INTRODUCTION

In February 1999, the Luso-American Foundation launched The Portuguese American Citizenship Project with the goal of encouraging Portuguese Americans to become U.S. citizens of Portuguese descent, register to vote, and vote.

The Project has worked with more than 70 religious, fraternal, and labor organizations in 27 communities in five states, from Massachusetts to California. We have assisted organizations and their members in identifying priorities, collecting information, and developing and implementing campaign strategies.

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 data on political participation at the local, state and federal levels.

Finally, the paper will attempt to draw conclusions as to how the political involvement of the Portuguese Americans in U.S. elections affects bilateral relations between Portugal and the United States and more specifically how this involvement directly or indirectly affects the health and well being of the Azores. It should be noted at the outset that an estimated 80 percent of Portuguese immigrants to the United States immigrated or have ancestors who emmigrated from the Azores.

1 Author’s note: The author recognizes that this presentation will not rise to the level of an academic treatise. The information presented is an offshoot of the primary and essential purpose of the Project, i.e., to promote civic participation. The data is the result of development of baseline voting studies which measures the voting strength of Portuguese American organizations. Any conclusions drawn from this data are, of necessity, subject to a variety of interpretations. Comments and criticisms are welcomed. Background information on the Portuguese American Citizenship Project may be found at www.portugueseamerican.org

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 the Portuguese American Citizenship Project.
BACKGROUND;

The Challenge

Integration of immigrant communities into the political arena is an ongoing struggle for U.S. 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.

The Portuguese American Citizenship Project 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 standard 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. An overwhelming majority of these immigrants have origins in the Azores not continental Portugal.

Like other ethnic groups Portuguese Americans 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 involved in civic affairs than other communities, and consequently, enjoying less influence over their own 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.

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 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

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

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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, the following graph presents the difference in voter turnout between parish’s heads of household and the city average.

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.
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.

Santo Cristo is in a sense the deep end of the immigrant community. If an immigrant recently arrived or arrived many decades ago but still has “saudades” or longing for Portugal, Santo Cristo and neighboring parishes are where these individuals will gravitate to.

By comparison, St Elizabeth parish less than 20 kilometers away is a strongly ethnic Portuguese church in Bristol, Rhode Island but in a more affluent region. An examination of the breakdown of their citizens versus non-citizens yields a different result.

**ST ELIZABETH DISTRIBUTION OF PARISHIONERS**

![Pie chart showing distribution of St Elizabeth parishioners: 58% U.S. citizen/registered, 31% U.S. citizen/not registered, and 11% not U.S. citizen.](image-url)
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 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
STEP 3 – Measure Results

All community organizations have very limited financial and volunteers 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 cads went out and September 2004 when they did not get delivered.

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 all Portuguese American voters in Tulare, California does confirm, however, that Portuguese immigrants who register to vote take the civic obligation more seriously than the general population. The graphic presented breakdown of voter turnout by age. Note that the Portuguese American community has a higher voter turnout at every age group.
As an aside, the influence of church membership can also be measured. The voter turnout of Espirito Santo parish, a neighborhood parish next to Santo Cristo, shows the parish community outvoting the city by wide margins.
The Portuguese American community in both Tulare and in Fall River exhibits the same uneven voter turnout performance according to age groups. Young people register but vote at a significant lower rate than the rest of the community.

The problem of young people not voting is presented in the following breakdown of Portuguese Americans by age in Hilmar California. Younger voters register to vote – they are the largest segment of the registered voting population - but they provide the smallest numbers of actual voters for all age groups.
STEP 4 – Candidates’ Nights

The Project does not support any candidates nor does it support any issues. It does however assist in creating a forum where the community can ask candidates for political office about issues and priorities which they consider important to their welfare.

Candidates' nights are forums where members of the community acting as a group can directly address candidates for public office on what the community wants – a reversal of the normal direction of political discourse where the candidates tell the voters what politicians think is important. Citizens, not the candidates, determine the agenda of an election campaign.

The following document is a listing of questions put to candidates for city council in Santa Clara, California.

The Portuguese-American Forum of Santa Clara
“Candidates’ Night” forum questions
November 3rd, 2006

1. Elderly care is an important issue to our community and most of the Portuguese American Seniors are not proficient in English. In order for them not to feel shut out of the city senior citizen center, services and activities, translation assistance would need to be provided. If elected how would you address this matter? And when?

2. A large development is being proposed near Santa Clara University and Downtown area. If approved, will it be funded Santa Clara taxpayers? Or whom will fund it and how?

3. According to the San Jose Mercury News, August 24 2006, there is a proposal being presented for a Korean town in Santa Clara. Do you believe that with the ethnic diversity that we have in Santa Clara, we should have a single ethnic identity for this city?

4. If due to budget restrains you had to limit some of the programs and services you propose to support, which ones would you eliminate?
A candidates’ night is not simply a one-evening event. After completing a candidates’ night, follow up letters to elected officials who participated in the event are extremely useful.

To ensure that the Candidates’ Nights are not filled with empty promises, the debate is videotaped. After the election is held, a review of the video tape is accomplished to determine what promises were made by each successful candidate. Midway through the newly elected official’s term of office, a letter is sent requesting an update on fulfilling these promises. The continued interaction between the community and the officials will keep the community aware of policies affecting them and make their local politicians more accountable.

The following a sample letter written by the parishioners of Mount Carmel parish in New Bedford Massachusetts is an example of this follow up process.

Dear Councilor Coelho,

Once again, thank you for participating in October 2005 Candidates’ Night at Mount Carmel Parish. Our community appreciated learning your positions on important issues and how you planned to address these problems.

Our civic involvement is not limited to one evening’s debate between candidates but rather an on-going exchange between our elected officials and the community. In that light, we wish to know what action has been taken regarding the important points you raised during your presentation.

Specifically:

- Improving safety: You stated that you would solve police contracts, reinstate gang units, reopen the North and South End police stations,
make all police officers community police officers, and create a master plan that includes a formal headquarters

- Accountability: You stated you would review the city budget, looking especially to reduce overtime, and look at other cities for models on how to save money

- Adult Education: You stated you would make it as easy as possible for immigrants to learn English, especially by bringing classes into their neighborhoods

- Snow: You stated that you would work to replace plows lost in privatization

A brief answer to these questions – not more than one page - would be appreciated. Please reply at your earliest convenience to the Immigrant Assistance Center at the address listed above.

We plan to compile into a composite report all of the responses from the Candidates’ Night participants who were elected in the November 2005 City Election.

After we have completed this report, but before it is made available to our community, we will send you a copy so that you can ensure your views and actions are accurately presented. Finally, we will translate the responses into Portuguese.

Sincerely,

CONCLUSION

Does greater political involvement by Portuguese Americans in the United States benefit Portugal in general and the Azores in particular?

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. The Project does not espouse any position vis a vis the foreign relations of the United States.
with Portugal. We are only concerned about promotion of voting by Portuguese Americans.

The questions posed to city councilmen in Santa Clara California and the letter to the city council woman in New Bedford all relate to local issues. A mayor in New England will lose an election if he or she cannot efficiently remove snow in the winter. In California, the Azorean American dominated dairy industry faces three political key issues: milk prices, availability and pricing of water, and environmental concerns. These are all domestic issues.

A former leader of the U.S. House of Representatives famously stated that all politics is local. To the Portuguese American community, this statement applies to communities on both the East Coast and the West Coast.

Notwithstanding the paramount importance of neighborhood politics, effective political organizing by the Portuguese American community at a city and state level does have consequences for the national government.

In 2002, in a primary election for the Democratic nomination for Governor of the Rhode Island, a Portuguese American ran against two formidable opponents. At the beginning of the campaign, the Portuguese American was estimated to win only 5 percent of the vote. The day before the primary election, the gentleman was estimated to win 13 percent of the vote. When the votes were counted, the Portuguese American won 25 percent of the vote and effectively ruined the candidacy of one particular candidate who was counting on Portuguese support.

The following graph from a social club in Cumberland Rhode Island illustrates the exceptional turnout by the Portuguese community in this election. The members voted at almost three times the rate of the state wide average.
In 2006, the candidate who lost the primary for governor ran and won a seat in the U.S. Senate, a win which was necessary for the Democratic Party to become the majority party in the Senate. Small elections often have large consequences.

The lesson of 2002 was not lost on any political figure in Rhode Island.

The question remains however whether this political mobilization has a demonstrable benefit to the Azores.

There are two issues which I am reasonably conversant with which can be used as examples: the problem of forced repatriation of Portuguese citizens who have convicted of major crimes in the United States and the negotiations surrounding the use by U.S. Armed Forces of the Lajes Air Base.

The deportation question is complicated and had plagued the foreign relations of the United States since 1996 when the law was first enacted. Portugal has a problem of several hundred repatriations while Latin America has a problem with tens of thousands of repatriations.

Regardless of the political strength of the Portuguese American community in the U.S., the law will not be changed on Portugal’s account – the problem is bigger than any one country. There, however, are measures to mitigate the damage caused by the repatriations.
The District Attorney and Sheriff of Bristol County, Massachusetts are contributing to the salary of a NGO social worker in New Bedford to work with the soon to be deported inmates at the county jail. The purpose of the interviews is to determine the needs of the individuals about to be deported and how best to assist in the assimilation of these individuals into Azorean society.

The motivation for these officials to support this effort is partly altruistic, both have personal ties to the Azores, but also very political. It is understood that the forced repatriation is having a serious impact on the family members left behind and the issue is one of the key domestic political problems, local politicians face. By addressing the impact on the U.S. community, these officials are in fact contributing to a more effective process of assisting these individuals in their establishment of a new home. They are helping the Azores.

On the Lajes Airbase question, the problem is more complicated. Questions surrounding Lajes arise regarding the obligations of Portugal toward the NATO alliance, questions regarding the importance of the base itself to U.S. strategic interests, and questions regarding the economic and social impact of the American forces on the Terceiran society. Semi annual meetings between Portuguese and U.S. officials are held to determine housekeeping details such as labor agreements, environmental concerns, and U.S. donation of surplus equipment. To the best of my knowledge, no U.S. politician, much less a politician from a state with a significant Portuguese American population, has intervened in these negotiations.

But domestic political concerns permeate every part of the U.S. government. It is what makes us a democracy. If similar circumstances were surrounding negotiations with Israel, Ireland or Greece for example, it is likely that domestic political considerations would play an important part in the drawing up of the U.S. negotiating position.

While there are many reasons why the Lajes Airbase talks are left solely to government officials, one fact is clear: no one, even in communities with the strongest ties to Portugal, has brought up the Lajes negotiations as a political football to kick around in U.S. political campaigns. Without pressure from the grass roots, domestic political considerations play no part in the deliberations.

Domestic pressure can and does make a difference. I was stationed in the U.S. Foreign Service in Communist Poland from 1976 to 1978. Poland, as part of the Warsaw Pact, at least in theory, had its armed forces ready to attack Western Europe.

That unpleasant fact did not prevent Congressmen elected by Polish American communities from issuing almost daily warnings to the State Department and to the Department of Defense not to do anything which might harm the citizens of
Poland, that is the fathers, mothers, sons and daughters of Polish American immigrants - who happened to be the Congressmen’s constituents.

There is no answer to the question of reliably measuring political influence of the ethnic community. It is difficult to impossible to weigh the political influence a country has in the United States and what this influence can actually accomplish until a point is reached where serious and vital interests are at stake. Then and only then can anyone determine who their friends truly are and what they are capable of achieving.