

## **IMMIGRANTS VOTING FOR EMPOWERMENT**

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### **Body**

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"Today we march; tomorrow we vote."

That sign, carried by an Asian couple in last April's massive immigrant march, made clear how well thousands of immigrants understand - and have integrated into - their new society.

It also made clear that, in this electoral year, those aspiring politicians who think that playing the anti-immigrant card will get them elected should think twice.

Last Tuesday, some of New York's main advocacy groups unveiled Democracy in Action! - an immigrant community empowerment campaign, which they said will become the largest ever in New York State. They made the announcement at the Board of Elections in Queens, the most diverse borough in the country, where they also delivered thousands of voter registration forms.

"Democracy in Action! is a national campaign in which New York plays an important role. It is an effort to channel the energy of the mass rallies this spring calling for just and humane immigration reform," said Ana María Archila, the youthful executive director of the Latin American Integration Center in Woodside, Queens, one of the groups involved.

"Mainly, it is a massive citizenship campaign, but it is also a grass roots effort to register those who are already citizens but have not done it."

Locally, the campaign's immediate goal is to turn out more than 100,000 immigrant citizens to vote in this November's elections, something that those seeking public office will do well not to ignore.

But Democracy in Action! also is a plan of action to activate an unprecedented number of immigrants to get involved - and stay involved - in the political process. And to do this, they don't have to be citizens or even documented, for that matter.

"Every Saturday for almost a year now, I spend three or four hours knocking on people's doors to motivate them to become voters," said Ana Velázquez, 36, an undocumented Mexican immigrant from Puebla who came to New York 13 years ago with her husband. She is a volunteer at the Latin American Integration Center, where she also takes English classes for free.

"Some people don't want to hear us and even slam the door on my face, but others do," she adds. "I ask them if they vote and tell them how important it is to vote in order to have more rights. I never tell them who to vote for, but

## IMMIGRANTS VOTING FOR EMPOWERMENT

I explain to them that, for example, we need more security, better education for our children, more after-school programs, and that only by voting those in power will pay attention to us."

Velázquez, the mother of four children born in New York, first visited the Woodside office of the Latin American Integration Center because her sister-in-law told her that there she could learn English for free. A few months later, she volunteered there to do political work. Despite her immigration status, it is obvious she does not feel powerless any more.

"My husband works in construction and I stay home taking care of our children," Velázquez said. "We pay our taxes every year, and we don't understand why they call us criminals. Our dream is to give our children an education so they can become useful and self-sufficient. Sometimes I feel that I am between a rock and a hard place. My parents are in Mexico and I haven't seen them in 13 years and I know they need me.

"But my kids are here and they also need me, and I am afraid that if I go to Puebla I may not be able to come back.

"I feel strange asking people to vote when I cannot do it," she said with conviction. "But we want to become legal, and I feel it is important that I work to help achieve that."

Like New York City, Democracy in Action! is a veritable rainbow of ethnicities. Latinos, Russians, Koreans, Chinese and many others have come together to build political power, protect their rights and make sure immigrants are given their due as decent, hardworking and productive members of society.

More and more immigrants are becoming citizens, registering to vote, or, like Velazquez, becoming politically active. Those politicians who cynically play the anti-immigration card may be in for the surprise of their lives. [aruiz@nydailynews.com](mailto:aruiz@nydailynews.com)

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