

# 'Illegals' debate reflects bias vs. all immigrants

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The steep rise in the number of citizenship applications around the country is a welcome - and unintended - byproduct of the Senate's shameful failure to do its job on immigration reform.

At a time of unprecedented hostility toward immigrants, thousands of them are taking the necessary steps to claim their rightful place in American society. And that's good news.

These are people who left behind their country, their language, their family and their friends to pursue the American Dream. What many have found instead is prejudice, persecution, mistrust and outright racism.

"I learned that it is a cruel world and that I don't have many choices," said 15-year-old Christian, a Mexican-born undocumented high school student who was brought to New York by his parents when he was 4. He could be speaking for thousands of decent, smart, hard-working immigrants like him.

The hostility, no matter what they say, is not directed only toward the undocumented.

"Many opponents of immigration reform tried to excuse the vitriol spewed in this debate or argue that it was not about all immigrants, just the so-called 'illegal' ones. But immigrant and ethnic communities can read between the lines and see that this debate is about 'those people' not being welcome here, regardless of immigration status" said Clarissa Martínez of the Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform.

And "those people" who are legal residents have reacted by applying for naturalization at unprecedented rates. Since January, more than 519,618 immigrants have begun the naturalization process. Filings for citizenship applications nationally have increased more than 60% for the first part of the year, as compared with the same period last year. The fact that naturalization fees are set to increase by 69%, from \$400 to \$675, on July 30, is also partly responsible for the tremendous increase in the number of applications.

In New York State, there are more than 1.8 million legal permanent residents who are eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship, and 800,000 of them live in New York City. If they become citizens - and voters - they could decide the outcome of many elections and put anti-immigration demagogues on the run.

"Legal immigrants and foreign- and native-born citizens of ethnic origin are feeling the aftershocks of this debate, and live with the divisive and discriminatory consequences of these tactics," said Clarissa Martínez. "Many legal immigrants are fed up and have decided that the time to become a citizen and a voter is now."

Last week, the *Ya es hora ¡Ciudadania!* (It is time, Citizenship!) campaign, was launched with a press conference at the steps of City Hall. It is an all-out effort to inform, educate and motivate eligible legal permanent residents who live in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut to apply for U.S. citizenship.

The effort is part of a national campaign that brings together community groups, service providers and media organizations in over 22 states, and expects to help a million legal immigrants apply for citizenship. That drive will be followed by voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts targeting new citizens in 2008.

The campaign provides a hotline to help eligible immigrants through the process at (888) Ve-Y-Vota (839-8682) or [www.yaeshora.info](http://www.yaeshora.info). It also provides a guide to the N-400 naturalization form, information about legal counsel, citizenship, English classes and information about registering to vote.

Definitely, the time to become a citizen is now.

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