



# New American Voters Project: Engaging Oregon's Newest Citizens In Democracy

Patricia Magallanes talks excitedly with her husband, teenaged children and other family members in the lobby of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services building at NW 14th and Overton in Portland, Oregon's trendy Pearl District. She holds a document that is 17 years in the making—her naturalization certificate. Patricia has just taken the oath to become a citizen of the United States, and one of the first things she did after saying “I do” was to register to vote. “I voted when I lived in Mexico and I will vote here because it’s my right and it’s my responsibility,” she says. She’s beaming. Patricia moved to the U.S. 17 years ago and now lives in Salem.

Gene Domke has lived in the U.S. for 50 years and has never had the right to vote. “But now I’m able to,” he says. “It’s my right. Not every country has that right, but I’m glad now I do. I’m honored.”

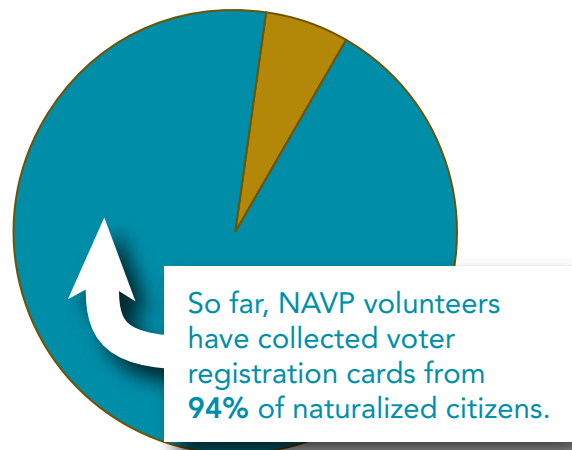
Across the lobby, Gene Domke and his wife are on their way to celebrate. “I’ve lived in the United States since 1961, and I’ve never been able to vote,” he says. His voice wavers, and his wife is close to tears. He moved here from Canada half a century ago, and this day is a long time coming.

“But now I’m able to,” he says. “It’s my right. Not every country has that right, but I’m glad now I do. I’m honored.”

Patricia and Gene are just two of the new citizens who registered to vote today through the New American Voters Project (NAVVP), a collaboration among three culturally specific organizations with deep experience in cultivating, educating and mobilizing diverse immigrant and refugee communities across Oregon. NAVVP volunteers offer new citizens the opportunity to register to vote at every single naturalization ceremony—three to four per week, with five to six volunteers at each ceremony. Oregon’s newest citizens come from Mexico, Ukraine, Vietnam, China, India, and 112 other countries<sup>1</sup>; in fact, Oregon is rising among a few states—what the Brookings Institution calls “new Sunbelt States”—

that draw immigrants through in-migration from larger initial landing states.<sup>2</sup> It is resulting in a changing demographic; the increase in Oregon’s Latino population accounted for nearly half of the state’s growth over the last decade.<sup>3</sup>

And each day, anywhere between 20 and 50 new Americans—who now live all over Oregon and Southwest Washington—step out of the building on Overton Street as new U.S. citizens, having taken the first step in a lifetime of civic engagement.



In its first eight weeks at the ceremonies, NAVVP collected 845 voter registration cards from Oregon and Southwest Washington’s newest citizens, exceeding its own ambitious goals with a 94-percent card collection rate. That means 94 percent of all people going through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) administrative ceremonies are helped to register through this new project.

To produce these kinds of numbers, Causa Oregon, Oregon’s leading Latino rights organization; the Center for Intercultural Organizing, the state’s only multi-racial/ethnic immigrant and refugee advocacy organization; and Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon, the state’s leading Asian Pacific Islander civic engagement group, have come together to create a truly collaborative voter registration project that, with the support of

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security. *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2011: Supplemental Table* {<http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk11Na.shtm>}

<sup>2</sup> Heavens, Alan J. (2012, May 12). Population growing in new “Sunbelt.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. {[http://articles.philly.com/2012-05-12/business/31669673\\_1\\_hispanic-population-population-gain-asian-population](http://articles.philly.com/2012-05-12/business/31669673_1_hispanic-population-population-gain-asian-population)}

<sup>3</sup> “Latino Contributions to Oregon: Strengthening Our State Economy.” Causa Oregon, 2012



government partners, has the potential to engage thousands of immigrants and refugees in the democracy of their new home country.

## Coming to the *Table*

Kayse Jama knows he has a tough job. As the executive director of the Center for Intercultural Organizing (CIO), Jama sees that vibrant and growing immigrant and refugee communities have the potential for making grassroots change in the state. But he also sees how language and other barriers can create difficulties for organizers trying to engage those communities in the democratic process.

“The immigrant and refugee community has a lot to offer,” he says, “but participation is crucial. They historically haven’t been getting the attention and support they need, and they haven’t been reached out to by mainstream ‘get out the vote’ or voter education efforts.”

In 2010, only one in two naturalized citizens was registered to vote, while two in three native citizens were registered.<sup>4</sup> The administrative barrier of registering to vote adds to other cultural and language barriers that new citizens face. Janelle Wong, executive director of the Institute for Public Service at Seattle University, states, “Voter registration is the key to immigrant political participation.”<sup>5</sup>

Researchers also point to socioeconomic status as a barrier to registering to vote; statistically, among all Americans, individuals with lower incomes are far less likely to register. And, when asked why they weren’t registered to vote, naturalized citizens are more likely than native-born citizens to cite structural barriers—things like language difficulties or not knowing how to register.<sup>6</sup>

Reyna Lopez, Portland organizer and policy associate with Causa Oregon, was confronting the same challenges as Jama. Latinos now make up 12 percent of Oregon’s population, a 63 percent increase since the 2000 census, but voter registration is “a big challenge,” she says. “Latinos in Oregon are a very young demographic. The average age of a Latino in Oregon is 26. But there’s no good place to find and register those people. Going door to door in Latino neighborhoods just isn’t efficient.”

Then she got an idea.

Reyna attended a national conference in the fall of 2011 and heard from her organizing colleagues in Idaho about some of the voter registration numbers they were getting. They were impressive—and those numbers were coming from oath ceremonies.

She came back to Oregon with hopes of starting something similar and presented the idea to local organizers at a gathering of the state’s nonpartisan civic engagement table, Oregon Voice.

Meanwhile, big changes in regulations were trickling down to states from USCIS requiring that “All newly naturalized citizens will have the opportunity to receive a voter registration application at administrative naturalization ceremonies.”<sup>7</sup>

Jama had worked years earlier to get voter registration in the ceremonies, but the timing was never right. Now, suddenly, there was a serendipitous moment. Two key government leaders, Oregon Secretary of State Kate Brown and USCIS Portland Field Office Director Evelyn Sahli, quickly stepped up to help design the project, provide access, and facilitate the process. Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO) joined the effort, with the Portland League of Women Voters—whose volunteers had been registering new citizens at judicial ceremonies twice a month – providing early advice.

“The New Americans Voters Project is truly groundbreaking work,” says Secretary Brown. “Together we’re making the ballot more accessible to immigrants and refugees, who historically have the lowest voter registration rates in Oregon and nationwide. I’ve talked with my colleagues around the country, and this work is truly unique.”

These early, strategic partnerships laid the groundwork for unprecedented success.

## The NAVP “*Family*”

At a time when resources for civic engagement are scarce, Causa, CIO and APANO are modeling precisely what it looks like to build a true collaboration based on high efficiency—and high success rates. “This is a cutting-edge project that will not only help to create strong alliances within our organizations but really has the potential to shift the balance of power in our community,” says Jama. “This is the immigrant and refugee community saying ‘We’re all in this together’ and creating systems of democratic engagement for our population.”

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With Oregon’s civic engagement table playing its coordinating role, the three community-based groups worked together to set goals and design a pilot for registering new voters at oath ceremonies. They visited several ceremonies, planning what it might look like to be there. Nate Gulley, civic engagement coordinator for Oregon Voice, calculated that if volunteers were permitted to be in the room at the close of the ceremony, they could help to register 75 percent of the newly naturalized citizens. But if they were limited to tabling outside of the ceremony room, the registration card completion rate would dwindle to 25 percent. NAVP organizers knew that having a USCIS official

<sup>4</sup> Wang, Tova Andrea and Youjin B. Kim. (2011, Dec. 19). From Citizenship to Voting: Improving Registration for New Americans. Demos. {<http://www.demos.org/publication/citizenship-voting-improving-registration-new-americans>}

<sup>5</sup> Wong, Janelle. *Democracy’s Promise: Immigrants and American Civic Institutions*. University of Michigan Press: 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Wang and Kim, From Citizenship to Voting.

<sup>7</sup> Model Plan for Administration Naturalization Ceremonies; Revision to Adjudicator’s Field Manual (AFM) Chapter 75.3; AFM Updated AD10-53

introduce NAVP at the close of the ceremony would be critical to its success.

“I think the new citizens appreciate the opportunity to register to vote right after the ceremony,” says USCIS Portland Field Office Director Evelyn Sahli. “Otherwise, they may go home with a packet full of papers, including a blank voter registration card, and then forget to register to vote.”

“The naturalization ceremony is an important culmination of the immigration process. It should be a special day to celebrate the achievements of the new citizens and also to help them take the next steps towards participating in our democratic process.”

The team established a key ground rule early in the process: the community-based organizations wouldn't be there to recruit or to represent their organizations. NAVP would take on a life of its own. Collecting cards was the goal here—not self-promotion. Organizational staff were each trained by Gulley and Lopez so everyone would know their place in the room and how to tell a personal story about their own voter registration experience. Culturally and linguistically diverse NAVP volunteers from each organization were identified and recruited.

“Nobody has a big ego,” says Lopez. “It's such a different dynamic than past coalitions I've been a part of. We believe in this so much, and we truly care about each other as people. We look out for each other. I call it my NAVP ‘family.’”

“This project just wouldn't fly without any one of the partners,” says Gulley. “We really are more than the sum of our parts.”

The Portland League of Women Voters, who continues to register new citizens at judicial naturalization ceremonies twice a month, served in an advisory role as NAVP was first launching and continues to help celebrate the new project's success. “It is so important to involve the new citizens in voting when they are newly engaged in democracy,” says Janine Settlemeyer, a lead volunteer with the League. “Democracy is often called a ‘great experiment,’ and democracy works when *we the people* are involved.”

The project also wouldn't work without the support of government partners. After each ceremony has closed, Sahli passes the baton to a group of NAVP volunteers in bright yellow shirts. With a five-foot replicate of a registration card, an NAVP volunteer congratulates and thanks the new citizens before going through the card step by step and telling his or her personal story of registering to vote. That hand-off is key; the audience is rapt, and another day of voter registration is already a success in the making.

## High Numbers—And More

According to the U.S. Census, 5,657 people were naturalized in Oregon in 2011.<sup>8</sup> At its current pace, NAVP is well positioned to meet its goal of helping to register 5,000 new voters in one year. But it's about more than math. NAVP is investing in young

The top five countries Oregon's newest citizens come from:

Mexico China  
Ukraine India  
Vietnam

(there were 5,657 people total naturalized in 2011)

leaders in the immigrant and refugee community and building the capacity of the three grassroots organizations who comprise it.

Nicole Brown, civic engagement intern with Causa, is one of several NAVP volunteers who were recruited for what is an intensive, high-level commitment. “Having been able to be a part of it since the beginning and learning about organizational structure and seeing how things work has been so eye opening,” she says. “How to do messaging, why we're working in coalition—all of it's genius.” In fact, Brown was just hired as CIO's new full-time civic engagement coordinator after having proven herself such an invaluable volunteer.

In her first few weeks as a volunteer, Fipe Havea with APANO went to a ceremony almost every day. The experience, she says, has honed her leadership skills and helped develop her as an up-and-coming organizer.

“I've learned a whole lot about organizing and being able to communicate with people, especially with folks of different ethnicities,” she says. “I've also learned a lot about multitasking, because when there are only a few volunteers but it's a full house at the ceremony, we're each going to have to take on more than one role. It's pretty intense. At times I have two or three people asking me questions, and other people asking me to help take their pictures. I'm learning how to manage the environment, take control of the room, and keep my cool.”

One core value and operating principle behind NAVP is that voter registration is a way to help integrate immigrants and refugees into our larger society. NAVP volunteers are the first to congratulate people for their years of dedication to becoming U.S. citizens.

Celebrating is paramount, but so is making a real connection with a new voter.

“It's so powerful when the new citizens see people who look like them registering them,” says Brown. “It's comforting. You can see them soften.”

“Just today some people were leaving the room without having registered, and I approached them, but they said they'd fill it out later. I heard the daughter say something quietly in Spanish. So I spoke Spanish back to her, encouraging them to fill out the cards now. Still, they left. But, then, five minutes later, the daughter

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security. *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2011: Table 22.* {<http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk11Na.shtm>}

came back in and handed me a card. It's like, she realized that here was a person from her community who cares that she's voting and who cares about her voice."

Someone who isn't registered to vote has a zero percent chance of voting. But after simply registering, that chance goes up dramatically. "Statistically speaking, the single most effective thing you can do to improve somebody's chances of voting is to ask them to register with a smile on your face," says Gulley.

And census data shows that naturalized citizens will vote at very similar rates as native-born citizens once they have registered to vote.<sup>9</sup> It's all about having that initial invitation to civic participation, something NAVP volunteers facilitate every day and will continue to do for the life of the project.

## The *Long Haul*

Since the very first day of the project, NAVP volunteers have helped to register new citizens at every single administrative naturalization ceremony. The NAVP team has never missed a day. Given its early success, and with the encouragement from its government partners, the groups who dreamed up this collective effort are making plans to sustain it over the long haul.

Staying power will require resources, and there is work going forward in developing a joint proposal for truly collaborative fundraising. So far, one third of the project budget for 2012 has been raised.

The groups meet frequently to identify and refine best practices as the project continues to evolve and find ways to develop young leaders, register new voters and welcome new Americans. It's about getting as many people registered to vote as possible at those ceremonies. And it's also about something much more.

"Getting the immigrant population out to vote is ultimately what this is all about," says Lopez. "It means leveraging power here in Oregon, which is what we do. We build power for the immigrant community."

Jama fled to the United States in 1998 from war-torn Somalia. "I knew when I came to this country how important it is to have civic participation," he says. "It's not something I take lightly."

"I'm committed because of my own experience and because I want every single immigrant and refugee to participate and to be fully integrated in our society. It's not just about voting. It's about having a voice."

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2010. {<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/>}

## ✓ For more information on the New American Voters Project, contact these key organizations:

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