



Building Strong Communities in California: The Case for Citizenship and a Coordinated Statewide Funding Strategy

Central Valley

An estimated 2.5 million legal permanent residents—a quarter of all citizenship-eligible immigrants in the United States—live in California. The Golden State leads the nation in the number of citizenship-eligible immigrants; New York is a distant second with about 950,000. In California’s Central Valley, approximately 284,025 immigrants are eligible to become U.S. citizens. However, because of region-specific challenges, their naturalization rate is as low as two-thirds the rate of their counterparts in urban areas.¹

Many Central Valley immigrants are farm workers, primarily from Mexico, and they live and work in communities where English is not required for many daily activities. Moreover, the limited transportation options across the vast, rural area are an obstacle to accessing English as a Second Language classes, legal services, and other citizenship resources.

Naturalization brings significant social, economic, and civic benefits not only to newcomers and their families but also to local communities, individual states, and the country as a whole. In the Central Valley, new citizens could make up a substantial portion of the total number of registered voters. If all citizenship-eligible Mexican immigrants naturalized, they could represent nearly one in five registered voters in Kings, Madera, and Merced counties and one in four in Tulare County.²

Central Valley LPRs Eligible to Naturalize (2010)³

Central Valley	284,025⁴
Sacramento Metro Region	63,456
Sacramento County	47,410
Sutter County	5,056
Yuba County	2,461
Yolo County	8,529
North San Joaquin Region	75,870
San Joaquin County	33,803
Stanislaus County	23,213
Merced County	18,854
South San Joaquin Region	144,699
Madera County	8,559
Fresno County	63,149
Kings County	7,379
Tulare County	30,484
Kern County	35,128

Central Valley’s Citizenship-Eligible LPRs: Top Countries/World Regions of Origin⁵

	Citizenship-Eligible Population
Mexico	183,233
Other Asian	28,666 ⁶
Philippines	12,131
India	9,418
Ukraine	7,883
Russia	4,938
Vietnam	3,704
China	3,633

In order to help large numbers of immigrants become U.S. citizens, national, state, and local funders must work together to build a stronger immigrant integration infrastructure that expands access to immigration legal services, citizenship application assistance, and English language instruction. These services are crucial to helping newcomers achieve citizenship, establish a social and economic foothold, and become full and active members of society.

BENEFITS OF CITIZENSHIP

Civic Engagement. Many immigrants are motivated to naturalize as an expression of commitment to their new homeland and to ensure that their voices are heard by policymakers. Once immigrants become U.S. citizens and register to vote, they are just as likely as other Americans to cast a ballot: 89 percent of native-born and foreign-born citizens who are registered to vote actually do so.⁷ Moreover, immigrants and their children represent 54 percent of the net gain in registered voters nationally between 2004 and 2008.⁸

Economic Mobility. Naturalization affords immigrants numerous opportunities that lead to greater economic security through better jobs and accelerated wage growth.⁹ Naturalized male immigrants under the age of 30 have a wage advantage of five to 12 percent over their non-naturalized counterparts.¹⁰ And the average income of adult citizen immigrants is 33 percent higher—and the poverty rate is nearly six percentage points lower—than that of noncitizens.¹¹

Strengthening Families. For many immigrants, naturalization is an important pathway for maintaining or restoring family unity. Parents who naturalize before their noncitizen children turn 18 years old can petition for their children to become U.S. citizens. And U.S. citizens generally get priority when petitioning to bring close family members to this country as lawful permanent residents.¹²

Education. U.S. citizenship provides greater access to resources that make postsecondary education more attainable, thereby expanding immigrant students' long-term job prospects and earning potential. For example, the Rhodes Scholarship, the Fulbright Program, admission to U.S. service academies, and some private scholarships are available only to U.S. citizens.¹³

Health. In 2003, between 43 to 52 percent of noncitizens were uninsured, compared with only 15 percent of native-born citizens and 21 percent of naturalized citizens.¹⁴ Health care, employment, education, and civic participation are the foundation for the social, economic, and civic integration of immigrants and their ability to contribute fully to society as workers, taxpayers, and community members. The acquisition of U.S. citizenship positively impacts the social determinants of health, including access to affordable health care and use of preventive health resources and services.

CALIFORNIA CITIZENSHIP INITIATIVE

Background. Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR) has embarked on a statewide initiative to promote citizenship and civic participation among California's citizenship-eligible immigrants. The *California Citizenship Initiative* builds on several years of discussion, research, and groundwork by GCIR and members of its California Immigrant Integration Initiative (CIII). Since 2007, CIII has engaged more than 25 statewide and local funders in efforts to strengthen the immigrant integration infrastructure in the state. Most recently, a group of 18 CIII funders aligned resources to support a coordinated statewide campaign to ensure that historically undercounted populations—including low-income, immigrant, and communities of color—were included in the 2010 Census. This is an example of how GCIR has been able to mobilize the philanthropic community to support and advance immigrant and refugee issues at both the state and local level.

Project Rationale. The *California Citizenship Initiative* is poised to build on the relationships developed within philanthropy and the nonprofit sector as part of the 2010 Census project. A coordinated funder response is imperative in California, particularly given the sheer size of the citizenship-eligible population, the scale of needed expansion of ESL instruction and immigration legal services, and the geographic and demographic diversity within the state. The initiative responds to funders interested in maintaining benefits eligibility for immigrants in the midst of a state fiscal crisis, those who seek to improve job outcomes and build assets among low-income groups, as well as those seeking to increase civic and political participation in disenfranchised communities.

GCIR'S Approach. The *California Citizenship Initiative* builds on the lessons learned during the wave of naturalization programs implemented following the 1996 federal welfare reform law

and the promising practices utilized in recent citizenship campaigns. It is also modeled after what worked well in the 2010 Census project in California—including building a “big tent” to engage stakeholders with diverse interests, but allocating time as well as human and financial resources where they are likely to have the greatest impact.

Funding Imperative. Scarce public and private resources create an imperative for foundations to work together at the regional, state, and national levels to develop and implement a coordinated funding strategy to promote citizenship and civic participation. In so doing, funders can leverage their grantmaking and create economies of scale to ensure that immigrants—and the communities in which they live and work—reap the many benefits of citizenship.

GCIR believes the future of California is inextricably linked to how well we integrate immigrants into our communities—and the integration process is greatly enhanced when citizenship-eligible immigrants are provided with the support, information, and resources to take that next step. The many benefits of citizenship—from enhanced civic participation to greater economic mobility and access to health care to educational attainment—are accrued not only to those who naturalize, but also to our society as a whole.

Contact Information

Fleecia Bartow, Director of Special Projects
Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees
P.O. Box 1100, Sebastopol, CA 95473
fleecia@gcir.org or 707.303.0035
www.gcir.org

Endnotes

- 1 Kissam, Ed. “Mexican-born Naturalization-Eligible Immigrants in California's Central Valley and Potential Impact of Naturalization Initiatives on Immigrant Political Voice.” Prepared for Werner-Kohnstamm Family Fund. February 2012.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (CSII) analysis of data from the Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS). Compiled in 2012. Note: Data represent all LPRs who attained status in the U.S. between 1985 and 2005. There are important limitations to these data. While estimates have been applied to make basic adjustments for mortality, derivative citizenship and emigration, no adjustments have been made to account for mobility (i.e., all LPRs are assumed to reside in 2010 in the same county in which they attained status). Therefore, the data are more useful for making relative comparisons between counties and regions than for assessing absolute numbers.
- 4 Colusa, Glenn, Butte, and Tehama counties were omitted from this analysis as well as the total number of citizenship-eligible immigrants in the Central Valley. Statistical analyses were not feasible given these counties' small populations and the presence of relatively few immigrants.
- 5 CSII, 2012.
- 6 Most of the immigrants in the Other Asian category include Hmong, Thai, and other Southeast Asian immigrants.
- 7 Paral and Associates, *Benchmarks of Immigrant Civic Engagement*. Prepared for Carnegie Corporation of New York. New York, NY: July 2010.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Bratsburg, Bernt, James F. Ragan, & Zafar M. Nasir. “The Effect of Naturalization on Wage Growth: A Panel Study of Young Male Immigrants.” *Journal of Labor Economics*. Volume 20. Issue 3 (2002): 568-597. Web.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Shierholz, Heidi. “The Effects of Citizenship on Family Income and Poverty.” Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper #256, February 24, 2010. Web.
- 12 Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.
- 13 Becker, Aliza. *Building Bridges: A Resource Guide on Citizenship*. Macomb, Illinois: Illinois State Board of Education, 1993.
- 14 Fremstad, S. and L. Cox. *Covering New Americans: A Review of Federal and State Policies Related to Immigrants' Eligibility and Access to Publicly Funded Health Insurance*. Washington, D.C.: Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured. 2004.