

Immigrants Prepare for Next Step

Citizenship, Voting Take Priority After Marches Disappoint

The Washington Post
September 14, 2006

Advocates working on behalf of illegal immigrants said they learned a lesson from the immigrant rights marches that fizzled over the Labor Day holiday: It's time to start driving.

During the recently concluded National Latino Congreso in Los Angeles, organizers decided to focus on voter registration drives for documented immigrants and citizenship drives for immigrants who qualify.

Antonio González, president of the Los Angeles-based Southwest Voter Registration Project, said 50 voter registration drives will be launched in California, Texas, New Mexico and Colorado, states with large Latino populations. In addition, 100 voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives will kick off in October, he said.

"The message from the community was to switch gears," González said. "Now is not the time for mass mobilization of immigrants who don't have the right to vote. There has been a massive amount of intimidation, and immigrants aren't stupid. They're trying to protect themselves as best they can. It's time to get the vote out."

But opponents of illegal immigration said voter and citizenship registration drives will not reignite a movement that has stalled.

Labor Day week demonstrations that were supposed to draw hundreds of thousands of marchers in six cities drew fewer than 25,000 total. The number paled in comparison with the millions of illegal immigrants and supporters who came out in the spring for huge protests in Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago, Phoenix and Washington.

With little political follow-up in the months after the big marches, immigrant organizers could only watch as legislation stalled in Congress to give illegal immigrants a chance to work legally and start on a path to citizenship. Meanwhile, state and city governments enacted laws targeting illegal immigrants.

Organizations working to stop illegal immigration said the big marches succeeded only in reminding U.S. citizens that the situation is out of control.

"The momentum is on the enforcement side," said Rosemary Jenks, director of government relations for NumbersUSA, a group that wants to decrease immigration. "I don't think the marches generated the spirit they were meant to generate. I think they scared Americans. It was an in-your-face reminder that we have a problem with illegal immigration. In my view, the marches were great."

At the Latino Congreso, or congress, González and other leaders said the marches touched off the largest Latin movement in decades. In May, applications for citizenship were up by 42 percent from that time last year, and approvals rose by 21 percent, according to the Web site of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

But the leaders acknowledged that they failed to dissuade Congress from pushing forward with proposals that would make life harder for illegal immigrants. They also said the Labor Day marches fared poorly because potential marchers felt intimidated because of a government and law enforcement backlash against illegal immigrants.

The timing of the marches -- several of which happened in the middle of the week at a time when families were returning from vacation, children were back at school and the nation was remembering the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks -- was poor, several organizers acknowledged.

"The plan of action is to play strong defense and adamantly oppose with a variety of tactics the proposals that are coming out of Congress through November," Gonzalez said. "We will take our chances with a new Congress."

González said activists hope to increase the number of registered Latino voters from about 8 million to 10 million.

Baldemar Velasquez, founder and president of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, who once worked beside farmworker organizer Cesar Chavez, said Latino representatives in Washington are failing to tell Americans the story of why there are so many undocumented Mexican immigrants.

"The North American Free Trade Agreement opened up the market and put 1.3 million Mexican corn farmers out of work," he said. "Where do you think those corn farmers are now? Some of them are in Mexican slums, but a lot of them are in the United States."

The president of the Migration Policy Institute, an organization that studies immigration patterns, disagreed.

"The first part of the statement is true: Mexican farmers have lost their farms," Demetrios Papademetriou said. "But to say that those people are releasing into the United States, I think it's a gigantic leap. I certainly would not make that suggestion."