Immigrants are becoming citizens faster than past decades

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Orlino and Jonah Ordona of San Jose were concerned about rising immigration fees. Pre-med student Shilpa Muddagowni of Cupertino has her eye on a medical residency. Kenneth Leung of Berkeley wants to vote for John McCain in the Feb. 5 primary.

From hard-headed pragmatism to the civic idealism of voting, the ***immigrants*** who stood in line outside federal immigration offices in San Jose Friday morning had a range of reasons why they were there to ***become*** U.S. ***citizens***.

"My kids are going to be growing up in this land. I don't want to be an observer," said Jia-Huey Yuan, 38, of Santa Clara, moments after she took the oath of citizenship. "I want to participate and really make an impact, to the society and to the nation."

According to a new and unprecedented analysis from the Department of Homeland Security, newer ***immigrants*** are moving more quickly into citizenship than those who ***became*** permanent residents in the 1970s and 1980s.

Among Asian ***immigrants*** who got their green cards in the early 1990s, between 53 and 59 percent went on to ***become*** ***citizens*** within 10 years, up from about 44 percent among Asians who got green cards in the early 1980s.

And while only about 20 percent of Mexican ***immigrants*** receiving green cards in the 1990s ***became*** ***citizens*** within a ***decade***, Mexican ***immigrants*** "exhibited the greatest relative increase in [naturalization] rates between the earliest and latest cohorts," said the report, released this week by Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics.

Based on federal data between 1973 and 2005, this new, authoritative analysis is based on actual administrative records instead of polls or other statistical samples.

Because the study compared the path to citizenship of legal ***immigrants*** in different ***decades***, it presents a fresh and intriguing view of how legal immigration is evolving.

Meanwhile, there are other signs the movement of ***immigrants*** into citizenship appears to be accelerating. In the wake of the immigration protests of 2006 and the citizenship drives that followed, the number of citizenship applications submitted to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services nearly doubled in the 2007 fiscal year over the previous year, to almost 1.4 million.

The new study provides "a much more accurate estimate of citizenship acquisition among ***immigrants*** eligible to apply than almost all prior studies," said Irene Bloemraad, a sociologist at the University of California Berkeley and the author of "***Becoming*** a ***Citizen*** - Incorporating ***Immigrants*** and Refugees in the United States and Canada."

And in light of the coming elections, "***immigrants*** might ***become*** a greater force in politics in the future," Bloemraad said, "if the trends continue and citizenship gets translated into voting."

Still, Bloemraad and others cautioned, citizenship does not necessarily equal cultural assimilation.

"High rates of naturalization aren't necessarily a sign that everything is hunky dory," said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, D.C. think tank that wants tighter controls on immigration. "There are plenty of people who are not assimilated in a deeper sense, not socially or emotionally assimilated, but they still ***become*** ***citizens***. They don't identify with America as their country and Americans as their people. They have a passport of convenience."

Krikorian and other experts agreed that 1996 welfare reform changes that limited social benefits to ***citizens***, excluding legal residents, were a factor in people seeking citizenship in greater numbers. They disagree about the interpretation of that effect.

Krikorian said some people have ***become*** ***citizens*** since the mid-1990s to claim welfare, food stamps and other government benefits. He said CIS research showed that "the groups with the highest rates of welfare use also had the highest rates of naturalization."

Others argue that relatively few take the oath of citizenship just for a government benefit check.

"People who get up and move long distances, pay a lot of money to go to a new place, who often risk life and limb to get to a country, are generally incredibly motivated people," said Tomas Jimenez, a sociologist at the University of California, San Diego, and a fellow at the New America Foundation. "They are not generally the kind of people who are motivated to go to another country to sit on welfare. That's not to say it never happens, but you're getting essentially a lot of Type A personalities."

But from welfare and immigration reform acts of the mid-1990s, to travel restrictions and distrust of foreigners after the Sept. 11 attacks, to rising immigration fees and a perception of increasing hostility to ***immigrants***, ***immigrant*** rights groups agree the distinction between Legal Permanent Resident and ***citizen*** has widened.

"Within the last 10 years, it's ***become*** more worthwhile to ***become*** a ***citizen***," said Jeffrey Passel of the Pew Hispanic Center, whose research also suggests a surge in citizenship among newer ***immigrants***. "There are a number of things that are not available to legal ***immigrants*** that used to be, and there are some protections available to ***citizens*** that didn't used to be so necessary."

From eligibility for government jobs to immigration fees, there were plenty of practical reasons ***immigrants*** waiting outside the US Citizenship and Immigration Services offices on Monterey Road Friday morning gave for their decision to seek citizenship.

Yuan, a scientist turned stay-at-home mom, said she had also thought about the many government jobs require citizenship. Like many other soon-to-be-***citizens***, Yuan said this year's presidential election is a definite factor.

Hugo Calderon of San Jose, a native of Mexico who ***became*** a ***citizen*** Friday, eight years after getting his green card, hasn't chosen who he'll support for president. He just knows he's going to vote.

Ligia Henriquez of Santa Clara, a native of Nicaragua who got her green card five years ago, wanted to make sure she ***became*** a ***citizen*** in time to vote for president. She declined to say who will get her first vote.

"The right to vote is very important for me," said Henriquez. "How can I explain? You can decide who is better for the country."

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