

# **LEGAL IMMIGRANTS IN RECORD NUMBERS WANT CITIZENSHIP**

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## **Body**

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The **number** of **legal immigrants** applying to become United States citizens has nearly doubled in the last year, an increase that one immigration official described as "an unprecedented surge" stemming partly from recent initiatives passed in California and in Congress that would deny many benefits to noncitizens.

From October 1994 through January of this year, the first four months of the Federal fiscal year, applications for **citizenship** rose to 232,850, about 80 percent above the same period a year before, according to the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

And there are some signs the trend is accelerating among the nation's approximately 10 million **legal immigrants**. In January, the **most** recent month for which statistics are available, there were 65,959 applications, the highest monthly total on **record** at the agency and more than double the 31,846 filed in January 1994.

The biggest reason for the increase, immigration officials contend, is the fear that many government programs that are now legally available to noncitizens will be cut off.

Rudolph Brewington, a spokesman for the immigration service in Washington who described the increase as unprecedented, said: "There is a fear of losing benefits. They talk about the G.O.P.'s Contract With America, they talk about welfare reform."

While many of the **immigrants** themselves cited the fear that benefits might be cut off, others said their decisions were based on an even broader concern. They said that all noncitizens, whether in this country legally or illegally, were stigmatized in the current political climate.

And with a more than doubling of applications here in Texas and in Southern California, some experts see yet another factor at work: the declining economic conditions in Mexico.

"In older days, many Mexicans who came here said it was better to stay a first-class Mexican than become a second-class American," said Leonel J. Castillo, the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization in the Carter Administration who now runs a program in Houston offering **citizenship** classes.

## LEGAL IMMIGRANTS IN RECORD NUMBERS WANT CITIZENSHIP

"Now they don't talk that way, especially the younger ones," Mr. Castillo said. "It isn't just the economic crisis, or the political crisis. Their whole notions of Mexican patriotism have changed. They're feeling like becoming a U.S. citizen is not such an act of disloyalty."

Sirelio Flores, a 36-year-old appliance repairman in Houston who is a Mexican citizen with legal authorization to live in the United States, became eligible for American citizenship nearly 10 years ago but chose not to apply for what he said were "sentimental reasons." He said he had also thought of returning to his native Mexico to retire, as many Mexicans who spend their working lives in this country do.

Now, as he studies for the citizenship examination and plans to apply to become an American, he cites a number of reasons, one of which is the turmoil in his native country.

"The way things are going in Mexico, I think the U.S. is looking like a better choice all the time," he said.

And just as important, he said, he was deeply angered by what he had heard of moves in Congress to take away benefits now available to noncitizens who are here legally. "I'm afraid they are trying to take everything away from us," Mr. Flores said. "I pay my taxes all the time. I've been very straight with the Government here. So why are they coming after us?"

The recent welfare overhaul package passed in the House of Representatives as part of the Republicans' Contract With America, and now pending in the Senate, would strip legal immigrants of eligibility for dozens of major aid programs, including food stamps, Medicare, rental assistance and testing for lead poisoning in children. Such cuts are intended to save about \$20 billion over five years and affect at least 2.2 million legal immigrants.

That vote and other moves that are widely perceived as anti-immigrant have been exhaustively covered in the Spanish-language press here and in other immigrant communities. So has California's Proposition 187, the referendum approved by voters last fall that would make illegal immigrants ineligible for nearly all Government programs except emergency medical aid. While the measure was not specifically directed at them, many legal immigrants view it as part of a backlash directed at all foreigners. The measure has been tied up in court challenges, and most of its provisions have not been enforced.

To be sure, there are plenty of other forces at work in the increase in legal immigrants' becoming citizens.

For one thing, under terms of the 1986 Immigration Act, there is a sizable pool of formerly illegal immigrants who were granted amnesty and in recent years have become eligible for citizenship.

For another, the immigration service is now requiring all people who prior to 1979 were issued a "green card," or authorization to live in this country, to apply for new, computer-compatible cards similar to bank cards. The new card costs \$75 while an application for citizenship costs \$95, and many people are simply deciding to use the moment to spend the extra \$20 on a citizenship application, immigration officials and advocates say.

In general, immigrants who have been in this country for five years with proper authorization are eligible to apply for citizenship and, in the absence of any criminal history, are entitled to receive it. Immediate relatives of those who have become citizens are eligible to become citizens more quickly. Some demographers predict that the current boom in applications will only amplify as new citizens sponsor other members of their families.

Still, the rise in applications is less a function of increasing numbers of people coming to this country than of more people who are already here deciding to apply. In the past, many legal immigrants decided to delay or forgo applying for citizenship, either because they intended to return to their native countries or because they just did not see American citizenship as necessary.

One Federal immigration study a few years ago suggested that as many as two-thirds of those eligible to apply in any given year were not doing so; what may be happening now is a return to past generations, when roughly two-thirds of those eligible chose to become naturalized citizens. One major reason for the dip was the ever-increasing number of immigrants from Mexico, who typically had less difficulty returning to their native country than other noncitizens and may have felt less need to become United States citizens.

## LEGAL IMMIGRANTS IN RECORD NUMBERS WANT CITIZENSHIP

For many of the Mexicans now applying for ***citizenship***, the decision seems tinged with both excited anticipation and more than a hint of bitterness.

"I ***want*** to vote, I'll tell you that," said Monica Guerra, a 21-year-old Mexican who is applying for ***citizenship*** now that her husband, Angel, a welder in Houston, has received his.

"I don't believe there's justice for ***immigrants*** now," she said recently at the home of a neighbor in Houston's Spring Branch area, clutching her 7-month-old daughter, Jennifer. "The Hispanics, the Mexicans, they have done all the hard work that nobody else ***wants*** to do. It's not fair to deny them."

Mrs. Guerra's application is part of a surge in Houston. From a total of 937 ***citizenship*** applications in February 1994, the ***number*** rose as high as 2,734 last September and was 1,674 this February, said Mariela Melero-Chami, a spokeswoman for the immigration service here.

Mrs. Guerra and others are taking English and ***citizenship*** classes and studying sample questions for the test, including, "What is the name of the ship that brought the Pilgrims to America?" "What are the colors of our flag?" and "Who is the President of the United States today?"

## Graphic

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Photo: ***Legal immigrants*** are applying for United States ***citizenship*** in increasing ***numbers***. Monica Guerra, 21, in Houston with her daughter, Jennifer, is seeking ***citizenship*** now that her husband has received his. (F. Carter Smith for The New York Times) (pg. 28)

Graph: "ADDING IT UP: U.S. ***Citizenship*** Applications" tracks ***number*** of new applications submitted by ***legal immigrants***, per month, from October 1992 through January 1995. (Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service) (pg. 28)

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