



Column: Greater civic engagement will make Latinos a political force

Giovanna Negretti

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This year's elections in key Massachusetts cities have marked some important milestones for Latinos.

Not only did Dominican-born William Lantigua become the first Latino mayor in Massachusetts, but for the first time, two-thirds of the Lawrence City Council is now Latino.

In Springfield, Jose Tosado, a Puerto Rican, received the most votes for city council, and two more Latinos — Zaida Luna and Clodo Concepci3n — were elected to newly formed districts.

In Boston, F3lix Arroyo won handily for city councilor at-large. In all, about 50 Latinos this year ran for local offices in local primaries and 35 of them moved on to the general elections.

Ordinarily, this is something likely to be applauded: Latinos finally making their own patches in the state's political quilt. However, numbers only tell part of the story. There is still a lack of political recognition by wider mainstream political establishment and an absence of strong leadership among Massachusetts Latinos.

Despite these gains, most leaders of major political parties, candidates, and pundits in this state still dismiss Latinos by taking their votes for granted or disregarding them as non-voters. Some still condescendingly refer to the Latino community as some "sleeping giant" that, once awakened, will become some potent force with the potential to impact all elections.

The reality is that Latinos have been awake and kicking around for quite some time. In fact, the past 10 years has seen a steady increase in Latino voter participation and candidates running for office all across the state.

In Lawrence and Springfield, the number of Latino candidates for elected office has doubled. Latino advocacy efforts, media presence and political participation have risen as well. This has produced Latino politicians that represent a wide spectrum of political stripes, which shows that Massachusetts is a microcosm of national trends that both Democrats and Republicans are too slowly grasping when it comes to understanding the emerging Latino political power. The sooner that one political party can comprehend and maximize on this political diversity of Latinos, the better their chances of capturing more of this critical vote.

Is this awakening giant progressive or conservative? Long taken for granted by Democrats and ignored by Republicans, the question now is where these voters will sway in local and statewide elections?

The complexity of the matter is heightened because Latinos across Massachusetts still lack adequate voice and leadership on some of our most important issues — such as federal immigration reform and access to in-state college tuition rates for all immigrants. For the most part, our elected Latino leaders choose to keep themselves "invisible" on these controversial issues. Perhaps this is because their political power is so new and there is a tendency among this first generation of elected leaders to not "rock the boat" and to instead

stay within designated legislative comfort zones. But our need for action is only grows more urgent with each election cycle.

By taking such a passive leadership style, some of our own promising political "leaders" have failed to create a sustainable political force within the Latino community in Massachusetts. The problem is serious because the lack of political force translates into the passage of policies and other measures that end up demonizing our community regardless of whether we have been here for generations or have recently immigrated. For example, if our Latino elected officials would have taken a strong lead on legislation that would allow immigrant students to pay in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities, the issue would be more supported by mainstream policy makers and media because these Latino leaders would bring credibility to the issue while helping to galvanize support on the grassroots level.

We should all recognize the important milestones that have been passed this year with the record number of Latino candidates for elected office that we have seen across the state. Latinos also need to capitalize on their political maturation in this state and begin to develop and demand a different kind of political leadership — one that educates the community on the issues at hand and engages masses of people to create change while contributing to a more cohesive social fabric in this state and in this nation.

It's not just about electing Latino candidates or registering people to vote. It's also about holding elected officials and political parties accountable to their promises to be more inclusive and responsive and electing candidates based on their potential for real leadership on issues of critical importance-not just based on their identity. By this, we ensure a more holistic approach to civic engagement, where Latinos are truly integrated, equipped and motivated to participate in every aspect of the very essence of what this county is all about: democracy.

That's the real giant that we as a society should be working to awaken.

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Giovanna Negretti is co-founder and executive director of "Aste", a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the political, social and economic standing of Latinos in Massachusetts.

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