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From the Los Angeles Times

Last-minute rush for citizenship deal

Immigrants trying to avoid an application fee increase flock to a free workshop in central L.A. offering help in filling out forms.

By Teresa Watanabe
Times Staff Writer

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Hundreds of immigrants rushed to apply for citizenship at a free workshop in central Los Angeles on Friday, many seeking to beat stiff application fee increases that take effect next week.

A throng of mostly Latino immigrants began lining up at 4 a.m. for free help filling out the applications at the National Assn. of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials' Educational Fund office on Washington Boulevard. By 2:30 p.m., officials began turning people away because they had reached their capacity of 1,000 applicants, said Evan Bacalao, the fund's research associate.

Application fees will increase Monday for most immigration benefits, including a hike from \$400 to \$675 for citizenship applications. To avoid the fee hike, applications must be postmarked by today. The full-fee schedule is posted with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at <http://www.uscis.gov>.

Although the fee hikes drew widespread protest, the federal immigration agency said the increases would help reduce application processing times 20% by the end of the fiscal year 2009.

Jose Olvera, a 64-year-old Diamond Bar maintenance man, said he arrived at the Educational Fund office at 5 a.m. The native of Mexico has been eligible to apply for citizenship for 35 years, by virtue of his marriage to a U.S. citizen. Olvera said he finally took the plunge Friday to beat the fee increase.

"I decided about five years ago that I would apply for citizenship, but it was always 'tomorrow, tomorrow,' " he said. "But when I heard about the fees, I said it's time to go because I don't want to pay hundreds of dollars more."

Surveying the crowd, Bacalao said that the surge of prospective new Latino citizens — and potential voters — was a "harbinger of what is to come in the 2008 elections."

"These folks applying for citizenship are taking the first step in their political involvement," he said.

The challenges facing the Latino electorate were underscored by a new Pew Hispanic Center study released this week. The report found that 5.6 million Latinos nationwide voted in the 2006 midterm elections, an increase of 800,000 voters compared with the 2002 poll.

That growth, however, represented only a "marginal increase" in Latino voter registration and participation, the study said, despite national campaigns to increase the community's electoral clout fueled by the immigration marches of the last two years and high-profile congressional debate over the issue.

The study, based on an analysis of new U.S. Census data, found that Latinos constituted 5.8% of votes cast in 2006, compared with 5.3% in 2002.

About 54% of eligible Latinos registered to vote in 2006, up from 53% in 2002.

The study found that Latino electoral participation continued to lag that of whites and blacks. In 2006, 71% of eligible whites and 61% of eligible blacks registered to vote. About 72% of registered white voters and 67% of registered black voters cast ballots in 2006.

Overall, 13% of all Latinos in the U.S. voted in 2006, compared with 39% of whites and 27% of blacks, according to the study.

The study also found that the gap between the growth in the Latino electorate and the ethnic group's overall population continued to widen. Although Latinos comprised nearly half the nation's total population growth from 2002 to 2006, their share of new eligible voters was only 20%. That's because two-thirds of the nation's new Latinos either were too young to vote or lacked citizenship, the study said.

The new figures disappointed some Latino officials, who had hoped for a bigger boost from the widespread immigration rallies, marches and civic campaigns.

"Obviously, we were hoping there would be a massive bump up from the immigration marches, but it's going to take time," Bacalao said. "But we'll see the impact over the next several election cycles."

In January, the national association of Latino officials, along with Spanish-language media companies La Opinion and Univision, launched a major campaign to increase naturalizations and voter registrations among immigrants. But Arturo Vargas, executive director of the national Latino group, said Friday that far more effort would be needed.

"There's a big glass we need to fill up," he said. "We're doing it drop by drop, but a mass mobilization is needed. This isn't something that will change overnight."

Some of the immigrants who rushed to apply for citizenship Friday said they were determined to help make that change.

"I want the right to vote to help my people and other immigrants," said Elizabeth Meza, a 47-year-old Los Angeles dental assistant and El Salvador native.

Meza said the United States welcomed her when she escaped her war-torn country and provided her free English classes and a subsidized community college education.

"This is a great country," she said with a smile.

"And now I'm going to become a citizen."

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