

# **PORTUGUESE-AMERICAN POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN MASSACHUSETTS AND CALIFORNIA<sup>1</sup>**

**James M. McGlinchey**

Coordinator for the Portuguese-American Citizenship Project

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Portuguese American Citizenship Project is active in five states and works with over 55 organizations. Among the participating communities are towns in southeastern Massachusetts and the San Joaquin Valley of California. The presentation will examine the voter participation for the specific communities of Fall River Massachusetts and Tulare California. The analysis will attempt to draw some conclusions on the similarities and differences in the ability of these communities to advance their interests.

This paper will first present a description of the Portuguese American Citizenship Project. Who we are, why we are, and how we do business.

After establishing the Project's methodology, the paper will examine the voting results from two communities Fall River, Massachusetts and Tulare, California.

Finally, the paper will characterize the extent of political involvement of Portuguese Americans in these communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Author's note: This presentation is not offered as an academic treatise but rather a description of an ongoing grassroots endeavor. The information presented is an offshoot of the primary and essential purpose of the Project, i.e., to promote civic participation. The data was derived from baseline voting studies that measure the voting strength of Portuguese-American organizations. Conclusions drawn from this data are necessarily open to multiple interpretations. Comments and criticisms are welcomed.

The opinions presented in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Luso-American Foundation or of the Portuguese-American Citizenship Project.

Background information on the Portuguese-American Citizenship Project may be found at [www.portugueseamerican.org](http://www.portugueseamerican.org)

## **BACKGROUND;**

### The Challenge

Integration of immigrant communities into the political arena is an ongoing struggle for our society. On one hand, the basic principle of our democracy requires that as many members of our society as possible become active players in civic affairs. On the other hand, the process of incorporating new waves of immigrants is often resisted because it is perceived as lending an advantage to one political group over another. In fact, however honorable the intentions, immigrant citizenship and voter registration campaigns are characteristically guided by national organizations that espouse some political agenda.

This initiative proposes to empower community organizations without any accompanying political agenda or advocacy of any causes. The plan of work is to introduce to community groups proven technical tools for mobilizing their members. As a result, individual community groups – the people - can more confidently form and communicate their concerns to their government representatives in contrast to the practice of political leaders dictating the “will of the people” to the people.

### The Portuguese American Citizenship Project

Portuguese immigrants have been crossing the Atlantic to America for more than a century. Like other ethnic groups they have become economically and socially integrated into U.S. society. Unlike other ethnic groups, and particularly ethnic groups of European origin, Portuguese Americans perceive themselves as being comparatively less civic involved than other communities, and consequently, enjoying less influence over their governance.

According to traditional characterizations of the community, many Portuguese have not applied for U.S. citizenship despite working and residing in the U.S. legally for decades. The same legend holds that many who acquire citizenship do not register to vote. And finally, those who are registered to vote do not vote.

Because of this generally accepted version of widespread political apathy, Portuguese American communities have not enjoyed political advantage commensurate with the concentration of their population and their economic stature. The consequences of this perceived abandonment of the political process are real and immediate.

Candidates for political office do not ignore Portuguese Americans because of ethnic prejudice – some of the candidates are Portuguese Americans themselves. Political office seekers do not court voters in the Portuguese American community simply because they believe the community does not turn out to vote. The challenge is to understand the cause of this political apathy,

measure the extent of the problem, and take measures to stimulate greater participation in the political process.

Portuguese American communities have a long history of private and government-sponsored programs to foster citizenship and civic participation. The separate projects had a laudable history of achievement but are notable by the absence of shared strategies. Interaction among interested individuals and organizations within the local community has been limited. Cooperation between communities within a region or state has been rare. Interstate cooperation among Portuguese American communities has not taken place. While most of these civic promotion efforts have yielded noteworthy results, often benefits have been limited to the immediate community and the broader effect of any successful strategy thereby diminished.

In February 1999, the Luso American Foundation (FLAD) initiated the Portuguese American Citizenship Project. The Project is intended to encourage Portuguese Americans to participate fully in the civic activities of their communities; that is to become U.S. citizens, to register to vote, and to vote.

The grant program was administered by one coordinator under contract to the Luso American Foundation.

As a part of the Project, the Luso American Foundation has made small grants to community organizations to implement a plan of action which push the community well beyond the normal range of activities to promote civic activism. The Project's essential methodology is based on the sharing of best practices between the participating communities.

The Project is based on the assumption that the communities themselves are best able to determine the strategy to encourage greater civic participation. These community leaders and activists understand their specific problems and how they can best overcome these obstacles.

Organizational, volunteer and financial resources are a significant constraint. The most difficult problem however remains how to efficiently and effectively mobilize the community.

### Campaigns without Candidates

Based on the collective experience of community activists, the Project has developed a three-step methodology of encouraging not-for-profit community organizations to copy the campaign organization and methods of politicians.

Assuming that, in the Darwinian world of politics, successful political candidates have developed the most efficient and practical methods of campaign organization, a not-for-profit organization should imitate these same practices as

far as practical. The notable exception is that a non-partisan campaign does not support a candidate or an issue – it is a “Campaign without a Candidate.”

**STEP 1 – Assess Political Strength**

The essential first step is accurately defining the current civic involvement of an organization’s membership.

By linking an organization’s membership rolls with the voter registration and voter history lists of the local government, organizers can define who is registered to vote and when and how often these individuals vote. This information is vital to focusing strategies on citizenship, voter registration, and/or voter turnout.

The following table presents the results of a recent report on Santo Cristo Parish in Fall River Massachusetts.

**TABLE 1**

<b>HISTORICAL DATA: SANTO CRISTO PARISH REGISTRATION - VOTING</b>			
<b>MEMBERS RESIDING IN FALL RIVER</b>	<b>3,893</b>		
<b>MEMBERS REGISTERED TO VOTE IN THE CITY OF FALL RIVER</b>	<b>1,267</b>	<b>HEADS OF HOUSEHOLD</b>	
	<b>2,085</b>	<b>ALL HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS</b>	
<b><u>VOTING PERFORMANCE OF FALL RIVER RESIDENTS</u></b>			
	<b>HEADS OF HOUSEHOLD</b>	<b>AS PERCENT OF ALL REGISTERED MEMBERS ELIGIBLE TO VOTE</b>	<b>CITYWIDE VOTING HISTORY AS PERCENT OF ALL REGISTERED VOTERS)</b>
<b>COMPARABLE STATISTICS</b>			
<b>VOTERS NOV 2002</b>	<b>939</b>	<b>53.5%</b>	<b>41.7%</b>
<b>VOTERS SEP 2003</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>41.0%</b>	<b>22.7%</b>
<b>VOTERS NOV 2003</b>	<b>1071</b>	<b>61.0%</b>	<b>38.8%</b>
<b>VOTERS MAR 2004</b>	<b>412</b>	<b>23.5%</b>	<b>16.3%</b>
<b>VOTERS SEP 2004</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>22.4%</b>	<b>12.2%</b>
<b>VOTERS NOV 2004</b>	<b>1242</b>	<b>70.8%</b>	<b>56.4%</b>
<b>VOTERS SEP 2005</b>	<b>722</b>	<b>44.2%</b>	<b>27.2%</b>
<b>VOTERS NOV 2005</b>	<b>958</b>	<b>58.6%</b>	<b>41.2%</b>
<b>VOTERS SEP 2006</b>	<b>722</b>	<b>43.6%</b>	<b>28.8%</b>
<b>VOTERS NOV 2006</b>	<b>958</b>	<b>56.0%</b>	<b>47.3%</b>
<b>VOTERS SEP 2007</b>	<b>727</b>	<b>57.4%</b>	<b>33.4%</b>
<b>VOTERS NOV 2007</b>	<b>739</b>	<b>58.3%</b>	<b>37.9%</b>
<b>VOTERS FEB 2008</b>	<b>774</b>	<b>61.1%</b>	<b>36.6%</b>

Table 1 shows that the Parish lists 3,893 members who reside in the city of Fall River. These listed members are normally, but not always, the heads of household, for a family. Children and senior dependents are normally not included in this list.

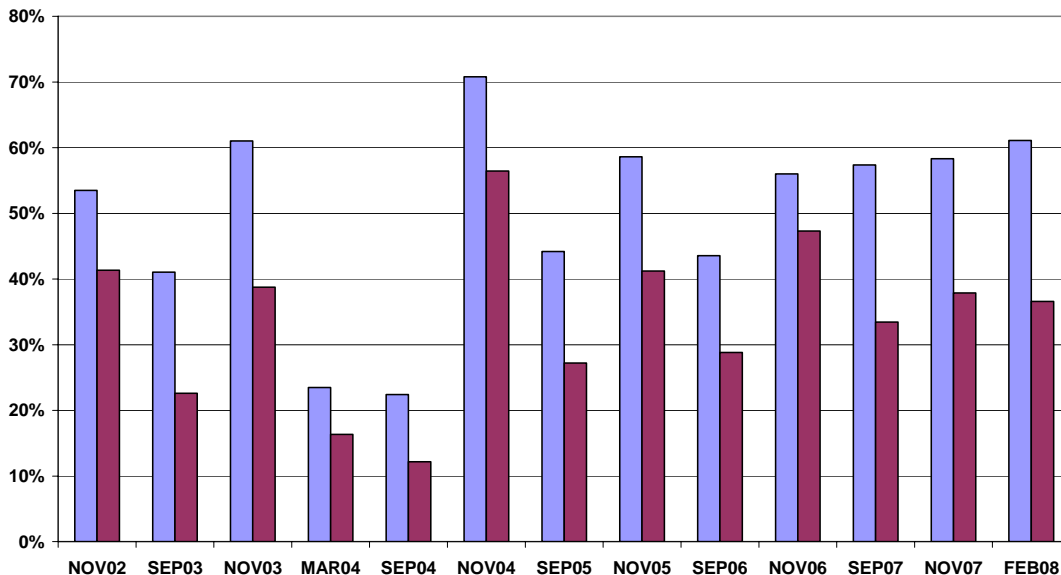
The Project has identified 1,267 heads of household who are registered to vote. Furthermore, the Project identified an additional 818 family members – adult children or senior citizens – who are also registered to vote. Santo Cristo Parish encompasses a total of 2,087 registered voters – the largest collection of registered voters in the city.

Voter registration is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for civic participation. A citizen must not only register to vote but also complete the process by actually casting his or her ballot. Voter turnout<sup>2</sup> in Fall River and in fact in the entire United States varies according to the election. Presidential election years bring out more voters than school board elections.

Santo Cristo not only represents the largest collection of registered voters but these parishioners continually outvote the city.

The following graph illustrates the relationship between the parish turnout and the turnout of the city at large.

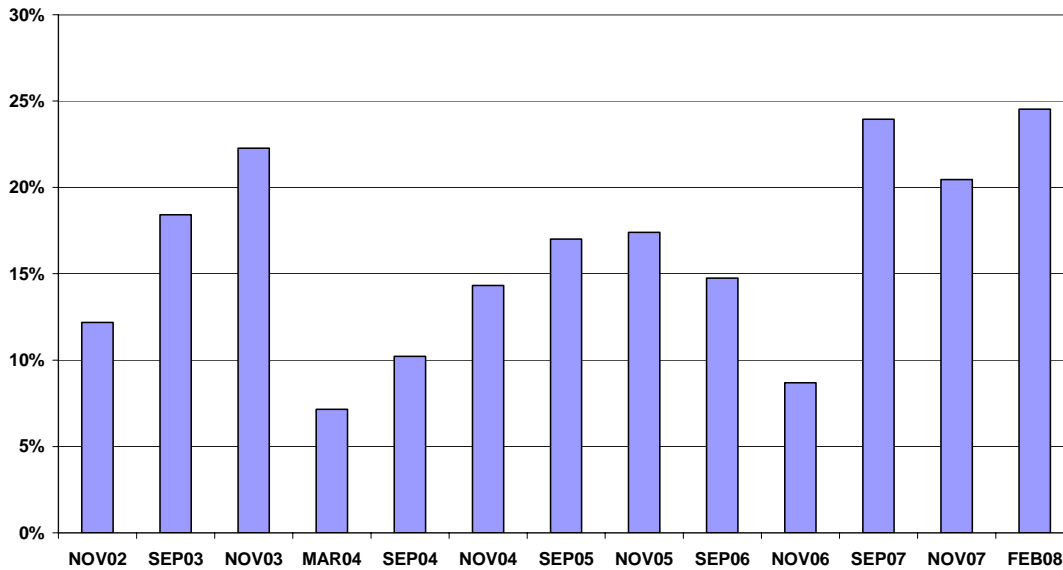
**REGISTERED VOTER TURNOUT  
COMPARISON BETWEEN FALL RIVER AND SANTO CRISTO  
HEADS OF HOUSEHOLD**



<sup>2</sup> Voter turnout is defined as the votes cast divided by the number of voters eligible to vote.

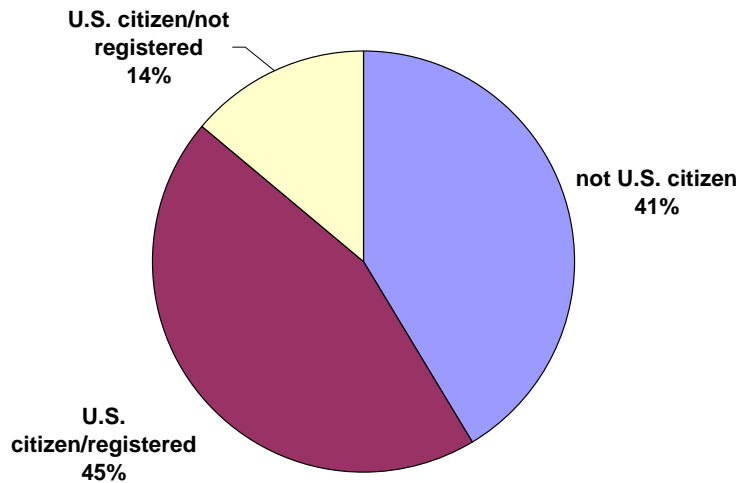
To further demonstrate the parish's higher turnout, Graph 2 presents the difference in voter turnout between parish's heads of household and the city average.

**DIFFERENCE IN VOTER TURNOUT BETWEEN  
FALL RIVER VOTERS AND SANTO CRISTO VOTERS  
HEADS OF HOUSEHOLD**



As an aside, the Project also surveyed parish members to determine the extent of non-citizenship in the parish. Graph 3 presents the results of this survey.

**SANTO CRISTO DISTRIBUTION OF PARISHIONERS**



The 45-percent registration rate is low compared to an estimated registration rate in the city of over 70 percent of city residents eligible. But after adjusting for non-citizens, over 76 percent of the eligible parishioners are registered to vote. It should also be noted that politicians do not really care about who does not vote and why. They care vitally, however, about how many people an organization brings to the polls on elections day.

Santo Cristo's high voter registration and high voter turnout results in significant impact on local elections. In the period surveyed, Santo Cristo with 4.7 percent of all registered voters in the city accounted for over 7 percent of all votes cast in recent city elections.

## STEP 2 - Conduct Get Out the Vote Campaigns

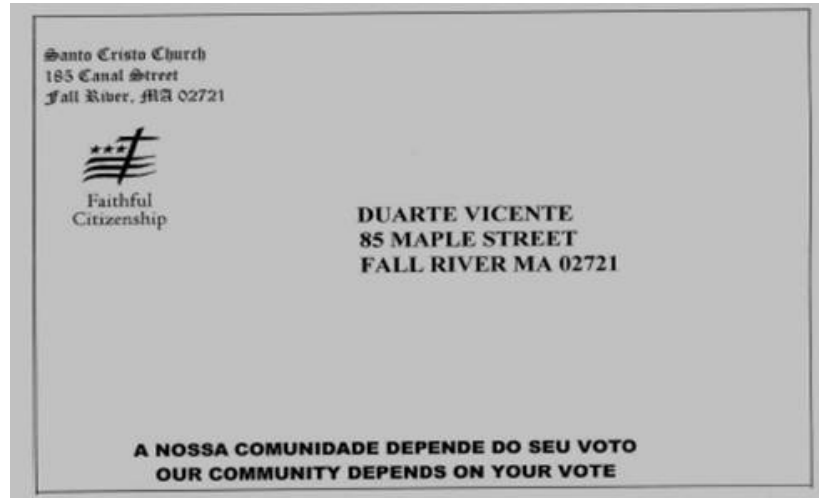
The purpose of introducing these membership/voter registration databases is to create a methodology for an organization to conduct political campaigns which are well within its financial and volunteer capabilities.

To be effective, these campaigns must be repeated year after year. To be repeatable, the method cannot exhaust the organization and its members. Otherwise the effort will collapse and the problem of political participation will quickly lapse back into the status quo.

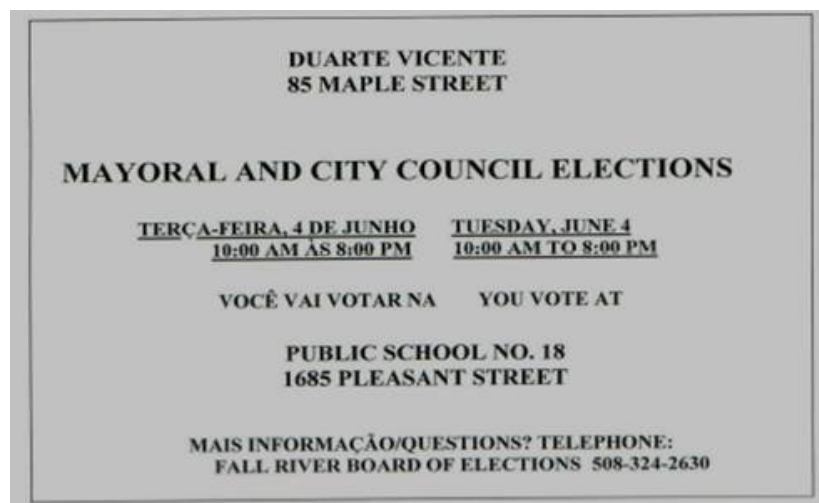
The database can be used for very targeted mailings encouraging voter registration and/or voter turnout. For example, during the Primary and General Elections in 2006, participating communities sent out over 70,000 pieces of mail addressed to each registered voter, listing their place of voting, and the hours of polling stations.

The cards are composed to also inform the registered member of his/her polling location. These have a significant effect on voter turnout, especially in local elections and primary elections where there is little media interest. Included below is a sample voter registration card.

## SAMPLE VOTER CARD-FRONT



## SAMPLE VOTER CARD-BACK

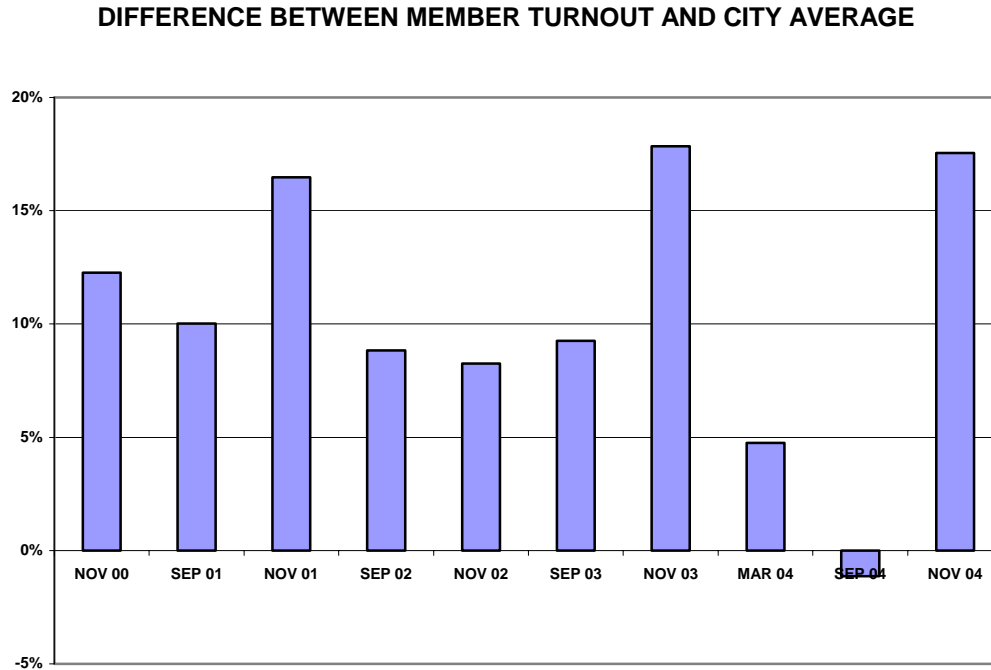


### STEP 3 – Measure Results

All community organizations have very limited financial and volunteer resources available to devote to political activism. As a result, each and every action to promote voter registration and voting should be constantly evaluated to ensure the most effective utilization of scarce resources. If an initiative works, it should be continued, if not, it should be dropped.

Because a “Campaign-without-Candidates” does not by definition promote the election of any individual, it is important to measure the impact of any campaign effort on voter turnout.

As a stark if somewhat negative example, one unnamed organization did not send out voter cards in September 2004. The impact of not sending the cards out is apparent in the following graph.



There was a swing of almost 11 percent between the organization's performance in a similar election in September 2002 when the voter cards went out and September 2004 when they did not get delivered.

Comparison of Voting Patterns in Fall River Massachusetts and Tulare California Portuguese American Communities

The data presented above for the Portuguese American is from an urban East Coast community with an economy based largely on labor intensive industry. Tulare, California on the other hand has a farmed based economy and the Portuguese American community has a strong presence in the dairy industry.

An examination of the voter strength of the Portuguese Americans in Tulare city<sup>3</sup> illustrates the continuing theme that Portuguese Americans take their right to vote seriously.

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<sup>3</sup> The methodology of collaboration with the Tulare community differed significantly from work done in Fall River. In Fall River, the Project began with individual organizations and built the campaign strategy based on the assessment of that organization. In Tulare, the methodology consisted of first determining the names of every registered voter in the city. The Project then filtered those names through its list of 1,050 Portuguese surnames. This list was reviewed by local community leaders to eliminate Latino families with the resultant list of 2,217 registered Portuguese Americans in the city. This effort is endorsed and supported by virtually all major Portuguese American organizations in the community.

**HISTORICAL DATA: PORTUGUESE AMERICAN CITIZEN FORUM  
REGISTRATION - VOTING**

**PORTUGUESE AMERICANS REGISTERED  
TO VOTE IN THE CITY OF TULARE 2,217**

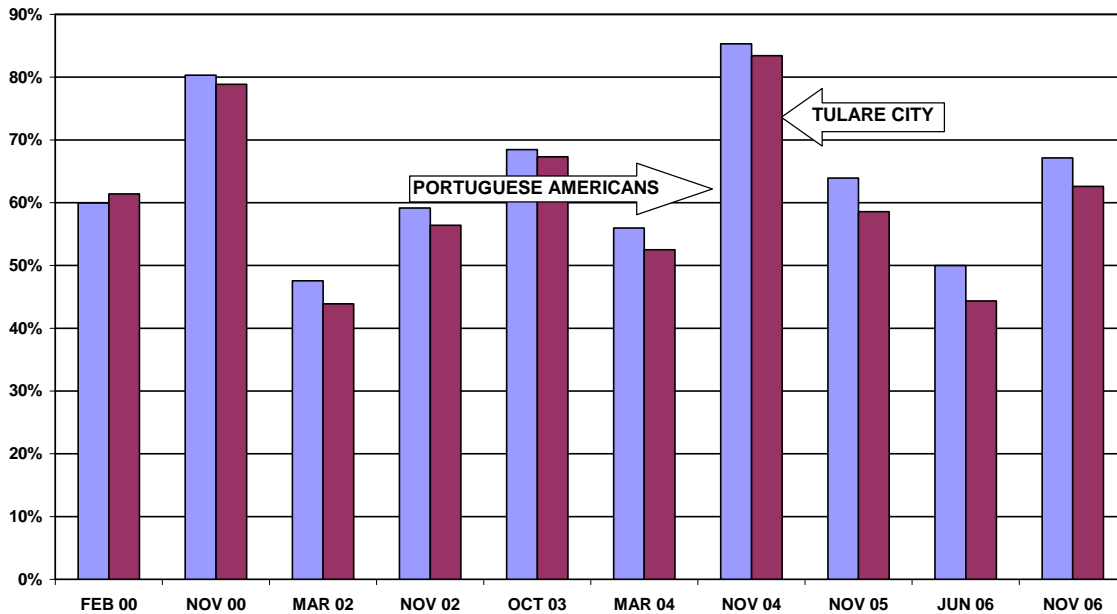
**ALL REGISTERED VOTERS IN TULARE 19,409**

**VOTING PERFORMANCE OF TULARE RESIDENTS**

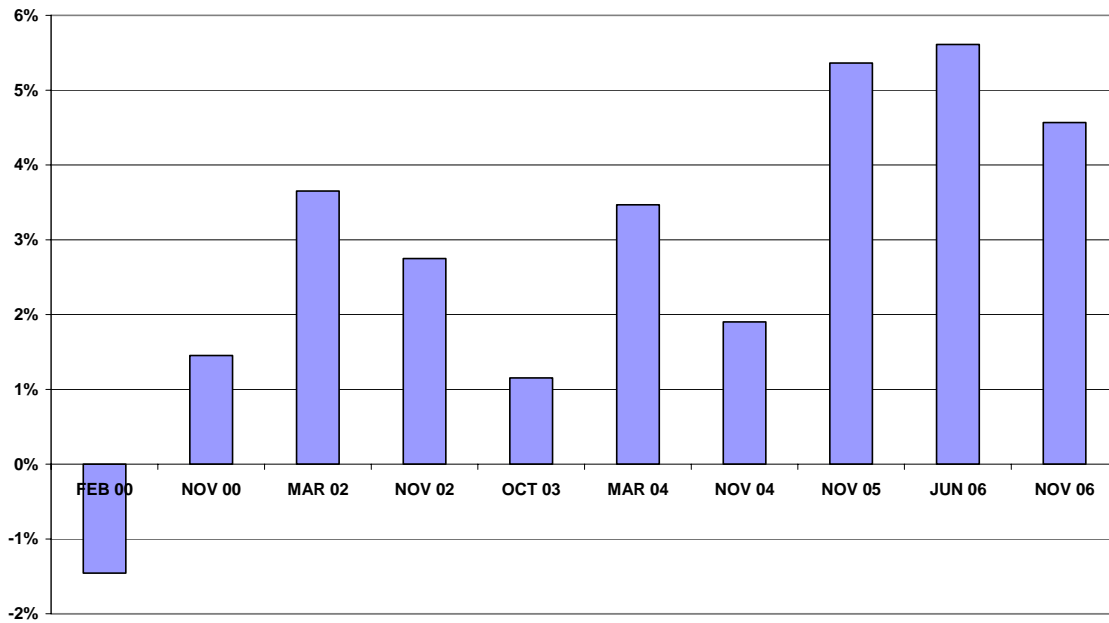
	<b>PORTUGUESE AMERICANS</b>	<b>AS PERCENT OF ALL REGISTERED MEMBERS ELIGIBLE TO VOTE</b>	<b>CITYWIDE VOTING HISTORY AS PERCENT OF ALL REGISTERED VOTERS</b>
	<b>COMPARABLE STATISTICS</b>		
<b>VOTERS FEB 2000</b>	925	59.9%	61.4%
<b>VOTERS NOV 2000</b>	1304	80.3%	78.8%
<b>VOTERS MAR 2002</b>	812	47.6%	43.9%
<b>VOTERS NOV 2002</b>	1036	59.2%	56.4%
<b>VOTERS OCT 2003</b>	1233	68.5%	67.3%
<b>VOTERS MAR 2004</b>	1034	56.0%	52.5%
<b>VOTERS NOV 2004</b>	1677	85.3%	83.4%
<b>VOTERS NOV 2005</b>	1338	63.9%	58.6%
<b>VOTERS JUN 2006</b>	1074	50.0%	44.4%
<b>VOTERS NOV 2006</b>	1458	67.2%	62.6%

The following graphs further depict the voting performance of the Tulare Portuguese American community.

**REGISTERED VOTER TURNOUT  
COMPARISON OF TULARE CITY  
AND PORTUGUESE AMERICANS**



**DIFFERENCE IN VOTER TURNOUT BETWEEN  
TULARE CITY VOTERS  
AND PORTUGUESE AMERICAN VOTERS**



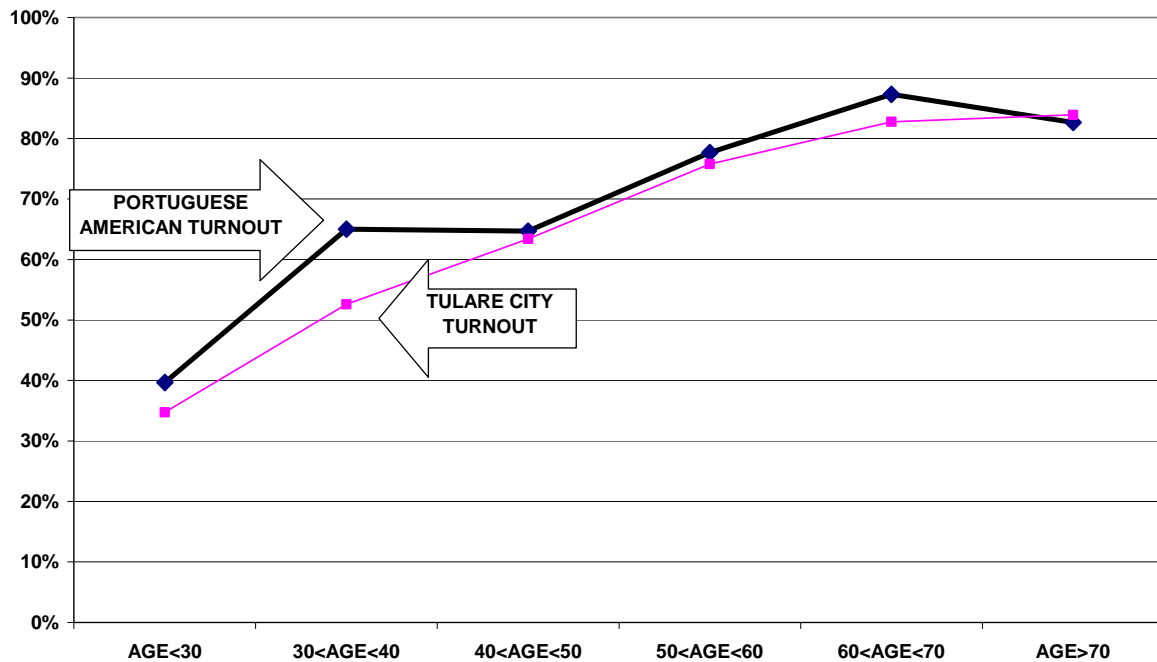
This performance is noteworthy because in contrast to the work in Fall River and other communities, the Tulare Portuguese American community selected is more universal than the community measured in Fall River.

To explain, in Fall River, the parish members outvote the community at large by a wide margin but this group is populated by members of the parish. It can be hypothesized that citizens who take their religious duties seriously would also take their civic duties more seriously than others.

Furthermore, the measurement of the Santo Cristo church was limited to heads of households which are on average older citizens.

An evaluation of the turnout rate by age group in Tulare explains the remarkable differences among age groups in civic participation.

**TURNOUT BY AGE NOVEMBER 2006  
TULARE CITY AND PORTUGUESE AMERICANS**

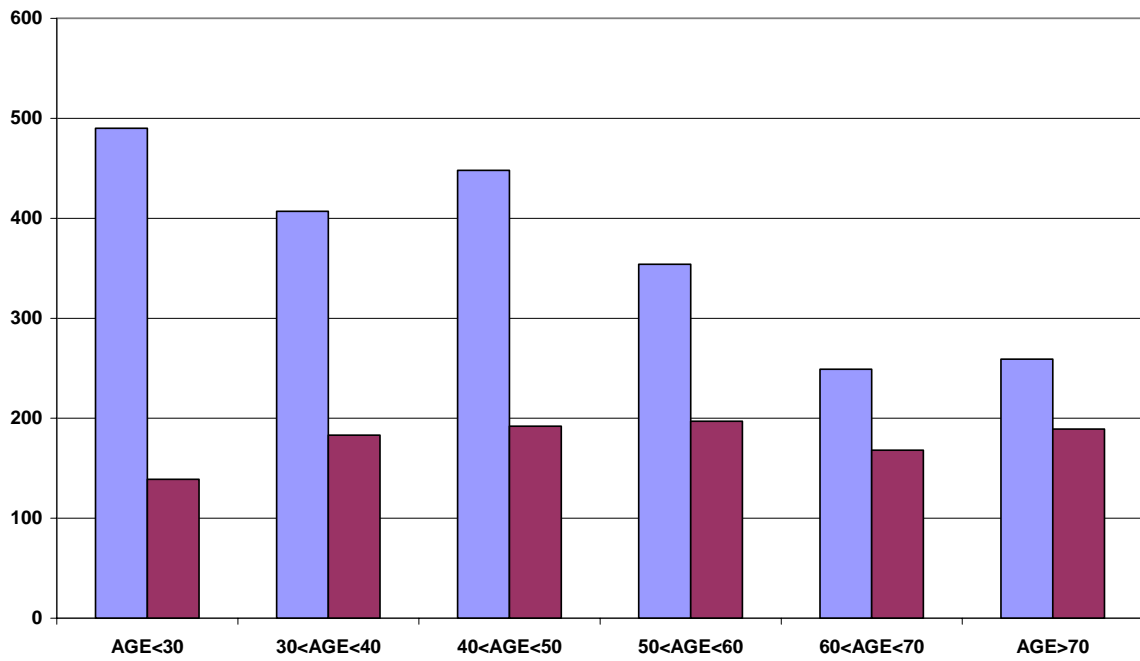


With this illustration, a sampling of church members, presumably an older-age group, would yield a higher voter turnout than a sample based on the all age population.

The graph also illustrates a persistent and as yet unresolved problem among voting by younger citizens.

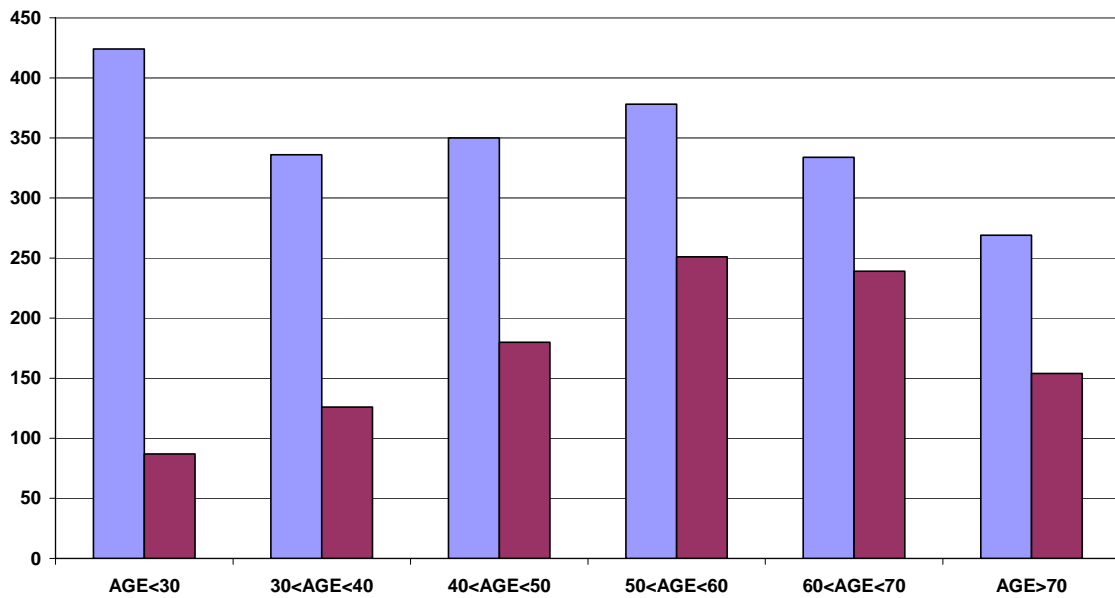
Again a breakdown of Tulare Portuguese Americans in the following graph further illustrates that in younger voters register to vote – they are the largest segment of the voting population but they provide the smallest numbers of actual voters for all age groups.

**Registered Voters Versus Actual Voters June 2006  
Portuguese Americans of Tulare, CA**



A similar examination of the Santo Cristo parish yields a similar result.

**REGISTERED VOTERS VERSUS ACTUAL VOTERS NOVEMBER 2007  
SANTO CRISTO  
ALL HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS**



Both East Coast and West Coast Portuguese American communities suffer from the same American disease of voter apathy among the young.

### Election of Portuguese American – a Comparison of Results

It has been noted earlier that the mission of the Portuguese American Citizenship Project is to promote greater civic participation among Portuguese Americans. The Project does not promote Republicans or Democrats. It does not take a position in favor or against the election of Portuguese Americans. We are only concerned about promotion of voting – how individuals choose to use their vote is their business.

Notwithstanding this caveat, one reliable indication of political integration is the election of members from the ethnic community to political office. In this regard the fortunes of the Massachusetts and California communities are very different.

In 2006, there were four Portuguese/Azorean-American Congressmen from the San Joaquin Valley of California. In the current Congress there are three members from the Valley, Dennis Cardoza, a Democrat, Jim Costa, a Democrat, and Devin Nunes, a Republican. There are no Portuguese American congressmen or congresswomen from Massachusetts. Why?

In the dairy industry of California, there are three political key issues facing dairymen: dairy prices, availability and pricing of water, and environmental concerns. Dairymen have a tradition (actually they have little choice if they are to survive economically) of supporting candidates for state and Federal offices. They have money to put into campaigns and the Portuguese American communities have a significant number of votes to back that up.

The Portuguese American dairymen are very sophisticated however and they support both Republican and Democratic candidates. Often they support both with the result that elected political figures of all stripes are very responsive to the Portuguese American community's concerns.

The California success in state and Federal offices is not however reflected in Portuguese American presence in local county level office and local boards. Compared to Massachusetts, Portuguese Americans in California have a comparatively weak presence in local and state government.

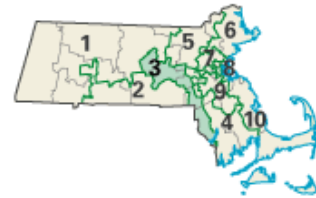
In Massachusetts, the presence of Portuguese American in local government is commensurate with the percentage of Portuguese Americans in the population. A number of mayors, city councilmen and women, school board members are Portuguese Americans. Similarly state-level representative offices have a fair share of Portuguese Americans

A key reason for the absence of a Portuguese American in Congress is found in the map apportioning Congressional seats. The following illustrations demonstrate how the southeast Massachusetts region has been carved up to dilute its ability to elect its own Congressional representative.

### Congressional District 3



**3** Congressional District  
Bristol County

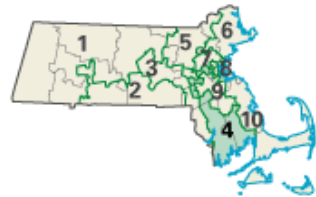


Massachusetts (10 Districts)

### Congressional District 4

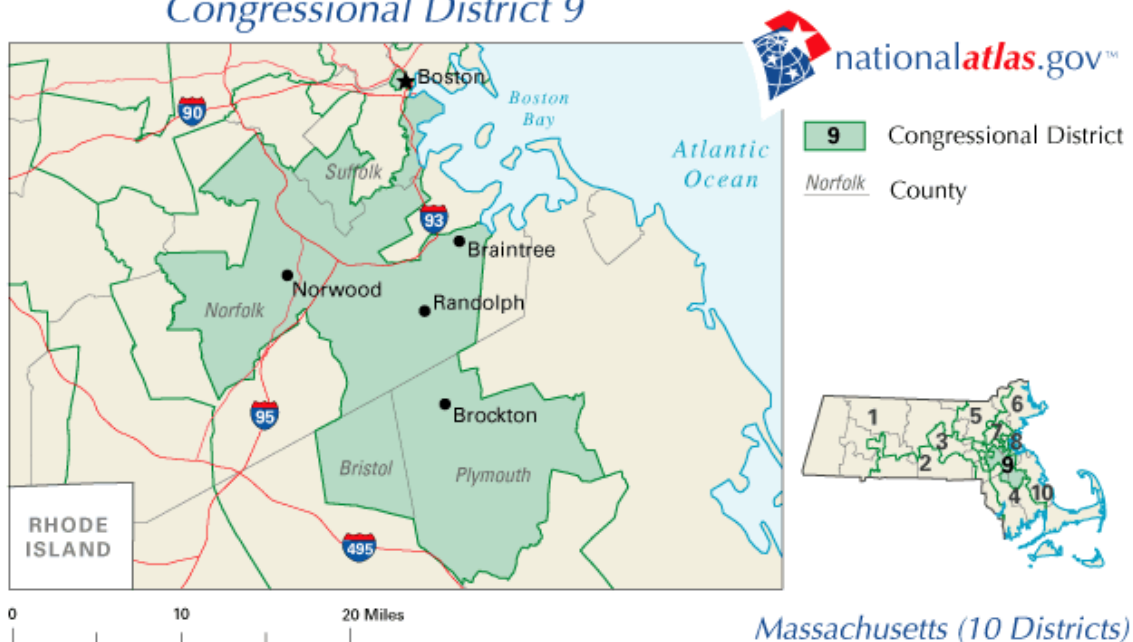


**4** Congressional District  
Bristol County



Massachusetts (10 Districts)

## Congressional District 9



The splitting of the south coast of Massachusetts into three districts which are all dominated by other parts of the district effectively emasculates the local community. The unfortunate side effect is that this is the epicenter of the Portuguese American community in the state.

According to Wikipedia, the word "gerrymander" is named for the [Governor of Massachusetts Elbridge Gerry](#) (July 17, 1744 – November 23, 1814),<sup>[2]</sup> and is a [blend](#) of his name with the word "[salamander](#)," used to describe the shape of a tortuous electoral district pressed through the Massachusetts legislature in 1812. The tradition lives on today.

### Conclusion

There is a long and revered axiom in the Portuguese American community that as an ethnic group, the community has become an integral part of the society where they have settled. In the economy, in the legal community, in the work place, Portuguese Americans have succeeded much like other ethnic groups.

Politically, however, there is a continuing self-characterization of the community as "invisible." This depiction is neither deserved nor accurate.

Portuguese Americans are not ingénues wandering around the political forest waiting for some wolf to attack. On the contrary notable Portuguese Americans have demonstrated the political skills to get anything they want of the political system. They have the "jeito" of knack of getting things done.

There are examples too numerous to mention of Portuguese Americans who have made fortunes in construction, concrete work, finance and other

enterprises. By and large they have accomplished these successes by working successfully with the political system and not by either ignoring political reality or even opposing it.

There is a strong symbiotic relationship in U.S. politics between money – campaign contributions – and numbers – voters at the polls.

The Latino community in the West has a large numbers of voters but has relatively little in the way of funds to support political candidates. Corporations have money but they have few votes to command.

When a community marries an organized voting block with a willingness and capacity to donate to political campaigns, the effect can exceed the sum of the two parts. Examples of this synthesis of effort can be found in any number of interest groups. The success of the Portuguese American community in the San Joaquin Valley of California is due in no small part because the rich segment of the community – the dairy farmers – are not segregated from the vast majority of working class Portuguese Americans in the region. The community lives as one and is not divided into separate classes.

For the Massachusetts Portuguese American community to begin to realize the success of California in electing individuals to higher offices, the well educated elites of the community with money and objectives must form common cause with the large numbers of working class Portuguese Americans who form the essential and vital foundation of the community.

On the East Coast, one of the Project's "discoveries" was the obvious but unacknowledged fact that the largest collection of registered voters in Fall River, New Bedford and Taunton are, by a wide margin, Portuguese American parishes. The Portuguese clubs also represent huge voting blocs.

The members of these organizations are primarily working class. The educated members of the community have largely migrated to the suburbs for the standard reasons of seeking better homes, better neighborhoods, and better schools.

The virtually black and white separation of the community into the college educated class (with money) and the povo (who represent the numbers/voters) is an East Coast problem not a West Coast problem.

On the East Coast, it is not a question of forming better organizations or creating more political weight, it is a question of political direction to form a common purpose to unite all segments of the Portuguese American community. Unless and until someone figures out how to marry these two groups, each facet of the community will fight its own battles in isolation from the other - and they will continue to inevitably and unnecessarily lose.