UCLA Voting Rights Project

The Effects of Section 203 Language Access Coverage on 2016 and 2020 Election Turnout

University of California, Los Angeles

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About the UCLA VRP

The UCLA Voting Rights Project (UCLA VRP) is a nonpartisan educational at the University of California, Los Angeles. The UCLA VRP educates undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree students through our voting rights clinic. The UCLA VRP works with experts and election officials across the country to ensure equitable access to voting.

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The Voting Rights Act's Section 203 provisions were designed to expand access to the ballot for language minority voters; however, the measurable effects of these federal mandates remain understudied. Seeking to fill this gap, our study investigates whether bilingual voting requirements under Section 203 significantly increase Latino and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) voter turnout.

The History of Section 203

The 1975 amendments to the Voting Rights Act added Section 203 to address the exclusion of language minorities from participating in the electoral process (52 USC § 10503(a)). Section 203 holds that states or political subdivisions with either: more than 10,000 voting-age citizens or greater than 5% of voting age citizens that are members of a single-language minority group, have limited English proficiency and have high illiteracy rates, are required to provide translated copies of all voting materials (52 USC § 10503(b)(A)(i-ii)).

Political subdivisions with decreased literacy rates containing part of a Native American reservation with more than 5% of "American Indian or Alaska Native" voting age citizens that are members of a single language minority and are limited in English proficiency are also covered under Section 203 (52 USC § 10503 (b)(A)(i-ii)). Section 203 mandates that oral assistance also be provided. While required for all languages, this is especially critical for unwritten Native American languages (U.S. Department of Justice 2024, July 15).

Every five years, the U.S. Census Bureau determines which jurisdictions, and political subdivisions fall under the purview of section 203. The latest determination came in 2021 and found that a total population of over 24 million voting-age citizens resided in the 331 jurisdictions covered by Section 203. This was a 22% increase from 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021, Dec. 8). As of 2021, over 20 million Hispanic, 3 million Asian, and 236,942 American Indian and Alaska Native voting age citizens reside in the jurisdictions currently covered by section 203(U.S. Census Bureau 2021, Dec. 8).

Section 203 and Increased Latino Voter Turnout

With approximately 20,386,604 eligible Hispanic voters and 3,621,264 eligible AAPI voters residing in jurisdictions covered by Section 203, we seek to answer the critical question of how Section 203 coverage, encompassing both first-time designations and recertifications in the 2016 determinations, impacted Latino and AAPI voter turnout in the 2020 election. Or, put more simply, how has expanded language access at the polls meaningfully shaped Latino and AAPI voter participation?

a. Why Latino and AAPI Turnout Should Increase in Covered Jurisdictions

Our study seeks to challenge the belief that language access provisions provide a purely symbolic gesture to non-English proficient voters. Rather, the data supports the theory that tangible language access positively influences Latino and AAPI electoral participation (Jones-

Correa 2005). Analyzing various theories of political participation such as Social Participation Theory, Political Incorporation Theory and Rational Choice Theory, we lay a comprehensive framework for understanding Latino and AAPI voter mobilization, particularly regarding language access provisions. The intersection of social participation, historical institutional barriers, rational choice decision-making, socioeconomic inequalities, practical implementation, procedural impacts, and identity-driven mobilization provides the analytical foundation for the empirical examination of VRA Section 203's impact presented in this study.

Particularly our study seeks to replicate prior academic research documenting the positive impact language access mandates like Section 203 have on electoral participation of limited-English-proficient communities. For example, in 2011, research found that Latino voters of limited-English proficiency had increased election turnout of 6 to 11 percent when translated election materials were required by law (Hopkins 2011). Another study found that between 2006 and 2012, counties covered by Section 203 saw Latino voter registrations increase 14 to 16 percent and Asian American voter turnout increase 15 to 18 points, compared to demographically similar, but uncovered jurisdictions (Fraga et al., 2016).

What our study found is that language access leads to increased Latino and AAPI voter participation. We prove that once barriers to voting, such as lack of language access, are removed, the "costs" to voting lessen, and minority electoral participation rises (Jones-Correa 2005). Absent barriers to voting, Latinos and AAPI voters benefit from voting as an expressive act of identity and can view their identities as politically relevant, similarly leading to increased electoral participation. In other words, access to voting information and the polls leads to higher voter turnout as does the feeling of empowerment and belonging, two things directly provided by Section 203.

The increased compliance of jurisdictions covered by Section 203 raises hopes for the efficacy of this study. Research shows a high compliance record for those jurisdictions required to follow the Section 203 language access requirements (Fraga et al., 2016). This increased compliance provides a sturdy database of election turnout results to test our theories and provides hope for the effectiveness of Section 203 in serving its purpose of expanding voter opportunity.

Methodological Approach

In this study, we employ a quasi-experimental design using inverse probability weighting (IPW) to estimate the causal effect of Section 203 language assistance on Latino and AAPI turnout. Counties newly covered or recertified in 2016 serve as the treated group, while control counties are those within the same states that did not meet the Section 203 thresholds. We aggregate individual-level voter registration and turnout data from the L2 National Voter File to the county level and measure the change in Latino and AAPI turnout between the 2016 and 2020

presidential elections.[1] A logistic regression model of key pre-treatment covariates (e.g., Latino citizen voting age population (CVAP) /AAPI CVAP, education, prior turnout) produces propensity scores used to construct IPW weights that balance treated and control counties. Weighted linear regressions and adjusting for baseline demographics, prior turnout trends, and state competitiveness, then estimate the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT), with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors ensuring valid inference.

Latino Turnout Analysis

For the Latino turnout analysis, we assembled a county-level dataset of jurisdictions subject to the Section 203 2016 Spanish-language assistance determinations. We assembled datasets at the county level concerning jurisdictions subject to the 2016 Spanish-language assistance determinations for all analyses of Latino turnout. These counties were located nationwide, including states like California, Texas, and Florida, where statewide language assistance mandates also exist. *See* Figure 1.

Figure 1: 2016 Spanish Language Determination Map (County Level).

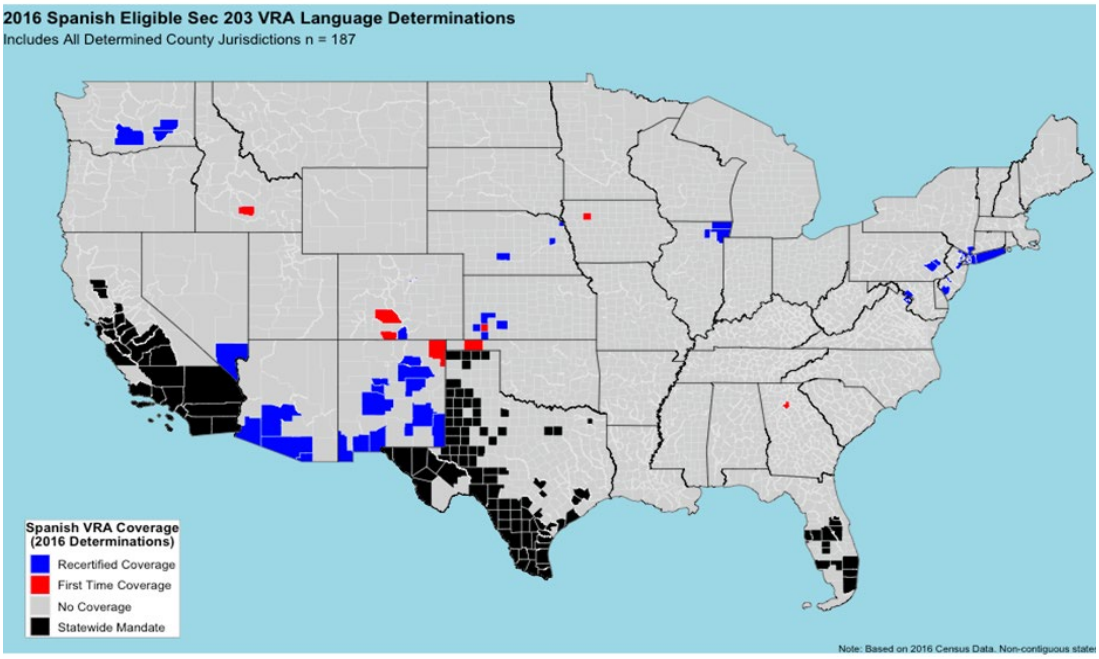


Figure 1 illustrates all U.S. counties covered under the 2016 Census determinations for Spanish language assistance under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act. Counties in red represent jurisdictions that received Spanish-language coverage for the first time in 2016. Counties in blue reflect those that received continued coverage based on recertification. Counties in black are also under continued coverage but fall within statewide mandates in California, Texas, and Florida states, where language assistance must be provided in all covered jurisdictions. The map captures the geographic distribution and policy reach of Section 203 coverage as of 2016, encompassing 187 counties

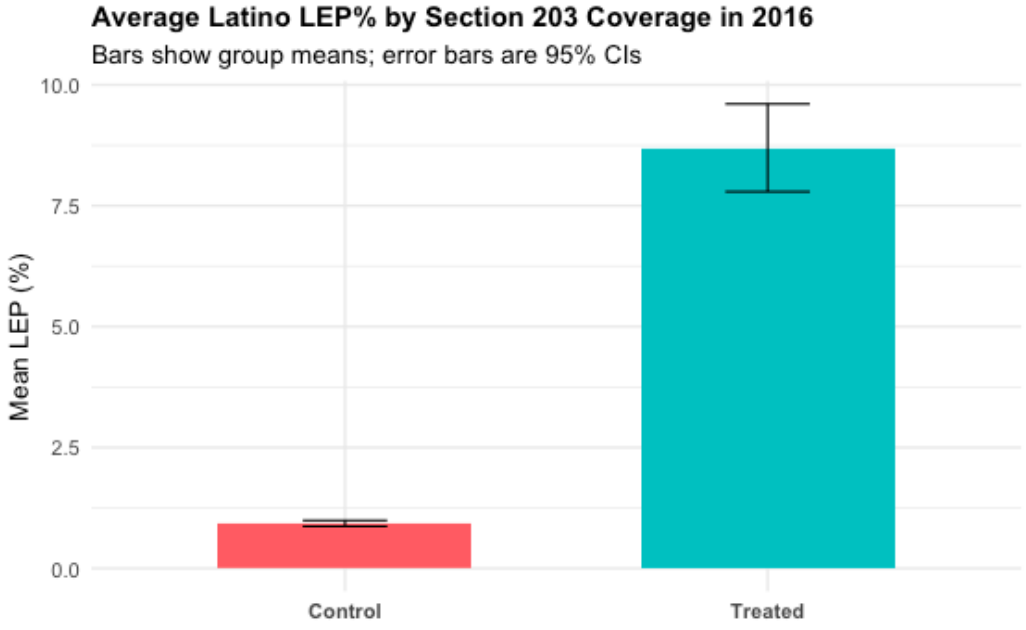
[1] The L2 file is a commercial voter data product compiled from official state voter rolls and enhanced with modeled race and ethnicity indicators.

The "treated" group for our analysis comprises the 183 counties newly covered or recertified in 2016.[2] This allows us to measure the combined effect of first-time and continued Spanish-language coverage on Latino turnout during the 2020 presidential election.

The comparison or "control" groups are those counties within the same states that did not meet the Section 203 threshold. In comparing these groups, we looked for the change in Latino turnout between the 2016 and 2020 general elections, measured as the county-level percentage point difference. This approach captures the within-county change over time, helps control for time-invariant county characteristics and mirrors the logic of a difference-in-differences framework even in the absence of multiple post-treatment periods.

To address concerns about variation in limited English proficient (LEP) rates across jurisdictions, we present a comparison of mean Latino LEP percentages between treated and control counties based on 2016 Section 203 determinations. As shown in Figure 2, treated counties exhibit significantly higher average Latino LEP rates (mean ≈ 8.5%) compared to control counties (mean ≈ 1%). This pattern is consistent with the criteria for Section 203 coverage, which includes thresholds for LEP populations. The large gap in LEP rates supports our argument that treated counties are more likely to benefit from bilingual voting materials and services. Our findings show that these counties also experienced higher Latino turnout, suggesting that language assistance may be especially impactful in jurisdictions with larger LEP populations.

Figure 2: Latino Average LEP% by Section 203



[2] Although 187 counties were eligible to be analyzed, four were excluded due to lack of available data.

AAPI Turnout Analysis

Our analysis of AAPI turnout follows the same methodological approach as that for Latino voters. We focused on 19 counties that received Section 203 coverage in 2016 for one or more AAPI languages. *See* Figure 3.

We compare these "treated" counties to similar counties without such coverage to measure any differences in voter turnout. Using the L2 voter file, we calculate turnout rates for AAPI voters by aggregating individual voter data to the county level.

Figure 3**:** 2016 AAPI Combined Language Determination Map (County Level).

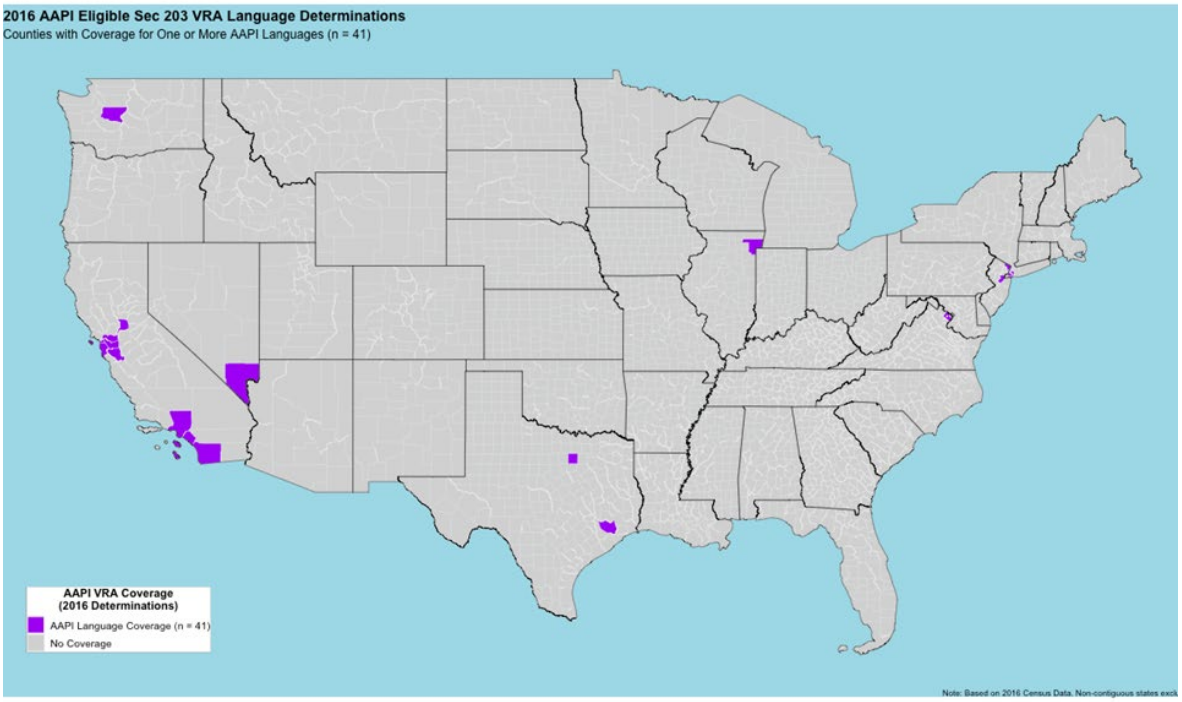
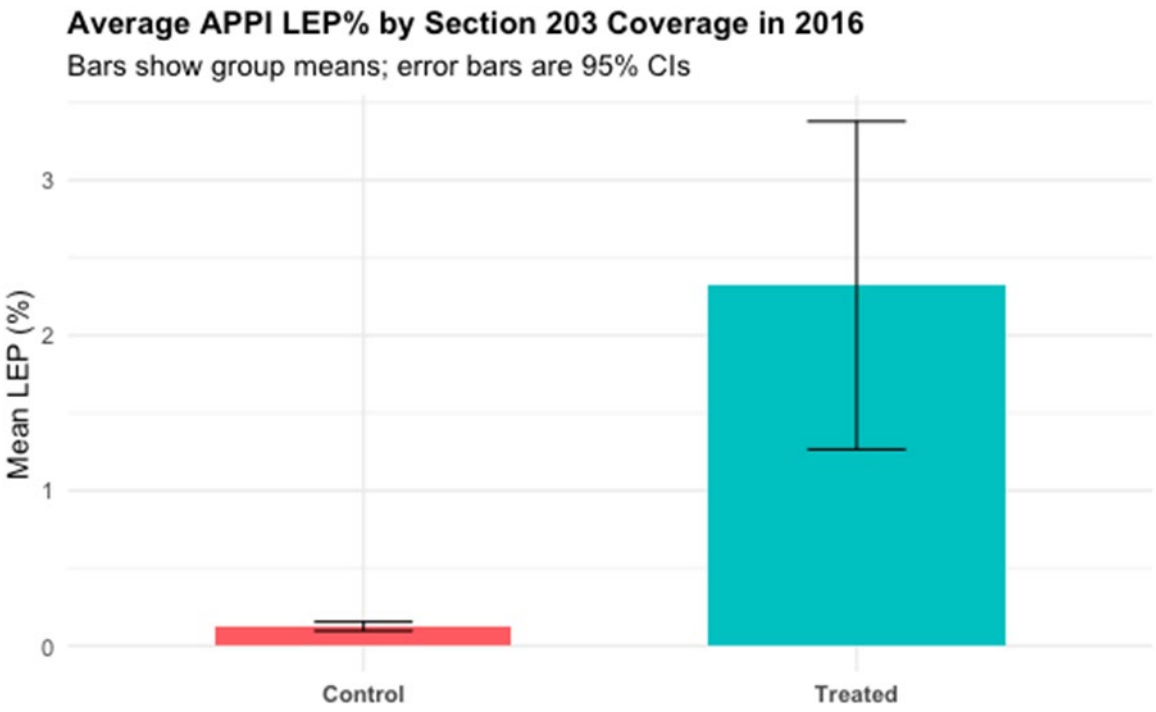


Figure 3: The map above presents the counties covered under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act for one or more Asian-language groups based on the 2016 determinations. The map visualizes the geographic distribution of these covered counties. For visual clarity, the map displays only the contiguous United States and excludes jurisdictions in Alaska and Hawaii.

As a preliminary validation step, we assess whether Section 203 jurisdictions covered for AAPI languages have higher LEP rates among their AAPI populations. As Figure 4 illustrates, treated counties that were newly covered in 2016 exhibit significantly higher AAPI LEP rates (mean ≈ 2.3%) than control counties (mean ≈ 0.1%). This stark difference is consistent with Section 203's coverage criteria, which target jurisdictions where language minorities face substantial barriers to electoral participation. These findings affirm that Section 203 effectively identifies areas with high linguistic need and set the stage for our analysis of its impact on AAPI voter turnout.

Figure 4: AAPI Average LEP% by Section 203



Latino Turnout Regression Results

Table 1: Effect of Section 203 Spanish Coverage on Change in Latino Turnout

	Robust HC2 se
	Difference in Latino Turnout (2020-2016)
Section 203 Coverage for Spanish Language	3.361***
	(0.340)
Latino Citizen Voting Age Population	0.072***
	(0.012)
2016 Dem Vote Share	−0.045***
	(0.009)
Change in Latino Turnout (2016 - 2012)	−0.290***
	(0.021)
Constant	−0.737
	(0.656)
Observations	1,421
R^2	0.178
Adjusted R^2	0.176
Residual Std. Error	2.996 (df = 1416)
F Statistic	76.771*** (df = 4; 1416)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
	N = 183 counties (Treated Sample)

On average, Latino turnout was more than 3 percentage points higher in these covered counties compared to similar counties without coverage. This finding underscores the positive impact of providing bilingual election materials and assistance on voter participation in Latino communities.

Figure 5: Predicted Change in Latino Turnout

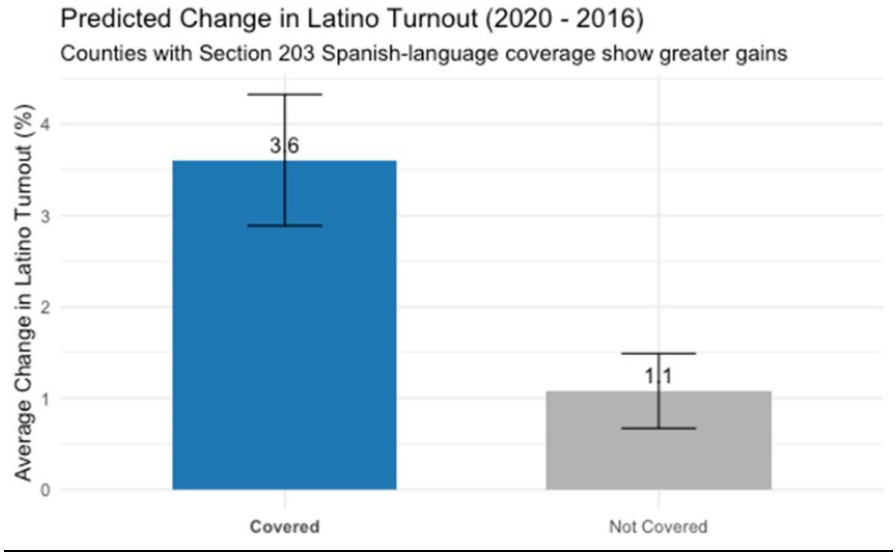


Figure 5 illustrates the predicted change in Latino turnout between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections for counties covered under Section 203 compared to those not covered. On average, covered counties experienced a noticeably higher increase in turnout. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the group mean.

AAPI Turnout Regression Results

Table 2: Effect of Section 203 AAPI Language Coverage on Change in AAPI Combined Turnout

	Robust HC2 se
	Difference in AAPI Turnout (2020-2016)
Section 203 Coverage for AAPI Languages	6.011***
	(0.844)
AAPI Citizen Voting Age Population	−0.065***
	(0.021)
2016 Dem Vote Share	−0.198***
	(0.050)
Change in AAPI Turnout (2016 - 2012)	−0.002
	(0.019)
Constant	7.571***
	(1.476)
Observations	349
R^2	0.151
Adjusted R^2	0.141
Residual Std. Error	1.797 (df = 344)
F Statistic	15.252*** (df = 4; 344)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
	N = 19 counties (Treated Sample)

On average, AAPI turnout was more than 6 percentage points higher in these covered counties compared to similar counties without coverage. This finding underscores the positive impact of providing bilingual election materials and assistance on voter participation in Asian American communities.

Figure 6: Predicted Change in AAPI Turnout

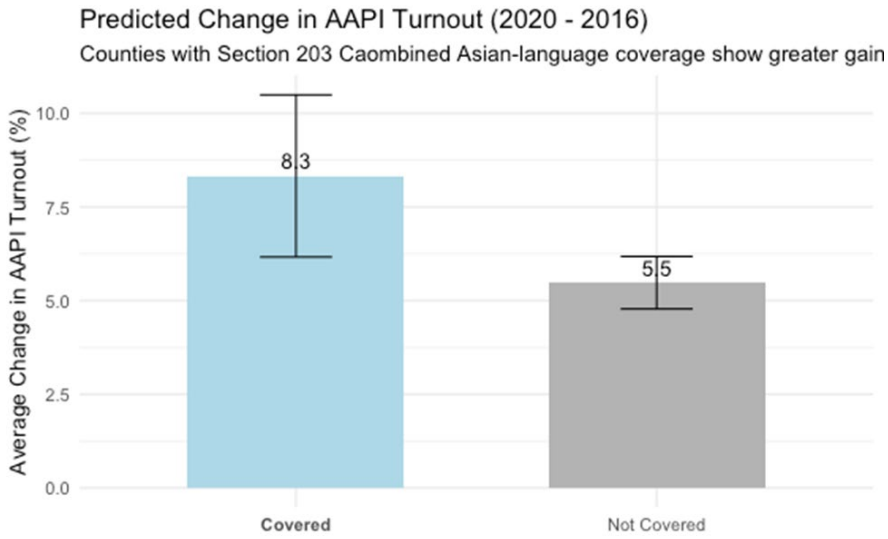


Figure 6 illustrates the predicted change in AAPI turnout between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections for counties covered under Section 203 compared to those not covered. On average, covered counties experienced a noticeably higher increase in turnout. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the group means.

While our findings show lower levels of increased turnout for Latino and AAPI voters than the Hopkins and Fraga studies done in the decade prior (with increase levels at 3 and 6 percent respectively) these drops may be attributable to the fact that many counties analyzed had already been covered by Section 203 in the years or even decades prior. This means that large gains in turnout may have likely already occurred in the years closer in time to the initiation of coverage. However, the fact that there are still statistically significant increases in LEP voter turnout in recent years may be illustrative of the lasting, positive impact of Section 203 on minority LEP communities.

II. The Continued Need for Section 203 and Language Access to the Polls

This year, our nation celebrates the 50th Anniversary of the implementation of Section 203. While Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act was reauthorized by Congress in 2006 to last until 2032, challenges to voting rights, particularly the VRA, are rampant. It is now more important than ever to underscore the importance of Section 203 and preserve it for future elections.

The 1975 Amendments to the Voting Rights Act, which led to the implementation of Section 203's language access provisions, were implemented as a response to widespread voting

discrimination against Latinos in the nation. Among the commonly used tactics of Latino voter suppression were English-only elections and the ban on any language assistance to non-English proficient voters. Section 203 and the other amendments at the time not only made it possible for Latinos to vote absent institutional discriminatory practices but it also made it possible for them access the vote in a way that every other English-speaking citizen is entitled to.

Over 24 million voters reside in the jurisdictions currently covered by Section 203, with over 23 million of those voters being Latino or AAPI. This study proves that Section 203 has worked in providing these voters the ability to vote absent language barriers. Continued fair and equitable access to all voters is vital as immigrants and non-English speakers face continuing targeting and attack in the United States.

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