

English as the “National Language”? A Political Blunder by Republicans

By James Crawford
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English Only has always been about fear. Fear of demographic and cultural change, as American communities are transformed by immigrants. Fear of strangers speaking Spanish in public places or posting business signs in Chinese. Fear among Anglos about losing their majority status and, with it, their political dominance. Fear of “the other.”

The latest fear is more specific. Republicans in Congress – battered by charges of extremism, incompetence, and corruption – are terrified about facing the voters in November. Rather than addressing these issues, they are trying to solidify their conservative base, by appealing to its basest instincts. A long-term strategy of reaching out to Latinos and other language-minority Americans has given way to short-term political panic.

U.S. Senate action to declare English the “national language” is best understood in this context. An amendment to the immigration bill, sponsored by Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK), passed on May 18 by a 63-34 vote, largely along party lines. It provides the following:

“The Government of the United States shall preserve and enhance the role of English as the national language of the United States of America. Unless otherwise authorized or provided by law, no person has a right, entitlement, or claim to have the Government of the United States or any of its officials or representatives act, communicate, perform or provide services, or provide materials in any language other than English. If exceptions are made, that does not create a legal entitlement to additional services in that language or any language other than English.”

U.S. residents, whether citizens or not, would have to be proficient in English to enjoy all of the rights and services guaranteed to other Americans. Access to government would be restricted to English only, unless Congress passed laws authorizing exceptions.

Let’s call this what it is: an **official language** measure – Sen. Inhofe substituted the term “national language” at the last minute to garner more votes – although its direct legal implications remain uncertain. Supporters argued that there would be no effect on existing laws, such as provisions of the Voting Rights Act that require bilingual assistance for voters in some jurisdictions.

Yet there are very few such laws at the federal level. An Executive Order signed by President Clinton in 2000 requires federal agencies to develop plans “to improve access” to their services for those whose English is limited. But it specifically “does not create

any right or benefit” for such persons. Most bilingual assistance is now provided on a discretionary basis. The “national language” amendment, if enacted as part of a new immigration law, would likely send a signal to government officials at all levels – federal, state, and local – that they no longer need to offer services in any language but English.

Symbolically, however, the amendment’s message is clear: ***One must speak good English to be a “good American.” Those who do not will be relegated to second-class citizenship. Minority language speakers take note: you must conform or you will not be welcome here. English rules in this country. Government will make life difficult for anyone who doubts that.***

In effect, the Inhofe amendment legitimizes language-based discrimination. This is not a wise decision for the country – or for the Republican Party.

Back in 1996, Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole jumped on the English Only bandwagon, hoping to ride it to electoral gains. The House of Representatives passed a “Language of Government” bill that year, and Gingrich instructed his members to talk up the issue with voters in their districts during the August Congressional recess. But when they reported back in September the news was not encouraging.

Polls show that a substantial majority of Americans, then and now, see nothing wrong with the idea of officializing English. A common language is a good thing, they reason, and in this country English is it. So what’s the big deal? Not having thought much about the issue, they haven’t considered the downside. On recognizing the divisiveness of English Only, many change their minds. Or they wonder why Congress is wasting its time on such matters. It’s an issue that only a minority of voters feel strongly about.

As Republican House members reported back to Gingrich, Americans who do feel strongly fall into two groups: those eager to restrict immigration, who already vote Republican, by and large, and ethnic minorities who are deeply offended by English Only, many of whom are swing voters who might be attracted to a non-nativist Republican Party.

It made little sense to push legislation with no constructive purpose – official English bills have never included funding for English classes – which delivered a gratuitous insult to Latinos in particular, the fastest-growing part of the American electorate.

An astute politician, Gingrich dropped the issue immediately. So did Dole. The Language of Government Act was allowed to die a quiet death in the Senate. For the next decade, the Republican Congressional leadership kept the issue from coming to a vote – or even a committee hearing – until Sen. Inhofe introduced his amendment into this year’s polarized debate over immigration.

Meanwhile, as governor of Texas, George Bush came out squarely against English Only legislation and in favor of a policy stressing the benefits to the nation of encouraging

proficiency in English, **plus** other languages. This stand paid off handsomely in Latino votes for President Bush in 2000 and 2004.

Even earlier, English Plus legislation was promoted by senators including John McCain, Pete Domenici, Chuck Hagel, Richard Lugar, Mike DeWine, Kay Bailey Hutchison, and Orrin Hatch. No forward-thinking Republican wanted to follow the example of Gov. Pete Wilson, whose anti-immigrant advocacy proved expedient in the short term but drove away enough Latinos to transform California into safe territory for Democrats. Over time, the same pattern is likely to repeat itself in all but the least diverse states if Republicans persist in catering to nativists.

Yet among all the Republicans mentioned above, only Sen. Domenici opposed the Inhofe amendment. Will this help their party win in 2006? Possibly. In 2012? Not a chance.