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# More people, more diversity

*Can political strength grow along with the suburbs' rising minority population?*

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The country's population continues to grow and diversity grows with it, census reports show, strengthening the political muscle of minority voters.

A third — or 98 million — of the 296.4 million people living in this country are minorities, according to a report released today by the U.S. Census Bureau.

As home to a rapidly changing mix of ethnic groups, including more Latino residents than Chicago and a burgeoning Asian community, the suburbs reflect the shift.

Yet, driving the growth locally and nationwide are children born in America — citizens with political rights and expectations beyond basic immigrant hopes for a better life.

Of the 2.7 million increase in minority population from 2004 to 2005, 1.7 million came from within American borders — representing the number of births minus deaths.

Immigrants represented the remaining 1 million. Immigrants can vote only if they become citizens, but U.S.-born minorities can do so as soon as they turn 18 and register.

"It's very significant politically," Harper College political science professor Sharon Alter said Tuesday. "It's significant politically not just in numbers, but once you have those numbers, it's easier to mobilize."

Turning minority citizens into minority voters won't happen overnight, Alter cautioned. And turning minority voters into minority candidates takes more time.

The process has begun to unfold in many suburban towns and villages, and social scientists say the census figures fore-

shadow ever more diversity on suburban school boards, city halls and park districts.

"It's a pipeline," said Matt Streb, a political science professor at Northern Illinois University. "People argue the election of statewide minority candidates could be changing somewhat soon, as you see more and more minority candidates elected to local office, and that is definitely happening."

Take Fred Crespo. The Hoffman Estates man became the village's first Hispanic trustee elected last year. Come November, Crespo plans to vie for the 44th District state House seat now held by Republican Terry Parke.

"I'm running on the issues. I'm running on health care. I'm concerned about education. That's an issue that goes across race, across culture," Crespo said.

Concrete statistics on the number of suburban minority candidates over the decades are difficult to find, but political observers say anecdotal evidence shows a steady increase.

In 2005, 42 Hispanic, Asian and black candidates were on the ballot for 800 elected offices in parts of Cook, Lake, Kane, DuPage, McHenry and Will counties covered by the Daily Herald.

The Rev. Andre Allen of Wheaton's Second Baptist Church conducts voter registration drives within his church. He said he finds the increasing interest in politics among minorities encouraging.

"It would be my desire that with growing diversity in the population, we can have greater representation throughout every area of American life," said Allen, who is black. "I think we're all better for it."

Elgin City Councilman Juan Figueroa, who immigrated from Puerto Rico more than a decade ago, said he expects to see more minority candidates.