

Categories: Interview

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Title: New Nationwide Campaign - Ve Y Vota - Mobilizes Immigrants to Vote

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**reporter:** M. Thang

**Juan Vega**, executive director of Centro Latino de Chelsea, is one of many leaders in Massachusetts who are implementing a new nationwide campaign to mobilize new citizens and immigrants to vote.

Called *Ve Y Vota* (It's Time, Go Vote), the campaign's New England kick-off took place on Jan. 12, 2008, in Boston.

Vega, a former Chelsea city councilor, talked to New England Ethnic News about the campaign and progress and obstacles of Latino enfranchisement.

Following is the edited and condensed interview with Vega, which took place by phone on Jan. 11, before *Ve Y Vota's* New England kick-off.

### **Why is it important to get more immigrants registered to vote?**

Immigrants have unfortunately become a lightning rod in terms of being scapegoats. Research has shown that immigrants have played an incredible and positive role in the economy of Massachusetts, particularly as it relates to workforce.

The majority of immigrants have legal status and are contributing (to their communities).

Politicians, policy makers and the public in general have such misinformed perceptions and attitudes about immigrants. One way the tide can be changed is by encouraging people to vote.

### **What are the challenges in getting Latinos registered to vote?**

The rules of voter registration differ all over the country. Those different rules make it difficult to do a national education campaign.

In some places, the rules or laws are a little more flexible. In other places, it's harder (to become registered to vote).

For example, in some places you can only register in person, in city hall. In other places, people have to be deputized by a local government official to do registrations outside of city hall.

In some places, you have to register 20 (or more) days before an election in order to participate in that election. In other places, it's less days. Some states (allow) registration on the very day of the election.

Locally, the challenges are with education - training more individuals, activists and community organizations on how to do a registration drive, how to motivate voters, and then how to take (what they've learned) to their communities and neighborhoods, through door-knocking and phone-banking campaigns.

Another challenge is to encourage 501(c)(3) [non-profit] organizations, in particular, to run full-fledged campaigns to register people.

### **Are Latinos in Greater Boston a fairly unified group? Or are they somewhat disjointed by**

### **country of origin?**

No [pause], certainly what happened last year with *Ya Es Hora* – and what will happen this year with our *Ve Y Vota* campaign – is a lot of unity.

The challenges within this community are no different than for any other ethnic community in terms of organizations and large diversity.

I certainly don't see divisions along the lines of nationalism or people only working with people from their country.

### **In Chelsea, how many Latinos are registered to vote?**

About 35,000 people live in Chelsea, and 48% are Latino. That's according to the 2000 Census, so it may be more than that by now.

Chelsea is second only to Lawrence (for having the most Latinos in its population, in Massachusetts).

The total registered voters in Chelsea average about 12,000, according to the city clerk.

About a third are Latinos, at this point. We've identified *up to* 4,000 Latino voters on the lists.

We do voter registration year-round, and we print out lists, so this is right up our alley.

### **Is that part of a new upward trend, the number of Latinos in Chelsea who are registered to vote?**

No, not at all, that's been an upward trend for the last decade.

We have Latinos as elected officials, on the School Committee, on the city council, so we've broken a lot of those "ceilings" a long time ago, over the past 15 years.

Every year there are more Latinos who are going to vote. But we want to be at least 50% of the vote.

### **What is the mission of *Ve Y Vota*?**

*Ve Y Vota* is actually an extension of a national campaign that we participated in last year, called *Ya Es Hora; ¡Ciudadania!* (Citizenship: It's About Time!), to increase the number of people that apply for U.S. citizenship.

*Ve Y Vota* is now the next step that we're taking on this year, to educate and register and mobilize all of those new citizens, to participate in elections.

### **Who are the sponsors behind *Ve Y Vota*?**

The coordinating partners behind the national campaign are the National Council of La Raza, the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO), and Mi Familia Vota educational fund.

Locally, we organize coalitions to join the campaign. Centro Latino is part of the (wider) New England coalition. About 50 organizations (working together in New England) were part of the *Ya Es Hora* (national) campaign that ended in December 2007.

This week, we launch the 2008 *Ve Ye Vota* campaign, and those organizations will be asked to sign up again for this next phase. Currently 10 to 15 organizations are on board. We'll work over the next couple of weeks to bring in more organizations.

(Our) media sponsors – Univision, Entravision and ImpreMedia, a print media outlet – are going to play a key role in terms of distributing information.

### **Is *Ve Ye Vota* focused on increasing voter participation just from Latinos?**

The New England coalition is focused on immigrants – *all* immigrants.

A lot of the media effort is being done in Spanish for *Ve Y Vota* – Latinos are the largest group of immigrants certainly in Massachusetts, if not nationally as well – but a lot of the New England coalitions work with diverse groups – Irish, African and other immigrants.

### **What is the first priority of *Ve Y Vota*?**

The first priority is to increase the participation, education, voter registration and mobilization (of these diverse Latino and non-Latino immigrant groups) in a non-partisan fashion.

The idea is that whether it's a candidate trying to get elected – or people already elected – immigrants form a substantial part of their constituency.

### **What are some of the activities that Centro Latino – or any of the other participating local organizations – will be doing as part of the *Ve Y Vota* campaign?**

Tomorrow (Saturday, Jan. 12), we have a press conference. Afterwards, we'll reconvene to make more specific plans.

Locally, we have groups like MIRA (Mass. Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy) Coalition and the Chelsea Collaborative that currently have a focus on attending all the (citizenship) swearing-in ceremonies and registering those new citizens to vote. We want to make sure that happens consistently over the next year.

We're going to organize trainings for community workers and activists through the spring, for how to register people to vote, how to work with your municipality, what to do if someone's registration is contested, et cetera.

We'll pick days when we have, for example, statewide efforts to register voters.

### **What is the mission of Centro Latino de Chelsea?**

The mission is to improve the quality of life of Latinos and immigrants in Chelsea and the Greater Boston area, through education, health and social well-being strategies.

### **Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

We're looking for any community organizations, groups or neighborhood associations who would like to be affiliated with this effort, who in believe in empowering immigrant communities. A contact group or person will be announced soon.

**CHECK OUT:**

**Ve Y Vota** national campaign  
[VeYVota.org](http://VeYVota.org)

**National Council of La Raza**  
[nclr.org](http://nclr.org)

**National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO)**  
[naleo.org](http://naleo.org)

**Entravision**  
[entravision.com](http://entravision.com)

**WUNI-TV 27** (Univision New England)  
[wunitv.com](http://wunitv.com)

**ImpreMedia**  
[impremedia.com](http://impremedia.com)

**Centro Latino de Chelsea**  
[centrolatino.org](http://centrolatino.org)

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