The Census and Bilingual Ballots

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts two surveys – Census 2010 and the American Community Survey (ACS) – that determine the availability of bilingual ballots, translated voting materials, and interpreters during elections. Participation in these surveys also helps to ensure that the Asian American community will receive its fair share and political representation.

First, the decennial census is a count of the entire population that is taken every 10 years. In March 2010, every household receives a census form, which asks a few simple questions about age, gender, marital status, and race/ethnicity.

Second, the American Community Survey (ACS) is distributed to a random sample of the population every month. The ACS is a much longer questionnaire that asks about citizenship, income, education, employment, and English proficiency.

If these forms are not mailed back, census-takers will visit individuals at home to take the information through an interview. Both questionnaires ask specific questions that help determine the availability of language assistance under the federal Voting Rights Act. Therefore, a complete count and accurate statistical portrait of the Asian American community are crucial.

The Law

Under the language assistance provisions (Section 203) of the Voting Rights Act, bilingual ballots, translated voting materials, and interpreters must be provided in counties where the census reports that more than 5% or 10,000 people who are (1) over 18 years old (voting-age); (2) citizens of the United States; (3) speak the same Asian language; (4) have limited English proficiency; and (5) have a higher illiteracy rate than the national illiteracy rate.

After the 2000 Census, sixteen counties in seven states were required to provide language assistance in one or more Asian languages. After the 2010 census data are examined, federal law may cover more counties and require more Asian languages.

### Asian Language Coverage Under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act

**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
How the Law Works

The Decennial Census Form
Every household will receive a “decennial census form” in March 2010. Everyone must fill out the census form.

Respondents must answer how many people – children and adults – live in the household, regardless of their immigration status. Individual answers will be kept confidential.

1. How many people were living or staying in this house, apartment, or mobile home on April 1, 2010?
Number of people =

6. What is this person’s race? Mark [x] one or more boxes.
- White
- Black, African Am., or Negro
- American Indian or Alaska Native — Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.
- Asian Indian
- Chinese
- Filipino
- Other Asian — Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.
- Japanese
- Korean
- Vietnamese
- Native Hawaiian
- Guamanian or Chamorro
- Samoan
- Other Pacific Islander — Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.
- Some other race — Print race.

The American Community Survey (ACS)
From the decennial census, a randomly selected set of households will also receive the American Community Survey (ACS). This longer questionnaire is an ongoing survey conducted throughout the decade. Everyone who receives this form must also complete it.

Respondents must identify their racial background. **Same as decennial census form, question #6.**

Respondents must also identify their ethnic background.

13 What is this person’s ancestry or ethnic origin?
(For example: Italian, Jamaican, African Am., Cambodian, Cape Verdean, Norwegian, Dominican, French Canadian, Haitian, Korean, Lebanese, Polish, Nigerian, Mexican, Taiwanese, Ukrainian, and so on.)

8 Is this person a citizen of the United States?
- Yes, born in the United States □
- Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas □
- Yes, born abroad of U.S. citizen parent or parents □
- Yes, U.S. citizen by naturalization — Print year of naturalization □
- No, not a U.S. citizen □
Respondents should write in their native language. This question determines the size of the language minority group.

English proficiency is measured by the question, “How well do you speak English?” If more people mark “not well” or “not at all,” then there is a greater chance that bilingual ballots will be available. Unfortunately, this question is only written in English, so respondents who do not speak English should get assistance to accurately answer this question.

The law requires that the language minority group must also have a high illiteracy rate in order to obtain bilingual ballots. This is not the same as English proficiency. Illiteracy is determined by Educational Attainment. In order to qualify for bilingual ballots, more than 10,000 or 5% of the language minority group must have less than a 5th grade United States education. (Respondents should not include education received abroad.)

If respondents answer this question to include only formal education received in the United States – even if it is none or less than a 5th grade U.S. education – then it will show a greater need for language assistance on Election Day.

An accurate count of the Asian American population in the census and American Community Survey can help ensure that the Asian American community will be entitled to bilingual ballots and language assistance. Participate in the census!

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