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Surge in US Citizenship Applications as Immigrants Demand the Vote

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BY IONUT GITAN ON NOVEMBER 2, 2016

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Photo courtesy of Erik (HASH) Hersman via Flickr.

Students nestle into desks in a crowded classroom at elementary school PS 69 in the Jackson Heights, neighborhood of Queens, New York. But it is after school hours, and no children are to be seen. Instead, adult immigrants from countries ranging from Colombia to Nepal open their spiraled notebooks lined with facts about US presidents and constitutional amendments. An instructor asks the class, “Why do you want to become a US citizen?” The response: “I want to vote.”

Emerald Isle Immigration Center—an immigration and social services non-profit in Woodside, Queens—holds bi-weekly classes at PS 69 for lawful permanent residents applying for US citizenship. The naturalization process includes the N-400 application form, a \$595-\$680 filing fee, and the US citizenship interview and test. During class, volunteer instructors administer mock interviews, review civics, and coach English language conversation skills to prepare the students.

This past year, Emerald Isle Immigration Center experienced a significant increase in service requests from immigrants seeking citizenship. John Stahl, a lawyer and the Director of Legal Services at the non-profit, estimates a 25 to 30 percent increase in the number of client applications received in recent

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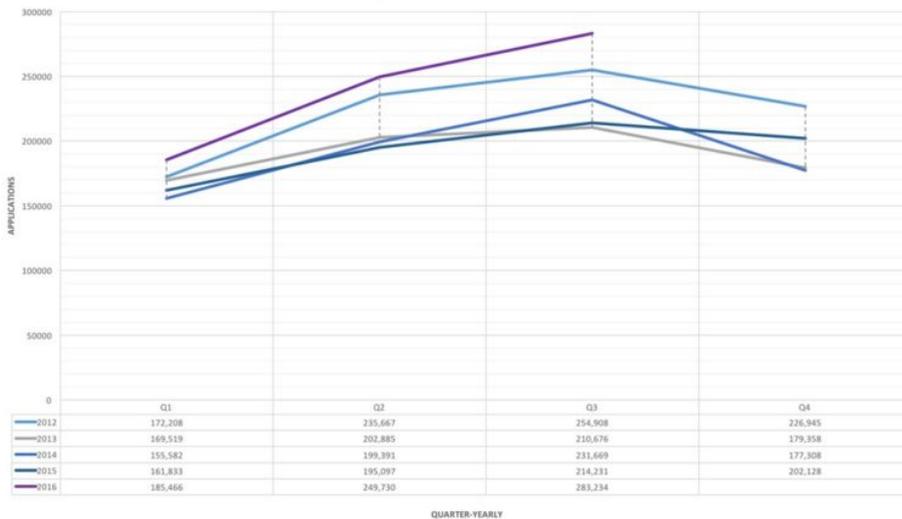
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months. This had led to a record numbers of clients at the center looking to become US citizens. “I think we served the most naturalization clients that we ever had in a 3-month period,” Stahl said.

According to the US Department of Homeland Security’s US Citizenship and Immigration Services reports, applications for naturalization increased in 2016. Compared to the presidential election year 2012, there is an overall 8.37 percent increase in received N-400 applications in 2016 over the same period (Quarters 1-3). While each year saw an increase in applications from Quarters 2 to 3, the increase in 2016 was higher than any previous years. Applications in 2016 swelled to a record four-year high.



N-400 Applications Received 2012-16



SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY, U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES REPORTING & GRAPH BY KONUT GITAN, JOURNAL OF POLITICAL INQUIRY NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, OCTOBER 2016

According to the US Department of Homeland Security’s US Citizenship and Immigration Services reports, applications for naturalization increased in 2016.

While the data does not indicate a causal relationship between the 2016 presidential election and an increase in N-400 applications, the heated debate over immigration policy may be one factor influencing permanent residents to seek citizenship in larger numbers. “This election might be more polarizing than most, especially towards immigrants,” Stahl said. “There may have been some fear in the immigrant community to get citizenship.”

Decisions leading up to this election may have motivated immigrants to naturalize so they can vote. Roy Germano, a documentary filmmaker of *The Other Side of Immigration* and expert on Mexico-US immigration at New York University, researches immigration policy and voting patterns. According to Germano, motivating factors for increased naturalization applications could include the House’s failure to vote on the Senate immigration bill and Supreme Court ruling to block President Obama’s immigration plan.

There is also the Donald Trump factor. “I have spoken to immigrants who have made a special effort to naturalize so they can vote against Donald Trump,” Germano said. “Trump’s anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Mexican rhetoric has energized many immigrants.”

But the clock before Nov. 8 has already run out on most. According to the same US Citizenship and Immigration Services reports, some 1.3 million N-400 applications are still pending in 2016. As the backlog grows, immigrant students at elementary PS 69 may have to wait for 2020 to cast their first US presidential vote.

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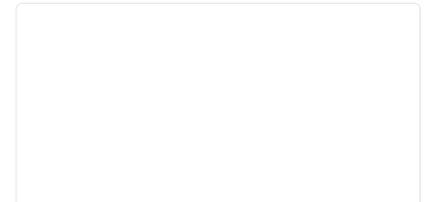
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