



**NATIONAL  
IMMIGRATION  
FORUM**



# **The Road to Naturalization:** Addressing the Barriers to U.S. Citizenship

## Introduction

Democracy — the bedrock of America — is best sustained with an active and informed citizenry. Today, more than 8.8 million lawful permanent residents (LPRs) throughout the United States are eligible to naturalize. Yet, fewer than 800,000 have naturalized every year for the last six years.<sup>1</sup> The lawful permanent resident population of the United States continues to grow as millions of eligible-to-naturalize immigrants do not take the steps to become citizens.<sup>2</sup> At a time when we see declining civic participation, our nation cannot afford to allow these potential citizens to languish.

Many people who are eligible to naturalize and desire to do so face significant barriers. Our nation should work to remove unnecessary barriers to citizenship and help would-be citizens overcome difficulties.

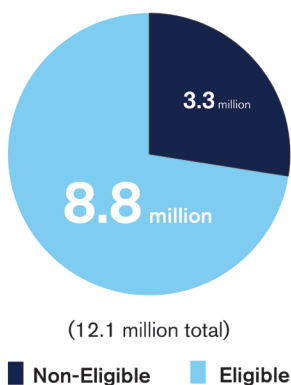
Naturalizing more eligible individuals also would provide significant economic benefits to our country, because it helps immigrants improve their social and economic status. Naturalized immigrants generally have higher incomes than permanent residents. In addition, once they naturalize, they have access to rights and opportunities that are available only to U.S. citizens, allowing them the opportunity to help our country reach its full potential, both economically and civically.

This paper provides a general overview of immigrants eligible to naturalize, the naturalization process, the economic benefits of and barriers to naturalization, and efforts by the New Americans Campaign to assist eligible immigrants to become citizens. It concludes by providing policy recommendations to make the process more accessible and affordable to all eligible immigrants.

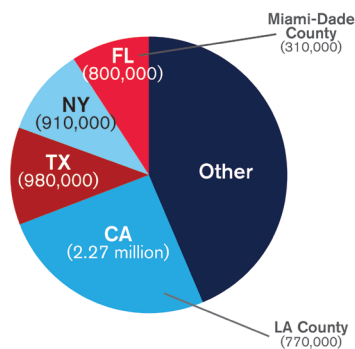
## A Portrait of Those Eligible to Naturalize

The United States is home to an estimated 12.1 million lawful permanent residents,<sup>3</sup> of whom more than 8.8 million are eligible to naturalize. Of the eligible-to-naturalize population as of 2012, 29 percent, or about 2.5 million people, were born in Mexico. Rounding out the top five were nationals of India, China, Cuba and Canada. Overall, 50 countries of origin have 25,000 or more naturalization-eligible people in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

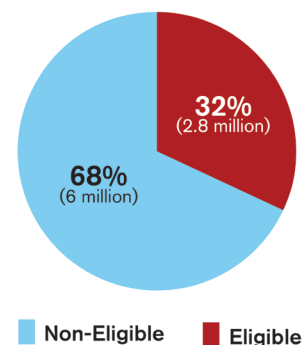
Lawful Permanent Residents in the U.S. Eligible to Naturalize



States with the Largest Numbers of Lawful Permanent Residents Eligible to Naturalize



Naturalization Eligible: Percentage Eligible for an Application Fee Waiver



Although immigrants eligible to naturalize live in all 50 U.S. states, the majority, 58 percent, live in four states: California (2.27 million), Texas (980,000), New York (920,000) and Florida (800,000). Approximately 73 percent of the naturalization-eligible population lives in 10 states.<sup>5</sup> The metropolitan areas with the highest number of naturalization-eligible people are New York City (1.14 million), Los Angeles-Long Beach (940,000), Miami-Fort Lauderdale (500,000), Chicago (340,000) and Houston (290,000).<sup>6</sup>

Segments of the naturalization-eligible population face particular challenges. About 2.8 million people, or 32 percent of the naturalization-eligible population, have an income below 150 percent of the federal poverty level.<sup>7</sup> For a family of four, an annual income of \$36,450 is 150 percent of the federal poverty level.<sup>8</sup>

Although almost 65 percent of those eligible to naturalize say they speak English either very well or well, more than 3 million naturalization-eligible persons still report that they do not know how to speak English or speak only a little. In terms of educational attainment, 1.8 million (22 percent) have a bachelor's degree or an advanced degree and 1.5 million (18 percent) have some college experience. However, more than 3 million (35 percent) of the eligible-to-naturalize population report an educational attainment of less than high school.<sup>9</sup>

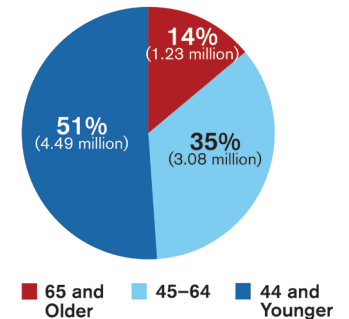
Age and length of residence in the United States are important factors in the eligible-to-naturalize population. Depending on their age and length of residence, those eligible to naturalize can be exempted from the English requirement and given special consideration for the civics test.<sup>10</sup> Those 65 years old and older make up 14 percent of the naturalization-eligible population, or 1.2 million people. Those ages 45 to 64 comprise 35 percent (3 million) and those 44 years and younger make up 51 percent (4.4 million).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, almost 70 percent of permanent residents eligible for naturalization became eligible more than 15 years ago. As many as 3.4 million people became eligible for naturalization between 1960 and 1989 and more than 160,000 became eligible before 1960.<sup>12</sup>

## Citizenship Trends

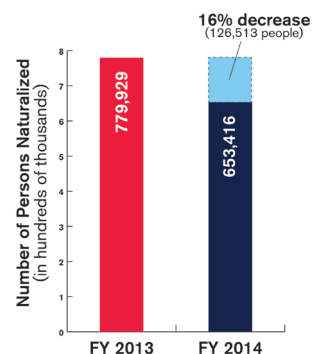
The most recent government figures available reveal that 723,164 naturalization applications were approved in fiscal year (FY) 2015.

**Almost 70% of permanent residents eligible for naturalization became eligible more than 15 years ago.**

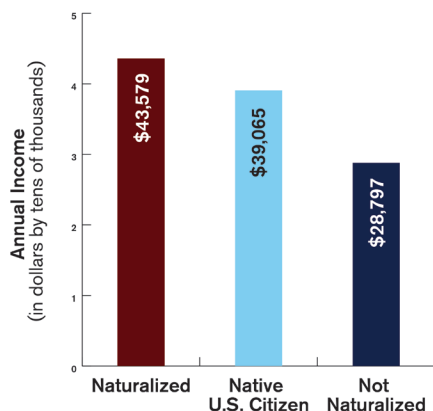
Age Distribution in Naturalization-Eligible Population



Naturalizations in Fiscal Years 2013 and 2014



Average Annual Income



The FY 2015 figures represent an 11 percent increase from 653,416 naturalizations in FY 2014 but are still below the record 1.046 million naturalizations in FY 2008.<sup>13</sup> Historically, the annual number of naturalizations in the United States increased from an average slightly less than 120,000 in the 1950s and 1960s to approximately 210,000 during the 1980s and 500,000 during the 1990s. Between FY 2000 and the record naturalizations in FY 2008, an average of about 680,000 eligible immigrants naturalized every year.<sup>14</sup> Since FY 2009, fewer than 800,000 people have naturalized every year.<sup>15</sup>

The spike in FY 2008 followed a year in which U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) received 1.4 million naturalization applications (most of those who applied in FY 2007, and were approved, naturalized in FY 2008). That almost doubled the number of applications from the year before. The surge in applications increased the length of the naturalization process from seven months to 18 months on average. It also corresponded with a looming fee increase for the naturalization application from \$330 to \$595.<sup>16</sup>

In the first two quarters of FY 2016, USCIS received about 440,000 applications for naturalization. The number is 7 percent higher than the 412,000 applications USCIS received over the same months in FY 2012. Overall, currently available data suggest that the FY 2016 application rate is consistent with other presidential election years.<sup>17</sup>

## The Benefits of Citizenship

Naturalization provides significant economic benefits for our nation and for new Americans. Naturalization greatly benefits the U.S. economy. One study finds that the gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States would increase between \$37 billion and \$52 billion annually if at least 50 percent of the eligible-to-naturalize population in the United States obtained U.S. citizenship. The increase in GDP would result from higher earnings and their effects on spending and demand.<sup>18</sup> Another study finds that aggregate earnings in the 21 cities that the report examined would increase by \$5.7 billion if everyone eligible to naturalize in those cities did so and by \$3.4 billion if 60 percent did so. Increased earnings also would provide an additional \$2 billion in tax revenue and increase homeownership by more than 45,000 people in the 21 cities the report examined.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, naturalized immigrants tend to have better economic outcomes than their nonnaturalized counterparts. One study from 2012 examined the average annual earnings of a naturalized immigrant (\$43,579) and compared it to the income of a nonnaturalized immigrant (\$28,797) and the income of a native-born U.S. citizen (\$39,065). Naturalized immigrants have higher average annual earnings than their nonnaturalized counterparts partly because they tend to have higher levels of experience, education and English language ability.<sup>20</sup> But even after controlling for all variables, the study found that naturalization increased earnings by 8 to 11 percent, or by \$2,304 to \$3,168 for those with an average annual income of \$28,797.<sup>21</sup> The study concludes that naturalization provides

access to better paying jobs by signaling command of the English language and commitment to remain in the United States for the long term, and it opens the door to public-sector jobs that require U.S. citizenship.<sup>22</sup>

Naturalization also provides access to other opportunities available only to U.S. citizens, which helps foster a more engaged citizenry. Once naturalized, immigrants can vote in U.S. elections and run for public office, leading to more participation in and defense of our democracy. Naturalization also provides immigrants with automatic citizenship for their children under age 18 who are lawful permanent residents, permits immigrants to file immigration petitions with the government to reunite with family members and allows immigrants to travel without the restrictions placed on lawful permanent residents and with the protection of a U.S. passport. By naturalizing, new Americans are able to contribute to their local communities and participate in U.S. society to their fullest potential.<sup>23</sup>

## The Naturalization Process

The United States confers citizenship on immigrants who fulfill the naturalization requirements set forth in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA).<sup>24</sup> An immigrant is eligible to apply for naturalization if he or she is:

- > at least 18 years of age;
- > a lawful permanent resident of the United States for at least five years;<sup>25</sup>
- > able to prove continuous residence in the United States for at least five years and physical presence in the United States for a total of at least 30 months within that five-year period;<sup>26</sup>
- > able to show he or she has lived in the state in which he or she is applying for at least three months; and
- > a person of good moral character.<sup>27</sup>

Immigrants who meet these requirements must apply for naturalization by filing an “Application for Naturalization” (Form N-400) with USCIS and submitting a \$680 fee, which includes the \$595 application fee and an \$85 biometric fee. USCIS is proposing to increase these fees by \$45, to \$640 plus the biometric fee.<sup>29</sup>

Once an application is submitted, USCIS schedules a biometrics appointment to collect an individual’s fingerprints, photograph, and/or signature. Working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, USCIS verifies identity and conducts background and security checks. After the background check is completed and the application has been reviewed, USCIS schedules an in-person interview with USCIS officers to determine the applicant’s eligibility to naturalize. The interview includes both an English and a civics test to assess the applicant’s ability to speak, read and write the English language and knowledge of U.S. government and history. If applicants fail either test at the initial interview, they can be retested in the portion they failed between 60 and 90 days from the date of the initial interview.<sup>30</sup> Finally, once USCIS approves the application for naturalization based on meeting the requirements set forth in the INA, the applicant must attend a ceremony and take the Oath of Allegiance to the United States, at which point they become U.S. citizens.<sup>31</sup>

## Barriers to Naturalization

Eligible immigrants face many barriers to naturalization, including the high cost of citizenship, age and other personal barriers, and unfamiliarity with the requirements to naturalize. The naturalization fee of \$680 is prohibitive for many low-income eligible immigrants. Current policy allows for fees to be waived for naturalization applicants who make below 150 percent of the poverty level. However, for many applicants whose income is just above that threshold, the \$680 fee is a barrier that may cause them to delay their acquisition of citizenship. In one survey, about 18 percent of Latino immigrant respondents cited financial and administrative barriers, such as the cost of gaining citizenship, as the main obstacles to naturalizing.<sup>32</sup> USCIS is proposing a partial fee waiver of 50 percent for applicants whose income is above 150 percent and up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. While significant, such a waiver still would mean that an individual earning \$24,000 (just over 200 percent of the federal poverty level in 2016) would have to pay \$725 to apply for naturalization.<sup>33</sup>

Data suggest that naturalization rates are responsive to price changes. In 2007, the last time a fee increase (from \$330 to \$595) took effect, a surge to about 1.4 million naturalization applications immediately preceded the increase and a steep decline followed it, to 500,000 applications in 2008. Research has shown that fee increases for naturalization also have had a significant impact on the composition of the population that naturalizes. An increase in the naturalization fee reduces the number of naturalized immigrants with less than a high school education, increases the number of years immigrants wait to become citizens and changes the national-origin breakdown of the naturalizing population.<sup>34</sup>

USCIS is almost entirely funded by immigration and naturalization fees. As a result, the naturalization fee in the United States is higher than in other countries with a long history of immigration.<sup>35</sup> Congress required that USCIS recover almost all of the costs for its services through fees immigrants pay. USCIS sets the fees at levels sufficient to cover not only the corresponding services, but also to fund operations for providing similar services to immigrant populations that are exempt from paying immigration and naturalization fees, including refugees and other recipients of humanitarian visas. This method of funding results in a higher fee for naturalization and other immigration services than would be warranted by the actual cost of processing the application.<sup>36</sup>

For elderly immigrants, the civics test and English requirements present significant hurdles to obtaining U.S. citizenship. The INA<sup>37</sup> provides an exemption from the English language requirement for people who have been permanent residents for at least 20 years and are age 50 and over, and to people who have been permanent residents for at least 15 years and are age 55 and over. Applicants who are age 65 or older and who have been permanent residents for 20 or more years also may receive special consideration regarding the civics requirement.<sup>38</sup> The aforementioned possibilities for exemptions from the English and civics tests make sense because elderly immigrants may have a harder time learning a new language and memorizing facts to pass the required history and civics portions of the naturalization exam. Unfortunately, these existing exemptions do not help elderly immigrants who migrated to the United States when they were older and who do not have more than 15 or 20 years of permanent residence in the country and extensive knowledge of the English language. As a result, age, English proficiency and other personal barriers continue to be hurdles for some eligible-to-naturalize immigrants.



In addition, on the other end of the age spectrum, eligible immigrants who graduated from high school in the United States and gain knowledge of U.S. history, government, civics and the English language are still required to take the citizenship test. This requirement seems unnecessary and results in processing delays.

Another common barrier is that many eligible immigrants are unfamiliar with the process and requirements to become a U.S. citizen. For many immigrants, navigating the complex naturalization process and eligibility requirements is a daunting task. A survey by a local network of immigration legal service providers in Boston found that 35 percent of respondents said that the lack of information on how to successfully complete a naturalization application was a top obstacle in the naturalization process. More recently, the public interest research firm Bendixen & Amadi found that there has not been a concerted effort to inform eligible LPRs about how to become citizens.<sup>39</sup> Researchers found that 61 percent of those eligible had not received any information about how to become a U.S. citizen. The lack of outreach has resulted in an information gap surrounding the naturalization process. Without federal and local programs to promote naturalization, unfamiliarity with the naturalization process discourages eligible immigrants from applying and becomes another major barrier.<sup>40</sup>

Unfamiliarity with the naturalization process also could lead a naturalization-eligible immigrant to unintentionally register to vote, which could lead to negative immigration consequences. New automatic voter registration laws are making this situation much more likely. For instance, in a state with such laws, permanent residents may unintentionally register to vote as they receive or renew a driver's license because they do not realize that they need to affirmatively *decline* to register to vote.

Under current law, an immigrant who falsely claims citizenship for any purpose or benefit under the INA or any federal or state law, even if unintentionally, is considered inadmissible to the United States and subject to deportation. It would be unfair and unduly harsh for permanent residents to be inadmissible and subject to deportation because a state Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) automatically registered them to vote and they had no intention to register or knowledge of having registered. Additionally, in situations where a permanent resident was automatically and unintentionally registered to vote at the DMV, USCIS should not deem this act of registering to vote as a negative factor in determining moral character.

In some instances, administrative barriers also hamper the naturalization process. The average USCIS processing time for a naturalization application is between five and eight months, a duration that eliminating administrative barriers could reduce.<sup>41</sup> In some USCIS districts, federal courts responsible for administering the Oath of Allegiance — the last step in the naturalization process — fail to hold a sufficient number of ceremonies to accommodate the large number of applicants, lengthening the naturalization process for many eligible immigrants.

The naturalization process is also hampered by insufficient data from USCIS. Immigration legal service providers could employ data, such as the exam passage rates or average number of fee waivers granted in a year, or aggregate data on primary reasons for denials, to determine how better

to assist eligible immigrants as they navigate the naturalization process. However, USCIS does not disclose such information.

Adopted children who were already 18 or older when the Child Citizenship Act (CCA)<sup>42</sup> took effect face a legislative barrier to naturalization. The CCA grants automatic citizenship to children adopted by U.S. citizen parents. However, the act granted automatic citizenship status only to adoptees who were under age 18 when the law went into effect on Feb. 27, 2001, in addition to meeting other requirements. Many adoptees who did not meet the requirements of the act or whose parents failed to apply for naturalization on their behalf became ineligible for U.S. citizenship. This omission has resulted in adopted children susceptible to deportation to a country they have never known.

## Helping Immigrants Become New Americans

A number of organizations work to help eligible immigrants overcome the barriers to naturalization. For example, the New Americans Campaign (NAC), a nonpartisan, national network of legal-service providers, faith-based organizations, businesses, foundations and community leaders has been working since 2011 to modernize and streamline access to naturalization services so that greater numbers of lawful permanent residents take the critical step to becoming American citizens. The Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC), which leads the NAC, provides trainings and technical assistance to organizations helping eligible immigrants go through the naturalization process. Among the ILRC's work, it publishes a practitioner's guide, *Naturalization and U.S. Citizenship: The Essential Legal Guide*, to disseminate best practices in providing access to naturalization services.

For the New Americans Campaign, 10 national partners including the ILRC collaborate on national strategy and implementation. The other nine partners are Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Los Angeles (Advancing Justice-LA), Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), the Immigration Advocates Network (IAN), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund (NALEO), the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the National Immigration Forum (Forum), the National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA), and Pro Bono Net (PBN). The 10 national partners bring together decades of experience in naturalization law, policy, technology and practice.

The ILRC and CLINIC provide legal training and support in naturalization law, and CLINIC also helps organizations gain Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) accreditation. Advancing Justice-LA, CLINIC, the ILRC, the IRC, NALEO and NPNA have extensive experience organizing naturalization workshops that provide low-cost, high-quality naturalization application services, including mega-workshops. These organizations provide support on how to deliver naturalization legal services to local organizations throughout the United States. In addition, the New Americans Campaign has developed toolkits and other materials on best practices in naturalization services.

National partners bring a multitude of specific programs and supports to the New Americans Campaign. Advancing Justice-LA and NALEO host year-round national, multilingual citizenship hotlines to answer questions about the naturalization process. NPNA heads Cities for Citizenship, a program to support immigrant legal services in cities, which has assisted more than 60 municipal leaders as they have developed naturalization programs. NCLR provides citizenship tools and



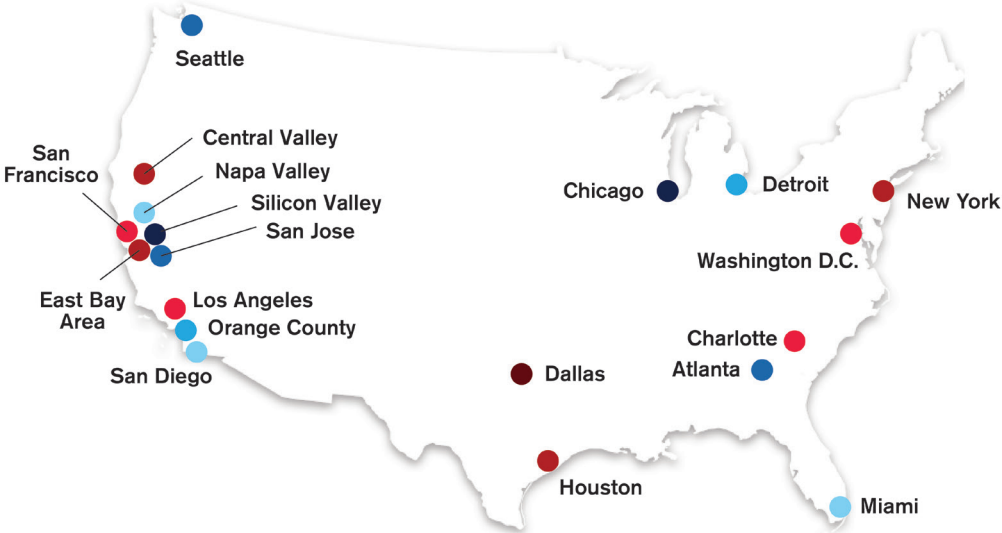
documents to help immigrants pass the naturalization test and develop the workforce skills they need to succeed in the economic environment.

Naturalization also helps immigrant employees become full contributors in the workplace and potentially leads to happier, more effective workers, which impacts business profitability. The Forum's *New American Workforce* program works with employers in eight cities to assist their eligible immigrant employees gain U.S. citizenship by providing access to citizenship assistance at the worksite. Through this program, employees attend classes and workshops offered onsite during employee breaks or before and after work hours. The classes and workshops provide an introduction to the citizenship process, including eligibility requirements, one-on-one assistance to complete the application for naturalization, and civics instruction. Some businesses even pay part of the naturalization application fee.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, the NAC ties together technology and citizenship assistance to help eligible immigrants navigate the naturalization process. IAN manages Citizenshipworks, an online, interactive tool to help low- and moderate-income immigrants become U.S. citizens. Citizenshipworks guides applicants safely through every step of their citizenship application, answers questions about their eligibility for naturalization, can connect applicants to free or low-cost assistance, helps the applicant better understand the naturalization process and prepares the applicant for the naturalization test.

The 10 national partners support local organizations throughout the United States. The NAC operates in the metropolitan areas of Atlanta, California's Central Valley, Charlotte, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, the San Francisco East Bay Area, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, Napa Valley, New York, Orange County, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose and the Silicon Valley, Seattle, and Washington, D.C., and has affiliates in additional regions. These NAC partners work with scores of nontraditional partners as well. These include government agencies (social service agencies, libraries, public school systems, mayors' offices); educational institutions (colleges, law schools); faith-based organizations; private businesses and unions; pro bono attorneys; and organizers. Local service providers host citizenship classes and workshops for naturalization-eligible people. The classes

**The New Americans Campaign Operates Across the Nation**



and workshops help large numbers of lawful permanent residents determine their eligibility for naturalization and complete their naturalization applications. In the NAC's first five years, partners helped more than 230,000 people complete naturalization applications. While efforts like these are very helpful, sound policy solutions would do even more to help more eligible-to-naturalize people overcome barriers to naturalization.

## Recommendations

The naturalization process can become more accessible to eligible immigrants through the implementation of policy changes. They include expanding the naturalization fee waiver and setting up fee caps for families, expanding exemptions for portions of the naturalization exam for elderly immigrants and young eligible immigrants who are already familiar with U.S. civics and the English language, better informing permanent residents of their eligibility for naturalization, streamlining the naturalization process, and ensuring that all adopted children of U.S. citizens can apply for naturalization.

**1. Make the Naturalization Process More Affordable.** USCIS is currently proposing to offer a partial, 50 percent waiver of the naturalization application fee (for a total cost of \$320, plus the \$85 biometric fee) for immigrants earning between 150 percent and 200 percent of the federal poverty level.<sup>44</sup> Still, more could be done to make the N-400 naturalization application fee affordable. For instance, there could be a fee cap for families or a family discount if multiple family members are naturalizing at the same time. In addition to the proposed partial fee waiver, the naturalization fee could be assessed on an income-based sliding scale. Such a sliding scale could take into account an area's cost of living. Congress also should appropriate funding for the processing of refugee and asylum applications, as well as other applications for which fees are waived. Congress, not immigrants applying for naturalization, should pay for the humanitarian benefits the government is providing to those fleeing persecution and harm.

**2. Expand Exemptions for Elderly Applicants.** Congress must expand partial waivers from the naturalization test for certain elderly applicants, many of whom may be unable to learn a new language or memorize civics facts for a test. Eligible immigrants who are older than 60 and have been living in the United States as permanent residents for at least 10 years, and those older than 65 who have been living in the United States as permanent residents for at least five years, should receive a waiver from the English requirement in the naturalization test. Eligible immigrants who are older than 75 and have been living in the United States as permanent residents for at least five years also should receive a waiver from the civics requirements in the naturalization test.

**3. Exempt Eligible Students from the Citizenship Test.** To streamline the citizenship process for certain applicants, Congress should provide an exemption from the citizenship test to lawful permanent residents who are able to demonstrate that they graduated from high school after completing academic grades six through 12 in the United States and that their curriculum reflects knowledge of U.S. history, government and civics, as well as the English language.

**4. Fund the Citizenship and Integration Grant Program.** Congress should appropriate at least \$10 million in funding for USCIS's immigrant integration and citizenship grant program. Since

the Citizenship and Integration Grant program began in 2009, it has awarded more than \$53 million through 262 competitive grants to help more than 122,000 permanent residents prepare for citizenship. Congress used to appropriate discretionary funds for the program, but USCIS has been forced to tap into funds collected from application fees for the past four years. Without discretionary funding, USCIS will have to continue the grant program at the cost of an additional surcharge to citizenship and other immigration applications.

**5. Ensure Federal Agencies Promote Naturalization.** Government agencies that serve lawful permanent residents should promote and provide information about the naturalization process. USCIS should be providing proactive notification of the process for applying for naturalization to all lawful permanent residents who have had their green card for five years. This notification must be clear about the benefits of citizenship, the naturalization process and where to get help applying, and it should encourage permanent residents to consider applying. Additionally, USCIS should develop and implement a media campaign promoting naturalization to raise awareness about the fee waiver, affirm the importance of becoming a U.S. citizen and urge eligible immigrants to take the step. Congress should appropriate funding for this media campaign. Other government agencies that serve lawful permanent residents should provide information about the naturalization process to the permanent residents they serve. This includes, for example, an outreach campaign by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) through which officers would provide naturalization information to eligible immigrants coming back from international travel through the ports of entry. One of the biggest barriers to citizenship is lack of awareness about requirements and how to apply. A sustained effort to reach and educate eligible immigrants will go a long way to removing that barrier.

**6. Support Public-Private Partnerships on Naturalization.** Congress should permit and encourage a public-private partnership between USCIS and private donors to encourage naturalization. These partnerships would financially support activities that encourage and help immigrants to naturalize.

**7. Increase USCIS' Data Transparency.** USCIS must improve agency policy related to immigration data transparency and the naturalization process by providing more information about the naturalization exam passage rates by fiscal year and USCIS district; data on the annual number of fee waivers accepted for the N-400 Application for Naturalization; more detailed information on the cost breakdown used to determine individual fee levels, including direct and indirect costs; and other data points such as primary denial reasons that would help federal agencies, state agencies and service providers understand and address barriers to naturalization.

**8. Provide Reprieve for Immigrants Who Register to Vote.** With the trend toward automatic voter registration laws, it is easier for immigrants who may not be familiar with these processes to unintentionally register to vote. People who do so but refrain from voting should not face any negative immigration consequences when there is no clear and convincing evidence that the individual is attempting to engage in fraudulent activity. USCIS should not use the automatic voter registration as a negative factor in determining if the naturalization applicant can demonstrate good moral character. An immigrant who falsely claims citizenship unintentionally through an automatic voter registration process should not be considered inadmissible to the United States and should not be subject to

removal. Furthermore, if a permanent resident unintentionally registered to vote, such voter registration should not be considered a *per se* false claim to citizenship if he or she refrained from voting. He or she should not suffer any negative immigration consequences that are imposed with a false claim to citizenship, including inadmissibility, deportability, or a lack of good moral character because such false claim was not for any purpose or benefit under the INA or any federal or state law.

**9. Reduce Delays in the Naturalization Process.** Administrative delays in the naturalization process unnecessarily prevent eligible immigrants from becoming citizens. USCIS should review which steps in the process are causing unnecessary delays and develop a plan to address these delays. USCIS also should identify which of these delays would require legislative action to solve. For example, delays by federal courts in the USCIS districts where they are responsible for administering the Oath of Allegiance ceremonies may require congressional action to expedite the process for holding oath ceremonies.

**10. Ensure All Adopted Children Can Naturalize.** Congress should ensure that adopted children who were already 18 or older when the Child Citizenship Act (CCA) of 2000 took effect are able to apply for U.S. citizenship.<sup>45</sup> Many adoptees who did not meet the requirements of the CCA or whose parents failed to apply for naturalization on their behalf became ineligible to become U.S. citizens. This omission has resulted in adopted children susceptible to deportation to a country they have never known.

## Conclusion

The United States is home to 8.8 million immigrants who are eligible to naturalize — more than the population of Virginia or Arizona.<sup>46</sup> While this number continues to grow every year, fewer than 800,000 have naturalized each year for the last six. Many who desire to do so face significant barriers on the road to naturalization, including the high cost of applying for citizenship, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the naturalization process, and other obstacles.

Our country should ensure that the naturalization process is more accessible to eligible immigrants because it is important for the nation's economic and civic health. Studies show that naturalization provides significant economic benefits to our nation and helps immigrants reach their full potential and contribute fully to their communities.

Making the naturalization process more affordable can address one of the most significant barriers. Informing more LPRs about the naturalization process would increase the number of individuals who become citizens. Finally, administrative processing delays in the naturalization process should be addressed.

Naturalization is an important part of the American story. Almost all Americans have an ancestor and/or a relative who was an immigrant. Much of our country's success stems from our ability to incorporate immigrants into our society and our willingness to embrace people who are different from ourselves and consider the new ideas and approaches they bring. Active and informed new citizens strengthen our communities and our democracy. We should continue to encourage more eligible people to become U.S. citizens.

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## Notes

- 1 "Table 22, Persons Naturalized by State or Territory of Residence: FY 2005 to 2014," *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2014 Naturalizations*, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (1 June 2016): <https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2014-naturalizations>.
- 2 "Table 1, Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status: FYs 1820 to 2014," *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2014 Lawful Permanent Residents*, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (1 June 2016): <https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2014-lawful-permanent-residents>.
- 3 A "lawful permanent resident" (LPR) is a person who has been granted permanent legal residence in the United States. LPRs may live and work permanently in the United States, own property, join certain branches of the armed forces and apply to become U.S. citizens if they meet the requirements for naturalization. "U.S. Lawful Permanent Residents: 2013," U.S. Department of Homeland Security (10 September 2015): <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/us-lawful-permanent-residents-2013>.
- 4 Pastor, Manuel, Patrick Oakford and Jared Sanchez, "Profiling the Eligible to Naturalize," Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration and Center for American Progress (24 November 2014), 2: [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/Report\\_Profiling-the-Eligible-to-Naturalize.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/Report_Profiling-the-Eligible-to-Naturalize.pdf).
- 5 In order of states with the highest number of naturalization-eligible persons: California, Texas, New York, Florida, New Jersey, Illinois, Massachusetts, Arizona, Washington and Georgia. *Ibid.*, 312.
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- 21 According to our calculations, an increase in individual earnings for a new American with an average annual income of \$28,797 by 8 to 11 percent would mean an additional \$2,304 to \$3,168. *Ibid.*, 23.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 1-2.
- 23 "Top 5 Benefits of Citizenship," New Americans Campaign (16 September 2015): <http://newamericanscampaign.org/news/top-5-benefits-of-citizenship>.
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25 Immigrants are also eligible to naturalize if they are a permanent resident of the United States for at least three years and married to a U.S. citizen and/or a member of the U.S. Armed Forces and permanent resident at the time of the naturalization interview with USCIS.

26 "Continuous residence" means that the applicant has maintained constant residence in the United States for the required period of time. Absences of more than six months but less than one year may disrupt an applicant's continuous residence unless the applicant is eligible for an exemption based on a number of factors. Absences in excess of one year will disrupt an applicant's continuous residence unless the applicant can prove he or she engaged in qualifying employment abroad. "Continuous Residence and Physical Requirements for Naturalization," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (1 June 2015): <https://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/citizenship-through-naturalization/continuous-residence-and-physical-presence-requirements-naturalization>.

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28 USCIS released a proposed Fee Schedule on May 4, 2016, that would increase the naturalization fee for Form N-400 by \$45 to \$725, including the biometric fee. The Fee Schedule also proposes a partial waiver of the naturalization fee that would allow applicants with a family income between 150 and 200 percent of the federal poverty level to pay only half of the fee. "U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Fee Schedule; A Proposed Rule," *Federal Register*, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (4 May 2016): <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2016/05/04/2016-10297/us-citizenship-and-immigration-services-fee-schedule>.

29 *Ibid.*, 26934.

30 "The Naturalization Test," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (25 June 2016): <https://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/naturalization-test>.

31 "A Guide to Naturalization," 31-39.

32 Gonzalez-Barrera, Ana, Mark Hugo Lopez, Jeffrey S. Passel and Paul Taylor, "The Path Not Taken: Two-Thirds of Legal Mexican Immigrants Are Not U.S. Citizens," Pew Hispanic Center, Pew Research Center (4 February 2013): <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2013/02/04/the-path-not-taken/>.

33 "U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Fee Schedule, *supra* note 28, at 26934.

34 Pastor, Sanchez, Ortiz and Scoggins, "Nurturing Naturalization," 4-16.

35 To compare conditions across various countries based on the cost of naturalization, select the following: Indicators -> Permanent Residence -> Conditions for Acquisition for Status -> Cost of Application. "Migrant Integration Policy Index 2015," Migrant Integration Policy Index (2015): <http://www.mipex.eu/play/>.

36 *Ibid.*, 26906-26907.

37 Immigration and Nationality Act, 82nd U.S. Congress (1952): <https://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/SLB/HTML/SLB/act.html>.

38 "Exceptions & Accommodations," *supra* note 10.

39 In 2015, the National Immigration Forum, a New Americans Campaign partner charged with communications for the NAC, hired Bendixen & Amandi, a highly respected public interest research firm, to carry out focus groups and conduct a nationally representative poll to study lawful permanent residents (LPRs) and measure their attitudes toward citizenship, identify what motivates them to naturalize and determine the most effective messaging strategies. The project consisted of qualitative research (six pairs of in-language focus groups consisting of LPRs eligible for citizenship for a total of 128 individuals) and quantitative research (a national survey in native languages representative of LPRs who are eligible to become U.S. citizens, which yielded 740 interviews). Specific ethnic groups were included to provide a comprehensive look into the perspective of LPRs across the United States. Those groups were Hispanics (Mexican and non-Mexican), Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese and Filipino. The poll's margin of error is plus or minus 3.6 percent. Those surveyed were asked approximately 35 questions, and demographic information (age, sex, country of origin, household income, etc.) was collected. Among the survey questions were ones on participants' uninformed perception of the process, as well as more specific questions on why participants had not undertaken the naturalization process and opinions on the process.

40 "Overcoming Obstacles to Citizenship: How Group Processing Can Better Serve Immigrant Communities," Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (9 January 2013), 6-7: [https://miracoalition.org/images/stories/pdf/mira\\_overcoming\\_obstacles\\_1-9-13.pdf](https://miracoalition.org/images/stories/pdf/mira_overcoming_obstacles_1-9-13.pdf).

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42 Child Citizenship Act of 2000, 106th U.S. Congress (2000): <https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/house-bill/2883>.

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44 The Fee Schedule released by USCIS on May 4, 2016, proposes a partial waiver of the naturalization fee that would allow applicants with a family income between 150 and 200 percent of the federal poverty level to pay only half of the fee (\$325, not including the \$85 biometric fee). "U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Fee Schedule," U.S. Department of Homeland Security (4 May 2016): <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-05-04/pdf/2016-10297.pdf>

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