

Immigrants discover power of citizenship

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

March 25, 2007 Sunday, FIRST EDITION

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Section: NEWS; Pg. A2

Length: 500 words

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Dateline: WILLIAMS, CALIF.

Body

On a recent balmy afternoon, a group of women at a park in this small town in northern California celebrated the imminent birth of a baby with tamales and gallons of horchata, a Mexican cinnamon punch made with rice.

Talk in Spanish turned to the flavor of the punch - which had been prepared with bottled water - and then to the flavor of the water that flows in people's homes here, which the women described as being as foul sometimes as rotten eggs.

Griselda Gonzalez, a hotel maid, suggested that if **immigrants** such as themselves wanted to do something about the water, those who can, must become U.S. citizens and use their votes.

"If those of us who can become citizens don't do it, we have only ourselves to blame for putting ourselves on the sidelines," said Gonzalez, 49, who is proud to have ascended from undocumented farmworker to homeowner, mother of a U.S. Navy veteran and, as of 2005, American citizen.

Mexican **immigrants** such as Gonzalez have long served as the silent backbone of the farm industry that dominates Williams and the rest of Colusa County, about an hour's drive north of Sacramento.

Change has been slow in coming in these remote parts. But Latinos here are starting to become more outspoken about their desire to have a greater say over the quality of public services, the allocation of taxpayer dollars and the wooing of better-paying jobs.

Colusa County's population of barely more than 21,000 has become, over the years, almost half Latino and more than 27 percent foreign-born. As of a few years ago, half of Williams' approximately 3,700 residents were noncitizens.

Countywide, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, at least 76 percent of Colusa's **immigrants** were not naturalized citizens.

Because few Hispanics vote, many **immigrants** believe, the county lacks a Latino supervisor, and the city of Colusa has no Latino city council members. Williams has had only one.

A national backlash against Mexican **immigrants** and undocumented workers has left residents here indignant, though, and that is starting to change the composition of the electorate. So, too, is aggressive organizing to help eligible **immigrants** become citizens, in the process transforming them into activists for better water, safer streets, more activities for children.

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Colusa County has plenty of undocumented **immigrants** who don't qualify for **citizenship**. But it is also home to a sizeable reservoir of legal residents who received green cards through family ties or through a federal amnesty Congress enacted in 1986.

Gonzalez is emboldened by her new right to vote.

Her breakthrough came, she said, when she signed up in 2005 with a Sacramento-based group called the North Valley Sponsoring Committee, which has guided more than 100 **immigrants** in Colusa County through the naturalization process.

While **immigrants** study for their **citizenship** test, organizers begin teaching them community-organizing methods.

"The more qualified the local people, the better," said Colusa Heritage vice president Jim Resney.

Graphic

PHOTO

PHOTO - Eligio Ortiz (center) and fellow Latino **immigrants** practice the process of being sworn in as U.S. citizens in a **citizenship** class earlier this month in Williams, Calif. Sacramento Bee / MCT

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: **CITIZENSHIP** (92%); IMMIGRATION (89%); ILLEGAL **IMMIGRANTS** (89%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (89%); NATURALIZATION (89%); CITY GOVERNMENT (78%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); INFANTS & TODDLERS (78%); POPULATION SIZE (78%); COMMUNITY ACTIVISM (75%); FOREIGN LABOR (75%); COUNTIES (74%); FARM LABOR (74%); HOTEL STAFF (70%); CITIES (61%)

Organization: US NAVY (56%)

Industry: BOTTLED WATER (77%); FARM LABOR (74%); HOTEL STAFF (70%); HOTELS & MOTELS (55%); HOTEL HOUSEKEEPING (55%)

Geographic: SACRAMENTO, CA, USA (92%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (93%)

Load-Date: June 26, 2007