

From the Clinic to the Polls: Why Voting Matters for Latino Medical Professionals

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ABSTRACT

There is a well-established connection between voting and health as referenced by the American Medical Association (American Medical Association n.d.). However, the Latino electorate continues to face suppression, a challenge that also affects Latino medical professionals and students. Latino medical professionals are a critical part of the healthcare delivery system, often serving patients who share their ethnicity (Hutchinson, Davis, & Mulligan, 2010). Latino medical professionals play a crucial role in representing the needs of the Latino community, not only in healthcare delivery but also in shaping policy decisions that impact the health of their communities.

In this article, the authors highlight the persistent barriers to voting faced by Latino medical professionals and their impacts on community health. The authors offer tangible solutions, which aim to reduce voting barriers and promote civic health within the Latino medical community, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding policies that provide time off to vote.

Keywords: *Voting and health, Latino electorate, Civic engagement, Latino medical professionals, Civic health*

Voting is not only a fundamental democratic right but also a critical determinant of community health and well-being (Nelson, Sloan, & Chandra, 2019). For Latino medical professionals, who often serve our own (Latino) communities (Hutchinson, Davis, & Mulligan, 2010). The ability to vote is essential in advocating for policies that address health disparities and improve our communities' health outcomes. Despite this, the Latino vote continues to face suppression, a challenge that extends to our medical colleagues and students.

The impacts are profound and undeniable. Latino communities in the United States bear the heavy burden of healthcare disparities, perpetuating a cycle of limited access to quality care and negative health outcomes. The stark reality is painted by statistics revealing higher rates of chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension (Pew Research Center, 2008), coupled with low insurance rates leading to reduced access to preventive services and timely medical interventions (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2023). Our community's well-being often falls behind, caught in systemic barriers within our health institutions compounded by disenfranchisement in electoral processes – ***issues that can be addressed when all members of our community vote.***

As the second-largest group of voting-age Americans (Pew Research Center, 2024), Latinos wield significant influence in elections (Voto Latino, n.d.) – but in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, only 53.7% turned out to vote (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2020). With an expected 17.5 million Latino voters casting ballots in 2024, and a quarter of them participating for the first time in a presidential election, our collective impact cannot be overstated (Hutchinson, Davis, & Mulligan, 2010).

Evidence indicates that Latino voters frequently face significant barriers at the polls, such as longer wait times, stringent voter ID laws, and fewer polling locations per capita compared to white voters (Brennan Center for Justice, n.d.) In the 2018 election, 9% of Latino voters were informed that they lacked the proper identification to vote, while only 3% of white voters reported the same issue(Vij, 2020). Additionally, studies have shown that Latino voters, on average, experience a 46% longer wait time at polling stations compared to their white counterparts (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.; American Public Health Association, 2023).

These barriers do not spare the medical community. Medical students and physicians face unique hurdles that hinder their voting participation, exacerbated by demanding schedules and logistical complexities (American Medical Association, 2023). These challenges include obtaining identification documents, language barriers, transportation issues, and limited polling hours. For medical professionals, long working hours often overlap with polling times and frequent relocations for medical training can make participation even more challenging (UCSF School of Medicine, 2022).

A solution is needed and Latino Medical Students are paving the way. Notably, The Latino Medical Student Association's (LMSA) Resolution 03-2024, "Affirming Voting as a Healthcare Right and Promoting Civic Engagement Among Medical Students," emphasizes voting as a healthcare right and a pillar of democracy and offers solutions. LMSA proposes comprehensive resolutions to address this challenge, including drafting policy statements, partnering with organizations for voter registration, organizing drives, advocating for protected voting time, and promoting voter education initiatives(Latino Medical Student Association, 2024).

Addressing these issues can start with initiatives like protected voting time but can expand to voter registrations within our health institutions and patient interactions. Nonpartisan efforts from organizations like Vot-ER make it easy to boost political efficacy (Pew Research Center, 2015) and civic health at-large. By promoting civic engagement and ensuring that our eligible colleagues can vote without barriers, we can begin to dismantle the systemic inequities that perpetuate poor health outcomes ***ensuring that the voices and needs of the Latino community are heard and addressed.***

With over 350 institutional partnerships, 700 participating sites, and 50,000 medical professionals taking action inside their healthcare centers and clinics with Vot-ER, there is a growing movement dedicated to uplifting our communities' voices in shaping local, state, & federal health policy, through the power of our vote. This vital work starts with each of us.

Health is always on the ballot and the 2024 election offers a significant opportunity for Latinos to have a say. Guaranteeing protected time for Latino medical professionals and students to cast their votes isn't solely an issue of equity; it's a fundamental step in empowering our future healthcare leaders to advocate for policies that align with the needs of our communities.

Let's unite in ensuring every voice is heard this election year and beyond. Together, we can empower the voices of our Latino colleagues and students, forging a path towards healthier communities.

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