Election 2010: What will this mean for Latino Students?

On November 2nd, voters cast their ballot in the mid-term elections, resulting in one of the most dramatic midterm congressional swings since 1938. Republicans won control of the House of Representatives with a gain of 63 seats, minimized Democratic control of the Senate with the addition of six seats, and gained a total of seven Gubernatorial seats. Latino voters contributed 9% of the vote nationwide and, according to exit polls, voted 64% Democrat and 34% Republican as opposed to 69% Democrat and 30% Republican in 2006.

The Latino community supported democratic candidates in key races, such as California Governor Jerry Brown (D) with 64% of the Latino vote and Nevada Senator Harry Reid (D) with 68%. Despite these Democratic voting tendencies amongst Latinos, three conservative Latino candidates New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez (R), Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval (R), and Florida Senator Marco Rubio (R) were elected, with substantial support from the Latino community, marking a victory for Latinos as well as Republicans.

The results reflect constituents’ concerns about the economy and mark what will be significant changes in the 112th congress. Although education was not a primary issue in most campaign platforms, the election results may have major implications for education policy over the next two years. First and foremost, politicians that have been central to education reform in the past will no longer play the same role. The coalition that assembled the No Child Left Behind legislation—former Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA), Senator Judd Gregg (D-NH), Representative George Miller (D-CA), and Representative Boehner (R-OH)—has largely been disbanded. Rep. Miller has been replaced as chair of the House Education and Labor Committee by Rep. John Kline (R-MN); Rep. Boehner has assumed the role of Speaker of the House; Senator Gregg chose not to run and Senator Kennedy passed away. It is undecided what role Miller and Boehner will play in these new roles. A new set of key figures will have to emerge and their position on education is yet to be decided.

There will also be significant changes on critical education committees in the House and Senate. Both the House Education and Labor Committee and the House Appropriations Committee, charged with disbursing funds

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from the Federal Treasury to government agencies such as the Department of Education, will most likely gain a dozen Republican members. In the Senate, the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee is still chaired by Tom Harkin (D-IA) and is only projected to lose one seat. In the Senate Appropriations Committee, Democrats will most likely lose two or three seats, but notable change will occur on the Republican side where half of GOP committee members will be replaced.

With the large wave of freshmen legislators entering Congress, it will take time for them to learn about legislative processes and the key issues before any significant legislation can be developed. Furthermore, many of these freshman legislators ran on a platform of small government and challenging the status quo—some going as far as calling for the abolition of the Department of Education. This focus on fiscal responsibility, coupled with economic anxieties, will mean that additional funding for many current programs and new initiatives for students, and Latino students in particular, will be minimal.

There has been an optimistic view of opportunities for bipartisanship in education over the last few weeks. Education has traditionally been a bipartisan effort (i.e. NCLB under President George W. Bush in 2001) and passing some bipartisan legislation in the interest of both parties in 2012, to prepare for the Presidential election, but there are a number of obstacles that could stand in the way. While the Obama administration has successfully made awards to states, in the Race to the Top program, the Investing in Innovation grants, and passed an Education jobs bill, it has yet to pass any comprehensive education legislation.

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The Nation’s Report Card, 12th Grade Results are in!

The results of the Department of Education initiative, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (the Nation’s Report Card), were recently released for 12th grade students in 11 states. This national assessment, given periodically, measures academic proficiency in math, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. history among 4th, 8th, and 12th graders at the national, state, and local level.

Started in 1969, its goal has been to provide a measurement tool that is nation-wide and to report progress over time. While based on samples of the population, the results are nationally representative. Complete results of the assessment can be found at http://nationsreportcard.gov/about.asp. Although participation for 4th and 8th grade students in Title I funded schools is mandated under No Child Left Behind, the 12th grade assessment remains optional to states. In 2009, 11 states participated, testing 52,000 students in reading and 49,000 in math. The average reading score rose slightly since 2005, but was still lower than 1992. The number of students performing at or above proficient rose 3% from 2005 to 26% in 2009. The most pronounced gains were among the Asian/Pacific Islanders (the category of Asian/Pacific Islander does not disaggregate data for Asian and Southeast Asian students, hiding significant differences in student achievement) and the American Indian/Alaska Natives. However, despite gains across the board, achievement gaps saw no significant change.

Latino children remain twice as likely as white children to score in the woeful “below basic” category at both the fourth- and eighth-grade reading levels on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). For the two in five Latino eighth-graders nationally scoring “below basic,” the test’s lowest category, the odds against earning a high-school diploma are extremely steep. Worse still, however, is that Latino proficiency levels essentially failed to improve between 2002 and 2009. This fact holds even more daunting implications considering the Pew Charitable Trusts’ projection that 29 percent of the U.S. population will be Hispanic in 2050.

The 12th grade results show marginal gains, but are not nearly as impressive as improvements in 4th and 8th grade. This can be interpreted in two ways; either the test does not accurately portray 12th grade students’ abilities or the assessment provides evidence of a struggling education system. Some, including former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch, have criticized the test as it is not tied to any meaningful consequences. Unlike state assessments and college entrance exams, the results of the NAEP are not individually scored and have no bearing on grades or college acceptance, increasing the likelihood that 12th grade students won’t take the exam seriously.

Despite its limitations, officials have acknowledged that the assessment is rigorous. The National Assessment Governing Board has even been studying the test’s overlap with other college entrance exams. Other studies have drawn attention to the differences between state assessments and the NAEP. In a comparison of 2009 results in 8th grade, the Alliance for Excellent Education found that the students scored significantly lower on the NAEP than the state tests with an 39% average gap in reading scores and 30% average gap in math. Five states had a reading gap larger than 60% and four states had a math gap larger than 50%. These numbers demonstrate that state assessments are not portraying an accurate picture of student achievement. For example, New Mexico state tests showed that more than half of students were proficient in reading and

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overwhelming variability when it comes to
the NAEP’s more rigorous standards.

proficient, in either subject, when tested by
showed that less than 20% of students were
more than 40 percent in math. Yet the NAEP
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These discrepancies demonstrate the
need for nationally comparable data. The state
assessment shortcomings that are highlighted
by the NAEP warrant improved measures to
ensure student success throughout all states.

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Common Core Standards — More than 40 states and the District of Columbia have signed on to a set of common standards that address low state standards. Although these are a state-led effort, the Department of Education has endorsed the initiative through Race to the Top and its ESEA Blueprint.

These standards will have a significant impact on Latinos across the country. While a few states with large Latino populations have not adopted the standards, the majority of Latinos will see dramatic changes. Keeping college and career readiness in mind, the Common Core standards are much higher than many previous state standards. This makes a well supported transition necessary for success. The standards have taken into account advice from policy makers, experts, teachers, and community advocates to ensure broad-based support at all levels.

While sometimes criticized for their lack of communication with ELL advocates, the National Governor’s Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) has been working with organizations around assessment, teacher development, curricula alignment, and community involvement to support students in this complex transition. Organizations across the country, including LULAC (individually, and with, the Campaign for High School Equity) have been involved in the development of the standards and are now shifting their efforts to work with state Departments of Education on ensuring that implementation is done properly and with community input.

The Dream Act — This bipartisan legislation was intended to allow undocumented high school graduates brought to the United States at a young age to a six year conditional path to citizenship following completion of a college degree or two years of military service. The bill passed the house, but was rejected in the Senate. President Obama has committed to the bill’s reintroduction, but the 112th Congress will present a significant challenge.

For a complete list of sources for this article please contact Andrew Valent at avalent@lulac.org

Endnotes
1 Source: http://nationsreportcard.gov/grade12_2009_report/
2 Ibid.
3 Source: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/2010/11/12th_grade_naep_scores_are_mea.html
5 Source: http://all4ed.org/press_room/press_releases/05192010