Interpreters at Poll Sites

by Amy Ngai
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It was Tuesday morning in 1992 when I accompanied my newly naturalized mother to the polls on Election Day. She had not wanted to vote since she was unaccustomed to the tradition and process of electing a representative and she was not exactly fluent in English. So at the tender age of ten, I offered to go with her. At the polling site, although I provided limited assistance, my presence made her feel more comfortable. But it is this same fear and intimidation that prevents the rest of my family, my aunts and uncles, from heading to the polls on Election Day-- in essence disenfranchising them.

Every fall millions of voters, such as my mom, brave the intimidations and frustrations of voting to cast a ballot. Here in New York City, about twenty-five percent of voters need language assistance. But that's no surprise in NYC, a bastion of ethnic diversity. What is alarming is the lack of assistance provided to these citizens who wish to vote.

Congress initially addressed the needs of language minority citizens to access the polls in 1975 when it amended the Voting Rights Act. The Section 203 amendment established a formula to determine jurisdictions that must provide materials, instructions, and assistance relating to the electoral process in the applicable minority language, in addition to English.

As a result of the federal legislation, the New York City Board of Election was required to provide language assistance in Spanish for all five boroughs and Chinese for Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. After the 2000 Census, Korean was added for language assistance in Queens County. (In PDF Format)

Despite the institutionalized mandate of providing language assistance at the polls, voters needing such assistance still find themselves alone on Election Day.

According to 2004 survey (In PDF Format) by The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, over 46 percent of first time Asian voters needed language assistance at the polls.

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"I was very scared to vote by myself and no one was there to help me. The workers always speak so fast and I never know where to go," recalled Wun S. Li, a voter in Brooklyn, in Chinese.

There are two main reasons for this inattention towards these voters. Just enough interpreters are recruited to work on Election Day, thereby filling the minimum number of positions allocated by the Board of Elections. However, not all of those interpreters assigned to work actually turn out to do so, with only 54 percent turnout of Chinese interpreters, 60 percent of Korean Interpreters and 61 percent of Spanish interpreters in the 2004 General Elections. With no standby pool to offset the absences, many election districts find themselves incapable of assisting non-English proficient voters.

Secondly, under Section 203, the covered language minorities are limited to American Indians, Asian Americans, Alaskan Natives, and Spanish-Heritage citizens- " groups that Congress found to have faced barriers in the political process ." Other citizens, who lack English proficiency but fall in the language categories outside these four, are disenfranchised due to literacy inadequacies. According to the New York City Department of City Planning, the addition of Russian, Italian and Haitian Creole will cover over 82 percent of the eligible voter pool that is not English proficient. Meanwhile, the three current languages cover only about 66 percent of those in need of assistance.

Onida Coward-Mayers, the executive director of the Voter Assistance Commission , proposes that "strengthening New York City's pollworker pool with bilingual individuals will reduce potential barriers and provide voters with the appropriate access to the polls."

Because of such needs, Citizens Union Foundation has incorporated interpreter recruitment into its third Poll Worker Recruitment Drive. The organization has recruited over 1,000 poll workers including 200 Election Day language interpreters as we strive toward a goal of 1,500 poll workers. If you are interested in becoming a poll worker or language interpreter, you can apply online at www.citizensunionfoundation.org/pollworker or call 212-227-0342 (x31).

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