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Recommended Citation

Granberry, Phillip and Jiménez, Luis F., "The Increasing Latino Vote in Massachusetts: Results from the 2020 Presidential Election" (2022). *Gastón Institute Publications*. 279.
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The Increasing Latino Vote in Massachusetts: Results from the 2020 Presidential Election

**by Phillip Granberry, PhD. &
Luis F. Jiménez, PhD.**

February 2022

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



Introduction

During the early 21st century, Latinos have grown as a part of the Massachusetts population. To a considerable extent, this growth is reflected in Latinos' political participation, as shown by voting statistics. For example, the number of Latinos voting in presidential elections rose from 51,000 in 2000 to 227,000 in 2020, a remarkable increase of 345%. Similarly, the percentage of votes for president that were cast by Latinos rose from 1.8% in 2000 to 7.0% in 2020. However, Latino voting is still not fully proportionate to Latinos' share of the statewide population. Both of these phenomena – the growth of Latino voting and the continued lag – are examined in this report. As the Latino population is projected to grow to over 15% of Massachusetts' population by 2035 (Granberry & Mattos, 2019), their voting will become more critical in future election outcomes.

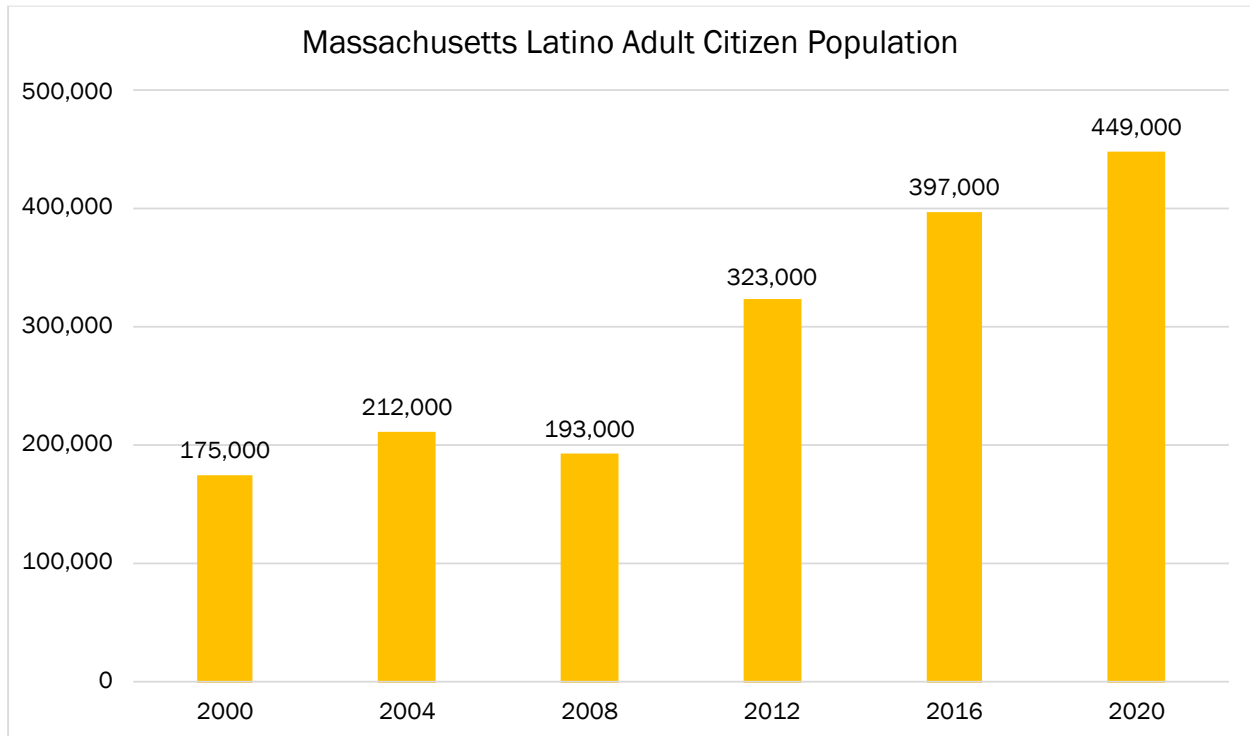
This report analyzes Current Population Survey (CPS) data from the six presidential election years from 2000 through 2020. The CPS sample is a probability sample that produces national and state estimates of the civilian non-institutional population 16 years of age and older. The data are generated from replies to survey questions about whether individuals were registered and/or voted in specific national elections.

Eligibility to Vote

Two factors place constraints on the extent of Latino voting. 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 (37%), while 15% of Blacks and 3% 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 the voting age. The median age of Latinos in 2019 was 28 years, compared to 44 years for Non-Latino Whites and 34 years for Blacks and Asians. Taken together, these two voting requirements limit the share of Latino voters to 54% of the total Latino population. Only Asians with 51% of their population voting-eligible have a lower voting-eligible share. Both Non-Latino Whites with 81% and Non-Latino Blacks with 65% have larger voting-eligible shares of their populations. Figure 1 shows the increase in eligible Latino voters in Massachusetts. The 449,000 adult citizens in 2020 represent a 157% increase since 2000.

Figure 1: Massachusetts Latino Adult Citizen Population, 2000-2020

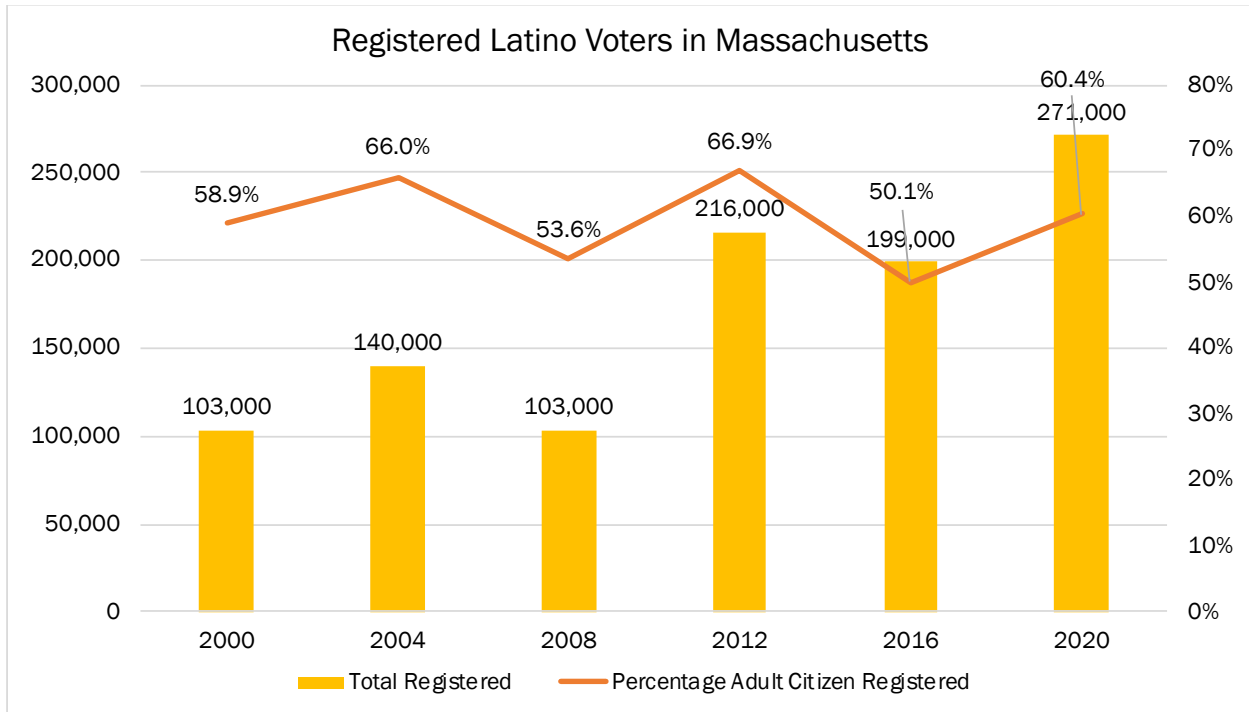


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2000-2020

Voter Registration

Figure 2 shows voter registration by Latinos in Massachusetts in presidential election years from 2000 to 2020. The solid columns represent the number of Latino registered voters, while the thin line above shows the percentage that these registered voters constituted among all Latinos who were voting-eligible at the time. Over this period, the number of Latino registered voters increased by over 163%. In comparison, the Latino population eligible to vote (adult citizens) increased by 157% from 2000 to 2020. The increase in Latino voter registration was especially noteworthy between the 2016 and 2020 elections: from 199,000 to 271,000, from 50.1% of voting-eligible Latinos to 60.4%. Aside from 2008 when non-response may have lowered CPS estimates (Hur and Achen, 2013), changes in voter registration may principally reflect the strength or weakness of voter registration efforts.

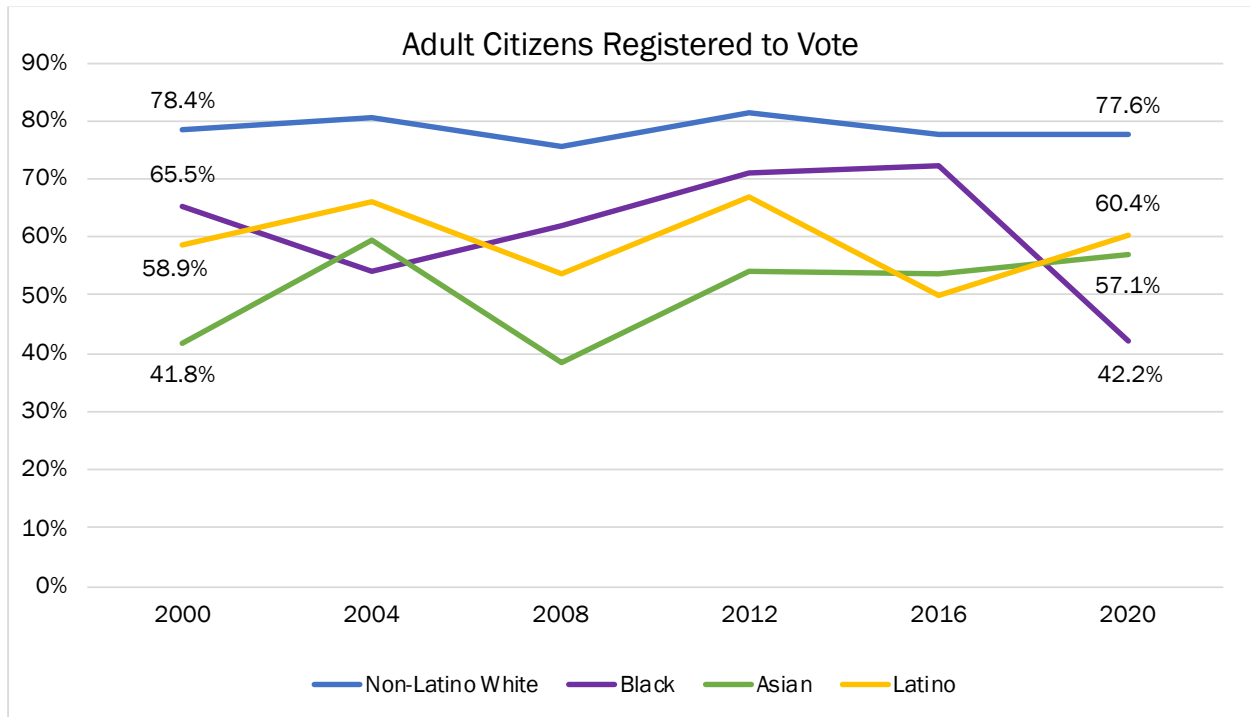
Figure 2: Registered Latino Voters in Massachusetts Presidential Elections, 2000-2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2000-2020

The next figure compares the registration of Massachusetts' racial-ethnic groups over the six election cycles. Figure 3 shows that the share of voting-eligible Latino citizens who were registered to vote fluctuated between 50% and 67% during presidential elections. In 2020, 60% of Latino citizens were registered to vote compared to 78% of Non-Latino White citizens. This 2020 Latino share was below the 2012 share of 67%. Asians displayed a similar trend to Latinos over last several election cycles, while the Black share declined during the last two presidential elections. The Non-Latino White share of registered adult citizens remained steady between 78% and 82% over these years.

Figure 3: Citizen Voter Registration in Massachusetts Presidential Elections by Race and Ethnicity, 2000-2020

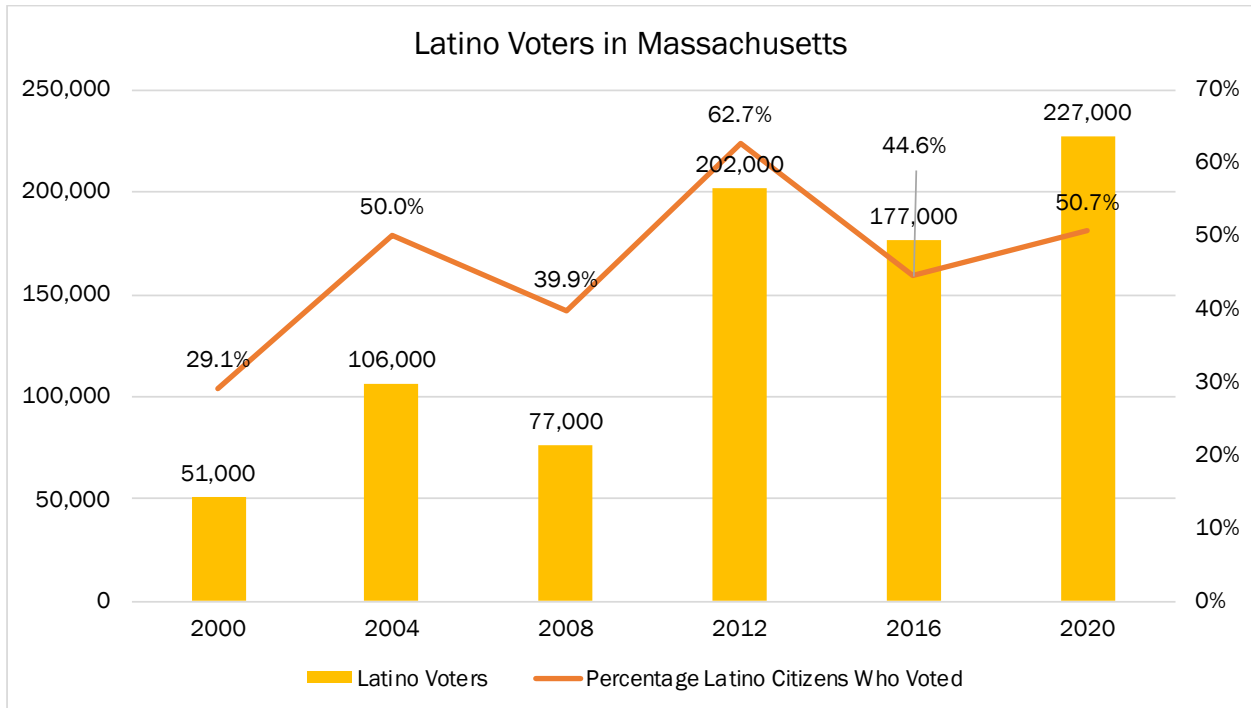


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2000-2020

Voter Turnout

Increasing voter registration is only part of the voting process. Figure 4 reports the number of Massachusetts Latinos who actually voted in presidential elections from 2000 to 2020. Over this time, the number of Latino voters increased by over 345%. After a slight decline in the number of Latino voters in 2016, 50,000 additional Latino voters turned out in 2020. The Latino turnout was second only to that of Non-Latino Whites in Massachusetts.

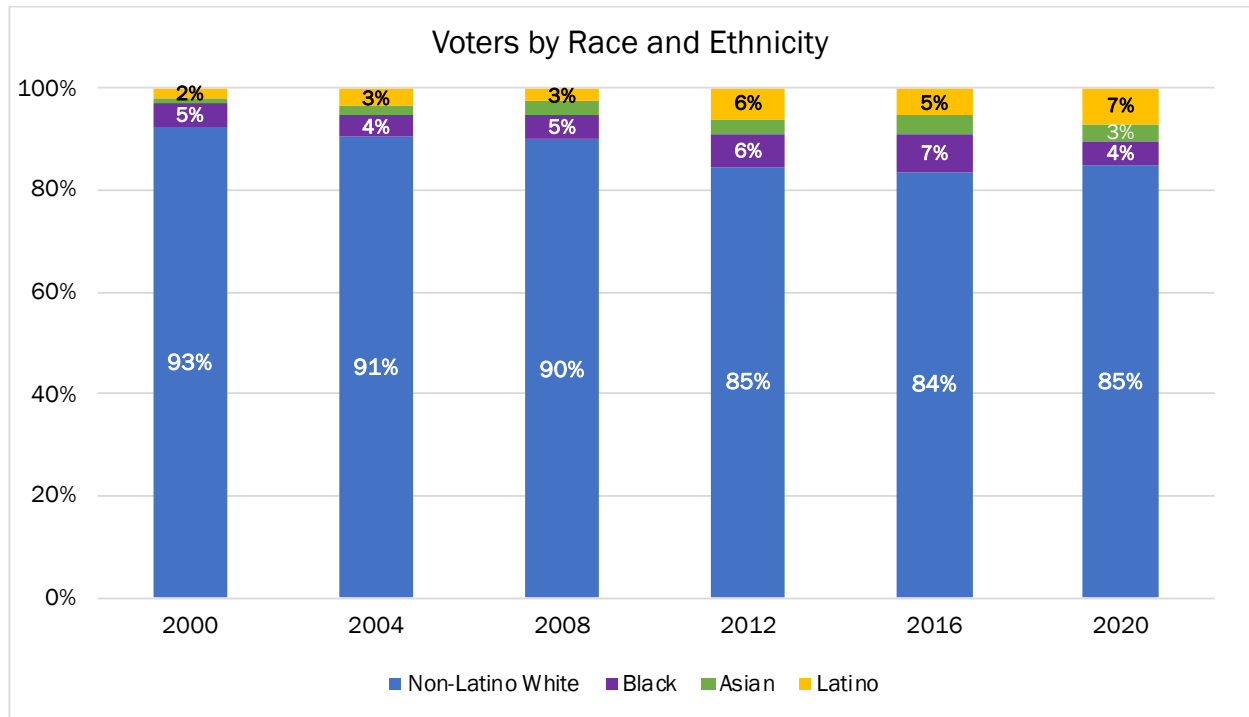
Figure 4: Latino Voters in Massachusetts Presidential Elections, 2000-2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2000-2020

The increase in Latino voting from 2012 to 2020 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 2020, 621,508 adult Latinos resided in Massachusetts, and they made up 10.9% of the state's adult population, according to the 2020 Decennial Census. However, Figure 5 shows that they made up only 7% of voters in the 2020 presidential election. Still, this is an impressive increase from 2% in 2000.

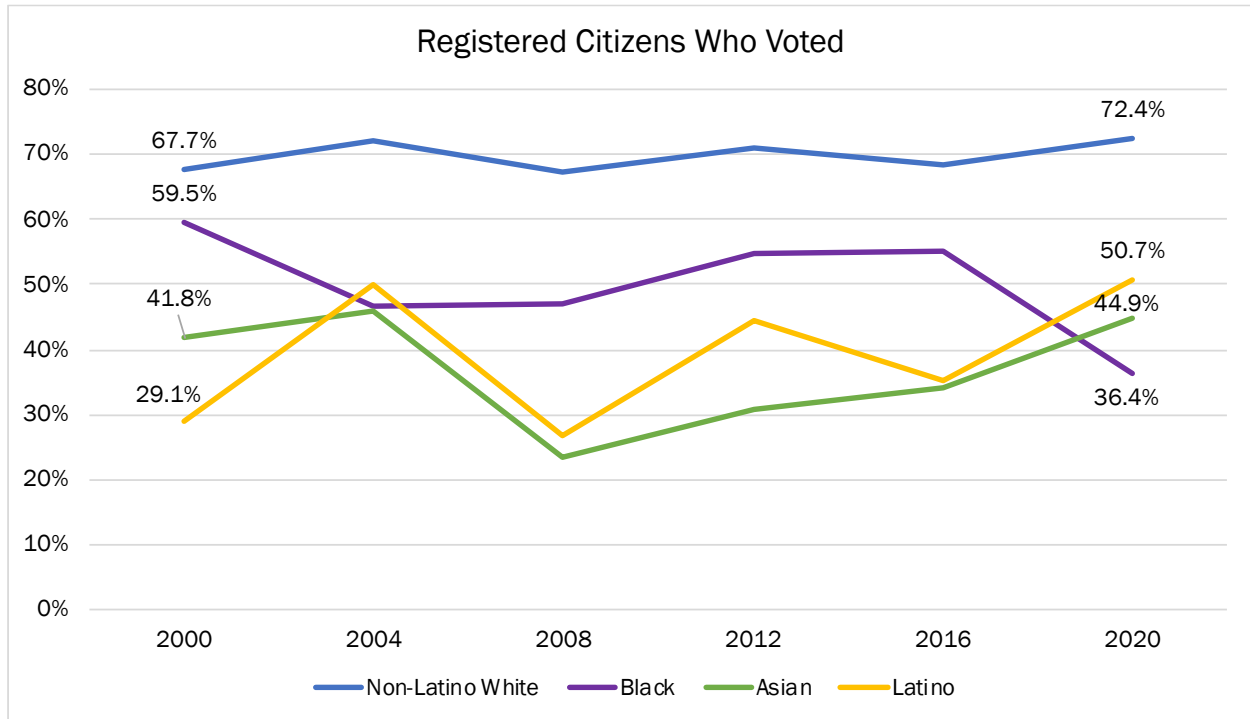
Figure 5: Voting Population in Massachusetts Presidential Elections by Race and Ethnicity, 2000-2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2000-2020

The share of voting-eligible Latino citizens who voted in 2020 reached its highest level at 51%. This turnout was lower than for Non-Latino Whites (72%). However, as previously mentioned, this was part of the record voter turnout in a presidential election for Latinos. This voter turnout was dramatically higher than 29% in 2000, but similar to the 50% in 2004. Asian voter turnout continued to increase, parallel to that of Latinos while Black turnout, similar to Black voter registration, declined from 2016 to 2020.

Figure 6: Citizen Voter Turnout in Massachusetts Presidential Elections by Race and Ethnicity, 2000-2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2000-2020

Discussion

This study of Latino voter turnout has three important conclusions. The first is that despite the pandemic and the lack of prominent competitive races in the 2020 elections in Massachusetts, turnout among Latinos continued rising. The second is that compared to other groups in the commonwealth, their percentage rise was higher, especially because Black and Asian turnout actually dwindled in relationship to 2016. Finally, although turnout has continued to increase in the last couple of elections, it remains below the national average and even below neighboring states like Connecticut. Thus, whether one was in the pessimistic or the optimistic camp as to the future of Latino voter turnout in the commonwealth, there would be data here to support that position.

The literature has pointed to three main reasons for a lower Latino voter turnout compared to other groups (Ramírez 2015; Li and Jones 2019; Shaw, Foster and Kerry Combs 2019). The most important by far is the enormous lack of eligibility amongst its population because of a lack of citizenship. Although this report presents voter turnout only among those who are eligible, this pattern in the Latino community has a huge

indirect effect that contributes to low voter turnout. The problem is that having a population with a disproportionate number of ineligible voters means that any political appeal, by definition, will be more costly to a political actor because it will take more effort to achieve the same number of Latino votes than it would to do so with any other group. This, in turn, discourages political actors from trying to mobilize Latino voters and thus creates a vicious cycle. Latinos do not vote because political parties do not try to mobilize them, and political parties do not try to mobilize them because Latinos do not vote.

The second reason is that collectively Latinos tend to be disproportionately less educated and wealthy than other groups. The more education and wealth a person has, the more likely it is that the person will have the resources to overcome potential obstacles to voting (e. g. knowing how and where to register, voting on a weekday etc.). The final reason is socialization. When the act of voting is routine for people, often it is because they were socialized into it. The younger a person is when they start voting, the more likely is it that they will keep voting throughout their lifetime. Because of the previous two reasons, however, Latinos are less likely to go through that socialization process, especially if their parents are ineligible to vote. And thus, here we have another vicious cycle, Latinos are not socialized into voting, so they don't vote; and they don't vote, so they are not socialized into voting.

Thus, whenever voter turnout in the Latino community goes up, there must be some factor or factors that are overcoming these obstacles in some way. These may include: a heightened interest in the particular elections or candidates that makes them believe their vote will make a difference; mobilization that will do the same thing either through political parties, community organizations, or some other social institution such as churches or unions (Michelson 2003, Fraga 2018); or removal of institutional barriers that discourage people from voting.

So what happened in Massachusetts that accounts for the increased Latino voter turnout compared to 2016? Well, we definitely know that institutional barriers were lowered. On July 7, 2020, Governor Baker signed a law that allowed all voters to vote by mail. There was also expanded early voting for the general election and allowed for the first time for the September primaries. If all Massachusetts voter groups had then increased their turnout about roughly the same, we could point to this as the main explanation. That was not the case, however. Black and Asian people both voted at a lower rate than they did in 2016, and White voter turnout increased at a much lower rate. Thus, although it is undoubtedly the case that for some people, this change resulted in a vote that otherwise might not have happened, it cannot be the sole explanation.

Mobilization also must have played some role. The campaigns of both Edward Markey and Joseph Kennedy in the 2020 Democratic primary for U.S. senator made strong efforts to rally voters, including Latinos, which could have well made a difference in turnout in general. Latino organizations in Boston, such as AmplifyLatinx, have also been working to turn out Latinos for years now. But it is unclear just how much we could attribute to them specifically.

The final explanation lies in the specific dynamics of 2020, which may have enhanced interest in political participation. These are the devastation wrought from the pandemic, which must have made increased the stakes for all voters, including Latinos, and the Trump effect. The data seem to show that Donald Trump's unique brand of polarization had a turnout effect both among those who found him a menace (predominant in Massachusetts) and those who found hope in his message. Despite his loss, he has maintained relevance, and Republicans could conceivably nominate him again in 2024. If that is the case, the Trump effect may have an impact long after he is gone as the practice of voting becomes routine for Latinos now and in future generations.

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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 33th 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

Dr. Phillip Granberry worked with various community-based organizations assisting recently arrived U.S. immigrants before earning a Ph.D. in Public Policy from UMass 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.

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