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Challenges to Multiculturalism

Jorge Capetillo-Ponce

An anti-bilingual education referendum was offered to citizens of Massachusetts in November of 2002. The referendum read, in part, “The current state law providing for transitional bilingual education in public schools will be replaced with a law requiring that, with limited exceptions, all public school children must be taught English by being taught all subjects in English and being placed in English language classrooms.” The University of Massachusetts Gaston Institute analyzed the results of that referendum, here reported on by Jorge Capetillo-Ponce.

The second great wave of immigration to the United States, which began in the mid 1960s, has dramatically changed the ethnic composition of the nation. Though smaller than the first great wave of Europeans (1880–1930), the present wave has brought to our shores a much more diverse group from Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa.¹

Many Americans consider that this influx of new cultures has greatly enriched American society, bringing both skilled and unskilled workers into expanding industries, revitalizing decaying urban centers across the country, and re-energizing our political establishment with new visions for the future. In this view, the culture, values, and language of the newcomers contribute to cultural diversity within the country. Other Americans, however, see diversity as a cause of disunity, not a source of national enrichment. They speak of the costs inherent in the new wave of immigration — labor market competition with native workers and the demands for social services. They hold to a nativist view, believing that the nation is divided and its common history diluted by strangers. They see the myth of the melting pot — the assimilation of immigrants into the American culture — being challenged by an influx of foreigners who are not interested in maintaining the ties to American culture based on Anglo Protestant history and the English language.

As a result of the Civil Rights movement, bilingual education programs were created in the 1960s and 1970s within public schools. Bilingual education

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policy, it was believed, would enhance the educational and other civil rights of millions of non-English speaking immigrants. Reasons for this policy were both pragmatic (providing assistance in learning English would make workers more productive) and ideological (a real cultural democracy respects the language of its minority members).

But the dramatic increase in the Spanish-speaking population in recent decades (and the increase in smaller but still significant numbers of immigrants from Asia, Europe, Africa, and the non-English speaking Caribbean countries) has provoked concern among citizens who view the supremacy of the English language as a necessary element of national cohesion and identity. This connection between language and ethnicity has been the focus of discussion of bilingual education programs.

The most visible and influential anti-bilingual education movement in recent years has been “English Only,” headed by California millionaire Ron Unz. Its platform argues that bilingual programs take resources away from public school budgets. The movement equates bilingualism with “cultural separatism,” especially among Spanish speaking immigrants. The anti-bilingual advocates argue that these non-English speakers may be evading the process of assimilation that earlier immigrant groups followed. In short, for “English only” proponents, bilingual education in public schools threatens to divide us along language lines. Response to this negative trend has been an energetic national campaign that has been successful in passing anti-bilingual education legislation in California, Arizona, and more recently, in Massachusetts.

Examining the vote on bilingual education (Referendum Question 2) in Massachusetts sheds some light on contemporary attitudes about immigrants and a diverse society and on the challenges that cultural democracy — what is also called multiculturalism — faces in Massachusetts and perhaps elsewhere as well.

Even though the effects of recent large-scale immigration are more visible in such states as California, New York, and Florida, Massachusetts has also experienced substantial changes in its ethnic population. According to 2000 census data, the population of the state increased by 5.5 percent from 1990 to 2000, but the growth of Latinos and Asians in particular was much higher.

The Latino population, mostly from Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Central America, grew by 49 percent, and the Asian American population, particularly Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Korean, grew by 69 percent. While the presence of Latinos has increased in such cities as Lawrence, Holyoke, Chelsea, and Springfield, and the presence of Asians has increased in Lowell, Quincy, Cambridge, and Worcester, the most dramatic and visible example of the Commonwealth’s new ethnic diversity is in the city of Boston, where people of color now comprise more than 50 percent of the population.

Massachusetts is no stranger to racial and ethnic tensions, but it is also a state with a reputation for valuing immigrants and seeing to the needs of groups entering the society. In fact, in 1970 the Massachusetts Legislature enacted the first mandatory transitional bilingual education law in the United States.² But in November 2002, the Massachusetts electorate effectively ended bilingual education programs by voting overwhelmingly (68 percent) to pass Referendum Ballot Question 2. Exit polling done by the Mauricio Gaston Institute and UMASS Poll revealed, however, that out of a total 1,491 Latinos polled, 93 percent had voted to reject Q.2 and keep bilingual education in place.³

These numbers show a polarization between an English speaking, mostly white, majority and the linguistic minorities, especially Latinos (by far the largest group using bilingual educational services provided by the state) on the bilingual education issue. Less evident is the reason the referendum drew so much mainstream support.

With the majority of voters lacking expertise in language learning programs, the question arose: why did they vote as if they were convinced that English immersion is superior to bilingual education? Answering this question was problematic for two reasons. First, it is not certain that Latinos were satisfied with the system of bilingual education in Massachusetts. Latinos, who voted almost unanimously against the referendum, may have done so simply because they saw Q.2 as a referendum on themselves as Latino immigrants.⁴ Second, the Unz group appeared to represent a commonsense point of view: the need to learn English. The Unz campaign used simple but powerful slogans such as “English for the Children,” but did not discuss how to accomplish the task.

Thus, our focus shifted to the analysis of mainstream perceptions of bilingual education, the media coverage, and the two campaigns (pro and con bilingual education), since these factors could shed further light on how and why the vote was polarized.

The Focus Group Study

In order to understand mainstream voters’ perceptions of bilingual education and immigrants in general, we conducted focus groups in six urban areas around the state: Boston, Chatham, Chelsea, Holyoke, Stoughton, and Worcester. Reasons for rejecting bilingual education ranged from concerns over taxes needed to support the program, the perceived failings of the bilingual education system to the more ideologically and emotionally driven rejections based on the primacy of English or a “pull yourself by your bootstraps” philosophy stemming from the belief that new immigrants should go through the same acculturation process as did earlier immigrants. The reasons for maintaining bilingual education included the belief that it is better to educate Limited English Proficient (LEP) students to a sense of solidarity with immigrants and minorities.

To better understand the complexity of this issue we broke down the many themes arising from the focus group study into motivational categories: (1) instrumental/pragmatic and (2) emotional/ideological.

The following instrumental/pragmatic reasons for specific votes by focus group participants were identified:

- a. Funding* Although there was no consensus that funding and taxes were the dominant reason for votes for or against the referendum, there was a feeling that bilingual education needs more funds to be effective.
- b. Teacher training* Some felt that finding bilingual teachers for so many languages is especially difficult. Consequently, many school systems may use teachers not adequately fluent in the language they are using to teach their subjects.
- c. Tenure* Another major criticism was that students were kept in the programs too long, becoming dependent on the system and unable to transition into mainstream education.
- d. Selection* Some participants questioned the procedures for student placement, claiming that some students are able to argue in English quite effectively while others who had recently arrived are unable to do so. Other participants felt that students with learning disabilities or disciplinary problems might have been placed into bilingual education to keep the “problem” students together.
- e. English as a vehicle of success* Almost all participants shared, as a rationale or pragmatic motivation, the expectation that speaking English is necessary for success in American society.

The second category of reasons for votes by focus group participants — emotional/ideological motivations — are defined as the adoption of positions based on values informed by popular conventional wisdom, myths, and unsubstantiated beliefs, independent of the likelihood of their benefit to a specific community or of success. We identified six of these motivational categories:

- a. Nostalgic optimism* Many participants mused that their grandparents would have viewed bilingual education as a luxury. Such a feeling is not necessarily anti-immigrant as many who hold it also hold a romanticized version of their ancestors’ immigration to the United States and the way in which they “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.” The feeling was that newcomers should go through the same initiation process that past waves of immigrants had gone through to become successful.
- b. Language of the Land* This sentiment was expressed by many participants. Whether this was an anti-immigrant expression, however, was contingent upon whether it was voiced in concert with the previous position (“nostalgic optimism”), or with the instrumental/pragmatic position “English as a

vehicle of success.” When related along with “nostalgic optimism,” it seemed to imply that immigrants, for some unknown reason, do not want to learn English; whereas when used with “English as a vehicle for success” argument, it may be considered a pragmatic view of the skills immigrants need to become successful in the United States.

- c. Perceptions that bilingual education does not work* While many participants favored bilingual education in theory, they indicated that, based on what they had heard, read, or seen, it has been implemented so poorly in the past few decades that a change was needed. Since the referendum did not offer the possibility for reform, elimination of the program appeared to be the only option.
- d. Belief that English immersion works* In contrast to nostalgic optimism, some participants with direct experience of language immersion believe in the efficacy of this approach. This sentiment was consistent with learning English as the educational goal. While other participants without any first hand experience agreed with this position, yet another group (more sympathetic with a multicultural agenda) did not. They believed immersion worked but attention to other subjects suffered or stripped people of their language and culture.
- e. Belief that native tongue can survive at home* Participants related stories of their friends or relatives who had come to America at different ages and either lost or maintained their native language. In general, the distinction came from the age at which people came to this country. Some participants related their own stories or those of children of German, Italian or French Canadian ancestry, who enrolled in American schools and lost the ability to speak their native languages. Yet others just took for granted that a native language would remain since it is the language of birth.
- f. Conspiracy to maintain underclass* The notion that eliminating bilingual education served the purposes of those who wanted to maintain an immigrant underclass was mentioned in a Worcester focus group in the context of government officials not caring whether bilingual education programs failed, but this notion was much more prominent among the Boston group, where there was near consensus that “the powers that be” are deliberately trying to strip people of their culture and sabotage the educational and advancement opportunities of minorities, keeping them in a marginalized situation indefinitely.⁵

In discussion about people speaking other languages in their presence, several respondents pointed to occasions where people around them would speak Spanish, effectively excluding them from the conversation and creating an awkward social situation. Furthermore, the speaking of several languages in the workplace often led to frustrating and unproductive experiences, in interactions with co-workers, and particularly in customer service situations

where interactions were made difficult by language differences. For several participants, this frustration was combined with a feeling that the speakers of other languages were talking about them, viewed as the cause of workplace conflicts as well in social situations.

Media Coverage and the Character of the Campaigns

The motivational reasons briefly described above are useful because they offer a framework in which to place the breadth of opinions held on the issue of bilingual education and immigrants by various representatives of the mainstream target group. Still, it is important to emphasize that tracing back the origins of the mainstream vote against bilingual education is a complex task. While most of the instrumental/pragmatic and emotional/ideological motivations exhibit a degree of negative or critical evaluations of bilingual education, participants exhibited and attributed to others a mixture of motivations for voting one way or another. In any case, opinions can be changed or reinforced according to the social context in which they interact with other opinions and influences. Thus, to achieve an overall understand of the vote on Q.2, we need to examine two key issues that had a central impact on the mainstream vote: the media coverage and the propagandistic⁶ character of both the pro and the anti bilingual education campaigns. For example, while research on the effectiveness of bilingual education is inconsistent, media coverage of the debate on the referendum, continuously underscored this fact. The public could read or hear how referendum opponents, from politicians to grass-root activists to teachers and scholars, denounced the gubernatorial candidate, Mitt Romney, for using “misleading statistics on immersion in California,” while Romney declared that his campaign “had examined research from California and determined that immersion was superior.” Other articles questioned bilingual teachers’ training or the lack of monitoring the programs as the heart of the problem. Yet still others questioned the idea that the path to faster acquisition of English also led to better fluency, labeling English immersion as a “myth,” with students still taking several years to become fluent. While focus group participants indicated that they may have been paying more attention to the media as voting day approached, the media coverage led to confusion about the effectiveness of bilingual education and English immersion, limiting its influence on voting decisions.

Also confusing for focus group participants were the messages and slogans used in the bilingual education referendum campaign, such as “Don’t sue the teachers,” a slogan used by those opposing ending bilingual education programs, suggesting that should the referendum pass, teachers could be sued for using a child’s native language in the classroom. In rebuttal, supporters of the referendum stated that if teachers followed policy, there need be no fear of litigation.

The campaign to end bilingual education in the Commonwealth was successful; 328 of the state's 351 communities, urban centers, blue-collar towns, and wealthy suburbs, voted in favor of it, including even cities with large Latino populations. To understand this outcome, the opinions and sentiments expressed in the focus groups must be viewed in the socio-political context of the campaign, shaped mainly by the media coverage of the debate and the approaches to influence voters used by each side of the debate. Only then can we appreciate how the campaign devised by those opposed to bilingual education exploited the fears of mainstream voters — fears of the large immigration of linguistic minorities into “their” cities and towns.⁷ They effectively used a low-key approach with a simple message (“English for the Children”) reinforcing the unsubstantiated but widely held belief that by eliminating bilingual education voters were contributing to mending the fractures that affect present day America. Their strategy gained the center of the political spectrum and decisively out-maneuvered the more multiculturalist, activist-oriented, coalition style of the pro-bilingual education campaign, with disparate messages that appeared more radical to the mainstream public.

The vote on the referendum suggests that the mood of mainstream Massachusetts has shifted away from sympathy with ethnic diversity as a means of enriching our society to an attitude of concern about the effects of the recent large-scale influx of immigrants into the state. Most participants in the focus groups were sympathetic with a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps ideology. They were willing to “tolerate” high levels of immigration as long as they were satisfied that the newcomers pay their own way, do not receive special consideration or “breaks,” such as bilingual education, and assimilate at a relatively rapid rate.

By no means have these attitudes consolidated into one coherent or conscious ideology. In fact, the focus group study shows that, in general, participants did not realize the consequences of voting in a particular way on a program in which they had little or no interest. But most of the instrumental/pragmatic and emotional/ideological motivations of participants did exhibit some degree of negative or critical evaluations of bilingual education and of immigrant groups in particular. And the mainstream vote did have a profound impact on linguistic minority groups, especially Latinos, who use and value bilingual education programs.

These aspects of the vote constitute a sign of the challenges that achieving multiculturalism faces in Massachusetts today. We know that with tenuous evidence one way or another on the efficacy of bilingual education, the public remained confused and uninformed, left to rely on conventional wisdom, the ambivalent media coverage, and the propaganda-like character of both campaigns. The question is, how can cultural democracy — a view that among

other things emphasizes the need for a language policy that protects the educational and other civil rights of linguistic and cultural minorities — be positively presented to the mainstream population?

There are no easy answers to this question. Research on this referendum vote, however, indicates that in their search for “objectivity,” the media altogether avoided the issue of minority rights, focusing instead solely on the efficacy of the program, rather than promoting a wider debate on the multiculturalist issue of recognizing and treating linguistic minorities as equals. Proponents of the referendum used to their own advantage many of the negative or critical evaluations of bilingual education. Their approach was successful in disguising intolerance in common sense attire by projecting the idea that the main objective of the campaign was not restricting the rights of linguistic minorities, but promoting social integration. And the anti-Unz campaign laid out a confusing and fragmented campaign, wasting a rare opportunity to enlighten the mainstream public about the fact that pluralism in language as in other cultural qualities is desirable, and about the benefits to be gained from improving interaction between dominant and minority groups in the state.

The vote on Q.2 is an example of how a prime tool of democracy — the referendum — can be used, wittingly or unwittingly, to provoke intolerance in the mainstream population and, in this case at least, it may have the effect of undermining minority rights. In theory, referenda, by triggering media coverage and campaigns for and against a specific issue, increase political knowledge, political efficacy, and politicization. But as we can see in the focus group participants’ generalized state of confusion about central aspects of Q.2, neither the media coverage nor the strategies of the two campaigns had a measurable effect on civic education or on increasing the mainstream population’s understanding of bilingual education. Nor did the process promote political efficacy by offering citizens a direct say in policy making. The way Q.2 was worded, reform was not an option. And reform would have been the best way to achieve political efficacy and avoid polarization.⁸ In regard to politicization, we should not confuse what actually happened (the polarization of political discourse, resulting in a vote characterized by vulgar majoritarianism) with increased citizens’ interest and popular participation.

Finally, we must realize that treating members of minority groups as equals entails appealing to and transmitting values that are compatible with the recognition of the worth of distinctive cultural traditions. Achieving this goal seems to require that public institutions be actively involved in pushing for educational programs that acknowledge rather than ignore cultural particularities. Referendums can be an important element in this educational process, but it is possible that they need to occur in a more regular basis, be more fully institutionalized (particularly the funding aspects), and especially be part of a broader process of citizen participation and cross-cultural acculturation that

includes a continuous dialogue between majority and minority groups, to achieve their intended goal of increasing political knowledge, political efficacy, and politicization in the population. These changes might prevent the polarization of political discourse that we saw on the vote on bilingual education and promote a better understanding of how to deal with such an emotional and symbolic issue in a manner that enhances the rights of cultural minorities and the overall democratic process. ❁

Notes

1. The leading immigrant groups by nation of origin according to the Statistical Yearbook of Immigration and Naturalization Service 2000 are Mexico (20.21 percent), Russia (5.15 percent), China (9.93 percent), the Philippines (4.78 percent), India (4.6 percent), Vietnam (2.98 percent), and Haiti (2.59 percent).
2. This was the result of the efforts, during the 1960s, of the Puerto Rican community of Boston to address the educational problems faced by their children. In fact, bilingual education was the first citywide Latino effort in Boston. For a detailed account see Miren Uriarte's "The Way We Went to School: The Roots of Bilingual Education in Massachusetts," available at <http://omega.ccumb.edu/uriarte/bilingualed.htm>.
3. This percentage contrasted sharply with polls reported in the media that indicated Latinos were split on the issue of bilingual education versus English immersion.
4. It is interesting to note a survey of 198 Latino leaders conducted by students of University of Boston and the Gaston Institute during the Statewide Latino Public Policy Conference held on April 23, 2004, indicated that 74 percent felt that bilingual education programs needed reform, while only 16 percent said that bilingual education was working fine. Both groups said that it should not have been eliminated.
5. It is telling that in the Boston focus group, which was overwhelmingly African American — feelings toward the vote itself differed from English speaking participants in other urban areas. What these responses point to is not only a higher degree of solidarity among English speaking minorities, such as African Americans, with linguistic minorities and the immigrant underclass, but also a perception of the vote as an issue of ethnic majority-minority group relations.
6. "Propaganda-like" meaning in this context expressions of opinions or action by groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends, and without careful scrutiny and criticism of the issue at hand. In this case, we refer to propaganda that alters public opinion on matters of social consequence, such as is discussed here.
7. The present wave of immigration to the state can be overwhelming to many members of the mainstream population who don't understand how to manage this great demographic change. Still, according to a recent Commonwealth Corporation report, Massachusetts is reliant upon immigrants to sustain its economy. Its population would have decreased by about 25,000 were it not for the arrival of 108,737 immigrants between 2000 and 2003, contributing at least 62 percent of the growth of its resident labor force. See A. Noorani in the Boston Globe, July 18, 2004, E11.
8. Some focus group participants pointed out that the wording of Q. 2 and its accompanying description was somewhat unclear. For instance, a "NO" vote on the referendum was to keep the bilingual education system the way it was, and a "YES" vote was to change or eliminate the system, which is less than intuitive since the question was a referendum on bilingual education. Others expressed the opinion that had the referendum offered a choice between elimination and reform rather than elimination and no change, their vote might have changed for reform.

