the right to choose someone—like a friend or relative—to bring with them to the voting booth to help them understand the voting materials and to vote. Section 203 encourages local election officials to work with community-based organizations to develop language assistance programs.

Application of Section 203

For Section 203 to apply to a jurisdiction, the Census must find 5% or more than 10,000 voting-age (over 18 years old) citizens who speak an Asian language, have limited English proficiency, and have a higher illiteracy rate than the national illiteracy rate. Following Census 2010 and a mid-decade review of data (required under the 2006 amendments to the Voting Rights Act), the updated list of counties and cities covered for translated voting materials and interpreters, as well as the specific languages under Section 203, appears in this chart.

Problems in Implementing Section 203

There have been problems in implementing Section 203 for Asian language voters, such as:

- jurisdictions unwilling to provide any language assistance;
- mistranslated materials;
- interpreters speaking the wrong language or dialect;
- poll sites missing translated materials and signs;
- insufficient number of interpreters.

All problems should be reported immediately to the appropriate officials.

Voluntary Language Assistance

In many U.S. counties, Asian language speakers may be numerous but still too small to meet Section 203's test for coverage. In these instances, community groups have worked with or urged local election officials to *voluntarily* provide translated materials and language assistance. For example:

Philadelphia – The City Commissioners provide Chinese, Vietnamese, and Khmer interpreters at poll sites.

Boston – State law requires bilingual ballots and language assistance in Chinese and Vietnamese.

By working with local election officials, access to the vote can be expanded for many more Asian Americans.

Asian Language Coverage Under Section 203, Voting Rights Act (12.5.16)

ALASKA

- Aleutians East Borough: Filipino
- Aleutians West Census Area: Filipino

CALIFORNIA

- Alameda: Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese
- **Contra Costa: Chinese**
- Los Angeles: **Cambodian**, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, Other (not specified)
- Orange: Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese
- Sacramento: Chinese
- San Diego: Filipino, Chinese, Vietnamese
- San Francisco: Chinese
- San Mateo: Chinese
- Santa Clara: Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese

HAWAII

- Honolulu: Chinese, Filipino

ILLINOIS

- Cook: Chinese, Indian

MASSACHUSETTS

- **Lowell: Cambodian**
- **Malden: Chinese**
- Quincy city: Chinese

MICHIGAN

- Hamtramck city: Bangladeshi

NEVADA

- Clark: Filipino

NEW JERSEY

- Bergen: Korean
- **Middlesex: Indian**

NEW YORK

- Kings (Brooklyn): Chinese
- New York (Manhattan): Chinese
- Queens: Chinese, Korean, Indian

TEXAS

- Harris: Vietnamese, Chinese
- **Tarrant: Vietnamese**

VIRGINIA

- **Fairfax: Vietnamese**

WASHINGTON

- King: Chinese, Vietnamese

Note: New counties and languages added in 2016 are bolded.