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Immigration Reform: The Need for Upholding Our National Language

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With the most expansive immigration and naturalization overhaul in the past 40 years marching at full speed through the U.S. Senate, it is worth pausing to reflect on the wise words of Alexis de Tocqueville: “The tie of language is perhaps the strongest and the most durable that can unite mankind.”

Lost in the 600-page immigration reform bill is a declaration of English as our national language in both principle and practice. A commonsense amendment being offered by Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) will give every Senator the opportunity to affirm the importance of declaring, preserving, and enhancing the role of the English language in the United States.

Language and the American Dream. American history shows the nation’s remarkable resiliency in forging “Out of Many, One.” As opposed to other countries, where geography and racial composition are requisites for citizenship, the United States is rooted in a conscription of ideas—among them are equality, liberty, democracy, freedom of religion, and self-government. The United States affords people of any creed or color the opportunity to become Americans. Former President Ronald Reagan once remarked that someone could spend an entire lifetime in China, speak fluent Chinese, follow Chinese customs and yet never truly be *Chinese*.

Critical to that success has been the role of a unifying and singular language. The ability to converse, interact, trade, and communicate in a common language is key in order for newcomers to

assimilate into the nation’s unique fabric and become active participants in—and valuable contributors to—society.

History is scattered with examples of newcomers who at first resisted learning a new language, only to realize that without a firm understanding of English, the American Dream is effectively out of reach. Unlike the past, however, when language assimilation was strongly encouraged, multilingualism is now more promoted. The problem is that multilingualism leads to separatism, which works against assimilation. The facts are staggering:

- One in 25 American households are linguistically isolated, meaning that no one in the household older than age 14 can speak English;¹
- 21.3 million Americans are classified as “limited English proficient,” a 52 percent increase from 1990 and more than double the 1980 total;²
- The total annual cost for the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to provide language services is \$2.2 million. Providing the same level of DMV translation services nationwide would cost approximately \$8.5 million per year.³

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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Language and Assimilation. Beyond the fiscal and bureaucratic nightmare of multilingualism is the inherent danger of driving a spike between English- and non-English-speaking citizens. Immigration tests the bonds of country and citizenship unlike any other force because it involves a fundamental change of allegiance. A common language is the best way to ensure assimilation among the citizenry; it assuages concerns and sets forth a unifying medium for immigrants and new citizens to pursue happiness and prosperity. In return, assimilation encourages patriotism and a deeper appreciation for the community and homeland.

The Inhofe Amendment. Legislators must rise above the simple rhetoric of purporting the significance of a common language, and mandate the use of English in all federal functions and capacities. Senator Inhofe's amendment establishes that "...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..." This does not necessarily require that English be the official or exclusive language of the nation, but it does mean that English needs to be the primary and authoritative language, particularly in public and political discourse as well as the laws, records, and proceedings of government.

A provision to preserve and codify a national language will compel all newcomers to learn English.

Unfortunately, the proposal being considered in the Senate does the exact opposite by codifying Clinton Executive Order 13166, which effectively requires multilingualism.

The empirical data in favor of English-immersion is overwhelming, with even its most vociferous opponents conceding its merits. Among them is Ken Noon, the founder of the California Association of Bilingual Educators. Two years after leading the march against Proposition 227 (ending bilingual education), he stated, "I thought it would hurt kids. The exact reverse occurred, totally unexpected by me. The kids began to learn—not pick up, but learn—formal English, oral and written, far more quickly than I thought they could."⁴ Simply encouraging someone to learn English is not enough. The immigration reform bill is a good vehicle to give teeth to the long-held notion that English is the "unofficial" language of the land.

Conclusion. If legislators are serious about fashioning one out of many, then a unifying language requirement is both sensible and necessary. Americans must demand that their legislators act on the principle described by Alexis de Tocqueville as "the strongest and the most durable that can unite mankind."

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1. U.S. Census Bureau 2000
 2. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 1990, 1980
 3. U.S. Office of Management and Budget, Report to Congress, "Assessment of the Total Benefits and Costs of Implementing Executive Order No. 13166: Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency," March 14, 2002.
 4. Jacques Steinberg, "Test Scores Rise, Surprising Critics of Bilingual Ban," *New York Times*, August 20, 2000.