



Immigrants to Citizens



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A Role for State Legislators

By Ann Morse and Aida Orgocka

At the dawn of the 21st century, the United States is revisiting a challenge from the dawn of the 20th century—how to welcome, integrate, and make citizens of large numbers of new immigrants. Approximately one million immigrants are arriving each year and resettling in a broad array of new communities in addition to the traditional gateway cities of New York, Miami, Chicago and Los Angeles. As we did a century ago, when 8.9 million immigrants arrived during the last peak of immigration, Americans are wondering if the nation can make new Americans of these newcomers. Then, the nation launched an “Americanization” movement, involving federal, state and municipal governments, businesses, labor unions, schools and social organizations, to teach newcomers English and American values. Today, however, few similar programs exist at the federal or state level, and some public leaders are suggesting a renewed focus on helping new immigrants understand their rights and responsibilities in U.S. civil society. In its final report to Congress in 1997, the bipartisan U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform defined naturalization as “... the most visible manifestation of civic incorporation as well as a crucial component of the Americanization process.” The Commission urged federal, state, and local governments to do more to help immigrants integrate into U.S. society, by “... developing capacities to orient both newcomers and receiving communities; educating newcomers in both English language skills and our core civic values; and revisiting the meaning and conferral of citizenship to ensure the integrity of the naturalization process.”

Naturalization goes far beyond providing benefits for new citizens; it ensures the vitality of this nation through the inclusion of new members and through cohesion of our nation's peoples.

—The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, 1997

One in nine U.S. residents today is foreign-born. According to the 2000 census, 40 percent of the nation's 32 million foreign-born residents have become naturalized U.S. citizens. The Urban Institute estimates another 8 million legal immigrants are eligible to naturalize (see table 1, Naturalized and Eligible Population, by state.) State legislators have encouraged immigrants to naturalize, to become registered voters, and in general, to become active citizens in our democratic system. In the late 1990s, about a dozen states launched state-funded citizenship assistance programs. In addition, interested policymakers and community organizations crafted partnerships to encourage a range of civic engagement activities beyond naturalization and voter registration, to voter education and candidate forums, to visiting state legislatures and becoming active in local town hall meetings, to identifying new citizens to serve on civic committees and state-local commissions. Many immigrants have even made the leap from new citizen to elected representative.

This report provides a brief introduction to how immigrants become U.S. citizens, and beyond the naturalization process, how they become “American” and active participants in civil society. The paper revisits examples of government efforts to encourage naturalization and adaptation during the Americanization movement of the early 20th century and provides examples of today's programs. Research comprised a review of NCSL publications and NCSL's legislative database, as well as interviews with state officials and nonprofit organizations in representative states with high immigration populations and strong citizenship programs.

Table 1. Naturalized and Eligible Population, by State: March 2002 CPS				
State/Jurisdiction	Eligible to Naturalize (000s)	Naturalized (000s)	Percent of Naturalized Eligible	Soon to be Eligible (000s)
Total	7,911	11,146	58%	2,661
Major Destinations	5,914	7,663	56%	1,758
California	2,695	3,018	53%	717
New York	1,133	1,673	60%	282
Texas	766	727	49%	263
Florida	607	1,181	66%	219
New Jersey	373	592	61%	134
Illinois	340	473	58%	142
New Growth States	981	1,474	60%	419
Arizona	183	223	55%	36
Washington	114	207	65%	82
North Carolina	69	71	50%	36
Georgia	69	139	67%	31
Nevada	69	123	64%	18
Oregon	63	79	56%	35
Colorado	61	87	59%	51
Minnesota	47	88	65%	7
Utah	39	40	51%	12
Oklahoma	31	33	52%	8
Arkansas	30	20	40%	3
Tennessee	28	58	67%	17
Iowa	28	32	53%	19
South Carolina	27	48	64%	8
Idaho	25	17	41%	5
Kansas	24	46	65%	15
Indiana	19	59	76%	5
Nebraska	18	25	58%	5
Kentucky	13	24	65%	13
Alabama	12	25	67%	7
Mississippi	6	10	60%	5
Delaware	4	18	80%	2
All Other States	1,016	2,009	66%	484
Massachusetts	179	278	61%	89
Pennsylvania	115	225	66%	65
Michigan	115	269	70%	53
Maryland	98	220	69%	51
Virginia	84	203	71%	65
Ohio	83	140	63%	44
Connecticut	63	173	73%	18
Wisconsin	45	77	63%	20
New Mexico	40	39	49%	10
Hawaii	39	99	72%	14
Rhode Island	35	48	57%	9
Missouri	26	63	71%	8
Louisiana	23	48	68%	18
New Hampshire	17	30	64%	2
District of Columbia	14	21	60%	5
Maine	14	17	55%	2
Alaska	9	25	73%	4
Vermont	5	10	68%	1
West Virginia	3	9	73%	0
Montana	3	5	68%	1
South Dakota	2	5	69%	2
North Dakota	2	2	48%	3
Wyoming	1	5	79%	1

Urban Institute tabulations of modified CPS. Eligibles include all immigrants over age 18 who have been in the country long enough to be eligible to naturalize, not just the post-1975 arrivals included in the "currently eligible." Naturalized population includes all naturalized immigrants over age 18, not just the "recently naturalized."

Source: Reprinted with permission from the Urban Institute's *Trends in Naturalization*, September 2003.

Citizenship and “Americanization”

Federal law and regulations outline a series of requirements for acquiring U.S. citizenship. U.S. citizenship can be gained by legal immigrants with good moral character after five years of residence and demonstrated proficiency in English and civics (see box on “Becoming a U.S. Citizen”). In addition, the immigrant must show an “... attachment to the principles of the U.S. Constitution and be disposed to the good order and happiness of the United States.” This includes a belief in representative democracy, the ideals in the Bill of Rights, and the political processes of the United States.

Complementing the legal, administrative steps in becoming a U.S. citizen, the nation has long promoted the idea of becoming “American” and assuring that newcomers adopt the language and norms of their new community. The imagery includes the popular “melting pot” concept of assimilation and more recent metaphors of accommodation, a balancing of old and new cultures: the salad bowl or mosaic, or, in an effort to capture the evolving ethnic dynamics of assimilation, a “kaleidoscope” of complex and continually changing interrelationships.

In the early 20th century, the United States undertook a broad-based campaign to reinforce America’s national identity by assimilating new arrivals, known as the “Americanization” movement. The movement was derived from two separate forces, progressive and nationalistic. Groups such as settlement house workers sought to help immigrants adapt, while other groups were concerned about “protecting the national character” from foreigners.

State and federal governments, private groups, and businesses all undertook programs to instill American values of liberty, democracy and equal opportunity among immigrants. For example, in 1907, New Jersey passed legislation to support English and civics classes for the foreign-born. In New York, a Bureau of Industries and Immigration was established in 1910 to promote the effective employment of immigrants and their development as useful citizens. In 1914, the Federal Bureau of Naturalization sponsored citizenship classes in the public schools, and reported that 2,240 communities were conducting classes by 1919. Social clubs, labor unions, and businesses also supported language and civics classes for newcomers in the early 20th century.

In the years after World War I and in reaction to the fear of communism, the Americanization movement evolved into an extreme phase, calling for the deportation of radicals, restrictions on the use of non-English languages, and intolerance of political and cultural differences. At this point, the movement lost support from progressive groups, and Americanization became seen as a one-model-fits all, requiring conformity rather than adaptation.

Americans today, as in previous generations, are worried that newcomers will not successfully acculturate and absorb democratic ideals. Although most immigrants value a democratic system, they may have limited knowledge about how a democracy works. Compounding the problem are the added dimensions of isolation, dislocation, cultural and language barriers, and lack of knowledge or access to civic engagement and direct political participation. However, the concept of Americanization seems to be enjoying a renaissance, as the public debates what can be done to improve the involvement and participation of new Americans in civic life.

Becoming a U.S. Citizen

Immigrants must meet many requirements before they can “naturalize,” or become United States citizens. These include qualifying factors such as age, immigration status, residency, English proficiency, knowledge of United States civics, and sound moral character.

Age, Immigration Status, and Residency

To naturalize, an immigrant must meet three general requirements:

- 1) The applicant must be at least 18 years of age;
- 2) be a legal permanent resident (green card holder) in the U.S.; and,
- 3) have established residency in the United States (five years of continuous residence for legal permanent residents; three years for spouses of U.S. citizens).

English and Civics

The applicant must demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking English, and knowledge of U.S. history and government during the interview with an INS official or by taking an INS-approved test in English. Any test may be given in the applicant’s native language or the applicant exempted from the English literacy requirement in the following circumstances:

- 1) Applicants 50 years or older who have had a green card for at least 20 years;
- 2) Applicants 55 years or older who have had a green card for at least 15 years;
- 3) Applicants 65 years or older with 20 years of residence may be exempted from the English test and may take a simpler version of the civics test in the applicant’s language of choice; or
- 4) Applicants that are disabled.

Moral Character

An applicant for naturalization must show that he or she has been a person of good moral character during the residency period, defined as the current standard of average citizens in the community. Grounds for ineligibility include: habitual drunkenness; polygamy; conviction for prostitution, narcotics, or other criminal acts; gambling; perjury; jail time greater than 180 days; failure to support a dependent; membership in the Communist Party; terrorist acts; lying to gain immigration benefits; and persecution of anyone because of race, religion, national origin, political opinion, or social group.

The applicant must file an application (Form N-400), along with a fingerprint card, biographic information, photographs, and a filing fee of \$260.

Once approved for citizenship, the new citizen takes an oath of allegiance, and promises to support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States, to give up allegiances to other countries and to serve the country when required.

Naturalized citizens have the right and responsibility to vote in local, state and federal elections, to serve on juries, and to run for public office (except for the office of President and Vice-President of the United States). Citizens have the right to public benefits, all types of employment, and preferential treatment to sponsor relatives under immigration laws.

State Citizenship Programs

In the mid-1990s, several states launched efforts to encourage and assist legal immigrants to become citizens. Most were short-term initiatives intended to help legal immigrants adversely affected by the 1996 federal welfare law's restrictions on federal public benefits. Below are examples of program components and successes in Massachusetts, Illinois, and New Jersey, and a local government example from Santa Clara County, California.

The **Massachusetts** legislature passed a three-year, \$2 million initiative with overwhelming support in 1997 to fund a Citizenship Assistance Program (CAP) for low-income immigrant residents. The program matched state funds with contributions from private organizations, foundations and federal agencies. A statewide network of more than 100 community-based organizations provided English and civics classes as well as assistance with citizenship applications. A 24-hour hotline was created to provide information in nine languages on services such as civics and English classes, application assistance, and legal referrals. More than 22,000 Massachusetts residents benefited from the program, and more than 11,000 immigrants have pledged their allegiance as new citizens of the United States. The target population included the elderly and disabled, prompting innovative strategies such as conversation circles, stress-reduction techniques and a mix of audiotapes, flash cards and special interview curricula. When asked their reasons for becoming U.S. citizens, most immigrants in the program said that they wanted to vote and help their community. Students participated in Immigrant's Day to get a first-hand look at how government works, meet with legislators and discuss policies important to their community.

Through the Refugee and Immigrant Citizenship Initiative, **Illinois'** Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Services expended about \$12 million over the last seven years, contracting with 32 community-based organizations (CBOs) to provide lessons in US history, civics, and instruction in English language. The CBOs have served more than 90,000 individuals. These contracts serve members of the community through education and by stimulating civic participation, and provide the CBOs with experience both in navigating the governmental contract process and in building ties and credibility to the community through provision of service.

The **New Jersey** Citizenship Campaign was a statewide naturalization effort led by a collaborative partnership of community-based organizations and state and federal agencies. The campaign began in 1997 with support from the Governor and legislature, funded originally at \$2 million and later increased to \$3 million. The CBOs provided an in kind match of another \$3 million for a total program budget of \$6 million. The campaign initially targeted low-income, elderly and disabled lawful permanent residents and those eligible for New Jersey's State Food Stamp Program. More than 20 nonprofit CBOs participated and provided the following naturalization services: English language and civics/history instruction, INS interview preparation, customized classes for homebound elderly and disabled immigrants, and legal services and assistance in

573,000 New Citizens in 2002

The top 10 countries of origin, accounting for half of those naturalizing, were Mexico (76,531), Vietnam (36,835), India (33,774), the People's Republic of China (32,018), the Philippines (30,487), Korea (17,307), the Dominican Republic (15,591), Jamaica (13,973), Poland (12,823) and Ukraine (12,110).

Top 10 cities. These metropolitan areas accounted for almost half of all naturalizations: New York, N.Y. (81,421); Los Angeles, Calif. (55,892); Chicago, Ill. (30,808); Houston Texas (19,641); Miami, Fla. (18,270); Orange County, Calif. (15,985); Oakland, Calif. (14,976), San Jose, Calif. (13,805), San Diego, Calif. (13,023) and San Francisco, Calif. (12,723).

Note: In November 2002, the functions of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the U.S. Department of Justice were merged into the new U.S. Department of Homeland Security; citizenship services are handled by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2002.

filing naturalization applications. Other support services, such as interpreter assistance and transportation to classes and INS interviews, were also provided. The New Jersey Immigration Policy Network (NJIPN) reports that ending in March 2000, the campaign provided services to 12,000 individuals (exceeding their target of 10,000) and resulted in more than 7,100 applications for citizenship.

Santa Clara County established a citizenship initiative in 1996, committing \$250,000 annually to fund semi-annual free citizenship days in 18 languages and to provide outreach to underserved immigrant communities. As a result, over 60,000 low-income immigrants have received assistance and more than 16,500 have become United States citizens.

English as a Second Language (ESL) and Civics Classes

In 2000, Congress created a new program for integrated English literacy and civics education for immigrants and other limited-English proficient populations, now funded at \$70 million through the U.S. Department of Education. Sixty-five percent of the funds are allocated based on a state's share of immigrant population on a 10-year average and 35 percent of the funds are allocated to states with recent growth in immigration (based on a three-year average). The program provided \$6.3 million in demonstration grants to nonprofit organizations nationwide, and evaluations showed significant impact on the lives of immigrant communities served by the program. In addition, states and localities support English language and civics training for naturalization, as in the examples below.

California approaches English-learning in competency-based formats. Students can use the skills gained to achieve basic life skill needs, enhance employment and career opportunities, obtain citizenship, progress to vocational or academic programs, and function in English at high cognitive levels. The state offers ESL-Citizenship programs in day, evening, and weekend formats, as well as via cable television and other distance learning strategies in some locations. Citizenship classes offer students instruction in history, geography, and government to prepare students for the citizenship test and INS interview.

The **Maryland** Office for New Americans (MONA) follows a similar approach. It funds participatory English and civics classes where students are asked to explore the different service agencies and report on the information gleaned in their own visits to these services.

Through funding from state and private foundations, in 2001 the **Illinois** New American Project offered citizenship and ESL classes that helped 10,000 students, of which 4,000 could navigate easily through the INS bureaucracy. The Coalition of Limited English Speaking Elderly in Chicago developed and tested an innovative curriculum on daily life with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Students from Bosnia, Cambodia, China, India and Korea learned to communicate in English and can now participate in English conversations with family members, grandchildren and community members. The elderly decreased their social isolation and increased their civic participation while they solved real-life problems and learned about their neighborhood and city.

English language and citizenship classes, however, remain underfunded and fail to reach a considerable number of America's newcomers. There are few language and civics programs at either the federal or state level, and the limited programs that exist face cuts as states grapple

with dropping revenues and budget deficits. States have had to close cumulative budget gaps of \$200 billion over the last three years. Because of the limited resources, these programs fail to reach out to prospective citizens. For example, a study by the New York Immigration Coalition observed that although currently there are one million immigrants in the state who need to take English classes, there are only 50,000 slots available.

Beyond Naturalization

Policymakers and community organizations crafted partnerships to encourage a range of civic engagement activities, from registering to vote and turning out on election day, to visiting state legislatures and becoming active in local town hall meetings, and identifying new citizens to serve on civic committees and state-local commissions. And, many immigrants themselves have made the leap from new citizen to elected representative—more than 100 serve in state legislatures today.

Today's new Americans are learning about their rights and responsibilities in hands-on activities. Groups in various states organize a day visit to the State Capitol, giving residents and prospective citizens an opportunity to see first hand how the U.S. political system works. For example, the **Massachusetts** Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA), a multiethnic coalition, convenes community-based organizations, immigrants and activists from around the state to show their support for immigrant issues and to meet with state legislators about the needs of immigrant and refugee communities. In 2002, 1200 people participated in the 6th Annual Immigrants' Day at the State House, representing immigrant communities from different religions, cultures, and countries of origin. Issues included support for the citizenship assistance program, funding for Massachusetts' interpreter law, adult basic education, and restoration of federal immigrant benefits. Refugees and immigrants learn about the legislative process and educate their state legislators about their communities' contributions.

The **Illinois** Immigrant Policy Project, a needs assessment project supported by state and private funding, launched four workgroups on health and human services, education, employment and economic development, and immigration law. The workgroups developed recommendations to the state to expedite immigrant integration into Illinois communities and address the needs of low-income immigrants. The reports were released in March 2003 at a statewide "Summit on Refugee and Immigrant Policy in Illinois," attended by more than 600 individuals.

In **New Jersey**, the coordination established among public and private agencies for the 1997-2000 citizenship campaign helped them respond to the needs of New Jersey victims of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center. Federal, state and local agencies worked with community-based and grassroots organizations, as well as legal, health care and social service providers, labor groups, educators, and others.

In **North Carolina**, the Senate President created an Office for Hispanic and Latino Affairs to act as a liaison with the Latino community and to improve outreach and education. The Governor's Office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs is working to increase participation of Latinos to serve on state and local boards and commissions and matches a database of qualified candidates to weekly postings of open positions.

The Role of Nongovernmental and Community Based Organizations

Nongovernmental and community based organizations have stepped forward to provide services that complement States' work with funding from private donors and foundations.

In **Illinois**, the Coalition for Asian, African, European and Latino Immigrants (CAAELI) brings together 20 agencies serving ethnic communities. CAAELI provides integrated English literacy and civics education to immigrants and non-English speakers, and encourages them to become civic leaders. In 2002, they brought 300 immigrants to the state capitol to educate legislators about their communities and to support immigrant services. The legislature nearly doubled the Governor's request, from \$2.5 million to \$4.15 million.

The **Iowa-Nebraska** Immigrant Rights Project fosters a public dialogue about the impact of new immigration to the region. The main goals of the project are to celebrate immigrant contributions to the region, build inclusive communities and support reform of federal immigration law. The Network currently has 7 chapters meeting in the various regions of Iowa and Nebraska. The network provides training on leadership development, worker rights, eligibility for public benefits, voting, and media relations.

The **Northern California Citizenship Project** was originally established in May 1997 as a short-term response to the immigration provisions of the 1996 federal welfare reform law. The first phase of activities involved 70 collaborating agencies in 12 counties and assisted over 45,000 immigrants in the citizenship process. In January 2000, the project shifted its focus to support efforts that involve newly naturalized citizens and other immigrants in civic life. Some of its noteworthy activities include *Mobilize the Immigrant Vote! Campaign 2002*, providing mini-grants to design, organize and implement a series of training, technical assistance, and networking opportunities for 14 diverse organizations to strengthen the effectiveness of their voter education and mobilization activities. Together, the participating organizations reached over 38,000 immigrant and new citizen constituents through various forms of educational outreach.

The Refugee Women's Leadership Project is a community collaborative effort that increases the leadership opportunities of African and Middle Eastern refugee women living in Baltimore, **Maryland**. It collaborates with Advocates for the Survivors of Torture and Trauma, American Red Cross, Baltimore Medical System and Tressler Refugee and Immigration Services to create strong resource networks by developing and building on the skills refugee women bring with them to this country. Refugee women involved in the project serve as resources to the newly arrived and others in the refugee community.

Conclusion

U.S. immigration in the decade of the 1990s reached 13 million, dramatically exceeding the last peak of immigration in the 1900s when immigration arrivals numbered 9 million. Naturalization rates have also increased dramatically in the past decade. According to federal statistics, naturalizations exceeded 300,000 only twice between 1908-1990, in 1943 and 1944. Since 1990, naturalizations have exceeded 300,000 in every year, except 1992.

In 2002, more than 573,000 immigrants became naturalized citizens. Naturalization applications rose sharply in the 1990s due to several factors, according to the INS (now USCIS):

a mandatory replacement program for green cards led some to consider naturalization; more than 2.7 million immigrants became eligible for citizenship after the 1986 immigration reform law; and still others naturalized in response to 1996 federal legislation restricting benefits for noncitizens.

The high number of applications has led to a processing backlog. At the end of 2002, the backlog was more than 623,000, with a waiting time of one to two years from application to naturalization. The absorption of INS into the newly formed Department of Homeland Security, along with new program demands related to border enforcement and antiterrorism activities, also contributed to the slowdown in processing of citizenship applications.

The backlogs and recent budget shortfalls present a dilemma for policymakers who wish to assist new immigrants become citizens and adapt to American culture. Although few federal or state programs currently exist and English/civics classes are oversubscribed, more naturalization programs could merely exacerbate the naturalization backlog, and discourage would-be citizens.

However, the programs described in this report go beyond the act of naturalization to promoting knowledge of democratic ideals and involvement in civic activities. In California, home to the largest number of the nation's immigrants, a recent state report found that "newcomers to California are often unaware of how they can participate and what is expected of them as responsible community members." The report, by California's "Little Hoover" Commission, recommends that the state encourage citizenship, and that immigrants become actively involved in local civic affairs through public, volunteer, and community organizations.

In addition, a number of immigrants have made the leap from new citizen to elected representative—more than 100 serve in state legislatures today. Their commitment to tackling socio-economic issues such as poverty, housing, and education springs from their lived experiences of belonging to immigrant communities. Because of their experiences in bridging minority communities to the mainstream, these legislators may bring new perspectives on prevailing practices and thus help sustain and develop democratic processes.

The expectations for new Americans range from basic proficiency in English language and knowledge of U.S. civics to their full engagement in civil society. Though financial resources for citizenship may be scarce, state legislators have found ways to bring their leadership and expertise to bear in educating new Americans and encouraging them to add their skills to the nation's civic life. The uniquely American approach to national identity, through commitment to democratic ideals and constitutional principles, makes this country one of the most successful multiethnic nations in history.

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