

## Issue Brief: Immigrant Status and Voting Behavior

### Description:

This issue brief focuses on how do non-English speaking immigrants from the Caribbean (focusing primarily on Haitian immigrants) tend to vote when they migrate to the United States. Also, how has their language barrier, along with their prior history in Haiti effect their voting behaviors and political participation in America.

### Key Words:

History, Haitians, Immigration, Voting Behavior, Civic literacy, Civic Skills, Civic Attachment

### Key Points:

- Every wave of migration from Haiti has come during political turmoil
- The most notable civic engagement achievements have been the election of Haitian officials
- The Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act amendment did not protect Haitian immigrants, whom primary languages was Haitian Creole and French
- Haitian-immigrants tended to vote more in local and state elections

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There are *five* major documentation periods of Haitian migrations to the United States: the period of French colonization; the Haitian revolution (1791-1803); the United States occupation of Haiti (1915-1934); the period of the Duvaliers (1957-1986); and the overthrow of President Aristide (1991). Although during these periods Haiti was the first country in the Caribbean to gain its independence from the French through the Haitian Revolution; afterwards, they experienced extreme poverty, violence, and oppression under the dictatorship of Haiti's previous presidents—the Duvalier's and Jean-Bertrand Aristide. During each of these periods Haitians were fleeing from Haiti, primarily to either the United States or France, in

search of political asylum and permanent residence. Hence, every wave of migration from Haiti has come during its political turmoil.

Within the United States, Haitian immigrants migrated to New York City, Florida (primarily Miami), Boston, New Orleans, and Los Angeles in mass amounts. These cities were found to have one of the largest growing population of immigrants in general, however, what attracted many Haitian immigrants to these cities were their advocacy for people in Haiti and Haitian immigrants through the National Coalition for Haitian Rights. The NCHR was created to help many Haitian refugees, who were faced with deportation, remain in their adopted country of America. This was due to a vast amount of Haitian immigrants arriving to America on boats along the shores of Florida. These Haitian immigrants were labeled 'Boat people.'



The largest amount of Haitian immigrants, along with Cuban immigrants migrated to Miami, Florida. However, unlike the Cubans, Haitian immigrants were met with great hostility.

'Almost half (over 95,000) of the state's Haitian-American population lives in Miami-Dade County. Most of the remaining Haitian-Americans in Florida live in Palm Beach (over 30,000) and Broward Counties (over 62,000).

Haitian- Americans are a growing segment of the population in Florida.”

In Florida, a large percentage of the Creole-speaking population of Haitians was prohibited from voting because of their language barrier. In Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act amendment, it was created for the protection of language minorities in the mid 1970s. Immigrants whom were protected under this act were: American Indian, Asian American, Alaskan Natives, and of Spanish heritage. However, this act did not protect Haitian-Americans who primary language was Creole, and English proficiency rate was below that of ‘native-born Americans and even other immigrant groups.’ Creole speaking Haitians in Florida were prevented from voting during the 2000 presidential election because Florida had failed to provide them with language assistance, that they had provided to other immigrant groups. Due to this, a large amount of Haitian voters were turned away from the voting booths.



However, today on the ballots, is the option of French, which is another language spoken by many Haitians.

In Alex Stepick’s, *Civic Engagement of Haitian Immigrants and Haitian Americans in Miami-Dade County* report, Stepick found that there was less political

participation and voting done by Haitian immigrants and Haitian Americans due to: civic literacy, civic skills, and civic attachment. The Haitian population in Miami-Dade County seemed to lack the knowledge of community affairs and political issues, which further influenced them not to vote. Due to their low rates of English proficiency it encouraged their lack of participation and attachment to politics and involvement; also, many Haitian's held strong ties to their culture and Haiti. They were more concerned with the presidential elections going on in their native country of Haiti. However, although many Haitian immigrants and Haitian Americans were Democrats, Haitians were more likely to participate in local and state elections rather than presidential elections, because their state and local officials were more likely to address the 'multiple and immediate pressing needs of individuals and families,' which would receive the most support. Also, many times during these state and local election Haitians themselves were running for office, which made it accessible for other Haitian immigrants to relate and vote more. Life for Haitians in the U.S. tended to be dominated by struggle, therefore, 'For a very large proportion of Haitians their focus in the U.S. is commonly on surviving and getting ahead more than on civic involvement.'

As a solution for more political and voting participation from Haitian immigrants, Stepick's found that churches served as a centrality for many Haitians immigrants; just like how black churches during the Civil Rights Era was a centrality for many Black's, which encouraged them to participate in conventional and nonconventional political participation; thus, churches can also influence Haitian

immigrants political engagement. I think it is extremely important to look at the periods in which Haitian's migrated the most to the U.S because it foreshadows their voting behaviors today in America. Haitian's were leaving Haiti in a time when there was political turmoil, and they were in need of equality not dictatorship, nor oppression. Majority of Haitian-Americans are considered to be Democrats, in which they are in favor of the working class, health insurance, stability, and immigration rights.

#### Works Cited:

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