

Becoming a Citizen: Naturalization in California and the United States

Over the past two decades, millions of immigrants have arrived in the United States. Integrating these many newcomers into mainstream society has become a crucial and ongoing concern for public policy—especially in California: The state has the largest noncitizen population in the nation (over six million people) and a lower naturalization rate than every other state but Texas. Although California's low naturalization rates result primarily from its much higher proportion of unauthorized immigrants, the vast majority of non-citizen immigrants in California are legal residents of the United States and are therefore eligible to become citizens.

Naturalization, or the granting of citizenship, is important for a number of reasons. First, it confers the right to vote, thereby altering the political landscape. The composition of the voting population is especially important in California, where the will of the people is often established at the ballot box through the initiative process. Second, citizenship determines eligibility for certain government programs. Under the welfare reform legislation passed in 1996, new immigrants (except for refugees) are no longer eligible to receive most federally funded social services until they become citizens or have 40 quarters of employment in the United States. Finally, naturalization trends affect future patterns and levels of immigration, because immigration law gives priority to family reunification of American citizens.

In *Taking the Oath: An Analysis of Naturalization in California and the United States*, Hans Johnson, Belinda Reyes, Laura Mameesh, and Elisa Barbour answer the following questions:

- How has the propensity to naturalize changed over time?
- What factors are associated with naturalization?
- Do California immigrants have a different propensity to naturalize? If so, why?

- How and why do naturalization rates vary across California counties?
- What role have California state and local governments played in encouraging naturalization?

Trends in Naturalization

The author's analysis of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) administrative data revealed that the naturalization rate for all legal immigrants in the United States declined steadily from 1965 to 1993, falling from 63 percent to 38 percent. Most of the decline can be attributed to a change in the composition of the legal-immigrant population—from a population that had resided in the United States for a relatively long time to one that consisted of large numbers of more recent arrivals.

In the mid-1990s, naturalization rates increased substantially, and for three groups in particular: better-educated immigrants, Latino immigrants, and immigrants in California. As shown in the figure, naturalization rates in California jumped 8 percent between March 1996 and March 1997, which means that the number of naturalized citizens in the state grew by 24 percent—or almost 500,000 people in one year.

Much of the increase in naturalization rates in the 1990s resulted from efforts by the INS to clear up a large backlog of applications through its "Citizenship U.S.A." program, begun in 1995. However, this program does not explain the tremendous surge in *applications* for citizenship. Two factors probably account for this surge. First, the population eligible for naturalization increased greatly as formerly unauthorized immigrants were granted amnesty (legal permanent residency) under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA)—those granted amnesty became eligible for naturalization starting in 1993. Second, political events in

the 1990s may have led to increases in naturalization. Proposition 187 was passed in California in 1994 in an attempt to curtail the delivery of social services to unauthorized immigrants; in 1995 and 1996, the nation was debating the virtues of restricting benefits to *legal* immigrants. Many observers argue that perceived anti-immigrant sentiment encouraged immigrants to naturalize to protect their rights and vote against anti-immigrant legislation.

Factors Associated with Naturalization

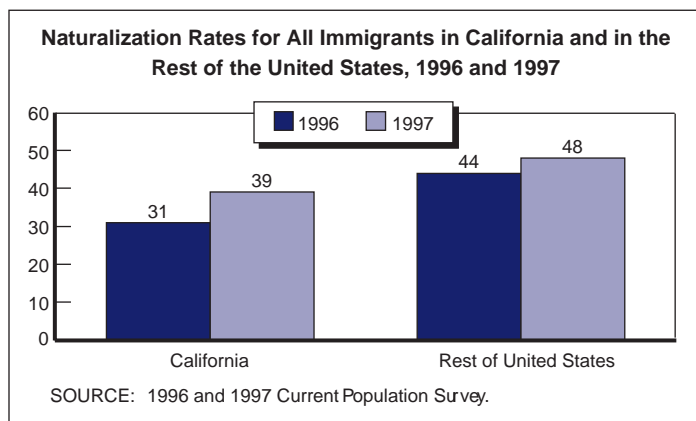
The single most important determinant of naturalization is time in the United States: The longer an immigrant has been in this country, the more likely he or she is to naturalize. An immigrant's socioeconomic characteristics also have a significant effect on naturalization. High levels of educational attainment, higher incomes and, in particular, the ability to speak English are all associated with higher rates of naturalization.

One of the most important findings of this study is that an immigrant's social capital is also a powerful predictor of naturalization. Immigrants who have close ties and contacts with U.S. citizens are much more likely to become naturalized than otherwise similar immigrants. This is probably because the former gain a better knowledge of naturalization requirements, procedures, and benefits.

Holding everything else constant, the authors also found a significant correlation between country of origin and naturalization rates. For example, immigrants from Latin America are less likely to naturalize than immigrants from Southeast Asia.

How California Differs from the Nation

California has one of the lowest naturalization rates in the nation for two reasons. First, it has a population of legal immigrants whose characteristics are associated with low naturalization rates. As a whole, California immigrants are more likely to come from Mexico, to be recent arrivals, to be married to noncitizens, to have lower levels of education, and to be less proficient in English. All of these characteristics are associated with lower probabilities of naturalization. Second, the state has a large number of unauthorized immi-



Although immigrants in California are less likely to naturalize than immigrants in the rest of the country, the difference between California and the rest of the nation declined between March 1996 and March 1997.

grants, whose status makes them ineligible for citizenship. If the latter group are excluded from the calculation and only those who are eligible to become citizens are considered, the difference in naturalization rates between California and the rest of the nation in 1990 is less pronounced, dropping from 14 percent to only 4 percent.

Challenges for California Naturalization Policy

Telephone interviews with county welfare officials to identify what counties were doing to encourage naturalization among immigrants receiving welfare revealed a great deal of variation across counties in terms of naturalization activities. The interviews also brought to light many of the challenges involved in naturalization—for example, inadequate English skills among elderly immigrants, poor access to services, and high citizenship application fees. California also has a difficult noncitizen population to naturalize. Because many have poor English skills and tend to live in neighborhoods with large numbers of other immigrants, they lack the social networks that might encourage them to become citizens. The authors conclude that if California is to have a more effective naturalization program, the state must create avenues to provide hard-to-reach populations with information about the naturalization process and the benefits of citizenship.

This research brief summarizes a report by Hans P. Johnson, Belinda I. Reyes, Laura Mameesh, and Elisa Barbour, Taking the Oath: An Analysis of Naturalization in California and the United States. The report may be ordered by calling (800) 232-5343 [mainland U.S.] or (415) 291-4415 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.
