

# *Yearning to*





# *Be Voters*

Tens of thousands of new U.S. citizens could be a powerful force in the 2020 elections ... if they go to the polls

By **MICHAEL MACAGNONE** and **TANVI MISRA**

*Photographs by Tanvi Misra*



**WELCOME TO THE USA:**  
New Americans line up  
at their naturalization  
ceremony in Philadelphia.



t her naturalization ceremony, Blanca Inhof, a 49-year-old woman from West Lawn, Pa., could not hold back her tears.

“I have been waiting for this moment for 25 years. I always wanted to become a citizen, but ... we couldn’t get the money together,” says Inhof, who works as a translator for her school district. “It’s been a bit of a struggle, but we are so grateful to be here,” she adds. “Indeed, we are in a free, free country — a beautiful country. It has brought so much happiness in my life.”

After her mother passed away 25-or-so years ago, Blanca came to the United States from Mexico on a 10-year visa. She considers it a “miracle” that she was able to immigrate legally in search of a new beginning, a better life. A couple of years after she arrived, she met her husband, David Inhof, and within months they married. He, along with their two children — a 20-year-old daughter studying in college to be an

interior architect and a high-schooler son who wants to join the Marines — watched Blanca take the momentous final step to citizenship one February afternoon in Philadelphia.

Along one wall inside the ceremony room, volunteers waited with voter registrations forms, and Blanca filled one out. While it was not the determining factor, the 2020 election contributed to Blanca’s naturalization decision. Having her citizenship pending any longer would have added a layer of precarity to her family’s life.

“We don’t trust him — it’s plain and simple — we don’t trust him,” David Inhof says, referring to President Donald Trump. “He’s kicked legal residents out and put kids in cages.”

The continual crop of new citizens like Blanca Inhof in Pennsylvania and across the country represents a “sleeping political giant,” says Diego Iniguez-Lopez, policy and campaign manager at the National Partnership for New Americans, a coalition of state, federal and local organizations working to naturalize immigrants and register them to vote.

Naturalizations tend to spike in an election year and drop right after. If fiscal 2020 follows a similar rise in naturalization rates as fiscal 2016, then this year alone may see around 860,000 naturalized citizens, according to NPNA’s analysis of government data. Between the last presidential election and the upcoming one in November, there may be an estimated 3.1 million naturalizations, many distributed across

key battleground states. And there may be significant political muscle in those votes.

Immigration is a key concern for the Inhofs because of how it affects Blanca. It gets her husband riled up, prompting a stream of exasperated shushes from his family.

David, 47, drove a truck for years, but became disabled with a bone condition, osteomyelitis, and retired early. He went back to school and earned a degree in information technology but hasn’t landed a job yet. For that reason, the Inhofs say they also care about trade tariffs, unemployment, education and other issues that shape their lives. Together, these will inform their decision come November.

Blanca says she’s excited about the ability to cast a ballot in the state she now calls home. It’s something she had been aching for a long time.

## Potential Power Brokers

As the presidential primary season swings into high gear, immigrant voters may play a consequential role: Over 23 million U.S. citizens who were born abroad will be eligible to vote in the 2020 election, according to a Pew Research Center analysis from February. As 10 percent of the overall electorate, that would be a record high. Nearly half of these voters live in states with Democratic primaries or caucuses that took place by March 3, Super Tuesday.





**NEW AMERICAN:** Blanca Inhof (in red) verifies her biographical information with the USCIS clerk at her naturalization ceremony in February.

In fact, the number of new citizens since the last election alone exceeds Trump's margin of victory in Florida, Pennsylvania, Arizona and Michigan combined, and has made up substantial portions of the growth in each state's eligible voters since 2016. In other states, like Texas, they may be critical to local and state elections, or may propel new candidates to congressional seats. Like Blanca Inhof, these potential new voters bring with them rich stories about where they came from, and diverse opinions about where they would like to take their new country next, and have a range of issues they care about.

The catch, however, is that immigrants face multiple barriers to naturalization and to participating in government, due to language differences, fear of authorities and lack of information on how to vote. If they are low-wage earners, as many tend to be, multiple shifts may prevent them from making it to the polls. Government office closures and ballot accessibility issues due to the coronavirus pandemic may make it even more difficult. These people are considered "low propensity voters" — those who vote at lower rates than native-born Americans.

But some research has found that those able to transcend these obstacles end up going to the polls at the same or higher rates than native-born Americans. They can become "super voters" who reliably turn up at the polls. According to Pew, naturalized Hispanic and Asian voters — two of the biggest immigrant groups — tend to turn out at higher rates than their native-born counterparts from the same groups.

"Yes, we have opportunities in the immediate term if the investments are there to target these populations, in particular, and to talk about issues that are top of mind, to talk about immigration when

other campaigns might be pivoting away from the issue of immigration," says Tom Wong, an associate professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego who has been creating new methods to isolate these so-called "new American" voters. "I think that's how we unlock the potential electoral power of this new American electorate."

Advocates and politicians caution that new Americans are not a monolith. Each community may have a kaleidoscope of views that make it more or less likely to support a particular candidate.

Business-minded South Asian Americans in the Texas suburbs, religious Mexican Americans in Arizona concerned about abortion, and Cuban Americans now living in South Florida after living through the Cuban revolution may not line up cleanly with prevailing assumptions about how they're likely to cast their votes.

In other words, these voters could be up for grabs if politicians running for office care to court them.

### The Naturalization Boom

Blanca Inhof gained citizenship along with around 70 other people — many also hailing from Pennsylvania but some from as far as Delaware — that February afternoon.

Before the ceremony, the soon-to-be Americans sat listening to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officers joke about the Super Bowl victory the night before by the Kansas City Chiefs. In front of them, a row of eight American flags stood next to a dim projector screen with the words "Celebrate Citizenship" glowing softly.

The officer then called their countries of origin — 35 in all. They listened to a recorded message by Trump welcoming them as fellow

citizens, and waved miniature flags as the song “Proud to be an American” played. They recited the Pledge of Allegiance — and finally, after their long wait, were told they could “join the American family.” Then came a wave of teary smiles, family photographs and congratulations.

There’s a quiet efficiency to the process; the unassuming U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office that hosted the ceremony, tucked away in a West Philly corner, swore in 140 citizens just that day. That office conducts between four and six ceremonies a week, making about 10,000 new citizens a year. The agency also has a regional office in Pittsburgh that conducts naturalizations for the western half of the state and West Virginia.

According to NPNA’s tally of government data, an estimated 80,379 adults have been naturalized in Pennsylvania since 2017. That’s almost double the margin of Trump’s victory there a year earlier, when he won by 44,292 votes.

New citizens add to some of the few growing demographic groups in an otherwise shrinking state. Pennsylvania’s population has been largely flat since 2010, at about 12.8 million, as the more rural, less diverse western portion of the state loses people compared to the growing, diversifying eastern half.

According to census data, Pennsylvania gained about 100,000 naturalized citizens between 2010 and 2018. The state is now roughly 4 percent naturalized citizens, up from less than 3 percent in 2010.

That growth, coupled with new congressional maps, have factored in flipping several Philadelphia-area seats in recent elections. Blanca, for instance, lives in the 6th Congressional District represented by first-term Democratic Rep. Chrissy Houlahan. Diversifying suburbs may play a key factor in some of the most competitive congressional seats in the country, such as Pennsylvania’s 1st District held by Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, a Republican.

## The Call of Citizenship

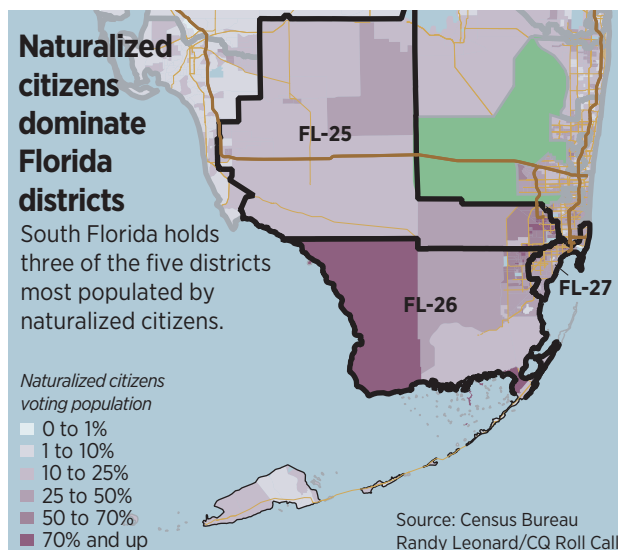
Naturalized voters will be roughly the same as the size of the Generation Z bloc of eligible voters — people born after 1996. For the first time in a presidential election, both may be larger than the so-called “Silent Generation” born before 1946, according to Pew. The growth in these potential voters — naturalized citizens who are at least 18 years of age — has increased by a striking 93 percent since 2000.

Historically, the nationwide growth of naturalized citizens has corresponded with changes in immigration and welfare law. The growth rate has steadily climbed since the 1990s — generally, with spikes right before election years and drops right after. Immigrants from Latin American countries make up the largest group of naturalized citizens, with Mexico being the top country of origin for new Americans.

The decision to naturalize has grown more political in the past few decades, according to research by University of California, Irvine political science professor Louis DeSipio. Immigrant groups view naturalization as a way to leverage community power, he says, especially in cases where they feel villainized in the prevailing rhetoric.

“I think we have seen increasingly over the last 25 years now concerted efforts to mobilize naturalization around anger at the way immigrants are treated in national discourse,” DeSipio says.

That mobilization has borne fruit. In 1996, news stories reported a “massive tide” of naturalized citizens at the voter rolls in response to



## Votes from naturalized citizens could push polls

Naturalized citizens make up enough of the voting-age population to close the margins in key battlegrounds.

|          | Voting population that is naturalized | Added naturalized citizens between 2010 and '18 |
|----------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Florida  | 15.4%                                 | 649K or 5.7 times Trump's '16 margin            |
| Texas    | 9.4%                                  | 485K 2X Cruz '18 over O'Rourke                  |
| Arizona  | 8.0%                                  | 103K 113% of Trump's margin                     |
| Penn.    | 4.4%                                  | 108K 2X of Trump's margin                       |
| Michigan | 4.4%                                  | 65K 6X of Trump's margin                        |

Source: Census Bureau, AP  
Randy Leonard/CQ Roll Call

a government naturalization campaign the year before. In states like California, which had passed a landmark anti-immigrant measure four years earlier, new citizens went for then-Democratic nominee Bill Clinton.

The 2008 election also saw a massive spike in the New American population, largely the result of naturalization campaigns in the run-up to the presidential election and a rush to get applications in before a hike in naturalization fees that took effect a year earlier, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

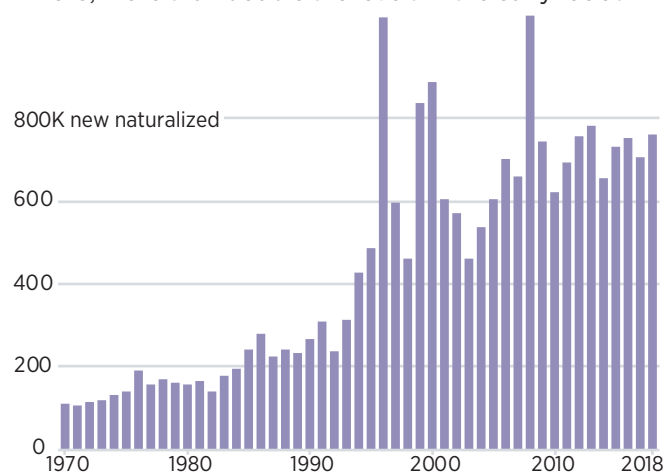
But the fee hike and growing application backlog under the Obama administration blunted the spikes during the next two elections.

After 2016, however, experts and advocates reported a great deal of enthusiasm, in part because Trump’s presidential campaign rhetoric targeting immigrants has created an additional layer of insecurity.

“The immigrant communities are feeling this,” says Eric Cohen, executive director of the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, which manages the nonpartisan New Americans Campaign. “My impression is that this is a continued spike, and a major driver of that is the Trump administration.”

## More people getting naturalized

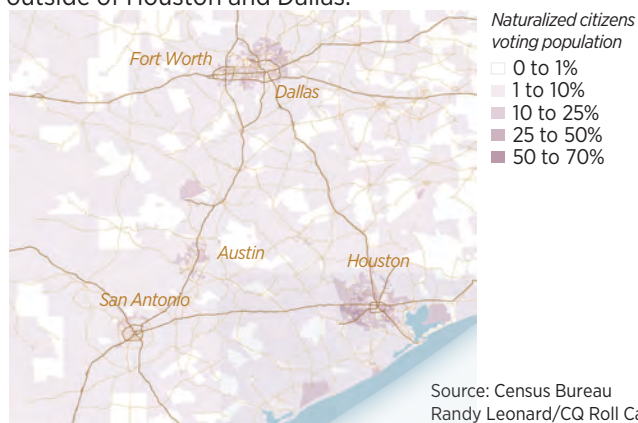
The number of new naturalizations was above 760,000 in 2018, more than double the levels in the early 1990s.



Source: Department of Homeland Security  
Randy Leonard/CQ Roll Call

## Texas suburbs are diversifying

Naturalized citizens make up a significant part of areas outside of Houston and Dallas.



Source: Census Bureau  
Randy Leonard/CQ Roll Call

The other reason, he and others on the ground continually mention, is what naturalization advocates have taken to calling the administration's "second wall" — a slate of proposals that make naturalization an intimidating and prohibitively expensive prospect. The current administration's proposal to dramatically increase naturalization fees by roughly 83 percent, in particular, is pushing people to take their final steps towards citizenship, lest they can no longer afford to do so in the future.

While the estimated numbers of new voters expected in fiscal 2020 are lower than 2008 peak, they can still make a huge difference — that is, if they turn out to the polls.

## Questions of Turnout

Historically, naturalized immigrants have voted at lower rates than U.S.-born citizens — a phenomenon that leads politicians to overlook

this group.

While that gap has generally narrowed over time, it's still significant. According to the Census Bureau, around 68 percent of native-born Americans registered to vote in 2018, about 10 percentage points lower than the registration rate for naturalized citizens. Similarly, around 54 percent of native-born citizens voted that year, whereas the percentage for naturalized Americans was 46 percent.

**A 2016 bureau report that analyzed 2012 presidential voting patterns found a slightly sunnier outcome: Around 62 percent of first-generation immigrants registered to vote and a little over half actually turned up at the polls.**

Structural barriers can keep people in lower income brackets from voting and many immigrants may face the same issues — digital divides, access to information about voting and candidates in the right language, limited access to polling places, shorter voting hours and voter ID laws. But increases in income, education and voting age population since 2012 means that "immigrant voting will be increasingly relevant to electoral outcomes in years to come," the Census Bureau predicted in 2016. Indeed, naturalized citizens made up 8 percent of the ballots cast in the 2018 midterm elections — twice their share compared to 1996.

By becoming citizens, immigrants, and often their families, are on steadier ground: They can sponsor their immediate family members who may still live abroad, access benefits that they may otherwise not be eligible for, and of course, they can vote. For these reasons, immigrant groups are seeing increased interest to vote among New Americans.

Their interest in getting civically involved isn't always reciprocated by political candidates, though, potentially further discouraging voters who already face barriers to participation.

"I think it is a systemic issue of not having been engaged before," says Rep. Pramila Jayapal, a Washington state Democrat who often speaks about being one of the few naturalized citizens serving in Congress. "I think a lot of immigrants do come to the United States and perhaps are escaping repressive regimes. They tend to want to keep their head down, work hard and not do anything that draws attention."

As co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Jayapal has had conversations with the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee to encourage a more tailored approach to voter education, outreach and communication: Ads in multiple languages in community news outlets and publications, as well as messengers who look like the voters they're targeting and who understand their experiences.

"I do think it's a challenge to not have our engagement feel transactional," she says. "I feel like it is an ongoing effort, taking on the issues that these communities have and that we're ready to embrace them and see them and hear them and speak to them in the languages and with the messengers that make the most sense."

Jayapal says she endorsed Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders in the Democratic presidential race because his campaign understands that. In the primaries held so far, Asian and Latino voters have preferred Sanders over Joe Biden. In Iowa, immigrant slaughterhouse workers showed up to caucus; in Nevada, Latino voters went to the polls in droves.

The reason, according to Belén Sisa, Sanders' national constituency press secretary, is because the campaign made concerted efforts to



# Citizenship: A Tough Mountain to Climb

Gaining citizenship is a long, expensive and complicated process — one that has gotten more so under the Trump administration.

As the system currently stands, it can take 10 years or more for a person who entered the United States on a visa to become a citizen. Just getting a green card can take at least five years. Becoming eligible to apply for citizenship as a permanent resident after that? Another five years.

If you get to that stage, you then fill out the N-400 form, submit it with a \$640 filing fee and then ready yourself for the civics test, biometric appointment and potential further vetting. After clearing those last hurdles, you are home free — a bona fide U.S. citizen.

Except, for an increasing number of people, that process never really takes off.

Around 700,000 applications for citizenship remained pending at the end of 2019 — and wait times have doubled over the past two years to almost three years, according to a September report by the Colorado State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

“The substantial delay to naturalization created by the backlog negatively impacts voting rights, civil rights, and the administration of justice,” the report’s authors write.

A backlog results when the number of applications coming in exceed the ones processed by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services staff, who are tasked with adjudicating immigration benefits. Citizenship applications tend to spike before general elections, so throughout history, there have been crests and troughs in backlogs as the agency tries to catch up to the fluctuating heap of incoming applications.

The most recent uptick in pending applications started during the Obama administration. According to Eric Cohen, executive director of the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, technological updates instituted by the administration — meant to speed the processing along — actually led to delays due to unforeseen bugs. According to a 2017 report to Congress, the electronic platform initially faced “multiple technical problems, which negatively impacted processing times.”

The 2016 election year saw more appli-

cations than expected, as people rushed to apply before candidate Donald Trump could fulfill anti-immigration promises as president, so despite the technical hiccups demand continued to rise.

“It is my understanding that they underestimated the bump [in applications],” says Cohen, whose organization oversees the New American Campaign, a coalition of 150 organizations that provide legal help with naturalizations.

“The Trump effect was more profound than expected.”

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— Eric Cohen,  
Immigrant Legal  
Resource Center

tion, from around 300,000 in 2010 to around 700,000 in early 2017, when Trump took office. Fast forward two years, at the end of fiscal 2019, when the administration boasted about its processing progress.

“The men and women of USCIS continue to administer our nation’s lawful immigration system, processing a large number of applications and requests while naturalizing 833,000 new U.S. citizens, an 11-year high,” Ken Cuccinelli, then serving as the acting director of USCIS, touted in an end-of-the-year email.

But on the back end, delays compound the backlog, critics say.

The failure to resolve them is partly the result of a tepid response on the part of the Trump administration to the surge in naturalization applications, according to some.

Cohen mentions two other contributing

factors causing delays: more interviews and additional vetting, even in cases where neither are needed. He says he has heard stories of people vetted during the asylum process, then again when they sought to obtain their green cards, and then once more during the citizenship process. One elderly Iranian woman was so distraught during the final vetting that she broke down and withdrew her application, Cohen says.

“By doing super vetting, what you’re doing is discouraging people from applying, you’re giving people a really hard time during their interview process, and you’re taking much longer — 50 percent-plus longer,” he says. “Therefore, you’re doing fewer and fewer applications. So there are a lot of these bumps in the road that are there, I would say, purposely.”

USCIS maintains that it is “completing more citizenship applications, more efficiently and effectively — outperforming itself as an agency,” a spokesman said via email, and that “many factors relating to an individual’s case can affect processing times.”

In addition, the administration has put up what critics call the “second wall” — seemingly small rule changes, fee hikes and additional paperwork requirements that altogether make naturalization much more burdensome and prohibitive.

The one proposal advocates are most concerned about is a regulation that would, among other things, increase citizenship application fees from \$640 to \$1,170, and fees for green card applications from \$1,225 to \$2,195. It also would eliminate all fee waivers for these applications.

In a comment on the regulation, the National Partnership for New Americans, a group that helps immigrants naturalize, writes that the increase would leave tens of thousands of immigrants it serves unable to undergo naturalization. It is “undermining the civic and economic benefits that are a direct result of welcoming and naturalizing millions,” the organization writes.

“The agency is proposing to do this during the exact same time that citizenship application fees are beginning to rise in anticipation of the presidential election of 2020.”

— Tanvi Misra

involve Latinos, undocumented immigrants and others of immigrant background in agenda-making. It also organized communities in a culturally competent manner, so that members from within reached out to neighbors, relatives and friends — at Latin grocery stores, churches, coffee shops.

“When you invest in people, put in the money and the organizing, people will support you. ... They have been ignored so long and considered not worthy of investment,” Sisa says. “It’s not reinventing the wheel, it’s just going to people and asking for their vote. It’s just going to people and saying, ‘You matter.’”

It may be that targeted outreach efforts aren’t enough to overcome the systemic barriers that keep these groups from voting this time around, or for guaranteeing Sanders’ success in 2020. Sisa believes, however, that a foundation has been laid.”

“I think we’re making history — no matter what happens,” she says. “By engaging Latinos and immigrants in a way they haven’t been out-reached to, this will become a blueprint for candidates in the future.”

Jayapal also points to work that her Democratic colleague, Rep. Grace Meng of New York, conducts in state suburbs to turn out new voters.

Meng, a member of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, says outreach to new citizens requires much of the same in-person effort needed for other voter groups. Her Queens district includes more than 200,000 naturalized citizens, among the most in the country.

In 2018, Meng also went to Asian fish markets and grocery stores in Nevada with now-Sen. Jacky Rosen in her race to unseat Republican Sen. Dean Heller. Meng says that sort of literal retail politics can help build a relationship with a community — which she attributes to part of Rosen’s 50,000-vote victory over Heller.

Getting new voters involved in the process doesn’t necessarily

mean catering to their views on particular issues, Meng says. Sometimes, it’s as simple as showing up.

“People just feel respected. ‘Oh, this candidate came to visit us in our neighborhoods and met us where we are,’” Meng says. “So I think that’s important, instead of saying, ‘Oh, come to my campaign office, which is in the center of whatever business district where you’re not comfortable.’”

## Eyes on Texas

That growth of new voters can make a difference in places with flourishing immigrant populations. Meng and other members of CAPAC have reached out to the growing Asian American communities in the Texas suburbs, for instance.

According to the National Partnership of New Americans estimate of government naturalization data, around 96,161 people may naturalize by the end of fiscal 2020 on Sept. 30. Since 2017, total naturalizations are estimated at 310,732.

Democrats in Texas hope to capitalize on that growth, according to the state party’s director of voter expansion, Luke Warford. He believes the state’s growing diversity means the 2020 electorate will be friendlier to Democrats trying to flip the state legislature and add to the party’s House majority in Congress.

“The urban areas have already flipped blue, and as that diversity spreads out into the suburbs, the suburbs start to become more diverse as well,” Warford says. “The competitive districts are now just outside urban areas rather than in the downtown.”

The 22nd District, which includes Houston suburbs such as Sugar Land, contains key South Asian immigrant communities as well as some unincorporated areas. It is currently represented by retiring Republican Rep. Pete Olson. Asian American residents are one of the dominant immigrant groups in the region, and a target for national Democrats like Meng and the ASPIRE PAC, which promotes Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders running for Congress. In 2018, this coalition helped bring Democratic challenger Sri Preston Kulkarni, an Indian American candidate and former adviser to New York Democratic Sen. Kirstin Gillibrand, within 5 percentage points of unseating Olson.

Kulkarni won the Democratic primary for Olson’s open seat earlier this month and will face the winner of a May 26 Republican runoff. The Texas Democratic party has launched a campaign to boost turnout in swing districts like the 22nd, says organizing director Olivia Stitilis. The party aims to have on-the-ground staff from Asian American, African American, LGBT and other communities that have not been largely represented at the polls.

“We want to give community members the tools so that they can be organizers themselves so they can shape that program,” Stitilis says.

Angelica Razo, the Texas state director at Mi Familia Vota, echoes that statement. She has been working in the Houston area to engage Latino youth, particularly those of Mexican and Central American descent whom political candidates may ignore in their campaigns. Razo believes her group helped contribute to higher Latino turnout in the 2018 midterm elections and in Houston’s 2019 mayoral election. For her, galvanizing these voters is not just about the 2020 presidential election, but about building a consistent, long-lasting civic stamina that can withstand, and eventually dismantle, systemic barriers to



**PLEDGING ALLEGIANCE:**  
New citizens take the oath during the naturalization ceremony in Philadelphia.



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For her, galvanizing these voters is not just about the 2020 presidential election, but about building a consistent, long-lasting civic stamina that can withstand, and eventually dismantle, systemic barriers to representation for these groups, especially at the state and local level.

“Since 2016, we have built more and more political power, and 2020 is just another year we want to showcase that,” she says, adding she wants to ensure that the manifestation of that power “is not just every four years, it’s constant.”

## The Fight for Florida

Maria Alegria Rodriguez, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Coalition, often stakes out shopping malls in Jamaican and Haitian locales and coordinates with churches and workers’ unions. She and her colleagues seek out immigrants where they live and work and help put them on the path to citizenship.

“Naturalization is part of that civic engagement continuum,” she says.

Come November, naturalized citizens may have their biggest impact in her state, and in South Florida in particular. The Miami-Dade

Univision News and Latino Decisions, a political opinion research group focused on America’s Hispanic population, finds that health care costs were the top issue among Florida voters registered in the primaries. The issue was No. 1 for the Latino subset of this group as well. But while border security was No. 2 among the Florida registered voters overall, it wasn’t even in the top five for Latino registered voters in the state. Given the coronavirus pandemic, the importance of the health care issue for voters is likely to become even more acute come November.

The Univision-Latino Decisions poll, which surveyed Florida’s primary voters March 6-20, also found that Trump had just a slight edge statewide, with 48 percent of Florida registered voters supporting him. However, only 45 percent of Latino registered voters did so — somewhat surprising given the predominance of conservative Cuban American voters in the state. Among registered Democrats who identified as Cuban, support was roughly split between the two front-runners at the time: Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders.

All in all, these results show that Florida’s fast-changing voter demographics create dynamics a lot more complex than often thought.

“The Latino vote is not given, it is not automatic,” Matt Barreto,

# Between the last presidential election and the 3.1 million naturalizations, many districts flipped. And there may be significant p

County area has three of the five congressional districts most populated by naturalized citizens. According to Census Bureau data, districts 25, 26 and 27 each had more than 200,000 naturalized citizens in 2018, when two of those districts flipped Democratic.

In 2016, Donald Trump won Florida by 112,911 votes. According to NPNA, Florida will have recorded an estimated 363,761 naturalizations since 2017 by the end of the year, with more than 103,000 in 2020 so far.

While South Florida has long been a hub for Cuban Americans, it increasingly includes other nationalities, such as Colombians, Haitians, Jamaicans and Venezuelans. How these subgroups vote depends on several factors — age, socio-economic status and religious background, to name a few.

State voter data shows that the three Florida counties with the largest number of naturalized citizens — and some of the greatest population growth since the 2016 election — added about 70,000 registered voters since 2016. Most of the new voters registered in the Democratic Party or as unaffiliated.

That lines up roughly with Rodriguez’s experience on the ground. Like other organizations doing this work, her group also helps people register to vote. Of those who have signed up so far, roughly a third registered as Democrats, a third as Republicans, and a third as independents — meaning there’s a big share of voters who can be swayed.

So what do these voters care about? A poll released March 16 by

co-founder of Latino Decisions, said in a statement. “This is a community that has not historically received much outreach, and while outreach has been increasing there is still work to be done. We also know this is a state that Trump will be focusing on, so it will certainly be important that the Democratic Party needs to be well organized if they want to get the turnout they need to win.”

When it comes to immigration, for example, it could be that many Florida voters of immigrant backgrounds actually favor lowering immigration levels since they themselves immigrated legally, says Floridan Republican Sen. Marco Rubio.

“I think there’s a big misconception out there that, in communities made up of first-generation Americans and naturalized citizens, there’s somehow a disproportionate amount of support for immigration that either flows through and comes here illegally or places a burden on the country, and I found in many cases the opposite to be true,” says Rubio, a Cuban American.

“One of the most ironic things is you run into somebody who’s very strongly against illegal immigration, but they know someone at church who they hope can stay.”

Other Republicans, like Florida Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, argues that the economy under Trump grew rapidly until the coronavirus outbreak, lifting Latino communities with historic levels of employment. Diaz-Balart also wonders whether the Democratic presidential field tilted too far left to stay palatable for many Hispanic voters — especial-

ly those in South Florida who fled oppressive left-wing regimes back home: Venezuela under Hugo Chavez, Fidel Castro's Cuba, FARC-ruled Colombia and Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega.

Florida Republicans have done well in the state rebuking these regimes in their foreign policy positions. "In South Florida, socialism doesn't play," says Diaz-Balart.

Sanders stirred up some of that tension in the lead-up to this month's Florida primary. During a "60 Minutes" interview in February, Sanders said, "It is unfair to simply say everything is bad" in Cuba, in explaining his past positive statements about the government under Fidel Castro.

That prompted condemnation from politicians around the state, including Democratic Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, whose district is about half Cuban American. Mucarsel-Powell called Sanders' comments "completely unacceptable" and harmful to communities like hers that left the island.

There's even further splintering within the Cuban American community, according to a 2018 Florida International University poll showing stark generational divides. More than 70 percent of Cubans that emigrated before 1980 were registered as Republicans, a number

Mucarsel-Powell says. "They were very proud that I stood up to the administration for detaining kids for months and months."

### Challenges for Both Parties

Former Florida Rep. Carlos Curbelo, the Republican who lost to Mucarsel-Powell by about 4,000 votes in 2018, concedes that some of the president's rhetoric and policy on immigration have complicated the picture.

"One of the things that has attracted so many people to our country is the inclusiveness of our society and the unifying aspirational nature of a lot of our leaders, and this president has adopted more of a divide-and-conquer strategy," Curbelo says.

But he warns that just opposing Trump's policies won't win over naturalized citizens.

"Democrats for a long time have just assumed immigrant communities will support them because they are not Republicans. They have been guilty of taking immigrant communities for granted in the past and haven't made significant efforts to win over the communities beyond the standard criticism of the president," Curbelo says.

Jayapal agrees that her party should not take this part of the elector-

## he upcoming one in November, there may be tributed across key battleground states. political muscle in those votes.

that drops below 40 percent for those who emigrated after 1995. Age and race in this subset of voters also inform those preferences in complicated ways.

Mucarsel-Powell argues, though, that economic conditions and Trump's immigration policies may outstrip other concerns at the ballot box. While many naturalized citizens in working class areas have jobs, their wages have stagnated.

"They can't pay for their housing, they can't pay for transportation costs, they can't pay for prescription drug costs. ... They haven't seen any relief for the costs of living in South Florida," Mucarsel-Powell says. "I do think for those families, a lot of whom live in my district, are not going to buy the idea that the economy is working for everyone."

Mucarsel-Powell also notes that her constituents had a visceral reaction to the "temporary influx facility" that housed unaccompanied and separated immigrant children in Homestead — located in the heart of her district. The facility became a symbol of a broad swath of Trump's immigration policies and a huge bone of contention in congressional budget negotiations. After sustained citizen protests and multiple trips by Democratic lawmakers and presidential candidates, the administration emptied the facility last August. Administration officials have not yet ruled out reopening it should the need arise.

"More and more what I'm hearing from the Hispanic communities in my district — they are not happy with the administration's policies,"

ate for granted, a mistake she says Democrats have made for too long.

"I don't blame people for not voting or for feeling like their voice is not heard," she says. "I blame us for not really making it clear what's at stake and reaching out to them with answers to the concerns that they have."

Some research suggests changing demographics may favor Democrats. But those predictions often fail to take into account how systemic barriers to naturalization and to voting may increase, how census demographic categories and how people self-identify may change, and how new circumstances may develop that inform people's votes. With the coronavirus pandemic, for example, many immigrant families may see members excluded from aid packages and other relief measures, so the economic fallout could well reorient the ideological direction of voters in this group one way or another come November.

For now, experts warn that their vote is not is not something political candidates from either party should take for granted — or dismiss.

DeSipio, the UC Irvine professor, says new citizens have grown as a potential resource faster than campaigns have tried to tap them, particularly in communities like South Florida. Naturalized citizens represent growing groups of voters with varied interests and potential policy needs, which DeSipio says campaigns are just starting to tap into.

"It is to both parties' advantage to make some concerted investments early there," he says. ■