

## States where English is the official language

Five states are considering legislation this year to make English their official language. If passed, they would join the 31 states with existing official language laws.

In some states, an official language is treated similar to how official flowers, birds, or trees are treated: as just a designation without any particular guidelines for what to do about it. In Illinois, for example, its English law states simply, "The official language of the state of Illinois is English."

In Missouri, it's even more vague, more of an observation than a designation: "The general assembly recognizes that English is the most common language used in Missouri and recognizes that fluency in English is necessary for full integration into our common American culture."

Most states go further, with additional guidelines, like Tennessee, which mandates that, "All communications and publications, including ballots, produced by governmental entities in Tennessee shall be conducted in English unless the nature of the course would require otherwise."

In Massachusetts, its Supreme Court ruled someone could be convicted of a crime for violating a written order, even though it was written in English.

Even in states where the law includes additional guidelines, however, they aren't always strictly enforced, or are interpreted to allow for state documents to be translated. In California, for example, its constitution calls for the legislature to "take all steps necessary to insure that the role of English as the common language ... is preserved and enhanced," yet the state offers election services and materials in nine languages, and there's a Spanish-language DMV website. Arizona, which calls for all state action to be conducted in English, provides bilingual voter materials.

"It's not about language restrictions," said Karin Davenport, a spokesperson for U.S. English, which advocates to make the language official nationwide. "It's about making English the bond that ties us together in our diversity."

English laws can save states money by only requiring they print documents in one language, she said, and it "adds an incentive for people who don't know English to learn the language."

Opponents argue such laws are discriminatory against immigrants, Davenport said, and efforts to make English the official language at a federal level have stalled since the Obama administration has come out in opposition. A 2010 Rasmussen poll found 87 percent of Americans approved of making English the official language, and 16 percent opposed.

The states currently considering legislation that would make English their official language are Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.