



How Barriers to Citizenship Status Increase Inequality in the United States

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Current debates about immigration reform focus on whether or not there will be a “path to citizenship” for the eleven million undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States – and, if so, how long the road will be. Citizenship brings new rights and opportunities for individuals and families, and the country as a whole also has a stake in drawing into full citizenship both legal and undocumented newcomers. Otherwise America may face growing gaps in life chances among groups with different immigration and citizenship statuses. Across many decades of U.S. history, grants of citizenship, or refusals, have been used to incorporate masses of newcomers from Europe and exclude others, such as those from many Asian countries. Today, citizenship status has again become an axis of inequality that exacerbates other disparities grounded in class and race. Denying undocumented immigrants, mostly from Mexico and Central America, opportunities to get on a path to citizenship is one obvious source of continuing inequality. In addition, my research shows that barriers to citizenship status also exist for many newcomers with legal permanent resident status – so-called “green card” holders. The difficulties these immigrants face magnify inequalities in American society as a whole.

Access to Citizenship for Legal Residents

Citizenship can, in principle, be obtained by immigrants who already have “green cards,” or documents that demonstrate their legal permanent status in the United States and meet a range of criteria. Access to permanent legal residency itself is restricted. Most commonly, immigrants obtain green cards through close relatives who are already citizens or permanent residents. Many others do so through employment or by claiming refugee status. Residents of countries that are relatively underrepresented in the United States may be able to win green cards in a lottery. Once they gain permanent legal resident status, most immigrants must wait five years to apply for citizenship – and they then must pay hefty fees, fill out detailed applications, and undergo interviews and testing by immigration officials, all before, finally, attending a swearing-in ceremony that makes their newly gained citizenship official. Some legal residents have a slightly easier path. Those married to U.S. citizens wait three years instead of five, and members of the military may currently apply when they enlist. In response to anti-immigrant measures at national, state, and local levels, applications for citizen status have increased in recent years. Nevertheless, fewer than half of immigrants in the U.S. have become citizens, and the U.S. take-up rate is much lower than rates in sister immigration destinations such as Canada and Australia.

Who Gains Citizenship?

Commentators noting the low uptake of U.S. citizenship have raised concerns about the loyalty of new immigrants and difficulties in the naturalization process. In addition, uneven citizenship intersects with and exacerbates other dimensions of inequality in American society. In a study of data from the U.S. Census, I found that immigrants with less than high school education are increasingly less likely to be citizens compared to more educated immigrants. In 1970, the level of education did not make much difference for whether immigrants had become citizens, but by 2000 a large education gap had appeared. Immigrants with higher levels of income are also more likely to gain citizenship. In short, during an era when inequality has grown overall in the United States, citizenship status is being attained much more unequally by more and less privileged legal residents.

Racial disparities are also growing. Hispanic immigrants, whether black or white, have the lowest levels of citizenship, while non-Hispanic blacks and whites, as well as Asians, all gain citizenship at about average rates. This finding cannot be explained away by the higher representation of Hispanic immigrants among the undocumented, who are not eligible for citizenship; even among legal Hispanic permanent residents, the uptake of citizenship for the largest group, Mexicans, is low. By countries of origin, the lowest proportions gaining citizenship are found among Guatemalan, Mexican, and Salvadoran immigrants, and the highest proportions occur among immigrants from Vietnam and the Philippines.

Why Uneven Access to Citizenship Matters

It is unfortunate that access to citizenship is increasingly paralleling other disparities in U.S. society, because citizenship status promises access to the full civil liberties and rights, making immigrants almost equal to native-born Americans. The right to vote and to run for most political offices is reserved for citizens. For individual immigrants, citizenship expands job opportunities across the economic spectrum – opening posts ranging from state-licensed cosmetician to police officer and making it possible to compete for government fellowships, grants, and contracts. Citizenship also allows newcomers to bring other family members through reunification rules, and eases connections between the United States and immigrant countries of origin. For the immigrants who may fall on hard times, citizenship status improves access to welfare benefits. Perhaps most important, citizenship provides a sense of security and permanency by fully protecting immigrants from threats of deportation.

Citizenship benefits not only newcomers and their families, but also communities and the nation as a whole. For example, because Hispanics are often not citizens, this minority group, now the largest in the United States, has much less political clout than its sheer numbers might suggest. Although legal resident noncitizens can and do engage in political activity, their inability to vote and run for office reduces their political efficacy; and along with undocumented immigrants, they are at risk for deportation. The estimated twenty-two million noncitizen immigrants add up to a troubling indicator for the health of American democracy, because these people live, work, raise families, and contribute to their communities, but are excluded from the innermost circle of membership in the nation. Hundreds of thousands of legal resident immigrants become eligible to apply for citizenship every year. And comprehensive immigration reform, if Congress acts, could put many currently undocumented on the path to citizenship in the future. Everyone who cares about reducing socioeconomic and racial inequalities in the United States should want to address inequalities in citizenship acquisition by legal residents and support full access to citizenship for the undocumented.

Read more in Sofya Aptekar, *The Road to Citizenship: What Naturalization Means for Immigrants and the United States*. (Rutgers University Press, 2015).