

THE DIVIDENDS OF CITIZENSHIP: WHY LEGALIZATION MUST LEAD TO CITIZENSHIP

The most concrete proposals for immigration reform thus far in 2013 include earned legalization with a path to U.S. citizenship for unauthorized immigrants already living in the United States. This is a process that essentially permits unauthorized immigrants to come forward and receive a provisional legal status that—after paying taxes, proving they understand English and civics, passing all criminal and other background checks, and showing they are committed to the United States—allows them to become lawful permanent residents (LPRs). From there, like other LPRs before them, they will have to decide whether or not to make the final commitment to their adopted country by becoming American citizens. Some critics of the new proposals argue that citizenship is too good for unauthorized immigrants, or that legal status is really all they need to thrive in this country. But that kind of short-sighted thinking ignores one very important fact: more than half a century ago the U.S. finally abandoned the idea that there should be second-class citizens who could become lawful residents, but never have the chance to naturalize or vote or run for office.

The integration of the [11 million](#) unauthorized immigrants now living in the United States¹ into full citizenship is not only good for those individuals, but the country as a whole. Citizenship, and the quest for citizenship, facilitates integration in myriad ways that legal status alone does not. From the learning of English and U.S. civics to the earning of higher incomes, serving jury duty, and voting in elections, citizens and would-be citizens benefit from a deeper form of incorporation into U.S. society than do legal immigrants who have no hope of ever applying for naturalization.

As the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform [wrote](#) in a report to Congress in 1997, “Naturalization is the most important act that a legal immigrant undertakes in the process of becoming an American. Taking this step confers upon the immigrant all the rights and responsibilities of civic and political participation that the United States has to offer.”² Any sort of legal status which precludes the right to apply for naturalization would define the newly legalized population as permanently “separate and unequal,” to the detriment of the immigrants themselves and U.S. society as a whole.

Moreover, numerous polls have shown that a majority of Americans support a path to citizenship.³ In fact, once Americans overwhelmingly rejected the idea that unauthorized immigrants should not be allowed to become legal residents, the issue of citizenship became a straw man. In this country, lawful permanent residence implies a pathway to citizenship; and citizenship is essential to American identity.

The requirements of the naturalization process, and the obligations of citizenship itself, demand greater incorporation into U.S. society.

Immigrants age 18 and older are currently eligible for naturalization only if they have met the following requirements:

- Been LPRs for at least five years (three years for the spouses of U.S. citizens), during which time they have not departed the country for periods of six months or more.
- Are of “good moral character” (that is, have not been arrested for or convicted of any serious crimes).
- Demonstrated knowledge of English and U.S. civics.
- Sworn allegiance to the U.S. Constitution by taking the Oath of Allegiance.⁴

Naturalization opens up new avenues of integration into U.S. society.

U.S. citizenship affords rights which facilitate greater political and economic incorporation:

- The right to vote in federal and state elections.
- The right to run for political office (except the office of President or Vice President)
- The right to hold public-sector jobs and jobs that require security clearances.
- Protection from deportation.
- The right to travel with a U.S. passport.⁵

Citizenship boosts the earning power of immigrant workers.

- According to a [report](#) from the Migration Policy Institute, obtaining U.S. citizenship boosts an immigrant worker’s wages by *at least* 5 percent. The report notes that the “reasons for this citizenship premium are difficult to identify precisely, but are likely to comprise a combination of factors such as the ability to signal successful integration to employers and to garner access to certain jobs that are difficult to obtain without US citizenship.”⁶
- A [report](#) from the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration at the University of Southern California estimates that, if the 8.5 million LPRs in the United States who are eligible to naturalize did so, their earnings over the next decade would rise somewhere between \$21 billion and \$45 billion. These additional earnings and the spending they generate would amount to an increase in Gross Domestic Product of somewhere between \$37 billion and \$52 billion.⁷

Polls continue to show that most Americans support a path to citizenship.

- In January, a bipartisan poll sponsored by Service Employees International Union, America’s Voice Education Fund, and National Immigration Forum found that 77 percent of voters polled support an immigration reform plan that includes a path to citizenship. And 87 percent of Americans said “it would be better to give people a chance to eventually earn citizenship at some point after they register for legal status, pass a background check, learn English, and pay taxes,” while only 7 percent said “they should

be allowed to qualify for legal status and work in the United States but should never be given the chance to earn citizenship.”⁸

- According to an Associated Press/GfK poll released at the same time, Americans support “providing a way for illegal immigrants in the U.S. to become citizens” by a 65 to 35 percent margin.⁹
- A Fox News poll conducted in mid-January found that two-thirds of registered voters agreed that the government should allow unauthorized immigrants “to remain in the country and eventually qualify for U.S. citizenship, but only if they meet certain requirements like paying back taxes, learning English, and passing a background check.” Seventeen percent of people polled thought the government should send unauthorized immigrants back to their native countries.¹⁰
- In a November 2012 survey, an ABC News/Washington Post poll showed that 57 percent of Americans support a path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants.¹¹

Inclusion is the best policy.

- The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform [wrote](#) that “immigrants become part of us, and we grow and become the stronger for having embraced them.”¹² Denying the possibility of U.S. citizenship to 11 million immigrants would accomplish just the opposite: hindering their integration into U.S. society and diminishing us as a nation.

Endnotes

¹ Immigration Policy Center, [The Unauthorized Population Today: Number Holds Steady at 11 million, Three-Fifths Have Been Here More Than a Decade](#) (Washington, DC: American Immigration Council, March 2011).

² U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, [Becoming an American: Immigration and Immigrant Policy: 1997 Report to Congress](#), September 1997, p. 45.

³ America’s Voice, [Poll After Poll: American Public Wants Immigration Reform with Citizenship](#), January 23, 2013.

⁴ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, [A Guide to Naturalization](#) (M-476), March 2012, pp. 18-19.

⁵ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, [A Guide to Naturalization](#) (M-476), March 2012, p. 2; Madeleine Sumption and Sarah Flamm, [The Economic Value of Citizenship for Immigrants in the United States](#) (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, September 2012), p. 2.

⁶ Madeleine Sumption and Sarah Flamm, [The Economic Value of Citizenship for Immigrants in the United States](#) (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, September 2012), pp. 13-14.

⁷ Manuel Pastor and Justin Scoggins, [Citizen Gain: The Economic Benefits of Naturalization for Immigrants and the Economy](#) (Los Angeles, CA: Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, University of Southern California, December 2012), pp. 1, 6, 20.

⁸ Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, [National Immigration Reform Survey](#), January 2013.

⁹ Erica Werner and Dennis Junius, [AP-GfK Poll: Most back path to citizenship for illegal immigrants as Republican opposition declines](#), Associated Press, January 22, 2013.

¹⁰ Anderson Robbins Research (D) / Shaw & Company Research (R), Fox News, [Fox News Poll: Government Spending](#), January 18, 2013.

¹¹ Washington Post, [Q: Do you support or oppose a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants?](#), Post-ABC poll, November 14, 2012.

¹² U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, [Becoming an American: Immigration and Immigrant Policy: 1997 Report to Congress](#), September 1997, p. 27.