



Citizenship backlog to curb Latino vote

Newly naturalized often Democratic, but agency cites surge, denies plot

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By DIANNE SOLÍS / The Dallas Morning News
dsolis@dallasnews.com

The unprecedented 1.4 million surge in U.S. citizenship applicants won't translate into an equal number of new voters come November's presidential election because of a processing backlog.

But U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials said Monday that the agency is hiring more staff and pressing the FBI for more efficient background checks and that delays of weeks just to open mail are behind them.

"Anytime we have a surge in citizenship, it is a good thing," said Emilio Gonzalez, director of the agency, in a Dallas visit. "We are working as best we can."

Mr. Gonzalez and his agency have been assailed by critics who charge that the Republican administration wants to suppress the votes of new citizens likely to vote for a Democrat.

The agency has said it will take up to 18 months to process applications at some locations, though applicants in Dallas can expect a six- to seven-month wait.

"If they don't have the opportunity to vote in this election, they will have many other opportunities to vote in other elections," Mr. Gonzalez said.

Monday morning, dozens of immigrants and organizers from Texas and New Mexico marched to the immigration offices to protest the backlog.

'Not heard anything'

The group marched to the Dallas office because it's one of only four in the country that actually process naturalization applications, though many others accept them.

"They promised us that they would call us right away, and until now, we've not heard anything," said Teresa Boisselier, 58 and a cook who applied for citizenship July 27, just days before a fee increase went into effect.

Ms. Boisselier, who arrived Sunday night from El Paso, said she hoped to vote in the presidential election.

The marchers were part of a Los Angeles-based campaign called *Ya Es Hora*, or It's Now Time, whose intent is to encourage legal permanent residents to apply for citizenship. Many were organized by

ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now.

The goal of 1 million applications in a year was reached.

"Now our attention is to make sure those who are citizens register to vote and then vote," said Arturo Vargas, executive director of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials.

Rep. Roberto Alonzo, D-Dallas, who was at the rally, said the backlog reminded him of 1996, when he addressed similar delays by writing President Bill Clinton and asking that some 1 million applications be accelerated. "What a coincidence that people are being kept from becoming citizens in an election year," Mr. Alonzo said.

Both Mr. Vargas and Mr. Gonzalez said the FBI background checks are one reason for the delays. Those checks have grown more extensive since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Mr. Gonzalez said he's held discussions for more than a year with the FBI over the background checks and that he's "not thrilled with the results."

At the FBI office in Dallas, Assistant Special-Agent-In-Charge Kevin Kolbye said his agency has been swamped with requests for checks from multiple agencies, receiving about 80,000 a week.

The backlog since the terrorist attacks stands at 440,000, Mr. Kolbye said. That is about 10 percent of the more than 4 million requests received in fiscal year 2007.

"Normally about 90 percent of the name checks can be turned around in 60 to 90 days," Mr. Kolbye said. "It is the 10 percent that we may get some kind of hit."

A "hit," Mr. Kolbye said, is information that requires further investigation.

The processing delays vary from city to city, though the biggest backlogs are in Los Angeles, New York and Miami, said Mr. Gonzalez and Michael Aytes, associate director for the agency's domestic operations.

In Dallas, the backlog isn't as serious, with 30,000 applications pending in November, Mr. Aytes said. The number of applicants here increased 49 percent in the last fiscal year compared with the previous year. In San Bernardino, Calif., the increase was 1017 percent; in Los Angeles, 101 percent.

Just the same, Mr. Aytes acknowledged, some applications with checks enclosed had taken more than six weeks just to be opened, including some sent via Federal Express.

Fee increase played role

About half of the new naturalization applications were received in June and July – an increase of 350 percent from the previous year, officials said.

Many legal permanent residents were prompted to apply by an increase in the application fee to \$675 from \$400 at the end of July. Others said they were motivated by the spreading backlash against both illegal and legal immigrants, who've been criticized for "chain migration," or the petitioning on behalf of relatives in Latin America via legal immigration channels.

Adrian Oro, 21, from the central Mexican state of Guanajuato, said he became a U.S. citizen after applying in June in Dallas, just before the fee increase.

"I did it to feel safer," Mr. Oro said, adding that the political rhetoric against immigrants, legal and illegal, worried him.

The "vast majority," or about 70 percent, of new applicants are from Latin America, Mr. Gonzalez estimated.

Because freshly minted citizens generally turn out at the ballot box, Latino political analysts pay particularly close attention to the naturalization process. A study by the Latino elected officials organization, or NALEO, showed that the turnout rate in 2002 for Latino naturalized citizen voters was 34 percent compared with about 30 percent for native-born Latinos.

Latino voters, like others, care about the economy, education and the war in Iraq, said Rosalind Gold, NALEO's senior director of policy research and advocacy. "But they want to make sure that newcomers are not scapegoated and unfairly blamed in our immigration debate, and that is part of the motivation for getting out to vote," she said.

Some 57 percent of Hispanic registered voters call themselves Democrats or say they lean toward the Democratic Party, while 23 percent align with the Republican Party, according to a recent Pew Hispanic Center survey. The October-November 2007 survey of about 2,000 Latinos had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.7 percentage points, in general, and 4 percentage points for registered voters surveyed.

Mr. Vargas, the NALEO director, said the fastest growing sector of Latino voters consists of those who decline to state a party.

"They aren't to be taken for granted," she said.

Al Día staff writer Alejandro Martínez contributed to this report.