Paths to Citizenship

Understanding who is likely to naturalize

Executive Summary

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With the exclusionary tenor of the United States federal government towards immigrants and constant new policy proposals threatening newcomers, immigrant families and immigrant allies are seeking ways to better protect their communities and secure the American Dream for all. Some have begun linking arms with local immigrants' rights groups, while others have sharply limited their contact with authorities of any type. Many of those who have legal status have become naturalized citizens as a way to become more protected under federal law and to exercise voting rights in order to change the law itself.

Given the context, one would imagine that all eligible immigrants would make the choice to become a U.S. citizen. Yet the number of lawful permanent residents (LPRs) who are eligible to naturalize in the U.S. stands at nearly 9 million and has risen slowly and relatively steadily over the past several years. In *Paths to Citizenship*, we explore the factors that influence naturalization rates among eligible-to-naturalize adults in the United States, including individual characteristics (such as English language ability, income, and knowledge about the process) and contextual factors (such as the receptivity of the state or region to immigrants and their families).

Encouraging naturalization has long been a point of unity among those on all sides of the immigration debate. After all, the benefits of naturalization include increased wages, better job opportunities, enhanced security, and greater civic engagement. As such, immigrant integration advocates and practitioners have generally sought to boost naturalization rates. Knowing more about which characteristics are most strongly associated with naturalization can help identify which barriers need to be addressed. In addition, understanding which groups are more likely to naturalize than others and where they live can help the non-profit, public, and private sectors to effectively direct resources to boost naturalization rates. Such is the purpose of this research brief and its accompanying interactive maps (which can be found at dornsife.usc.edu/csii/map-eligible-to-naturalize-puma/).

To offer a data-driven approach to encouraging naturalization, we use publicly available datasets—the 2012-2016 American Community Survey and the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation—to generate individual-level estimates of who is eligible to naturalize and the probabilities of naturalization for eligible adults. We find that the main drivers of an eligible adult's propensity to naturalize are related to (1) individual demographic characteristics, such as English language ability, educational attainment, income, and whether they are married to a U.S. citizen or have an undocumented family member in the same household; (2) country-of-origin characteristics, such as whether dual citizenship is allowed and whether they come from a refugee-sending country; and (3) characteristics of where eligible adults live in the U.S., such as whether they reside in a Democratic-leaning state and the concentration of immigrants in their sub-county area.

Some of our main findings include:

- **Language**: Those who report speaking English "well" or "very well" are about 130 to 150 percent more likely to naturalize than those who report not speaking English at all.
- **Education**: Eligible adults who have some college education or a bachelor's degree are about 30 to 35 percent more likely to naturalize, compared to those who have less than a high school diploma.
- **Gender**: Females are 12 percent more likely to naturalize than males.
- **Family structure**: Having an undocumented family member in the household is associated with nearly a 50 percent lower likelihood of naturalizing, likely due to concerns about interacting with the government.

Building on this analysis, we are able to place eligible adults into three categories: low, medium, and high probability of naturalization. Each of these groups might require more or less effort (and different types of effort) to encourage naturalization, and this could be a guide to more efficiently targeting outreach. As it turns out, about 40 percent of eligible adults in the United States have a low probability of naturalization, 35 percent have medium probability, and 25 percent have high probability.

Some of the characteristics of these three groups are as follows:

- **Low probability:** This group is generally older, more Latino, has lower educational attainment and income, and is less proficient in their English speaking abilities. About 23 percent of this population is 65 years or older, 71 percent identifies as Latino, 60 percent report speaking English "not well" or "not at all," and 54 percent has a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

- **Medium probability:** This population is majority middle-aged (ages 35-54), has moderate levels of educational attainment, and tends to speak English at least "well." More than 70 percent of this group has at least a high school degree and 70 percent report speaking English "well" or better. Compared to the low probability group, this group is more economically resourced with 60 percent living at or above 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Though majority Latino, at 53 percent, there is a stronger presence of those identifying as Black and Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI).

- **High probability:** Eligible adults in this category are typically younger, have higher levels of educational attainment, and report higher English speaking fluency. Within this group, only 12 percent have less than a high school degree while 67 percent have at least some college education. About 88 percent report speaking English "well" or better. Compared to those with low or medium probabilities of naturalization, this group has higher levels of income with 69 percent at or above 200 percent of the federal poverty line. Black and AAPI eligible adults are more likely to be in this group than eligible adults of other races and ethnicities, with AAPI individuals making up 34 percent of high probability adults.

To add further richness to this research, we developed an interactive mapping tool (see prior link). The maps show how eligible adults with different probabilities of naturalization are geographically distributed. Specifically, these maps identify the number of eligible adults in different locations (i.e., on

the state, congressional district, and local levels) along with demographic information for each of the three groups.

Distinguishing these groups helps when considering what types of support and services would be most effective in boosting naturalization rates. Mapping the distribution of eligible adults by their probabilities of naturalizing provides guidance to service providers, elected officials, and policymakers with different objectives. For example, some may be more focused on equitably helping those with the most barriers (i.e., the low probability group), while others may be looking to substantially boost civic engagement and voting among those who may only need a nudge towards naturalization (i.e., the high probability group). Still others may want to work with populations that need more than a nudge but for whom the barriers to citizenship are more surmountable (i.e., the medium probability group). Our tool and data can help users determine the effectiveness and possible trade-offs between numbers of adults naturalizing and the resources providers may have.

Our case studies highlight the types of services offered by different organizations and infer which groups may benefit most from the services. For example, Citizenshipworks provides online resources and step-by-step guidance through the citizenship eligibility requirements and the naturalization application itself. Services like these may be beneficial to individuals categorized as having a *high probability of naturalizing* considering that they are more likely to have the skillsets to navigate the naturalization process and the online tools provided by Citizenshipworks. CASA is a membership-based organization that provides comprehensive naturalization support to its members, such as eligibility screenings, in-person application assistance, and referrals to attorneys. Resources like these may be particularly helpful in addressing some of the barriers to naturalization for individuals categorized as having a *medium probability of naturalizing* and who are able to afford the modest membership fee. Lastly, Asian Americans Advancing Justice – LA is an organization that provides free extensive and comprehensive naturalization support, including legal helplines available in eight AAPI languages, in-person application assistance, legal representation, and follow-up services. Those categorized as having a *low probability of naturalizing* may benefit from an organization that provides a range of comprehensive and accessible services that address multiple barriers to the naturalization process.

While useful, we are aware that categorizing eligible adults into three groups is imperfect and could result in equity issues. For example, among our high probability group, there are some who may have the language skills, education, and financial resources necessary for an easy path to naturalization but may not desire to naturalize for other reasons not captured by our predictive model. In terms of equity issues, if organizations promoting naturalization focus solely on the "low-hanging fruit" to improve their naturalization outcomes, resources could be diverted away from those who need the most support. Indeed, if organizations promoted the naturalization of those with the most barriers, those with fewer barriers would benefit along the way.

Despite these nuances and cautions, we trust that *Paths to Citizenship* is a useful contribution to the growing body of research on the eligible-to-naturalize population. For example, the higher probability of naturalization among women suggests that providers could both target women and support them as "ambassadors" who can encourage naturalization among other groups (much like the popular health *promotora* model). In addition, the fact that having an undocumented family member reduces the probability of naturalization suggests the interaction of different elements of our immigration system. If

we want to encourage naturalization, we should also understand the "chilling effect" of the current emphasis on deportation and family separation. Service providers and policymakers can collectively increase naturalization rates by providing a sense of security throughout the naturalization process. For example, service providers can proactively collaborate with other organizations and groups that have trust among the undocumented community, while policymakers can advocate for more institutional changes, such as removing questions on the N-400 form that ask about the legal and citizenship status of family members and spouses.

We are at a time in the history of our nation where our values of inclusion, equity, and diversity are being challenged. In order to overcome this challenge, we must add voices to the chorus of those who understand the importance of immigrants to our nation. Regardless of status, immigrants can work with others to make the case for the positive contributions immigrants make to our economy and our polity. But those who are LPRs will be even more effective at shifting public policy and public attitudes through naturalization and the new forms of civic engagement that naturalization facilitates. We hope that the analysis and tools we offer here help encourage citizenship, better support immigrants, and move us towards a more inclusive nation.

Acknowledgements