Issue Brief: Latinos and Immigration

Key Words
Latino, Mexico, immigration, naturalization, eligible immigrants, administrative barriers

Description
This issue brief discusses immigration and Latino population growth in the United States as they relate to the naturalization process for Latino immigrants. The Pew Hispanic Center states that language, financial, and administrative barriers are the main reasons for legal residents neglecting to seek citizenship. The main components of the brief address the naturalization process and why Mexican immigrants are the largest group of immigrants who live in the United States illegally.

Key Points
- Standardizing a straightforward process toward achieving citizenship for individuals who are in the United States illegally will likely be one of the most contested components of immigration legislation addressed by Congress this year.
- Approximately 65% of the 5.4 million legal Mexican immigrants who are eligible to become United States citizens have not yet taken steps to begin the naturalization process.
- Mexican immigrants are not only the largest group of immigrants in the United States illegally (6.1 million or 55% of the estimated 11.1 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. as of 2011), but they are also the largest group of legal permanent residents, accounting for 3.9 million out of 12 million individuals.
- Mexican naturalization rates are lower than those of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean – 36% versus 61% in 2011.

Issue Brief
Immigration has fueled the growth of the Latino population in the United States, as over 40% of United States Latinos are first-generation immigrants. Whether viewed through a historical or a contemporary lens, the relationship between immigration politics and Latino individuals in the United States raises a number of questions with widespread implications for American domestic and foreign policy concerns. Immigration is a highly divisive public policy issue for the general American population as well as for the country’s Latino population. For Latino Americans, the importance of this debate has intensified especially because an increased national focus on the
debate has led to a concurrent increase in anti-Latino discrimination and hate crimes. One of the primary outcomes of the growing number of immigrants in the United States is the growing number of immigrants who are eligible for citizenship and for the naturalization process. “People think [naturalization] is automatic, short and easy,” argues Dan Siciliano, a Stanford Law School professor.” In reality, however, “the pathway to citizenship is onerous.” The pathway to citizenship through naturalization for undocumented immigrants will be a highly debated subject as Congress works to pass immigration reform legislation.

The last time that Washington created a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants in the country was the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which included an amnesty provision in which 2.7 million undocumented residents could apply for naturalization in 1994. This significantly increased the pool of potential Latino citizens as Latino immigrants made up over 65% of eligible individuals. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security conducted a study in 2010, which illustrated that about 40% (1.1 million) of the 2.7 million immigrants who obtained a green card due to IRCA were naturalized by 2009.

Across all immigrant groups, naturalization has failed to keep pace with immigration. For Latino immigrants, the overall pattern has demonstrated a strikingly low level of naturalization, especially for Mexican immigrants. Approximately 65% of the legal immigrants from Mexico who are eligible to begin the naturalization process have not yet begun the path toward citizenship. The rate of naturalization for Mexican immigrants is 35%, which is only half that of legal immigrants from all other countries combined, according to data from the Pew Hispanic Center.

Demographic factors, such as lower levels of formal education among Latino immigrants than other immigrants, account for much of the variance in naturalization rates. It is also important to note that differences in naturalization rates are apparent across different Latino groups. For example, Cuban Americans have the highest naturalization rate among new Latino immigrants. This may be due to the fact that Cuban American leadership in the late-1970’s and 1980’s presented naturalization as a means of leverage in Washington to eventually overthrow Fidel Casto’s communist regime, as well as to gain a power base in Miami.
Studies state that based on current naturalization rates among Mexican legal immigrants, a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants would not ensure that all immigrants would pursue that option. The Pew Hispanic Center states that many of these immigrants would be more likely to choose an intermediate status – legal permanent resident – that would remove the threat of deportation and enable work eligibility, but not afford them the full rights of citizenship, including the right to vote.

The Pew Hispanic Center also conducted a survey of Latino immigrants, which revealed that 93% of those immigrants who have yet to naturalize would undergo the process if they could. The survey followed with an open-ended question that asked for the primary rationale why these immigrants have yet to begin the naturalization process: 26% identify personal barriers such as a lack of English proficiency, and an additional 18% identify administrative barriers, such as the monetary cost of naturalization. Of those citing personal reasons, approximately 65% cite a lack of English proficiency and approximately 23% state that the citizenship test and oral exam too difficult. Of those citing administrative barriers, approximately 94% cite the $680 application fee cost as their primary deterrent. According to these results, while patriotism, national allegiance, and cultural similarity with the United States have been seen as key determinants for naturalization, acquiring citizenship tends to be a more pragmatic decision for certain groups of Latino immigrants.

Further data sheds light on perhaps why Mexican immigrants are the largest group of immigrants who live in the United States illegally: almost half of Mexican-born permanent residents cite personal or administrative barriers as deterrents, while

![Figure 2: What Is the Main Reason You Have Not Yet Naturalized?](chart.png)

Table 1: What Is the Main Reason You Decided to Naturalize? (% of foreign-born Latino citizens who say ...)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Mexican</th>
<th>Non-Mexican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil and legal rights</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits or opportunities</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family reasons</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. is home</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N=159 for Mexican foreign-born citizens; N=201 for other Latino foreign-born citizens. "Don’t know" and "Refused" answers not shown.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center, 2012 National Survey of Latinos

The Pew Hispanic Center, 2012 National Survey of Latinos

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only about 39% of Hispanic permanent residents who were born in a country other than Mexico cite personal or administrative barriers as deterrents. This may be due to the fact that Mexican immigrants are more likely than others to maintain close personal ties to their home country because of Mexico’s close geographic proximity to the United States. The more tangible potential deterrent for Mexican immigrants’ naturalization is the cost of the naturalization process and the difficulty of the English and civics test. This sense of pragmatism runs parallel to the Pew Hispanic Center’s later claim that naturalized Mexican immigrants are more likely than non-Mexican Latino immigrants to give practical motivations for becoming United States citizens, as shown in Table 1.

The rate of naturalization for Latino immigrants has risen markedly over the past decade. Naturalization applications and eventual citizenship will continue to swell throughout the next few decades for Latino immigrants. Local governments, the media, community organizations, and public reaction to hostile policy initiatives have contributed and will continue to contribute to naturalization increases among Latino immigrants. However, as trends currently stand, a growing number of Mexican-born legal immigrants choose to not pursue citizenship. Barriers to these individuals’ naturalization processes can be personal and administrative, as well as outside of the naturalization process altogether.

**Bibliography**


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