

Campaign 2005: Much At Stake For Immigrants

by {ga=itung}

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There is no question that New York, with its nearly three million foreign-born residents representing 200 ethnicities and speaking 175 languages, is [a city of immigrants](#), as it always has been.

It should not be surprising that both the [incumbent mayor and three of his four major Democratic opponents](#) have said they support amnesty for undocumented immigrants — that the federal government grant legal status to those who have been in the United States for a certain period of time. (Only Anthony Weiner answered “no, not to all” at a mayoral forum.)

But in this city that more or less invented ethnic politics, advocates say they are hearing very little in this year’s local campaigns that directly addresses the *local* problems facing New York’s new immigrant population.

“There is a lot at stake this year for immigrants,” said Chung-Wha Hong, deputy director of the [New York Immigration Coalition](#), an umbrella organization consisted of more than 170 immigrant advocacy groups in New York. “But I haven’t seen any comprehensive plan in any of the candidates’ platforms.”

Almost by definition, immigration issues, it is true, are federal issues. But there are many [immigrant issues](#)

that do not necessarily involve the federal government directly -- such as language barriers, immigrant students’ specific educational needs, employment obstacles and the difficulties of obtaining legal and social services.

And nothing that New York does in this area can be considered completely local. “Historically and politically, whatever New York’s locally-elected officials do,” Hong said, “has significant influence in the national debate in immigration policies.”

Education

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New York City has the largest public school system in the United States, with more than a million school children from K-12. About one in seven are identified as English Language Learners, or ELL students (they used to be called Limited English Proficiency, LEP students), students who need extra help in English. Over the past four years, fewer of them are being taught in their native languages and more are being placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

According to a [2002 report](#) by the Manhattan Institute, less than ten percent of ELL students in elementary schools, and less than five percent in middle schools, achieved acceptable math test scores in the year 2000, much lower than the general city-wide average.

“Everybody wants to be the ‘education mayor,’” said Hong, whose organization counts immigrant education as a priority. “But they did not address one of the most serious problems: The LEP [Limited English Proficiency] [students’ dropout rate](#) is over 50 percent. It is a major crisis.”

However, C. Virginia Fields, the Manhattan borough president and one of the four Democratic candidates for mayor, promises on her campaign Web site to “develop small schools and programs focused solely on the instruction of high school-aged English Language Learners. I will also ensure that vocational education programs are capable of accommodating students with limited English proficiency.”

And former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer’s [education plan](#), as outlined on his campaign Web site, does focus on addressing “the dropout crisis” in general, and also promises to dedicate \$850 million a year “to expanding early childhood education programs and to strengthening special education and English language acquisition programs.”

Hong also stressed the importance of providing translations and translators to the [non English-speaking parents of school children](#), in order to have them be involved in their children’s education. Under the Bloomberg’s new “Immigrant Opportunities Initiative”, the New York Immigration Coalition was able to get \$9.1 million from City Hall to provide ESL classes, as well as legal and employment services to

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immigrants, up from \$2.8 million last year. But the amount, she said, is “not at all sufficient.”

Another must, Hong believes, is professional training for schoolteachers in learning how to get through to children from varying cultural backgrounds.

Civil Rights and Criminal Justice

With post-911 heightened security and the introduction of the Patriot Act, many immigrants in New York City, particularly those without documentation, are fearful of [deportation and police harassment](#). Under pressure from immigration groups and the City Council to protect the privacy of immigrants, Mayor Michael Bloomberg issued [Executive Order 41](#) in September 2003 to forbid city agencies from reporting illegal immigrants to federal agencies.

“It gives assurance to all law-biding New Yorkers -whether you are an immigrant, a victim of domestic violence, or any taxpayer- that the confidential information you give to the city will stay with the city,” Bloomberg said at the time.

However, this “don’t tell” policy is limited and unclear. Immigrants who are arrested by the police are not protected by it, no matter how minor the offense. All New York City police officers are equipped with a NCIC (National Crime Information Center) mobile device, which hooks into the FBI criminal justice information system, which shows outstanding deportation proceedings. Once arrested, one’s immigration record will be revealed and those without documentation will be reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which is part of the Department of Homeland Security.

Thomas Doepfner, an assistant deputy police commissioner, said in a hearing held by the City Council Committee of Immigration in April that anyone whose driver’s license is checked by the police, even in a random traffic stop, will have his or her name and birth date run through the NCIC database. If someone is listed there as an immigration violator, ICE will be contacted. And if authorized by immigration officials to detain the person, the NYPD can hold the person for 48 hours for pickup by federal officers.

“It is not a good idea for the NYPD or any law enforcement agency to be involved with immigration,” said Tushar Sheth, of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, which provides free legal services to immigrants. “You want to be able to trust the police so you can cooperate with them. It doesn’t help if the cop will ask you about your immigration status every time you talk to them. It makes it easier for immigrants to come forward in any investigation if they know their city leaders are behind them.”

Hong also denounces the practice as a “back-door” way to disregard Executive 41, which exempt from confidential immigration information about a person suspected of criminal activities by the police. “But illegal immigration is a civil violation. We need to adopt additional mechanism to protect the rights of immigrants. There are many loopholes to cover.”

Driver’s Licenses and “Real ID”

A national ID has been in the political debate for many years. It went back to the top of the agenda after 911 as the government tries to tighten the nation’s alarm system and prevent possible terrorists from traveling. The “Real ID Act”, a bill that requires all states to issue federally approved [driver's licenses](#) or identification cards to those who live and work in the United States, was passed by the Congress and will go into effect starting in May 2008.

Under the act, a Real ID will be required under federal law to verify a customer’s identity if one wants to drive, visit a federal government building, collect Social Security, access a federal government service or use the services of a private company. In a word, it will be almost impossible to live without such an ID.

“Having a driver’s license is part of many people’s livelihood,” said Sheth. “In a city with a significant immigrant population, I’d like to see our candidates to have that kind of New York sensibility to tell the federal government that it’s not good for New York. We can not comply with that on the local level.”

Non-Citizen Voting Rights

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For the first 150 years after the founding of the nation, [non-citizens voted](#) and held public office: alderman, coroner, school board member. Yet the policy fell casualty to the [anti-immigrant backlash](#) of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

While many European countries have been allowing legal immigrants to vote for public offices for many decades, only a few municipalities in Maryland and Massachusetts allow non-citizens to vote for local affairs. Non-citizens in Chicago vote in school board election. New York had the same practice from the 1970s until 2002 when the school boards were disbanded.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said on his weekly radio program on WABC-AM in April of 2004 that he opposed giving legal immigrants who are not United States citizens the right to vote in New York City elections.

The mayor said that while he sympathized with the plight of immigrants, particularly those who pay taxes, he still believed that "the essence of citizenship is the right to vote, and you should go about becoming a citizen before you get the right to vote."

Gifford Miller and Anthony Weiner have said they agree. Fernando Ferrer and Virginia Fields say they disagree, that non-citizens should be able to vote in local elections. A native of Taipei, Taiwan, Larry Tung is a frequent contributor to [the Citizen](#) . Â