

California braces for wave of new voters

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Body

California's burgeoning population of immigrants could bring a huge wave of voters, especially as their U.S.-born children reach voting age, a study released today found.

Under the most aggressive prediction, more than a quarter of the state's voters in 2012 would be an immigrant or have at least one parent who is, the study says. This scenario, however, is likely to occur more gradually than predicted: It depends on how many eligible residents will or can be naturalized, whether immigrant-citizens and their children will register and then whether they will cast ballots.

Even so, the coming wave has huge political and social implications if politicians and philanthropic organizations engage these groups and encourage them to naturalize and vote, the report's authors and funders conclude. The study was funded by members of the non-partisan Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, an umbrella group that includes the Silicon Valley Community Foundation.

"The civic potential of immigration in **California** is rarely discussed," especially on the local and state legislative district level, said the report's author Rob Paral. And on the statewide level, it's staggering: "If you naturalize these 2.3 million people who are eligible you would grow the adult citizen population by 10 percent and dramatically expand your electorate."

Santa Clara County ranks third, behind Los Angeles and Orange counties, in terms of the raw number of immigrant voters, and their children, who could potentially be on the rolls by 2012, a presidential election year. Based on Census Bureau and federal immigration data, the county has a maximum potential for 539,908 voters by 2012.

But immigration rules almost certainly will impact the growth.

Because there are quotas that limit the number of immigrants from individual countries, and because in Santa Clara County, for example, there is such a long backlog of people from India and China who have applied for a green card, some immigrants from those countries may be unable to complete the naturalization process by 2012, even if they have already started it.

The study also estimated the number of children of immigrants, who they suggest are more familiar with the immigrant experience than other native-born voters.

They found nearly three in four Latinos who will be 18 by 2012 will have an immigrant parent, rising to a dramatic nine-in-ten for Asians in that category.

The political implications almost certainly will be debated. While immigrant-rights advocates welcomed the study as evidence that federal immigration reform and driver's licenses for illegal immigrants, for example, might find new supporters, others predicted the impact of these potential voters will be more gradual.

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Studies and exit polling show that lack of language skills, affluence and understanding of the voting process tend to depress voter registration and turnout among ethnic groups and younger voters. Participation rates generally are increasing but still lag behind native-born, non-Latino white adults. However, other studies indicate that naturalized Latinos have higher registration percentages than native-born Latinos.

"There needs to be an investment from civic organizations, political parties, unions to educate and mobilize the voting eligible electorate," said Louis DeSipio, a professor of political science and Chicano studies at the University of California-Irvine. "Whether that impact of immigrants begins in 2012, 2016 or 2020, it will be felt eventually."

Even in California, where Latinos generally support Democrats, Republicans see potential, too.

The study found, on average, in Republican-held state Senate and Assembly districts, the potential immigrant-minded voters could make up as much as 20 percent of the electorate.

"It shows a number of seats with high immigrant populations are already held by Republican legislators. And a lot of these immigrants are Asian, and that demographic is certainly more supportive than Latinos," are of Republicans, said GOP legislative strategist Kevin Spillane.

"The key word is potential, not real," Spillane said. "It's not all bad news for Republicans."

Assemblyman Jim Beall, D-San Jose, said he was not surprised that by 2012 one in three of his district's electorate could be immigrant voters and their children. In Assemblyman Joe Coto's district, which covers East San Jose, the maximum potential could be one half.

"We've followed the transition of Silicon Valley," Beall said, "but this is news in many other parts of the state that you have to pay attention to the issues of immigrants."

And, he added, Democrats cannot take those votes for granted, especially as decline-to-state voters rise in number, including among ethnic voters.

"Many are independent-minded voters and are not committed to one party or another," he said.

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