

EYE ON GOP, IMMIGRANTS FLOCKING TOWARD U.S. CITIZENSHIP APPLICATION NUMBERS HAVE MORE THAN DOUBLED IN N.J. ANTI-IMMIGRATION MEASURES ARE BEING CITED.

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Body

Anna Carlin started feeling uneasy last fall, right around the time that California's Proposition 187 was making headlines.

The proposal, which bars illegal immigrants from receiving most public benefits, passed by a wide margin. It was followed by a rising chorus of calls

from all over the country for tougher immigration controls. Carlin grew even more nervous.

Next, the new, Republican-led Congress started pushing to cut welfare and Social Security benefits to legal immigrants.

That's when Carlin got really scared - and made a big decision. The Hungarian-born immigrant is trading in her green card and becoming an American citizen.

Why now, three years after she fell in love with an American and came to live in his country?

"The Republicans," Carlin, 24, of Maple Shade, said bluntly. "We hear Newt Gingrich saying that legal aliens, green card holders, shouldn't get money. Why? We pay as much taxes as anyone else."

Thousands of other legal immigrants feel the same way. The number of people all over the country applying for U.S. citizenship has soared in the last six months, say officials at the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

"The current Republican administration, and the push for Proposition 187, is giving people the idea that benefits will not apply to them if they don't become citizens," said Lisa Jacobs, an INS spokeswoman.

The INS expects to receive 691,000 citizenship applications in 1995, she said. In 1994, it processed 519,000.

"The numbers are changing fairly rapidly and dramatically," Jacobs said. "There's been a surge in the last six months, and we've almost doubled the number of applications."

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Carlin, an office manager at the Immigration Law Center in Camden and a full-time college student, says her office also started seeing a surge in **citizenship applications** about six months ago. And like her, many other applicants were unnerved by the rash of legislative proposals targeting **immigrants**.

"It did scare me a lot," Carlin said. "It's an easy issue to get people going on, and certain people take advantage of it. I want to have the paperwork behind me. . . . I don't want to be treated like an alien."

The **New Jersey** and Philadelphia INS districts are among the 15 showing the biggest increases in **citizenship applications**, Jacobs said.

In **New Jersey**, the **number** of **citizenship applications** has **more** than **doubled**. In the first two months of 1994, 3,406 were received in Newark. In January and February of this year, 7,463 **applications** poured into that office. INS workers are putting in extra hours at night and on weekends to process the mountain of **applications**, an official said.

In the Philadelphia district, there has been a 73 percent jump in **citizenship applications** since last year. Fran Holmes, the assistant district director for examinations, expects March to be the office's busiest month ever.

Both the Philadelphia and Newark INS offices have increased the **number** of naturalization ceremonies they are performing, hoping to keep up with the demand.

And officials expect the **numbers** to keep escalating. They say a **number** of factors are contributing.

All green cards, the identification cards carried by legal residents, issued before 1979 must be renewed, at a cost of \$75. A **citizenship application**, on the other hand, requires only a \$95 fee and does not need renewal.

A large group of **immigrants** who became legal residents under the Immigration Reform and Control Act qualify for **citizenship**. There are 1.3 million eligible now. By April 1996, another 1.3 million will qualify.

But the single biggest reason behind the increase in **citizenship applications** may be the country's political climate.

"They watch the same news I do; they read the same papers," Holmes said. "They're concerned about losing benefits, about Proposition 187, about the Contract With America."

California's Proposition 187 was aimed at illegal **immigrants**, but since its passing, a slew of proposals have targeted legal **immigrants**. There was talk of requiring all foreign-born residents to be listed in a computerized national registry. And both Republican and Democratic welfare-reform plans include cutting benefits for legal **immigrants**.

The Republican plan, which was approved by the House of Representatives on Friday, stops legal **immigrants** from qualifying for Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Supplemental Security Income for the elderly and disabled, and food stamps.

"**Immigrants** are feeling very much under attack," said Cecilia Munoz of the National Council of La Raza, a civil-rights group. "They are feeling the need to lift their voices a little. The way to do that is to vote. And the way to vote is to naturalize."

"They're becoming citizens in self-defense."

Much of the anti-**immigrant** backlash is built around the premise that most **immigrants** are here illegally and are using up a large share of government benefits.

The premise, Munoz says, is wrong.

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"Eight out of 11 immigrants are here legally and are close family members of citizens," she said. "They are parts of American families."

In addition, studies have shown that immigrants add \$30 billion a year to the economy, which means that they pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits.

Indeed, many immigrants applying for citizenship are longtime legal residents of this country, people who have worked here for 20 or 30 years, paying federal and Social Security taxes. Now that they are approaching retirement age, many fear that they will no longer be able to receive Social Security and Medicare.

"It's a much bigger decision than most people allow. It's not something people do casually," Munoz said. "And it's even more difficult for people who feel under attack to pledge allegiance to a country that's sending every signal that your contribution is not respected."

Friday, another signal went out when Sen. Arlen Specter (R., Pa.) introduced a measure that would cut \$6 million in naturalization funding to the Office of Refugee Resettlement. That money goes to agencies that offer citizenship classes and help immigrants wade through the paperwork necessary for citizenship applications. It is the only federal money that helps pay for naturalization services, Munoz said.

"It's a very mean-spirited, very badly timed initiative," she said. "Unless folks naturalize, they can expect to starve. So, at the very minimum, the government has a responsibility to help facilitate the application process."

Carmen Infante knows how she will show her distaste for anti-immigrant rhetoric. The new American citizen says she will register and vote.

"This country is made out of immigrants who came here to work," said Infante, 23, who left the Dominican Republic in 1989. "We are very hard- working people."

Infante, who came here to join her family and continue her education, attends Rutgers University in Camden and works full-time at a Camden preschool. She knew no English when she arrived but now speaks it fluently. The rush of anti-immigrant proposals has not been lost on her.

"It worries me," she said. "There is always discrimination, always someone trying to put Hispanics and immigrants down."

But even for her, the decision to become an American citizen was a hard one. It meant renouncing the country of her birth. She still gulps when she remembers the moment she handed over her Dominican passport.

"But I'm still Dominican; I'm still eating plantains," Infante said. "And I'm a U.S. citizen. I'm entitled to everything you are."

Graphic

PHOTO;

PHOTO (1)

1. Carmen Infante migrated here from the Dominican Republic in 1989. She has since learned to speak English, enrolled at Rutgers University in Camden, and recently become a U.S. citizen. "This country is made out of immigrants who

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