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CITY EDITION

THE NEW NEW YORKERS; They're election outsiders; About 1 in 5 city residents is ineligible to vote, but many immigrants have views on the candidates

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To the dismay of both Jonathan Palomino and his mother, Zoila, Nov. 2 will be just another ordinary day.

Jonathan and Zoila Palomino both feel that he has a stake in this country, having served in the Marines during the recent war in Iraq. But despite putting his life on the line for his adopted country, Jonathan Palomino, 29, has no say in the country's future direction. Emigrants from Ecuador now living in Woodside, the Palominos are permanent U.S. residents but not yet citizens, so therefore they cannot vote.

"There were so many immigrants who served this country and died in Iraq without the right to vote," said Zoila Palomino, 62, who added that if she could, she would vote for John Kerry.

"My son was in Iraq fighting for 11 months," Zoila Palomino said. "Now he comes back and they say he has no right to vote?"

According to data from the 2000 Census, New York City was home to 1,361,007 immigrants of voting age that did not have the right to vote. That means one out of approximately every five New Yorkers was ineligible to vote during the 2000 presidential election.

Who they favor

Despite not being able to make their voices heard in the voting booth come Election Day, immigrants throughout New York City have strong opinions on who they would like to see in the White House over the next four years.

Weimar Abella, 51, a Colombian living in Jackson Heights, was among a group of some 20 immigrants who gathered in the basement of the Jackson Heights public library last week to learn about immigrant rights and voting as part of a series of sessions on the U.S. Constitution being held nationwide and sponsored by a Los Angeles-based installation artist.

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"If I could, I would vote for Mr. Kerry because he is more in favor of the poor," said Abella, a painter, who is in the process of becoming a permanent resident, the first step to American citizenship.

Maria Sierra also attended the forum at the library, taking great pride in the fact that this Nov. 2, she will head to the polls for the first time.

Sierra, a 48-year-old housekeeper from Woodside, came to the United States from Colombia in 1982. She obtained her U.S. citizenship just two years ago.

"It means very much to me to finally be able to help define the future situation of this country," said Sierra, who is casting her ballot for Kerry.

But not all recent immigrants are as ecstatic as Sierra about the possibility of voting.

In a tiny second-floor Flushing office, Ramin Moshref Javid, director of Afghan Communicator, a nonprofit group that seeks to educate people about the Afghan and Muslim communities in the United States, is working through the struggles of a first-time effort to register members of the Afghan community in the tristate area to vote.

One day last month, Javid and his staff organized a voter registration drive on Long Island, attended by at least 2,000 Afghans eligible to register.

"We could only get 50 or so to sign up out of 2,000," Javid said. "People are afraid. They don't come from a place where they grew up with democracy. Many believe they'll be persecuted if they register with a party and vote against another party."

Tough choice for Afghans

As for a favorite contender in the upcoming presidential election, Afghan immigrants are divided, according to Javid.

"Afghans are divided three ways on Kerry and Bush," Javid said. "Some feel it doesn't matter because the U.S. is just the evil empire and they can't change that. Others support Bush because they believe if he stays in office, he'll continue to send military support to Afghanistan and keep the country from collapsing. The third sector would vote for Kerry because they feel Bush has done wrong to Afghanistan and has made the U.S. look bad as well."

In East Flatbush, 19-year-old Ramesh Dhamraj unpacks boxes and stacks shelves full of products at Tony's Health Food Store.

Dhamraj, a student at Kingsborough Community College studying railway electronics, made the journey from Guyana to the United States with his younger sister four years ago to join up with their father in Brooklyn.

Although he has not yet become a citizen and can't vote, Dhamraj does have a preference for the upcoming election.

"I wouldn't vote for Bush because he sent people to war unnecessarily," he said. "I don't know much about Kerry, but all I know is he might do better than Bush.

"I'm willing to give him a shot."

GRAPHIC: Newsday Photo / Ken Sawchuk - Zoila Palomino of Woodside, a native of Ecuador, is not a citizen yet and therefore can't vote.

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