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Advocates fight the clock to convert green card holders into voters

John Austin, *Community Newspaper Holdings, Inc.*
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By John Austin CNHI State Reporter  Feb 1, 2016

AUSTIN - Spurred by the rhetoric from Donald Trump and other Republicans running for president, pro-immigrant advocates are banding together in hopes of turning two million green card-holders into voting citizens by Election Day.

Immigration experts say their goal is daunting. Moving millions of legal permanent residents through the citizenship process in time will be difficult — even with a digital awareness campaign, free legal advice and low-interest loans to help cover each person’s $680 application fee for citizenship.

“It’s not like getting someone to sign an petition in a grocery store,” said Michael Olivas, an immigration expert at the University of Houston Law Center.

It’s not unusual for citizenship applications to take 12 months to process, he said, even with perfect paperwork.

“I would be astounded if, at this late hour, they could ramp it up,” he said.

That’s to say nothing for the current backlog at immigration centers in Texas.

“This is something to be working on for the next election (in 2018),” he said. “This is a project that we ought to be in for the long haul.”

Immigrant advocates have circled this Nov. 8 on their calendars, however.

Citing the urgency of getting Latinos to the polls, a coalition of groups united as the “New American Democracy Campaign” is offering computers to help legal permanent residents complete citizenship forms at 90 workshops in six states. In Texas, workshops begin in Houston on Saturday.

Texas has about 430,000 Latino legal permanent residents, according to Department of Homeland Security estimates from 2012.

The campaign also targets Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida and Nevada - home to about 1.6 million legal permanent residents who are eligible for naturalization.

The citizenship drive is fueled by the rhetoric of Trump, the billionaire real estate developer who raised hackles when he said that Mexicans who come to the United States are rapists who bring drugs and crime.

Sens. Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio have also taken sometimes contradictory positions on immigration, said Felipe Benitez, a spokesman for Mi Familia Vota, which promotes Hispanic civic engagement.

“Basically two sons of immigrants and refugees in the last debate were arguing who could deport more and faster,” said Benitez. “Our community is listening.”

Translating that into naturalized citizenship is far from straightforward.

Green card holders must live in the United States for five years before becoming eligible for naturalization; the spouses of U.S. citizens are eligible to apply after three years.

Citizen applications usually take about seven months to process at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services field office in Dallas, said Angela Morrison, an immigration law expert at Texas A&M University School of Law.
Facing an Oct. 11 deadline to register to vote, she said, means legal permanent residents who qualify for citizenship “need to get their application filed within the next month.”

As part of their application, green card holders must document five years’ worth of addresses, pass a language test, take a citizenship exam and offer proof of good moral character.

“The form asks crazy things,” said Morrison. “There’s a question that asks if you are a terrorist.”

For many, a $680 fee is daunting, but advocates are encouraging the would-be citizens to apply for 12-month micro-loans, on 9 to 18 percent interest, from a range of credit unions.

The loans come from sources such as Self-Help Federal Credit Union, which is based in North Carolina but has a strong presence in California and emerging profile in Florida.

Maria Ponce, a spokeswoman for Service Employees International Union, part of the coalition, called the credit union “an excellent example of a mission-driven organization that creates products to meet the needs of the members and the communities where they live.”

Other lenders include SCE Federal Credit Union in Los Angeles and Las Vegas. The 200 members of the National Federation of Community Development Credit Unions also offer a range of services and products for immigrant and low-wage workers.

“There is little to compare in the conventional market,” Ponce said.

Provided that green card holders come up with the money, file an application, become citizens and register to vote, they could have a significant voice in the election, advocates say.

Four years ago, 71 percent of Latino voters in the presidential election cast ballots for President Obama, according to the Pew Research Center, while 27 percent went to Republican Mitt Romney.

Sylvia Manzano, a principal at Latino Decisions, a political opinion research firm, said new Latino voters are an important group, and the citizenship effort could engage them.

“Parties and candidates are never going to invest in this segment,” she said, because they’re instead focused on registered voters who’ve participated in past elections.

Still, besides Florida, the population of new Latino voters is grouped in “non-competitive states” such as deep-red Texas and bright-blue California.

Their impact on races there likely would be marginal, she said.

Even so, as rhetoric and attention build around the presidential election, permanent residents such as Juan Aceves say they want to get involved.

Aceves, 54, a Houston green card holder who cleans office buildings, said he plans to apply for citizenship - somehow.

“I want to vote, he said. “Through our vote, we can make changes.”

Aceves doesn’t yet have the $680 for an application fee.

But, if he can make the deadline, one thing is sure: Trump is not his man.

“He gets it all wrong,” he said. “He says we’re bad people.”

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OCT 7
The Derailers
Shipping and Recei... | Fort Worth, TX

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Sabbath Services
Victorious Messiah... | Weatherford, TX

SUN 1
Andrew Greer
First Baptist Chur... | Weatherford, TX

SUN 1
Wayne Watson Fans
Brock Baptist Chur... | Brock, TX

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