

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States is a nation of immigrants united by a common creed and shared values. With 37 million foreign-born residents, the United States' strength and vitality depends on the contributions of its newest members. However, the integration of a population of this magnitude and diversity cannot be assumed. The pressing policy question becomes: what can be done to promote the integration of this record number of immigrants? *A More Perfect Union: A National Citizenship Plan* proposes a national program to naturalize the eight million immigrants who – based on their years as Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) – may qualify to naturalize, as well as the millions more who will become eligible in the near future.¹ Citizenship is a significant marker of immigrant integration and a pre-condition to full membership in our constitutional democracy. As a practical matter, naturalization involves immigrants in a range of integration activities. Yet despite its benefits, the United States does surprisingly little to promote this process. In theory, we want eligible immigrants to naturalize, but in practice we do little to encourage or assist them.

A More Perfect Union: A National Citizenship Plan sets forth the resources, activities, and partnerships that would be required to naturalize as many eligible immigrants as possible. It calls for a national mobilization in support of citizenship, identifying the roles of government, immigrant service agencies, and other sectors of society in a coordinated plan. It describes a program that could serve as the linchpin of an emerging U.S. immigrant integration strategy.

The benefits of citizenship cannot be overstated. For individuals, these include the right to vote, faster family reunification, better employment and educational opportunities, and a stronger attachment to the United States. For U.S. society, naturalization can be viewed as a benchmark of integration. Citizenship can serve as a catalyst for immigrants to become more: dedicated to democratic principles; informed about the Constitution; engaged in political elections;² represented in the political system; proficient in the English language; unified as families; employable in higher paying jobs;³ and integrated within a wider circle of people and institutions.

Most immigrants strongly value U.S. citizenship. Fully 90 percent view citizenship as something “necessary and practical” or “a dream come true.”⁴ Yet millions do not apply to naturalize when eligible. Lack of proficiency in the English language represents the most common barrier to naturalization. About 55 percent of immigrants who are otherwise eligible to naturalize and about 67 percent of immigrants who will soon be eligible have limited proficiency in English.⁵ Nationwide, there is a shortage of high quality and affordable English language classes. Government-supported language programs are operating at full capacity, and in many communities, waiting lists for English classes stretch several months. Yet these programs represent the only structured way for many low-income immigrants to learn English. Other serious barriers include ignorance of the legal requirements and benefits

of naturalization, a shortage of professional application assistance, inability to afford the application fee, and application processing problems.

The United States lacks a coherent immigrant integration policy, much less a coordinated program to promote citizenship and to prepare immigrants for naturalization. Since citizenship programs depend on short term, private funding, they tend to be sporadic and regional. Sustained federal leadership will be required to support a national program. Non-federal public and private support will also be needed. The proposed program would be implemented by existing networks of immigrant service organizations in partnership with English/citizenship instructors and an expanding circle of other sectors of society. Many pilot citizenship projects have been conducted over the past 15 years, and successful program models have been documented. There is no need for further pilots.

As part of a national citizenship program, Congress must pass better immigration laws, and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) division of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will need to make regulatory changes and to improve access to the naturalization process.

The proposed program should establish measurable outcomes, including a higher naturalization rate and less disparity in outcomes by socioeconomic and nationality group. It should also be designed to build the capacity of participating community-based organizations.

Just as native and foreign-born persons join together to celebrate citizenship at naturalization oath ceremonies, the nation should celebrate when immigrants exercise their rights and assume their civic duties, whether as voters, workers, family members, or volunteers. The time for a national citizenship program has arrived. U.S. political leaders must decide whether to continue the status quo,

laissez-faire approach to naturalization or to implement an immigrant integration initiative that actively promotes citizenship. The following 18 priority recommendations were selected by a core group of 22 experts based on more than 100 interviews with immigration service and policy experts.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP PLAN

Funding:

- 1 Congress should appropriate funds to the USCIS Office of Citizenship (OoC) to enable it to fulfill its mission, to support a national citizenship program, and to provide technical assistance and funding to qualified nonprofit organizations for citizenship services.
- 2 Congress should appropriate sufficient funding so that USCIS does not need to depend entirely on fee revenue to adjudicate applications. Adequate funding would allow USCIS to halt annual fee increases, reduce its backlogs, and improve the technology for application processing and its customer services. Congress should give USCIS flexible access to fee-account revenue to enable it to respond to sudden increases in applications. It should also hold USCIS accountable to maintain backlog reduction goals, upgrade its technology, and improve customer services.
- 3 Funding should be prioritized for networks of direct service providers that are engaged in all aspects of citizenship services including: outreach, intake, application assistance, English as a second language (ESL) and citizenship instruction, naturalization test and interview preparation, legal representation, post-naturalization services, and provision of civic participation opportunities. In many cases, this will require non-profit organizations to share funding and to join services. Nonprofit organizations that are engaged in application assistance should be recognized by the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) or supervised by an attorney. These agencies should be the preferred anchors in local collaborative programs.
- 4 A federally led program should not supplant, but should help to coordinate, increase, and sustain the citizenship work now being performed with other sources of support. State, local, philanthropic, and corporate interests should leverage federal dollars and expand the capacity of service providers, particularly for English language instruction. The OoC should track funding from these sources, state by state, and issue an annual report that publicizes citizenship funding commitments, their sufficiency, and the achievements of a national program.

Program Design and Planning:

- 5 To generate broad public awareness and support, a national citizenship program should bring together the leadership, resources, and talents of the nation's public and private sectors. Native-born, naturalized, and future citizens should be engaged in the program's design and implementation as a way to strengthen the program and to build bonds between these groups.
- 6 A national citizenship program should ensure that all LPRs have access to citizenship, regardless of their socioeconomic class or ethnic background. It should prioritize funding and services for LPRs who naturalize at the lowest rates. However, it should also assure that sufficient services be provided to those who can self-file and who need less information and assistance.
- 7 The OoC's budget should come chiefly from public funds, but its dependence on USCIS application fees should be reduced. The OoC should not seek or receive corporate or philanthropic donations. Instead, it should steer private funding to nonprofit groups by promoting naturalization and sharing successful program models. The OoC should hire community liaison officers for each USCIS district, and task them with coordinating local initiatives, conducting outreach, and building partnerships with nonprofits.
- 8 A national citizenship program should bring together academics and practitioners to identify the research and demographic data that will be needed to conduct outreach, design media campaigns, allocate funding, build service capacity, strengthen ESL and citizenship instruction, and provide benchmarks and tools for evaluation. Immigration experts should convene a privately funded national citizenship conference to share new research, knowledge, program models, and best practices.
- 9 A national citizenship program should include a methodologically sound evaluation component that documents successes and areas for improvement. Evaluation should rest on baseline data, shared modes of intervention, and coordinated data collection with a shared database. The database should maintain privacy and confidentiality, collect meaningful information, track benchmark information, and report successful outcomes. Program evaluation should document not only numbers of new citizens, but significant community interventions and steps contributing to citizenship. Protocols and technological barriers should be developed to restrict government and grantee access to confidential information.

Program Outreach, Activities, and Services:

- 10 The OoC, nonprofit service networks, and local service providers should coordinate citizenship outreach. Appropriate content should be developed by experts in media messaging and immigration services, as well as by immigrant organizers. Outreach should highlight naturalization requirements, as well as the benefits, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship. It should be designed with a consistent image and message, but be tailored to local needs and targeted populations. It should utilize naturalized citizens as spokespersons; offer true-life stories that balance emotional appeal and practical information; provide referral information; utilize multiple communication vehicles; be conducted primarily at the local level; and be evaluated for effectiveness.
- 11 USCIS should include in its approval notice for lawful permanent residence an addendum explaining citizenship eligibility requirements. It should also work with OoC to send *Welcome to the United States, A Guide for New Immigrants* to all immigrants and refugees upon their arrival. As a less costly alternative, it could distribute a multilingual flyer giving the Web link to the guide. Once an immigrant is eligible to apply for citizenship, USCIS should send him or her a reminder. If applicants fail the citizenship test, USCIS should refer them to local ESL and citizenship courses.
- 12 As part of a federally funded citizenship plan, local immigration service providers should significantly expand their provision of naturalization group processing workshops. These events should be sponsored and supervised by organizations with immigration attorneys or BIA-accredited staff, should use trained volunteers, and should follow stringent quality control standards for eligibility screening and application review.
- 13 Naturalization oath ceremonies should be the defining moment of the citizenship process and a key feature of a national citizenship program. USCIS should direct its district offices to offer same-day oath ceremonies if possible. The OoC should expand its efforts to organize and publicize high-profile naturalization ceremonies in order to raise awareness about citizenship. Ceremonies should be organized for days of national significance, such as Independence Day, Flag Day, and Citizenship Day. Court- and USCIS-administered ceremonies should be of equal solemnity and open to the public and service organizations. All oath ceremonies should conclude with voter registration. Local boards of election should oversee voter registration activities, and encourage civic organizations to provide this service.

Removing Barriers to Citizenship:

- 14 Congress should pass a law that broadens the English language waiver for elderly citizenship applicants, allowing applicants who are aged 60 or older to take the U.S. history and civics test in their native language.
- 15 ESL and citizenship instruction should be expanded through adult basic education classes and community-based organizations. Classes should be available at different English language levels, including short-term, high-impact instruction for advanced students and long-term, tailored instruction for students with low literacy. Standards should be established for both professional and volunteer instructors. Instructors should receive training and be able to refer questions and clients to immigration legal experts. Curricula should cover the naturalization test and interview, but include broader content that fosters an informed and engaged citizenry.
- 16 USCIS should expand the availability of citizenship application fee waivers for low-income immigrants. It should change its fee waiver policy to make it less discretionary; create a fee waiver application form to standardize the application process; explain the availability of waivers and the application process in its informational materials; establish an application filing discount for poor working families who wish to apply for citizenship together; and offer an option of paying the application fee in two installments.

Improving the Citizenship Test:

- 17 The revised citizenship test should: adhere to the current legal requirements for level of difficulty and use of discretion; include consequential material on U.S. history and civics presented at a basic English level; and be standardized in its delivery yet able to accommodate applicants with special needs. It should not adversely impact vulnerable applicants or those who are members of specific ethnic, national or language groups; pose legal questions from the Application for Naturalization in assessing the applicants' proficiency in English; create undue delays in the naturalization process; or impose additional costs on applicants. USCIS must provide extensive training and monitoring of its officers to ensure proper implementation of the redesigned citizenship test.
- 18 The OoC should partner with nonprofit organizations to: create a curriculum and study guide at basic and advanced English levels for use in preparing applicants for the citizenship test; create a teacher's guide that will allow teachers to receive broader and deeper instruction; create and distribute free, multimodal citizenship promotion materials; establish a clearinghouse of citizenship materials; fund training and technical assistance for ESL and citizenship teachers; and promote standards in citizenship education.

These recommendations form the basis of the more detailed analysis provided in *A More Perfect Union: A National Citizenship Plan*. If implemented, they will make an indispensable contribution to the integration of millions of would-be citizens and their families.

- 1 Passel, J.S. *Naturalization Trends, 1995-2005* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, Forthcoming 2007).
- 2 According to the 2003 Current Population Survey, 87 percent of new citizens registered to vote in the 2000 election, slightly higher than the 85.5 percent of native-born citizens. Source: Paral, R. "Power and Potential: The Growing Electoral Clout of New Citizens" (Washington, DC: The American Immigration Law Foundation's Immigration Policy Center, October 2004).
- 3 A study of young, male naturalized immigrants in New York using 1990 Census and 1994-1998 current population surveys and data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth reveals that naturalized immigrants earn higher wages and have better job distribution than immigrants who have not naturalized. Economic gains from citizenship appear greatest for immigrants from poorer countries. Source: Bratsberg, B., Ragan, J. F., Nasir, Z. M. "The Effect of Naturalization on Wage Growth: A Panel Study of Young Male Immigrants" *Journal of Labor Economics* 20, issue 3 (July 2002), p. 589 – 590.
- 4 Farkas, S., Duffett, A., & Johnson, J. *Now That I'm Here: What America's Immigrants Have to Say about Life in the U.S. Today* (Washington, DC: Public Agenda, 2003), p. 29.
- 5 Passel, J.S. *Naturalization Trends, 1995-2005*.