

The Effects of Voting Materials in Spanish on the Participation of Latino Voters in the

Ventura County

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine if voting materials in Spanish affects the participation of Latino voters in Ventura County, California. Though there is a fair amount of research on voting materials in Spanish and how they affected the participation of Latino voters, most studies were broad and no studies had ever been conducted on the Ventura County. For this study, it was necessary to determine the usefulness of voting materials in Spanish as well as which groups benefited from voting materials the most. To accomplish this, surveys and interviews were administered to Latinos in Ventura County. The data from the surveys and interviews reflected the benefits of voting materials in Spanish as they make voting easier for many Spanish speaking Latinos. This study concluded that voting materials in Spanish do affect the participation of Latino voters in Ventura County by making voting more convenient and easier for Latinos in Ventura County.

Introduction

All throughout the United States voting materials in other languages such as translated ballots and voter information guides are commonly used when voting because of our fast-growing diverse population. Many immigrants live in the United States all their lives and never learn to speak English fluently; voting materials in other languages allow these immigrants to vote in elections. The second largest ethnic group in the United States is Latinos, and the Latino population continues to increase rapidly over time. As a result of this rapid growth of immigrants who only speak another language, voting materials in other languages are offered in many counties throughout the United States to make it easier for people to vote.

More minorities voting in elections can change the results of an election based on how they vote, which means elections in which more people participate, the needs and wants of an entire community are better served. The usefulness of voting materials in other languages is constantly being questioned. The main issue people have is they believe these materials are a waste of government resources to make ballots as well as other informational materials and distribute them if they are useless or do not benefit everyone. The belief of many is that if people live in the US, they should learn English. However, many people in the United States never learn to speak English or are able to speak English but are more comfortable reading more sophisticated things such as voting materials in their native language because they most likely have a better vocabulary and a better understanding of information presented to them in their native language. Voting materials include important information, county voter information guides provide information on candidates and propositions on the ballot in other languages to keep non-English speakers informed. And many studies have exhibited that the turnout of Latinos in elections is significantly higher when the county provides voting materials in Spanish.

Ventura County is a county in Southern California with a total population of 854,223 people with a large Latino population that makes up 42.9% of the population. The estimated number of Latinos in the Ventura County is 366,461 and according to the U.S Census Bureau, about 240,036 of these Latinos are native Spanish speakers. Ventura County does provide voting materials in Spanish due to its high Latino population. The voting materials available in Spanish for Spanish speaking voters in the Ventura County include county voter information guides, ballots, all legal publications, website, voting instructions, voter outreach materials, voter forms,

ballot drop off location lists and press releases. Clearly, a lot of voting materials are available to voters in order to help them vote in elections and make informed opinions about the candidates and propositions on the ballot.

This project will assess if voting materials in Spanish are effective in helping Spanish speakers vote and be informed about elections. It will also evaluate how the use of voting materials in Spanish affects Latino voters participation in Ventura County.

Literature Review

According to the U.S Census Bureau, “Even among U.S. citizens, there were an estimated 8 million people who spoke little or no English in 2000”(Daniel J. Hopkins,2011). Many people in the United States are never able to speak English fluently or proficiently because they can live normal lives not being able to speak read or write in English. Although immigrants need to speak some level of English in order to become citizens in the United States, “the language skills required for citizenship are not always sufficient for meaningful political participation” (Daniel J. Hopkins,2011). The language skills required for citizenship are very basic and some immigrants do not have to know any English to become United States Citizens. However, basic to little English makes it difficult for these Latinos with limited English to participate in elections as they are unable to read in English about information on ballots, or voting registration, polling places or their language skills are not advanced enough to comprehend more sophisticated voting materials such as voter information guides which provide important information on candidates and propositions.

“The minority language assistance provisions of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) remove language barriers to voting and help provide limited English speaking American citizens with a full and meaningful opportunity to cast ballots” (Espino, Tucker, 2007). This amendment was added to the Voting Rights Act in 1965 originally to ensure that people particularly African Americans were able to vote without facing racial discrimination which was common at this time as a way to suppress African American voters. Ten years later in 1975, Congress amended the Voting Rights Act to include “Language Minority Provision” (sections 203 and 4(f)(4)) in an attempt to ensure that every American citizen regardless of their ability to speak English had access to the electoral process (Electiononline briefing). “Congress’ intention in passing the language provisions of the VRA was not to facilitate voting by immigrants but rather to increase participation by native-born languaged minorities” (Parkin, Zlotnick, 2014). Spanish language assistance is the most common with coverage in 425 jurisdictions and statewide coverage in 4 states (Espino, Tucker, 2007). The Ventura County in California is one of the four states with statewide coverage under the “Language Minority Provision” meaning it is one of the four states that is required to provide “Spanish language assistance” such as voting materials in Spanish and Spanish language translators it also means that “all election information that is available in the minority language ” (U.S Department of Justice). This mandated statewide assistance was rectified “so that all citizens have equal opportunities to register and cast free and effective ballots” (Marschall, Rutherford 2015). All materials provided by Ventura County for voters are translated into Spanish to make voting for citizens who are not comfortable enough with their English to vote only using voting materials in English.

A Joint Report of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the National Association of Latino Elected And Appointed Officials, as well as the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda, concluded that, “the Voting Rights Act has proven over forty-nine of the last fifty years to be the single most effective civil rights law enacted by Congress” (MALDEF, NALEO, NHLA, 2014). The Voting Rights Act is seen as the most effective civil rights law enacted by Congress because it plays an important role in increasing political participation amongst minority groups.

In previous years the rates of participation among voters that were racial minorities were low especially in communities where there were large concentrations of racial/ethnic minorities who primarily spoke a language besides English. Data from the political science quarterly featuring Rodolfo O. De La Garza and Alan Yang teachers at Columbia University in Law and Public Affairs found a direct impact between the jurisdictions covered by the VRA and the participation of Latino voters. They discovered that, “Nationally, turnout among citizens who speak only Spanish increases by 6.8 percentage points when this segment of the population increases from 4.99% to 5.01% ” (Rodolfo O. De La Garza, Alan Yang, 2015) and, “Turnout among Spanish dominant citizens living in VRA-covered jurisdictions is 11 percentage points higher than in non covered jurisdictions” (Rodolfo O. De La Garza, Alan Yang, 2015). This particular data reflects the trends in the participation of Latino voters in jurisdictions covered by the Voting Rights Act that offer Spanish language assistance, but these trends could be specific to the specific county that the data was taken from, because various similar studies have

concluded that their results were inconclusive due to the varying language abilities of the Latinos in the counties that the studies were conducted in.

In recent years the Latino population has become the second largest population group in the United States (MALDEF, NALEO, NHLA, 2014). This increase in the Latino population is also linked to Latinos having the potential to be more influential in elections. In 2008 votes cast by Latinos made up 7.4 percent of all of the votes in the 2008 presidential election and then just four short years later in the 2012 presidential election Latino votes accounted for approximately 10 percent of all U.S voters (MALDEF, NALEO, NHLA, 2014). Clearly, the number of Latino voters is increasing a lot every single year, due to Latino immigrants getting their citizenship and more Latino citizens reaching voting age and becoming eligible to vote. The Pew Hispanic Center actually estimates, “each month 50,000 Latinos become eligible to vote by reaching by reaching the age of 18” (Wallace, 2012). Additionally, “VRA coverage should have a particularly pronounced impact on registration rates because it simplifies what might otherwise be perceived as a daunting task” (Parkin, Zlotnick, 2014). Coverage by the Voting Rights Act making voter registration easier for non-English speakers may also add to the number of Latino voters in the United States if more non-English speaking Latinos are registering to vote due to their jurisdiction being covered by the Voting Rights Act. This leads to a huge influx of eligible voters every single month who in a few years or months when the next election comes there are thousands of potential Latino voters who can dramatically change the outcome in elections on every level such as presidential, local and midterm elections. Associate professor of political science at Georgetown University theorized that Spanish language assistance is deliberately

targeted to one ethnic/language minority group Spanish speakers because of this it has the potential to influence election outcomes if the political preferences of this group are distinctive (Hopkins, 2001)

Given the huge number of Latino voters in the United States that is constantly increasing very quickly, Latino voters may have the power to affect the results of elections in a big way depending on how they vote. The Mexican Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) determined, “the Latino vote has had a significant even decisive and much-remarked impact on two presidential elections, with predictions of growing decisive impact in future national elections” (MALDEF, NALEO, NHLA, 2014). Latinos had a big impact in the 2008 and 2012 elections because a large number of Latinos supported Obama. Sophia J. Wallace from the department conducted her own research on Latino support for Obama through Rutgers University and she found that “in the 2008 election, 72 percent of Latinos voted for President Obama, indicating a very strong level of support among Latinos for his candidacy” (Wallace, 2012). Another study that connected ethnic identity and political behavior through interviewing Latinos, found a high level of ethnic identity among Latinos as well as strong partisan identification with the Democratic Party in these same Latinos (Barreto, Pedraza, 2009). Latinos are normally twice as likely to vote in favor of Democrats over Republicans. This obvious support for the Democratic party in elections can greatly affect the results of an election especially when there is a huge number of Latino voters that is always increasing. In conclusion, the literature review prior to the study conducted in Ventura County helped to determine the importance of voting materials in Spanish. The benefits of voting materials in Spanish under the

Voting Rights Act which provides Spanish language assistance has been accessed in other covered jurisdictions with mixed results. Spanish language assistance through voting materials in Spanish has lots of potential benefits such as increased political participation of Latinos which leads to election results that better reflect the needs/wants of the population. This project will present a local study which addresses the need of voting materials in Spanish in the Ventura County as well as the nature in which they affect Latino voters, because the gap that currently exists in academic literature about the participation of Latino voters in jurisdictions with Spanish Language Assistance under the Voting Rights Act is how specifically voting materials/Spanish language helps/affects the voters as most of the studies in this literature review are solely based on numerical data of voting patterns of Latinos in these jurisdictions. This will be assessed to the number of Latino voters in the Ventura County and if they feel the use Spanish language assistance provided to them by the Ventura County is useful to them and how their political participation is affected by the voting materials provided to them. This project will focus on how the Voting Rights Act specifically influences the effects of the Spanish language assistance on Latino voters because no studies have been conducted about the effects of voting materials or Spanish language assistance in the Ventura County it is important to measure why increased participation of Latino voters has occurred in other jurisdictions covered by the Voting Rights Act in the United States.

Question

How do voting materials in Spanish affect the participation of Latino voters in Ventura County?

Do voting materials only benefit only Spanish speaking voters? What types of voting materials/language assistance do Latinos in the Ventura County use?

Methods

Latino adults in the Ventura County were surveyed through the assistance of the administration at all three schools in the Conejo Valley School District, these three schools were Thousand Oaks High School, Newbury Park High School, and Westlake High School. The administration at these three schools sent an email blast out with the survey to all parents of Latino students. An important criterion of taking the survey was that the people taking the survey were living in Ventura County as this project is a local project of the Ventura County. The survey had every single question translated into Spanish as well as a cover letter sent out to the potential participants of the survey in English and Spanish which explained what the survey was for and the kind of questions it would contain to ensure effective participation from English speakers and Spanish speakers alike. The survey asked simple identifying questions regarding the surveyor's name, age and if they lived in Ventura County. The survey also contained questions to assess the language abilities of the participant as well as if they are registered to vote, their voting experience in terms of difficulty, the language their ballot is in, if they use voting materials in Spanish and if voting materials are helpful or useless to them. The survey results were used to identify three individuals who benefited from the voting materials provided to them by the Ventura County at varying levels for interviews. One person who used voting

materials in Spanish because they are more comfortable with Spanish but would still be able to cast their ballot effectively in an election. One person who uses voting materials in Spanish and without them voting would be inconvenient and challenging. And then one person who if they did not have access to voting materials in Spanish, they would not be able to participate in elections as they could not cast their ballot effectively. As well as another interview with Crystal a records technician at the Ventura County Clerk's Office Election Division, before conducting this interview all of the interview questions were reviewed by the Election Division.

Survey Results

100 responses were collected from the parents of Latino students at Thousand Oaks High School, Newbury Park High School, and Westlake High School. 100 hundred percent of participants in the survey lived in Ventura County but only 89.9 percent were Latino and only 80.8 percent were registered to vote in the United States. There was a wide variety of language ability among the respondents, 33.7% speak English and Spanish the same, 13% speak both but were more comfortable with Spanish, 10.2% speak both but were more comfortable with English, 8.2% speak no Spanish, 4.1% speak only Spanish, 10.2% spoke English better than Spanish, and 20.4% speak Spanish better than English.

When asked if they had ever voted before in an election in the United States, 83.7% responded they had, 76% of these parents described their voting experience as easy and 7% described it as difficult. Respondents were asked to gauge if voting materials in Spanish such as ballots and voter information guide were useful, useless or necessary for them. The majority of voters who took this survey described voting materials in Spanish as useful (51.6%), 31.6% said

they are useless to them when voting and 16.8% said they were necessary to them when voting. 68.4%. Interestingly, in this relatively small study of only 100 participants, 68.4% of these participants found voting materials in Spanish useful for them when voting. In comparison, when asked if they used a ballot in English, Spanish or another language only 22.1% said that they used a ballot in Spanish and the majority 62.1% use a ballot in English when voting.

Lastly, when asked if the Ventura County did not have voting materials in Spanish 53.1% of participants said it would not make a difference to them, 33.3% said it would make voting inconvenient for them, and 13.5% said they would not be able to vote.

Interview Results

The motivations behind people using voting materials and how it helps them specifically are very important in this study as it gives more depth to why voting materials are beneficial or not beneficial as well as who they benefit and how they benefit these people. Individual interviews were conducted with one person who used voting materials in Spanish because they are more comfortable with Spanish but would still be able to cast their ballot effectively in an election. One person who uses voting materials in Spanish and without them voting would be inconvenient and challenging. And then one person who if they did not have access to voting materials in Spanish they would not be able to participate in elections as they could not cast their ballot effectively. The first interview conducted was with Veronica a Latino voter in the Ventura County who in the initial survey said she speaks Spanish better than English, uses voting materials in Spanish that are “somewhat helpful” to her but that it would make no difference to

her if the Ventura County did not have voting materials in Spanish. Ventura County offers a lot of different types of voting materials in Spanish to assist Spanish speakers when they are voting. Veronica uses a sample ballot booklet which according to the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder /County Clerk website is “an example of your ballot. It is specific to the information you provided on your voter registration form, such as where you live and party preference. When asked why she used voting materials and how they helped her when voting she responded, “for me, it is more comfortable reading in Spanish,” and voting materials in Spanish, “helps me be informed about the issues and the candidates”. Veronica was not born in the United States but for her voting is very important because “voting is the only way I can have my voice heard”. Although in the survey she initially said that it would not make a difference to her if the Ventura County did not provide voting materials in Spanish when asked if she felt she would be able to effectively cast her ballot if she did not have access to voting materials in Spanish she responded, “no”. When asked follow up questions about this inconsistency with her response to this interview question she responded, “if I could not use voting materials in Spanish, voting would be harder because some of the things in English are confusing to me, so I said it would not make a difference in my ability to vote I could still vote just for like the President because that is straight forward but not the propositions and other things because sometimes it confuses me”. Veronica concluded that voting materials do not affect her participation in elections as she would still be able to participate in elections if voting materials in Spanish were not available to her when voting; however, she would not be able to cast her ballot effectively if

the Ventura County did not provide her with voting materials in Spanish because certain aspect of voting in English is confusing for her.

The second interview was conducted with a woman named Sara, another Latino voter in the Ventura County who uses voting materials in Spanish. In the initial survey, Sara said she spoke English and Spanish the same, described voting materials in Spanish as, “useful” to her and, “voting would be inconvenient without voting materials in Spanish.” When asked about what voting materials she uses and how they help her she explained that she uses a ballot to cast her vote as well as a voter information guide which provides impartial information about candidates and propositions being voted on in the upcoming election. When asked why she used voting materials and how they helped her when voting she responded with, “The opinions, reviews or interpretations are written in such a foreign and one-sided manner that reading the translation in Spanish filters some of that.” Sara was born in the United States but is still more comfortable reading about candidates/propositions as well as actually voting in Spanish. Sara described voting as a privilege that is important to future generations and claims voting materials in Spanish help her exercise this privilege by helping to keep her informed on the issues and candidates. Ultimately Sara determined that although she uses both voting materials in English and Spanish the ballots and voter information guides are easier for her to understand and she feels they give her enough information to cast her ballot effectively as well as make a decision about who or what she is voting for.

The next interview was with Crystal a records technician at the Ventura County Clerk’s Office in the Election Division. When asked about her responsibilities at the clerk's office she

gave a very long list, “some of my responsibilities include: preparing candidate Guides with updated details information specific to each election, assist in the preparation and submission of legal notices assist and preparation of voter pamphlet information for measure and candidate statements, coordinating official and sample ballot layouts, proofread and correct accordingly, computations of signatures - in - lieu of filing fees cost. ” When asked if she thought voting materials in Spanish are helpful to Spanish speaking Latino voters Or just a waste of government funds she responded, “ helpful if they take advantage of the materials provided. It also allows Spanish-speaking voters to understand who and what they're voting on.”

The final interview was conducted with Gaby, a Latino voter who does not speak English at all. She described voting materials in Spanish as necessary to her when voting and said if the Ventura County did not provide voting materials in Spanish she would not be able to vote. When asked specifically about what voting materials are useful to her she responded, “all of them, but I only use the ballot in Spanish and the voter information guide in Spanish” and that because she can not speak English she needs to use a ballot in Spanish to understand how to vote and what she is voting for. Gaby was born outside of the United States and became a citizen about five years ago but she says voting is very important to her. Ultimately, she said that without voting materials in Spanish being available to her Gaby would not be able to vote at all as the process is too complicated in English.

Discussion

This study was aimed to determine if voting materials in Spanish had an effect on the participation of Latino voters in Ventura County. Through the results of the survey and four interviews, I saw that the participation of Latino voters in the Ventura County from my study was relatively high as 83.7% of respondents had voted in an election in the United States before. This could be attributed to voting materials in Spanish making voting easier for certain Latinos in the Ventura County. As the survey revealed that voting materials in Spanish can potentially increase the participation of Latino voters as many responded that these materials made voting easier/possible for them. The results of the interview also revealed that this could be due to voting materials in Spanish making voting easier and more convenient.

The survey also showed that the majority of respondents described voting as, “easy”. The majority of respondents also described voting materials in Spanish as useful to them, voting is probably easier for them because they are able to use these voting materials to vote and when making decisions about voting. Contrastingly, only a small percentage of respondents (22%) said that they use a ballot in Spanish when voting, but still described voting materials in Spanish as useful to them when voting this suggests that they use voting materials in Spanish that are not ballots. Similarly, my interview with Crystal the Records Technician for the Ventura County Clerk's Office gave me insight on how the Ventura County provides a wide variety of voting materials in Spanish to Spanish speakers, and all three people I interviewed took advantage of voting materials in Spanish specifically, the voter county information guide as all three interviewees used this to make decisions about who or what they would vote for. The survey also showed in most cases older people seemed to find voting materials in Spanish more helpful, the

interviews further confirmed this as Gaby the interviewee that would not be able to vote without voting materials in Spanish was the oldest person I interviewed and she seemed to benefit the most from voting materials in Spanish over the other two people I interviewed.

The survey had a wide variety of language ability among its participants while most people who benefited the most from voting materials in Spanish spoke only Spanish such as Gaby. Surprisingly, many Spanish speakers who also speak English at the same level still used and benefited from voting materials in Spanish. After the interviews, I believe this trend could be attributed to the sophisticated language used in voting materials or that your first language is always the one you will be more comfortable with.

Limitations

This project is not without its limitations while the majority of data comes from Latinos surveyed a small percentage of the data is generated from white people and people who have never voted before. The data generated by non-Latinos is due to the style of distribution, the survey was distributed to all parents of Latino students this included half Latino students who have parents of another ethnicity, as a result, a small percentage of data is generated by non-Latinos. The interview data was limited to only three interviews, with people three people who benefited from voting materials in Spanish at different levels, because of the lack of interview data it may be difficult to know how and why certain groups use voting materials in Spanish when voting. Additionally, my data was made mostly of people who had previously voted in an election, this could be also due to the style of distribution because voters seeing an email with a survey about voting may have been more likely to take the survey.

Conclusion

Overall, this study evaluated how voting materials in Spanish did somewhat affect the participation of Latino voters in Ventura County as voting materials in Spanish made voting for many survey participants easier and more convenient. Although this study was relatively small it did illustrate the benefits of voting materials in Spanish, they allow Spanish speakers in the Ventura County a better understanding of voting as well as what they are voting for. Voting materials in Spanish allow Spanish speakers who speak English at different levels be able to more effectively cast their votes in their best interests, as the interview results revealed that people who speak English proficiently still have difficulties with using voting materials in English. Further research is necessary in jurisdictions that do not provide voting materials for Spanish speakers in order to measure how voting materials in Spanish affects the participation of Latino voters and how comfortable they feel when voting without the assistance of voting materials in Spanish. Ultimately this study determined that the Ventura County needs voting materials in Spanish because of the benefits they offer Spanish speaking Latino voters.

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Appendix A

Voting Materials in Spanish Survey

Name/Nombre

Email/Su correo electronico

How old are you? ¿cuantos años tienes?

What is your race? ¿Cuál es su raza?

Latino

White/Angloamericano

African American/Afro Americano

Asian/asiático

Native American or Alaskan Native/Nativo American o Nativo de Alaska

other/otra raza

Do you live in the Ventura County? ¿Vives en el condado de Ventura?

Yes/Si

No

Are you registered to vote? ¿Estás registrado para votar?

Yes/Si

No

Which of the following best describes you? ¿Cuál de las siguientes te describe mejor?

I speak no Spanish/No hablo español

I only speak Spanish/Solo hablo español

I speak English better than Spanish/Hablo ingles mejor que espanol

I speak Spanish better than English/Hablo Espanol mejor que ingles

I speak English and Spanish the same/Yo hablo ingles y Espanol igual

I speak both Spanish and English but I am more comfortable (speaking, reading, writing) in Spanish

Hablo español y inglés pero estoy más cómodo (hablando, leyendo, escribiendo) en español

I speak Spanish and English but I am more comfortable (speaking, reading, writing) in English

Have you ever voted in an election in the United States? ¿Alguna vez has votado en una elección en los Estados Unidos?

Yes/Si

No

When was the last time that you voted in an election in the United States?(of any kind local,presidential)/¿Cuándo fue la última vez que votó en una elección en los Estados Unidos? (De cualquier tipo local, presidencial)

How would you describe your voting experience? ¿Cómo describirías tu experiencia de voto?

Easy/Facil

Difficult/Difícil

I have never voted/Nunca he votado

Describe your voting experince/Describiria su experincia de voto

Do you feel that voting materials in Spanish such as ballots and official voter information guides would be _____ for you when voting?/¿Cree que los materiales de votación en español, como boletas y guías oficiales de información para el votante, serían _____ para usted cuando vote?

Useless/Inútil

Useful/Útil

Necessary/Necesario

When you vote do you use...Cuando votas usas ...

a ballot in English/una boleta en ingles

a ballot in another language beside English or Spanish

una boleta en otro idioma además de inglés o español

a ballot in Spanish/una boleta en español

I have never voted/nunca he votado

If you use voting materials in Spanish would you say they are....

useless/Inútil

I do not use them or have not voted/No los uso o no he votado

Somewhat helpful/Algo útil

extremely helpful/extramadamente útil

necessary for me when voting/necesario para mí al votar

**If the Ventura County did not have voting materials in Spanish....Si el Condado de Ventura no
tuviera materiales para votar en español ...**

I would not be able to vote/No podría votar

It would not make a difference to me/No me haría ninguna diferencia.

Voting would be inconvenient/votar sería un inconveniente