



## The Value of Helping Immigrants Become U.S. Citizens

Irene Bloemraad, University of California, Berkeley

A cornerstone of America's success has long been our nation's ability to draw immigrants into the full rights and duties of citizenship. When newcomers successfully navigate the path to citizenship, they make a deeper commitment to American society and democracy. They join citizens born here as full members of a diverse nation, building a shared future.

But there are worrisome signs that the path for newcomers to become full-blown U.S. citizens has become steeper. Today, only 44% of the forty million foreign-born residents living in the United States have "naturalized," the term for completing the legal steps to acquire American citizenship. This percentage is among the lowest the United States has seen in the past century, and it is much lower than the proportion of immigrants who achieve citizenship in other English-speaking countries of immigration such as Canada and Australia. Why haven't more immigrants into the United States acquired citizenship? What can we do about it?

### Explaining Limited Citizenship

A number of possible reasons for limited naturalization leap to mind, but none of the usual arguments provides a strong explanation:

- **Maybe most foreign residents are in the country illegally or here only temporarily.** Permanent, lawful foreign-born residents are the only ones who have the right to apply for citizenship. But even if we subtract the sizeable numbers of temporary and unauthorized migrants who do not have the right to apply for citizenship, the rate of naturalization among foreign residents remains historically low. There are 12.6 million legal permanent residents who have not acquired U.S. citizenship – a total roughly equal to the population of Pennsylvania, the 6th most populous state. Maybe today's immigrants are less attached to the United States. Some conjecture that, compared to earlier newcomers, today's immigrants remain loyal to their lands of origin and lack strong civic impulses. But the evidence suggests otherwise. Surveys reveal that immigrants are very interested in citizenship and place a high value on the U.S. Constitution, democracy, and the rule of law. Many want full rights, including the vote.
- **Maybe cost-benefit calculations weigh against obtaining citizenship.** Naturalization is low, in this view, because many rights enjoyed by citizens are also open to legal permanent residents and, in more limited cases, to temporary or undocumented residents. In addition, the cost of applying for citizenship has risen from \$95 in 1996 to \$680 in 2012.
- **Maybe becoming a U.S. citizen just isn't worth the price, or the time and trouble.** But the benefits of naturalization have increased sharply in recent decades. Only legal citizenship guarantees access to a full range of social benefits, from income supports for the poor and disabled to protections offered by the new health insurance law. Non-citizens, even legal residents, face deportation if convicted of

crimes; and non-citizens can only sponsor a narrow range of family members to join them in the United States. If benefits versus costs were the only issue, legal immigrants would quickly naturalize.

## The United States Does Little to Encourage Citizenship

In contrast to other affluent democracies, the United States does little to encourage legal immigrants to become citizens. In Canada, 85% of immigrants eligible to become citizens have done so. My research shows that Canada's advantage is not simply due to immigrant characteristics and economic calculations. Instead, Canada takes an active approach to incorporating immigrants.

Canada reaches out through community organizations grounded in its various immigrant cultures. The federal government and the ten provinces provide funds to settle newcomers and help them learn English or French. In 2010-11, the Canadian federal government spent about \$1600 on each newcomer – a big contrast to the paltry \$2.23 spent by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In the United States, extra help goes only to officially designated refugees – deemed to have come to our country to escape political persecution. Such special efforts have paid off. Compared to non-refugees of similar background, refugees attain higher levels of citizenship and are better integrated into our society. Their children go further in school.

But doesn't the United States spend a lot on immigration? Yes, but the overwhelming target is border control. In 2011, Congress allocated \$15.3 billion to remove and keep out undocumented migrants. In comparison, just \$18 million was allocated to promote English instruction, citizenship, and social integration. For every dollar spent to guide legal immigrants to full membership, a whopping \$850 is spent on border control and the removal of undocumented people. Such a strong emphasis on exclusion limits America's ability to leverage the talents and loyalty of millions of eager legal newcomers.

## How the United States Can Do Better

For many immigrants and their children, the United States continues to be a land of opportunity, tolerance, and stable rule of law. Many will continue to arrive no matter what. For those here legally, integration would be faster, easier, and more successful if governments at all levels did more in partnership with nonprofits, churches, and community groups. Like Canada, the United States could actively invite applications for citizenship, thereby sending a message of welcome to join the national community. Government could offer resources to community-based groups that help newcomers find jobs, meet family needs, learn English, and take citizenship classes. Immigrants have always strengthened America through their active citizenship and hard work. The twenty-first century United States can do much more to invite and help newcomers join American democracy. If we do, everyone will benefit.

Read more in Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* (University of California Press, 2006).

**Read more in Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* (University of California Press, 2006).**