



## NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO **RESTORE CIVIL RIGHTS**

### **LANGUAGE RIGHTS**

In America, people who don't speak English as their first language can face both subtle and overt forms of discrimination. This discrimination can affect people's access to health care, education, employment, the justice system, and many other areas of daily life. People with limited English proficiency used to be protected by civil rights laws that prevented discrimination based on national origin, but a few recent court rulings are making it harder and harder to enforce these basic rights.

Martha Sandoval lived in Alabama, a state with an "English-only" policy, and needed to get a state driver's license. She could drive and could read the signs on the road in English, but she was not a fluent English speaker. When she was not allowed to take any part of her driving test in Spanish, Ms. Sandoval took her case to court, saying the state of Alabama had violated a basic civil rights law designed to prevent discrimination against people based on race or national origin in public places and programs.

*Alexander v. Sandoval* made its way all the way to the Supreme Court, which handed down a devastating ruling for civil rights. The Court ruled that no one could sue if that person could not prove intentional discrimination. Because Ms. Sandoval couldn't prove that the state had intentionally discriminated against her by passing its English-only policy, she had no right to bring her case to court. Ms. Sandoval, and every person after her who is discriminated against because of the language they speak will no longer find help in the federal courts.

This case weakened civil rights laws that affect many areas of American life, but the impact of this case is strongest against those who are discriminated against based on national origin and the language they speak. Americans who aren't given interpreters in hospitals and can't be understood by their doctors, or can't understand the questions being asked of them, have no recourse. Americans who are fired from their jobs for not speaking English-unrelated to their ability to perform their job-might not have any recourse. Even people who are denied interpreters in court will be unable to compel a state to provide them with an interpreter. The federal courts have slammed their doors shut on people for whom these issues can be matters of life and death.

**For more information on language rights and the courts, please contact the National Campaign to Restore Civil Rights at: [rollback@nylpi.org](mailto:rollback@nylpi.org).**

**For detailed case information, please see the below:**

- [\*Alexander v. Sandoval\* \(532 U.S. 275, 2001\)](#)