



## Language Access to the Vote for Asian Americans

### Renew and Expand Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act

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

#### Section 203 Coverage

Section 203 covers counties that have, according to the census, 5% or more than 10,000 voting-age (over 18 years old) citizens who speak the same language, are limited English proficient, and, as a group, have a higher illiteracy rate than the national illiteracy rate, which is measured by educational attainment.

When Section 203 applies, all voting materials must be translated and interpreters must be provided at poll sites. There are currently 5 Asian language groups covered in 16 jurisdictions (see chart).

#### Expanding Access to the Vote

Section 203 has given Asian Americans a real voice in the political process. Translated voter registration forms have helped more Asian Americans register to vote, bilingual ballots have allowed voters to vote on their own and in private, and election notices in Asian language media have increased voter turnout.

Notwithstanding these successes, there have been some shortcomings in Section 203 compliance. For example, voting materials were mistranslated, interpreters spoke the wrong language or dialect, too few interpreters were available, and poll workers did not post translated signs. Vigorous enforcement of Section 203 is still needed.

#### Reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act

Section 203 and the Voting Rights Act's enforcement provisions (Section 5) are set to expire in August 2007, unless Congress "reauthorizes" them.

Advocates are urging Congress to renew the Voting Rights Act by showing how language assistance has increased the political participation of racial and ethnic minorities.

#### New Places and Languages

In many counties, the Asian American population is growing but still too small to meet Section 203's current test for coverage. Reauthorization is an opportunity to expand language assistance to include more counties and other Asian languages. As Congress considers reauthorization of Section 203, Congress should lower the 10,000 trigger so that more counties will be covered. This will expand the right to vote for many more Asian Americans.

#### Asian Language Coverage Under Section 203

Based on Census 2000

##### Alaska

Kodiak Island Borough: Filipino

##### California

Alameda: Chinese

Los Angeles: Chinese, Japanese,  
Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese

Orange: Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese

San Diego: Filipino

San Francisco: Chinese

San Mateo: Chinese

Santa Clara: Chinese, Filipino,  
Vietnamese

##### Hawaii

Honolulu: Chinese, Filipino, Japanese

Maui: Filipino

##### Illinois

Cook: Chinese

##### New York

Kings (Brooklyn): Chinese

New York (Manhattan): Chinese

Queens: Chinese, Korean

##### Texas

Harris: Vietnamese

##### Washington

King: Chinese