

THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM

The strength of a democracy can perhaps best be measured by the participation of its members. Citizenship represents a pre-condition to full participation in our constitutional democracy. Yet large numbers of immigrants in the United States fail to pursue this status. If “the ease with which immigrants become citizens reflects the quality of [a] democracy,”¹ it would behoove us to understand the factors that promote, delay, or discourage naturalization. The nation would also benefit immensely from a national program to promote citizenship. This report proposes such a program.

The Importance of U.S. Citizenship

Citizenship greatly benefits the affected individuals and U.S. society.² These benefits include:

- The right to vote and hold public office. Naturalized citizens have the right to vote in federal, state, and local elections. They also have the right to hold all elected public offices, with the exception of President and Vice President, and to serve on juries.
- The ability to sponsor family members to legally immigrate to the United States. A U.S. citizen can sponsor his or her spouse, children, parents, married adult children, and siblings, while a noncitizen Lawful Permanent Resident can only sponsor his or her spouse or children under age 18. In addition, the visa waiting periods are much shorter for a citizen’s immediate relatives.
- Derivative citizenship for children. When a parent naturalizes, his or her Lawful Permanent Resident children who are under age 18 automatically become U.S. citizens, provided they meet certain eligibility requirements.
- Increased access to employment and educational scholarships. Certain jobs, particularly government-related jobs, are restricted to U.S. citizens. Some educational scholarships are also restricted to U.S. citizens.
- The ability to travel on a U.S. passport. Citizens are protected by the U.S. embassy when traveling abroad, and can leave and re-enter the United States without restrictions. Noncitizens can be barred from re-entering the United States, or can lose their permanent resident status if they remain outside the United States too long.

- Protection from deportation. Citizens cannot be deported from the United States, even if are convicted of a crime. Noncitizens, even Lawful Permanent Residents with minor criminal convictions who have lived in the United States for years, can be removed from the country.
- Preservation of public benefits. Citizens can access public benefits such as Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, and food stamps without being subject to the limitations placed on noncitizens. U.S. citizens also have full access to Social Security benefits when living abroad, while noncitizens do not.

The desire for one or more of these benefits induces many immigrants to apply for naturalization. Immigrants also are influenced by less tangible factors, such as identification with the United States, and family or community ties. A significant increase in naturalization applications followed September 11, 2001. Many immigrants who were interviewed about their reasons for applying expressed strong feelings of attachment to the United States. One person said: “That day I realized this is my country. It’s like they did something to me that day. I realized I am an American.”³ Anecdotal evidence suggests that once one family member becomes a U.S. citizen, other family members are more likely to apply.

Naturalization rates can be viewed as a benchmark of immigrant integration. Citizenship can serve as a catalyst to making the foreign-born more: dedicated to democratic principles, informed about the Constitution, engaged in political elections,⁴ represented in the political system, proficient in the English language, employable in higher paying jobs,⁵ and integrated within a wider circle of people and institutions.

It should be a point of national pride when immigrants exercise the rights and assume the duties of citizenship. As Professor Irene Bloemraad writes, “Citizenship is a legal status that accords rights and benefits, but it is also an invitation to participate in a system of mutual governance

and it can be an identity that provides a sense of belonging. When residents of a country do not acquire citizenship, or fail to participate in the political system, not only is the sense of shared enterprise undermined, but so, too, are the institutions of democratic government.”⁶

A Plan for a National Citizenship Program

A More Perfect Union: A National Citizenship Plan identifies how to increase naturalization rates and sustain them. It details how to expand services to immigrant groups that need minor assistance, as well as those with special needs.

Definition of Citizenship

The word “citizenship” can refer to either the legal status achieved through birth or naturalization, or to attachment and loyalty to a nation. This report primarily uses “citizenship” in the former sense. However, it occasionally adopts its patriotic meaning, and sees citizenship in this sense as an important goal of a national citizenship program.

What a National Citizenship Plan Can Achieve

The national citizenship plan seeks to: 1) garner support from federal officials for immigrant integration and to secure a federally-funded program; 2) serve as the linchpin of a U.S. immigrant integration policy; 3) forge stronger relationships between federal, state, and local governments in partnership with the private sector; 4) increase the naturalization rate for immigrants who are currently eligible to naturalize and for those who will be eligible; 5) serve as a catalyst for expanded support for English as a second language (ESL) classroom instruction; 6) deepen immigrants’ knowledge of U.S. history and civics; 7) increase voter participation and broaden civic engagement opportunities; and 8) build stronger social bonds between native- and foreign-born people through the shared experiences of helping, or being helped, in the naturalization process.

What a National Citizenship Plan Does Not Attempt to Achieve

The plan does not seek to: 1) offer just one model for a national citizenship program; 2) supplant current citizenship programs; 3) lend support to a select group of organizations; 4) offer a citizenship plan as a comprehensive policy for immigrant integration; 5) espouse narrow expectations of immigrant patriotic behavior; 6) coerce immigrants into applying for citizenship or disparage those who do not.

None of the 108 persons interviewed for this plan questioned the U.S. policy of granting citizenship based on birth in the United States. Nor does this report. Only a few expressed concern over dual citizenship. When asked about citizenship and immigrant integration, interviewees from a broad political and professional spectrum focused more on immigrants’ attachment to the principles of the U.S. Constitution and their willingness to participate fully in U.S. society.

Paving the Path to Citizenship

The national citizenship plan views all immigrants as on the “path to citizenship.” The plan focuses on two distinct immigrant groups, those without barriers to citizenship and the compelling minority with significant barriers.

Of the millions of immigrants currently eligible for citizenship, the majority will be able to file applications with minimal direction and assistance. The pertinent question is *when* they will naturalize, absent a “grand invitation.” This group needs to receive a clear message about citizenship’s benefits, as well as answers to questions that cause them to delay applying. The plan calls for a comprehensive citizenship outreach campaign to this population. (See Chapter 11 on marketing and outreach.)

To further promote citizenship and help the majority of self-filers, the plan also calls for the development of a self-study curriculum for high-level learners. The curriculum should be free, easily accessible, and produced for print and electronic media. It should contain more meaningful content than the information required to pass the current naturalization test and should inspire immigrants to learn more about the United States over their lifetimes. (See Chapter 7 for recommendations.)

The national citizenship plan largely focuses on those immigrants with significant barriers to eligibility and to the application process, particularly the poor and those who speak limited English. Increasing the naturalization rates for these groups would be an exemplary accomplishment for the United States and a model for other nations.

The Desire of Immigrants to Become U.S. Citizens

A large majority of immigrants want to become citizens. The question is what will prompt them pursue this goal. Ideally, citizenship should stem from patriotic attachment and a desire for political enfranchisement. However, most dramatic increases in naturalization have resulted from fear of the harsh consequences of anti-immigrant legislation.⁷

Although considerable data exists on immigrant demographics, naturalization rates and naturalization indicators, there is less data on immigrant attitudes towards citizenship. However, three studies offer a snapshot of how immigrants view naturalization.

A 2003 report titled *Now That I'm Here: What America's Immigrants Have to Say about Life in the U.S. Today*, written by Public Agenda for the Carnegie Corporation of New York, presents the views and attitudes of immigrants about living in the United States. Respondents were randomly sampled shortly after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, about their integration into U.S. life. In addition to questions about social relations, political environment, learning English, and work, immigrants were asked about their expectations to become citizens. The survey found that 93 percent planned to pursue citizenship. Immigrants were asked how best to describe what becoming a U.S. citizen meant to them. Fifty-six percent stated it was a necessary and practical matter, 34 percent a dream come true, 8 percent something not so important, and 2 percent had no response.⁸

A 2005 report, *New Americans Survey Frequencies*, prepared by the Chicago Information Center for the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, used intercept surveys in immigrant-impacted neighborhoods, snowball sampling (referrals from one immigrant to another), and convenience sampling (distribution of surveys through conduits to immigrants, such as social service agencies and employers). Immigrants were asked, "Do you expect to apply for citizenship?" Of the 481 respondents, 64 percent answered, "I definitely will." Another 27.2 percent responded, "Maybe I will or not sure." Only 8.7 percent said, "I think I will not."⁹

The third study summarizes data collected by the New Immigrant Survey (NIS), a longitudinal study of representative, new legal immigrants and their children. A pilot survey conducted in 1996 asked immigrants 18 years and older, "Do you plan to become a U.S. citizen in the next 10 years?" Responses were separated by four visa classes. Positive responses in rank order were: 98 percent from diversity visa holders, 78 percent from spouses of U.S. citizens, 75 percent from "other" visa holders, and 60 percent from employment visa holders.¹⁰

Characteristics of Immigrants Who Naturalize¹¹

- As immigrants' level of English proficiency increases, so does their likelihood of becoming naturalized citizens.
- As immigrants' level of education increases, the odds of acquiring citizenship also increase up to completion of high school; after that point, an additional year of schooling begins to reduce the odds of naturalization.
- Immigrants who are homeowners are about 1.3 times as likely to naturalize as those who are not.
- Immigrants who are married or were married are 18 percent more likely to become citizens than those who were never married. Having minor children further encourages naturalization.
- The odds of acquiring citizenship increase as age at the time of immigration rises, reaching a peak at age 39, and then descending.
- Men are about 10 percent less likely to naturalize than women.
- Immigrants from refugee-sending countries are nearly 15 percent more likely to naturalize than those not from such countries.
- Coming from an English-speaking country reduces the odds of naturalization by about 27 percent.
- The odds of naturalization for immigrants from countries that recognize dual citizenship are about 20 percent less than the odds for those from countries that do not.

Lawful Permanent Residents Currently Eligible to Become U.S. Citizens

As illustrated by Figure 1 (see page 4), a considerable number of immigrants currently eligible and soon to be eligible for naturalization face challenges in the areas of English language ability, formal education, and income, especially when compared to the recently naturalized. This data was an impetus for this report and the concept of a national citizenship plan.

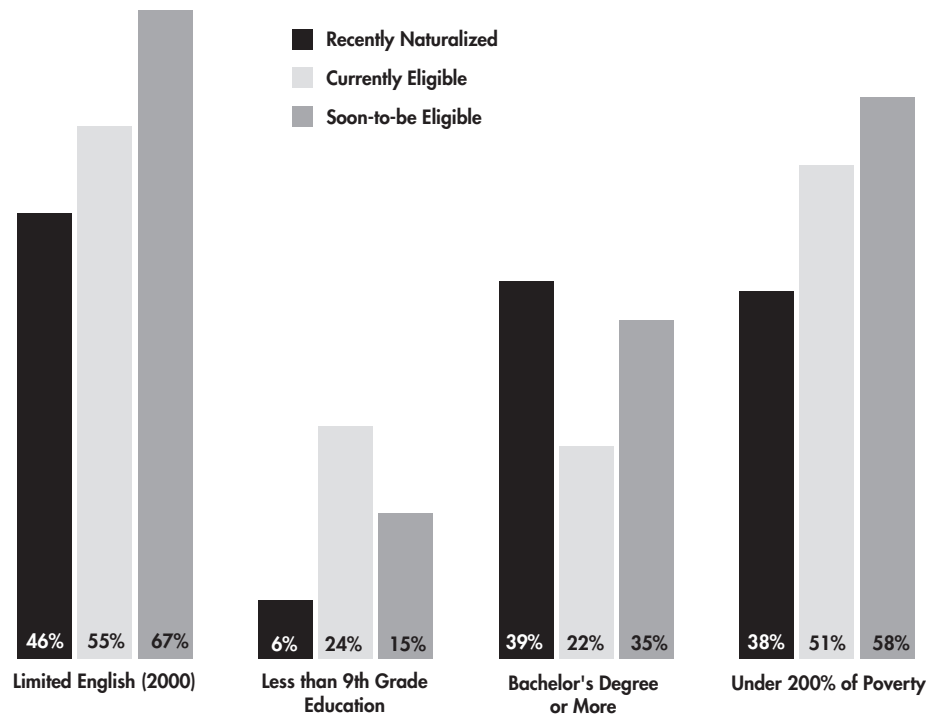


Figure 1. Selected Characteristics of Immigrant Citizenship Groups, 2005.

Source for Education and Income Data: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of supplement to the March 2005 Current Population Survey with legal status assignments and adjustments for omissions.
 Source for English Language Data: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of Census 2000 5% Public-Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) with legal status assignments and adjustments for omissions.
 Limited English Definition: Speaks a language other than English at home and does not speak English “very well.”

Patterns of Naturalization

Patterns of naturalization should concern all Americans, but particularly federal policymakers and immigrant advocacy organizations. Even though naturalization rates rose in the 1990s, the trend cannot be expected to continue indefinitely. A confluence of events prompted for the increase, including: response to anti-immigrant legislation (Proposition 187 in California and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996); an increase in the number of persons eligible to naturalize, including persons legalized under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act; the rising cost of replacing a green card for Lawful Permanent Residents; and Mexico’s easing of dual citizenship restrictions.¹² As these events suggest, naturalization increases cannot be assumed or predicted absent a national citizenship program.¹³

At present, the U.S. immigrant population can be roughly divided into three categories: one-third naturalized citizens,¹⁴ one-third Lawful Permanent Residents (green card holders),¹⁵ and one-third undocumented.¹⁶ These proportions will shift over time, particularly if Congress passes legislation to legalize the undocumented.

The number of immigrants eligible to become citizens (eight million) and soon to be eligible (2.7 million) are at historically high levels.¹⁷ Of the currently eligible, about three-quarters live in six states (California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey and Illinois) and one-third lived

in California alone.¹⁸ (See Table 1 on page 5.) In Texas, there are more eligible immigrants than naturalized citizens. In 2002, roughly 12 percent of those who were eligible lived in 22 “new” immigrant growth states and 13 percent lived in 23 states with relatively slower growth.¹⁹

Citizenship status and an engaged citizenry are particularly important given the volume and diversity of the foreign-born. The United States is not well-served by disparities in naturalization rates that turn on nationality, residence by state, religion, income, education or English literacy levels.

Requirements for Becoming a U.S. Citizen

Immigrants must meet certain eligibility requirements for naturalization. They must be at least 18 years old; have five years of lawful permanent residence (three years if they have a U.S. citizen spouse); have good moral character; be able to read, write, and speak basic English; pass a test on U.S. history and government; and take an oath of allegiance. Certain waivers of the English language and civics requirements are available for applicants based on disabilities, age, and length of lawful permanent residence. In addition, a waiver of the oath of allegiance is available for applicants with severe disabilities. There are also waivers of the residency requirement for certain categories of applicants, such as U.S. military personnel.

Table 1.
Naturalization Status of Legal Permanent Foreign-Born Adult Residents by State:
March CPS 2005 (Populations in thousands)²⁰

State or Area	Naturalized	Eligible to Naturalize	Soon-to-be Eligible*	% Natz. of Eligible	State or Area	Naturalized	Eligible to Naturalize	Soon-to-be Eligible*	% Natz. of Eligible
Total	12,361	8,482	2,758	59%	North Dakota	2	3	3	31%
"Big Six"	8,605	6,212	1,877	58%	South Dakota	4	5	4	43%
California	3,477	2,945	736	54%	Nebraska	18	22	8	45%
New York	1,937	932	361	68%	Kansas	33	35	5	48%
Texas	739	834	260	47%	Delaware	19	10	7	64%
Florida	1,268	756	275	63%	Maryland	274	114	61	71%
New Jersey	671	396	131	63%	DC	20	20	10	50%
Illinois	512	350	114	59%	Virginia	220	121	44	65%
Rest of Country	3,756	2,270	881	62%	West Virginia	3	3	1	53%
New England	646	346	114	65%	North Carolina	114	90	64	56%
Mid-Atlantic (->VA)	735	346	164	68%	South Carolina	33	39	0	46%
Southeast	493	353	199	58%	Georgia	174	97	63	64%
Mid-West	672	332	148	67%	Florida	1,268	756	275	63%
Plains	179	155	47	54%	Kentucky	25	22	21	54%
Mountain	566	438	136	56%	Tennessee	40	38	23	51%
Pacific	465	301	71	61%	Alabama	18	13	10	58%
Maine	20	7	2	74%	Mississippi	8	16	5	35%
New Hampshire	22	12	4	65%	Arkansas	20	10	5	67%
Vermont	9	4	0	68%	Louisiana	61	27	7	69%
Massachusetts	366	212	80	63%	Oklahoma	53	23	10	69%
Rhode Island	55	32	11	63%	Texas	739	834	260	47%
Connecticut	175	79	16	69%	Montana	2	4	0	36%
New York	1,937	932	361	68%	Idaho	17	26	7	40%
New Jersey	671	396	131	63%	Wyoming	3	1	0	75%
Pennsylvania	198	78	42	72%	Colorado	103	83	20	55%
Ohio	167	44	31	79%	New Mexico	46	41	22	53%
Indiana	73	22	16	77%	Arizona	226	173	48	57%
Illinois	512	350	114	59%	Utah	39	34	14	53%
Michigan	232	135	45	63%	Nevada	130	76	25	63%
Wisconsin	70	59	10	54%	Washington	225	167	40	57%
Minnesota	130	73	45	64%	Oregon	98	70	17	58%
Iowa	27	32	9	46%	California	3,477	2,945	736	54%
Missouri	44	35	9	56%	Alaska	22	10	4	69%
					Hawaii	120	54	11	69%

SOURCE: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of March Supplement to the Current Population Survey with corrections for misreporting of citizenship (1995, 2005) and adjustment for CPS omissions (2005 only).

AREA DEFINITIONS: Groups of states do not correspond to Census divisions; state groups are:

New England	ME, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT	Plains	IA, MO, ND, SD, NE, KS, OK
Mid-Atlantic (->VA)	PA, DE, MD, DC, VA, WV	Mountain	MT, ID, WY, CO, NM, AZ, UT, NV
Southeast	NC, SC, GA, KY, TN, AL, MS, AR, LA	Pacific	WA, OR, AK, HI
Mid-West	OH, IN, MI, WI, MN		

Challenges to Becoming a U.S. Citizen: The Decision to Apply

Many immigrants are unaware of the benefits of citizenship, eligibility requirements, or how the naturalization process works. They have never been educated about citizenship or encouraged to apply. For those who wish to naturalize, accurate information can be hard to find. Community outreach is seldom funded. As a result, immigrants resort to word of mouth and hearsay to determine their potential eligibility. While the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) provides helpful information on its website, many low-income immigrants either do not know how to use the Internet or do not have easy access to it.

Furthermore, many immigrants mistrust government agencies due to corruption in their native countries and negative experiences with U.S. immigration authorities. Immigrants also fear exposing undocumented family members to immigration authorities by applying for citizenship. Fear of the citizenship interview, especially the test, also inhibits some immigrants from applying.

Once immigrants decide to apply for citizenship, there are further barriers. Many require help in completing the application, which is lengthy and complex. Immigrants who must work long hours and care for their families often find it difficult to complete the application and assemble all the required documentation.

Because the consequences of submitting an inaccurate or incomplete application can be severe, it is advisable to obtain professional assistance in completing the application. However, many immigrant communities lack competent and affordable immigration assistance. Low-income immigrants who cannot afford a private attorney's fees may seek help from family members or friends with no knowledge of immigration law, or they may pay a *notario*, a person in the community who practices immigration law without proper training or authorization.

The high application fee of \$400 poses another barrier, and USCIS recently announced plans to increase the fee substantially in fiscal year 2007. Many immigrants work in low-wage jobs and have tight monthly budgets and little discretionary income. The Pew Hispanic Center found that 51 percent of immigrants eligible to naturalize have incomes under 200 percent of the poverty level.²¹ (See Figure 1.) Although fee waivers are available, they remain discretionary and are granted unevenly by different USCIS offices. USCIS policy requires careful, detailed documentation of household income and expenses to justify the need for a fee waiver. Without professional assistance, the correct documentation is often missing or incomplete.

Some immigrants come from countries that do not allow dual citizenship. In these cases, obtaining U.S. citizenship would mean losing their family home or land. Although the United States does not recognize dual citizenship, it does not expressly prohibit it. Thus, dual citizenship is possible for immigrants whose native countries allow it. In recent years, more countries, including Mexico, have officially permitted dual citizenship and passed laws allowing dual citizens to keep their property. Thus, the issue of losing one's native citizenship is less of a concern for would-be U.S. citizens than in the past.

To address the challenges described, the national citizenship plan would seek to: (1) expand public outreach on the benefits and requirements of citizenship in venues other than the Internet; (2) broaden USCIS's citizenship outreach efforts in immigrant communities; (3) increase funding for non-profit organizations providing application assistance and immigration counseling for low-income immigrants; (4) cap the citizenship application fee; (5) expand the availability of fee waivers, and; (6) increase the availability of naturalization group application workshops.

Challenges to Becoming a U.S. Citizen: The English Requirement

Based on the 2000 census, almost 14 million working-age adults in the United States, mostly immigrants, speak English "less than very well." The majority are of Mexican nationality (56 percent), have completed less than nine years of education (50 percent), and are the parents of minor children who speak English well, some as a first language (62 percent).²² Although other minorities have improved their English literacy skills in the past decade, English literacy among Hispanics has declined. In 1992, 35 percent of Hispanics were identified as having below basic English reading and speaking skills. This figure increased to 44 percent in 2003.²³

Many immigrants who are otherwise eligible for citizenship lack the English language skills necessary for the citizenship test. The law requires applicants to read, write, and speak basic English. A non-random survey of over 500 immigrants in Chicago found that 40 percent could "just barely get by" in English or could not "manage without an interpreter."²⁴ According to the Pew Hispanic Center, roughly 55 percent of immigrants who are eligible to naturalize and about 67 percent who will soon be eligible have limited proficiency in English.²⁵ It is not known how many of these immigrants could pass the citizenship test. The USCIS has reported anecdotally that a majority of its denials are due to lack of English.

In October 2005 the USCIS Office of Citizenship commissioned a study by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to document the pass rates for the current citizenship test. A sample of 3,074 naturalization records revealed that 84 percent of applicants passed the citizenship test on the first attempt and 93 percent passed the test on a subsequent attempt, either on the same application or a later application.²⁶ Only 71 percent of elderly applicants 65 years and older passed the English portion of the test on the second attempt.²⁷ Applicants from the Caribbean and Central America had the lowest English pass rates for the first test, 82.5 percent and 81.4 percent respectively.²⁸ By country of origin, applicants from the Dominican Republic, Iran, Mexico, and Vietnam had the lowest pass rates (between 69.9 percent and 75.4 percent).²⁹ These rates improved to between 90.7 percent and 93.6 percent after the last attempt on the test.³⁰ Since persons with the greatest challenges are more likely to seek representation, pass rates were lower for applicants who had application assistance or legal representation.³¹ Refugees had a significantly lower pass rate for the first attempt in comparison to applicants with other types of immigration status, 77 percent compared to 86 percent.³²

As suggested by these statistics, the English requirement is particularly challenging for immigrants with low levels of education in their native countries, especially those who are illiterate in their native language. Low levels of education and literacy are sometimes compounded by advanced age. For these groups, learning to read and write English can seem like an insurmountable challenge. ESL instructors estimate that it can take many years to prepare them for the citizenship test. An exemption from the English language requirement is available for immigrants meeting certain age and long-term residency requirements, but this does not cover immigrants who arrived in the United States at an advanced age and who often need an exemption the most. For example, a person who arrived in the United States at age 75 and wished to apply for citizenship at age 80 would not qualify for the English language exemption until age 90.

Interviewees for this report consistently stressed the importance of a legislative change to expand the English language waiver for the citizenship test. The current law allows an English waiver for eligible applicants who are 55 years of age or older with 15 years as a Lawful Permanent Resident and 50 years of age or older with 20 years as a Lawful Permanent Resident. A simpler alternative would be to broaden the English waiver to citizenship applicants age 60 years or older without respect to their years of residency. This alternative would allow them to take the U.S. history and civics test in their native languages.

Limited English skills coupled with low income and lack of formal education pose hardships not only for naturalization, but for integration overall. A 2002 study by the Urban

Institute found that immigrant families with limited English proficiency “are more than twice as likely to be poor as English proficient households.”³³ The hardship is perhaps greatest for those families in which the parents speak little or no English but whose children are English proficient and have minimal skills in the parents’ native language: “In addition to eroding family strengths, limited English proficiency can isolate immigrant families from the larger community, preventing them from interacting with American-born neighbors, engaging in civic life, and becoming integrated into their new community.”³⁴

The Need for Expanded English as a Second Language and Citizenship Instruction

Immigrants who want to learn English face considerable barriers, including a dearth of high quality, affordable, and accessible classes. Government-supported language programs are operating at full capacity, and many immigrant-impacted communities have a waiting list for English classes that stretches several months. Low-income immigrants, who cannot afford the high cost of private language institutes, depend on these programs. Another problem is that classes are not always scheduled at convenient times, making attendance difficult for immigrants who work long hours and support families. In addition, few English programs provide childcare, which is a major barrier for mothers with small children who wish to attend classes. Finding a class location that is convenient to where immigrants live, especially if they depend on public transportation, is also a challenge. These issues and more are expected to be addressed by the independent National Commission on Adult Literacy established in October, 2006 led by the Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy.

Immigrants consistently express their desire to learn English through formal language instruction. English instruction is the fastest growing component of adult education in the country. Of the 3.6 million adults who participated in federally funded adult education programs in 1999, 47 percent received English language instruction.³⁵ A survey of over 500 immigrants in New York City showed that nearly 90 percent wanted to learn English.³⁶ The majority expressed a desire to attend classes at night or on weekends, yet only six percent of the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative’s classes were provided on weekends.³⁷

Federal and state funding for English classes is inadequate to meet the need. In the New York metropolitan area, there are over one million people who do not speak English well or at all, and the supply of English classes is far below the demand. One study of 184 ESL providers reported 57.4 percent having a waiting list with waiting times ranging

widely between several weeks to more than three years.³⁸ Another study suggests that the availability of classes in the New York area actually decreased as immigration increased in the 1990's.³⁹ "In 2005, the Massachusetts Department of Education reported that more than 18,000 residents were on waiting lists for ESL classes; the average wait is six months to two years."⁴⁰

Since the country's diverse and non-English speaking immigrant population is expected to grow, the disconnect between English language need and instruction capacity must be addressed. More English classes and a larger corps of ESL instructors who are specially trained to teach adult learners are needed, especially if Congress passes legislation to legalize the undocumented. Limited funding for English language classes represents a major barrier to integration. Immigrants want to learn English, but too many cannot access formal instruction.

The national citizenship plan addresses the need to assist immigrants who have limited English proficiency by expanding funding and instruction for ESL and citizenship education. There is scant need for additional pilot projects given the demand for services and the expertise already accrued. Models of quality ESL and civics⁴¹ instruction and ESL and citizenship instruction⁴² are well-documented. (See Chapter 7 on ESL and citizenship instruction.) The question is whether good models will be given the resources necessary for replication where the need is greatest.

Challenges to Becoming a U.S. Citizen: The Naturalization Process

The naturalization process can be imposing and complex. While most immigrants experience few problems or only minor inconveniences, others encounter considerable hardships. Difficulties arise, for example, when the USCIS improperly rejects a fee waiver application, misplaces a citizenship application, fails to mail notices for appointments to the correct address, sends files to the wrong office, delays appointments due to security check backlogs, or improperly rejects a disability waiver application. (See Chapter 4 on barriers in the naturalization application process.)

The success of a national citizenship plan will require, in part, significant improvements by USCIS in the naturalization process. The federal government has improved customer service and application-processing backlogs since 1997 when 1.7 million naturalization applications were pending and the wait for citizenship averaged two years.⁴³ Nonetheless, improvements have been slow and inconsistently implemented by USCIS district offices and applica-

tion-processing problems from the 1990's persist.⁴⁴ FBI security checks delay interviews and oath ceremonies by a year or more for some applicants.

The President and Congress must work to improve the naturalization process. (See Chapter 11 for a list of recommendations for the President and Congress.) In addition, USCIS must be given the tools and resources to improve services to its customers. (See Chapter 11 listing recommendations for USCIS.)

An Immigrant Integration Policy from a Citizenship Perspective

In June 2006 President George W. Bush announced a plan "to create a 'task force on new Americans' to expand local initiatives to help immigrants integrate into American society."⁴⁵ The national citizenship plan would contribute to immigrant integration and strengthen the nation. However, many questions remain concerning immigrant integration. Are conditions more favorable for integration today than in times past? Do immigrants share commonly held civic values of U.S. society? What reasons do immigrants give for wanting to be citizens? What policies maximize integration? What sectors of society create opportunities for immigrant learning and engagement? What models of integration or community development work best to empower people?

Integration is a highly complex social process. Policies and practices involving integration must be equally sophisticated. First, integration needs to be better defined, differentiating between broad social characteristics and specific civic beliefs and activities.

Second, integration must be viewed from a longitudinal perspective that accounts for changes occurring over one, two, and three generations.

Third, social integration needs to be understood as a multidirectional process among many peoples and groups rather than as a one-way, majority-dominated process or a two-way process between the majority and a single immigrant group. Immigrants live in increasingly diverse communities and interact with multiple cultures on a daily basis. Thus, social integration cannot reflect a "one form fits all" approach.

Fourth, integration should be analyzed foremost at the micro level where citizens gather to solve problems, identify common interests, and engage in preferred activities. The task of identifying local citizens' associations committed to community building is essential to implementing immigrant integration policies. President Bush's cabinet-level task force on new Americans is a good start, but it must elicit local input and involvement. In light of

continuing budget constraints for domestic programs, it is unlikely that significant new federal monies will soon be forthcoming for an immigrant integration initiative.

Fifth, a national immigrant integration policy should remove obstacles to integration and create new opportunities for civic engagement. A national immigrant integration policy should avoid charged rhetoric on the perceived needs and problems associated with immigrants, particularly ethnic minorities and poor populations.

Sixth, an immigrant integration policy should use a community development, assets-based approach that focuses on immigrant community strengths and potential. The assets-based approach “leads toward the development of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills, and assets of lower income people and their neighborhoods.”⁴⁶ An integration policy should avoid a needs- or deficit-based approach, which focuses on problems. This approach is likely to produce anti-immigrant rhetoric, divide communities, and yield disappointing results.

An assets-based approach does not ignore deficits or socioeconomic disparities among people. Instead, it affirms a basic truth about the “giftedness” of every individual. Civic associations can be included in this inventory of community assets.⁴⁷ An assets-based approach to integration would: list immigrant-identified assets in the community; chart long-term integration benchmarks embraced by new immigrants and the public; work to eliminate structural barriers to naturalization; and support initiatives that have achievable outcomes. Naturalization assistance, including English and citizenship instruction, is an integration objective with clear outcomes. It does not depend on subjective expectations about immigrant thinking or behavior.

A More Perfect Union supports the creation of a formal immigrant integration policy whose cornerstone would be a national citizenship program. In the naturalization process, immigrants satisfy many of the indicia of integration, including English proficiency, knowledge of U.S. history and civics, and allegiance to the nation. The process ultimately allows immigrants to assume the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship. This report affirms the importance of being a U.S. citizen and using this status to its fullest potential.

A National Citizenship Program Leading an Immigrant Integration Policy

The United States has a storied but inconsistent history of welcoming immigrants. As we assess the country’s immigration needs, it is helpful to consider the country’s periodic shifts from inclusiveness to exclusivity. Reflecting this “high and low tide” approach to immigration is the country’s absence of a coherent immigrant integration policy that addresses the social needs of immigrants and receiving communities. Although citizenship is regarded as a high achievement of integration, there is no well-identified policy and system to promote citizenship, inform immigrants about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, prepare them to naturalize, or assist them through this process. There is also a shortage of English and citizenship classes. In the words of one immigration policy expert, “We as a nation don’t even send eligible immigrants a postcard telling them it’s time to apply for citizenship. Yet we complain, often angrily, that they don’t want to assimilate. Maybe—just maybe—we ought to be doing something about it? Encouraging citizenship would be one of the most useful things we could do to spur assimilation.”⁴⁸

The federal government in recent years has initiated various citizenship programs. Yet these have been sporadic and short-lived. One large federal citizenship initiative ended abruptly under a cloud of political suspicion and allegations of improper conduct. Subsequent federally funded programs were narrowly focused on immigrants who were at risk of losing public benefits under the 1996 welfare reform law.

The U.S. government has taken a laissez-faire approach to naturalization, making it entirely the immigrants’ responsibility. For example, by not providing USCIS with regular, annual appropriations, Congress essentially requires the USCIS to fully fund its budget for processing naturalization applications—and the separate budget of the Office of Citizenship—with immigrant application fees.

In the absence of a significant federal commitment to citizenship, states and philanthropic foundations have funded charitable agencies to provide naturalization services. These monies have been essential. However, state and philanthropic funds are limited compared to potential federal resources and have been available only sporadically. (See Chapter 10 for eight program models that sought to naturalize immigrants on a large scale.) A national citizenship program would make a strong statement that immigrant integration and citizenship cannot be left to chance, to immigrants, to charities, or to local governments and foundations alone.

In decades past, citizenship programs depended on active partnerships between federal and state governments and private organizations, nationally and locally. Many sectors of society were instrumental in receiving new arrivals; introducing them to housing, schooling, and work; and helping them learn English and become U.S. citizens. These sectors included city governments, schools, voluntary associations, religious institutions, employers, unions, and others. Today, these sectors and many others will play a critical role in building a national citizenship program. (See Chapter 11 for a description of sectors and recommendations for each.)

Historical Efforts to Naturalize Immigrants

The so-called “Americanization” movement took place in the early twentieth century at a time of heated social debates between right- and left-leaning Progressives and nativist political organizations, each attempting to respond to the era’s rapid demographic, sociological, and technological changes.

This movement attempted to address record-high immigration and lower than desirable naturalization rates. Large-scale efforts to naturalize immigrants were first implemented following a speech given by President Woodrow Wilson in December 1914 at a naturalization oath ceremony. Wilson spoke against ethnic groups perpetuating their foreign identities and cultural habits, urging immigrants to view themselves as members of a new nation. The “Americanization” movement sought to de-emphasize the different cultural habits and languages of the historically high number of immigrants arriving mostly from Europe and Asia and to emphasize assimilation into the dominant American culture. It expected immigrants to become U.S. citizens as soon as they were eligible. The onset of World War I deepened fears that immigrants from Europe might harbor allegiances counter to the United States.⁴⁹

The “Americanization” movement’s activities consisted chiefly of political speeches and lectures at workplaces and public schools. The agency in charge, the Federal Bureau of Naturalization, distributed notices and information directly to immigrants. It also distributed citizenship instruction materials via a nationwide network of citizenship programs, operated mostly by nongovernmental agencies, including YMCAs and YWCAs, international institutes, settlement houses, places of worship, adult education classes, neighborhood associations, women’s associations, male fraternities, and labor unions. Efforts were made to educate immigrants in English and teach U.S. history, civics, and social customs. By the 1920s, roughly 750 localities were offering programs that ultimately served one million immigrants.⁵⁰ This public-private initiative aimed to assist immi-

grants not only with the mechanics of the naturalization process but also attempted to instill allegiance to the Constitution and democratic principles.

The naturalization component of the “Americanization” movement produced public information materials, new public and private channels for their distribution, and expanded programs to help immigrants achieve citizenship.⁵¹

The movement eventually became harshly coercive, even xenophobic.⁵² Critics argued that the movement was rooted in a short-sighted and discriminatory view that immigrants were slow, if not unwilling, to become Americans, adopt democratic values, and naturalize.⁵³

Some proponents of immigration and immigrant integration activities adopted a different approach that did not seek to subvert the cultural, linguistic, and religious identity of newcomers. Instead, these reformers emphasized the need for shared values. John Dewey was a leading proponent among Progressives urging “like-mindedness” among native- and foreign-born Americans on principles of democracy and building community bonds.⁵⁴ An ally of Dewey’s was Jane Addams, a social worker who created the settlement house model in the late nineteenth century and spawned a national movement of integration services for immigrant resettlement. She decried derogatory statements and coercive acts that sought to force assimilation and to place people into citizenship classes.⁵⁵ Another distinguished figure of the era, Frances Kellor, dedicated herself to private and public service helping immigrants. Believing immigrants could Americanize without the use of harsh or forceful measures, Kellor pursued practical policies to expand government services for new arrivals and improve the appalling living conditions that she saw as an affront to the well-being and dignity of every American.⁵⁶

The years of the “Americanization” movement were characterized by rapid social change, passionate debates, new laws and agencies, and new private institutions and partnerships. The United States today faces similar challenges, and could benefit from the lessons of that earlier movement. The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform called “for the Americanization of new immigrants, that is the cultivation of a shared commitment to the American values of liberty, democracy and equal opportunity.”⁵⁷ Among other lessons, the government should strengthen, rather than ignore or supplant, private institutions that help immigrants integrate and become citizens.⁵⁸ (See Chapter 11 for a list of recommendations for future research about immigrant integration and naturalization.)

Recent Naturalization Efforts

The federal government has done little in recent decades to promote citizenship and provide naturalization services. To the contrary, immigrants face even more hurdles in the naturalization process, including application fees that have tripled since 1998 and waiting periods of two years or more during the past decade. Notwithstanding some of the criticisms of the “Americanization” movement, the United States today falls short of its best efforts 100 years ago to help immigrants become citizens. For example, the federal government has no storehouse of free materials on how to teach English and civics for the citizenship test and no monies for public and private partnerships to raise awareness about citizenship and provide naturalization assistance. Because there is no comprehensive federal citizenship initiative, state governments and philanthropic foundations have funded charitable organization to carry out state-specific and private initiatives.

The most comprehensive citizenship program in recent years was created by the philanthropist George Soros. Offended that hundreds of thousands of immigrants were facing a loss of public benefits due to welfare reform legislation, Soros donated \$50 million of his personal wealth to his foundation, the Open Society Institute (OSI). OSI used the funds to create a citizenship initiative called the Emma Lazarus Fund. The Fund distributed most of its monies in 1997-1999 to nonprofit organizations that assisted immigrants. As a result of the passage of punitive laws and the Emma Lazarus Fund’s work, naturalization applications soared. In addition, advocacy efforts supported by the Fund led to passage of legislation at the federal and state levels that ameliorated some the harshest aspects of the welfare reform law. (See Chapter 10 for details on the Emma Lazarus Fund.)

The Fund was successful in increasing the number of new citizens and in its political advocacy on welfare reform. By the end of its two-year period, it had assisted more than 500,000 immigrants to begin the naturalization process.⁵⁹ Grant recipients raised significant matching dollars. Many Fund grantees have continued to offer citizenship programs, but on a more modest scale because of the lack of federal and private funding. (See Chapter 10 for details of other recent and current initiatives.)

The Emma Lazarus Fund effectively ended its support for naturalization services in 2000. Despite its successes, the Fund did not spur Congress to create a national citizenship program. Nor did it succeed in convincing Congress to push for the reforms needed to reduce application-processing backlogs or to make the naturalization process more accessible.

The positive experiences of the Emma Lazarus Fund should inspire U.S. political leaders to advance a national citizenship program that is built not on the negative foundations of the past—fear over immigrant disloyalty, lack of assimilation, or loss of public benefits—but on the strengths we possess as a nation, our ideals, and how such a program would contribute to both.

U.S. Efforts Compared to Canada and Australia

The United States is a nation of immigrants who came to seek freedom and opportunity. During this era of sometimes violent immigrant protests in Europe and elsewhere, the United States can serve as a model of immigrant integration.

Unfortunately, the United States lags behind other democratic nations in providing citizenship information and assistance to its immigrants. For example, both Canada and Australia have official government policies and robust programs promoting immigrant integration. Both countries consider immigrants at their point of arrival to be on the path to citizenship, and this policy may explain why Canada⁶⁰ and Australia⁶¹ have significantly higher naturalization rates than the United States.

Australia:

In August 1998 the Australian government established an independent body, called the Australian Citizenship Council, to advise the minister for immigration and multicultural affairs on issues related to citizenship. The council consulted with the public and sought comments on a wide range of citizenship-related issues, then produced an extensive report in February 2000, entitled, *Australian Citizenship for a New Century*. The report examined Australian civic values, citizenship law, and citizenship policy and made recommendations in these areas. The Australian government produced a response to the council’s recommendations in May 2001, entitled, *Australian Citizenship...A Common Bond*.

The government of Australia views citizenship as a unifying force and has designed initiatives to encourage eligible noncitizens to naturalize and to encourage all Australians to value citizenship.⁶² These initiatives include periodic citizenship promotion campaigns using national media ceremonies for Australian citizens to publicly affirm their loyalty to the country, and civics and citizenship education in the community. The government also produces a variety of citizenship materials such as a booklet titled, *What it Means to be an Australian Citizen*, promotional posters, citizenship kits, lapel pins, and badges for use at citizenship ceremonies and other events.

Australia's Adult Migrant English Program provides up to 510 hours of free English language instruction to immigrants and refugees from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Refugees and humanitarian entrants are eligible for an additional 100 hours of instruction. The program provides about six million hours of instruction each year, and had a budget of \$137.4 million in 2004-05. In addition to free instruction, the program provides free childcare. Eligible students are required to register for the program within three months of arriving in Australia or gaining permanent residence, and must begin classes within one year.⁶³

As part of the program, students can elect to take a 20-hour citizenship course that helps them prepare for the Australian citizenship test. The course covers topics such as Australian values and principles, geography, national symbols, government, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Students who successfully complete this course are not required to take the test on citizenship rights and responsibilities at the naturalization interview. Similarly, students who successfully complete the English course do not have to take the English test at the naturalization interview.

An applicant for Australian citizenship must be a permanent resident; have resided in Australia for at least two years; be able to speak and understand basic English; be able to understand the nature of the citizenship application; understand the privileges and responsibilities of Australian citizenship; have good character, and; intend to reside in Australia or maintain a close and continuing association. Australia's testing exemptions are broader than U.S. exemptions. Applicants age 50 and older are exempt from the English test requirement, and applicants age 60 and older are exempt from the privileges and responsibilities test requirement. In addition, applicants with a permanent physical or mental incapacity are exempt from the test requirements, as well as from the requirement to understand the nature of the citizenship application.

The Australian government has a broad policy that the cost of its services, including naturalization, should be borne primarily by the beneficiaries of these services. The cost of the Australian citizenship application is \$120. A reduced fee of \$20 is available for applicants who receive government assistance or show evidence of financial hardship. Applicants are required to attend an interview. If they live outside a metropolitan area, their interview may be conducted at a post office. The naturalization process typically takes about 90 days.

Unlike U.S. citizenship, Australian citizenship is not linked to public benefits or immigration benefits; there is no distinction between citizens and noncitizens in this regard.

The major benefits of Australian citizenship are government jobs, a passport, freedom to travel, and the right to vote. Australian citizens are required to vote in elections.

Canada:

Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act defines the country's official policy of immigrant integration. One of the act's objectives is "to promote the successful integration of permanent residents into Canada." The act states that it is to be applied in a manner that facilitates cooperation between government and nongovernmental organizations.⁶⁴

To implement this policy, the Canadian government administers an immigrant settlement program that is designed to help immigrants adapt and integrate into Canadian society as quickly as possible. This program, delivered in partnership with volunteer organizations since 1974, is similar to the U.S. refugee resettlement program. Unlike the U.S. program, it is open to immigrants as well as refugees. To be eligible, the immigrant must be a permanent resident or have been granted permission to remain in Canada.

The Canadian settlement program includes direct services for newcomers, such as reception upon arrival, referral to community resources, community orientation, translation and interpretation assistance, counseling for those having difficulty adapting, and employment assistance. Again, this is similar to the U.S. refugee resettlement program except that it is available to all immigrants. The program also includes activities designed to improve service delivery such as conferences, publications, research, and training.

To further its immigrant integration policy, the Canadian government provides free language instruction that immigrants can access at any time during their first three years in the country. Community-based classes are available in the daytime or evenings, on a full- or part-time basis. The class curriculum includes orientation to Canadian culture, society, laws, volunteerism, and citizenship.

In addition to its settlement and language programs, Canada provides cultural orientation abroad for intending immigrants and refugees. (The United States provides cultural orientation abroad for refugees only.) A separate, refugee assistance program provides financial support to refugees for up to one year after their arrival in Canada.

Canada does not overtly promote citizenship, but seeks to create a welcoming environment that places a high value on citizenship and makes immigrants want to belong. In addition, the country prepares immigrants for citizenship by providing educational information about Canadian culture, society, laws, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship early in the immigration process. This occurs through orientation, settlement, and language programs. The government also sponsors promotional events high-

lighting the rights and responsibilities of citizenship around holidays such as Canada Day and Veterans' Day. In October, Citizenship Week features special events such as citizenship ceremonies. Municipal officials are encouraged to make statements about citizenship in their city or town councils, and teachers are provided with an activity guide to use in the schools.

Canada's citizenship requirements are similar to U.S. requirements, but somewhat less stringent. Applicants for Canadian citizenship must: be 18 years of age or older; be a permanent resident; have lived in Canada for at least three years; be able to communicate in English or French; have a knowledge of Canadian history, geography, and government; and have a knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Those who are charged or convicted of certain criminal offenses are ineligible for citizenship. Applicants must pass a citizenship test on their knowledge of English or French; Canadian history, geography, and government; and citizenship rights and responsibilities. Those aged 55 or older are exempt from the test.⁶⁵

The naturalization application fee is \$200. However, if the application is denied, half of the fee is refunded. When applicants apply for citizenship, the government sends them a study guide for the citizenship test. The naturalization process, which takes 10 to 18 months, includes an interview, a security check, and an oath of allegiance. This is similar to the U.S. naturalization process. In April 2005 the Canadian citizenship and immigration minister announced a government investment of \$69 million over two years in order to reduce the naturalization application processing time to an average of 12 months.⁶⁶

The United States—Canada Naturalization Gap

A study by Bloemraad posits that a North American naturalization gap exists, as evidenced by a higher naturalization rate and the earlier naturalization of eligible immigrants in Canada compared to the United States. Bloemraad suggests that a significant influence on naturalization rates is the institutional approach of the state, whether interventionist or autonomous. She concludes that Canadian federal policies are interventionist and “encourage citizenship through symbolic support and instrumental aid to ethnic organizations and community leaders.”⁶⁷ In contrast, the U.S. approach is described as neutral, even disconnected.⁶⁸

Bloemraad notes that immigrants from different countries naturalize at different rates.⁶⁹ Even so, census data from the United States and Canada taken in 1990 and 1991 for persons from 25 nations demonstrate a higher naturalization rate and earlier naturalization of eligible immigrants in Canada. The results are consistent for three immigrant

groups that have varying lengths of residence. The trend is most striking among the earliest arrivals, but continues for decades after residency and citizenship eligibility are established. According to Bloemraad, “[a]fter 21 to 25 years of residence, the Canadian naturalization level is 95.8 percent compared to the U.S. figure of 82.0 percent”⁷⁰

Bloemraad acknowledges that rates of naturalization may vary due to length of residency, education, and English language ability. To test her theory, Bloemraad studied the naturalization rates among Portuguese immigrants living in Ontario, Canada, and Boston, Mass., based on their common characteristics. The study controlled for the strongest known influences on naturalization: place of residency, years of residency, English language ability, education, and home ownership. Living in Ontario had a positive impact on the likelihood of naturalization, 18 percentage points over living in Boston. Portuguese immigrants naturalize at 66 percent in Canada compared to 48 percent in the United States.⁷¹ Besides state policies, only two other variables, English language ability and university degree, were similarly high probability factors.⁷²

Demographer Rob Paral also supports the idea that federal intervention can encourage citizenship. He states: “The U.S. government has an inherent interest in promoting and facilitating naturalization, as opposed to the current laissez-faire approach in which immigrants are left to judge the merits of U.S. citizenship without government advice or encouragement. A more activist stance towards naturalization by the government would go a long way in fostering an ‘American’ identity among those foreign-born individuals who might otherwise remain at the margins of U.S. civic and political life.”⁷³

A More Perfect Union supports an interventionist approach in the form of citizenship promotion and support for community-based naturalization services. As shown by Bloemraad, this approach is a significant naturalization variable that can be controlled, as opposed to variables like national origin, income level, or education level. Another important variable—English language ability—should be seen as a shared responsibility.

Community-Based Organizations Leading Immigrant Integration Efforts with Little Support

In the absence of federal leadership, charitable organizations have led efforts to help immigrants integrate and become citizens through public education, naturalization and citizenship services, organizing campaigns and other political activities. In a more recent study, comparing government financial and symbolic support of Portuguese

and Vietnamese ethnic civic associations in Canada and the United States, Bloemraad suggests that the U.S. government can play a pro-active role in integration. She concludes: “State intervention can foster immigrants’ and refugees’ ability to establish and to sustain community organizations,” and “by facilitating community building, host societies can encourage migrants’ participatory citizenship in their new home.”⁷⁴

Charitable organizations in the United States have been dependent on small-scale funding from mostly private foundations to support their modest immigrant integration efforts. These efforts continue to prove that immigrants, especially those with special needs, strongly desire citizenship, lack essential information to take the first steps, and face barriers that require assistance to complete the process.

Studies Validating the Importance of Citizenship for Immigrant Integration

Many recent studies support the view that naturalization and civic participation are necessary pillars for an immigrant integration policy. Although many aspects of immigrant integration are important, this report argues that citizenship holds a high and honored place and has support across a wide political and ideological spectrum.

The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform’s 1997 report to Congress affirmed that immigration to the United States has “created one of the world’s most successful multiethnic nations.”⁷⁵ The commission strongly supported the process of “Americanization” for new immigrants, recognizing that the process should arise from a set of shared expectations between the United States in its immigration selection policy and immigrants in choosing the United States as their new home.⁷⁶ The report concluded that naturalization is the most important act in the process of becoming an American. It focused its attention on how the government could improve its management of the naturalization process.⁷⁷

The Little Hoover Commission in 2002 studied the integration of immigrants in California. Its report, *We The People: Helping Newcomers Become Californians*, raises the concern that Lawful Permanent Residents who are slow to naturalize linger in an “in-between” status. Consequently, they are unable to hold public officials accountable through voting.⁷⁸ It also suggests that citizens may be reluctant to support local funding initiatives if these are seen as primarily benefiting noncitizens who are thought to be new to the country. The report recommended that the President and Congress work to reduce the naturalization backlogs (at the time an average of 15 months),

improve customer service, and update the public on its progress.⁷⁹ The report criticized the naturalization exam for failing to test “functional” English, knowledge beyond a set of historical and government-related facts, or an immigrant’s intention to participate in civic life.⁸⁰ It also recommended that the President and Congress create incentives for immigrants to meet their responsibilities as members of the community.⁸¹

A survey by Public Agenda for the Carnegie Corporation of New York asked immigrants to rank the major reasons to become a citizen. Respondents chose voting (76 percent), better legal rights and protections (70 percent), a commitment to and pride in being an American (65 percent), no worries about immigration status (58 percent), better employment (55 percent), easier travel in and out of the United States (51 percent), easier sponsorship of family members for a visa (36 percent), and public benefits (22 percent).⁸² These figures reinforce the significance that immigrants place on citizenship benefits, both pragmatic (rights and protections) and sentimental (demonstrating pride in being American and sharing American values).

The Pew Charitable Trusts requested studies from CLINIC, the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research and National Immigration Forum on the need and design of a large-scale citizenship project. CLINIC’s *Concept Paper on a National Citizenship Program for the Pew Charitable Trusts*, written in 2002, based its proposal for a national citizenship program on: the demographics of the U.S. legal immigrant population; the expertise of nonprofits and faith-based communities assisting immigrants; the impact of anti-immigrant legislation passed in 1996; and the nation’s response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The goals of this citizenship proposal were family reunification, legal status leading to naturalization, civic education, voter registration, English language proficiency, non-exploitative employment, and participation in civic institutions.

The CLINIC paper outlines how a national citizenship program might be structured around the naturalization process including: outreach, intake, application assistance, ESL instruction, links to support services, oath ceremony, voter registration, voter education, and civic engagement and volunteer opportunities. The study identified immigrant-focused networks of local charitable immigration programs, support agencies, and ESL and citizenship programs that could implement a national citizenship program with foundation funding.

It recommended that funding be substantial, sustained, and distributed based on three principles. First, funding should be divided according to the proportion of Lawful Permanent Residents in an area. Second, the overwhelming majority of funding should support the work of local charitable immigration programs that were networked with

national support agencies. Third, funding should build immigration service capacity in new gateway communities. The paper concluded that the responsibility for creating new citizens should not be left solely to the federal government, charitable agencies, or to immigrants themselves, but should be a national priority.

The Manhattan Institute for Policy Research and the National Immigration Forum provided the Pew Charitable Trusts with a paper in 2003 titled, *We The People: Proposed Citizenship Project*. Its goal was to promote immigrant integration by encouraging immigrants to become citizens and making the naturalization process more meaningful. The proposed project encompassed many sectors of society, including government, civic organizations, and businesses that benefit from immigrant labor. The proposal focused on more engaging and meaningful English and citizenship classes through professional instructors and volunteers. It called for an upgraded English and citizenship curriculum and an improved citizenship test.

This paper made eight key recommendations:

- Government, but not government alone, must devote resources to build an infrastructure of community groups that can help immigrants through the naturalization process and can make this process more meaningful.
- Employers should contribute financially to citizenship programs and offer the workplace as a site for English and naturalization services.
- English and citizenship instructors, elected officials, ethnic community leaders, and volunteers should infuse the naturalization experience with patriotic and civic content.
- Citizenship curricula should teach beyond the current naturalization test and amplify on the meaning of being an American.
- The federal government should consider alternatives to the naturalization test, such as the successful completion of a certified course.
- The federal government should reduce naturalization processing times to six months or less and fund faith-based groups and other service providers to help immigrants.
- An outreach campaign promoting naturalization and citizenship needs to be established and sustained.
- A national citizenship project should promote a national dialogue about immigration and raise public awareness about the role immigration plays in American life.

These proposals to the Pew Charitable Trusts, although not funded, anticipated some of the goals and objectives of *A More Perfect Union*. All three proposals: 1) place an emphasis on naturalization and citizenship for immigrant integration; 2) call on federal leadership for a national citizenship program, spurring financial support from other government and private sources; 3) emphasize the role of charitable immigration and English language programs to help immigrants in the naturalization process; 4) call for meaningful learning and citizenship engagement opportunities before, during, and after naturalization; and 5) seek to incorporate the foreign-born fully in U.S. society.

A 2004 report, *Building the New American Community: Newcomer Integration and Inclusion Experiences in Non-Traditional Gateway Cities*, offers a program model for how governments and civil society can work together to pursue integration outcomes. The Building the New American Community (BNAC) project directed members in three communities (Lowell, Mass., Nashville, Tenn., and Portland, Ore.) to set agenda priorities and pursue activities fostering integration. Immigrant residents in each city shared four principle plans of action for integration: 1) better access to English training; 2) vocational skills training designed for the U.S. workforce and local economies; 3) youth development through the school system and community-wide services; and 4) civic engagement for greater voter eligibility, turnout at the polls and activities not requiring citizenship status.⁸³ All three cities had relatively low naturalization rates.⁸⁴

The BNAC project identified four principles that underlie immigrant integration, all of which are key elements of a national citizenship program. First, immigrants should be involved in the decision-making process. Second, integration is a two-way process that connects immigrants and receiving community members. Third, integration is a challenging process that requires “effective and meaningful” collaborations of government and the private sector. Fourth, resources of monies and time should be dedicated to integration activities that have a concrete focus and lead to systemic change.⁸⁵

A 2004 report by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, *Keeping the Promise: Immigration Proposals from the Heartland*, concluded that the fractured U.S. immigration system did not meet the nation’s economic needs, specifically the need to address the status of the undocumented labor force. The report recommended the creation of a national immigrant integration policy for the purpose of strengthening American communities. It saw the need for “explicit integration efforts” because of the growth and diversity of the immigrant population. The goals of an immigrant integration agenda include: 1) civic participation arising from, but not limited to, citizenship status; 2) eliminating English language barriers that inhibit integration, especially among poor immigrants; and 3) expanded partnerships between state and local government,

private employers, educational and religious institutions, labor unions, and community-based organizations.⁸⁶ The national citizenship program would directly address these three agendas.

A 2005 report by the Migration Policy Institute, *Leaving Too Much to Chance: A Roundtable on Immigrant Integration Policy*, called for a framework by which a “policy and research agenda for an affirmative and more comprehensive immigrant integration program” could be established.⁸⁷ Roundtable participants considered immigrant integration under three broad policy arenas: Pre K-12 education, employment, and civic integration. The report recognized the importance of naturalization and citizenship for civic integration: “Naturalization has historically been a key integration indicator, signaling both the society’s acceptance of the immigrant as ‘its own’ and the immigrant’s commitment to membership.”⁸⁸

Leaving Too Much to Chance examines the technical issue of USCIS’s naturalization test redesign initiative, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of the current test and the opportunities presented by a new test. (See Chapter 6 on the citizenship test redesign process.) The report suggests that a rigorous review process be put in place to ensure a reliable, valid, and fair test. Roundtable participants offered three citizenship testing reform ideas, all of which should be included in a national citizenship program: 1) funding to create multimedia materials that can educate an array of immigrant students on history, government, and English; 2) use of immigrants and bilingual speakers to assist naturalization applicants who speak limited English; 3) meaningful research on vulnerable subgroups and on citizenship denials.⁸⁹

A federal immigrant integration policy, which starts with a national citizenship program, should spur further research and reports. (See Chapter 11, under “Research Institutions” for a list of research recommendations.) It should also encourage the exchange of opinions and ideas between experts in research, policy, and practice. (To facilitate this objective, Chapter 12 includes more than a dozen original opinion pieces, solicited by CLINIC for this report, by experts on immigration, integration, and citizenship.)

Consequences of Failing to Create a National Citizenship Program

U.S. political leaders must decide whether to continue the status quo, laissez-faire approach to naturalization or to implement an immigrant integration initiative through citizenship promotion. Failure to act could result in: long-term disenfranchisement; inter-generational civic disengagement; political alienation; fragmentation by social class, nationality, and immigration status; a large immigrant underclass; mixed-status families; and immigrant families physically separated for lengthy periods.

The U.S. government should initiate a national citizenship program as one of the best ways to advance immigrant integration. Sustained federal leadership is required to support a national program, backed by support from other funders and implemented by an existing network of national and local private organizations in partnership with an expanding circle of other sectors of society. (See Chapter 11 for detailed descriptions of 17 sectors and recommendations for each.) Modest and sporadic initiatives will not achieve the necessary goals.

A national citizenship program would lessen the disparity between educated and affluent immigrants and others. It could also serve to eliminate the myths and ease the tensions surrounding immigration. Debates over how many and what type of immigrants the country should accept have overshadowed questions of how immigrants best achieve their goals once they arrive in the United States and what support systems facilitate their integration and promote attachment to the country’s democratic principles. Currently, the lack of an immigrant integration policy places excessive burdens on state and local governments and private organizations to assist immigrants with a host of integration services, creating an anti-immigrant backlash. The debate has become mired in rhetoric, leaving the public confused and postponing practical solutions.

The time for a national citizenship program has arrived. Many pilot projects have been conducted over the past 15 years, and successful, large-scale citizenship program models have been documented. This report, in Chapter 2, presents the infrastructure of a national citizenship program, including the essential elements of leadership, funding, partnerships, geographic scope, ethical and professional standards, and program evaluation.

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