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### A Twist in Houston

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## A TWIST IN HOUSTON

AUTHOR:John Francis Burke

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Bucking what some consider a nationwide trend, voters in Houston, Texas, turned down an anti-affirmative action ballot initiative on November 7 by a margin of 55 percent to 45 percent. At the same time they gave a 42-percent plurality of votes in the multi-candidate mayoral election to a black candidate, Lee Brown, former chief of police in both New York City and Houston.

But both these victories are shadowed. Defeat of the referendum, though it brought euphoria to progressives here and nationally, may be rendered moot by a court case challenging the legality of the very set-aside program just rescued by the voters. And, under Texas law, Brown's failure to gain an absolute majority in the mayoral election means that he faces a run-off election on December 6 against second-place winner Robert Mosbacher, who received 29 percent of the November 7 votes.

Without a doubt, defeat of the anti-affirmative action referendum was in large part the result of a heavy turnout of blacks responding both to the initiative and to Brown's candidacy. Black voters rejected the initiative ("Proposition A") by a 9-1 margin. At least 30 percent of eligible voters in black precincts across the city, and 47 percent in middle-class black precincts, went to the polls. Mexican-Americans also voted in larger numbers than usual and turned down the proposition by a 3-1 margin.

These results were hardly surprising. More curious was the dead-even split among low-income white voters; 51 percent voted "yes," thereby rejecting affirmative-action, and 49 percent "no." Some have speculated that confusion among voters may account for this result, since voting "yes" to Proposition A meant voting "no" to affirmative action, and vice versa. But a gender gap among low- and mid-income whites is a more likely explanation; Houston's affirmativeaction system favors women as well as "minorities."

Beyond the numbers, another reason Proposition A was defeated was the organized opposition mounted by both the Houston business community and the outgoing mayor, Bob Lanier. Economically, Houston has profited enormously from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the business community has concluded that cultivating Houston's multicultural character brings benefits that would be endangered by backward-looking undertakings like Proposition A. The city's planning and development department projects that by the year 2000, the city's population will be 39 percent Latino/a, 29 percent black, and 7 percent Asian--what Father Virgil Elizondo refers to as a "global city." Although racial and cultural relations are by no means perfect, Houston has had a constructive history of racial and ethnic interaction.

Mayor Lanier's vigorous campaign against Proposition A and its supporters was so intense that their debate overshadowed the mayoral race. In the closing week of the campaign, Lanier ran an ingenious (and gutsy) television commercial arguing that passage of the proposition would mean a return to the bad old days when "only white males like me got jobs and city contracts." Lanier's strong opposition to the proposition was no surprise. Four years ago, he enlisted community leaders in a collective effort to rid the city of racial, religious, and other forms of prejudice.

Under Houston's affirmative-action program, actually only 20 percent of the city's contracts are set aside for minority or women contractors. But it developed, a week after the vote, that this moderation may not be enough to save it. On November 13, U.S. District Court Judge Lynn N. Hughes struck down the strikingly similar affirmative-action program of the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Houston as a form of reverse discrimination. Another lawsuit challenging Houston's program is now on Judge Hughes's docket.

A victory for Lee Brown in the December 6 run-off election is hardly a sure thing. His opponent, Robert Mosbacher, is an energy industry executive with extensive resources for campaign advertising. He also has name recognition because of previous runs for statewide offices and his father's service as secretary of commerce in the Bush administration. Since the affirmative-action proposition will not be on the ballot, Brown will have to work hard to sustain his base among black voters and to reach out to those who voted for the other candidates in the November 7 balloting.

It's my view, or hope, that if Brown draws upon the multicultural, global vision of the coalition that defeated Proposition A, Mosbacher and his money cannot beat him. But if elected, will Brown choose, to borrow from Cornel West, to be a "race-transcending prophetic leader" such as Chicago's Harold Washington, who tempered political demands with a moral vision, or simply a "race-effacing managerial leader" like Los Angeles's Thomas Bradley or Philadelphia's Wilson Goode, whose vision of politics was purely mainstream?

Regardless of the uncertain outcome of the mayoral election and the legal challenge to Houston's affirmative-action program, the multiracial, cosmopolitan coalition that handily defeated the anti-affirmative action proposition offers a progressive "unity-in-diversity" model for all of America's "global cities" to emulate.

Added material

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