

# The Strength of the Latino Vote: Current and Future Impact on the U.S. Political Landscape

In the 2016 presidential election, the number of Latino voters reached nearly 13 million nationwide, an increase of almost 13% over 2012, compared with a 3% increase and 4% decrease for White and African-American voters, respectively.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2040, Latinos will constitute almost a quarter of the total U.S. population, up from almost 18% today.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Latino vote will play an increasingly significant role in U.S. elections, including the upcoming 2018 midterms, and in local and state contests. In the now perennial battleground states of Nevada, Arizona, and Florida, the Latino population will grow at an even faster rate, with all three of these projected to become majority-minority states by 2028.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their record voting numbers in 2016, Latinos are still underrepresented in the electoral process. The limited investments in registering Latino citizens over age 18 have created a substantial opportunity gap. While more than 80% of Latinos who are registered to vote cast a ballot in presidential elections, there are more than 11 million eligible Latino citizens of voting-age who are not yet registered. Despite this fact, the resources spent during election cycles are rarely allocated to Latino voter registration. Additionally, research shows that contact rates from parties and campaigns are much lower, even among habitual Latino voters, than they are with other voting groups. In midterm elections, the impact of this registration gap and these lower contact rates on overall voter participation is exacerbated by

the voter drop-off that normally occurs among all voter groups between presidential and midterm elections, and which is slightly higher for Latino registered voters.

History shows that effective mobilization and investment in the Latino community can produce significant results in voter turnout. Thus, to achieve Latino voters' full potential, it is important to have a clear understanding of both the strengths and challenges of the Latino vote in the United States, particularly in a midterm election cycle.<sup>4</sup>

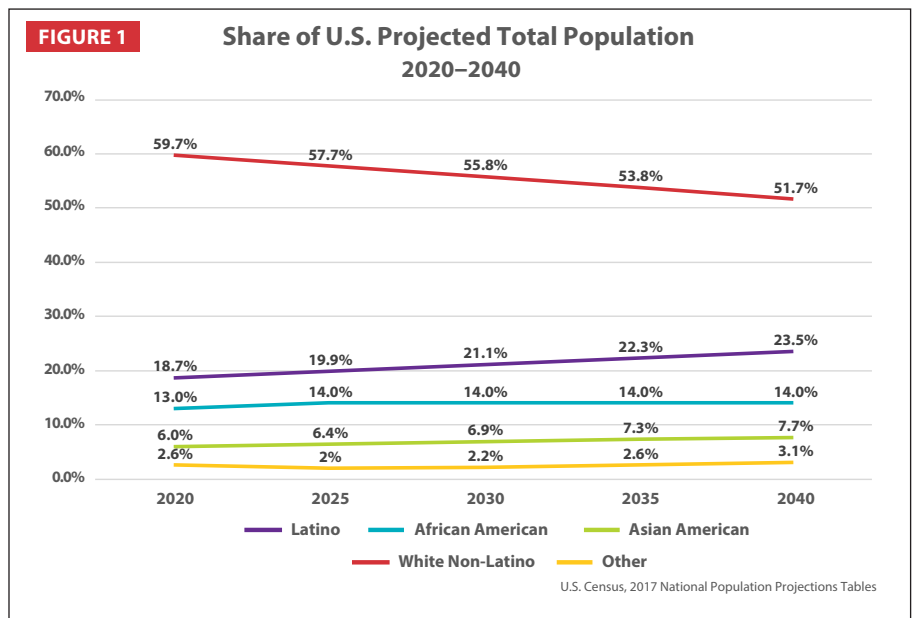
Many pundits and political operators continue to rely on a shallow understanding of the Latino electorate, and either act surprised when Latinos determine the outcome of an election, or ignore factors like lack of outreach and investment when these voters do not turn out. By continuing to misunderstand or undervalue this electorate, those who manage and advise political campaigns miss opportunities to register, engage, and persuade eligible Latino citizens to vote.

This research brief, the first in a series, provides an up-to-date profile of Latino voting power, using Current Population Survey data to examine current and past voting trends. Future briefs in this series will offer a detailed look at the Latino vote across the United States, including its variations, geographic hot spots, and areas of greatest potential growth.

## The Growing U.S. Latino Population

Latinos are a sizable and growing part of the U.S. landscape. Since 2000, the Latino population has increased 63%, while accounting for 47% of the nation's total population growth.<sup>5</sup> At 57.4 million strong, Latinos currently make up 17.8% of the nation's total population. This means that nearly one in five Americans are Latino. This growth is expected to continue at a robust rate. Further, the Latino population is projected by the U.S. Census to increase 52.2% between 2015 and 2040, to 87.5 million. As seen in Figure 1, by 2040, Latinos are projected to be nearly a quarter of the total U.S. population.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to age, the Latino population remains relatively young, with a median age of 29, compared with 38 for the whole U.S. population. Latinos are the youngest major ethnic or racial group in the country, with 60% of the Latino population under age 35, and nearly one million Latino citizens turning 18 each year between now and 2028. Currently, eight out of ten Latinos, or 44.8 million, are U.S. citizens, of whom 27.3 million are over 18. Among Latinos under 18, as many as 95%, or 17.4 million, are citizens. Overall, Latinos now make up 11% of the nation's citizen voting-age population (CVAP).<sup>7</sup>



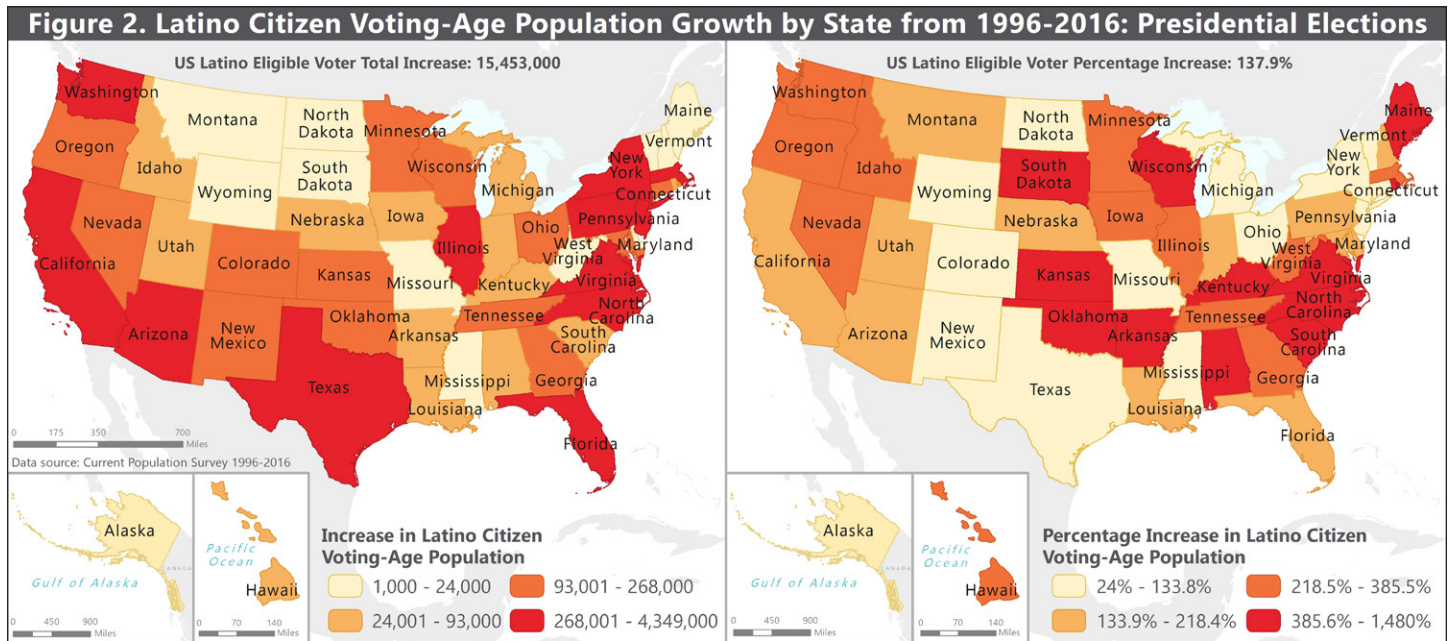
## The Rate of Growth of the Latino Electorate Is Outpacing that of Whites and African Americans

Table 1: Voting-Age Population Growth: 1996-2016					
	Latino	White Non-Latino	African American	Asian American	Total
Citizen Voting-Age Population	137.9%	8.9%	34.1%	155.9%	24.5%
Registered Population	132.3%	3.5%	40.1%	198.6%	23.4%
Voter Population	157.3%	10.6%	50.4%	294.7%	31.0%

Current Population Survey, 1996-2016

Table 1 shows that the growth rate of the Latino CVAP, including both those registered and those voting, has greatly outpaced the growth of both the White and African-American CVAPs—137.9% compared to 8.9% and 34.1%, respectively. Notably, the rate of growth in the number of Latinos actually casting ballots was larger than the rate of growth of Latino citizens of voting age. In the last two decades, the number of Latinos voting has grown 157.3%, or by 7.8 million voters (registration grew by 132.3%, or 8.7 million). Asian Americans have seen a larger rate of voter growth, though their growth in actual numbers is much smaller (see endnotes for limitations of CPS voter data).<sup>8</sup>

### Latino Population Growth in Every State



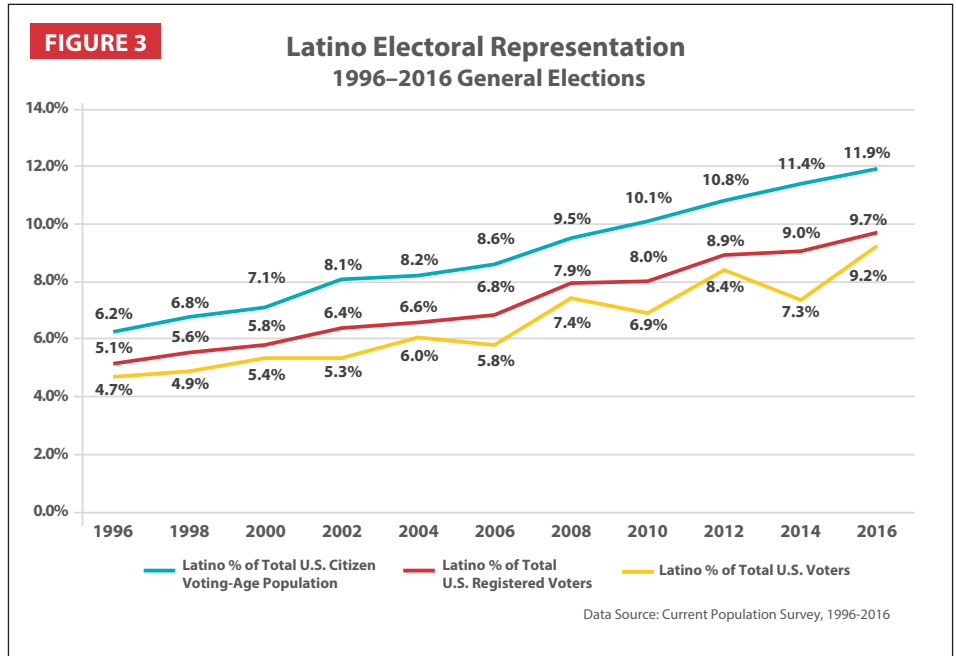
Over half the total U.S. Latino CVAP currently resides in California, Texas, and Florida. However, over the past two decades, every state in the nation has seen positive growth in the number of Latinos who are eligible to register and vote. While states with the largest Latino populations have experienced significant growth in the number of Latinos, the largest percent change in growth has been seen in states with small to medium-size Latino populations, such as Kentucky and Maine, with 1,480% and 700% growth, respectively, between 1996 and 2016. While these and other states have comparatively smaller populations of potential Latino voters, with many races being decided by razor-thin margins, Latino electoral participation in these states could have a significant impact.<sup>9</sup>

The term “citizen voting-age population” is commonly used to refer to people who are U.S. citizens and have reached the required voting age of 18. The term includes people who are not registered to vote. “Turnout of the citizen voting-age population” is defined as the percent of U.S. citizens 18 or over who voted.

## Latino Representation at the Polls

Over the last two decades, the growth in the Latino CVAP has been a key driver of the growth in Latinos’ share of the U.S. voting population. Figure 3 shows the fluctuation in the Latino percentage of the vote since 1996. The Latino share of U.S. voters has increased significantly—from 4.7% in 1996, to 9.2% in 2016. This increase represents 7.8 million more Latinos casting a ballot over this period.<sup>10</sup>

However, while overall registration and voting numbers continue to grow, the past two decades have also seen a widening gap in voter registration. In 1996, there were 4.6 million Latinos not yet registered; in 2016 that number reached 11.4 million. This means that Latino electoral representation is not keeping pace with the overall growth of the Latino CVAP.<sup>11</sup>



## Latino Participation: Midterms vs. Presidential Elections

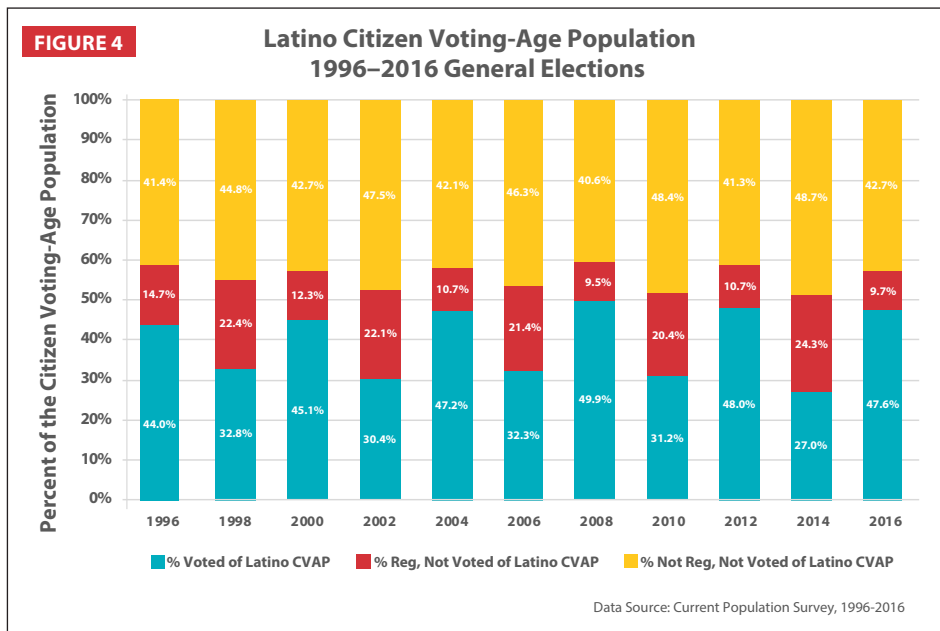


Figure 4 shows registration and voting rates for the Latino CVAP in each general election since 1996. In every election during this period, at least 40% of Latinos who were eligible to vote were not registered, and thus could not vote.<sup>12</sup>

While there are significant fluctuations in voter participation between presidential and midterm elections, one thing is clear: in recent years, there has been a concerning decrease in voter participation for all voting groups, regardless of whether the election is a presidential one.

In 2014, for example, midterm CVAP voting participation decreased significantly from the previous presidential election in 2012 for White, Black, and Latino voters.

Over the past two decades, the turnout rate of Latino citizens of voting age—a segment that includes those not registered to vote—has been significantly lower than that of White and African-American voters. However, if one looks at the turnout rate of Latinos who are registered to vote, their participation in presidential election cycles is close to that of registered voters in other groups, or upwards of 80%. Similarly, in 2016, the Latino share of total votes cast nationwide was very close to the Latino share of the U.S. registered voter population—9.2% and 9.7%, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

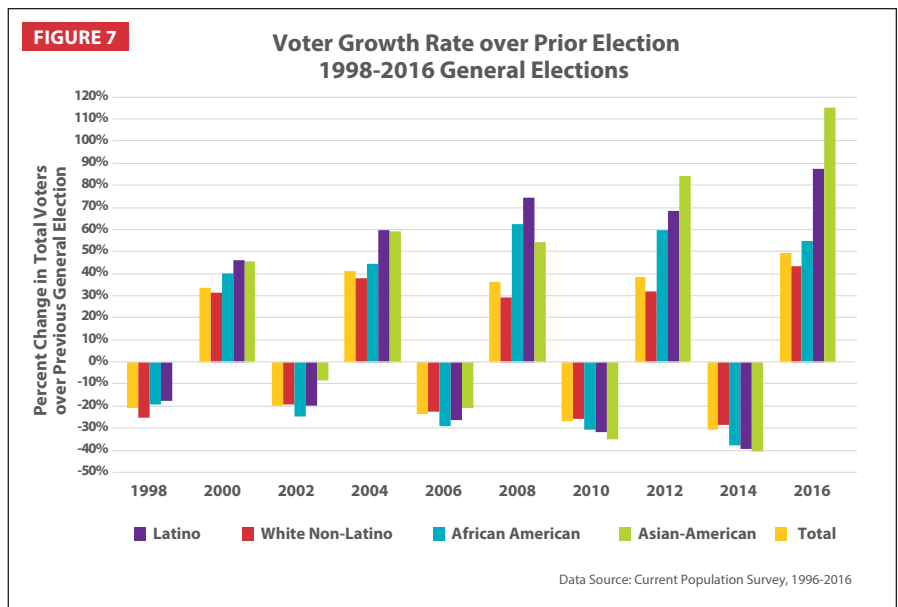
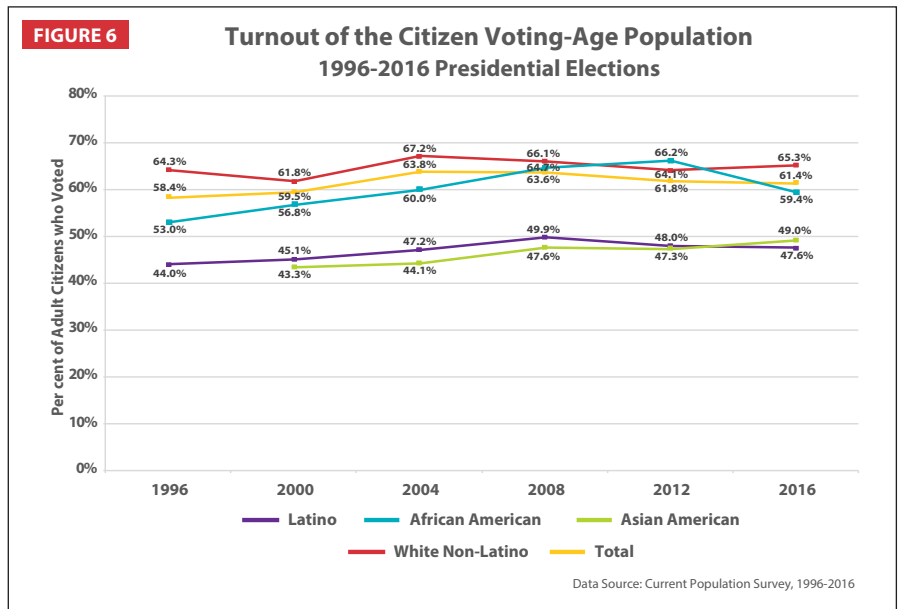
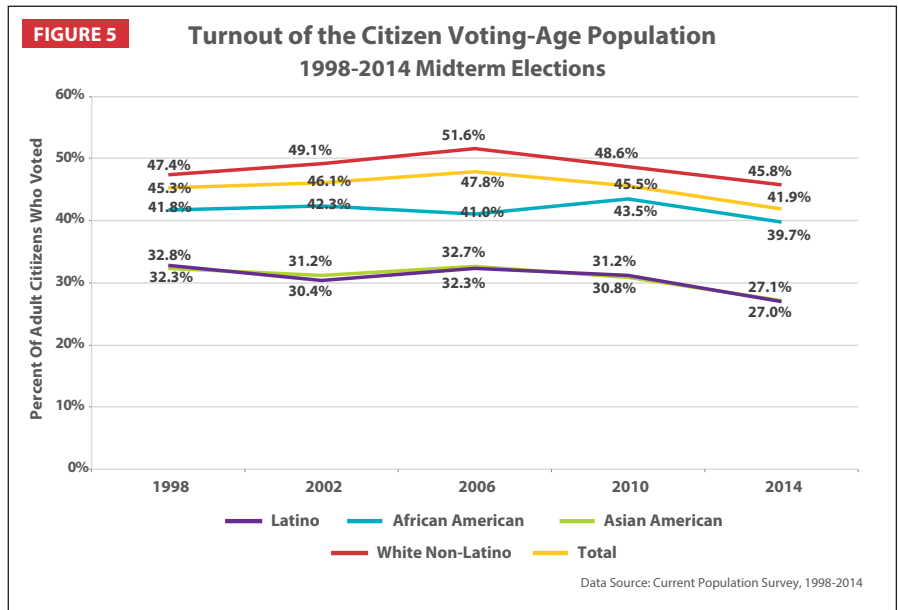
The participation gap (the difference between the number of those registered, and the number of those who cast ballots in an election) between Latinos and other groups deepens in midterm elections. Figure 5 shows the change in turnout for the CVAP in midterm elections, and Figure 6 in presidential elections. Since 1996, turnout for Latino citizens of voting age during midterm elections was 11 to 21 percentage points lower than Latino turnout during presidential elections, with the largest drop-off in the number of voters occurring between the 2012 and 2014 elections. In Figure 7, we can see the change in the absolute number of voters from one general election to another, starting with a midterm election and going on to a presidential one. Notably, among only registered voters, the drop-off in Latino turnout was slightly higher, in some cycles, than the drop-off in CVAP turnout.<sup>14</sup>

Overall, the lower rates of voter registration for Latinos demonstrate that voter registration efforts remain essential in future elections. More intense outreach, particularly during midterm elections, is key to encouraging more of those voting in presidential elections to also vote in midterm elections.

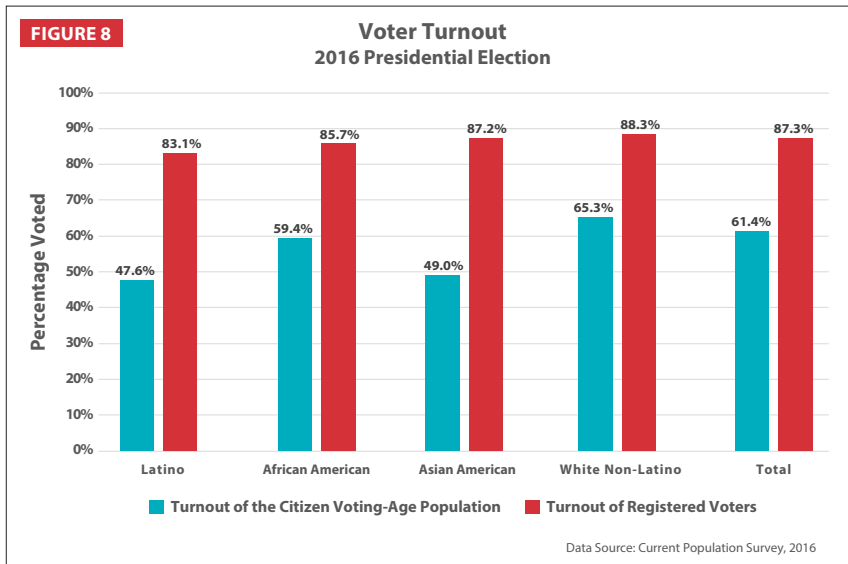
### The Future Latino Vote

Demographics are a driving force in changing voting patterns for Latinos. Even if current turnout rates for the CVAP stay the same going forward, the Latino share of the U.S. vote will continue to grow. According to U.S. population projections by the Pew Research Center, the total U.S. CVAP is projected to increase 19% between 2012 and 2030. The Latino CVAP is projected to increase 67%. Latinos will drive 39% of the nation's total CVAP growth (16 million). By 2030, Latinos are projected to make up 15.6% of the nation's CVAP.<sup>15</sup>

Given these population projections, our analysis suggests that if Latinos were to keep their 2016 turnout rate for the CVAP of 48.0% constant through 2032, then the Latino percentage of the nation's vote would rise to 12.4%, up from 9.2% in the 2016 general election. If naturalization and registration rates continue apace, and voter gaps are reduced, then the Latino share of the vote will further increase.



## Understanding the 2016 Latino Vote



Voter turnout of Latino registered voters is much higher than the turnout of the larger Latino CVAP (including those who do not register). Registered Latinos turn out to vote at rates on par with their peers in other ethnic or racial groups who are registered.

Figure 8 shows that the percentage of Latino citizens of voting age turning out to vote in the 2016 general election was lower than it was for other groups, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and White non-Latinos.

The 2016 general election saw turnout for citizen voting-age Latinos nationwide stay essentially flat compared to 2012 (48.0% vs. 47.6%) but the gap compared to White voters narrowed (from a 17.7% gap in 2012 to a 16.0% Latino-White voter turnout

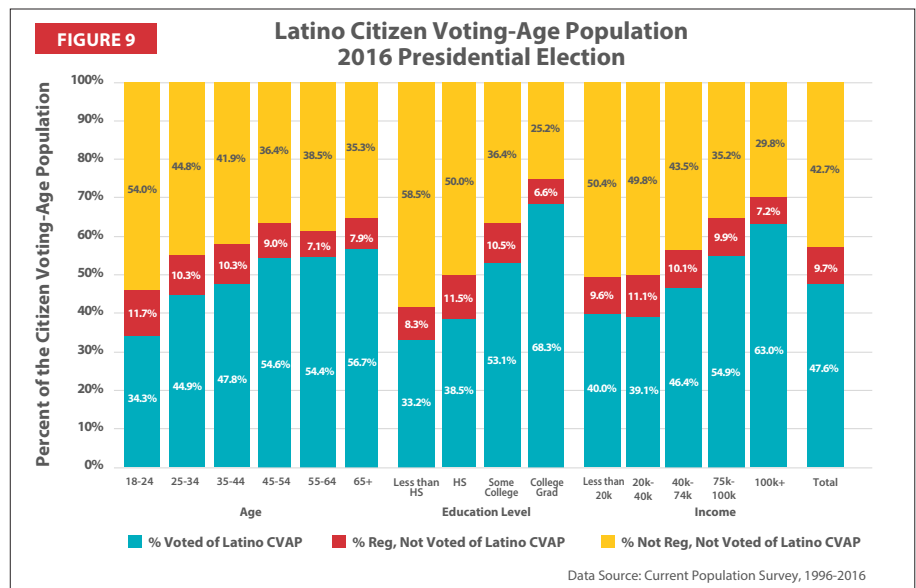
gap in 2016). Meanwhile, the gap in the 2016 turnout rate for the CVAP between Latinos and African Americans was smaller, at 12 percentage points. The size of the Latino-African-American voter turnout gap was similar in 2012.<sup>16</sup>

When we look at turnout of only registered voters in Figure 8, we see a different story. In 2016, the turnout rates of Latinos registered to vote were close to the registered turnout rates for other racial and ethnic groups. In 2016, 83.1% of Latinos registered to vote turned out at the polls. This was on par with percentages for other groups, for example, in 2016 there was a five percentage point gap between the registered voter turnout of Whites and Latinos. The gap between the registered voter turnout of Latinos and African Americans was even smaller, at about 2.5%.

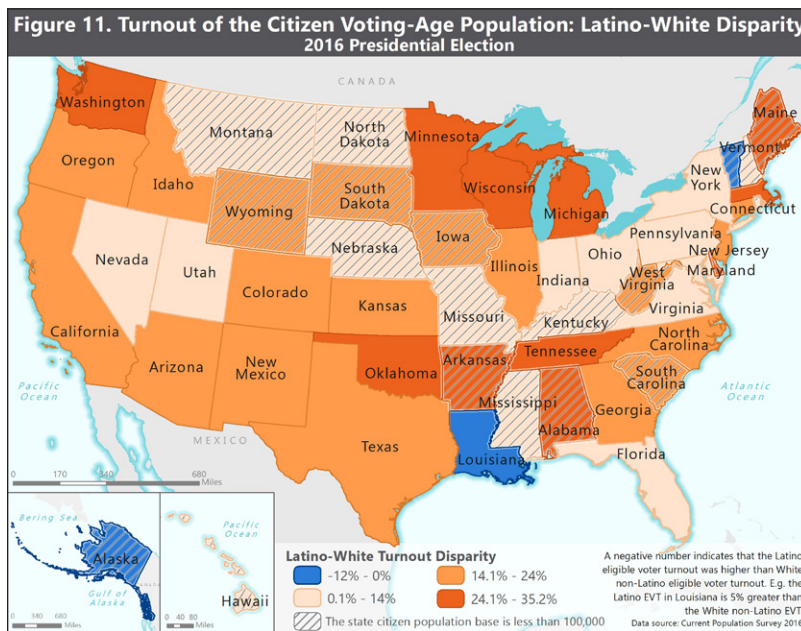
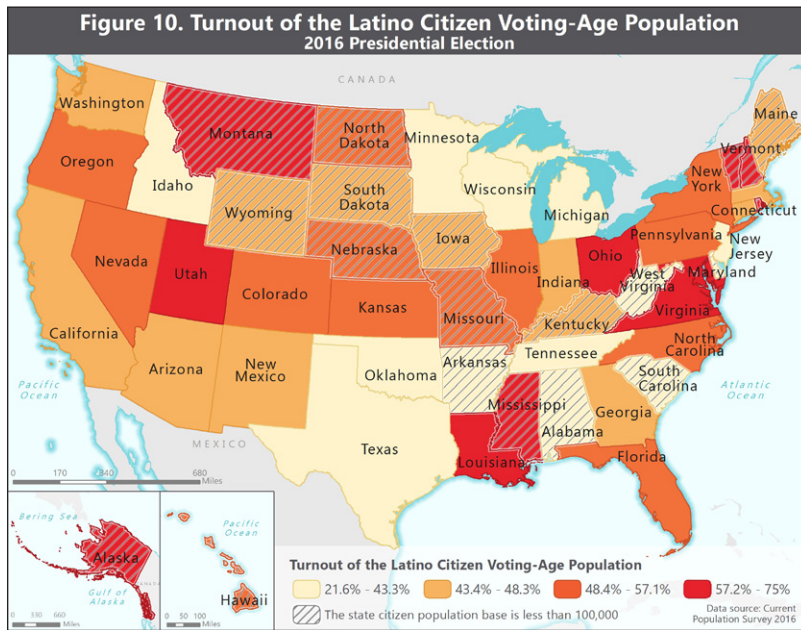
## Areas of Greatest Potential Voter Growth

Voting participation rates for the young, those who have less education, and those who are of lower income, are low across all racial and ethnic groups. Turnout data confirm the urgent need to register and turn out these segments of the population. In Figure 9, we see the level of Latino participation in the 2016 election by these demographic groups. Latino groups who were college-educated, had a household income of over \$75,000 a year, and were 45 years of age or older, had higher citizen voting-age turnout than Latinos as a whole. These groups have been driving Latino turnout upward.<sup>17</sup>

However, most Latino voters are young. In 2016, just over half were under age 45, while nearly 14% were ages 18-24. But Latino youth voters demonstrated much lower turnout rates for their CVAP than older Latinos did. Latinos under age 25, Latinos who did not receive a high school diploma, and Latinos who earned less than \$20,000 a year, all had the greatest unmet voting potential, with citizen voting-age turnout rates of 34.3%, 33.2% and 40%, respectively for each group. Indeed, in 2016, a full 54% of Latino youth, 58.5% of Latinos who did not receive a high school diploma, and 50.4% of Latinos who earned less than \$20,000 a year, were not registered, and thus could not vote. Further, an additional 7-12% of the Latino CVAP was registered but did not make it to the polls. This demonstrates another significant opportunity gap experienced by Latinos. Strategic investment in outreach and mobilization of non-voters in these groups could thus yield important gains. In particular, the data underline the urgency of registering more Latino youth, and encouraging them to turn out at the polls.



## The Strength of the 2016 Latino Vote by State



### Action Steps

Latinos are the second-largest racial or ethnic group in the United States, and comprise the largest share of the nation’s future population growth. The Latino community is a rising force in the nation’s political landscape, with its large number of voters, as well as its growing number of potential voters ready to be mobilized. But, there is still a great deal of unmet potential in the Latino electorate. Sufficient investments must be made to close registration gaps and mobilize new and low-propensity voters. In midterm elections, especially, efforts must be made to intensify contact with Latino voters to prevent a drop-off in their participation rates from presidential election levels.

Which geographic areas will be hot spots for Latino turnout? Which areas are likely to buck national and state trends, delivering higher-than-expected Latino turnout? In our next brief in this series, we will take a deep dive into the composition of the Latino vote at the state and congressional district levels, identifying areas of electoral strength for Latino demographic groups within these geographies. We will also highlight the congressional districts where Latinos can and do play a significant role in electoral races. A better understanding of current and historical Latino voter trends can inform both expectations and strategy in mobilizing the Latino vote for an even stronger representation in the 2018 and 2020 elections.

As in past elections, voting patterns in 2016 for Latinos showed significant variation across states, with participation rates for the CVAP ranging from 21.6% in Tennessee, to 75% in Vermont. Of the top quarter of states in terms of turnout of the Latino CVAP, only one state, Rhode Island, had a Latino CVAP of more than 10%. Figure 10 shows that, of the three states with the largest Latino CVAPs, California and Texas were in the bottom half in terms of state turnout rates for Latino citizens of voting age, at 47.5% and 40.5%, respectively. Florida was in the top half, with a much higher Latino turnout rate of 54.1%. Still, it should be noted that this turnout rate denotes a significant decline for Florida Latinos, down eight percentage points over 2012 (62.2%). In contrast, California Latinos experienced a small decrease of one percentage point over 2012, while Texas saw a small increase of nearly two percentage points.<sup>18</sup>

Figure 11 shows the difference between each state’s turnout of their Latino and White non-Latino CVAPs. In 2016, the disparity between these two turnout rates varied considerably from state to state. Latino turnout was lower than White non-Latino turnout in nearly every state. However, the Latino-White voting gap was much smaller, i.e., less than ten percentage points, in 11 states. And in three states, Alaska, Louisiana, and Vermont, Latinos achieved a higher turnout than White non-Latinos (see endnotes for the limitations of turnout data from small Latino population states such as Alaska and Vermont).<sup>19</sup>

If mobilized, the absolute numbers of Latinos who are eligible to vote but are not yet voting could easily help decide races in many states. Data from the 2016 presidential race reveals that in nine out of the ten states with the closest vote margins, the size of the Latino CVAP that did not vote was larger than the vote margin between the top two presidential candidates.<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

1. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey (CPS), November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 2012, 2016. See: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>. In 1996, data reported by the CPS for the White population included figures for Asian Americans, as well as Latinos. Latino data alone was also reported. Many types of data for Asian Americans were not available from the CPS until 1998. Consequently, the White percent of the vote is somewhat inflated for the election years of 1980 through 1996.  
  
CPS data is the most utilized estimate of voter turnout in the U.S., aside from state voter records (which do not provide demographic identification). However, CPS data can be problematic because of the overreporting (and occasional underreporting, by some groups) inherent in survey data involving self-reported rates of turnout, and also due to its methodology in treating non-responses. These issues often produce higher state turnout rates than those reported by state voter records, and the findings are not comparable to turnout findings utilizing state voter records. When comparing voter turnout across states and by demographic group, CPS voter data has the most consistent data collection methods and is the most reliable source available for historical analyses. For more information on CPS methodology, see: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/technical-documentation/complete.html>. For more information on the CPS's overreporting bias, see: <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/cps-methodology>. For an analysis of CPS data corrected for overreporting bias, see the United States Elections Project: <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/cps-methodology/>.
2. CCEP analysis of U.S. Census 2017 National Population Projections Tables. See: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/popproj/2017-summary-tables.html>.
3. Ruy Teixeira, William H. Frey, and Rob Griffin, "The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1974–2060," States of Change, Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015. See: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2015/02/24/107261/states-of-change/>.
4. Lisa Garcia Bedolla, Donald P. Green, and Melissa R. Michelson, "New Experiments in Minority Voter Mobilization: Second in a Series of Reports on the California Votes Initiative," Issue Lab, The James Irvine Foundation, September 1, 2008. See: <https://www.issuelab.org/resource/new-experiments-in-minority-voter-mobilization-second-in-a-series-of-reports-on-the-california-votes-initiative.html>.
5. CCEP analysis of U.S. Census Population Data (2000), and American Community Survey 2016, 1-Year Estimates.
6. CCEP analysis of U.S. Census 2017 National Population Projections Tables. See: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/popproj/2017-summary-tables.html>
7. Eileen Patten, "The Nation's Latino Population is Defined by its Youth," Pew Research Center, Hispanic Trends, April 20, 2016, last retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2016/04/20/the-nations-latino-population-is-defined-by-its-youth/>. CCEP analysis of American Community Survey 2016, 1-Year Estimates.
8. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 1996-2016 General Election. The term African American is utilized in this brief to include individuals who have reported their race as Black or African-American based on available U.S. Census classifications. See note #1 for limitations of CPS voter data
9. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 1996-2016 General Election.
10. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 1996-2016 General Election.
11. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 1996-2016 General Election.
12. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 1996-2016 General Election.
13. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 1996-2016 General Election.
14. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 1996-2016 General Election.
15. Our 2032 U.S. voter projections utilized U.S. population projections created by the Pew Research Center. These population projections were generated in 2008 and, thus, their assumptions may not reflect currently held expectations regarding changes in the size of foreign-born and immigrant populations. For more information on methodology, see Paul Taylor, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, Jeffrey S. Passel, and Mark Hugo Lopez (2012), "An Awakened Giant. The Hispanic Electorate is Likely to Double by 2030," at <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/11/14/an-awakened-giant-the-hispanic-electorate-is-likely-to-double-by-2030/>.
16. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 2012, 2016. See: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>.
17. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 2016. See: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>.
18. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 2016. See: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>.
19. CCEP analysis of Current Population Survey, November Supplement on Voting and Registration: 2016. See: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>. The crosshatch symbol in Figure 10 and Figure 11 indicates that, according to the Current Population Survey, the citizen population base in that state is less than 100,000. The Census considers this population base too small to show the derived measure of turnout of the citizen voting-age population.
20. The results provided for presidential elections by congressional district are from Daily Kos Elections, and exclude write-ins. See: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1oRl7vxEJUUDWJcyrjo62cELJD2ONIVl-D9TSUKiK9jk/edit#gid=1178631925>.

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### About the California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP)

The California Civic Engagement Project (CCEP) is part of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy in Sacramento. The CCEP conducts research to inform policy and on-the-ground efforts for a more engaged and representative democracy, improving the social and economic quality of life in communities. The CCEP is engaging in pioneering research to identify disparities in civic participation across place and population. Its research informs and empowers a wide range of policy and organizing efforts aimed at reducing disparities in state and regional patterns of well-being and opportunity. Key audiences include public officials, advocacy groups, media and communities themselves. To learn about the CCEP's national advisory committee, or review the extensive coverage of the CCEP's work in the national and California media, visit our website at <http://ccep.usc.edu>

### About Unidos US

UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels. For 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our country stronger. For more information on UnidosUS, visit [www.unidosus.org](http://www.unidosus.org) or follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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