Best Practices: Unwritten Languages

What is an unwritten language?

An unwritten language does not have a standard written form used by the native speakers of the language. Even though a written form for a language may exist, a language may be considered unwritten if it is not commonly used in a written form.

Which unwritten languages does Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act cover?

Section 203 covers the following unwritten languages:

- Aleut
- Apache
- Inupiaq
- Pueblo
- Yup'ik

According to the American Community Survey (ACS) data, there are nearly 30,000 people of voting age living across 78 jurisdictions in three states (Alaska, Arizona, and New Mexico) who speak unwritten languages. Election officials must be proactive in understanding the particular needs of these voters as the population of the language groups can change from year to year.

What type of assistance is required?

Covered jurisdictions must determine whether a language is considered written or unwritten. Unwritten languages require election officials to provide "announcements, publicity, and assistance" in oral form so that members of the unwritten language group can effectively participate in the electoral process. The Code of Federal Regulations sets the baseline for providing helpers, (i.e., assistors of choice) to voters who require oral assistance in their minority language. The baseline considers the number of voters in a precinct requiring such assistance and the voter's ability to choose someone to assist them.

New Mexico Secretary of State

The New Mexico Secretary of State's Native American Elections Information Program (NAEIP) broadcasts the election proclamation ahead of every statewide election on KANW-New Mexico Public Radio during Native Music Hours. The election proclamation as well as important deadlines are disseminated in four dialects of the Pueblo language: Tiwa, Tewa, Keres and Towa. For more information about NAEIP, visit: https://www.sos.state.nm.us/voting-and-elections/native-american-election-information-program/

Best Practices

- Prioritize which election materials to translate and finalize the English version. **Figure 1** on the following page provides examples of materials to consider translating.
- Contact tribal administrators or community organizations when seeking translators and poll workers. They can attest to the language proficiency of translators and can provide ongoing resources.
- Invite tribal administrators or community organizations to be a part of the process of enacting language assistance in your jurisdiction.
- Plan the translation process. Work with your language experts to determine what steps will occur each time a document is translated and how complete each step is.
- Design an appropriate review process. Because unwritten languages may not have a word-for-word translation from English and some unwritten languages are more descriptive, create a review process that ensures cultural appropriateness and applicability.
- Employ different methods to disseminate election materials. Some examples include audio files, radio announcements, and public service announcements. This will allow you to reach voters with multiple language skills.
- Ensure voting systems have an audio output usable by voters who can see the screen. Audio can also be helpful for voters who may not have experience with digital interfaces or who have low literacy.
- Create a dedicated page on your jurisdiction's website to share resources. This will serve your voters and other election officials as they take on the challenge of providing resources to their voters.
- Create a process to measure voter satisfaction. Conduct surveys or direct outreach to tribal administrators or community organizations.

Coconino County, Arizona

Coconino County has a dedicated Election Outreach staff member and a Native American Outreach program to prepare written and audio publications. The outreach staff consists of recognized experts in translating election materials who coordinate with other northern Arizona counties to ensure that every county uses the same translation for initiatives and referenda on the ballot. To read more about Coconino County's in-language news publications and radio announcements, visit: https://www.coconino.az.gov/489/Media-Sources

Figure 1 - Materials to Consider Translating

Voter Registration	Ballot Materials

• Voter registration application and instructions
• Confirmation notice
	• Ballot Instructions
	• Information on the following:
	   ○ Sample ballots
	   ○ Provisional ballots
	   ○ Any legal notices
	   ○ Drop box locations
	   ○ In-person voting locations
	   ○ How to request a mailed ballot
	   ○ What to do if a voter makes a mistake on their ballot

Outreach Materials	Website Information
• Poll worker recruitment materials • Social media messaging • Radio ads • Television ads • Press releases	• Voter registration information • Public portals • Election deadlines • Calendar of events • Accessible voting locations • Contact information • Mental competency information • Accessible voting information • Felony conviction rights information • Military voting information

Alaska Division of Elections

Alaska Division of Elections provides translations for indigenous languages using a translation panel made up of bilingual experts in the language, elders, and election staff. The translation panel model allows for collaboration and a higher caliber of translation that is more applicable and culturally appropriate. Read more about Alaska's Division of Election Language Assistance Program: https://www.elections.alaska.gov/Core/languageassistance.php

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