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, the counties and cities covered for translated voting materials and interpreters, as well as the specific languages/dialects under Section 203, are listed in the 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.

For more information contact AALDEF at “info@aaldef.org” or 212-966-5932.