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Immigrants seeking vote create backlog

CITIZENSHIP PROCESS CAN TAKE NEARLY 18 MONTHS

By Anna Gorman
Los Angeles Times

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LOS ANGELES - Julia Moreno has been following the presidential campaign and studying the issues. She has even chosen her favorite candidate: "La Señora Clinton."

Moreno, a legal immigrant from Guatemala who came to Los Angeles more than 30 years ago, applied for citizenship this summer so she would be able to vote - starting with the 2008 presidential election.

But U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced recently that green card holders who applied after June 1 could have to wait 16 to 18 months for their applications to be processed. For Moreno, that means she probably won't be able to cast her ballot for president.

"It's terrible," said Moreno, 62. "It's a long wait. . . . I want to vote. Mrs. Clinton needs my vote. Maybe my vote will put her in the White House."

Applications spike

Citizenship applications nationwide nearly doubled over the past fiscal year, from 731,000 in 2006 to 1.4 million in 2007. In July and August, the agency received more than 500,000 applications for naturalization - more than three times what it

normally receives in a two-month period.

The numbers soared as immigrants rushed to avoid an application fee increase that took effect July 30, raising the cost from \$400 to \$675. Immigrant rights groups and Spanish-language media also launched a massive citizenship drive called "Ya es hora, ciudadanía" - "It's time, citizenship" - to urge legal permanent residents to naturalize.

Still others were motivated by the debate over immigration reform in Congress this summer that ended without legislation.

"It slowed us down," said Sharon Rummery, spokeswoman for Citizenship and Immigration Services. "We are working very hard to find creative ways to deal with this so that it will lessen the impact."

But she added that the agency still has to go through all the necessary security checks.

"We just hope to give every person their citizenship as quickly as possible without compromising our efficiency, quality or security," Rummery said.

The agency pledged to hire 1,500 new employees to address the workload. Some offices have extended their hours. Others have opened on Saturdays. Before the surge, the average processing time was six to seven months.

Backlog backlash

Despite the efforts to address the backlog, civil rights organizations criticize the agency for its lack of foresight.

"We fault the planners for the situation they are now in," said John Trasvina, president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and

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Educational Fund. "It should have come as no surprise . . . that there would be a lot of people applying."

Trasvina said Latinos, and especially new citizens, are more energized than ever and want to have a voice in the presidential election. Even if many of the applicants are not naturalized in time, Trasvina expects Latinos to have an impact in key states, such as Colorado, New Mexico and Florida.

Manuel Morales, 48, submitted his paperwork in June with his wife and three of his five children. Morales, a pastor at a Los Angeles church, has been in the United States since 1988 and has had his green card since 2000.

"Many people said, 'Today or never,' and I said the same," Morales said. "I love this country more than my own."

Morales said he watched the presidential debates on Univision and wants his vote to speak for other Latinos, especially undocumented immigrants who need better access to benefits, jobs and housing. Unlike in his native Guatemala, Morales said, he believes that his vote in the United States can make a difference.

So when he heard about the delays, Morales said, it dampened his hopes about voting.

"It saddened me," he said.

Some attorneys believe the delays are more than just poor planning.

"I absolutely think they are politically motivated," said Los Angeles immigration attorney Carl Shusterman. "The Republican candidates have spent the last few months demonizing immigrants. Now, the party is disenfranchising immigrants."

Shusterman said the Bush administration is doing whatever it can to decrease the number of Latino voters, including stretching out the naturalization process.

Political motive denied

Citizenship and Immigration Services has denied that the delays are political.

Political accusations over newly naturalized citizens have occurred in the past. In 1995, the then-Immigration and Naturalization Service led an effort to swear in more than a million citizens, prompting Republican allegations that President Clinton was trying to create a pool of potential Democratic voters just in time for the 1996 election.

Moreno said she still holds out hope that she will be sworn in before November but agrees that there may be more to the story than an overwhelming number of applications.

"It's pure politics," she said in Spanish. "They are blocking these million people because they know these votes are going to a Democrat."

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