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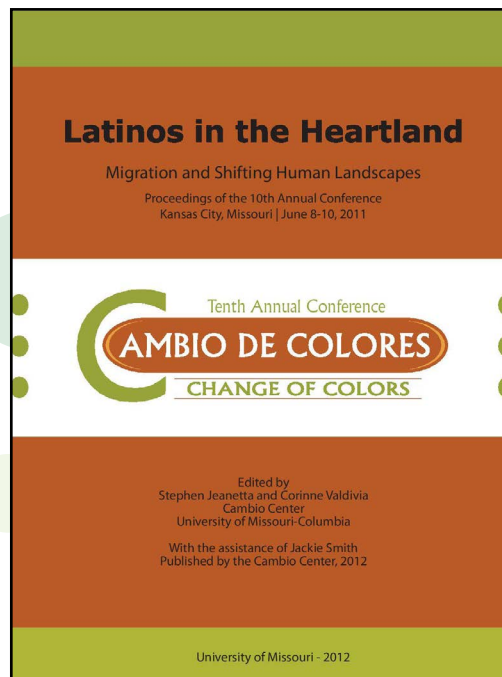
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Naturalization: The Official Integration

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send a message and have the power create an environment where immigrants are incorporated into or marginalized and excluded from mainstream services and society.

State policies regarding immigration issues are also connected to, and have implications for, the growing native-born Latino/a populations in many Midwestern states. Exclusionary immigration policies suggest a resistance to the increasing racial/ethnic diversity found in many of these states. This resistance is concerning given the demographic analyses that predict that the Midwest will continue to experience increasing diversity in the coming years fueled primarily by a quickly growing Latino/a population.

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► Naturalization: The Official Integration

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Abstract

While the nation has focused on the border and questions about the undocumented, the local population of both immigrants and the receiving community experience the issue of newcomers by their integration, participation levels in various civic organizations and impact on the political process. Often neglected is the importance of naturalization and the pathways toward it. This presentation explores the concept of citizenship, its benefits and the barriers immigrants face when attempting to naturalize. Who facilitates the naturalization process and how? What is the role of the federal government and what is

the role of local providers? Emerging efforts across the country will be included as encouraging signs of growing attention to the agenda of increasing levels of naturalization.

Introduction

With 37 million foreign-born individuals living within the U.S., questions of national identity, affiliation and integration become more urgent. Approximately eight million eligible immigrants have not yet naturalized. While the overall naturalization rate has increased, the roles of the receiving community, public institutions, educators, labor unions, CBO's and ethnic organizations warrant examination in service delivery, public awareness, civic engagement, and promoting the value of citizenship. Moreover, the federal government needs to play a key role in centralizing, coordinating and supporting efforts across intergovernmental agencies and drive a highly visible and valued campaign in citizenship promotion as central to American economic, democratic and strategic interests.

“Immigration is by definition a gesture of faith in social mobility. Immigration gave every old American a standard by which to judge how far he had come and every new American a realization of how far he might go. It reminded every American, old and new, that change is the essence of life, and that American society is a process, not a conclusion.” – President John F. Kennedy

Naturalization and Democracy

Witnessing a naturalization ceremony, when new Americans earn the full rights and responsibilities as citizens, by taking the oath of allegiants to the United States, is one of the most uplifting moments. It is a monumental step in immigrant integration, one that invites immigrants to fully participate in our civic and political system. It is also one that reminds us that our nation is ever growing and changing and our democracy ever maturing. However, naturalization is not an isolated event. It takes a cross-sector effort of education, civic engagement and public awareness to streamline the naturalization process and integration pathways as a whole.

To understand naturalization in the context of the national agenda, one needs to appreciate that the course of history has been in the direction of empowerment of the marginalized, African Americans, women, newcomers, to become fully part of America's democratic republic. Higher levels of participation in the nation and its civic functions facilitate the essential nature of a democracy built on shared power and shared laws. However, our republic is equally challenged when significant segments of the population are excluded from decision-making institutions. While often overlooked in the current debates regarding immigration, the United States is still a young nation and the nature of the democracy is never a settled matter. Rather, democracy evolves and is at risk of neglect. Nations build their identity with a variety of common elements, from the symbolic ingredients of the flag and anthem to the substantive issues of a shared constitution and laws. The degree of shared life by all residents is key to sustaining the democratic enterprise. One only need to recall the riots of Paris in previous years to see the danger of sustained second-class populations who feel excluded or frustrated by the absence of national inclusion. Integration of immigrants is a shared task of both the receiving society and the immigrant themselves, working toward a common life with mutual concerns, respect and opportunities.

High levels of legal permanent residents, not yet naturalized, pose challenges for the future as increased numbers perceive the government as foreign. Both the immigrant and receiving community encounter difficulties in creating shared culture, governance and laws. Against this backdrop, immigrant integration rises as a priority and with it, the role of naturalization as a critical goal for the immigrant community.

Economists, labor unions, and the business community have largely agreed that the flow of immigrants contributes to a strong workforce, especially as the native-born population ages and experiences declining birth rates. Immigration also fuels innovation and entrepreneurship, from small businesses to growth industries such as science and technology.

Our economy is reaping steady assets from the contribution of immigrants, in turn, boosting our

global competitiveness vis-à-vis other advanced democracies where migration and naturalization is less liberal. However, it is to the extent that these households and individuals take root and become full participants of our society that their vast civic potential is realized.

For non-citizen immigrants, workers, tax-payers, business-owners, community leaders, parents of public school students, and other members of our communities, have important voices that cannot be efficiently heard in the government that they help underwrite, if they do not naturalize.

In the United States, of the 12.6 million legal permanent residents (LPRs), an estimated 7.9 million are eligible to naturalize. When LPRs become citizens, there are across-the-board benefits because naturalization enables immigrants to fully utilize their civic and political power, in addition to their already-significant economic contribution that only increases after naturalization. More importantly, naturalized citizens also develop deeper community ties and enrich our democratic process. In the long-term, as one in five students are immigrants or children of immigrants (Current Population Survey 2008), ensuring a generation of new citizens strengthens civic leadership development and political engagement, empowering the next generation of voters and civic leaders.

Although many see the value of immigrants becoming full participants with the rights and responsibilities that only citizenship demands, there is no national strategy for facilitating integration. The U.S. naturalization rate is relatively low. This important process of securing America's future is often left to local and state government, CBO's, religious institutions, ethnic associations and immigrants themselves. In the federal government, there is insufficient infrastructure to facilitate large-scale, smooth transitions from immigrant to citizen. Investing in this process by increasing funding, outreach and collaboration will reinvigorate our civic life by engaging the increasingly growing, crucial and traditionally harder-to-reach populations.

Immigrant integration, a term well developed in the European Union, expresses the aspiration of the receiving society to keep its identity and for newcomers to successfully gain social, economic and civic inclusion in the life of the host nation. It is expressive of a process and a goal and recognizes the value of individual identity and contribution.

Legal status is only one element in the journey of an immigrant aspiring to find a new beginning and pursue opportunity, availing themselves of those resources that contribute to their life experiences, values and skills to their new home.

Given the 37 million foreign-born in the United States and the continuing wave of arrivals, conscious policy development and shared societal goals have increased value. It is a repeated statement that the U.S. has immigration policies but no immigrant integration policy.

Citizenship Acquisition

American citizenship comes through three avenues, acquisition, derivation, and naturalization. Acquisition, being a U.S. Citizen by birth, can happen in two ways. The first and most common way, birthright citizenship, is grounded in the legal concept of *jus soli* dating back to English Common Law. Citizenship by birth in the U.S. is a right protected in the Fourteenth Amendment's citizenship clause, that begins, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."

Judicial interpretation of this clause has long been understood as guaranteeing citizenship to native-born children of non-citizens who might be slaves (*Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 1857) or immigrants of non-European decent (*United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, 1898), who were shut out of opportunities and rights due to the country's first and most comprehensive, ethnicity-based exclusion (*Chinese Exclusion Act 1882-1946*) and subsequent oppression and discrimination.

This interpretation has never been seriously challenged and it extends to today's native-born children of non-citizens, even if born of undocumented parents. However, it re-appears in public discourse in times of nativist resurgence or restrictionist rhetoric, as it is today, when mainstream politicians and pundits are arguing for stripping birthright citizenship for children of undocumented immigrants.

As Garrett Epps recently argued in the *American University Law Review*, the drafters of the

amendment saw that the Constitution was fundamentally flawed in addressing the rights of the freed slaves and other non-citizens and that they were willing to undertake the political struggle necessary to amend it. It was not intended to create a large internal population of native-born non-citizens with lesser legal protections, even as they make up a large part of American society.

Federal law has also allowed for the acquisition of citizenship through birth to a US Citizen parent or parents, a concept known in Latin as *jus sanguinis*. This birthright is regardless of the place of birth, be it in the United States or abroad. Because this form of citizenship is not protected in the Constitution, it is more susceptible to political definitions of what it means to be an American Citizen and the laws around who is born a U.S. citizen change fairly regularly.

The second path toward citizenship, also mentioned in the Fourteenth Amendment, is through naturalization of LPRs, the most common way to gain U.S. citizenship after birth. Although not constitutionally protected, naturalization has not been subject to the same wholesale legal changes as citizenship through birth abroad. While the actual process will vary from individual to individual, as a general rule, naturalizations occur after five years of residence, an FBI background check, demonstration of basic English and civics knowledge, and swearing loyalty to the United States.

The final path toward U.S. citizenship, one specifically for children of naturalized U.S. citizens, is known as derivation. Like birth abroad, derivation has historically been subject to varying laws as the political definition of U.S. citizen has changed over the years. As of 2001, the law has required a child to be a LPR present in the United States and under the age of 18 at the time the parent naturalized. It also requires that the child be in the legal and physical custody of the naturalizing parent should the parents be separated or divorced. Unlike naturalization, derivation is automatic, requiring no paperwork, fees, or even knowledge on the part of the new U.S. citizen.

Citizenship Politics

As discussed previously, the concept of citizenship was historically intertwined with the nation's struggle with racism, national identity, ethnic tensions, and dysfunctional and biased immigration laws. Today, with the current impasse over comprehensive immigration reform, one response of advocates is promoting citizenship and increasing naturalization rates as a long-term imperative to increase civic engagement and voter registration, so the needs and contributions of the immigrant community can be heard as well as secure the benefits of citizenship for the individuals.

As a voting bloc, the "immigrant vote" is often described and understood in ethnic terms. Historically, new immigrants form ethnic associations and enclaves that will then translate into political activity to reflect their interests. These vary significantly between groups with differences in sending-nation conditions, if or how they are socialized politically, and their transnational commitments. It is the combination of these factors that affect how immigrants view American citizenship and American domestic politics.

The varieties of identifying with their new country vary from some first generation groups who live permanently in the U.S. but stay loyal to the home country, while others swear allegiance at the first opportunity. For these immigrants, some regard homeland politics with relative indifference while others escaped from fractured states, poverty, or internal turmoil, especially around WWI and WWII, are eager to form new identities.

In contrast to the mid-20th century, when many parts of the world went through decolonization, succession, or independence, immigrants bound for America today, have stronger national identities. Many of these immigrants see themselves as representatives of their native nations. While there are those whose migration is dictated by more individual interests, the early political concerns of the foreign-born today, seldom involve domestic American issues. As seen in native-language and ethnic media, main headlines focus on central issues and problems back home. This access to information and social networks of the native nation has been reinforced by communications technology and transportation.

For some, the political and economic ascendance of the native country also plays a role in how they engage their respective immigrant diasporas and also how these immigrants perceive their national and

cultural identities.

Sending countries have responded accordingly to this phenomenon by recognizing the importance and scale of their migrant communities in financial remittances, their more active voice through voting and communications, and contribution to transnational social capital. Many migrant-sending nations are granting dual-citizenship, voting rights, and tax exemptions for investments to proactively engage immigrants in America and elsewhere.

As immigrants settle longer and the second generation expands on their parents' experience through an American upbringing, American domestic issues become more politically salient. Still, many theorize that first generation's attachment to the native nation's issues, strengthened by globalization, undermines the political participation and integration of these immigrants in America. While that happens in some cases, studies have shown that overall, transnational activity accelerates civic and political integration of immigrants in the US. However, this is occasionally tempered by the factor of "reversibility" for migrants whose native country is close to the U.S., such as Mexico and Central America, that translates to a low propensity to naturalize and engage in American domestic politics.

Counter to the prevailing assumption that new immigrants are not assimilating, social and political capital are not exclusive to geography. For those immigrants who are active and skilled in civic engagement, eventually those activities are transmitted to the U.S. Case studies of local ethnic organizations in New York City have shown the importance of this population for both their sending-country officials and local city officials when both sets of leaders are invited to engage the immigrant community. In general, immigrants who are politically active in one setting are more likely to be interested and involved in domestic politics as well, further spurring naturalization. In addition, dual-citizenship policies by migrant-sending nation governments have also accelerated the naturalization process as immigrants are encouraged to engage in native-country affairs and participate in their adopted country concurrently.

For these ethnic groups, the best indicator of political strength in America depends on higher numbers, greater concentration and higher rates of naturalization.

Barriers & Obstacles

With the factors of political salience and transnationalism aside, immigrants of lower educational attainment and income take much longer to realize and acquire the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship. The process of naturalization, which for most applications requires a test of English knowledge and U.S. civics, creates a major barrier for immigrants with modest means and education.

The cost (\$680 per application) of naturalization also presents a barrier, especially when the benefits of citizenship versus lawful permanent residence (LPR) status are not fully understood. Initiatives that target ways to differentiate needs and help all those eligible for citizenship, from the wealthy but uninformed to the most vulnerable low-income, low-literacy LPRs eligible for citizenship, are required to address these barriers. For immigrants that have low educational attainment and low financial means or for elderly immigrants with little or no knowledge of English, any approach must take into account the need for specialized assistance and allow for the time it takes to acquire the level of English proficiency required to pass a citizenship test.

Lastly, a political climate where fear-mongering and the scapegoating of immigrants is accepted in mainstream discourse, contributes to a generally unwelcoming atmosphere and climate of hostility that disenfranchises immigrants by cutting citizenship funding, restricting voting rights, cutting access to government programs, and generating an atmosphere in which many immigrants are fearful to exercise their full rights.

Promising Practices

Many of the barriers relate to a lack of awareness of the process, benefits and importance of naturalization. Several state-wide organizations have begun to see the positive effects on naturalization rates by creating easy-to-use communication tools and relevant ethnic media campaigns. The

Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) launched a successful website, *www.becomeacitizennow.org*, as a tool for immigrants to complete the applications without assistance. It also includes trustworthy resources and links to services.

One America, Washington State's immigrant rights coalition's "I Am An American" branding and outreach campaign, drove significant demand for naturalization and was nominated for a statewide communications/radio award by the State's media associations.

On the service-provider side, several states have funding for citizenship providers, most notably the Citizenship for New Americans Program (CNAP) in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA) has successfully advocated for continued funding of this state program that supports the work of citizenship service providers in dozens of CBO's across the state. Similarly, CASA de Maryland currently has a program that places Americorps volunteers in other organizations to assist with citizenship, while the American Immigration Lawyers Association partners with local and state organizations to provide free legal services through citizenship days.

Besides the application process, the fee for the naturalization through the fee-based USCIS is increasingly prohibiting immigrants from naturalizing as they become eligible. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has supported the Opportunity Fund to launch Saving for Citizenship, a new program that will help 500 low-income legal immigrants in Northern California save money to apply for naturalization and become U.S. citizens. The Knight grant offers a 2:1 match for money saved toward naturalization. In addition, it also helps these LPR's navigate the U.S. financial system, manage their personal finances, and receive application assistance.

From civic engagement to financial access to a variety of integration pathways, these best practices were showcased at the National Immigrant Integration Conference, held annually by the members of the National Partnership for New Americans. Most recently, the conference, hosted by the MIRA Coalition, brought together over 400 leaders and practitioners from government, CBO's, the private sector, and education to discuss and share ideas to better integrate immigrants through ESOL and civics education, civic engagement, leadership and workforce development, small business development, asset-building, etc.

All of these pathways contribute to a higher propensity for eligible LPR's to take ownership of their participation in the U.S. and become naturalized citizens.

The 'E Pluribus Unum' annual awards are also playing a role as more models are identified and given visibility that are accelerating integration, fostering citizenship and aiding immigrants in civic participation.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the mentioned experiences, roundtable discussions with federal officials from the White House, Office of Citizenship, and Dept. of Education, the National Immigrant Integration Conference (hosted by MIRA in 2010), and the Migration Policy Institute Report on Administrative Fixes for Immigration Policy, MIRA and the National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) have developed a number of proposals for how the federal government can best promote the integration of immigrants and refugees into the civic and economic life of this country.

1. Integration Office:

- Create a White House Office of New Americans Integration to drive a national strategy for immigrant integration and encourage English, U.S. citizenship, and full integration into American society.

Such an integration office would coordinate policies to address the changing demographics of the U.S. head-on, and the challenges it brings, but through a positive framework of national unity. It would also focus attention on the overwhelming majority of immigrants and their children who are here legally, provide practical solutions that benefit all, and enjoy wide immigrant, business, and popular support. Furthermore, the Office of New Americans would coordinate key programs across the government to

achieve a more holistic approach to integration efforts, that in turn, would lead to stronger results, more efficiency and increased ability to track results.

2. Citizenship:

- Public education campaigns about the importance (benefits and responsibilities) of becoming a citizen that are tied to local service providers.
- Support of programs that assist in the naturalization process (AmeriCorps programs focused on immigrant integration services, small dollar loan programs to offset the cost of citizenship, etc).
- Funding USCIS through the federal budget instead of fee-based funding.
- Promoting citizenship to enhance civic engagement of immigrant populations.

Citizenship status enhances earning potential, neighborhood stability, and participation in civic life.

3. English Acquisition:

- Secure adequate public funding for community-based organizations, ethnic associations, community colleges and faith-based communities to deliver English language and civics instruction.
- Advocate for the Department of Labor to review existing public-private partnerships and evaluate ways to encourage employers to provide language acquisition programs for their employees.
- Foster workplace programs for English acquisition.
- Work to reduce or eliminate the distinction between 'Title 1' and 'Title 2' of the Workforce Investment Act.
- Advocate for more flexibility in grants that reward innovative programs, following a private sector model of investment.

Long waiting lists and high costs of classes are preventing tens of thousands of immigrants nationwide from learning English. The ability to communicate in English broadens immigrants' ability to effectively participate in activities such as parent teacher conferences, town hall meetings, as well as having economic benefits, etc.

4. Workforce Development and Economic Advancement:

- Intentionally include immigrant entrepreneurship in economic and business development programs offered by the federal, state, and local governments.
- Improve coordination among federal departments, specifically Education and Labor, to better align adult education and workforce development programming so that immigrants can learn English and job skills more quickly.
- Undertake a national review of federal and state licensing requirements with the goals of better informing foreign-credentialed individuals regarding these requirements and better enabling these individuals to practice their chosen professions.
- Increase supports for high level adult basic education (ABE) programs which allow students to transition from ABE courses to college or certificate programs.
- Actively combat wage theft abuses through increased enforcement and public education.

Supporting immigrants to work to their full potential either by utilizing existing skills and training or providing the framework to successfully attain skills, increase family income, assist employers, and spur economic growth.

5. Access to Services:

- Vigorously enforce Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, specifically, Executive Order 13166, directing all government agencies to issue Limited English Proficiency (LEP) guidance.
- Commit to federal agency worker training on immigrant eligibility, public charge rules, privacy

- protections, and other issues affecting immigrant participation in benefits, activities, and services.
- Provide new guidance for USCIS officers on ‘public charge’ so that individuals receiving food and medical benefits are not subjected to the public charge test required for those receiving cash assistance.
- Support immigrants’ access to health care coverage and services.

Efforts to clarify benefits eligibility and determinations will assist federal and state agency staff and policy makers to educate the immigrant community on public programs and efficiently manage those programs. In addition ensuring language access to these programs will allow all eligible applicants to receive proper assistance.

6. Support for Academic Achievement

- Create family academies that provide education programs and support for immigrant parents engaging in their children’s academic and social success.
- Support school-based programming specific to the needs of immigrant children and families.
- Ensure that civics is taught and the value of citizenship is communicated in schools.

Strong support for immigrant children and their parents is critical to ensure that children are receiving high-quality K-12 education and being supported in pursuing post-secondary education.

Conclusion

Immigration will continue to be a driving force in debates about national policy and identity politics. Although the need for comprehensive immigration reform is dire, the significant and growing LPR population demands an immediate and national integration strategy. A dedicated set of CBO’s, faith-based organizations, advocacy organizations, educators, and state and municipal agencies are already doing the work of integrating immigrants and helping those eligible to naturalize. However, a coordinated and visible effort must be fostered by the federal government to recognize and boost the work of the receiving communities and their respective organizations and to formalize and streamline intergovernmental responsibilities.

This commitment will be crucial in maintaining American competitiveness and strengthening our democratic enterprise. Ultimately, serious investment in immigrant integration and naturalization serves as an empowering reminder that the rights and responsibilities of citizenship are valued and practiced by all Americans, naturalized or otherwise, and aspired to by newcomers.

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