

## **The Latest Big Boom: Citizenship**

The New York Times

August 11, 1995, Friday, Late Edition - Final

Copyright 1995 The New York Times Company

**Distribution:** National Desk

**Section:** Section A; ; Section A; Page 12; Column 1; National Desk ; Column 1;

**Length:** 1092 words

**Byline:** By SETH MYDANS

By SETH MYDANS

**Dateline:** LOS ANGELES, Aug. 10

### **Body**

---

Doing their part in the greatest rush for **citizenship** in the nation's history, student volunteers are setting out almost every weekend in the Hispanic neighborhoods of this city to fingerprint their immigrant elders, take photographs of them and guide them carefully through Form N-400, Application for Naturalization.

The forms, once completed, become part of a surge of **citizenship** applications that have poured into the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the last year or so, many from people who lived in the United States for years or even decades before giving **citizenship** much thought.

"We are seeing record numbers of naturalization applications," said Virginia Kice, a spokeswoman for the immigration service in California. "April was the peak, with 2,200 a day in Los Angeles, and the numbers are still high."

Records are being set all over the country, said an I.N.S. spokesman in Washington, Rudolph Brewington. In the nine months through June, nearly 715,000 people applied for **citizenship**, a 78 percent increase over the corresponding period a year earlier. Mr. Brewington said Congress had approved the hiring of 1,000 new I.N.S. employees to help process the applications.

Several factors are feeding the surge, according to immigration officials and immigrant rights groups alike.

One is sheer numbers: Nearly three million undocumented aliens who were granted amnesty and legal residence under the 1986 immigration reform law are now becoming eligible to proceed with applications for **citizenship**.

Another is fear: Anti-immigration sentiment, as demonstrated by Proposition 187 in California and Federal legislative proposals, threatens to deprive noncitizens of education, all but emergency health care and other services.

Further, the Mexican Government is preparing to adopt a constitutional amendment that would remove both economic and emotional obstacles to a change in **citizenship** among Mexicans, by far the majority of California's immigrant population.

## The Latest Big Boom: Citizenship

The proposed amendment, which is expected to gain legislative approval next month and ratification by the states within a year or so, would change the law to allow Mexicans to retain their property rights, as well as a nonvoting cultural Mexican "nationality," while taking foreign citizenship.

"It is important that they understand that they are becoming citizens of this country but that they keep their cultural Mexican roots," said Jose Angel Pescador, Mexico's consul general in Los Angeles. "People were afraid of being ashamed in Mexico because they changed their nationality. Now they will not change their nationality."

Indeed, among people at a "citizenship fair" at Belmont High School in downtown Los Angeles last weekend, the cultural issue seemed to weigh much heavier than the matter of property rights.

"There's always been rumors in the immigrant community that when you become a United States citizen, people will ask you to spit on the Mexican flag or step on the flag," said Arturo Vargas, executive director of the fair's sponsor, the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials. "These were rumors that people actually believed."

For whatever reasons, Mexicans have traditionally been among the slowest immigrant groups to apply for citizenship. An immigration service study in 1992 showed that just 17 percent of Mexicans who entered the country legally in 1977 had sought to become citizens since, compared with 63 percent of immigrants from the Soviet Union, the group with the highest figure.

Now the amnesty program, anti-immigration sentiment and the Mexican Government's assurances have contributed to a shift in attitudes in the city's vast Mexican community, several Hispanic leaders agreed.

"There's even peer pressure," Mr. Vargas said. " 'Why, you haven't become a citizen yet? What's your problem? What are you waiting for?' This is something I've never seen before, and I grew up in L.A. You'll be talking politics, and someone will say, 'I can't vote,' and it's like, 'What?' "

Antonia Hernandez, president of the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said political and economic changes both here and in Mexico seemed to have contributed to a social awakening among Mexican immigrants.

"People who have been here 20 years will tell you, 'I'm becoming a citizen,' " she said. " 'I want to vote. I want to vote against Pete Wilson. I want to be heard.' "

Among many immigrants, Governor Wilson is the personification of Proposition 187 and of what they see as a political trend in which immigrants are blamed for the state's problems.

But beyond that, Ms. Hernandez said, a Hispanic voting bloc is harder to define. Republicans claim it, arguing that Hispanic people have strong family values consistent with Republican principles. But the Hispanic vote has traditionally been largely Democratic, a result, Ms. Hernandez said, of a prevailing sentiment that government should be actively involved in promoting the common good.

At the citizenship fair at Belmont High School last weekend, Manuel Jasso, now a 37-year-old telecommunications engineer, said he first came to the United States from Mexico as an illegal worker in 1982 and had not considered citizenship till now.

But so long away from a native land changes a person, Mr. Jasso said. "When you go back, you feel lonely, you feel like a stranger," he said. "You go back to a street that was a two-way street, and suddenly it's one-way. And you realize, 'I don't belong here.' "

Dora Monzon, 40, who sews jumpsuits for race-car drivers for a living, first came here, illegally, in 1969. She obtained legal residency five years ago under the amnesty program. She has not visited Mexico since 1976.

"In my heart, I am Mexican," she said. "I come from there. But my children are here, and for that I have to be an American citizen."

## The Latest Big Boom: Citizenship

Paula Gomez, an American-born high school student who was helping Ms. Monzon with her application, is a daughter of Mexican immigrants, both of whom, like many Mexicans here, continue to resist **citizenship**.

"I see myself as more modern-thinking than my parents," Miss Gomez said. "Like, my father is very macho and I am extremely feminist, and I don't put up with his macho stuff.

"When he says these things, I just let loose on him. 'You're a girl, and you're supposed to stay at home and make dinner,' and I'm like, 'Oh, dad, I'm going to college and be a lawyer and be a prosecutor like Marcia Clark, only more professional and not so emotional.' "

## Graphic

---

Photo: Many immigrants now applying for naturalization lived in the United States for years or even decades before giving **citizenship** much thought. One is Acetia Cantero, who arrived from Cuba 22 years ago and did not act until attending a "**citizenship** fair" last weekend at Belmont High School in downtown Los Angeles, where she was fingerprinted and got help in completing her application. (Jan Sonnenmair for The New York Times)

## Classification

---

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** **CITIZENSHIP** (95%); IMMIGRATION (94%); NATURALIZATION (92%); IMMIGRATION LAW (91%); **CITIZENSHIP** LAW (90%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (89%); US STATE IMMIGRATION LAW (78%); APPROVALS (77%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (76%); VOLUNTEERS (73%); HISTORY (73%); EMBASSIES & CONSULATES (73%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (72%); LEGISLATION (72%); CONSTITUTIONAL LAW (64%); AMNESTY (50%)

**Company:** IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE (US) IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%)

**Organization:** IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%); IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE (US) IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (83%)

**Industry:** SPONSORSHIP (50%)

**Geographic:** LOS ANGELES, CA, USA (93%); CALIFORNIA, USA (94%); MEXICO (95%); UNITED STATES (93%)

**Load-Date:** August 11, 1995