

# Latinos Seek Citizenship in Time for Voting

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A lawsuit filed Thursday in a federal court in New York by Latino immigrants seeks to force immigration authorities to complete hundreds of thousands of stalled naturalization petitions in time for the new citizens to vote in November.

The class-action suit was brought by the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund on behalf of legal Hispanic immigrants in the New York City area who are eager to vote and have been waiting for years for the federal Citizenship and Immigration Services agency to finish their applications. The suit demands that the agency meet a nationwide deadline of Sept. 22 to complete any naturalization petitions filed by March 26.

Latino groups hope to summon the clout of the federal courts to compel the Bush administration to reduce a backlog of citizenship applications that swelled last year. According to the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research group in Washington, more than one million citizenship petitions were backed up in the pipeline by the end of December, the majority from Latino immigrants.

Despite protests over the delays from lawmakers, Latino groups and immigrant advocates, the immigration agency is currently projecting wait times of 16 months to 18 months to process the petitions.

“The reality is that large numbers of Latinos will not be able to vote in the elections because of these delays,” said Cesar A. Perales, president of the defense fund. “Now the world will know that the Latino community expects the Bush administration to get this done on time.”

Christopher S. Bentley, a spokesman for Citizenship and Immigration Services, said he could not comment on pending litigation.

“Our commitment is to work through the naturalization applications as quickly as we can without compromising the security and integrity of the process,” Mr. Bentley said.

The lawsuit, filed in the Southern District of New York, asserts that the agency violated immigrants’ due process rights by routinely failing to finish their applications within a 180-day time period that Congress has set as a standard. It also asserts that the Bush administration did not follow regulatory procedures in November 2002 when it ordered the Federal Bureau of Investigation to deepen its background checks of citizenship applicants.

Foster Maer, a lawyer for the defense fund, said it would soon file motions asking the court to order the agency immediately to meet the September deadline, which is intended to leave new citizens time to register to vote.

Manuel Martinez, 35, a legal immigrant from Mexico who is a plaintiff in the suit, filed his petition in January 2006. It has been delayed because the F.B.I. has not completed the required background check, he said. He said he suspected the problem was that he has a common Hispanic name.

“I want to be a citizen yesterday, not tomorrow,” said Mr. Martinez, who has lived in the United States since 1990. “I am really worried about the economy, and the deficit is too much. I need to vote.”

A fee increase, raising naturalization costs 80 percent to \$595, went into effect on July 30. Legal immigrants were also spurred to seek citizenship by worries about the divisive debate over immigration and by citizenship campaigns by Latino groups.

“It is astonishing the government should be so unresponsive to immigrants who have enthusiastically taken all the steps to become Americans,” said Janet Murguía, president of the National Council of La Raza, a Latino group that supported the suit.