



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 29, 2010

## English-only Driver's Exam Proposed for Alabama

The state of Alabama offers driver's license tests in Japanese, Korean, German, Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, French, Greek, Russian, Spanish, Thai, and Vietnamese. And English. Tim James, a Republican candidate for Governor, says that's 12 languages too many.



"Why do our politicians make us give driver's license exams in 12 languages?" James asks in a campaign ad that has garnered much attention and generated no small amount of controversy. "This is Alabama. We speak English. If you want to live here, learn it. We're only giving that test in English if I'm Governor."

The candidate offers both economic and safety arguments in support of his position. The tests will be less costly and can be administered more efficiently in a single language, he maintains. "Maybe it's just the businessman in me, but we'll save money and it makes sense," says James, a partner in an Alabama construction firm. And, he maintains, without a requirement that applicants can understand and communicate in English, there is no assurance they will be able to read and heed road signs or be understood by emergency responders at the scene of an accident. On his website, James refers readers to a 2004 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report that, he says, attributed a sharp increase in work-related fatalities and a 72-percent increase in work-related traffic fatalities in Alabama to the fact that increasing numbers of workers and drivers could not read or understand warning signs in English.

But former Alabamian James Joyner, who runs the political blog *Outside the Beltway*, argues it's a myth that non-English speakers can't understand road and traffic signs. "The reality is that road signs are understandable to people who don't read the language," Joyner told *The Ticket*, a political blog of the *LA Times*. "The signs are intentionally pictographs, designed to be intuitively recognizable in an instant from a distance."

Campaign spokesman Brett Hall said that while the driver's license ad does not mention illegal immigration, the issues are closely related. If illegal immigrants had to take the test in English, he told the *Talking Points Memo* blog, "It would make it inconvenient for them to get an Alabama driver's license, that's for sure." Since the campaign began two years ago, Hall said, people have been asking on a daily basis what the candidate would do about the immigration issue.

"And our ad doesn't specifically address illegal aliens or talk about that, but we did see that the state of Alabama, in offering 12 foreign languages in addition to English for the driver's test, it was absurd," Hall said. "But we thought we would home in on that part of it and it seems to have a hit a raw nerve here in the state."

And outside the state as well. Cable TV commentator Rachel Maddow on MSNBC accused James of being mean and pandering to the far Right base of the Republican Party. Others in print, broadcast



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media, and on political blogs have blasted the ad as racism and jingoism.

"I have come under attack and under assault by a very interesting group of far-left reporters," the candidate told a group of supporters earlier this week. Ironically, many of those denouncing the ad have posted it on their blogs and websites, apparently to show how bad it is. But James seems to appreciate the added exposure. The video has had more than 50,000 hits since it went on Youtube, he said.

James, 48, is the son of former two-term Governor Fob James. The younger James ran for Governor in 2002 and finished third in the Republican primary. A recent Public Policy Polling survey found him running third again, trailing former state Sen. Bradley Byrne and State Treasurer Kay Ivey in potential matchups against Democrats Artur Davis, Congressman from District 7, and Agricultural Commissioner Ron Sparks. Republican Governor Bob Riley is term-limited and cannot run again.

In an editorial headlined "The Candidate From Xenophobia," the *New York Times* today described James as "transparently intent on tapping into the anti-immigrant, anti-government mood of malcontent voters." His ad ignores the fact that the state has attracted foreign auto manufacturers who have come to Alabama with workers who speak German, Japanese, and Korean, said the *Times*, which likened the candidate's strategy to the campaign advice followed by the fictional Willie Stark in *All the King's Men*: "Stir them up and they'll love it and come back for more, but, for heaven's sakes, don't try to improve their minds." The *Times* did not explain how administering driver's license tests in Chinese, Arabic, and Farsi will improve the minds of Alabamians or residents of other states that offer the tests in a variety of languages.

Minnesota, for example, provides the written exam in six languages: English, Spanish, Hmong (a language spoken by people in northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, among others), Vietnamese, Russian, and Somali. California, the largest state, tests drivers in 32 languages.

Georgia, like Alabama, has 12 languages for the written test. A bill introduced this session of the state's legislature to require English-only exams stirred up a hornet's of controversy, with opponents charging the effort is driven by racist and anti-immigrant sentiment. Some argued it could also dampen the interest of international companies to invest in the state and of workers to live there.

"This is an economic development killer for the state of Georgia," said Jerry Gonzalez, executive director of the Georgia Alliance of Latino Elected Officials. "This bill is about open hostility toward legal immigrants. It is open xenophobia."

Alabama began offering the tests in multiple languages in the 1970s, but stopped in 1991 after voters approved an English-only constitutional amendment. In 1996, the Southern Poverty Law Center sued the state on behalf of Martha Sandoval, a Mexican-born citizen with little proficiency in English. Sandoval had been arrested several times for driving without a license. The suit alleged the English requirement violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964 because "the regulation had impermissible disparate impact on the basis of national origin in violation of Title VI, and was not supported by substantial legitimate justification."

A federal court ruled in favor of Sandoval and Alabama went back to providing the tests in multiple languages, even as it appealed the ruling. The state lost again in appeals court but the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision (*Alexander v. Sandoval*) overruled the lower court, finding that Sandoval lacked standing to sue. Under the law, only a government agency is allowed to sue for enforcement of Title VI, the court said. The decision did not, however, protect the state against loss of federal highway funding,



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something opponents say will happen if it reverts to English only. The prospect of losing highway money might not agree with the businessman in Tim James, but it does not seem to dampen his political instincts.

"Offering driver's tests in 12 other foreign languages may be politically correct, but it's not in the public's interest to license people to drive when they can't read traffic signs," he says.

*This article has been edited. In its original iteration, it misidentified the current Governor as Gov. Donald Siegelamn, a Democrat.*

Photo of Tim James: AP Images



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