

A NATION OF CITIZENS.

OVERVIEW

Our nation is home to over 24 million foreign born non-citizens. 11 million are undocumented and trapped with no pathway to citizenship. 13 million are here with documentation, and 9 million of them could become citizens but for the barriers of cost and English proficiency that stand in their way. These barriers limit the rights protecting immigrants and their families and depress immigrant earnings and their ability to contribute fully to our workforce and economy. New Americans work hard to integrate into our society, but the current system is perpetuating an American underclass, frozen out of our democracy.

The federal government can support robust integration and promote civic participation. We must take action by:

- Passing comprehensive immigration reform that includes an earned path to citizenship
- Curtailing enforcement of broken immigration laws
- Promoting citizenship and eliminating disincentives to naturalization

BACKGROUND

The goal of equality and full participation is enshrined in the founding documents of our nation. The Declaration of Independence begins with the words "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Our history has been one of continued struggle to make these words true, from the struggle to end slavery to the enfranchisement of women. Our democratic ideal is one person, one vote. However, current immigration laws and regulations have resulted in the staggering 24 million non-citizens living in the United States, unable to participate fully in our civic life. This is not good for these individuals, for our nation, or for our democracy.

There are an estimated 11.3 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. today, working to support their families, paying taxes and contributing an estimated \$8 billion a year into the Social Security Trust Fund, at risk of deportation and the destruction of their families. These individuals live and work in our nation without any voice in our democracy. It is shameful that our gridlocked political system is incapable of legislating a solution.

In addition, 13.3 million legal permanent residents (LPRs), commonly referred to as green card holders, can work and travel legally, they pay taxes, but they have no say in our democracy. Nearly 9 million of them are currently eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship but have not done so due to barriers including cost and English; only about 650,000 immigrants, or around 7 percent of those eligible, naturalize each year.

Immigrants are priced out of citizenship. This is due to significant naturalization fee increases between 2000 and 2008. In 2007 alone, the naturalization fee rose by 300 percent, and a drop off in application rates followed. These increases have disproportionately impacted Latinos and the working poor, the largest groups eligible to naturalize. The naturalization fee is cost prohibitive for Mexicans in particular. Of the 2.6 million Mexican immigrants currently eligible to naturalize, only about 100,000 do so each year. 32 percent of people eligible to become citizens are eligible for a fee waiver because they

are under 150 percent of poverty.¹ For a household of one, that means they earn less than \$17,655 a year. And even for those above the federal poverty standard, recent research suggests that the naturalization fee, currently \$680, is prohibitively high.

Other barriers include lack of English skills, inadequate information, and fear of failing the citizenship exam. U.S. citizenship should not be a privilege limited to the wealthy and highly educated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pass comprehensive immigration reform that includes an earned path to citizenship

- Congress must pass bipartisan legislation to address our broken immigration system through comprehensive immigration reform to address our broken immigration system
- Comprehensive reform must include a path to citizenship for the undocumented
- Comprehensive reform should ensure that access to federal programs is not limited by immigration status. For example, comprehensive reform should include provisions for quality health care for all, regardless of immigration status, and a path to citizenship should allow for those who have already paid billions into Social Security to benefit from the programs so that they can age with dignity

Curtail enforcement of broken immigration laws

- In recent years enforcement has escalated at an unprecedented rate. Too often these deportations separate families and affect individuals who should certainly not be the priority for the huge amount of Federal funds required to take someone through deportation proceedings
- We must enhance oversight of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to minimize deportations
- We must aggressively legislate against and regulate private detention centers which are profiting from our nation's broken policies, exploiting immigrants' lack of legal status for their own gain

Promote citizenship and eliminate barriers to naturalization

- We must create a national push to promote naturalization
- Congress should fund United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Integration and Citizenship grant program to ease pressure on the fee account rather than allowing the agency to remain dependent on fees
- USCIS should reduce the cost of naturalization, invest in raising awareness of the naturalization fee waiver, streamline implementation of that waiver, and create a partial fee waiver for the working poor to reduce the cost disincentive to naturalization
- USCIS should further open its Integration and Citizenship grant program to community and immigrant organizations to foster outreach to the hardest to reach populations
- Refugees face particular barriers related to the language and civic requirements. More assistance and compassionate waiver policies must be extended to refugees

¹ Pastor, Manuel, et al. *Profiling the Eligible to Naturalize*. Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration and Center for American Progress. November 24, 2014.