

IMMIGRANTS HEAD TO POLLS AS CONGRESS STALLS REFORM

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Body

Arnulfo Vega, 21, of Stamford, Conn., already knows he won't be voting on Election Day; he's an undocumented immigrant.

But that didn't stop him from trekking to Manhattan yesterday to urge immigrants who are registered to vote to flock to the polls next Tuesday.

Vega, who holds two jobs, as a janitor and a car washer in Stamford, joined representatives of immigrant advocacy groups in a press conference at the headquarters of the Service Employees International Union.

The union and the organizations called for a heavy immigrant voter turnout next week and criticized Congress' inability to move on sweeping immigration reform proposals.

"We believe if we had good legal status that we would not be discriminated against, that we would not be exploited," said Vega. "Instead, we would be treated like the human beings that we are - not like animals."

Immigrant advocates had hoped election year fever - as well as increasing efforts by politicians to court the Latino vote - would have gotten immigration legislation passed this congressional session. But those hopes have grown dim.

Deadlocked on issues that include workplace safety and taxes, the Senate recessed Wednesday until Nov. 14, establishing Congress' third lame-duck session.

Republicans and the Clinton administration have stalled on negotiations to provide permanent residency to three groups of illegal immigrants, totaling an estimated 1 million to 2 million people.

Earlier in the session, Democrats tried to grant relief to undocumented immigrants by linking the proposal to a bill that increased the number of visas for foreign workers in high-tech jobs. However, that move was not successful.

"We're very angry that Congress couldn't get its act together to pass this law," said Margie McHugh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition. Through its network of organizations, the coalition has registered 120,000 new citizens to vote in the past year.

According to the city Board of Elections, 326,984 New Yorkers have registered to vote since February, bringing the number eligible to cast ballots Tuesday to 3.7 million.

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