



Braun: For civic-minded immigrants, votes count

Bob Braun/Star-Ledger Columnist By Bob Braun/Star-Ledger Columnist

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JERSEY CITY — Nina Davenport was finishing lunch at the White Castle on John F. Kennedy Boulevard and Newark Avenue when she overheard someone asking about where people could vote in Jersey City now that the storm played havoc with polling places.

"C'mon, I'll take you there," she says and leads a few people down through Little India, across Tonnelles Avenue to the back of School 23 and to a little-used rear entrance where the roar of a generator greeted confused voters.

"No, no, don't go there," she told others who were trying the usual doors to the century-old school. There were language problems — she doesn't speak Hindi or Gujarati or even Spanish — so she just waved them on. "Follow me."

So while Nina Davenport, born and raised in Jersey City, wears the uniform of a school security guard, the young woman played the role of Pied Piper to local voters who, in addition to the lack of power and heat and the flooding and all the rest of what Sandy left behind, have to navigate a bureaucracy printed in a foreign language.

"But they really want to come out and I figure I should help them," says Davenport.

She likely doesn't know it, but Davenport represents what some experts believe is precisely what the growing foreign-born population in this country needs — and what the country needs to assimilate immigrants into a stable, at least moderately integrated, republic.

"Unlike other countries — and Canada is a good example — we don't do much to prepare naturalized citizens for participation in civic life," says Janice Fine. She is a faculty member at the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations. She coordinates the Program on Immigration and Democracy at the university's Eagleton Institute of Politics.

"We have this 'You're on your own, pull yourself up by your bootstraps' mentality," she says. "That's not working," she adds, noting that the rate of naturalization in the country is falling.

The foreign-born are staying, but they're not becoming actively engaged in civic life.

That has to change the country. More than one in five members of the so-called "millennials" — those who came of

age at the turn of the century — either is foreign-born or has foreign-born parents.

"Many young people have no experience with democracy," says Fine's colleague, Elizabeth Matto, the director of Eagleton's Youth Political Participation Program. "And schools have cut back on civic education — the public schools are the most important transmitters of what it means to be a citizen."

The immigrants lined up to vote despite the nightmare of the last week knew what casting a ballot meant to them. It changed a "we versus them" to a "we together" attitude," changed the adjective "their" to "our."

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"This is our country," says Rosario Swapan of Jersey City, a native of Bangladesh, one of those who followed Davenport's lead to School 23. "We have the responsibility of selecting its leaders, determining its policies."

For many immigrants, the ability to vote defines what it is to be American, really the only public display of Americanness available that's more meaningful than a flag or a bumper sticker.

"It shows we play a part in running this country," says Nurul Izman, who voted at Jersey City's School 3. Izman, 28, an immigrant from Malaysia, voted wearing a headscarf.

The streets of her neighborhood near Van Vorst Park were littered with household items thrown to the curb after they were ruined in flooding. Power has not yet been fully restored and the week of cold and darkness has taken its toll.

"You felt you were out of control of your life, but you come down here" — she points to the polling place — "and you feel you have power over something." She laughs at the unintended pun. "I guess we do have power after all."

Naturalized voters frequently use the term "power" to describe voting. "It gives us power to determine the destiny of our country," says Patricia Lin of Fort Lee. She was born in Taiwan. "If you don't vote, you've lost control of the future of your country."

Voting wasn't easy for anyone, but especially for those with limited command of English. Yong Lee of Fort Lee came to vote in her neighborhood polling place but was sent back to Palisades Park, where she last voted before moving.

"I am sent back and forth, but I will find a place to vote," says Lee, an immigrant from Taiwan. "I have to vote."

For C.K. Paik of Edgewater, this was his first election as a citizen. "It made me feel as if I really were part of the U.S.," says Paik, an immigrant from South Korea. "In a sense, I felt like I somehow owned it, or a part of it."

With her niece translating from Spanish, Anna Chavez de Lazo of Elizabeth described a week of living with no power and no heat, moving from the home of one friend or relative to the next.

But the immigrant from El Salvador planned to be by her polling place Tuesday.

"Porque es importante," she says. Because it is important.

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