

The California Entrepreneur who Beat Bilingual Teaching

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PALO ALTO, Calif. — Ron Unz, the man who beat bilingual education in the nation's most populous state, is no slick demagogue or smooth revolutionary.

At 36, he looks and lives like a harried graduate student, dressed in faded and fraying clothing, fueled by fast food and canned chili, fatigued by late nights in the glow of a computer screen.

But by successfully promoting a statewide initiative that, if it withstands legal challenges, will essentially wipe out bilingual education in California, Unz emerged last week as a new force and a new kind of figure in California politics, the ardent ideologue who circumvents the telegenic requirements and messy compromises of a traditional candidacy by working his will through a voter referendum.

“Look at Jane Harman and Al Checchi,” Unz said, referring to two candidates who lost their bids for the Democratic nomination for governor on June 2, when his initiative passed. Exquisitely groomed and exhaustively coached, they were slaves to focus groups, he said, and have little to show for their efforts.

“Six months from now, will anyone really remember what either of them said in the campaign?” Unz asked. “For a politician, you spend a lot of time and a lot of money and you probably lose. With the initiative process, you can have a lot more direct impact, and if you can get your thing on the ballot, there's a good chance you'll win.”

That was true in California long before Unz and Proposition 227, supported by 61 percent of voters.

But seldom if ever has a referendum in this initiative-mad state been so entwined with a single individual and seldom if ever has that individual been someone who seemed poised to use the same blunt instrument to effect other changes.

As Unz ate egg rolls in a Chinese restaurant here and cast a sidelong glance in the direction of Burger King, where he prefers to take his meals,

he made no bones about it: He is likely to be back with another initiative, and maybe even another after that. He mentioned tax policy, then grew deliberately vague.

To his critics, such words are chilling. They say that the initiative process promotes often extreme ideas, unmitigated by the compromises and consensus building that occur in a legislative body, then asks uninformed voters for a simple yes or no.

And they say that the process provides a ready window of political opportunity for anyone who can afford to hire workers to gather the necessary signatures — about 430,000 in the case of Proposition 227 — to put a referendum on the ballot.

That amount of money, anywhere from \$500,000 to \$1 million, is a small fraction of the \$40 million that Checchi, for example, poured into his failed bid for governor. It is a sum available to a number of individuals in such a populous and wealthy state, political analysts noted.

Although advertising an initiative can raise the financial toll, Unz, who owns a software company in the Silicon Valley, said he spent less than \$300,000 on commercials and paid promotions for Proposition 227. He relied mostly on free coverage from news organizations.

In all, Unz said the bill for the initiative was about \$1.2 million, of which he contributed \$700,000. The initiative was certainly a more cost-effective strategy for change than his unsuccessful challenge of Gov. Pete Wilson for the Republican nomination for governor four years ago, when he mined his personal wealth for more than \$2 million.

“This year, Ron Unz used much less money to qualify an initiative, and he will be a player for a long time in California politics,” said Jim Shultz, executive director of the Democracy Center in San Francisco, a nonprofit advocacy-training group, and an expert on the history of initiatives in California.

Shultz and other political observers noted that Unz, perhaps more than any architect of a successful initiative before him, demonstrated the enormous potential impact that a single individual can have by tapping a sensitive nerve among voters. Conventional politicians, restrained by the legislative process and the influence of advocacy groups, had not raised the issue.

Unz did not have to soften or muddy his vision to get people to consider it, simply putting it before them in an uncomplicated triumph of will and wealth. “He didn’t have to wade into the muck,” said Dan Schnur, a Republican political analyst in California. “It’s a lot easier to be ideologically pure in an initiative campaign than in office.”

Because of that, Schnur said, “There is a potential for a lot more of these people.”

If Unz is any indication, they do not need any special charisma. Although he seems earnest and affable, he also comes across as somewhat goofy and disconnected, caught up in his own frenetic thought processes, his eyes fixed on some indeterminate point in space as his words tumble out in run-on paragraphs.

His voice has slightly nasal, cultured tones, and he laughs in open-mouthed gulps.

Unz did not have a particularly strong personal connection to the issue of bilingual education. He is unmarried and childless and had never set foot in a bilingual classroom.

Although his maternal grandparents spoke Yiddish when they came to Los Angeles from the former Soviet Union, his single mother raised him speaking English. Bilingual education was not prevalent when he attended Los Angeles public schools.

At Harvard University, he had double majors in theoretical physics and ancient history. But his passion for ideas ranged far and wide.

Eric Reyburn, who lived in a dormitory room that adjoined Unz's, said that Unz's conservative ideology put him at odds with many of his peers, and he relished engaging them in debate and trumping them with his easy command of information.

"Ron loves to be able to state his opinions on things," Reyburn said. "And he's a very competitive person underneath it all."

After graduate courses in theoretical physics at Cambridge University in England and Stanford University in Palo Alto, Unz moved to New York City to work as a software developer, at one point sending out resumes that listed his IQ as 214, more than twice the average person's. In 1988, he started Wall Street Analytics, which provides software programs for analyzing mortgage securities. Five years later, he moved the company to Palo Alto.

He also began pumping time and money into conservative organizations.

His surprise entry into the 1994 governor's race, however, came in protest of an idea supported by many conservatives and by Wilson: Proposition 187, which called for the denial of public services to illegal immigrants. Unz said he saw that initiative, which was passed by voters but is tied up in legal obstacles, as needlessly divisive.

Some opponents have branded Proposition 227 in similar terms. The initiative calls for students with limited skills in English to be given about a year of intensive instruction in the language, then be placed in classes where all subjects are taught in English.

But Unz and even some of his detractors said he was driven by a pure conviction that bilingual education, as a method of acclimating children into English, defied both logic and test scores, which showed poor achievement by many students in the programs.

Unz confessed that he was also excited by the prospect of waging ideological battle, and he did much of the work on his own, with a paid support staff that consisted of two people.

But Unz was careful to get several prominent Hispanic educators to attach their names to his cause, and political analysts said that by framing his case in educational terms that did not seem to fan the flames of racial conflict, he may have won over moderate voters who would have felt uncomfortable about siding with any referendum that smacked of bigotry.

Unz said he succeeded because the current system was terribly flawed and voters needed only to be enlightened. Unz, who attends conferences on public policy as a form of recreation, was happy to be the one to take on that task.

"It's nice to be able to fix broken things, and there are a lot of broken things in California," he said. "I certainly fixed bilingual education. I fixed it but good."