

The color of research

NUMBERS ARE NEEDED; CANDIDATES' OPPOSITION TO PROP. 54 IS WELCOME

By Manuel Pastor and Belinda Reyes

Cruz Bustamante's decision to divert controversial campaign contributions from his gubernatorial run to the campaign to defeat Proposition 54, though stopped Monday by a judge, changed the political calculus of this initiative measure.

Pushed by UC Regent Ward Connerly, Proposition 54 would make it illegal for schools, universities and other public agencies to collect data on the race, color, ethnicity or national origin of residents. Connerly and other advocates argue that there is no need to collect, keep or analyze data on race, ethnic or national origin and that racial and ethnic groups are interested in these data because they want government set-asides. More broadly, they argue that the collection of racial data moves us away from shared goals of a "colorblind" society.

On its face, the initiative seems, at worst, benign and, at best, a needed step toward American racial harmony. Yet Bustamante's decision to pour funds into the defeat and the opposition of leading Republican candidate Arnold Schwarzenegger has caused a sigh of relief among both civil rights activists and researchers.

Frankly, as researchers ourselves, we have been taken aback that an effort to erase important information from the public scene has gone so far in the political process. Race data, after all, is not simply about documenting inequality, al-

though the data do help us understand how little progress has been made on closing racial wage gaps or in diminishing the disparities in environmental conditions facing whites and non-whites in the state.

These data also allow us to understand less politically charged issues, such as the effects of particular medications across various groups. Advocates of Proposition 54 argue that exemptions for medical research will be allowed. But health experts

If what we want is a society in which everyone has an opportunity for a better life regardless of race or heritage, then learning when and why this is not taking place is crucial.

have countered that the proposition could prohibit the collection and use by state and local agencies of racial data from hospital records or disease registries.

The secondary data Proposition 54 would clearly ban is important for other health purposes as well. For example, the state's Healthy Families program was intended to bring health care to needy California children, but many eligible Latino families did not register for help. Does this mean that the program was not adequately targeted or designed to respond to the needs of this population? Without key ethnic or national origin data, how can we change our approach to achieve the universal goal of providing health care to as many children as possible?

Racial data can highlight inequality, but rather than exacerbating tension, such data can lead to a shared vision of effective

interventions. According to UCLA Professor Jeannie Oakes, for example, "African American and Latino students were much less likely than white or Asian students with the same test scores to be placed in accelerated courses." Knowing this can help us target placements in such courses and improve chances to attend college without a reliance on heavy-handed admissions policies.

Does opposition to Proposition 54 imply support for minority set-aside programs? Not necessarily. Differences in outcomes by race do not necessarily mean there is discrimination or a reason for special treatment, but they may indicate problems in particular neighborhoods or limitations in access or incentives for particular groups. In any case, Proposition 209 already prohibits the state from using race and ethnicity for the purpose of deciding school admission, offers of employment and government contracts.

Does knowing this information move us away from a colorblind society? If the goal of a colorblind society is to ignore differences in opportunities and needs, then not having information might make sense. But if what we want is a society in which everyone has an opportunity for a better life regardless of race or heritage, then learning when and why this is not taking place is crucial.

Democracy is based on an informed public. By this light, Proposition 54 falls far short of the democratic and egalitarian ideals it purports to celebrate. And the opposition of Schwarzenegger and Bustamante to the measure is welcome indeed.

MANUEL PASTOR is director of the Center for Justice, Tolerance and Community at UC-Santa Cruz. **BELINDA REYES** is research director of Best Policy Alternative Group.