



# IMPROVING THE NATURALIZATION PROCESS

BETTER IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION LEADS TO ECONOMIC GROWTH

By Mary Giovagnoli

SEPTEMBER 2011

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## **ABOUT PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRATION**

The Immigration Policy Center's *Perspectives* are thoughtful narratives written by leading academics and researchers who bring a wide range of multi-disciplinary knowledge to the issue of immigration policy.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## **ABOUT THE IMMIGRATION POLICY CENTER**

The Immigration Policy Center, established in 2003, is the policy arm of the American Immigration Council. IPC's mission is to shape a rational conversation on immigration and immigrant integration. Through its research and analysis, IPC provides policymakers, the media, and the general public with accurate information about the role of immigrants and immigration policy on U.S. society. IPC reports and materials are widely disseminated and relied upon by press and policymakers. IPC staff regularly serves as experts to leaders on Capitol Hill, opinion-makers, and the media. IPC is a non-partisan organization that neither supports nor opposes any political party or candidate for office. Visit our website at [www.immigrationpolicy.org](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org) and our blog at [www.immigrationimpact.com](http://www.immigrationimpact.com)

Anyone who has ever attended a naturalization ceremony cannot help but be moved by the power of the moment. The participants enter as men, women, and children of diverse countries, but leave the room as citizens of one—the United States. For many, the path to that naturalization ceremony has been long and arduous, irrespective of whether they entered the United States as wealthy entrepreneurs or as refugees with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The process of obtaining lawful permanent resident (LPR) status, and ultimately U.S. citizenship, is often daunting. A new country, new rules, high costs, and little targeted support for new immigrants makes what should be a journey of exploration and opportunity one that may be frustrating and lonely. Consequently, in order to focus on ways to improve the naturalization process itself, we must take a step back and consider the nature of immigrant integration in the United States. The better our integration policies—and the sooner they begin—the more likely we are to improve the rate of naturalization.

Integration is an often overlooked but key component of U.S. immigration policy. Successful integration of immigrants fuels their success, strengthens communities, and builds bridges between newcomers and other community members. Time and again, an influx of immigrants has been shown to reverse economic decline and breathe new life into urban areas, small towns, and rural communities. Moreover, integration can be a key to entrepreneurship and future economic growth. For example, research by Richard Florida and Charlotta Mellander<sup>2</sup> found that nations which focus more on immigrant integration have higher levels of economic competitiveness, are more innovative, and have higher rates of entrepreneurship. Solid integration policies offer benefits to both the immigrant and the receiving community. The investment in immigrants, therefore, is an investment in the country's own well-being.

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Last year, the Immigration Policy Center (IPC) participated in a major international comparative study of integration laws across Europe, Canada, and the United States. Now in its third edition, the Migrant Integration Policy Index, or MIPEX, is a reference guide and tool which measures and compares the immigration and integration policies of 31 countries.<sup>3</sup> After a year of collaboration and analysis, the MIPEX researchers found that the U.S. ranked 9<sup>th</sup> overall, receiving 62 of a total possible 100 points derived from averaging scores in seven categories: labor market mobility (how immigrants access jobs and job training); family reunification (who is eligible to bring family members, and which family members); access to education; political participation; long-term residence (who is eligible, how does one get it, and can it be revoked); access to citizenship; and anti-discrimination laws and protections. This overall ranking is not bad, especially when the lack of a national integration policy is taken into account. Canada, for example, which ranked third, engages in extremely detailed integration planning, in which the federal and provincial governments work together to determine both the necessary level of immigration and the types of support needed to attract new immigrants to the country.

From a practical and political perspective, there is little doubt that the kind of labor-intensive immigration planning that goes on in many countries, as reflected in the MIPEX survey, would

be difficult to replicate in the United States. Despite the overwhelming evidence that immigration is a net positive for the country, there is no national agreement that immigration is a good thing. It is hardly surprising, then, that we have trouble scraping together support for integration initiatives, including much-needed grants to organizations that provide basic English and civics training to prepare applicants for the naturalization exam. Such initiatives, run through the Office of Citizenship at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), began under the Bush administration and have received continued support from the Obama administration. Congress, however, may not approve funding for these and other integration programs in the DHS Appropriations Bill for FY2012.

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For immigration restrictionists, any kind of pro-active effort to develop programs to assist immigrants is seen as a handout to immigrants, who are incorrectly viewed as uninterested in integrating into American life. Yet the work of researchers such as Dowell Myers<sup>4</sup> and Tomas Jimenez<sup>5</sup> disprove this assumption, demonstrating that today's immigrants are integrating at least as quickly as prior waves of immigrants, and, in some cases, much faster. For instance, the percentage of immigrants who become homeowners or naturalize increases the longer they are here. Jimenez notes that such increases are particularly striking, given the "laissez faire" approach to integration in the United States, which has generally relied on immigrant initiative, access to public education, and a strong economy to encourage integration.

Historically, many of the states with a long tradition of immigration—New York, California, Illinois, Massachusetts—have also been important players in integration, providing training and assistance to newcomers. However, the economic downturn and stretched state budgets have reduced states' ability to fill in the gaps. At the same time, Myers notes that the rise of immigration to "new destination" states—such as Georgia or South Carolina—has led to a whole new crop of problems, in part because local residents have little experience with immigration and therefore harbor many misconceptions about immigrants. The absence of an immigration tradition, the suspicion that immigrants don't want to integrate, and the host of anti-immigrant laws introduced or passed in these new-immigrant states have created even more urgency for the development of national integration strategies.

Institutional barriers to LPR status and naturalization also play a role in hindering immigrant integration. MIPEX catalogs some of the legal and policy problems that plague the naturalization process. The study notes that U.S. naturalization fees "are now higher than in 25 of the 30 other MIPEX countries. Half ask for just normal administrative fees similar to obtaining passports." The process of acquiring citizenship in the United States can be uncertain, lacking "legal time limits (unlike in 13 MIPEX countries). Many long and discretionary background checks also leave applicants slightly insecure about their status."<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, problems such as these are a major obstacle to naturalization. Jimenez notes that, despite the steady rise in naturalization rates over the decades, a shocking number of

people do not naturalize who are eligible to do so. In 2008, for example, while more than one million LPRs naturalized, more than eight million were eligible to do so. Recognizing this gap, USCIS has begun a major public education initiative to invite LPRs to learn about the rights, responsibilities, and importance of U.S. citizenship. And state and local groups continue to work creatively with ever shrinking resources to give immigrants the tools they need to succeed.

The good news is that, unlike many aspects of immigration reform, the challenge for improving integration and naturalization efforts is less about reforming existing law and more about generating support for sufficient planning and resources to create a more robust integration program. Efforts to prioritize integration and naturalization, to streamline current application processes, and to revise existing policies and procedures can be accomplished through administrative action. The most urgent legislative changes needed, as discussed by Maurice Belanger of the National Immigration Forum<sup>7</sup>, relate primarily to increasing the appropriations given to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to promote integration, improve services, and reduce the high fees applicants currently pay for immigration benefits.

Because successful integration is measured through a range of criteria—from educational attainment to employment to naturalization—a national integration policy necessarily involves coordination across a wide range of government agencies and must include the states. Many groups have called for the establishment of an Office of Immigrant Integration within the White House, while others see an expansion of the work of the Office of Citizenship as a logical base for promoting integration. Regardless of where the work is housed, however, taking the time to map out the steps government can take to facilitate integration would have a dramatic payoff for the country.

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The most obvious payoff would come from better coordination, allowing existing programs to leverage resources and strategies to encourage greater integration of immigrants. Promoting naturalization as a key step towards full civic participation, for instance, can be effectively done not only through immigration outlets, but through other government programs and agencies. For instance, few people think of the Department of Agriculture when we talk about immigrant integration, but it has long funded studies of immigrants in rural America. As the percentage of immigrants settling in rural areas increases, the opportunity for extension programs and other agricultural support programs to promote integration grows.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, promoting and publicizing immigrant integration, especially in states where the new wave of immigration is taking place, offers an opportunity to overcome hateful stereotypes. Working with receiving communities to create a more welcoming environment and to educate these communities about the importance of immigrants to America's future is also critical to a successful integration strategy. In the long run, building support for more appropriations to integration programs will be easier when the public recognizes that such support translates into a better economic and social future for our communities.

In the meantime, however, if Congress insists on requiring naturalization and other immigration benefits to be self-supporting, it should at least sanction creative ways to assist immigrants who find the fees a major obstacle. Micro-loans, installment plans, and other payment options should be made available to applicants. Authorizing a citizenship foundation, much like the private foundation that supports the national parks service, is a mechanism for creating a private-public partnership which would cost the taxpayer little, but reap great rewards. Proposals to give tax breaks to businesses that provide access to English classes or otherwise support the integration process are also promising. Without the benefit of a national integration initiative, however, many of these ideas will languish because their importance is overlooked or minimized by Congress and the public.

If we want to improve the naturalization process, we must urge the government to use its executive authority to improve the quality of the application and adjudication process. But we must also encourage the executive branch to think far more broadly. A national immigrant integration strategy—coordinated across the federal and state governments—is critical to changing the way we talk about immigration today. The success of such a plan would benefit individuals, strengthen our democracy, and help us break the stalemate that keeps us from addressing the broader immigration reform we need. In a classic case of “which came first, the chicken or the egg,” promoting immigrant integration will actually make it easier to justify better, smarter immigration laws.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This essay first appeared in National Foundation for American Policy, [Reforming the Naturalization Process](#) (Arlington, VA: August 2011), pp. 9-13.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Florida, “[Immigrants and the Wealth of Nations](#),” Creative Class blog, April 20, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> MIPEX is a project of the European Union, administered by the Migration Policy Group of Brussels, Belgium and the British Council. See the MIPEX website (<http://www.mipex.eu/>) for the complete survey, individual country analyses, past rankings, and additional tools for researchers, government officials, the public, and the media.

<sup>4</sup> Dowell Myers and John Pitkin, [Assimilation Today: New Evidence Shows the Latest Immigrants to America are Following in Our History's Footsteps](#) (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, September 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Tomas R. Jimenez, [Immigrants to the United States: How Well are They Integrating into Society?](#) (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, May 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Huddleston, et al., [Migrant Integration Policy Index III](#) (Brussels, Belgium: British Council and Migration Policy Group, February 2011), p. 210.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Belanger, untitled essay, in National Foundation for American Policy, [Reforming the Naturalization Process](#) (Arlington, VA: August 2011), pp. 6-9.

<sup>8</sup> For a wide-ranging survey of the impact of immigrants in rural America, see the conference proceedings of [Cambio de Colores](#), an annual conference hosted by the Cambio Center at the University of Missouri Columbia, which examines the range of immigrant integration issues in the Midwest. This year's conference included an expanded examination of the impact of new immigration to the South, marking an important collaboration between land grant universities throughout the Midwest and the southern United States.