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Questions and Answers about Official English

Q: Isn't English already our official language?

A: No; despite the fact that most Americans speak English, it is not the official language of the United States. The Founding Fathers never really discussed this issue, because over 90 percent of the voting population was of British ancestry. It was not until the 1960s that the U.S. began its current multilingual policies and the need for English to be the official language became evident.

Q: Why is it necessary to declare English our official language?

A: Official English promotes unity and empowers immigrants by encouraging them to learn English, the language of opportunity in this country.

Q: What happens when English is declared the official language?

A: All official government documents, records, legislation and regulations, as well as hearings, ceremonies and public meetings are conducted solely in English, with some common sense exceptions.

Q: When are languages other than English permitted in government under Official English legislation?

A: Official English legislation allows a variety of common sense exceptions permitting the use of languages other than English: public health and safety, international relations and national security, judicial proceedings (although actual trials would be conducted in English), tourism, foreign language instruction, terms of art or phrases from other languages, and the like.

Q: How does Official English affect private businesses and private citizens' daily lives?

A: Official English legislation only applies to government functions. Language policies in private businesses are not affected, and private citizens are still free to use any language they wish in their daily lives.

Q: Is there Official English on the state level?

A: Yes. Thirty-one states have enacted Official English laws and several others are considering legislation. Since 2006, Arizona, Idaho, Kansas and Oklahoma have all adopted Official English on the state level.

Q: Is there an Official English bill on the federal level?

A: With the support of U.S. English, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 123, The Bill Emerson English Language Empowerment Act of 1996, with a bipartisan vote of 259 – 169 in August 1996. Unfortunately, the Senate did not act on the bill before the end of the session. A similar bill making English the official language of the U.S. government has been introduced by Rep. Steve King (R-IA) in the 112th Congress and currently has 111 cosponsors. In the Senate, Sen. Jim Inhofe has introduced S. 503, the English Language Unity Act. Both bills await further consideration before Congress.

Q: Does Official English legislation affect bilingual education or bilingual ballots?

A: While bilingual ballots and bilingual education are not directly addressed by Official English legislation, U.S. English supports the reform of bilingual education to favor programs that are English intensive, short-term and transitional.

Q: Does Official English legislation imply that English is better than other languages or that it is wrong to speak other languages?

A: Official English legislation discourages multilingualism only at the government level. There is no question that being proficient in other languages in addition to English is extremely advantageous to an individual. Multilingualism in government, however, can actually discourage immigrants from gaining proficiency in English.

Q: Does Official English legislation violate 'freedom of speech' and has this ever been brought up in the courts?

A: Because Official English legislation is a limitation on government, not private individuals, it does not violate the principle of freedom of speech. The courts have usually held that the government is under no general obligation to provide services in a language other than English.

Q: Is Official English legislation anti-immigrant?

A: No. Official English is actually beneficial to immigrants. A study published by the U.S. Department of Labor found that immigrants learned English more quickly when there was less native language support around them. A 'linguistic welfare' system that accommodates immigrants in their native languages lowers the incentive to learn English and restricts them to low-skilled, low-paying jobs. Official English legislation encourages immigrants to learn English so they can truly enjoy the economic opportunities available to them in this country.