

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness
Ballot questions on Election Day

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Ballot questions make an important part of the Massachusetts political tradition, from Proposition 2 1/2 to Clean Elections. This November voters will be asked to decide three referendum questions, two coming from initiative petitions and a third generated by the legislature. Here are the issues of the year.

Question 1 seeks to repeal the Massachusetts income tax. Closely linked with Carla Howell's Libertarian Party, the repeal would instantly remove the largest source of revenue from the state treasury. It would carry with it these two unstated requirements: reduce government and provide other means of funding services. School costs would fall on local school districts, though supporters of the repeal even question whether the state should be paying for public education. Most state spending would require significant cuts.

New Hampshire does not have an income tax, using property taxes for many services that are funded in our own state by our income tax. However, that state is engaged in a lingering court battle over the lack of equity in school funding caused by disparities in resources, and its property taxes are among the highest of any state. A "Yes" vote repeals the income tax; a "No" vote retains the existing system.

Question 2 seeks to abolish the Massachusetts program of Transitional Bilingual Education. It is an effort I have pursued legislatively for years, a 31-year-old program supported by an entrenched bureaucracy committed to the status quo.

The initiative is led by Lincoln Tamayo, a Cuban immigrant and professional educator who has worked with the system. Through such experience as serving as principal of Chelsea High School he has come to believe it must be abolished if non-English-speaking children are to succeed educationally and socially in Massachusetts. The effort has the organizational expertise and support of Ron Unz, the Californian who led that state's successful reform effort. It is opposed by supporters of the existing system as amended by the legislature this year.

I became involved in the question of teaching English to children simply because too many children are languishing in classrooms separated from fellow students in a school's mainstream educational program. My interest grew and my opposition strengthened when I learned that backers of the existing system truly believe that a young child needs five or six years to learn English, a belief belied by the experience of our immigrant nation.

Children enter school eager to learn. The first lesson on the first day in a Massachusetts school, the first lesson should be that they are ready to learn English.

A "Yes" vote replaces the existing program with a year of sheltered immersion, a classroom taught in English by an instructor who is trained to assist students with any comprehension stumbling blocks. A "No" vote will retain the existing system.

Question 3 asks voters if they support taxpayer money being used to fund political campaigns. It does not change any law. With memory of the summer's Steve Tolman gubernatorial campaign spending \$4 million of tax money and with news reports appearing almost daily of the state's falling revenues and program cuts, the legislature has asked voters to weigh in on the question. A "Yes" vote supports appropriations for campaigns; a "No" vote opposes such use of tax money. Neither vote will change existing law.

We are fortunate to live in a state where our constitution gives us the right to vote by referendum. On November 5th, vote as you please, but please exercise your right to vote on these three public policy questions.