

**PART 1**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF  
"PORTUGUESE-AMERICANS IN SOUTHEASTERN  
MASSACHUSETTS, LEVELS OF POLITICAL  
EFFICACY"**

**PART 2**

**PORTUGUESE AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP PROJECT  
COORDINATOR'S NOTES ON CENTER FOR  
POLICY ANALYSIS PAPER ON PORTUGUESE  
AMERICAN CIVIC PARTICIPATION**

# PORTUGUESE-AMERICANS IN SOUTHEASTERN MASSACHUSETTS LEVELS OF POLITICAL EFFICACY<sup>1</sup>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Policy Analysis was asked by the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture to conduct a study to measure the political efficacy of Portuguese Americans and Portuguese immigrants on Southeastern Massachusetts. Political efficacy is defined as the degree to which an individual believes that he/she can influence the political process and government decision making. Levels of political efficacy are highest when citizens feel that they have an outcome on political outcomes and when they believe that the political system is responsive to their concerns. The study compares the perceptions of Portuguese residents to determine if there are significant differences in the levels of political efficacy between the two groups.

The levels of political efficacy among Portuguese-Americans was conducted using a survey instrument developed by the Center for Policy Analysis and the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture. The survey was administered by telephone to households in eighteen cities and towns in Southeastern Massachusetts. The study area was selected because it contains a high percentage of Portuguese-Americans and foreign born residents of Portuguese origin. The Center received a total of 401 responses to the survey.

The survey found generally low levels of political efficacy among Portuguese American, although these levels are comparable to non-Portuguese groups. While one might expect the political efficacy levels of Portuguese Americans to be lower than other residents in the region due to their lower education levels and political history, the fact that Portuguese-Americans do not report lower levels of political efficacy than those of non-Portuguese suggests that there is nothing peculiar about Portuguese Americans and their levels of political efficacy. Indeed, their level of political efficacy is higher than one would expect based on their educational attainment and occupational status. These findings contradict the conventional wisdom that Portuguese-Americans participate less in politics, have lower levels of political knowledge, or have higher levels of distrust in government. Results include:

- Only 9.2 percent of survey respondents feel they have a lot of influence over state and local government, while 20.5 percent feel they have no influence at all. A higher percentage of Portuguese respondents (26.0%) feel they have no influence

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Policy Analysis, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. October 2000. The complete study is presented in "Portuguese-Americans and Contemporary Civic Culture in Massachusetts" Clyde W. Barrow, editor. Tagus Press

over state and local government in comparison to non-Portuguese respondents (18.0), although this result is not statistically significant.

- More than sixty-one percent of survey respondents (61.8%) strongly or somewhat agree with the statement that most public officials are not really interested in the problems of the average person. Only 12.7 percent of respondents strongly disagree with this statement. Portuguese respondents (69.2%) are more likely than non-Portuguese respondents (59.5%) to strongly or somewhat agree that public officials are not interested in the problems of the average person, although this result is not statistically significant.
- In general, respondents do not participate in local meetings. More than half the respondents (51.9%) never attend City Council or Town meetings, while a quarter (25.4%) rarely attend. There are not statistical differences between Portuguese-Americans and non-Portuguese respondents and their participation in local meetings.
- Only twenty percent of respondents (19.5%) agree that people are best represented in politics by leaders from their own racial or ethnic background. There are only minor and statistically insignificant differences between Portuguese-Americans and non-Portuguese respondents on this issue.
- Nearly sixty percent of respondents (59.6%) indicate that a candidate's party would have no effect on whether or not they would support him or her. Again, there are only minor and statistically insignificant differences between Portuguese-Americans and non-Portuguese respondents (73.3%) feel that Portuguese-Americans are well represented in important institutions in the region such as government and business. There is a statistically significant correlation between ethnicity and this issue. For example, a lower percentage of Portuguese respondents (65.7%) feel that Portuguese are well represented in important institutions of the region in comparison to non-Portuguese respondents (76.8%).
- Ethnicity also does not appear to be an important determinant of which political candidates the Portuguese respondents support. For example, about twenty percent of the Portuguese (21.1%) and non-Portuguese (18.9%) respondents agree that people are best represented in politics by leaders of their own racial or

ethnic background. This finding contradicts the view that Portuguese voters are more likely to support Portuguese candidates based on ethnicity alone.

**PORTUGUESE AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP PROJECT COORDINATOR NOTES  
ON CENTER FOR POLICY ANALYSIS PAPER ON PORTUGUESE AMERICAN  
CIVIC PARTICIPATION (OCTOBER 2000)<sup>2</sup>**

The *Portuguese American Citizenship Project* is based on the assumption that the Portuguese Americans are significantly less active than the general population and have suffered as a consequence. There is substantial subjective and objective evidence to support the assertion that Portuguese are different.

All of the papers presented at the *Who Are the Portuguese* conference argued that the Portuguese Americans are like everyone else. If that is true, why are Portuguese Americans second class citizens, why are they shut out of many government jobs, why don't they become citizens, why are they so much less educated than the rest of the population?

On the economic paper, the unskilled Portuguese American workers are now being affected by trade agreements opening U.S. markets to more textile and other imports. Unemployment may be low - it may be easy to get a position at McDonalds after losing a union job but the pay and benefits are significantly different. These workers simply put are more at risk - and they know it. The economic paper glosses over this distinction and really lends nothing to our understanding.

The political paper concludes (as does virtually all of the other papers in their respective areas of study) that Portuguese Americans are just like everyone else, specifically they do not report different levels of political and civic participation than those of non-Portuguese Americans.

That conclusion is in my opinion contrary is supported by some data which is not credible and ignores data uncovered by the survey which does not support that thesis.

Over the past two years, in interviews I conducted in New England (and in New Jersey), Portuguese Americans and non-Portuguese Americans alike repeat the litany that Portuguese Americans are politically invisible.

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<sup>2</sup> Speaking notes for presentation at conference organized by the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, UMASS-Dartmouth, October 2000.

They do not become citizens in great numbers, those who are citizens do not register to vote, and those who do register do not vote. In my own examination of official registration and voting data, I have found some support for the argument that Portuguese do not become citizens and they do not register.

I also found, however, that the Portuguese Americans who do register to vote come out at or above the rate of the general populace.

The central supporting data that 60 percent of Portuguese Americans report always voting in local elections is wildly overstated and undermines the entire paper. Local elections are typically no more than 15 percent of registered voters overall. That 60 percent number (and the 21 percent "who sometimes miss one") is unusable. If 35 percent of the non-Portuguese Americans always vote in local elections and 60 percent of Portuguese Americans do the same but the average turnout is less than 15 percent, someone is lying.

A glaring statistic from the survey was the numbers of Portuguese American respondents who are not citizens and the education levels of those who were cited as citizens.

In the Southeast Massachusetts study, 14 percent of the Luso Americans were not U.S. citizens and 24 percent of the Taunton survey. It is likely that the non-citizen rate is significantly higher in New Bedford and Fall River.

Automatically these respondents are excluded from the survey but they are by definition politically inactive. If we are measuring the relative political and civic participation of Portuguese Americans as an ethnic group, why exclude the least active?

We are told that standard political science theory postulates that the greater the education level the more politically involvement. Yet the survey indicates that 50 percent of the Portuguese Americans do not have a high school degree. The report asserts that this undereducated group is as politically active as the general population. If that is true, the original political science theory is turned upside down. That must be explained - if it is true.