

## **Language, Identity and Vote Choice: A Survey Experiment among Texas Republicans**

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**ABSTRACT:** Does fluency in Spanish (or the lack thereof) matter to voters? Does the degree to which language ability matters depend on the ethnicity of the candidates? We help answer this question with the results of a randomized survey experiment. In the summer of 2012, two candidates faced off for the Republican nomination to the U.S. Senate from Texas: Ted Cruz and David Dewhurst. Cruz, while Latino (Cuban-American), had limited Spanish-language skills. Dewhurst, an Anglo, was more fluent in Spanish. In the week prior to Election Day, we called registered voters in Texas who were likely to be Republicans (based on their previous primary election participation) and asked them to indicate which candidate they supported. For a randomly selected half of those voters, the question included embedded information about the ethnicity and language ability of the candidates. We find that language ability made a statistically significant difference, with both Latino and Anglo voters in the treatment group more likely to support the Spanish-speaking, Anglo candidate.

Language ability is often used as a marker of ethnic identity: Latinos are bound by a common language, and Latinos who do not speak Spanish fluently may feel their identity as Latinos is called into question by others. At the same time, the willingness of Latino immigrants to the United States to assimilate into the host culture is questioned when they do not learn English. Thus, they are torn between wanting to learn English to demonstrate their incorporation into the host society and make socio-economic advances, and wanting to speak Spanish in order to demonstrate that they are members of the Latino community. For non-Latino whites (Anglos), the consequences of language ability are quite different: Anglos who speak a language in addition to English are generally still considered to be loyal and deserving members of the community; their citizenship is not questioned and they may be seen as educated as a result of their bi- or multi-lingualism.

For candidates vying for political office, Spanish-language ability takes on new meaning. For Latino candidates, Spanish fluency may increase their support among Latino voters at the risk of alienating non-Latino voters, who might worry that the candidate will only care about and serve Latinos. Koike and Graham (2006: 186), in their analysis of a Spanish-language debate between two Latino candidates vying for the 2002 Democratic nomination for Governor of Texas, note that one candidate objected to the Spanish-only format of the debate at the last minute, claiming it would “elevate Spanish to the same level of English.” The move was interpreted as an attempt to reach out to Anglo voters, and a ceding of the Latino vote to his opponent. Similarly, successful Latino candidates such as Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa have been careful to downplay their ethnicity and run multi-ethnic campaigns in order to appeal to non-Latino voters (Sonenshein and Pinkus 2005, Juenke and Sampaio 2010).

What previous scholarship is less clear about is the importance of language ability and ethnic identity in the context of an overwhelmingly non-Latino electorate. In other words, does fluency in Spanish (or the lack thereof) matter to Anglo voters? Does the degree to which language ability matters depend on the ethnicity of the candidates? In this research, we address these questions with a randomized survey experiment. In the summer of 2012, two candidates faced off for the Republican nomination to the U.S. Senate from Texas: Ted Cruz and David Dewhurst. Cruz, while Latino (Cuban-American), had limited Spanish-language skills. Dewhurst, an Anglo, was more fluent in Spanish. Election Day was officially July 31, but Early Voting allowed registered voters to cast their ballots as early as July 23. In the week prior to Election Day, we called registered voters in Texas who were likely to be Republicans (based on their previous primary election participation) and asked them to indicate which candidate they supported. Prior to launching the survey, we randomly divided the pool into two groups: treatment and control. Voters randomly assigned to the control group were asked a simple question about which candidate they preferred; voters randomly assigned to the treatment group were asked a question that included embedded information about the ethnicity and language ability of the candidates. As shown in the discussion of our results below, we find that language ability made a difference, with both Latino and Anglo voters in the treatment group more likely to support the Spanish-speaking, Anglo candidate (Dewhurst).

### **Bilingualism and Latino Identity and Politics**

As the Latino population in the United States continues to grow, it is also aging and acculturating, leading to reduced Spanish speaking ability (Rumbaut, Massey and Bean 2006). According to U.S. Census data, nearly 80 percent of Latinos in the U.S. speak Spanish fluently, but that percentage decreases as generation increases: only 50 percent of those who are third

generation and only 10 percent of those who are fourth generation speak Spanish fluently (U.S. Census 2000). This loss of fluency has consequences for feelings of ethnic identity and group consciousness. Sanchez et al. (2012) find that Latinos who do not speak Spanish fluently feel disconnected from other Latinos. When put in a situation where they were forced to reveal their lack of fluency to other Latinos, they were less likely to identify themselves as Latino and felt less connectedness to other Latinos. Elsewhere, Sanchez and Chavez (2010) find that Anglos view Latinos who speak Spanish as more Latino.

Rudman and Fairchild (2004) note that those who deviate from cultural gender stereotypes often suffer economic and social penalties, known as backlash effects. Phelan and Rudman (2010) find that backlash, or jeer pressure, also affects those who violate racial cultural stereotypes. Further, because stereotype violators challenge the beliefs of others who observe the violation, those perceivers may react negatively (Clark et al. 2009). In sum, previous research suggests that voters will punish non-Spanish speaking Latino candidates because they are not conforming to the stereotype of Latinos as speakers of Spanish.

Latino voters express a clear preference for Spanish-speaking candidates. A sizeable majority of respondents to the 2006 Latino National Survey said that they valued a candidate's ability to speak Spanish, including a majority of respondents across all education levels and all but the highest income group (Fraga et al. 2012, ch. 10). In a survey of Latino voters conducted by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute prior to the 2000 election, one in three respondents said that they thought it was "very important" that a president be able to speak Spanish (Barreto et al. 2002). Araújo (2012) reviews the increased use of Spanish-language outreach in presidential campaigns over time, as the Latino vote has become more important. This is not a new tactic uniquely invented to appeal to the Latino electorate. Abrajano (2010) notes that ethnic campaigns were used in the late 1800s to appeal to European immigrants. Appealing to

Latinos in Spanish “is a powerful and relatively easy way to show voters that candidates understand and can relate to them” (2010: 5). Yet, while candidates may find the increasing size of the Latino vote good reason to campaign in Spanish (personally or through surrogates and subtitles), existing political science research has not examined the effect of such campaigning on non-Latino (Anglo) voters.

In contrast, Spanish-speaking non-Latino candidates are less likely to suffer such backlash. Instead, they are often rewarded by voters who interpret their bilingualism as indication of reaching out to Latino voters. Barack Obama expressed regret in July 2008 that he was not bilingual,<sup>1</sup> and a few months later released a 30-second television commercial, “The American Dream,” delivered entirely in Spanish by the candidate himself.<sup>2</sup> Observers noted that the ad was meant to appeal to Latino voters, who were expected to reward, not punish, the candidate. In 2010, Newt Gingrich was praised by the media for announcing that he had been learning Spanish in preparation for his 2012 presidential run (although Gingrich later criticized Mitt Romney for speaking French).<sup>3</sup> And in the final weeks of the 2012 presidential election, with the Latino vote in swing states the subject of intense focus on both sides, both President Obama and Republican candidate Mitt Romney released ads in Spanish, the former with Obama again speaking in Spanish personally. Spanish-speaking Latinos may have chuckled at his accent, but they also noted the significance of the effort.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, we test the hypothesis that both Anglo and Latino voters will prefer an

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-502443\\_162-4254480-502443.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-502443_162-4254480-502443.html), accessed 10/04/12.

<sup>2</sup> <http://blog.sfgate.com/nov05election/2008/10/28/obama-speaks-spanish-for-first-time-in-ad/>, accessed 10/04/12.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.latina.com/lifestyle/-news/newt-gingrich-learning-spanish>;  
<http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/99863/bilingualism-presidents-foreign-languages-fluent#>, accessed 10/04/12. Also see <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/29/146062632/bilingualism-a-political-liability>, accessed 09/13/12.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/09/barack-obama-spanish-dreamer\\_n\\_1951678.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/09/barack-obama-spanish-dreamer_n_1951678.html),  
<http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/politics/2012/10/09/in-new-ad-obama-speaks-spanish-and-calls-undocumented-students-as-inspiration/>, accessed 01/22/13.

Anglo Spanish-speaking candidate to a Latino non-Spanish-speaking candidate. The remainder of this work proceeds as follows. First, we describe the context of the election in which the candidates were vying for support. Next, we describe the randomized field experiment used to collect data, and the results of our analysis of that data. We conclude with a discussion of what the findings tell us about the importance of language and identity in voter behavior.

## **Context**

Nine candidates competed for the Republican Party nomination for the U.S. Senate in the regular Texas primary election on May 29, 2012<sup>5</sup>, for the seat being vacated by Kay Bailey Hutchison. Victory in the GOP primary is tantamount to election success in Texas as no Democrat has been elected statewide since 1994. Over 1.4 million votes were cast, including 44.67 percent for Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst and 34.09 percent for former Texas Solicitor General and Tea Party favorite Ted Cruz. Although Dewhurst finished more than 10 percentage points ahead of Cruz, the state requires candidates to win an absolute majority in a primary; thus the two were forced into a runoff election on July 31, 2012.

The campaign reflected internal GOP battles going on throughout the country in 2012, with an establishment candidate (Dewhurst) facing a Tea Party underdog (Cruz). At the opening ceremony of the Texas Republican Party's convention in June, delegates rose from their seats and cheered as Gov. Rick Perry took the stage, but then nearly drowned his speech out with boos a few minutes later when he announced his endorsement of Dewhurst. Cruz was endorsed by a number of prominent Tea Party Republicans, including Sarah Palin.

In the weeks leading up to the primary runoff, both campaigns released internal polls that showed their candidate the likely victor. An independent poll by Public Policy Polling (PPP)

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<sup>5</sup> Early voting was available May 14-25.

released on July 12 showed Cruz ahead by 49-44 percent, and ahead by 59-36 percent among voters “very excited” about voting in the election. Another poll by Wenzel Strategies released the same day found Cruz ahead 47-38 percent. Despite being outspent by the Dewhurst, Cruz seemed to have a good chance of winning. This contradicted findings from a hypothetical runoff poll released May 24 by PPP. Asked which candidate they would prefer if a runoff were held between Cruz and Dewhurst, voters preferred Dewhurst by 59-34 percent.

As the runoff campaign progressed, Dewhurst challenged Cruz to a debate in Spanish, putting the issue of language at the center of the runoff for a period of time. Cruz declined. The challenge was meant to draw attention to the fact that Dewhurst is relatively fluent in Spanish, while Cruz, a Cuban-American, is not. Latinos make up a substantial portion of the Texas electorate, but they tend to be Democrats rather than Republicans. In addition, the PPP poll released July 12 showed Cruz ahead 78-19 percent among Latino voters; not surprising given the well-established preference of Latino voters for Latino candidates, (Barreto 2011, Michelson 2005). Thus, we hypothesized that the Dewhurst campaign was drawing attention to the issue of language ability not to win votes from Latinos but rather to increase support among Anglos—as mentioned above, Anglo candidates are likely to be rewarded by voters for bilingual abilities, whereas ethnoracial candidates are not. We tested this hypothesis with a survey experiment.

## **Data and Methods**

A pool of registered voters was pulled from the Texas Voter Activation Network (VAN). Because the Secretary of State in Texas does not include partisanship in the voter registration file, we used participation in a recent Republican primary election as an indicator of party identification. The pool was also limited to individuals for whom a telephone number was listed,

and whose ethnicity (Anglo or Latino) was known. Individuals in the pool (N=6,215) were then randomly divided into treatment and control groups for targeting in a live phone bank.

The phone bank was conducted at the Center for Survey Research at the University of Texas, Pan American, using bilingual undergraduate and graduate students from the university. Students were paid for their work. Calls were made Tuesday, July 17 through Sunday, July 22, during evening hours on weekdays and throughout the day on the weekend. Callers first introduced themselves as a student calling from the university and then asked for the individual on their call list; once the target voter was on the line, they asked a series of questions, starting with a question about the two candidates. Subsequent questions asked about support for the Tea Party, education, income, and Spanish language ability.<sup>6</sup>

In order to test our hypothesis about the importance of language ability to candidate choice in this race, contacted voters in the control and treatment groups were exposed to different question wording. In the control group, the script for the first question read:

As you may know, there are two candidates on the ballot for July 31 to be chosen as the Republican nominee for the U.S. Senate. Of the two candidates, who do you plan to vote for, Ted Cruz or David Dewhurst? Or some other candidate?

In the treatment group, the script read:

As you know, there are two candidates on the ballot for July 31 to be chosen as the Republican nominee for the U.S. Senate. One candidate is Ted Cruz, a Cuban-American with limited Spanish language skills. The other is David Dewhurst, an

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<sup>6</sup> The full scripts (in English and Spanish) are in the appendix.



Anglo who is more fluent in Spanish. Who do you plan to vote for, Ted Cruz or David Dewhurst? Or some other candidate?"

A total of 467 surveys were completed, including 233 in the control group (26 Latinos and 207 Anglos) and 234 in the treatment group (29 Latinos and 205 Anglos).

## **Results**

Of our 467 respondents, 362 indicated a preference for one of the two candidates (Cruz or Dewhurst); the remaining 105 respondents said that they did not know which candidate they preferred or declined to answer the question. As shown in Table 1, voters in the treatment group were far more likely to support Dewhurst over Cruz, by 7.5 percentage points (SE = 5.2,  $p < .077$ ). Looking separately at Anglo and Latino respondents, the effect persists for both groups; what is particularly notable, however, is that the effect among Latinos is statistically significant despite the very small size of the sample ( $N=40$ ), due to the very large observed effect. Latinos randomly assigned to the treatment group were 23.6 percentage points more likely to support Dewhurst (SE = 14.8,  $p < .059$ ).

[Tables 1-2]

We also examined our data using probit, adding covariates for information collected during the experiment and as available in the VAN. Results for these models are shown in Table 2. This included information on age, gender, education, income, Spanish-language ability, and support for the Tea Party. To minimize the impact of missing observations on our already fairly small sample, we run multiple models with different sets of covariates included. When adding income to the model, a variable for which there are a sizeable number of missing observations, we created dummy variables for each income category and also a dummy variable for those

choosing to not answer the question. The excluded income category for this model is the lowest, for those indicating an annual income of less than \$25,000/year. None of these dummy variables are statistically significant; income is not a predictor of candidate preference. We also find that education, age, and Spanish ability are not significant predictors.

At the same time, the effect of random assignment to the treatment group persists when various covariates are included, as shown in Table 2. Those given information about ethnicity and Spanish-language ability are more likely to say they support Dewhurst. In addition, we find that supporters of the Tea Party, Latinos and women were more likely to support Cruz, although the coefficient estimates for the latter two variables do not consistently reach statistical significance as other variables are added to the model. The most powerful covariate, consistently, is identification as a member of the Tea Party. As the election approached, Ted Cruz was often referred to in the media as a “darling” of the movement, and Tea Party stars such as Sarah Palin endorsed him. Yet, even controlling for identification with the Tea Party assignment to the treatment group – exposure to information about the candidates’ language skills and ethnicities – had a significant impact on candidate choice.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Extant Latino politics scholarship provides strong evidence that Latino voters prefer co-ethnic candidates that reach out to them in Spanish (Abrajano 2010). Less well understood is the impact that bilingual abilities impact candidates appealing for votes from English-dominant (if not monolingual) Anglo voters. In this experiment, we found that Latino Republican voters in Texas, not surprisingly, preferred the candidate who spoke Spanish, despite the fact that his opponent was Latino. Michelson (2005b) notes that Latino voters’ general preference for coethnic candidates can be outweighed by other considerations, such as shared partisanship. In

this case, Spanish language ability proved a more important factor in predicting Latino vote choice. What was perhaps less expected is that Anglo Republican voters in this context also preferred the bilingual candidate. Rather than punishing Dewhurst for being fluent in a language other than English, Anglo Republicans receiving the treatment script were more likely to say they preferred him to Cruz.

Tea Party identification is a consistent predictor across model specifications of support for Ted Cruz, an expected finding given the salience of Cruz's identity as a member of the Tea Party. In a sense, this makes our findings more remarkable, given that the power of the treatment had to compete with Tea Party identity as a predictor of candidate preference. Further research is needed to determine the degree to which language skills might influence voter preferences in a context without this sort of sub-partisan group dynamic.

The Republic of Texas, as it is often called, is a unique context. Spanish language skills might not be looked upon so favorably by Anglo Republicans in other states, or if held by a Latino candidate. Given work by Dan Hopkins (2012) on the different reaction to bilingual ballots by Republicans and Democrats, we would expect Democratic voters to also react differently. Further research on this topic, with different candidates and in different electoral contexts, is needed to better understand the effect of Spanish-language skills on vote choice. Yet, the opportunity to conduct such experiments is of course limited by the existence of appropriate real-world contests. In general, Anglo candidates who speak Spanish are not competing for votes against Latino candidates with limited Spanish skills. The Cruz-Dewhurst contest provided an unusual opportunity for a randomized field experiment, and the feasibility of duplicating this research is as yet unknown.

Our results thus stand out as a unique contribution, taking advantage of real-world events. Both Latino and Anglo voters do not punish Anglo candidates for speaking Spanish, although they seem to punish Latino candidates who do not. Bilingual ability in Spanish is looked upon favorably. That Dewhurst challenged Cruz to a Spanish-language debate may be evidence that he already knew this; that Cruz declined may be evidence that he did as well.

**Table 1. Percent favoring Dewhurst, by Randomized Survey Group (Ns in parentheses)**

	ALL	Anglos	Latinos
Control group	43.39 (82/189)	45.83 (77/168)	23.81 (5/21)
Treatment group	50.87* (88/173)	51.30 (79/154)	47.37* (9/19)
Overall	46.96 (170/362)	48.45 (156/322)	35.00 (14/40)

\*= $p < .10$ , one-tailed.

**Table 2. Probit regression of Cruz vs. Dewhurst Experiment (standard errors in parentheses)**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Treatment	.190* (.132)	.205* (.136)	.206* (.137)	.208* (.138)
Latino	-.350* (.216)	-.493** (.225)	-.253 (.282)	-.282 (.285)
Gender (male)		-.226** (.136)	-.204* (.140)	-.158 (.144)
Tea Party supporter		-.670** (.138)	-.695** (.143)	-.693** (.144)
Spanish ability			-.086 (.091)	-.092 (.092)
Age			.005 (.005)	.003 (.005)
Education			.004 (.070)	.042 (.074)
Income \$25-40k/yr				.062 (.381)
Income \$40-60k/yr				.085 (.350)
Income \$60-100k/yr				-.223 (.341)
Income \$100-200k/yr				-.382 (.364)
Income >\$200k/yr				-.306 (.409)
Income declined/no answer				-.135 (.342)
Constant	-.130* (.094)	.280** (.135)	.153 (.431)	.092 (.500)
N	362	362	356	356
Pseudo R-squared	.0094	.0627	.0671	.0765

\*=p<.05, \*\*=p<.01, one-tailed. Omitted category for income is 0-\$25k/year.

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