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Tongue twist

Should English be the national language of the U.S.?

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Senate: Make English official

Historic vote on language provokes passions

By Frank James
Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON -- The Senate on Thursday voted to make English the national language of the United States, a historic move that arose out of its debate of comprehensive immigration reform.

The lopsided 63-34 vote came after an impassioned debate in which the word "racist" was used on the Senate floor to describe the effort.

It was the first time in U.S. history that the Senate had passed such legislation. More negotiations on the final bill are expected, but if a "national language" measure cleared both the Senate and House and was signed by President Bush, it could mean a greater emphasis on the federal government providing its services in English.

The vote also appeared to be an important moment of reaction against multiculturalism in the U.S.

In recent weeks, large protests across the U.S. by supporters of immigrant rights have pointed to America's increasingly polyglot future. But the Senate's action appeared to be a reassertion of the nation's English heritage.

"This is something that is more significant probably to the American people than it is inside this chamber," said Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), who introduced the bill.

He said solid majorities of Americans, including Hispanics according to recent polls, believe English should be the nation's official language.

"So I believe this is something very significant we'll be doing today that people have talked about now for four decades that I know of, and I believe it should be popular," said Inhofe, who speaks fluent Spanish.

Although the immigration bill passed by the House last year doesn't have a similar provision, there is a separate "official English" bill in the House with strong support.

The Senate's action on Thursday raises the prospect that when Senate and House members meet to iron out differences in their immigration bills, the final product will include an "official English" provision.

Inhofe's legislation originally called for English to be the nation's "official" language. But to draw enough support to pass his amendment, he made a subtle change, calling for English to be the "national" language.

To some, this softened the measure slightly, but supporters said it made

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little difference.

"We think it's basically the same thing. It's a 'You say potato, I say potato' kind of thing," said Tim Schultz, director of government relations of U.S. English Inc. The organization describes itself as dedicated to preserving English's unifying role in U.S. life.

Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid of Nevada said the legislation struck him as invidious--if not in motivation, then in result.

"While the intent may not be there, I really believe this amendment is racist," he said. "I think it's directed basically at people who speak Spanish."

The bill's supporters rejected that charge.

Specifically, the bill says that "unless otherwise authorized or provided by law, no person has a right, entitlement or claim to have the government of the U.S. or any of its officials or representatives act, communicate, perform or provide services, or provide materials in any language other than English."

The amendment continues, "If any forms are issued by the federal government in a language other than English . . . the English language version of the form is the sole authority for all legal purposes."

Opponents of the bill said that under their interpretation, it would prevent government officials from conducting a range of activities, from speaking Spanish in government assemblies to putting up warning signs in both English and Spanish.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), for example, said drowning deaths on the Potomac River, which flows through the nation's capital, had gone from more than a dozen in 2004 to none last year. The U.S. Park Service credited the decline, he said, to warning signs in Spanish and English after it noticed that many drowning victims were immigrants.

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