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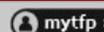
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Immigrants eye political power

by Perla Trevizo
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Consuelo Salaices, left, a volunteer with the Coalition of Latino Leaders, teaches a class aimed at giving Latinos the information they need to become a citizen in Dalton, Ga. Since 2006, almost 300 people that participated in the classes have become naturalized citizens.

Photo by [Ashlee Culverhouse](#).

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Sonia Shostak has called the United States home for more than three decades, and the 64-year-old has spent more time in her adoptive country than in her native Honduras.

But it wasn't until last year that she was able to say she is a citizen of the United States of America.

"I always felt like the ugly duckling for being the only one in the household who couldn't vote," said Shostak, who married a U.S. citizen and has two American grown children.

She earned her naturalization certificate in a Knoxville ceremony last year. The first thing

CLOSER TO HOME

GEORGIA

- 35 percent of immigrants, or 329,875 people, were naturalized U.S. citizens in 2010, making them eligible to vote.

- "New Americans" — naturalized citizens or the U.S.-born children of immigrants — account for 7.3 percent, or 337,544, of registered voters in the state.

TENNESSEE

- 33.5 percent of immigrants, or 96,905 people,

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she did afterward was find out where she could register to vote.

About 700,000 people became U.S. citizens last year, according to the Department of Homeland Security. But as of 2010, there are about 8 million permanent residents eligible to naturalize — all of them potential voters. And with major elections just months away, efforts to encourage eligible immigrants to become citizens and register to vote are intensifying.

“We know they may not be a force of naturalized citizens to change a federal election or even a statewide election, but certainly there are some shifts happening in some communities in the Southeast that can impact local elections,” said Flavia Jimenez, director of integration projects for the National Immigration Forum, an organization that advocates for public policies that welcome immigrants and refugees to the United States.

National and local organizations are redoubling their efforts with citizenship classes and voting registration drives.

In March, the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition launched a citizenship campaign together with 11 other immigrant advocacy organizations across the country to promote and facilitate U.S. citizenship. The nationwide goal is to naturalize 3,650 citizens this year.

The state coalition held the first workshop in Franklin, Tenn., on April 1 and attendance was far beyond what organizers expected.

“I was prepared to assist 60 people at the most, but we had 120 who showed up and most were eligible to become citizens,” said Anahi Gutierrez, citizenship coordinator for the coalition.

The group helped people fill out 50 naturalization forms, she said. Another workshop will be held to accommodate the 50 or so people the group turned away.

Nearly 10 percent Georgians are immigrants, and more than one-third of them are naturalized U.S. citizens, according to the Immigration Policy Center, a national research and policy organization.

In Tennessee, the foreign-born make up roughly 4.5 percent of the state’s population and more than one-third are naturalized citizens.

About 7 percent of all registered voters in Georgia and 3 percent in Tennessee are “New Americans” — naturalized citizens or U.S.-born children of immigrants.

Usually, permanent residents can apply to become citizens after five years or three if they are married to a U.S. citizen. But getting eligible residents to become citizens is challenging, Jimenez said.

Some postpone taking the citizenship test because of their allegiance to their native country. Some simply don’t know what the process is, she said. Permanent residents can essentially do the same things U.S. citizens can — except vote — so it’s easy for some to procrastinate.

Shostak initially thought becoming a U.S. citizen would mean she was abandoning her native country. However, once she went through her naturalization ceremony, those concerns evaporated.

“Why did I wait so long for something so beautiful?” she said to herself when she was presented a small American flag and given her certificate.

Still others don’t pursue citizenship because of the cost — which has increased from \$35 in 1983 to \$680 today.

“This administration has certainly made the effort to streamline that process, however it doesn’t take away from the fact if I were an indigent applicant thinking about citizenship, \$700 is a significant burden,” Jimenez said.

GROWING NUMBER

Even though the issues that matter to most Americans — the economy, education, health care — are the same issues that matter to immigrants, legislation aimed at stricter immigration laws is

were naturalized U.S. citizens in 2010, making them eligible to vote.

- “New Americans” — naturalized citizens or the U.S.-born children of immigrants — account for 3 percent, or 87,629, of all registered voters in Tennessee.

Source: Immigration Policy Center

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pushing more people to pursue citizenship.

Shostak said she would like to see a change in immigration law, including a way to legalize some of those already here.

"There has to be a solution to this problem," she said.

America Gruner, president of the Coalition of Latin American Leaders in Dalton, Ga., said her office receives inquiries from about 15 people a month who want information on how to become citizens and register to vote.

Her organization started registering people to vote and offering citizenship classes in 2006, she said. In the last five years, they've registered more than 700 people, with a record 300 in 2008, a presidential election year.

And since 2006, about 300 people who have participated in the classes have become naturalized citizens, she said.

"People have told us they've heard about the state laws and they want to do something about it," she said.

Georgia is among the top 20 states in the country with the largest share of legal permanent residents eligible to become citizens. In 2010, there were 120,000, or about 2 percent of the voting eligible population, according to National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials.

That number is expected to grow to close to 280,000 within five years, Jimenez said. In Dalton, the figure is projected to grow from about 4,000 to 7,000.

In Tennessee, the number of immigrants eligible to become naturalized citizens is projected to grow from about 42,000 to more than 87,000 within five years, said Jimenez.

Shostak knows that numbers matter because "votes do count."

"It's very exciting to be able to be part of change," she said.



about Perla Trevizo...

Perla Trevizo joined the Chattanooga Times Free Press in 2007 and covers immigration/diversity issues and higher education. She holds a master's degree in newswire journalism from Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in Madrid, Spain, and a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Texas. In 2011 she participated in the Bringing Home the World international reporting fellowship program sponsored by the International Center for Journalists, producing a series on Guatemalan immigrants for which she ...

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