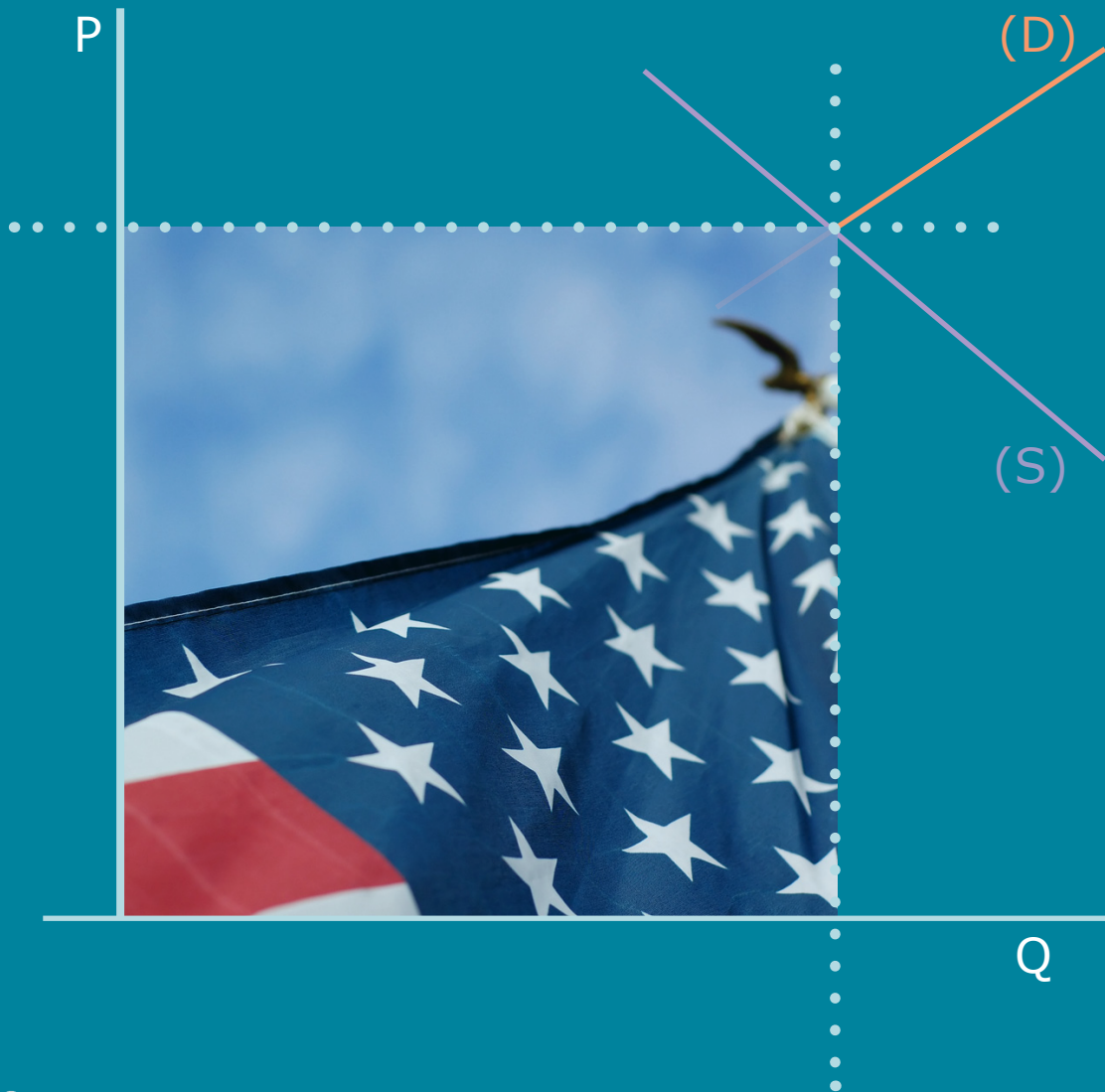


# THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF CITIZENSHIP FOR IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

By Madeleine Sumption and Sarah Flamm



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## Executive Summary

Citizenship is widely recognized as an important symbol of full membership and participation in society. By naturalizing, immigrants receive a range of rights and prerogatives available only to citizens. Naturalized citizens can vote and run for public office; they receive protection from deportation and from losing their residence rights; and they enjoy other rights, such as the ability to bring family members more quickly to the United States, full access to public benefits, and visa-free travel to many countries.

Surveys suggest that political and social rights — particularly the right to vote — are the primary motivation for naturalizing, alongside the desire for a sense of belonging. However, citizenship is also thought to provide economic benefits, including access to job opportunities that are not open to noncitizens. Certain government jobs and licensed professions require citizenship (the vast majority of immigrants holding public-sector jobs are naturalized). And some employers may treat citizenship as a signal of good integration into US society or otherwise discriminate against noncitizens when hiring.

This report analyzes the impact of naturalization on immigrants, as well as the motivations for seeking citizenship and the barriers to doing so. Among the key findings:

- For a variety of reasons, naturalized citizens earn more than their noncitizen counterparts, are less likely to be unemployed, and are better represented in highly skilled jobs. Naturalized citizens also appear to have weathered the effects of the economic crisis more successfully, experiencing a decline in median annual earnings of 5 percent from 2006 to 2010, compared to 19 percent for noncitizens and 8 percent for the US born. As a result, the earnings gap between naturalized and noncitizen immigrants increased from 46 percent to 67 percent over the same period.
- Most of the gap between citizens' and noncitizens' outcomes is explained by the fact that naturalized immigrants have higher levels of education, better language skills, and more work experience in the United States than noncitizens. Even after accounting for these differences, however, there is some evidence that the naturalized may earn a wage premium of at least 5 percent. This premium is thought to be larger for Latino immigrants and for women.
- Despite the potential economic and other benefits of citizenship, far fewer immigrants naturalize than are eligible to do so. An estimated 8 million lawful permanent residents (LPRs) — representing about two-thirds of the total LPR population and two-fifths of the total foreign-born population — are eligible to apply.
- Immigrants are more likely to naturalize if they have high levels of education, speak English well, and have been in the United States for a long time. Refugees and other immigrants from politically troubled countries also naturalize at higher-than-average rates. By contrast, immigrants from high-income countries are less likely to seek US citizenship despite higher levels of education and language proficiency, perhaps because they perceive US citizenship as providing fewer benefits relative to their existing nationality.
- Naturalization rates in the United States are lower than in most other countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), largely because of the significant number of unauthorized immigrants who are not eligible to apply for citizenship. The share of *eligible* immigrants who have naturalized is higher than most OECD member countries but still lags behind other English-speaking receiving countries such as Australia and Canada, which have made more active attempts to promote naturalization.
- Barriers to naturalization include low English language proficiency, lack of knowledge about the application process, and the cost of applying, which at \$680 is higher than in most other OECD countries.



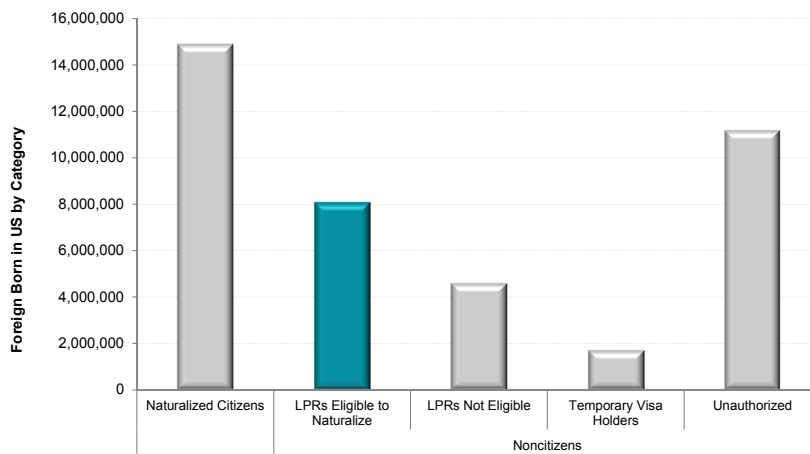
## I. Introduction

Citizenship is an important milestone along immigrants' journey toward full political and economic membership in their host society. At this point, immigrants receive the complete range of rights accorded to the native born, most notably the right to vote in national elections. By naturalizing, immigrants also gain a range of practical benefits, including security from deportation, access to certain public-sector jobs, and the ability to travel abroad on a US passport.

All immigrant-receiving countries in the industrialized world provide a route for immigrants to become citizens through naturalization. During the naturalization process, aspiring citizens must typically demonstrate that they have achieved a certain level of integration into the host society by meeting eligibility criteria or taking tests. However, naturalization is also a tool that can be used to encourage and facilitate *further* integration — a point along the journey rather than the culmination of the integration process.

About two-fifths of the United States' 40 million immigrants held US citizenship in 2010, a share that had risen from just over 30 percent in the early 1990s (see Appendix).<sup>1</sup> Among the remaining noncitizens, an estimated 44 percent were unauthorized, and hence not eligible for citizenship. Another 18 percent were lawful permanent residents (also known as green-card holders) but had not been in the country long enough to be eligible. However, a substantial share of the noncitizen population — about 8 million, according to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) — was eligible to apply but had not done so (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Estimation of Legal Status among Foreign Born in United States, 2010**



*Note:* Department of Homeland Security estimates of the legal permanent resident (LPR) population in 2010 are 200,000 higher than Pew Hispanic Center estimates, which do not include a breakdown by eligibility status.

*Sources:* LPR figures from Nancy Rytina, *Estimates of the Legal Permanent Resident Population in 2010* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2011), [www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois\\_lpr\\_pe\\_2010.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_lpr_pe_2010.pdf); citizens, temporary visa holders, and unauthorized immigrant figures from Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends, 2010* (Washington DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2011), [www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/133.pdf](http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/133.pdf).

<sup>1</sup> The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that 37 percent of the foreign born held citizenship, based on Current Population Survey (CPS) data but adjusting for the fact that the survey undercounts immigrants and that immigrants overreport citizenship when interviewed. The unadjusted percentage of immigrants who report that they hold citizenship is higher — 44 percent in the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) and 43 percent in the March 2010 CPS. Unless otherwise stated, this report uses unadjusted ACS and CPS data, made available by IPUMS; Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010).



The total share of naturalized citizens in the US immigrant population is low in comparison with other OECD countries — particularly Australia and Canada, where 68 and 79 percent of immigrants, respectively, as of 2006 were naturalized.<sup>2</sup> Part of this gap results from the substantial number of unauthorized immigrants in the United States. About two-thirds of immigrants *eligible* to take US citizenship had done so in 2010; this figure is significantly higher but still lags behind comparable estimates of 80 percent in Australia and 89 percent in Canada.<sup>3</sup> Higher naturalization rates in these countries are thought to result at least in part from more active efforts to promote citizenship, as well as from differences in immigrants' major countries of origin.<sup>4</sup>

The substantial size of the eligible but non-naturalized population raises important policy questions. Why do some immigrants either choose not to naturalize or find themselves unable to do so? Given the protections that citizenship offers, would higher naturalization rates improve immigrant integration? If so, how might one reduce the barriers to naturalization? These questions are of particular interest in light of the recent economic crisis and persistent high unemployment, which might have long-term impacts on immigrant integration.

This report examines the role of naturalization as both an indicator and facilitator of successful integration. It asks why immigrants decide to naturalize, what benefits they can expect to receive as a result, and why a substantial share of immigrants who appear to be eligible to naturalize are unable or choose not to do so. In particular, the report examines benefits that naturalized immigrants appear to receive in the US labor market.

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*Citizenship is an important milestone along immigrants' journey toward full political and economic membership in their host society.*

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- 2 Canadian data refer to immigrants ages 25 and above. Among immigrants who have been in the country for ten years or more, about 50 percent were naturalized in 2007 in the United States, compared to 67 percent in the United Kingdom, 81 percent in Australia, and 89 percent in Canada. Spain, Germany, and Switzerland had lower naturalization rates than the United States in 2007, according to an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) cross-country comparison. See Garnett Picot and Feng Hou, *Divergent Trends in Citizenship Rates among Immigrants in Canada and the United States* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2011), [www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2011338-eng.pdf](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2011338-eng.pdf); Australia's Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), *Population Flows: Immigration Aspects 2009-2010 Edition* (Belconnen: DIAC, 2011), 166, [www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/popflows2009-10/](http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/popflows2009-10/); OECD, *Naturalization: A Passport for the Better Integration of Immigrants?* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2012), [www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/naturalisation-a-passport-for-the-better-integration-of-immigrants\\_9789264099104-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/naturalisation-a-passport-for-the-better-integration-of-immigrants_9789264099104-en).
- 3 Australian data from 2006 Census. DIAC, *Population Flows*, 166. Canadian data refer to all immigrants in the country for ten years or longer in 2006 and are taken from OECD, *Naturalization: A Passport for Better Integration*.
- 4 Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Picot and Hou, *Divergent Trends in Citizenship Rates*.





## II. Who Naturalizes, and Why?

Motivations for naturalizing range from gaining political rights and economic benefits to personal and social considerations. Citizenship offers more security than permanent resident status, which can be lost or revoked, and thus guarantees the permanent right to remain part of US society.<sup>5</sup> Naturalized citizens gain the right to vote in national elections and the ability to run for political office. US citizens are also able to sponsor a wider range of family members for immigration and to bring certain family members — notably spouses — more quickly than they could as lawful permanent residents (LPRs).<sup>6</sup>

In surveys, immigrants have primarily emphasized political rights and the sense of belonging that citizenship brings over practical benefits such as the ability to sponsor family members for immigration.<sup>7</sup> However, immigrants have also cited better economic opportunities as a reason for seeking citizenship.<sup>8</sup> Citizenship might be expected to improve employment prospects in a number of possible ways. First, some jobs are only open to citizens. These include a range of public-sector jobs, such as competitive civil service positions and jobs requiring security clearance. Indeed, noncitizens are much less likely to work in the public sector than either naturalized citizens or the US born, according to labor force data.<sup>9</sup> Since government jobs typically provide stability and good wages, easier access to these positions may improve immigrants' outcomes after naturalization. In addition, private-sector companies that frequently act as federal contractors in work requiring a security clearance may prefer to hire citizens. Finally, access to certain licensed professions requires citizenship, although their number has declined over time and the requirement is not always enforced.<sup>10</sup>

Outside of these occupations, some employers may simply prefer to hire citizens over noncitizens. For example, they might perceive the administrative costs of hiring a citizen to be lower than hiring a permanent resident (even if this is generally not the case, except perhaps in jobs that require frequent travel abroad to countries in which US citizens enjoy visa-free travel). Some employers may prefer a US passport as a guarantee that the worker is not unauthorized.<sup>11</sup> Employers may also view citizenship

5 Green-card holders who are convicted of certain crimes can be deported; noncitizens may also lose their green card if they spend substantial periods outside of the country and are deemed by US authorities to have abandoned their permanent residence.

6 In particular, US citizens can sponsor their spouses, parents, and unmarried minor children without numerical limits, while permanent residents must wait longer for visas to become available.

7 A 2009 Public Agenda poll lists the right to vote as one of the two most commonly cited major reasons for seeking citizenship, alongside the desire to gain equal rights and responsibilities. See Scott Bittle and Jonathan Roch, *A Place to Call Home: What Immigrants Say Now About Life In America* (New York: Public Agenda, Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2009), [www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/Immigration.pdf](http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/Immigration.pdf). A survey of over 800 Latino immigrants who had attended a citizenship application workshop in 2010 found that the right to vote was the most important factor, as did an earlier poll of recently naturalized Latinos in Texas. See Richard Ramirez and Olga Medina, *Catalysts and Barriers to Attaining Citizenship: An Analysis of ya es hora Ciudadania!* (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2010), [www.nclr.org/images/uploads/publications/Naturalization\\_YaEsHora\\_Ciudadania\\_2010.pdf](http://www.nclr.org/images/uploads/publications/Naturalization_YaEsHora_Ciudadania_2010.pdf). See also Louis DeSipio, "From Naturalized Citizen to Voter: Context of Naturalization and Electoral Participation in Latino Communities" (working paper, University of California, Berkeley, 2006), [www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/european\\_studies/files/pdf/immigration-policy-conference/desipio.pdf](http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/european_studies/files/pdf/immigration-policy-conference/desipio.pdf); and Susan Gonzalez-Baker, Luis Plascencia, Gary Freeman, and Manuel Orozco, *The Making of Americans: Results of the Texas Naturalization Survey* (Austin, Texas: Tomás Rivera Center, 2000).

8 Sixty-eight percent of respondents to a 2009 poll cited access to better employment opportunities as a "major reason" for naturalizing. This is consistent with an earlier survey of immigrants in Texas, among whom 62 percent cited better job opportunities. These surveys allowed respondents to cite multiple reasons. By contrast, the survey of citizenship workshop participants described in footnote 7 found that only 6 percent cited "economic opportunity" as the *most* important reason for naturalizing. Bittle and Roch, *A Place to Call Home*; Gonzalez-Baker et al., *The Making of Americans*; Ramirez and Medina, *Catalysts and Barriers to Attaining Citizenship*.

9 Sixteen percent of US-born citizens worked in the public sector in the 2006-10 period, compared to 13 percent of naturalized citizens and only 5 percent of noncitizens. See Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of ACS pooled 2006-10 microdata.

10 Luis F. B. Plascencia, Gary P. Freeman, and Mark Setzler, "The Decline of Barriers to Immigrant Economic and Political Rights in the American States: 1977-2001," *International Migration Review* 37, No. 1 (2003): 5-23.

11 Employers are required to accept a number of other documents demonstrating lawful residence, including a green card, but some are not aware of or do not comply with this requirement. The most common complaint of citizenship-related discrimination filed by noncitizen permanent residents is the employer's failure to accept qualifying documentation as proof of





as a signal of better social and cultural integration, motivation, or a commitment to stay in the country permanently — discrimination that is legal in many circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, naturalized citizens do tend to have higher levels of education and language proficiency than noncitizens, as discussed in the next section; they also on average have been in the United States for longer, giving them more time to gain local networks and cultural knowledge.

After major reforms to the US welfare system in 1996, it has been argued that immigrants seek citizenship in order to ensure access to publicly funded welfare benefits.<sup>13</sup> The 1996 reforms sharply reduced welfare eligibility for immigrants who have been permanent residents for fewer than five years. After five years, permanent residents still do not qualify for some benefits unless they have completed at least 40 quarters of work with legal status.<sup>14</sup> As a result, citizenship dramatically simplifies, and in some cases liberalizes, eligibility requirements.

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*Naturalized citizens do tend to have higher levels of education and language proficiency than noncitizens.*

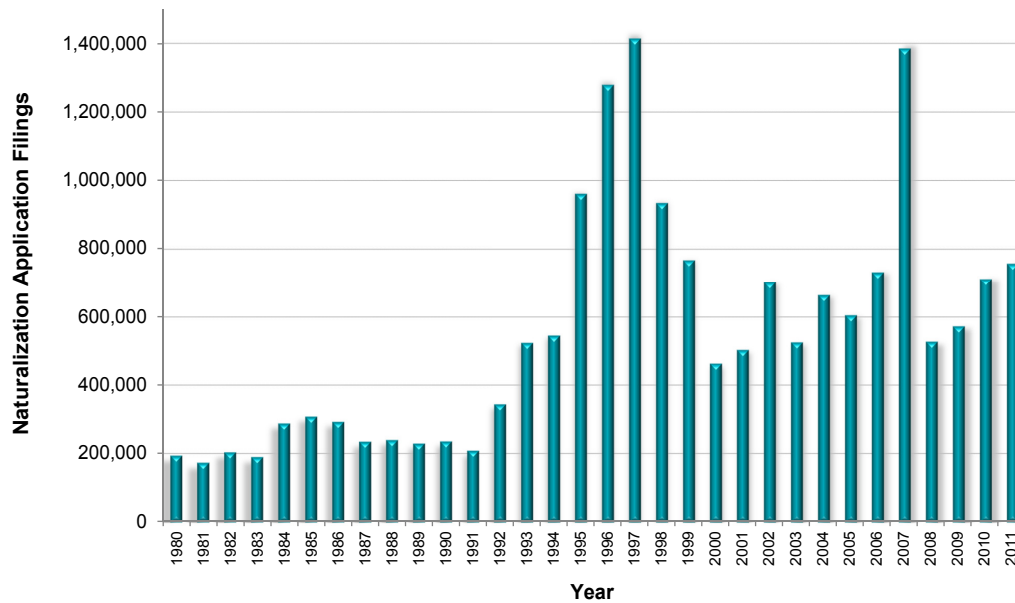
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Citizenship applications did, in fact, surge in the late 1990s (see Figure 2). However, this spike tracks the sudden increase in the number of eligible applicants approximately five years after a record number of immigrants were granted permanent resident status in 1989-91.<sup>15</sup> It is not clear to what extent access to welfare may have motivated further applications, since immigrants' welfare use is not thought to increase after naturalization.<sup>16</sup> Increased citizenship applications may also have resulted from the acrimonious debate surrounding passage of the 1996 law, which prompted fears about rising anti-immigrant sentiment and a desire among immigrants to secure their status, as well as various campaigns encouraging immigrants to naturalize.<sup>17</sup>

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employment eligibility. Author conversation with attorney from the Office of Special Counsel for Immigration-related Unfair Employment Practices, December 16, 2011.

- 12 Employers are allowed to prefer a US citizen over a permanent resident on the basis of citizenship status if the two individuals are equally qualified in every other respect; they are also allowed to discriminate against better-qualified, permanent residents who have been eligible for naturalization for at least six months but have not applied for it and in cases where the employer has three or fewer employees. See 8 U.S.C. §1324b, [www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1324b](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1324b).
- 13 See, for example, George Borjas, *The Impact of Welfare Reform on Immigrant Welfare Use* (Washington, DC: Center for Immigration Studies, 2002), [www.cis.org/articles/2002/borjas2.htm](http://www.cis.org/articles/2002/borjas2.htm).
- 14 In addition, non-naturalized permanent residents may find it more difficult to qualify for means-tested benefits if they were sponsored for permanent residence by a working family member.
- 15 The number of green cards issued exceeded 1 million per year from 1989 to 1991, reaching the historic peak of more than 1,800,000 in 1991. The 1986 *Immigration Reform and Control Act* (IRCA) legalization program was largely responsible for this increase. See US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2011* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2012), [www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk10Na.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk10Na.shtm).
- 16 Michael Fix, Jeffrey S. Passel, and Kenneth Sucher, *Trends in Naturalization* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003), [www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/310847\\_trends\\_in\\_naturalization.pdf](http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/310847_trends_in_naturalization.pdf). Another study finds that noncitizens receiving welfare before the law was enacted were not more likely to naturalize after its passage; Jennifer Van Hook, Susan K. Brown, and Frank D. Bean, "For Love or Money? Welfare Reform and Immigrants Naturalization" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, August 14-17, 2004), [www.cri.uci.edu/pdf/ForLoveOrMoney\\_July1806.pdf](http://www.cri.uci.edu/pdf/ForLoveOrMoney_July1806.pdf).
- 17 See Ann Morse and Aida Orgocka, *Immigrants to Citizens* (Washington, DC: National Council of State Legislatures, 2005), [www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/documents/immig/immigrantstocitizens.pdf](http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/documents/immig/immigrantstocitizens.pdf).

**Figure 2. Naturalization Applications Filed, 1980-2011**

Source: DHS, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2011*, Table 20 (Washington, DC: DHS, 2012) [www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk11Na.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk11Na.shtm).

### Determinants of Naturalization and Barriers to Citizenship

Naturalization rates depend on a complex range of factors that shape immigrants' ability to meet eligibility criteria on the one hand, and their motivation to naturalize on the other. To naturalize, immigrants must already hold lawful permanent residence,<sup>18</sup> demonstrate their English language proficiency and knowledge of US history and government through the naturalization test,<sup>19</sup> pass a criminal background check,<sup>20</sup> and pay an application fee of \$680.<sup>21</sup>

The cost of naturalizing in the United States is high compared with other OECD countries, potentially delaying or discouraging applications, especially among low-income immigrants.<sup>22</sup> Immigrants living on very low incomes can apply for a fee waiver,<sup>23</sup> but the threshold is quite low and applicants still face other

18 The general residence requirement is five years with lawful permanent resident (LPR) status, although there are some exceptions, most notably for the spouses of US citizens and US armed forces veterans, who can apply for citizenship after three years in LPR status. Note that since most employment-based immigrants spend a number of years on temporary visas before receiving a green card, the effective residency requirement for most employment-based immigrants is longer. The waiting requirement can be waived entirely for noncitizens who join the military. See Jeanne Batalova, "Spotlight on Naturalization Trends," *Migration Information Source*, August 2009, [www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=737](http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=737).

19 Exceptions to the English language test are in place for immigrants over the age of 55 who have been in the country for at least 15 years, those over the age of 50 who have been in the country for at least 20 years, and those with disabilities.

20 Immigrants may become ineligible if convicted of an aggravated felony, controlled substance violation, prostitution, earning money from illegal gambling, and smuggling, among others. See US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), "Adjudicator's Field Manual – Redacted Public Version," [www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/AFM/HTML/AFM/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-23223/0-0-0-23319/0-0-0-24712.html](http://www.uscis.gov/ilink/docView/AFM/HTML/AFM/0-0-0-1/0-0-0-23223/0-0-0-23319/0-0-0-24712.html).

21 This includes a fee for the collection of biometric data. For a detailed description of eligibility requirements and the naturalization process, see USCIS, "A Guide to Naturalization," 2012, [www.uscis.gov/files/article/M-476.pdf](http://www.uscis.gov/files/article/M-476.pdf).

22 Fees are significantly lower in most European Union (EU) countries, as well as Canada and Australia. They range from zero in France and Spain, to \$100 in Canada and \$260 in Australia. Higher fees prevail in the United Kingdom (\$1,375), Ireland (\$1,237), and the Netherlands (\$737). See United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA), "Fees with Effect From 6 April 2012 For Citizenship Applications," [www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/britishcitizenship/nationality-fees.pdf](http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/britishcitizenship/nationality-fees.pdf); Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS), "Citizenship Fees," [www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/WP11000026](http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/WP11000026); Sara Wallace Goodman, *Naturalisation Policies in Europe: Exploring Patterns of Inclusion and Exclusion* (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 2010), <http://eudo-citizenship.eu/docs/7-Naturalisation%20Policies%20in%20Europe.pdf>.

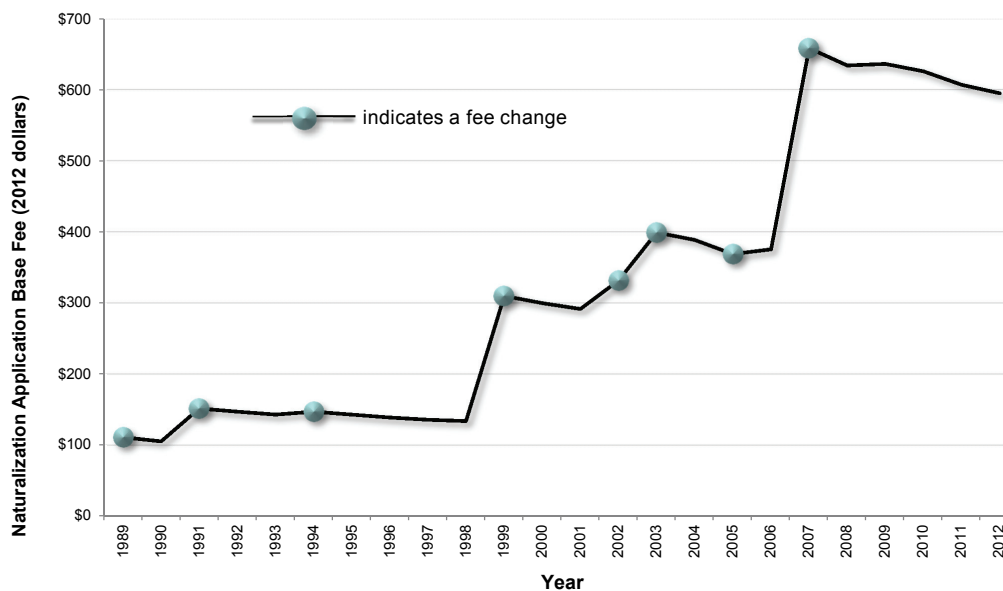
23 Fee waivers are available for a wide range of immigration applications, but are granted most often for naturalization.



costs such as transportation and the value of the time spent preparing their application and studying for the language and civics tests.<sup>24</sup> In a survey of Latino immigrants who had attended one of a series of citizenship workshops in 2010, one-quarter indicated that they had borrowed money to cover the application fee and more than two-fifths of those who had postponed their application reported cost as the reason for doing so.<sup>25</sup> The surge in naturalization applications in advance of an announced fee increase in July 2007 (see Figure 2) also indicates immigrants' sensitivity to the cost; in the month before the fee increase alone, over 460,000 applications were filed, a six-fold increase over the same month the previous year.<sup>26</sup>

*The cost of naturalizing in the United States is high compared with other OECD countries.*

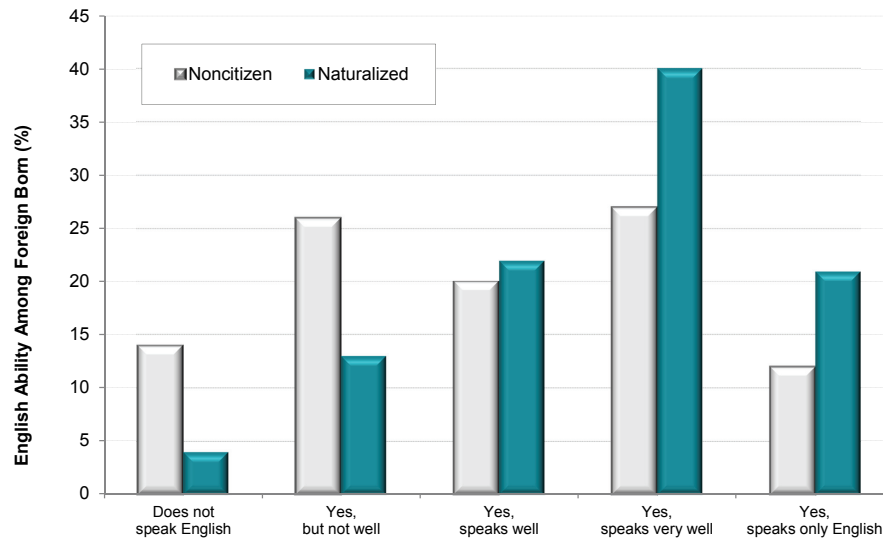
**Figure 3. Base Application Fee, Excluding Biometrics, (2012 dollars), 1989-2012**



Source: Lauren Laglagaron and Bhavna Devani, "High Stakes, More Meaning: An Overview of the Process of Redesigning the US Citizenship Test" (Migration Policy Institute Backgrounder No. 6, September 29, 2008), [www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/BR6\\_NatzTest\\_092908.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/BR6_NatzTest_092908.pdf), updated using BLS Consumer Price Index.

Approval rates for naturalization fee waiver applications are relatively high, reported to be 82 percent in the six months prior to February 2011. See USCIS, "Q&A: Quarterly National Stakeholder Engagement," [www.ilw.com/immigrationdaily/news/2011.0301-uscis.pdf](http://www.ilw.com/immigrationdaily/news/2011.0301-uscis.pdf).

- 24 Applicants are eligible for a fee waiver if they are recipients of a means-tested welfare benefit, if they have household income of no more than 150 percent of the poverty line (in 2012, this is equivalent to \$16,750 for a single person or \$22,700 for a household of two), or if they are facing other special financial difficulties. See US Department of Health and Human Services, "2012 HHS Poverty Guidelines," <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/12poverty.shtml>.
- 25 The survey was administered to immigrants who had attended workshops organized through the *Ya es hora* citizenship campaign. See Ramirez and Medina, *Catalysts and Barriers to Attaining Citizenship*. For a broader discussion of naturalization fees, see Julia Gelatt and Margie McHugh, "Immigration Fee Increases in Context" (Migration Policy Institute Fact Sheet 15, February 2007), [www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/FS15\\_CitizenshipFees2007.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/FS15_CitizenshipFees2007.pdf).
- 26 Claire Bergeron and Jeremy Banks, "Behind the Naturalization Backlog: Causes, Context, and Concerns" (Migration Policy Institute Fact Sheet 21, February 2008), [www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/FS21\\_NaturalizationBacklog\\_022608.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/FS21_NaturalizationBacklog_022608.pdf).

**Figure 4. English Language Ability among the Foreign Born, (%), 2010**

Note: Excludes individuals who have been in the United States for fewer than ten years.

Source: MPI calculations from the American Community Survey (ACS), 2010.

Pass rates for the English language and civics test are high: 93 percent of those who took the naturalization tests between October 2009 and December 2011 passed.<sup>27</sup> However, many immigrants with low English proficiency may not reach the point of taking the test because they know that their language skills are not sufficient or because low proficiency makes it difficult to understand the administrative process.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, noncitizens report much lower English proficiency than their naturalized counterparts. Noncitizens are about four times as likely as citizens to report not speaking English, and twice as likely to report not speaking English well (see Figure 4). Even when excluding unauthorized immigrants from the noncitizen population, a wide English proficiency gap remains. A 2005 estimate found that 55 percent of LPRs eligible to naturalize were Limited English Proficient (LEP), compared to a much lower 38 percent of naturalized citizens; and 72 percent of eligible Mexican citizens were LEP, suggesting that language barriers may be a strong contributor to low naturalization rates among legal Mexican immigrants.<sup>29</sup>

Lack of knowledge about the application process represents another barrier. While information on immigrants' reasons for *not* naturalizing is limited, a survey conducted in the late 1990s found that the most commonly cited obstacles aside from not meeting residence or English language requirements were the cost (18 percent of respondents) but also lack of time (21 percent) and not knowing how to apply (14 percent).<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, immigrants with spouses who are also naturalized citizens have higher-than-average naturalization rates (even compared to immigrants with US-born spouses). This suggests that family members' prior knowledge of the application process may help in encouraging immigrants to naturalize and in meeting administrative requirements.<sup>31</sup> More broadly, the extent to which immigrants'

27 USCIS, "Applicant Performance on the Naturalization Test," [www.uscis.gov/testpassrate](http://www.uscis.gov/testpassrate). For more on the naturalization test, see Laureen Laglagaron and Bhavna Devani, "High Stakes, More Meaning: An Overview of the Process of Redesigning the US Citizenship Test" (Migration Policy Institute Background No. 6, September 29, 2008), [www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/BR6\\_NatzTest\\_092908.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/BR6_NatzTest_092908.pdf).

28 Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen*.

29 Jeffrey S. Passel, *Growing Share of Immigrants Choosing Naturalization* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2007), [www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/74.pdf](http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/74.pdf).

30 The survey was of a nonrandom sample of Spanish-speaking lawful permanent residents in Texas. See Gonzalez-Baker et al., *The Making of Americans*. Cost also emerged as an important reason for postponing citizenship applications according to the *Ya es hora* survey.

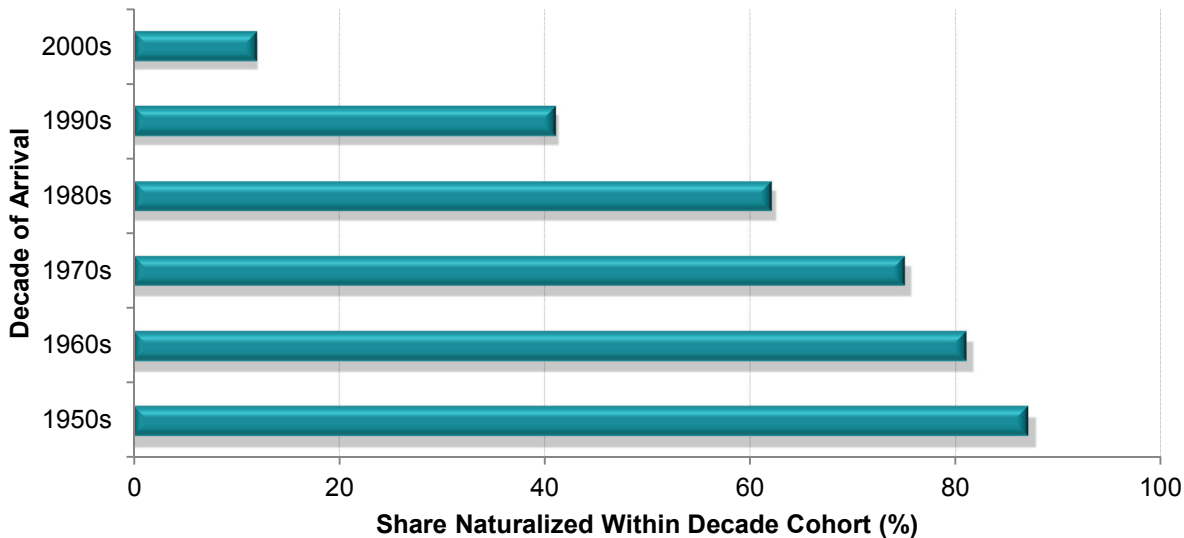
31 Van Hook et al., "For Love or Money." More generally having a citizen spouse (whether US born or naturalized) is associated with higher naturalization rates. Barry R. Chiswick and Paul W. Miller, "Citizenship in the United States: The Roles of



friends, families, and local communities promote and support citizenship acquisition is likely to shape the motivation to naturalize, overcoming barriers such as the time and effort of completing the process.<sup>32</sup>

Over time, immigrants should be able to overcome some of the barriers to naturalization as they learn English, improve their earning potential, and learn how to apply. One indication that this is the case in practice is the higher naturalization rates for those who have been in the country longer (see Figure 5).<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 5. Share of Naturalized Immigrants among Foreign Born, by Decade of Arrival, (%), 1950-2010**



Source: MPI analysis of 2008-10 ACS microdata.

Personal motivations and different perceptions of naturalization's benefits are also likely to explain why some immigrants choose to naturalize while others do not. These factors are difficult to measure, but research examining variations in naturalization rates by country of origin can provide some insights. Immigrants from refugee-sending countries have higher-than-average naturalization rates,<sup>34</sup> a trend attributed to the fact that they are much less likely to want to return to their home country and may have a greater sense of gratitude or attachment to the country that offered them refuge.<sup>35</sup> Naturalization rates are also estimated to be higher among immigrants from countries that are socially and politically less attractive — for example, those with poor records on civil liberties.<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, immigrants from high-income countries are less likely to naturalize despite having higher

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Immigrants Characteristics and Country of Origin," *Research in Labor Economics* 29: 91–130, [www.econstor.eu/dspace/bitstream/10419/35145/1/574382275.pdf](http://www.econstor.eu/dspace/bitstream/10419/35145/1/574382275.pdf); Passel, *Growing Share of Immigrants Choosing Naturalization*. One reason for this may be that immigrants who received their green card through marriage to a US citizen can apply for citizenship after three years instead of five.

32 In other words, the decision to naturalize is not just an individual cost-benefit analysis, but a decision strongly shaped by institutions and communities. See Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen*.

33 Note that immigrants who arrived in the 2000s have particularly low naturalization rates because many are not yet eligible based on residency requirements. In addition, the 1990s and 2000s cohorts have larger shares of unauthorized immigrants than other groups, reducing the numbers who are eligible to naturalize.

34 Fix, Passel, and Sucher, *Trends in Naturalization*; Chiswick and Miller, "Citizenship in the United States;" Karen Woodrow-Lafield, Xiaohu Xu, Thomas Kersen, and Bunnak Poch, "Naturalization of U.S. Immigrants: Highlights from Ten Countries," *Population Research and Policy Review* 23 (2004): 187–218.

35 The fact that refugees receive more targeted support for learning English and integrating into social and civic life probably also plays a role.

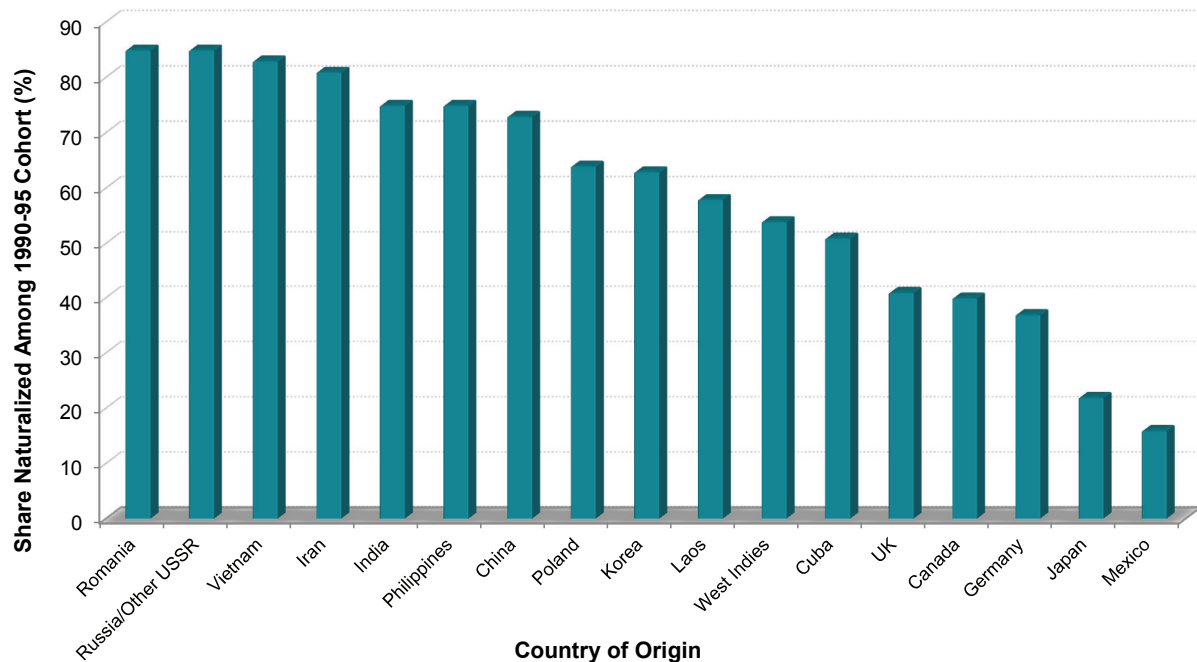
36 Chiswick and Miller, "Citizenship in the United States;" Guillermina Jasso and Mark Richard Rosenzweig, "Family Reunification and the Immigration Multiplier: US Immigration Law, Origin-Country Conditions, and the Reproduction of Immigrants," *Demography* 23, no. 3 (1986): 291–311; Philip Q. Yang, "Explaining Immigrant Naturalization," *International Migration Review* 28, no. 3 (1994): 449–77.



education levels and language proficiency.<sup>37</sup> One explanation for this is that they perceive US citizenship as granting fewer benefits relative to their existing nationality, perhaps because they already experience benefits such as visa-free travel abroad, because they are more likely to return home,<sup>38</sup> or because the prestige of US citizenship is not as great in their home countries.

Figure 6 shows the share of naturalized citizens among a cohort of immigrants that arrived in the early 1990s, as measured in 2008-10. While not all countries follow the expected pattern,<sup>39</sup> striking differences exist between the low naturalization rates of immigrants from high-income countries such as Japan, Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom, and the much higher rates among those from current or recent refugee-producing countries such as Iran, Vietnam, Russia, and Romania.

**Figure 6. Share Naturalized Citizens among 1990-95 Immigrant Cohorts in 2008-10, (%)**



Source: MPI analysis of 2008-10 ACS microdata.

Immigrants' desire to naturalize may also depend on whether their home country permits or tolerates dual citizenship. While restrictions on dual citizenship are often not enforced in practice, immigrants who are aware of the restrictions may still prefer not to take the risk of losing their original citizenship and with it the flexibility to live, work, and in some cases own property or businesses in their country of origin. A number of studies support this hypothesis, although the effects of dual citizenship laws appear to be relatively small in comparison with other factors that shape naturalization rates.<sup>40</sup>

37 Chiswick and Miller, "Citizenship in the United States." This finding holds for a wide range of immigrant-receiving countries. See OECD, *Naturalization: A Passport for Better Integration*.

38 OECD, *International Migration Outlook: SOPEMI 2008 Edition* (Paris, OECD, 2009), [www.oecd.org/dataoecd/30/13/41275373.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/30/13/41275373.pdf).

39 This is perhaps not surprising if Barry Chiswick and Paul Miller are correct in finding that individual characteristics such as age, education, language proficiency, and legal status explain more of the variation in naturalization rates than country-specific characteristics. Chiswick and Miller, "Citizenship in the United States."

40 In particular, studies have found that the liberalization of dual citizenship restrictions in several Latin American countries during the 1990s increased the propensity of immigrants from these countries to naturalize in the United States, and that immigrants from countries that permit dual citizenship have higher naturalization rates, other individual characteristics held constant. See Michael Jones-Correa, "Under Two Flags: Dual Nationality in Latin America and Its Consequences for the United States."

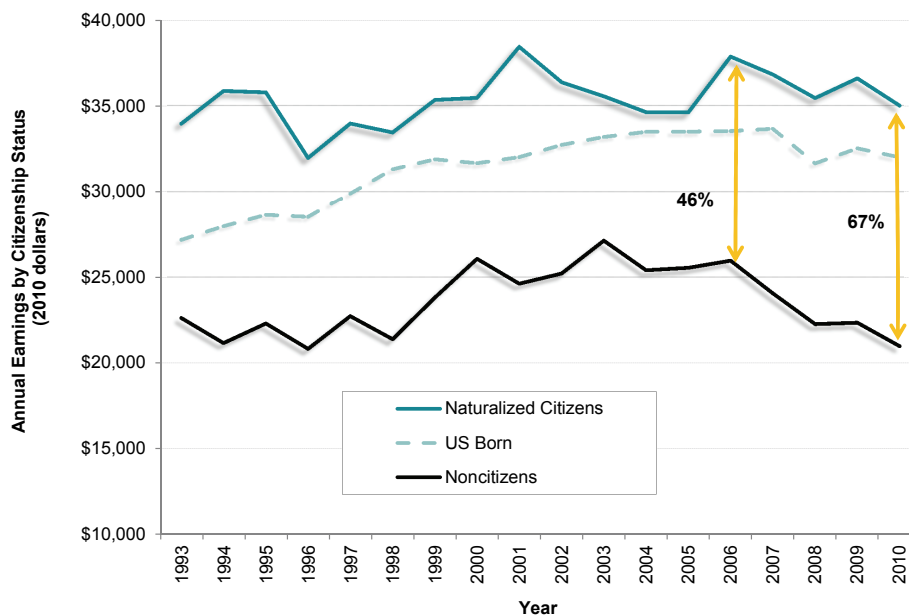


### III. What Is the Economic Value of Naturalization?

Given that citizenship both signals the integration already achieved and opens up opportunities for further integration, it is perhaps no surprise that naturalized immigrants fare better in the labor market than noncitizens. On the one hand, naturalized immigrants have characteristics associated with economic success, such as higher levels of education and English language ability, and longer tenure in the US labor market — characteristics that are in part responsible for their ability to obtain citizenship. On the other hand, naturalization can bring direct benefits such as access to a wider range of jobs and the ability to signal social and cultural integration to prospective employers.

Naturalized citizens earn between 50 and 70 percent more than noncitizens (see Figure 7). They have higher employment rates and are half as likely to live below the poverty line as noncitizens (see Figure 8).<sup>41</sup> Naturalized citizens also appear to have weathered the effects of the economic crisis more successfully.<sup>42</sup> Noncitizens' median income fell by 19 percent from 2006-10, compared to declines of 8 percent for the US born and just 5 percent for naturalized citizens.<sup>43</sup> As a result, the earnings gap between naturalized and noncitizen immigrants increased from 46 percent to 67 percent over the same period (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Annual Earnings by Citizenship Status, (2010 dollars), 1993-2010**



*Note:* Arrows indicate the percentage gap between naturalized and noncitizen immigrants. Excludes immigrants who have been in the United States for fewer than ten years.

*Source:* MPI analysis of CPS data, 1994-2011, adjusted for inflation using the BLS Consumer Price Index.

States" (working papers in Latin American Studies, no. 99/00-3, Harvard University, 2000), [www.drclas.harvard.edu/uploads/images/26/jones\\_correa.pdf](http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/uploads/images/26/jones_correa.pdf); Francesca Mazzolari, "Dual Citizenship Rights: Do They Make More and Better Citizens?" (IZA Discussion Paper 3008, Institute for the Study of Labor, Bonn, Germany, August 2007), <http://ftp.iza.org/dp3008.pdf>; Chiswick and Miller, "Citizenship in the United States."

41 All calculations restricted to those with at least ten years of residence in the United States.

42 Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Madeleine Sumption, and Aaron Terrazas, eds, *Migration and the Great Recession: The Transatlantic Experience* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2011), [www.migrationpolicy.org/bookstore/migrationand-recession.php](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/bookstore/migrationand-recession.php).

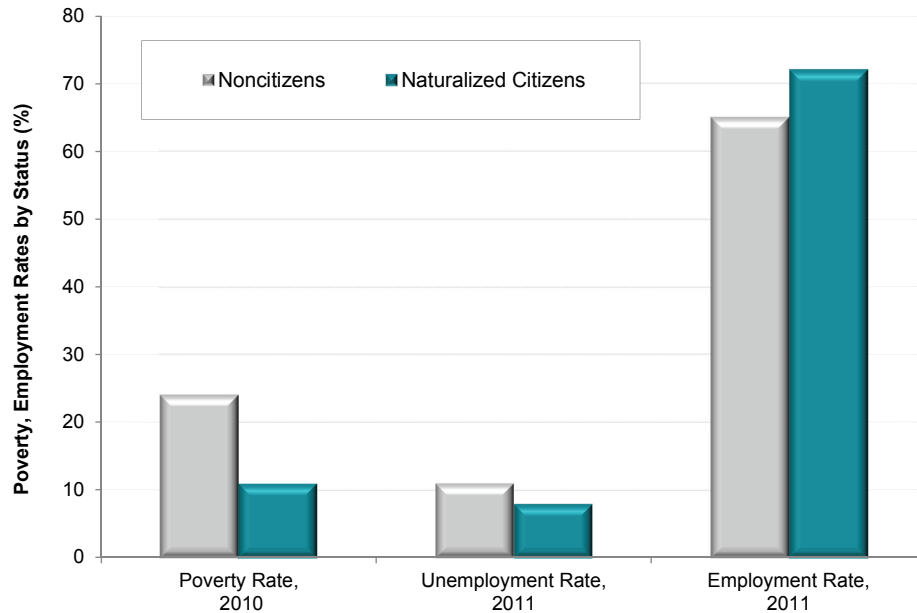
43 Figures apply to all immigrants with at least ten years of residence in the United States.





How much of this apparent “citizenship premium” is explained by the characteristics of immigrants who are motivated to naturalize, and how much results directly from citizenship itself? Separating the impact of citizenship from individual citizens’ characteristics is difficult. Researchers have typically estimated the impact of citizenship itself by comparing naturalized and noncitizen populations while statistically controlling for observable differences between them, such as higher education levels and US work experience. After all, naturalized immigrants are on average ten years older, have an additional ten years of residence and potential work experience in the United States, and are twice as likely to have a college degree or higher (32 percent have at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to 15 percent of noncitizens).<sup>44</sup>

**Figure 8. Foreign-Born Poverty, Unemployment, and Employment by Status, 2010-11**



*Note:* Excludes immigrants who have been in the United States for fewer than ten years.  
*Source:* MPI calculations from CPS.

noncitizen immigrants of 41 percent. The impact was higher for women than for men (9 and 7 percent, respectively). The same study finds that naturalization is associated with both an immediate earnings boost within two years of gaining citizenship, and faster earnings growth in subsequent years.<sup>45</sup>

Another study that takes a similar approach using data from 2006-07 finds that naturalized citizens had family incomes 15 percent higher than noncitizens, although the data do not allow controls for language ability and thus are likely to overstate the true impact of citizenship.<sup>46</sup> Again, the estimated benefit of citizenship was slightly higher for women than for men (17 compared to 12 percent). It was also higher for Hispanic immigrants than other ethnoracial groups, and for immigrants with at least a high school education, a finding that may be driven in part by higher concentrations of unauthorized immigrants among noncitizens who lack a high school diploma. Citizenship was also associated with lower poverty levels, especially among Hispanic immigrants, whose naturalized citizens experienced poverty rates 4.3 percentage points lower than among noncitizens, after controlling for observable differences compared to noncitizens.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Excludes those who arrived within the past ten years. See MPI calculations from ACS 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Manuel Pastor and Justin Scoggins, *The Economic Benefits of Naturalization* (tentative title) (Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California, Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, 2012, forthcoming).

<sup>46</sup> Pastor and Scoggins’ analysis includes a slightly wider range of other controls, including the unemployment rate in the local area. Heidi Shierholz, *The Effects of Citizenship on Family Income and Poverty* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2010), [www.epi.org/page/-/bp256/bp256.pdf](http://www.epi.org/page/-/bp256/bp256.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Analysis that controls for these characteristics has typically found that citizenship has a positive impact on immigrants’ incomes even if most of the wage gap between the citizen and noncitizen populations results from differences in individual characteristics. Manuel Pastor and Justin Scoggins, for example, find that in 2010 naturalized citizens earned 8 percent more than noncitizens, after adjusting for differences in variables that included industry and occupation, language ability, country of origin, and duration of residence in the United States. This compares to a total (unadjusted) gap between naturalized and



Studies such as this can control for immigrants' observable characteristics, but they cannot account for the unobservable factors that explain why apparently comparable individuals make different choices about whether to naturalize. These include characteristics such as motivation or a sense of commitment to the United States, both of which might be associated with greater personal investments in income-boosting activities such as locally relevant training or language learning.<sup>48</sup> The studies also cannot eliminate the impact of legal status on noncitizens' incomes. As a result, this methodology almost certainly overstates the benefit of naturalization to some extent.

Researchers can in theory address some of these problems by using longitudinal data that follow individuals over time and identify the labor market performance of the same individuals before and after naturalization. But because only limited data of this kind are available, only one US study has taken this approach. It relies on a (relatively small) sample of individuals from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to estimate the economic benefit of naturalization for young adult men during the 1980s. The study found that recently naturalized immigrants enjoyed faster wage increases than their noncitizen counterparts for several years, leading to a total citizenship-induced wage boost of 5.6 percent.<sup>49</sup> One of the reasons for this faster wage growth was that naturalization led to an immediate increase in immigrants' representation in white-collar jobs.<sup>50</sup> The study shows that without longitudinal data to account for unobserved differences between individuals, the estimated impact of naturalization on earnings would have been slightly higher, although not dramatically so, at about 5.9 percent.<sup>51</sup>

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*Naturalized citizens appear to have weathered the effects of the economic crisis more successfully.*

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Taken together, these studies suggest that while most of the difference between citizens and noncitizens derives from observable differences between them (such as education, age, US work experience, and country of origin), in addition to a smaller share that derives from unobserved differences such as motivation, ability, or better social and cultural integration, a meaningful citizenship premium remains. While the magnitude of the estimated wage premium varies by study, all of them have found an impact of at least 5 percent. This finding is broadly consistent with those of similar studies using a range of data (including longitudinal sources) in other OECD countries.<sup>52</sup>

48 Note also that since naturalization involves nontrivial costs, immigrants with higher incomes are better able to afford it and hence will be represented in higher numbers among the naturalized population.

49 Bernt Bratsberg, James F. Ragan Jr, and Zafar M. Nasir, "The Effect of Naturalization on Wage Growth: A Panel Study of Young Male Immigrants," *Journal of Labor Economics* 20, no. 3 (2002): 568–97.

50 As the authors point out, longitudinal data cannot entirely eliminate the problem of selection bias. Immigrants who stand to gain most from naturalization — for example, because they are seeking work in highly skilled occupations where US citizenship is a requirement for entry — may be most likely to naturalize.

51 The paper also presents results using a similar methodology to Heidi Shierholz's study, and comes to consistent conclusions. In particular, it also finds that the impact of citizenship varies by country and is most significant for immigrants from lower-income countries.

52 OECD, *Naturalization: A Passport to Better Integration*.



## IV. Conclusion

Naturalized citizens have fared consistently better in the US labor market than their noncitizen counterparts, and this gap has widened as a result of the economic crisis. Some of the gap results from easily measurable differences between the two groups; some derives from less tangible differences such as the commitment to the country that naturalization both symbolizes and enables; and some appears to result directly from the acquisition of citizenship itself. Even after controlling for the fact that naturalized immigrants have higher levels of education, better language skills, and more work experience in the United States, there is some evidence that the naturalized may earn a wage premium that different studies have estimated at 5 percent or more. The citizenship premium appears to be larger for Latino immigrants and for women.

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. Even if the true impact of naturalization on immigrants' labor market prospects is closer to the lower end of the estimates described in this report, citizenship policy remains a significant tool for facilitating integration, especially if taken as part of a broader strategy to improve immigrants' outcomes through access to language learning and skills development.

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*Citizenship policy remains a significant tool for facilitating integration, especially if taken as part of a broader strategy to improve immigrants' outcomes through access to language learning and skills development.*

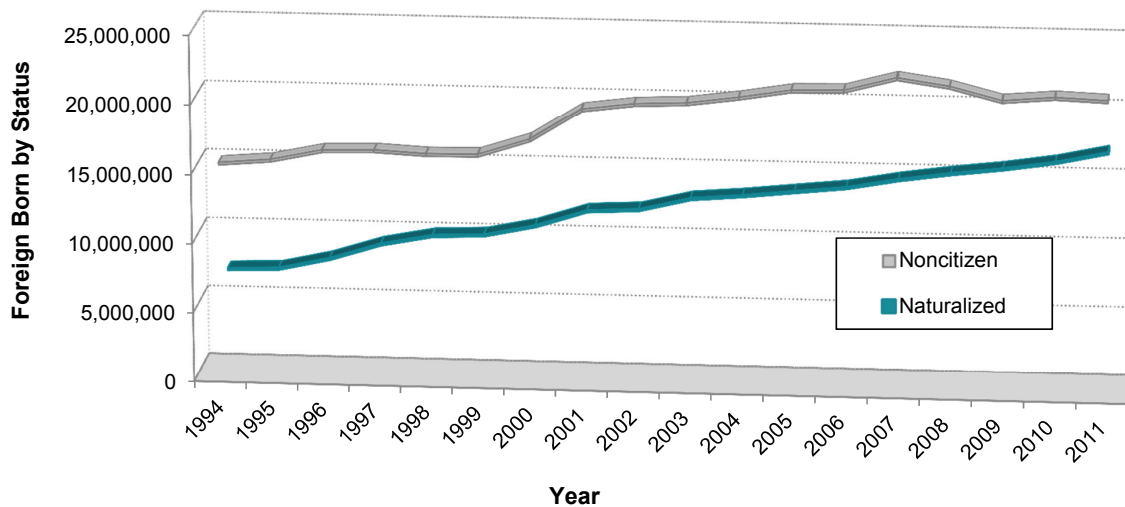
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## Appendix: Changes in the Naturalized Population over Time

The share of the immigrant population with US citizenship has fluctuated over time. It fell from about 50 percent in 1980 to 30 percent in 1994 alongside a large increase in immigrant flows that boosted the size of the recently arrived and unauthorized immigrant populations not eligible for naturalization. The share of naturalized citizens has risen gradually ever since.<sup>53</sup> Since 2007 the number of naturalized citizens has continued to grow while the number of noncitizens remained stable — a trend in large part attributable to the sharp reduction in illegal immigration during the late 2000s (Appendix Figure A).<sup>54</sup>

**Figure A-1. Number of Naturalized and Noncitizen Immigrants, 1994-2011**



*Note:* Percentages refer to the share of naturalized citizens in the total foreign-born population.  
*Source:* CPS March Supplements, made available by IPUMS.

<sup>53</sup> MPI calculations from unadjusted CPS data (1994 onwards) and Census data (1980 and 1990).

<sup>54</sup> An average of 670,000 people have naturalized annually since 2000. In 2010, 620,000 people were naturalized — roughly 8 percent of the number estimated to be eligible at the beginning of the year. According to DHS, the eligible non-naturalized population fluctuated but remained roughly stable during the 2000s, between about 7.75 million and 8.16 million people. DHS, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2010*, Table 20 (Washington, DC: DHS, 2011), [www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk10Na.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/YrBk10Na.shtm).



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