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New citizens get ready to cast their votes

Although most of the nonpartisan campaigns are helping Latinos with the voting process, some groups are helping Asian Americans prepare for the November elections.

By Anna Gorman

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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At a recent voter fair at Placita Olvera, Carmen Gutierrez practiced punching her ballot in a mock polling booth and received information about the state's propositions.

Though she has lived in the United States for more than a decade, Gutierrez only became a new citizen in September and registered to vote earlier this month. Gutierrez said she is eager to vote in the presidential election.

"There are a lot of Latinos here," said Gutierrez, who is originally from Mexico. "We have to make our voices heard."

Hundreds of thousands of new citizens like Gutierrez are registering to vote in California and around the nation in time to cast ballots Nov. 4. In Los Angeles County, about 60,000 new citizens have registered to vote since January, according to the county registrar. In all of last year, about 34,000 new citizens registered.

In an effort to get new citizens registered and to the polls, community groups are walking precincts, conducting phone banks, holding forums and distributing multilingual voter guides. The *Ya es Hora, ¡Ve y Vota!* (It's Time, Go Vote!) campaign aims to involve Latino immigrants in the electoral process and force politicians to listen. But first, many of the new citizens need help with the logistics, such as filling out registration forms and finding polling places.

"A lot of people in the community are ready to participate in the civic life of our country, but often they don't know how the process works," said Ben Monterroso, executive director of the Mi Familia Vota organization.

The nonpartisan campaign is the next phase of a movement that started in 2006, when immigrants nationwide marched for immigrant rights. Many held signs saying, *Ahora marchamos, mañana votamos* (Now We March, Tomorrow We Vote).

Building on the momentum from the marches, community organizers helped get record numbers of eligible green-card holders to apply for citizenship. In fiscal years 2006 and 2007, about 1.36 million legal immigrants were naturalized, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Now groups are trying to turn that energy into political power, working to increase new Latino voter turnout throughout the country.

"It's just the third leg on the journey, after the marches and the citizenship push," said Holli Holliday, executive director of the We Are America Alliance. "We actually got to the 'Tomorrow We Vote' part."

Holliday said the We Are America Alliance has registered more than 400,000 people in 14 states.

Spanish-language media, which has played an integral role from the start, is also doing its part to get new citizens registered. Newspapers inserted nearly 1 million voter registration cards during one weekend last month. Univision is also airing public service announcements and promotions on radio and television to mobilize Latinos. They are also sharing the stories of people like DJ Eddie "El Piolin" Sotelo, who became a citizen this year.

"We think it's important for Univision to inform and educate the Latino community," said Cesar Conde, executive vice president of Univision Communications. "But we think it's equally important for us to ensure that we are empowering them."

During the recent voter fair, volunteers walked down Olvera Street with clipboards, ready to register eligible vendors and shoppers. At one table, Teresa Maya handed out voter guides in Spanish and urged people to read about the candidates and the propositions.

Carlos and Ana Romero, from El Salvador, were naturalized three years ago and registered to vote during the voter fair.

"We want people to know we're here and our next generation is going to be very important in the process," Carlos Romero said.

Asian American groups are also reaching out to new citizens in their community. They are distributing "easy voter guides" in various languages, including Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean and are calling registered voters in their own languages.

"To get a personal phone call in their language is rare for them," said Eugene Lee, voting right project director at the Asian Pacific American Legal Center. "It makes a difference."

Eun Sook Lee, who works with Korean Americans, said new citizens are attending voter presentations about the political process and the current ballot initiatives. She said they are concerned about many of the same issues, including the economy and healthcare, as other Americans.

"There is a lot of heightened interest in our community," she said.

Voters have until Monday to register to vote in California, but that deadline is extended until Oct. 28 for new citizens who were recently naturalized, said Sharon Rummery, spokeswoman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

The agency, which had earlier been criticized for the lengthy citizenship process, has held numerous naturalization ceremonies in recent months. Late last month, more than 18,000 people were naturalized in one day at the Los Angeles Convention Center.

Advocates said they believe the new voter mobilization will affect the outcome of the election, especially in battleground states such as Colorado and Florida. But they hope for an even broader impact.

"It will not only help decide the outcome in this election, but it will begin to reshape the political landscape around the nation," said Efrain Escobedo, senior director of civic engagement for the National Assn. of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials.

USC political science professor Ricardo Ramirez said most of the new citizens are in noncompetitive states like California.

"No matter how many new citizens register to vote and vote in California, it's not going to make a difference," he said.

But politicians still should go after these new citizens, he said, because most haven't committed to a party and represent a growing, untapped population of voters.

"It behooves both parties not to take this bloc vote for granted," Ramirez said. "Whatever they do now will have serious impact in coming elections."

anna.gorman@latimes.com



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