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Gutiérrez: Immigrants hold the power with our vote



by Special to San Jose Spotlight February 6, 2019

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Photo courtesy of SIREN.

SIREN started the 2019 year in the immigrant and refugees rights movement with the federal government in a partial shutdown, where more than 800,000 federal workers were working without pay due to a failure between President Donald Trump and Congress to compromise over a useless and unnecessary border wall.

And on January 25, after 35 days of the longest government shutdown in U.S. history, a budget continuing resolution was passed to open the government for another three weeks — without funding for the border wall.

From the resistance by members of Congress who refused to give in to Trump's border demands, a major theme rang true — immigrant voters helped put Congress in a position to resist this discriminatory and racist wall.

For the November 2018 midterm elections, we saw record voter turnout among immigrants on the regional, state, and national level. Though SIREN doesn't engage voters on behalf of candidates, we heard the frustration from voters

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in those districts where incumbent members of Congress lost.



Photo courtesy of SIREN.

Our volunteers made more than 80,000 phone calls to Congressional Districts 10 and 21, who were represented by Rep. Jeff Denham and Rep. David Valadao, respectively, this past election. The number one concern voiced by immigrant voters was how Congress wasn't doing

enough for immigrants.

From not protecting immigrant youth by failing to pass a clean DREAM Act to not pushing back against Trump's draconian immigration executive orders, immigrant voters shared their disapproval for their members of Congress and their empty promises. As a result, the two incumbents lost their congressional seats this past November, along with other incumbents across the state and country.

We know through the power of the immigrant vote, we have the political power and leverage to move members of Congress to support issues like a Clean DREAM Act or comprehensive immigration reform.

We also must keep up our state and local advocacy. On January 10, newly sworn-in California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced a \$260 billion investment in expanding full-

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scope Medi-Cal to undocumented young adults ages 19 to 25. While we recognize that this is a great first step, we need to ensure that ALL immigrants in California have coverage.

Undocumented adults are the single-largest group of Californians who remain uninsured and face an unjust exclusion based on immigration status that leads to wider health disparities, and they deserve to be included in the system.

The number of remaining undocumented individuals without health coverage in California is about 1.48 million people, and this population remains the single greatest group of uninsured Californians, approximately 40 percent.

Providing preventative and life-saving medical care is essential to ensuring that every Californian is able to contribute to their community, thrive in our economy, and age with dignity. Ensuring quality healthcare for every Californian, including undocumented adults whom the federal government continues to unjustly shut out of care, is an urgent matter and essential to reaching the goal of health justice for all.

So, as we barreled toward another deadline for Congress to pass a budget package before another government deadline, we need members of Congress to commit no money toward a border wall, as well as no funding for increased immigration enforcement like more ICE or border agents, or other programs that contribute to the breaking up of families.

Immigrants have the power through our vote, and this power got us to this moment. Let's harness this power and continue to push back against any further racist and harmful policies from this administration.

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Maricela Gutiérrez is the executive director of the Services, Immigrant Rights & Education Network (SIREN), an advocacy and community organizing nonprofit providing immigration legal services to low-income residents with offices in Northern California and in the Central Valley.

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