



State Question 751

State Question 751 would designate English official language

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If voters approve State Question 751, they will amend the Oklahoma Constitution to make English the official language of state government.

The proposed amendment recognizes that English is Oklahoma's common and unifying language, and declares that all official actions of the state must be conducted in English. It also bars individuals from suing the state to have services provided in languages other than English.

Under provisions of the proposed amendment, private individuals and businesses will still be allowed to use whatever language they choose. Only official government business would be impacted.

The measure also contains specific provisions protecting the "use, study, development, or encouragement" of any Native American language, including the languages used by Oklahoma's 39 federally recognized Native American tribes.

Supporters of the state question believe it will ultimately increase the incentive for immigrants to learn English, assimilate and succeed in the U.S., and they say the measure would also reduce unnecessary expenditures by state government during the ongoing budget downturn.

In 2007, the state was sued by an Iranian couple who wanted to take an Oklahoma driver's license test in Farsi (the dominant language of Iran). At the time the lawsuit was filed, Oklahoma provided driver's tests in both English and Spanish. (By 2009, lawmakers voted repeal the requirement for the Department of Public Safety to provide driver's license tests in Spanish.)

The lawsuit illustrated the potential costs facing the state – there are more than 300 languages spoken across the globe. If the state had to provide driver's manuals and other documents in all the various non-English languages at any time, the costs to the state could grow exponentially. For example, the price of providing driver's tests in foreign languages is estimated to be between \$25,000 and \$50,000 per language, per year.

In March 2010, the U.S. Department of Transportation Office of Civil Rights ruled that the State of Oklahoma did not discriminate against the Iranian couple, saying the lack of Farsi drivers' manuals was not discrimination based on national origin. However, the incident provided greater leverage to those seeking an "official English" constitutional amendment in Oklahoma.

Supporters note that 30 other states have already adopted official English laws as have more than 50 nations around the globe, and Oklahoma is already one of nine states that now requires motorists to pass driver's license tests in English.

Supporters also cite safety concerns in their push, contending that non-English-proficient drivers pose a risk to other citizens on the road. That's one reason the Federal Motor Carrier Safety

Administration's regulations require individuals seeking a commercial license for interstate commerce to "read and speak the English language sufficiently to converse with the general public, to understand highway traffic signs and signals in the English language, to respond to official inquiries and to make entries on reports and records."

The Official English effort easily cleared the Oklahoma House of Representatives in 2009, but met some resistance in the state Senate, where a handful of lawmakers promoted an alternative proposal that would have simply changed state law to declare English the "common" language of Oklahoma instead of putting forward a constitutional amendment.

Among other things, Senate critics suggested the House version of the proposal was legally problematic due to language attempting to define federal law.

The conflict became so heated that two national "official English" groups took out newspaper ads and radio spots targeting state Sens. Brian Bingman (a Republican from Sapulpa) and Patrick Anderson (a Republican from Enid).

The impasse was eventually resolved and a slightly revised version of the constitutional amendment was approved by both chambers and sent to the voters.

House Joint Resolution 1042, which placed State Question 751 on the ballot, passed the Oklahoma House of Representatives on a bipartisan 89-8 vote while the measure cleared the state Senate on a 44-2 vote.

The state question has been endorsed by three national groups supporting "Official English" measures – ProEnglish, English First, and U.S. English.

The ballot measure seems to have broad public support. A July poll conducted for The Tulsa World by SoonerPoll.com found that 85 percent of Oklahomans support passage of State Question 751.