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Laird W. Bergad

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Latino Voter Registration and Participation Rates in the November 2016 Presidential Election

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The Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies is a research institute that works for the advancement of the study of Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States in the doctoral programs at the CUNY Graduate Center. One of its major priorities is to provide funding and research opportunities to Latino students at the Ph.D. level.

The Center established and helps administer an interdisciplinary specialization in Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies in the Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies program.

The Latino Data Project was developed with the goal of making information available on the dynamically growing Latino population of the United States and especially New York City through the analysis of extant data available from a variety of sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Institute for Health, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and state and local-level data sources.

All Latino Data Project reports are available at <http://clacls.gc.cuny.edu>

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary5

The Dynamic Expansion of the Latino Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters, 1992 - 20166

Stagnation of Registration and Voting Rates7

Latinos as Percentages of Total U.S. Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters 1992 - 2016 11

Latino Voter Registration and Participation Rates by Age Categories and Sex 12

Nativity and Voter Registration and Participation 14

Why have Latinos Consistently Abstained from Registering and Voting? Voter Registration and Participation by Educational Attainment Levels 14

The Challenge..... 17

Guide to Figures

Figure 1. The Latino Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016..... 7

Figure 2. Latino Registered Voters as a Percentage of all Eligible Latino Voters (the Electorate) Presidential Elections, 1992 - 20168

Figure 3. Latino Total Voters as a Percentage of all Eligible Latino Voters (the Electorate) Presidential Elections, 1992 - 20169

Figure 4. Latino Voters as a Percentage of all Registered Latino Voters Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016..... 10

Figure 5. Percentage of Electorate Registered and Voted by Race/Ethnicity Presidential Elections, 2016 10

Figure 6. The Latinos as a Percentage of the total U.S. Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016 11

Figure 7. Latino Voter Registration Rates by Age and Sex, Presidential Election 2016 13

Figure 8. Latino Voter Participation Rates by Age and Sex, Presidential Election 2016 13

Figure 9. Latino Voter Registration and Participation Rates by Nativity, Presidential Election 2016 14

Figure 10. Overall Voter Registration and Participation Rates by Educational Attainment
 Presidential Election 2016 15

Figure 11. Educational Attainment Rates among Citizens 18 Years of Age and Older by
 Race/Ethnicity in the U.S. 2015..... 17

Guide to Tables

Table 1. Age Structure of Latino Electorate, 2015..... 12

Table 2. Educational Attainment Levels Among Citizens 18 Years of Age and Older by Race/
 Ethnic Group, 2015 16

Executive Summary

The Latino electorate, citizens 18 years of age and older, has increased impressively between 1992 when it stood at approximately 8.8 million eligible voters and 2016 when there were 26.6 million eligible Latino voters.

Yet, in every presidential election from 1992 through 2016 about 47% to 48% of all potential Latino voters actually went to the polls.

Although, Latinos have increased as a percentage of all voters from 3.7% of the total U.S. voting population in 1992 to 9.2% in 2016, Latinos do not exercise their potential political power because of comparatively low voter registration and participation rates.

That only 47% of eligible Latinos voted in November 2016 is puzzling because of the well-known vicious and racist attack on Latino communities which was central to the Republican candidate's electoral campaign.

Despite the general and repeated denigration of Latinos during the campaign, there was no reaction among Latino voters at the national level who did not increase their historically low registration and participation rates. In fact, these rates were lower in 2016 than in the 2012 presidential election.

The principal problem was not voter turnout. It is that Latinos register to vote at significantly lower rates than the other major U.S. race/ethnic groups. Between the 1992 and 2016 presidential elections the voter registration rate among eligible Latino voters has remained absolutely unchanged at about 57% to 58%, despite well publicized voter-registration drives. By way of comparison about 74% of non-Hispanic white and 69% of black potential voters registered to vote in the 2016 presidential election.

Once registered, Latinos do in fact vote at high rates. In the 2016 presidential elections about 83% of registered Latino voters went to the polls. Thus, the central problem facing Latino political, civic, religious, and other organizations is not a traditional 'get out the vote' campaign, which is always important on election day, but rather the challenge of increasing the Latino voter registration rate beyond the 57%/58% level which has remained unchanged between 1992 and 2016.

The reasons for these low Latino voter registration rates are difficult to analyze using strictly quantitative data. Yet three factors stand out. The first is the age structure of the electorate. About 61% of the Latino electorate was found in two age categories in 2016: 18 - 24 year olds and those between the ages of 25 and 44. These age cohorts had lower registration rates compared with older Latinos. Additionally, Latino men in these age categories registered at significantly lower rates than Latinas.

The second issue is related to nativity. About 74% of eligible Latino voters were born in the United States and they had significantly lower voter participation rates at 45.5% than naturalized Latino citizens in November 2016. About 53% of naturalized Latino citizens voted in 2016, but they comprised about 26% of the Latino electorate.

The most important quantitative variable, however, was educational attainment. Data for the entire electorate are available and indicate very graphically that potential voters with lower educational attainment levels register and vote at significantly lower rates than those with higher educational attainment. The Latino electorate had the poorest educational attainment levels of any race/ethnic group in the U.S.

Only 32% of eligible voters with less than a 9th grade education voted in November 2016. An astounding 40% of eligible Latino voters had not completed the 9th grade compared with 25% of non-Hispanic blacks, 23% of Asians, and 18% of non-Hispanic Whites.

Only 35% of those who had completed 9th grade but had not graduated high school voted. Another 12% of the Latino electorate was in this category. Thus 52% of all eligible Latino voters had not completed high school compared with 35% of non-Hispanic blacks, 29% of Asians, and 25% of non-Hispanic whites. Clearly Latino potential voters were concentrated in both the lowest educational attainment levels which were also those with the worst records of voter registration and voting.

Potential voters who had graduated college had a 74% voting rate and those with an advanced degree voted at 80% of their total. Latinos with a B.A. degree or higher comprised only 9% of the Latino electorate compared with 14% of non-Hispanic blacks who had graduated college among the non-Hispanic black electorate, 39% of Asians, and 26% of non-Hispanic whites.

The challenge for the future among Latino civic, political, religious and other organizations who seek to register Latino voters is clear. They somehow must convince poorly educated Latinos that voting is important and that abstention can have drastic consequences. This is a very difficult proposition given a seemingly long record of low voter registration and turnout among potential Latino voters.

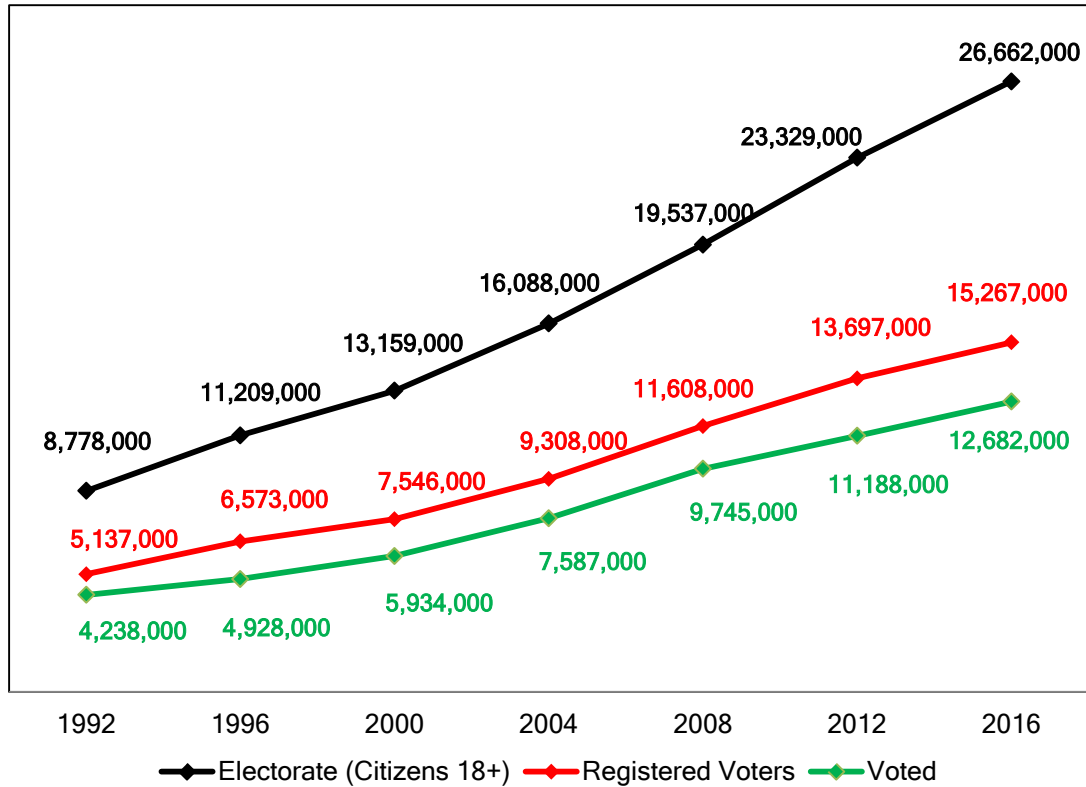
The Dynamic Expansion of the Latino Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters, 1992 - 2016

The Latino electorate, citizens 18 years of age and older, increased from approximately 8,778,000 potential voters in 1992 to 26,662,000 eligible voters in 2016.¹

Latinos who were registered to vote rose from 5,137,000 in 1992 to 15,267,000 in 2016. Latinos who actually voted in presidential elections increased from about 4,238,000 in 1992 to 12,682,000 in 2016. (See figure 1).

¹ These data are based on the data presented by the U.S. Census Bureau for each presidential election and accessible on the Bureau's Voting and Registration web site at <https://www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/voting/data/tables.html>. The 2016 data, released on May 11, 2017 are based on samples with a 1.5% margin of error for registered voters and the same margin of error for those who actually voted. All demographic data in this report were based on an analysis of the 2015 American Community Survey 1-Year Sample released by IPUMS USA. Steven Ruggles, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015. <http://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V6.0>.

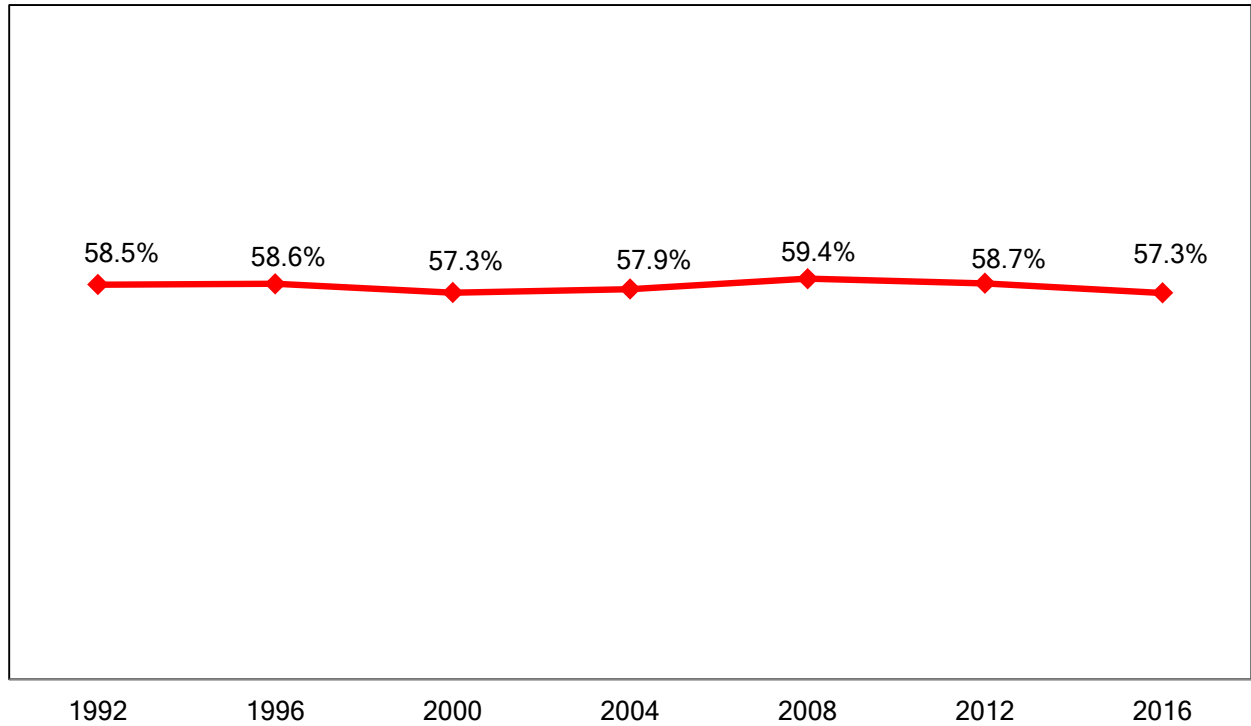
Figure 1
The Latino Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters
Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016



Stagnation of Registration and Voting Rates

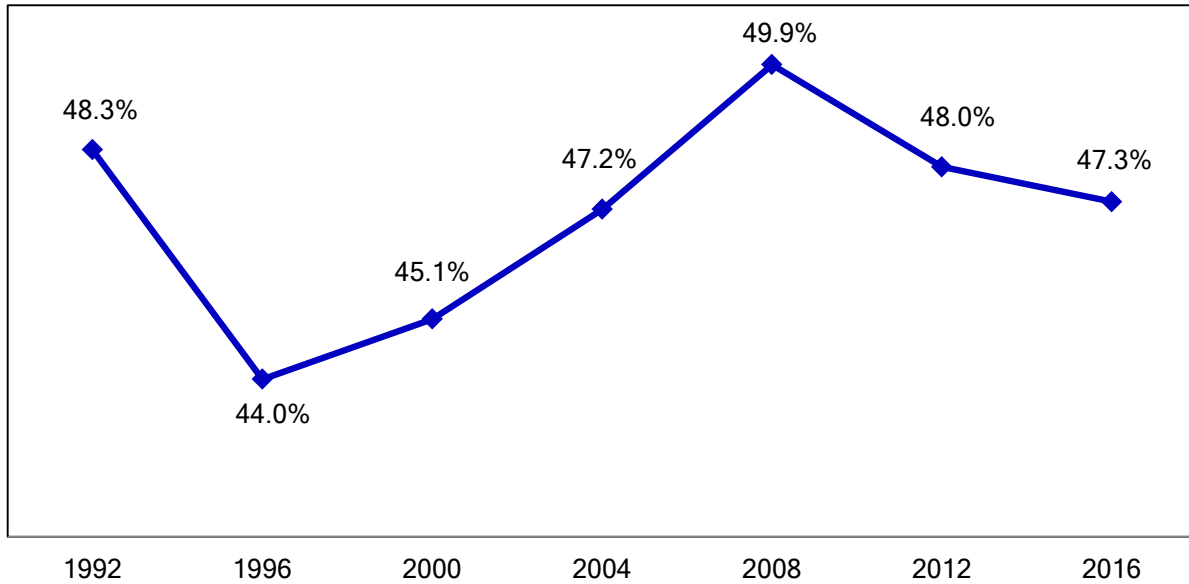
Yet, despite the fact that the absolute number of Latinos eligible to vote, registered, and who actually voted grew dramatically, the rate of Latino voter registration was slightly lower in 2016 at 57.3% than 1992 when this rate was 58.5%. Although the Republican candidate who went on to win the election in November 2016 launched a massive verbal assault on Latino communities in the United States by characterizing undocumented Latinos as criminals, and worse, Latinos in the United States who were eligible to vote did not register in the presidential election in any greater percentages than in the previous six presidential elections. This must also be placed within the context of well-publicized voter registration campaigns in Latino communities throughout the United States, which apparently had limited or no success whatsoever. (See figure 2).

Figure 2
 Latino Registered Voters as a Percentage of all Eligible Latino Voters (the Electorate)
 Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016



Because of this relatively low registration rate, the percentage of eligible Latinos voting in presidential elections also remained completely stagnant between 1992 and 2016. Some 48.3% of the Latino electorate, citizens 18 years of age and older, voted in 1992 and although these participation rates fluctuated from election to election, in 2016 they were below the 1992 level at 47.3%. This was lower than in the two elections of 2008 and 2012 in which Barack Obama won the White House. (See figure 3). In critical states which swayed the election toward the Republican candidate in 2016, the failure of Latinos to turn out and vote was instrumental in determining state outcomes and these will be considered in a subsequent report.

Figure 3
 Latino Total Voters as a Percentage of all Eligible Latino Voters (the Electorate)
 Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016



However, once registered to vote, Latinos turned out at the polls at fairly high rates: 82.5% in 1992 and 83.1% in 2016. (See figure 4).

Compared with registration rates of the largest voting blocks in 2016, non-Hispanic whites (74%) and non-Hispanic blacks (69%) the Latino registration rate at 57.3% was dismally low.

About 65% of all eligible non-Hispanic white voters and 59% of the non-Hispanic black electorate actually voted in the 2016 presidential election compared with only 47% of the Latino electorate. It is critical to note that the non-Hispanic black voter participation rate fell dramatically from 66.2% of eligible voters in 2012, a decline of nearly 7% in the nominal turnout rate and that this was a major factor in swinging the election to the Republican candidate. Non-Hispanic white voters increased their participation rate by only 1% point, as it was 64% in 2012.

The combination of lower voter turnout among non-Hispanic black voters in 2016 who overwhelmingly voted Democratic, and the historically low voter turnout among the Latino electorate, were the most critical factors accounting for the Republican victory in November 2016. This observation is from a strictly quantitative perspective and does not factor in the underlying subjective considerations which may explain why a particular race/ethnic group exhibited particular registration and voter turnout patterns.

However, had Latino registration rates been higher, the overall impact of Latinos in the national election could have been decisive. This is because over 83% of registered Latinos actually voted in the 2016 presidential elections as indicated previously. Although this rate was lower than non-Hispanic whites and blacks, even at an 83% of registered voter turnout, had registration rates been

higher Latinos would have exercised a great degree of political influence on the 2016 election. (See figure 5).

Figure 4
 Latino Voters as a Percentage of all Registered Latino Voters
 Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016

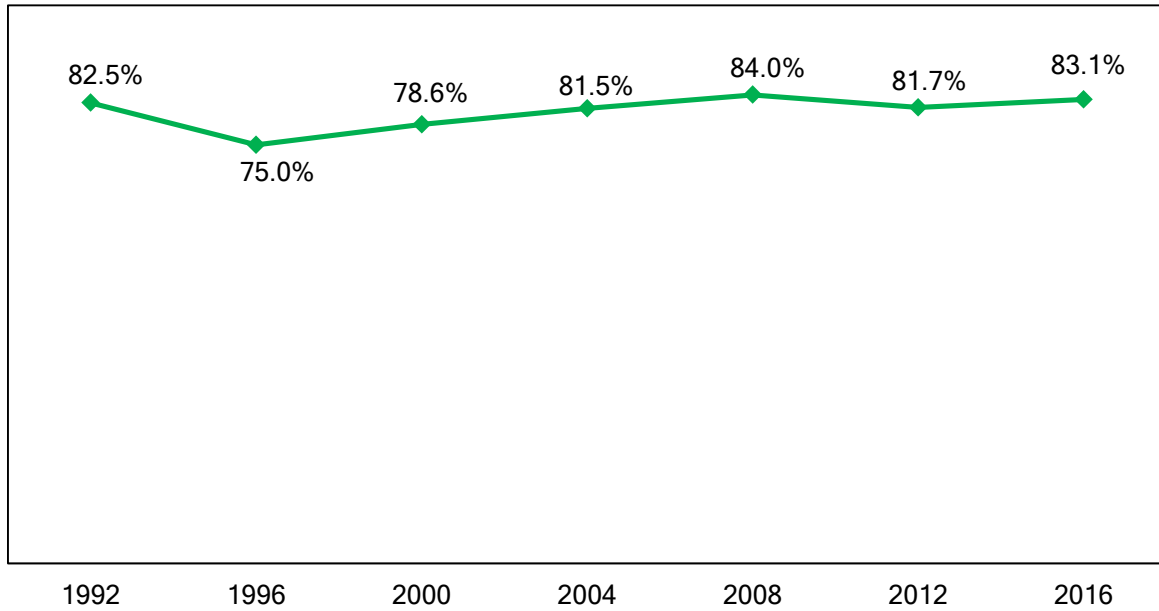
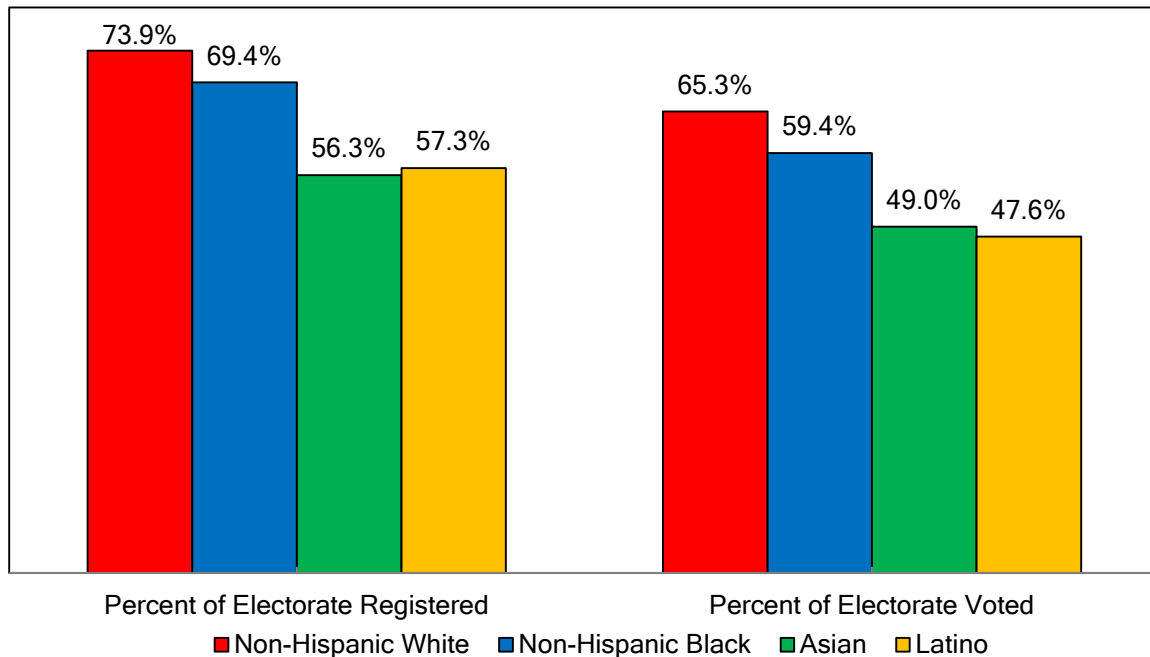


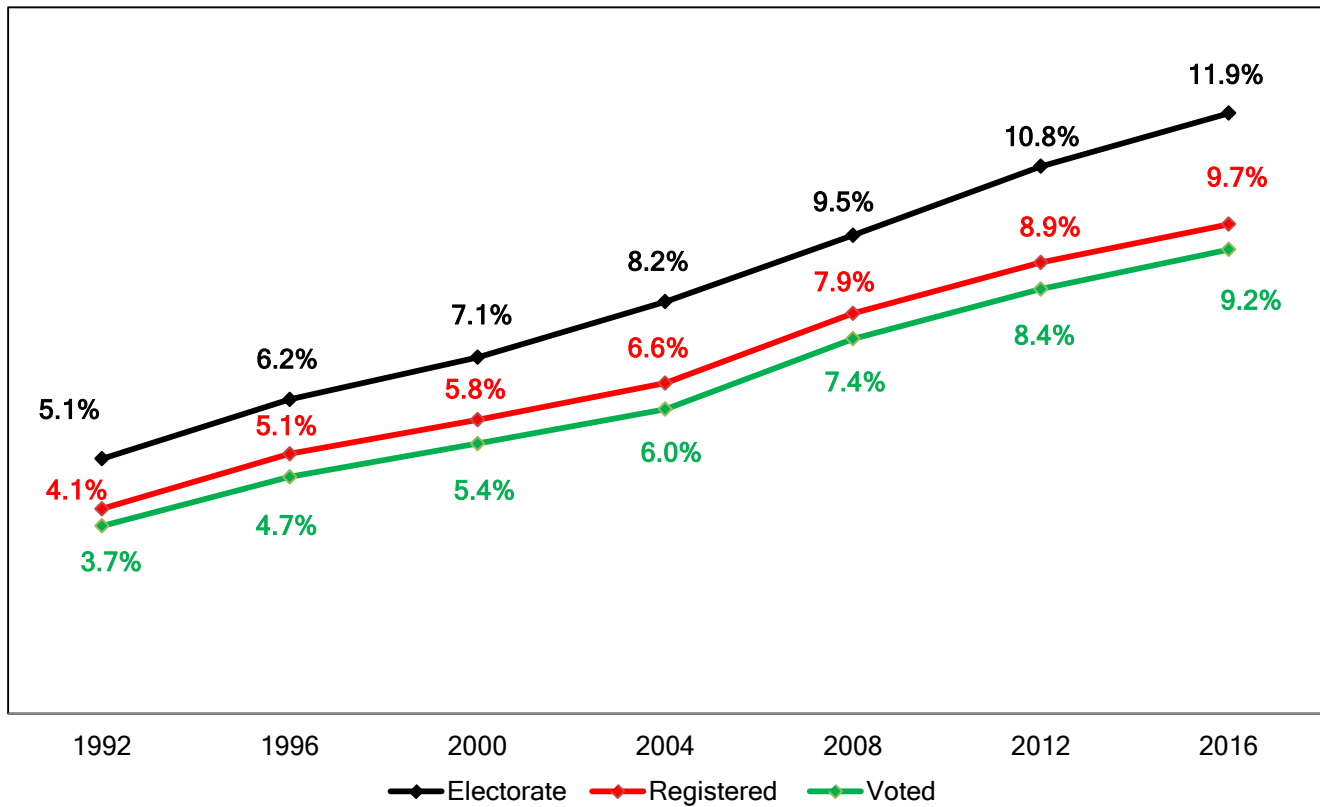
Figure 5
 Percentage of Electorate Registered and Voted by Race/Ethnicity
 Presidential Election, 2016



Latinos as Percentages of Total U.S. Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters 1992 - 2016

In 1992 Latinos who were eligible to vote comprised only 5.1% of the U.S. electorate. By the presidential elections of 2016 they were 11.9% of all eligible voters. In 1992 Latinos were only 4.1% of all registered voters and 9.7% of total registered voters in the 2016 presidential election. In 1992 Latinos were 3.7% of all those casting ballots in the presidential election. This increased to 9.2% in 2016. (See figure 6). It is clear that if registration rates were higher Latinos could exert much more influence in presidential and other elections.

Figure 6
The Latinos as a Percentage of the total U.S. Electorate, Registered Voters, and Voters Presidential Elections, 1992 - 2016



Latino Voter Registration and Participation Rates by Age Categories and Sex

One of the issues with respect to Latino voter registration and participation rates revolves around the age structure of the electorate. Latino voters are very young with about 61.3% of all potential voters falling between 18 and 44 years of age according to 2015 data released by the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey. About 21% were between 18 and 24 years of age. (See table 1).

In the 2016 presidential elections both registration and voting rates were significantly lower in the 18 - 24 and 25 - 44 year-old age categories than among older voters as indicated in figures 7 and 8. The overall Latino voter registration rate in 2016 was about 57% but only 46% of Latinos ages 18-24 were registered and only 34.3% of the total Latino 18-24 year old electorate voted. Male Latinos between 18 and 24 years of age had the lowest registration rate at 38.7% compared with a Latina rate of 52.3% in the same age bracket. Accordingly, only 27.9% the 18 to 24 year old male electorate went to the polls in November 2016 compared with 40.7% of eligible Latinos

Among 25 to 44 year olds, the largest segment of the Latino electorate at 40.3% in 2015, 56.5% were registered, and 46.1% of potential voters voted. Women in this age category also voted at significantly higher rates than males, 49.8% to 42.3%.

After age 45 both participation and voting rates increased significantly, and there was greater parity by sex among Latinos. (See the data in figures 7 and 8. But once again it should be reiterated that the young age structure of the Latino population weighed heavily on overall Latino registration and voting rates and pulled down the averages because of very low participation.

These data suggest that voter registration efforts must target younger Latinos if registration and participation rates are to rise in the future.

Table 1
Age Structure of Latino Electorate, 2015

Age	Male	Female	Total
18-24	2,900,054	2,780,006	5,680,060
25-44	5,390,387	5,511,200	10,901,587
45-64	3,616,956	3,829,536	7,446,492
65-74	807,131	992,598	1,799,729
75 +	479,156	727,378	1,206,534
Total	13,193,684	13,840,718	27,034,402

Age	Male	Female	Total
18-24	22.0%	20.1%	21.0%
25-44	40.9%	39.8%	40.3%
45-64	27.4%	27.7%	27.5%
65-74	6.1%	7.2%	6.7%
75 +	3.6%	5.3%	4.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 7
 Latino Voter Registration Rates by Age and Sex
 Presidential Election 2016
 (percentage of eligible voters)

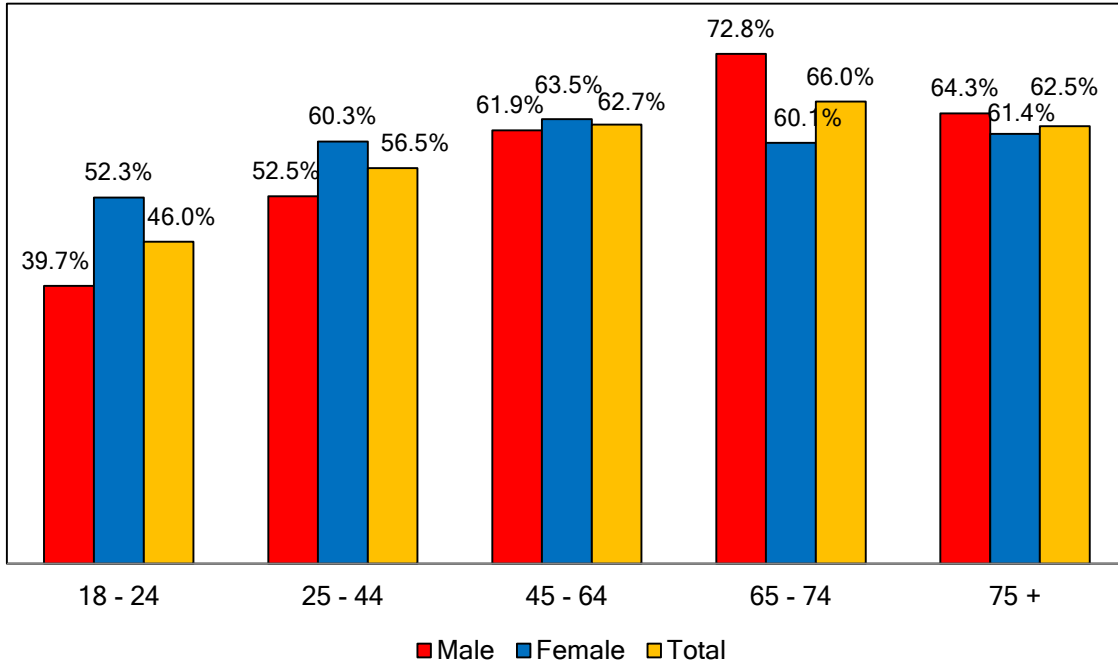
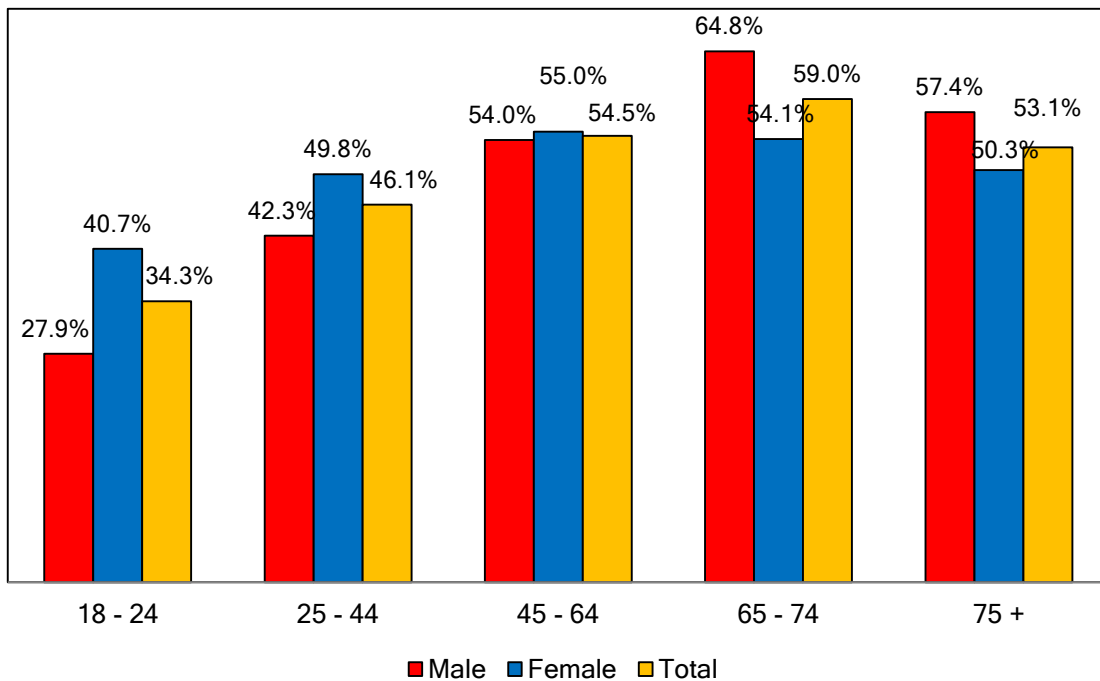


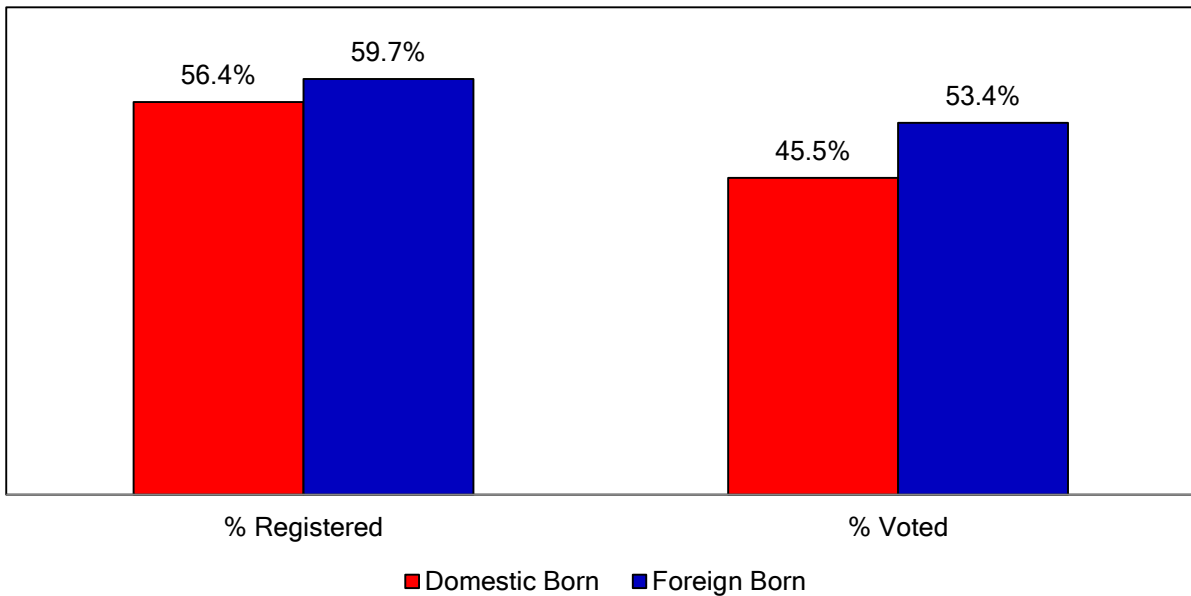
Figure 8
 Latino Voter Participation Rates by Age and Sex
 Presidential Election 2016
 (percentage of eligible voters)



Nativity and Voter Registration and Participation

Of the over 26 million eligible Latino voters in the nation approximately 74.4% were born in the U.S. and 25.6% were naturalized U.S. citizens according to 2015 census data. There were significant differences in voter registration rates: 59.7% of all naturalized Latinos were registered compared with 56.4% of Latino citizens 18 years of age and older born in the United States. But the sharp contrast in voter participation rates is what is striking when voter participation rates are examined. About 53.4% of the naturalized Latino electorate voted in November 2016 compared with 45.5% of U.S.-born Latinos eligible to vote. This lower rate among domestic born Latinos has been found in every presidential election since 1992 and clearly has dragged down overall voter participation rates sharply mitigating the potential impact of Latinos on national elections. (See figure 9),

Figure 9
 Latino Voter Registration and Participation Rates by Nativity, Presidential Election 2016



Why have Latinos Consistently Abstained from Registering and Voting? Voter Registration and Participation by Educational Attainment Levels

The quantitative data released by the Census Bureau on registration and voting does not measure the qualitative reasons for the consistent low level of Latino voter registration and participation that has prevailed in every presidential election since 1992 and before.

Well publicized voter-registration drives and a Republican presidential candidate that disparaged Latino communities with overtly hostile and blatantly racist attacks as a central theme of his candidacy throughout 2016, failed to budge registration and participation rates among Latinos at the national level. Irrespective of the attractiveness, or lack thereof, of the Democratic candidate it remains puzzling why Latinos eligible to vote did not demonstrate some reaction on election day in November

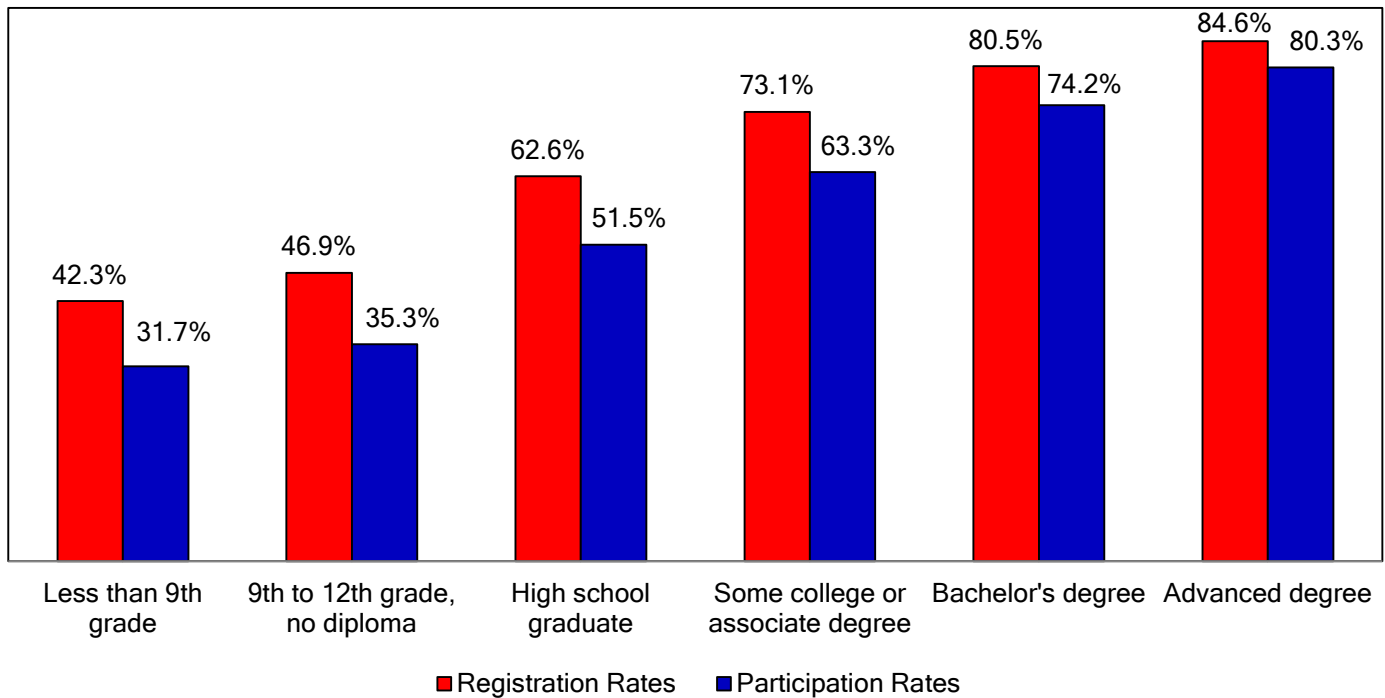
2016 to the virulent and often vicious attacks launched on a continual basis by the Republican candidate.

Quantitative data on registration and voting are available for a variety of variables such as participation rates by income, education, age, class of worker, marital status, and even disability status.² These have been examined in an effort to try and understand Latino non-participation in presidential elections, and particularly in 2016.

The one quantitative variable which may help explain why Latinos have had considerably lower levels of voter registration and participation than the other major race/ethnic groups in the U.S, is educational attainment. There are no specific data on voting and educational attainment for each race and ethnic group, although data are available for the entire electorate.

The positive correlation between educational attainment level and voting behavior is overwhelmingly clear. Those with greater levels of education participated at significantly higher levels in every presidential election since 1992. The data are nuanced and for the 2016 election are presented in figure 10. Some important conclusions are crystal clear. College graduates with a B.A. degree voted at a 74.2% rate of eligible voters in November 2016, while the rate for high-school graduates was 51.5%. If we examine those with less than a 9th grade education, 31.7% eligible voters went to the polls; 35% of those who had between over a 9th grade education but did not graduate from high school.

Figure 10
Overall Voter Registration and Participation Rates by Educational Attainment
Presidential Election 2016



² See the different statistical data released by the Census Bureau for the November 2016 election at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>

According to analyzed 2015 census data, without question Latino citizens 18 years of age and older and eligible to vote had the absolutely lowest educational attainment rates compared with the nation’s other race/ethnic group by extraordinary margins.

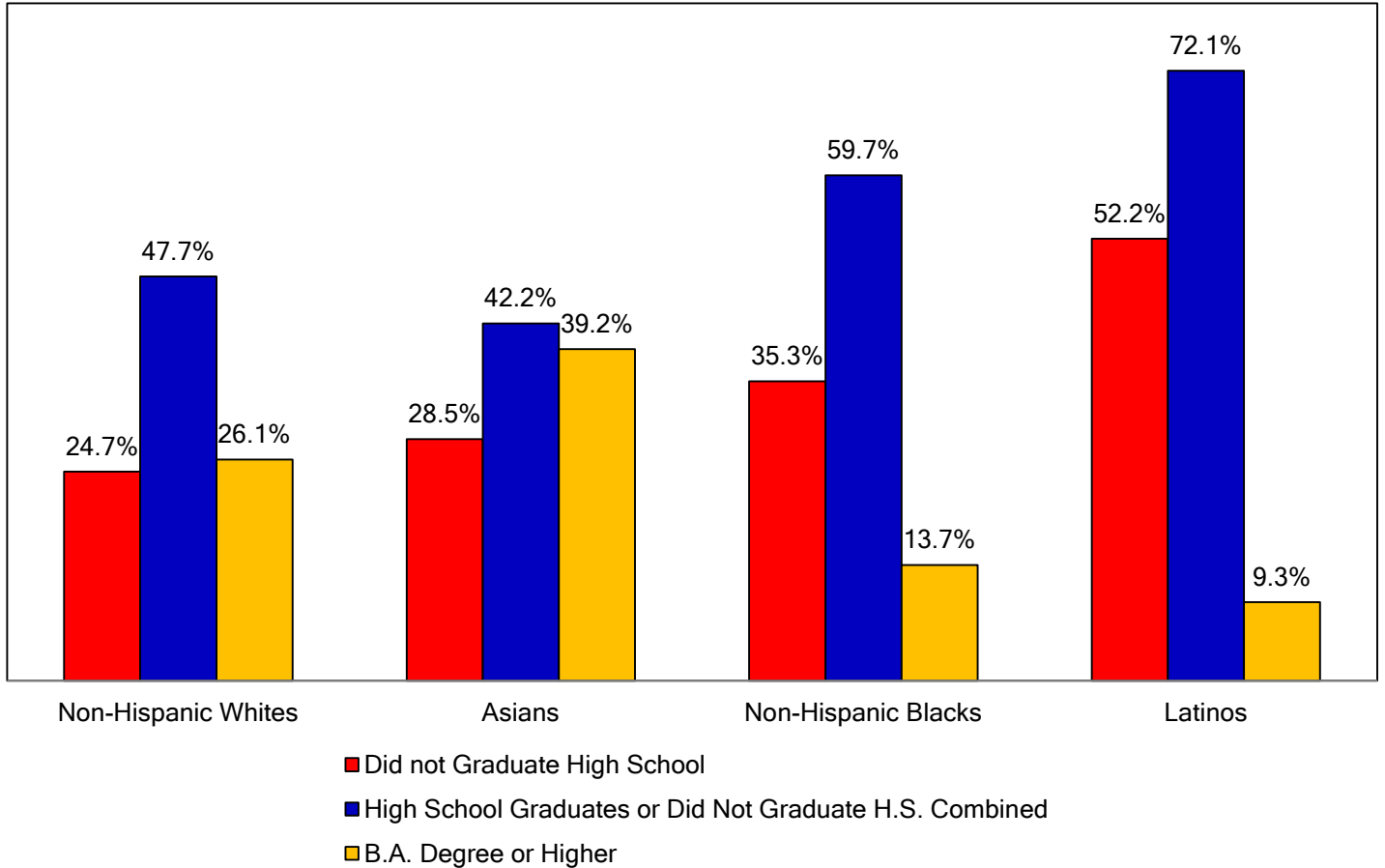
As astounding 40% of the Latino electorate had not completed 9th grade! This compared with 25% of African Americans; 18% of non-Hispanic whites and 23% of Asians. An additional 12% of the Latino electorate had not graduated from high school. Thus, 52% of Latino eligible voters had not completed high school compared with 35% of non-Hispanic blacks, 25% of non-Hispanic whites, and 29% of Asians. These were the educational attainment categories with the absolutely lowest voter registration and participation rates. Additionally, the Latino electorate had the lowest college graduation rate among the major race and ethnic group in the nation, and this was the educational cohort with the highest voter participation rates. (See table 2 and figure 11).

Table 2
Educational Attainment Levels Among Citizens 18 Years of Age and Older, by Race/Ethnic Group, 2015

	Non-Hispanic Whites	Non-Hispanic Blacks	Latinos	Asians
Less than 9th grade	17.9%	24.5%	40.1%	22.9%
9th to 12th grade, no diploma	6.8%	10.8%	12.1%	5.6%
High School Graduate	23.0%	24.3%	19.9%	13.7%
Some College or Associates	26.2%	26.6%	18.7%	18.6%
BA	16.5%	8.8%	6.6%	23.0%
MA	6.8%	3.8%	1.9%	10.7%
Professional Degree beyond BA	1.7%	0.6%	0.5%	2.8%
Ph.D.	1.1%	0.4%	0.3%	2.7%

These data suggest that Latinos register and vote at such poor levels compared to other race/ethnic groups because of significantly lower educational attainment levels. There are no other quantitative variables which correlate in such a graphic manner. This finding may also be a guide for future voter registration campaigns among Latinos which must target poorer educated Latinos in some way if voter registration and participation drives are to successfully increase Latino political influence in the nation.

Figure 11
Educational Attainment Rates among Citizens 18 Years of Age and Older by Race/Ethnicity in the U.S, 2015



The Challenge

Latino voters have been characterized as the ‘sleeping giant’ in U.S. electoral politics and the Democratic candidate in November 2016 often and mistakenly conceived of Latino voters as a ‘fire wall’ of sorts which would guarantee victory.

It is certain that the absolute number of Latino voters has increased substantially because of demographic expansion between 1992 and 2016. However, the persistence of low voter registration rates has meant that the ‘giant’ is fast asleep. Had Latino voters turned out at the polls in particular states which swung the election to the Republican candidate, at even marginally higher levels, the results of the November 2016 election would have been different.

The Hispanic media, civic organizations, political operatives, and religious groups have long trumpeted voter registration drives among potential Latino voters and it is certain that there may have been many local successes. However, to be frank these efforts have been an abysmal failure that must be clearly, if painfully, recognized. New strategies for voter registration are called for if Latinos

in the United States are to increase participation rates and exercise the potential political power that remains largely dormant. Sitting on the sidelines can have cataclysmic consequences and the results of the November 2016 election are testimony to the tragedy of not exercising political rights in the context of a democratic system. Despite its glaring imperfections, U.S. democracy affords most citizens 18 years of age and older the right to vote. If this right is not exercised the outcomes of elections at all levels, national, state, and local can have serious and even dreadful consequences.