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Under Trump, as election approaches, almost 235,000 fewer new citizens will be sworn in this fiscal year

"We understand that COVID is a difficult environment but many institutions and entities have figured out how to work in this environment," said one leader.

By Dianne Solis – Sept. 13, 2020

Ömer Özak will take his U.S. citizenship oath this week — just in time to register as a voter in the contentious Nov. 3 presidential election.

Ömer Özak, a professor at SMU, on Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, in Dallas. Özak will soon become a U.S. citizen — and a first-time voter.(Smiley N. Pool / Staff Photographer)

He's coming in just under the wire: The Southern Methodist University economics professor was stuck in a huge backlog of more than 700,000 applications at the federal agency that vets and approves new citizens. Last fiscal year, 834,000 people became U.S. citizens. This fiscal year, the number of new citizens is expected to reach only about 600,000.

"I am really looking forward to the oath," said Özak, a Brown University graduate who holds Colombian citizenship and has waited 13 months since applying for U.S. citizenship.

But many would-be voters won't make it to the polls this year. The coronavirus pandemic forced a three-month pause to in-person meetings and interviews that are a required part of the naturalization process, making the backlog worse. Others suspect politics may be playing a role as the Trump administration requires increased scrutiny of citizenship applicants in a tight election year. Trump's anti-immigrant policies will likely influence many new citizens to cast ballots against him.

"At best, this is egregious indifference to ensuring that new Americans have the right to vote," said Doug Rand, the co-founder of the **Boundless** Immigration, which helps immigrants obtain green cards and citizenship. "At worst, it is intentional."

The former policy advisor in the Obama administration said the slow restart of oaths is especially troubling because the backlog through the first six months of this year was already about 700,000 and is likely now significantly worse.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services spokesperson Dan Hetlage defended the agency's work, saying it has been "extremely productive" and noting that when the agency reopened in early June, 110,000 naturalizations were pending and all are now completed.

"Focusing on the number of people currently waiting to naturalize, just months before the election, is, at best, an incomplete way of assessing our performance in the naturalization process," he said in an email. "The women and men of USCIS proudly naturalize thousands of potential new voters on a daily basis whether it is an election year or not."

Record highs

According to a recent report from the **Pew Research Center**, 1 in 10 eligible voters in the 2020 election will be immigrants. That's more than 23 million U.S. immigrants.

Sara Ramirez would love to vote in the presidential election. But the Kaufman resident, a technology specialist for the schools there who was born in Mexico, is scheduled for her naturalization interview this week. The last day to register to vote in Texas is Oct. 5, so it's unclear whether she can take her oath of citizenship soon enough to register to vote by the deadline for the Nov. 3 election.

The agency has been known to do same-day oath ceremonies in some locations.

"I can only hope," Ramirez said.

There's an easy solution for situations like those of Ramirez, said Sarah Pierce, a lawyer with the D.C. nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute. USCIS could have those passing their interview recite the oath at the time of their interview. Pierce praised some of the creative measures taken at offices around the nation to speed up citizenship oaths of allegiance, such as allowing drive-up oaths of allegiance.

"In the regs, it is possible for them to finalize someone's naturalization without doing a ceremony," Pierce said. "It is called an administrative oath. The regs clearly say in extraordinary circumstances they can do it. What could be more extraordinary than this pandemic?"

At the National Partnership for New Americans, a coalition of groups pushing for citizenship education, executive director Nicole Melaku noted that 3.5 million people have become U.S. citizens since Trump became president.

"We understand that COVID is a difficult environment but many institutions and entities have figured out how to work in this environment," Melaku said.

Greater scrutiny

A Migration Policy Institute report in July analyzed a survey of about 200 immigration assistance agencies, including Catholic Charities of Dallas. It found that, under the Trump administration, there was tougher scrutiny of applications.

But Pierce noted that a critical finding was that the denial rate didn't rise.

"The Trump administration has pursued extra vetting as though there is rampant fraud but even with that increase we haven't seen an increase in denials," Pierce said.

Republican activist and immigration attorney Jacob Monty said his clients are facing more scrutiny in their citizenship applications. But "there should be scrutiny," he said.

Nevertheless, processes should be smoother, Monty said. He calls it a mix of "man-made havoc by the administration and the virus."

"A lot of our clients are wanting to vote and they are not going to be able to," he said.

The number of citizenship applications is also expected to sharply increase before possibly leveling off again. That's because fees for such applications will rise from $640 to nearly $1,200 on Oct. 2.

When fees were increased in a similar way in 2008, even as there were naturalization campaigns ahead of the election for the White House that year, more than a million people became naturalized U.S. citizens, up from 660,000 in 2007.

Margarita Juarez, originally from Mexico, became a U.S. citizen last year — and brought about a dozen family members and friends to her ceremony. Her celebrators even included her pastor and a volunteer with Dallas Area Interfaith, a nonpartisan group that pushes citizenship campaigns.

"It is so sad that people can't participate in a ceremony that is so beautiful," Juarez said of the pandemic restrictions on ceremonies.

She will vote for the first time Nov. 3. She says she is letting her faith in God assist with her election decision. And, she added, she believes the U.S. is doing well under the current president.

Trump or Biden?

"El voto es secreto," she said in Spanish with a laugh.