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The Latino Vote in Massachusetts

By Phillip Granberry, PH.D., and Luis F. Jiménez, PH.D.

September 2020

**THE MAURICIO GASTÓN INSTITUTE
FOR LATINO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
AND PUBLIC POLICY**



Foreword

Phillip Granberry's report on the increasing voter turnout of Latinos in Massachusetts and nationwide is an encouraging sign that Latinos are finally reaching their potential within the electorate. There have been glimmers of hope before, but this is particularly bright for three reasons. First, this is a report about the midterm elections, which usually see a far lower turnout than presidential elections. This is important because to the extent that it may be a response to any particular political or economic condition, it is more likely to be sustainable if it does not depend on the presence of a particular presidential candidate on the ballot. This is particularly so for Massachusetts, where the 2018 midterm elections featured few high-profile competitive contests.

Second, as Granberry explains, this was not a simple matter of new voters registering and entering the electorate. In fact, turnout significantly outpaced registrations. This is another sign of sustainability. All things being equal, for the Latino electorate to reach its potential one would need new voters to register—especially as the Latino population is disproportionately younger compared to other groups—but also infrequent voters to turn out with more regularity. The fact that both of these things happened further implies that this is not dependent on a particular temporal event.

Finally, although there was a surge in turnout among all groups, it was particularly concentrated within the Latino electorate. This is crucial. If turnout had been equally distributed among the voting public, it would strongly suggest that the surge was in response to some specific person or event which might evaporate once those conditions changed—as it did after the 2008 election. Instead, this might be a sign that Latinos are discovering their own political efficacy—a collective realization that their vote matters would be the clearest predictor of future higher turnout.

What this report cannot answer is *why* the Latino vote surged in this election. As Granberry rightly points out, the single most important explanation for the discrepancy between Latino population numbers and their meager impact at the ballot box has always been that a considerable part of Latinos are ineligible to vote given that they lack American citizenship. Still, even among those who *can* vote, many opt not to. Even worse, historically this apathy has registered at a far higher rate than other groups as Granberry shows in this report. The literature has tried to solve this puzzle and has found that there is a U-shaped pattern in Latino participation where third-generation and first-generation/naturalized citizens vote at higher rates than second-generation Latinos.¹ This appears to be at least in part because of disappointment with voting as a tool for change. Other factors include how institutions, particularly civic ones, shape Latinos' engagement,² and in the case of first-generation immigrants who opt not to vote, the age at which Latino immigrants arrive in the United States. The older they arrive in the US the less likely they are to be engaged and vice-versa.³ More than

anything, however, what predicts political participation is a shared sense of being part of a racialized group that is under threat in some way, for instance by the threat of deportation—even when someone is a citizen.⁴ That is why President Trump’s rhetoric and policies have had such a mobilizing effect on Latinos.⁵

Granberry’s report, especially his finding that naturalized citizens voted at a higher rate than US-born Latinos in 2018, is consistent with the literature in suggesting that racial threat as personified by Trump’s policies may have been a catalyst for the surge in voting both nationwide and in Massachusetts. If that is the case, the question then becomes whether this period has created a politicized identity that will outlive Trump’s period in office or whether it will subside once he is gone or his anti-immigrant policies change. We cannot be sure as of yet, but for now, Latino’s political power seems to have finally be on its way to achieving its potential.

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¹ Stephanie Potochnik and Mary Stegmaier. (2020). “Latino Political Participation by Citizenship Status and Immigrant Generation,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 101(2): 1-17.

² Marcela García-Castañón, Kiku Huckle, Hanna L. Walker, and Chinbo Chong. (2019). “Democracy’s Deficit: The Role of Institutional Contact in Shaping Non-White Political Behavior,” *Journal of Race and Ethnic Politics*, 4(1): 1-31.

³ Van C Tran. (2016). “Beyond the Ballot Box: Age-at-Arrival, Civic Institutions and Political Participation among Latinos,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(5): 1-25.

⁴ For example, see: Kelly Birch Maginot (2020), “Effects of Deportation Fear of Latinxs’ Civic and Political Participation,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 1-20 and Chris Zepeda-Millán (2017), *Latino Mass Mobilization: Immigration, Racialization, and Activism*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Angela Gutiérrez, Angela X. Ocampo, Matt A. Barreto, and Gary Segura. (2019). “Somos Más: How Racial Threat and Anger Mobilized Latino Voters in the Trump Era.” *Political Research Quarterly*, 72(4): 1-16.

The Increasing Latino Vote in Massachusetts

In the 2018 United States midterm election, voters turned out in impressive numbers. The turnout rate was the highest for a midterm election since 1978. Latinos helped lead the way: although their 40.4% turnout (of the citizen, voting-age population) was lower than the overall national figure of 53.4%, it represented an increase of 13 percentage points over the previous midterm election in 2014. A larger share of naturalized Latino citizens voted, 44.2%, than did U.S.-born Latinos, 39.0%. With the growing Latino and Asian populations in the United States, the share of Non-Latino White voters declined from 76.3% in 2014 to 72.8% in 2018, while the Latino share increased from 7.3% to 9.6% of all who voted.

In Massachusetts, 55.5% of the citizen voting-age population voted in the 2018 midterm election. Among Latino citizens, the turnout was 42.7%, an increase of more than 25 percentage points over the 2014 midterm election. The share of Non-Latino White voters declined from 92.4% in 2014 to 82.8% in 2018, while the Latino share increased from 2.4% to 6.5% of all who voted.

As the Latino population is projected to grow to over 15% of Massachusetts' population by 2035, their voting will become more critical in future election outcomes. However, two factors limit their importance. First, 22% of all adult Latinos in Massachusetts are not U.S. citizens, and cannot register to vote. Only Asians have a larger share of non-citizens (40%), while 19% of Non-Latino Blacks and 4% of Non-Latino Whites are not citizens. Not only are Latinos less likely to be citizens, but they also have a younger population, with many below voting age. The median age of Latinos in 2017 was 28 years, compared to 44 years for Non-Latino Whites, 33 for Non-Latino Blacks, and 34 for Asians. The combination of these two voting requirements limits the share of Latino voters to 54%. Only Asians with 49% of their population voting-eligible have a lower voting-eligible share. Both Non-Latino Whites with 80% and Non-Latino Blacks with 62% have larger voting-eligible shares of their populations.

This report analyzes Current Population Survey data from 2002 to 2018. The data are generated from replies to survey questions about whether individuals were registered and/or voted in specific national elections. The Census Bureau releases the data on the federal and state level in tabular form.

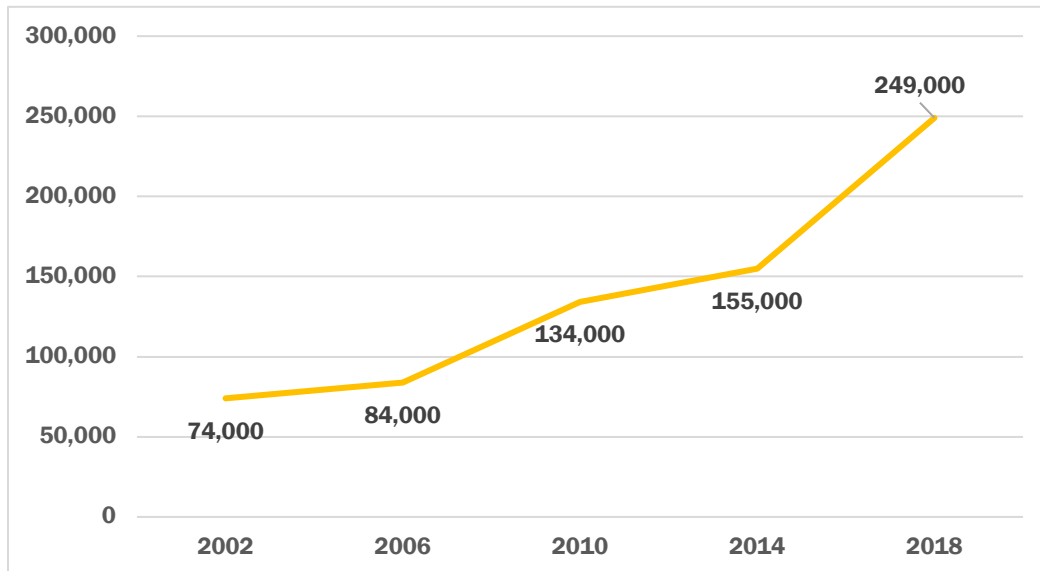
This report examines the Latino vote in national midterm and presidential elections from 2002 to 2018. Voter turnout typically is higher in presidential than in midterm elections. In Massachusetts, elections for governor occur in midterm election years, and this could increase the voter turnout compared to other states that do not have the same gubernatorial election schedule. These census data do not include information on local elections unless they overlap with national elections. Latinos hold more elected positions in city and town government than they do in state government, and this could

increase their voter turnout in these local elections.

Registered Voters

Figure 1 reports the number of Latino registered voters in Massachusetts in mid-term elections from 2002 to 2018. Over this time, the number of Latino registered voters increased by over 236%. The most significant increase occurred between the 2014 and 2018 elections, when an additional 94,000 Latinos registered to vote in Massachusetts.

Figure 1: Registered Latino Voters in Massachusetts Mid-Term Elections, 2002-2018

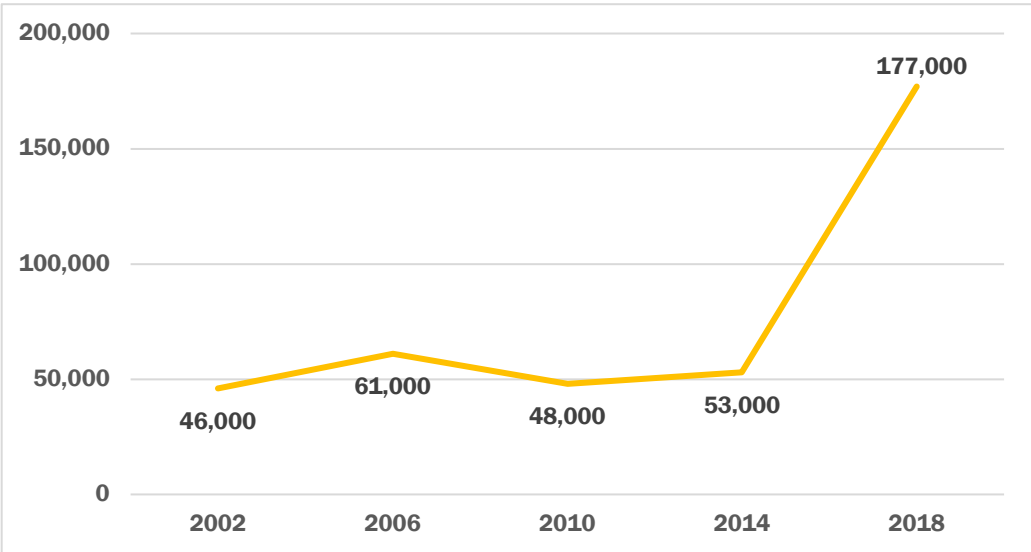


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2002-2018

Voter Turnout

Figure 2 reports the number of Latino voters in Massachusetts mid-term elections from 2002 to 2018. Over this time, the number of Latino voters increased by over 284%. The number of Latino voters declined in 2010 and 2014 from the 2006 election, but 124,000 more Latinos voted in Massachusetts in 2018 than did in 2014.

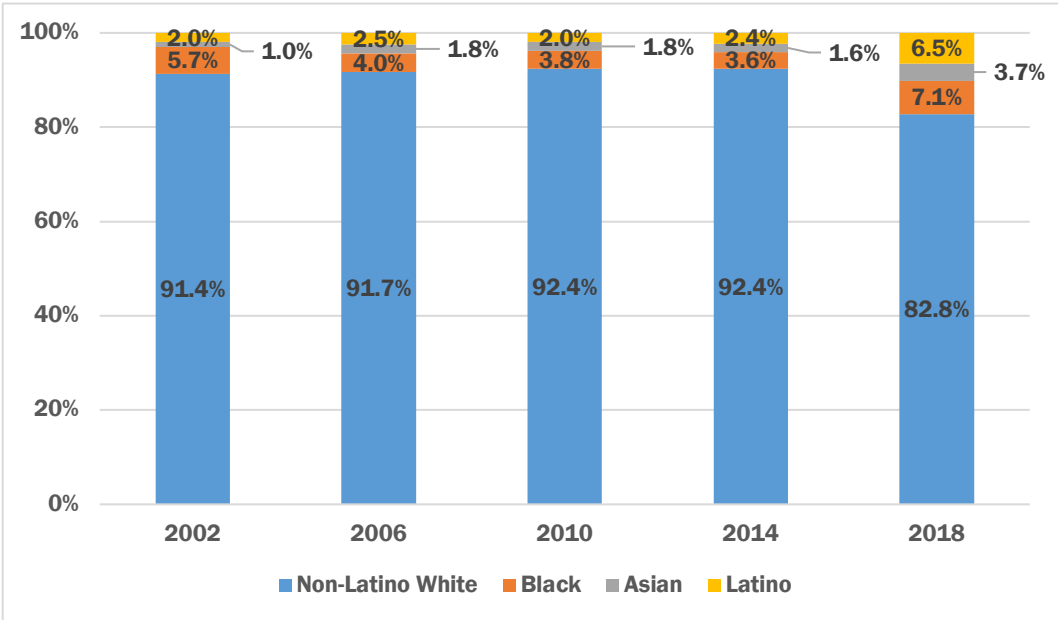
Figure 2: Latino Voters in Massachusetts Mid-Term Elections, 2002-2018



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2002-2018

The increase in Latino voting from 2014 to 2018 suggests that Latinos in Massachusetts are continuing to develop their political power. However, this process continues at a slow pace because so many Latinos lack eligibility to vote. In 2017, 811,038 Latino resided in Massachusetts, and they made up 11.8% of the state's population. However, Figure 3 shows that they made up only 6.5% of voters in the 2018 mid-term election.

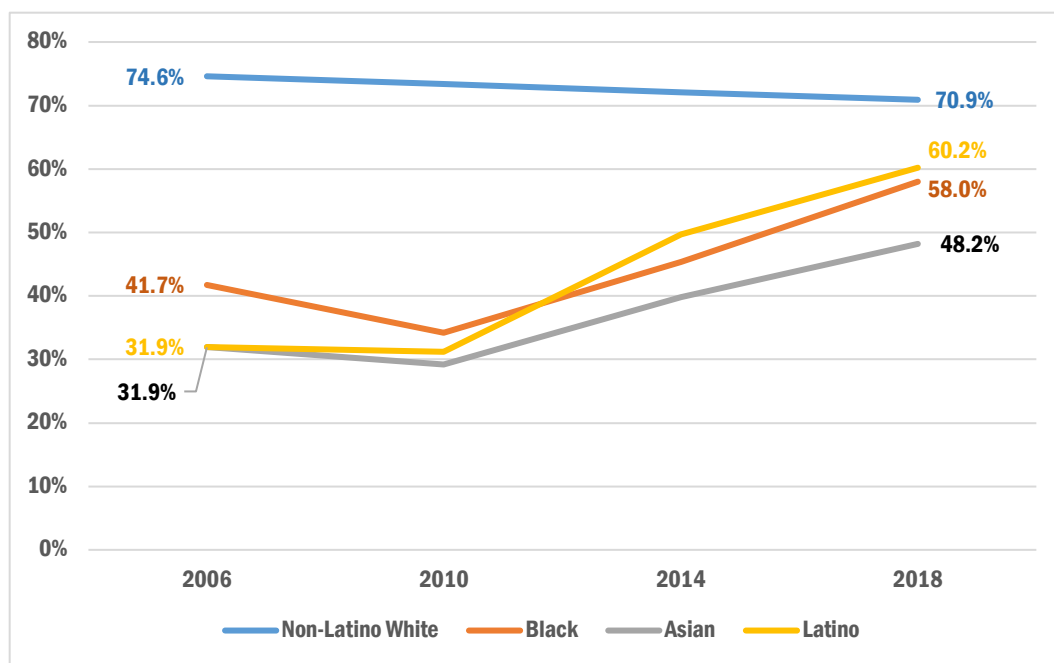
Figure 3: Voting Population in Massachusetts Mid-Term Elections by Race and Ethnicity, 2002-2018



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2002-2018

The final two figures compare the voting behavior of Massachusetts' citizen voting population. Figure 4 shows that the share of Latino (and also Black and Asian populations) who are registered to vote is approaching that of the majority Non-Latino White population. In 2018, 60% of Latino citizens were registered to vote compared to 71% of Non-Latino White citizens. Thus, if this trend continues by the 2022 mid-term election, the two populations will have similar shares of their citizen population registered to vote. (The Current Population Survey data did not report voting characteristics for the citizen population until 2006, and thus the 2002 mid-term election data are missing.)

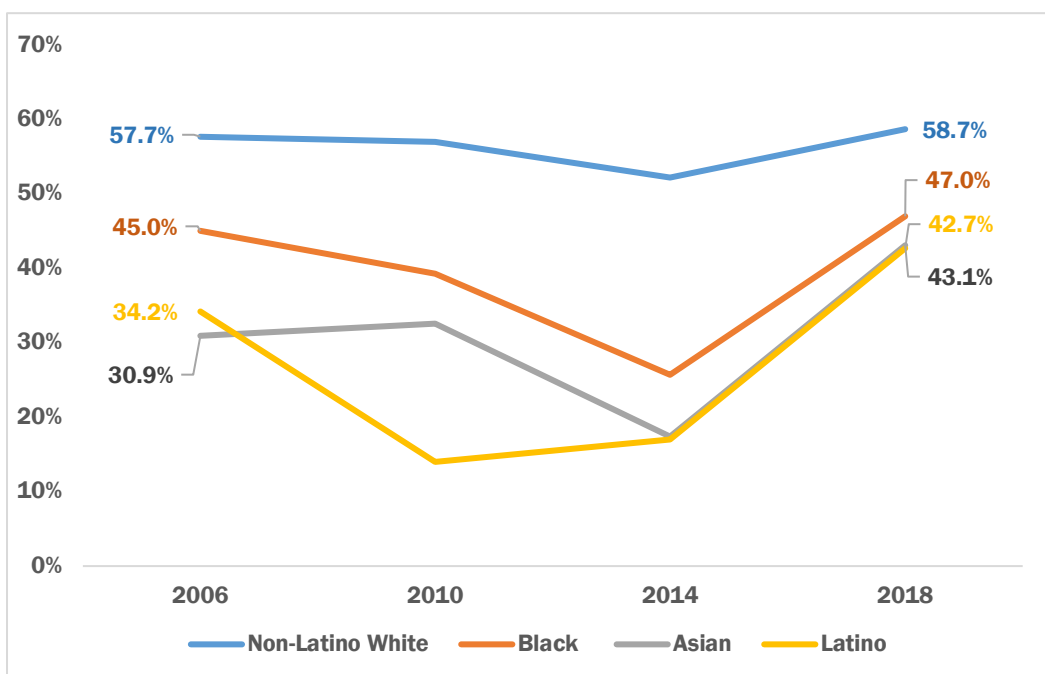
Figure 4: Citizen Voter Registration in Massachusetts Mid-Term Elections by Race and Ethnicity, 2006-2018



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2006-2018

Increasing voter registration is only part of the voting process. The share of Latino citizens who voted in 2018 reached its highest level at 43%. This turnout was lower than for Non-Latino Whites (59%). However, as previously mentioned, this was part of the record voter turnout in a mid-term election for Latinos. This voter turnout was dramatically higher than 14% in 2010 and 17% in 2014.

Figure 5: Citizen Voter Turnout in Massachusetts Mid-Term Elections by Race and Ethnicity, 2006-2018



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2006-2018

Similar to other voters, Latino voters in Massachusetts increased their turnout in the 2018 mid-term election. There was an increase in voter registration, but the voter turnout outpaced this gain in registrations. Overall, Latinos made up less than 7% of the voter turnout in this election. Thus, Latinos in the state can claim more political power with increased voter turnout. The 2020 election appears to be drawing the political interest that motivated the increased 2018 participation. This election will provide another opportunity for Latinos to increase their vote and thus acquire more political power in the state. Even with this increased voter turnout in 2018, more Latino citizens did not vote than did, and the Latino vote in 2020 can be higher if more effort is made to increase the Latino vote. The Gastón Institute will report on this election after the 2020 election Current Population Survey data are released.

¹ Stephanie Potochnik and Mary Stegmaier. (2020). “Latino Political Participation by Citizenship Status and Immigrant Generation,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 101(2): 1-17.

² Marcela García-Castañón, Kiku Huckel, Hanna L. Walker, and Chinbo Chong. (2019). “Democracy’s Deficit: The Role of Institutional Contact in Shaping Non-White Political Behavior,” *Journal of Race and Ethnic Politics*, 4(1): 1-31.

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About the Gastón Institute

Established in 1989, the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy was created by the Massachusetts Legislature in response to a need for improved understanding about the Latino experience in the commonwealth. Now in its 30th year, the Gastón Institute continues its mission of informing the public and policymakers about issues vital to the state's growing Latino community and providing information and analysis necessary for effective Latino participation in public policy development. To learn more about the Gastón Institute, visit www.umb.edu/gastoninstitute.

One of the goals of the Gastón Institute is to be responsive to the needs of the Latino and policy communities through the research we undertake. Please feel free to contact us with suggestions or requests for specific information.

About the Authors

Phillip Granberry is a social demographer. He worked with various community-based organizations assisting recently arrived U.S. immigrants before earning a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of Massachusetts Boston. He has published several articles on the accumulation and use of social capital among Latinos and the sexual health communication of Puerto Rican mothers with their children. In addition to his research and teaching in the Gastón Institute and Economics Department at UMass Boston, he is Senior Researcher in demography for the Boston Planning and Development Agency.

Luis F. Jiménez is an associate professor in the Political Science Department. His main research interests are Latin American politics, immigration and US-Latin American Relations. He has published in *PS: Political Science and Politics* and in *Social Science Quarterly*. In addition, he has just published a book with the University Press of Florida on the impact that Latin American migrants have in their home countries. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, he demonstrated the ways that migrants are shifting political behavior and politics of Mexico, Colombia and Ecuador.



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