

## Southern California's dual citizens see little conflict

With dual citizenship on the rise, many residents who are also citizens of other countries say their status doesn't make them any less loyal to the U.S.

By Teresa Watanabe  
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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Salvador Gomez Gochez was 25 when he first came to Los Angeles with \$3 in his pocket and painful memories of his Salvadoran homeland torn apart by repression and war.

Working his way up from a parking lot attendant to a manager, he learned English, bought a home, volunteered for a Salvadoran community organization and became a U.S. citizen, grateful to the country he says saved his life.

But Gomez Gochez, now 54, also retained his Salvadoran citizenship. Now, as a dual citizen, he has made the dramatic decision to return to his impoverished hometown in El Salvador and run for mayor after nearly three decades away. His hope: to revive his town's agricultural base with his U.S. contacts and empower the villagers with U.S. practices of participatory democracy.

"America is the country that gave me the opportunity to be alive, and I'll be loyal to it until the end of my life," said Gomez Gochez in a phone interview from his home in Atiquizaya, a bedroom community of 52,000 about 50 miles west of San Salvador, the capital. "But I also want to give something back to my hometown. I want to teach them about the U.S. political process and how we as U.S. citizens use our rights, respect the Constitution and participate in the democratic process."

As international business, travel and communications explode, a growing number of nations are allowing dual citizenship, and more immigrants are claiming it. Some, like Gomez Gochez, aim to use their bilingual and bicultural experiences to infuse their homelands with U.S. values and strengthen bonds between both countries.

Others cite personal benefits, such as easier travel and better business opportunities. At a U.S. citizenship ceremony last month in Los Angeles, Ben Raposas, 38, a Simi Valley nurse, said he would apply for dual citizenship from his native Philippines to save tax dollars, have wider job choices and retain the right to return and retire. As an American, he said, it will be easier to get visas to travel and qualify for more jobs.

But the trend is also stirring some unease. Some argue that dual citizenship weakens a person's commitment to the United States, threatens a common national identity and violates the oath of allegiance taken by every naturalized citizen to "absolutely and entirely renounce" fidelity to any foreign government. A person cannot be loyal to two countries any more than to two spouses or two religions, critics say.

"For me, the idea of being American means your primary attachment is to the United States and not your country of origin," said Stanley A. Renshon, a political science professor at City University of New York Graduate Center. "The harm that comes from dual citizenship reflects the question of which identity will be primary."

Although the U.S. government does not keep statistics on dual citizens, some studies suggest that the number is large and growing. A 2007 study by Florida and Chicago researchers estimated that 77% of first-generation Latino immigrants who are U.S. citizens have dual citizenship. Renshon estimated that more than 90% of immigrants from the top 20 sending nations between 1994 and 2002 who are naturalized U.S. citizens had dual citizenship.

More than 150 nations allow some form of multiple citizenship, including Canada, Mexico, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and France, according to Renshon. The number has particularly increased in the last 15 years in Europe and Latin America.

The U.S. government does not require a person to renounce the former country when becoming a citizen. But it does not recognize or encourage dual citizenship because of the problems it could create over potentially conflicting obligations for military service and the like, said Chris Bentley of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service. He cited as one example Japanese Americans in Japan during World War II who were drafted into the Japanese military.

"There are serious ramifications, and that's why we don't encourage it," Bentley said.

Both sides in the dual-citizen debate see validation for their arguments in recent studies by Florida State University political science professors Jeffrey K. Staton and Robert A. Jackson, and Damarys Canache of the University of Illinois. In a 2007 study examining claims that dual citizenship weakens ties to America, the researchers found that Latino immigrants who were dual citizens were less likely to be fluent in English, identify as U.S. citizens, consider the United States their homeland, register to vote and vote in a U.S. election than Latino immigrants who were sole U.S. citizens.

But the researchers' latest findings, scheduled for publication this year, show that those differences disappear among the U.S.-born second generation, Staton said.

"If these differences go away across generations, it doesn't strike me as a matter that is all that worrisome," Staton said.

And community activists assert that the massive energy invested in the last two years to register immigrants to vote, get them to the polls and better integrate them into U.S. society has deepened their connections to their new nation.

Renshon, who argues that citizenship without emotional attachment is the "civic equivalent of a one-night stand," advocates deepening the integration of new U.S. citizens through free universal English classes. He also argues that dual citizens should be discouraged from voting in foreign elections, holding foreign office and serving in foreign militaries.

But many dual citizens themselves dismiss such concerns and say their binational connections richly benefit both nations.

"The U.S. is my home and El Salvador is my home. It's not either/or, it's both," said Mario Fuentes of the Salvadoran American National Assn. in Los Angeles.

The organization actively promotes binationalism as a way to connect people to the riches of their joint heritage. The group hosts frequent delegations between the two nations, holds an annual Salvadoran Day, sponsored a historical tour to El Salvador last month and brought El Salvador's

most important religious icon, a statue of the Divine Savior of the World, to Los Angeles churches. The group promotes immigrant participation in U.S. civic affairs with voter registration drives and other activities.

Salvadoran association members aim to share their U.S. democratic experiences and know-how with compatriots in El Salvador. Gomez Gochez's mayoral campaign, for instance, is based on grass-roots organizing skills he learned on the streets of Los Angeles.

Gomez Gochez said he had talked so far with more than 4,000 people in 167 home meetings to seek their input -- a new political style, he said, in a country with a history of repression and political oligarchy.

"No one ever did that before in El Salvador," he said. "I learned a different kind of politics in the United States."

Some dual citizens admit to emotional twinges, however, at the ultimate moment when they raise their right hand, renounce all fidelity to other countries and pledge allegiance to the United States.

"You get a little ripped in the middle. You say you're putting the other guys behind you," said Gene Hernandez, 40, a Valencia physical education instructor who became a U.S. citizen last month.

But Hernandez said there was no question where his primary allegiance lies. He left Mexico when he was 5 and has never returned. He grew up on U.S. football and speaks English with his wife and three children.

Although proud of his native Mexico, he said he became even more patriotic toward his adopted homeland after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

"I love America and I hold it really close to me," he said. "You mess with America, and you're messing with me."