



Lost In Translation: How Iowa's 'English-Only' Law Affects Some Voters

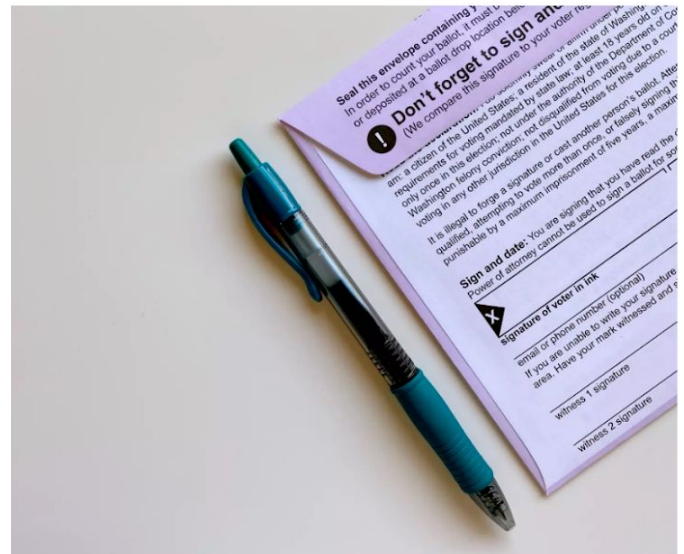
By Cassidy Arena | Published September 16, 2020

This year's election has the potential to be unlike any other in recent memory. COVID-19 has complicated things and to be honest, there's just a lot of information to keep track of. But imagine if you also didn't speak English fluently.

Iris Tun makes videos translating information from English to both Burmese and Karen, two of the languages spoken in Myanmar. When it is really complicated, she said it can take up to two hours before she can translate. [EMBARC Iowa](#) airs informational videos in multiple languages. When she isn't making videos for EMBARC Iowa, she translates people's voter registration forms at her church for free. She's pretty well-known for it.

"At my church, if you call Iris, everyone knows me," Tun said with a smile.

It really is up to her to help all the non-fluent English speakers she knows. In Iowa, it's illegal for the state to translate official government forms, including anything election-related. This makes it really hard for non-fluent English speakers in Iowa to gather official voting information.



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Iris Tun said she always encourages citizens to vote, but the pandemic makes it harder on some. "Right now it's confusing," Tun said. "That's why a lot of people this year, they decide not to vote."

A Little History

Iowa's "English-only" law, as it is known by some, dates back to 1918 after World War I. Republican Gov. William Harding signed the [Babel Proclamation](#) into law, which made English the only language legally permitted in the state. It was intended to limit the German language in schools and other public spaces.

It was repealed only five months after Harding signed it, but then in 2002, former Democratic Gov. Tom Vilsack signed the [Iowa English Language Reaffirmation Act](#). It lists all official documents "on behalf of, or representing the state and all of its political subdivisions shall be in the English language."

Lawmakers said it was meant to encourage assimilation to Iowa culture. Vilsack said the law would encourage people to learn English. But according to [Yale Law and Policy Review](#), it had an even heavier effect: "As a result, eligible voters in Iowa who did not understand English were prevented from registering to vote in state and national elections."

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Tun said this law scares her community. She said sometimes they are too afraid to vote. They are worried they will get in trouble if they make a mistake in the voting process.

"Even though they become a citizen, they got citizenship, they're really scared because a lot of people, they talk about voters, if you do something wrong, you make a mistake, the police come and get you and you can go to jail," Tun said.

Some county auditors saw this problem and tried to translate voter forms in the past or provide multilingual how-to videos. But [Republican U.S. Rep. Steve King sued the Iowa secretary of state in 2007](#) for violating the law. King argued if someone was a U.S. citizen, they had to prove proficiency in English. Therefore there was not a need to translate government documents.

But people who translate the forms disagree. Jan Flora and Terry Potter of [A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy \(AMOS\)](#) said it is especially true this year. Flora translates voter forms into Spanish and Potter distributes them to other organizations throughout the state.

"In this COVID year, since it's so complicated, and things have become so messy, what we're trying to do is, first of all, make sure people are encouraged to register," Potter said. "And then ultimately, that they vote whichever way they're most comfortable with."

And even if people speak English proficiently enough to be a U.S. citizen, there are a lot of things this year that even English speakers get confused about. Flora said sometimes he literally gets lost in translation with some vocabulary.

"One of the terms that I found difficult to translate was the word ballot. In some dictionaries it has *balota*, but my experience in Latin America has said to me that didn't ring true," Flora said. "So we ended up with *papeleta de voto*, which is interpreted as a small piece of paper."

Flora remembers when the English Reaffirmation Act was signed into law, "I think Gov. Vilsack was incorrect in saying that the English-only law was merely symbolic."

The only county in Iowa that can translate voter forms to Spanish is Buena Vista County. And that is only because the federal government required it after the Census revealed there were a significant number of citizens in the area with limited English proficiency.

Sue Lloyd is the county auditor. She said the county was notified of the federal requirement in December, 2016. The requirements of [Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act](#), stipulate "The law covers those localities where there are more than 10,000 or over 5 percent of the total voting age citizens in

a single political subdivision...who are members of a single language minority group, have depressed literacy rates, and do not speak English very well."

Buena Vista County is also required to have bilingual poll workers for the elections. Lloyd said the county is [still looking for people](#) who can help fulfill this federal requirement.

Lloyd said she thinks Iowa is diverse enough that other counties should be allowed to translate, at least into Spanish.

"I think there's interest because I've been contacted by some other counties asking about the forms and what I've been told. And I tell them that we're the only ones that can accept those forms for Iowa," Lloyd said.

Translator Tun said there is not only just an interest from non-fluent-English speakers in the state, but a need during this unprecedented time.

"If we cannot translate that, maybe we're going to lose our voters...Yea, a lot of voters," Tun said.

She said the state has a responsibility to Iowans, whether they speak Spanish, Burmese, Karen or anything else.

"If they want everybody to participate, to vote, maybe they should do something. If they don't care, if they don't want everybody to participate, they can continue to do it like this," Tun said.

In the meantime, Tun said voting is one of the promises you make when you become a citizen, and she is going to help as many people as possible keep that promise.