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Nation

Immigrants Rush to Seek Citizenship

by Jennifer Ludden



David McNew

Immigrants wave flags after being sworn in as U.S. citizens in naturalization ceremonies last week in Pomona, Calif. Some of the 6,000 people taking their citizenship oath are part of a flood of immigrants trying to beat a Monday deadline when fees go up. Getty Images

Morning Edition, July 30, 2007 · For the past week, legal immigrants have been rushing to submit applications for citizenship, in part because fees for doing so rise dramatically Monday. But the rush is also part of a larger surge in naturalizations that analysts say has been spurred by Congress' failure to pass an immigration overhaul in recent years.

Through May of this year, more than half a million people had filed forms to become citizens — up 60 percent from last year, which was already substantially up from the year before.

The federal immigration agency counts 8 million legal residents eligible to become citizens. Last year, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials, or NALEO, found two main reasons people hadn't taken that final step: lack of information and fear of the process. Starting in January, NALEO has worked with Spanish-language newspapers and television stations to help Hispanics overcome those obstacles.

In a promo airing on the national TV network Univision, an anchor says, "American citizenship is the key to a more secure future. You'll be able to get better jobs, reunite your family and have more rights."

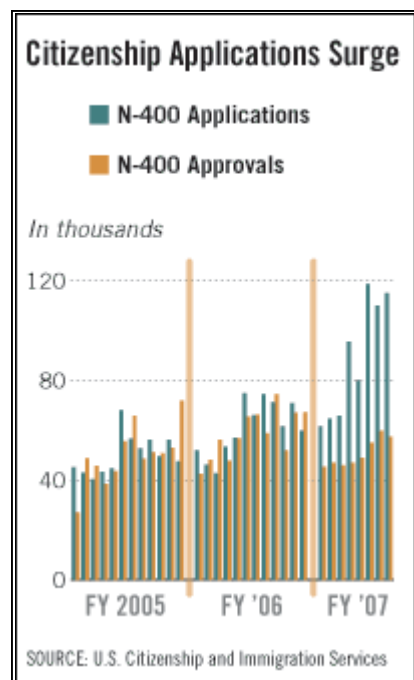
During news programs, Univision anchors toss out questions on the citizenship test, with the answer "Right after this commercial break!" On a special Saturday morning program, viewers can watch someone fill out the entire form, and NALEO is also holding workshops across the country to walk immigrants through the process.

NALEO program director Marcelo Gaete likens the campaign to a new civil rights movement. He says next year it will morph into a campaign to get immigrants to register to vote and then into a voter turnout drive.

"I think the country for several years has been talking about immigrants," he says. "This campaign will make sure immigrants are talking back to the country and are an integral part of that conversation."

The idea is resonating with people like Mauro Ambriz, who works at the meat counter of a Hispanic supermarket in Woodbridge, Va.

Ambriz moved here from Mexico 35 years ago and gained legal status in a 1986 amnesty. But only now has Ambriz and his entire family decided to become U.S. citizens. Ambriz says he very much wants to vote and make the Hispanic community's opinions count. But he also cites a fear factor: Local politicians in Virginia recently joined a national trend in seeking ways to



Lindsay Mangum, NPR

The number of applications for citizenship has surged in recent years. Through May of this year, applications were up 60 percent over last year.

However, there is a backlog of applications waiting for approval at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

crack down on illegal immigrants.

"Who knows what they'll do next?" Ambriz says. "Today I may have my residency card, but maybe tomorrow it will mean nothing. They'll just say, 'Everyone out.'"

His colleague Ephraim Rojas, who has also applied for citizenship, says life is more difficult now even for legal residents, with some state and local police helping enforce immigration laws.

"I've heard of people who have a few problems with the police," Rojas says, "and then [they're deported and] they lose everything — their residency card, their house, their family."

Pollster Sergio Bendixen sees a repeat of the mid-1990s when California voters approved Proposition 187 — later overturned by a court — to deny public benefits to illegal immigrants. Today, he says, in the wake of a Senate immigration debate that included some ugly rhetoric, the turmoil that once played out in California has gone national.

"A feeling has been created that maybe Hispanics are not welcome in this country, and that the Hispanic culture is hurting the fiber of American society. And, of course, that has offended and insulted many Hispanics," he says.

Bendixen says in the '90s, a surge of new Latino voters in California punished the Republicans who had sponsored Proposition 187. He believes this current wave could have a similar impact.

"Hispanics are concentrated in many of the so-called swing states. New voters in Florida, in Arizona, in Nevada and Colorado could very much have a significant impact on the way those five states vote for president next year."

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