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The Vote on Bilingual Education and Latino Identity in Massachusetts

By Jorge Capetillo-Ponce, Ph.D.

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Introduction

In November 2002, the Massachusetts electorate voted overwhelmingly to pass Referendum Ballot Question 2 (Q. 2), sponsored by California millionaire Ron Unz. The passage of this initiative by close to 70% of the voters effectively ended bilingual education in the state as it had been known for thirty years. Exit polling done at selected cities in Massachusetts by the Mauricio Gaston Institute and UMASS Poll revealed, however, that out of a total 1,491 Latinos polled, a vast majority of them, around 93%, had voted in favor of rejecting Q. 2 and keeping bilingual education in place.

Indeed, Q. 2 became a rallying point for the Latino communities of Massachusetts. By promoting the maintenance of bilingual education programs, Latino leaders and bilingual education activists were able to raise voter awareness and to mount voter-registration campaigns throughout the state. As a result, Latino identity became directly linked to their rejection of Q. 2, and their support of Shannon O'Brien for governor.

The Poll

The precincts chosen for the exit polling (see table 1) are located in urban centers having high percentages of potential Latino voters (that is, high percentages of Latino residents over 18 years of age). There were three precincts selected for polling in Lawrence; three in Springfield; three in Holyoke; two in Chelsea; two in Worcester; two in Boston; and one in Salem.

Participants in the poll answered a questionnaire that could be read and

answered in English or Spanish (see Table 2). The first eight questions addressed the voters' political considerations; the remaining questions were designed to capture socio-economic information: identity, birth place, children under 18 years of age, language spoken at home, age, income, and gender.

In this sample of Latino voters women outnumbered men almost two to one (63% to 37%); close to 50% had incomes of under \$20,000, while around 30% had incomes of under \$50,000; about 75% were between the ages of 30 and 64; 40% spoke Spanish at home, 56% spoke both Spanish and English, and 4% spoke only English; 55% had children under 18 years of age; 66% were born in Puerto Rico, 19% in the Dominican Republic, and close to 10% in the United States.

There is a strong correlation between the responses to questions 1 and 8, between Latinos voting *against* Q. 2 and *for* Shannon O'Brien for governor (93% and 86%, respectively). This may indicate that Governor Romney's support for Q. 2 hurt him with Latino voters, since his showing among those polled (6.5%) was even worse than it was for the "other" category of candidates (7.8%).

Also notable is the 68% figure one arrives at when one adds together those who thought that the current bilingual program is working (38%), that kids can't learn English in one year (12%), and that parents/teachers should have a voice in choosing what they consider to be the best program for learning English (18%).

Although, not surprisingly, the majority of Latino voters polled got most of their

information about Q. 2 through television (54%) and radio (20%), there was a significant percentage of voters who received their information from community organizations (17%), which may be the effect of political organization and activism. In fact, more than half of the Latinos who participated in this poll were well-informed. They were aware of the recent reforms to bilingual education in Massachusetts (53%), of the failure of English-immersion efforts in California (58%), and of the possibility that if Q. 2 passes, teachers can be sued for using Spanish in the classroom (54%). Finally, the percentage of Latinos who voted against Q. 2 did not vary significantly from city to city. The lowest percentage was 89% in Chelsea and the highest was 97% in Springfield.

Table 1. Selected Precincts

Town	Ward/Precinct
Boston	Ward 10/Precinct 7
Boston	Ward 1/Precinct 4
Salem	Ward 1/Precinct 2
Chelsea	Ward 1/Precinct 1
Chelsea	Ward 1/Precinct 2
Worcester	Ward 2/Precinct 5
Worcester	Ward 10/Precinct 5
Lawrence	Ward C/Precinct 1
Lawrence	Ward C/Precinct 2
Lawrence	Ward C/Precinct 3
Holyoke	Ward 2/Precinct B
Holyoke	Ward 1/Precinct A
Holyoke	Ward 4/Precinct A
Springfield	Ward 1/Precinct C
Springfield	Ward 1/Precinct A
Springfield	Ward 1/Precinct B

Table 2. Frequencies in Exit Poll Questionnaire

Question 1: How did you vote on Q.2?		
a. Voted yes	71	(4.8%)
b. Voted no	1387	(93.2%)
c. Didn't vote	29	(2%)
Question 2: Why did you vote that way?		
a. The current system isn't working	37	(2.8%)
b. I heard this was successful in other states	11	(0.8%)
c. I want my kids to learn English quickly	52	(3.9%)
d. The current system of Bil.Ed is working	503	(37.6%)
e. I heard this was a failure in other states	25	(1.9%)
f. Kids can't learn English in one year	159	(11.9%)
g. Parents and teachers should be able to choose programs	240	(18.0%)
h. Shouldn't sue teachers for speaking Spanish in class	43	(3.2%)
i. Other	266	(19.9%)
Question 3: Did you see, hear, or read anything about Q. 2 before today?		
a. yes	1219	(84.7%)
b. no	213	(14.8%)
Question 4: Where did you get most of your information about Q. 2?		
a. TV	650	(54%)
b. Radio	239	(19.9%)
c. Newspaper	84	(7.0%)
d. Community organizer	203	(16.9%)
e. Mail	19	(1.6%)
Question 5: Did you know that State Legislature passed a law reforming Bil. Ed.?		
a. yes	75	(53.4%)
b. no	504	(35.4%)
c. not sure	70	(4.9%)
d. don't know	89	(6.3%)
Question 6: Did you know that Q. 2 includes provision for suing teachers?		
a. yes	784	(53.8%)
b. no	605	(41.6%)
c. not sure	33	(2.3%)
d. don't know	31	(2.1%)
Question 7:		
Did you know that the same plan in California failed to teach English in a year?		
a. yes	810	(58.1%)
b. no	414	(29.7%)
c. not sure	60	(4.3%)
d. don't know	80	(5.7%)

Table 2. Frequencies in Exit Poll Questionnaire -- Con't

Question 8: Who did you vote for Governor?	
a. O'Brien	1153 (85.7%)
b. Romney	88 (6.5%)
c. Other	105 (7.8%)
Question 9: Do you identify yourself as Latino?	
a. yes	100%
b. no	0%
Question 10: Where were you born?	
a. Puerto Rico	977 (66.1%)
b. Dominican Republic	275 (18.6%)
c. Mexico	7 (0.5%)
d. U.S.	137 (9.3%)
e. Other	81 (5.5%)
Question 11: Do you have children under 18 living at home?	
a. yes	796 (54.4%)
b. no	662 (45.2%)
c. refused	4 (0.3%)
Question 12: Age	
a. 18-29	227 (15.5%)
b. 30-44	540 (36.8%)
c. 45-64	538 (36.6%)
d. 65 and older	142 (9.7%)
e. refused	22 (1.5%)
Question 13: Family income	
a. Less than \$20,000	647 (48.6%)
b. Between \$20,000 and \$49,000	405 (30.4%)
c. Between \$50,000 and \$74,000	76 (5.7%)
d. More than \$75,000	28 (2.1%)
e. refused	175 (13.1%)
Question 14 : Sex	
a. male	534 (35.8%)
b. female	904 (62.8%)

The Uses and the Limits of the Exit Poll

The polling was done in densely populated Latino communities or enclaves, both in sections of large cities such as Boston (where 20% of Massachusetts Latinos live) and in smaller cities where Latinos account for over 40% of the population – as in Lawrence (60%), Chelsea (45%), and Holyoke (42%). Even though more than 50% of all Latino residents of the state live in the cities that were selected for the exit polling, the choice of these "culturally bounded" barrios as opposed to polling Latinos living in largely non-Latino communities might seem problematic to some. However, no extant research suggests that more "mainstream" Latinos (those who speak mostly English at home and who live outside the barrios) would have joined non-Latinos in voting for Q. 2, particularly given the almost unanimous (93%) vote by Latinos against Q. 2. Further, any hypothesized difference in voting patterns between barrio and mainstream Latinos would be difficult to apply to the vote on Q. 2, if, in the final analysis, the vote had less to do with education and more to do with identity politics and majority-minority group relations.

The Politics behind the Vote

The anti-Unz campaigns mobilized a loose coalition of immigrant rights activists, community groups, teachers and principals, unions (such as the Massachusetts Teacher Association and the Massachusetts Federation of Teachers), governmental organizations (such as Boston's Office of New Bostonians and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), under an umbrella organization known as FACT (the Committee for Fairness to Children and Teachers). Unlike previous get-out-the-vote campaigns, this one featured Latino leaders. In Chelsea, for example, the Vota-Movils blared a Spanish

jingle set to a salsa beat: *Latino sal a votar, una voz unida para triunfar* (Latinos go out to vote, a united voice will triumph). It was a scene played out in Latino enclaves throughout the state. The democratic candidate for governor, Shannon O'Brien, as well as such national leaders as senators Kennedy and Kerry, also supported the anti-Unz campaign, although they did not make it a central issue as did the Romney campaign in support of English immersion. As a result, it is no surprise that Latino identity became directly linked to their rejection of Q. 2, and to their support of O'Brien for governor. Still, even though Latinos are the state's largest minority, and their vote against Q. 2 may indicate increased political activism and group awareness, they make up around 5.6 % of the voting-age population, according to the 2000 census figures, too small an electorate to make a difference on a statewide initiative.

What makes the passage of Q. 2 so difficult to understand is that the focus of the referendum wasn't really about reaching a consensus on educating youth. While research on the effectiveness of bilingual education is inconsistent (and my analysis of the media coverage of the debate around Q.2 reveals that media outlets in the state continuously underlined this fact¹), this aspect does not seem to be the principal reasoning behind the majority vote.² Rather, proponents of the referendum continued to stress the need for all citizens to learn English, without initiating any serious discussion as to how this end could most efficiently be reached.

It comes as little surprise, then, that in the absence of both research consensus on the effectiveness of bilingual ed and any sustained pre-election public debate about relevant facts and research, the issue of maintaining bilingual education in Massachusetts moved on to the politically polarized spheres of identity politics and majority-minority relations.

Latinos may have voted as they did

simply because they saw Q. 2 as being a referendum on themselves, as Latinos and as immigrants. Less clear, and hence an urgent question for further research, is the issue of what factors or motivations led the average English-speaking voter of Massachusetts to support the initiative.

The pro-Unz campaign won in 328 of the state's 351 communities, including urban centers, blue-collar towns, and wealthy suburbs. It even passed in cities with large Latino populations, such as Holyoke and Chelsea. It was defeated in Boston, as well as in such liberal towns as Amherst, Brookline, and Cambridge. Besides these "core liberal" towns of Massachusetts, Q.2 passed almost everywhere else in the state.

How the Unz campaign attracted the vote of two out of three registered voters in the state is a question worthy of analysis. Among other factors, its success may have been due to having better economic resources. According to reports filed with the Office of Campaign and Political Finance, for example, covering Aug. 1, 2001 – Oct. 15, 2002, the pro-bilingual, anti-Unz campaign raised \$206,664 and the Unz anti-bilingual-ed campaign raised \$442,100. A second factor may have been that the Unz campaign had a simple but unified message: "English for the Children." In addition, Romney introduced English immersion as central issue of his campaign. The Unz campaign was also supported by a coalition of educators, academics, and politicians, and used television and radio to project its message, avoiding pep rallies and demonstrations, and focusing on debates, media interviews, and low-key addresses to target groups.

The Unz campaign understood very well, after its victories in California and Arizona, the power that negative perceptions of bilingual education held in the minds of typical American voters. The Unz campaign used both economic logic and historical stereotypes of bilingual education

to project the idea that you can be a democrat or a liberal and still vote against a program that has failed to deliver on its promises and that liberalism is not necessarily linked to multiculturalism.

On the other hand, the anti-Unz campaign, while mustering the support of many organizations, including the state's Democratic party, had to deal with the diverse interests of its supporters. It might have been impossible to unify the agenda of teachers, minority groups, governmental, and non-governmental organizations into one message that could effectively oppose the negative views on bilingual education and convince the English-speaking majority of the importance of a multiculturalist approach to the problem of English-language learning and the benefits to be gained from improving interaction between dominant and minority groups in the state.

The following are four preliminary hypotheses for further examination of the mainstream vote, none of them mutually exclusive:

1. Some mainstream voters might have been confused by the media's portrayals of the effectiveness of bilingual education, and never really analyzed the details of each side of the debate;

2. Others might have been anxious because of the growing immigrant population, fearing an increasingly multicultural society;

3. Some might have voted to cut back on public resources for a program specifically targeting minority populations;

4. And others might have seen the vote, not as expressing hostility to immigrants, but as an opportunity to return to an earlier assimilationist approach that allowed foreigners who entered the United States to learn English without bilingual classes and succeed.

Conclusion

For many Latinos in Massachusetts, the vote on Q. 2 was probably an uneasy

introduction to the American political system, especially if they understood the vote for English-only classes as an assault on their language and parental choice. The voter turnout rate increased in Boston by 41% from 1998, which also was a midterm election, according to BostonVote Analysis.³ It might very well be a turning point for Latino activism. Increased activism among Latinos may translate into the development of other avenues in which to speak out. If they can't succeed at the polls, Latinos will likely apply pressure on Romney and on school districts throughout the state. In fact, as Jorge Dominguez, professor of government at Harvard University, has pointed out, this vote could trigger Latino activism similar to the organizing seen after then-California Governor Pete Wilson campaigned for Proposition 187, a 1994 referendum that cut off public services to illegal immigrants⁴ and resulted in a Latino registration rate that increased from 8 % in 1992 to 11 % in 1996. Proposition 187 was also a wake-up call to the Latino community that resulted in a rapid rate of naturalization among Latinos, who saw the referendum as a sign of increasing anti-immigrant sentiment. We may see this effect in Massachusetts, with the end result being greater political empowerment of Latinos.

Endnotes

¹Research was based on textual analysis of 150 newspaper and television pieces about the debate on bilingual ed in Massachusetts, using the Lexis-Nexis database. See particularly the pieces on Q.2 by Anand Vaishnav of *The Boston Globe* to understand the complexities of news media coverage of this issue.

²The research literature evaluating the effectiveness of bilingual ed programs is inconsistent because, first of all, there is a notable lack of standardization of evaluation criteria, which leads to a wide range of opinions on the effectiveness of current bilingual ed programs and creates difficulties in framing meaningful comparisons with other types of programs, including English immersion. Secondly, because it is such a politically charged topic, the goals and opinions of both proponents and critics vary significantly, causing activists, politicians, and educators on both ends of

the political spectrum to ignore available research. See Lorna Rivera, "A Review of the Literature on Bilingual Education," (Boston: The Mauricio Gastón Institute, 2002)

³See Cindy Rodriguez, "Election 2002: activists encouraged by Latino turnout," *The Boston Globe*, 9 November 2002, B1.

⁴ Ibid.

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