

Naturalization Rates among IRCA Immigrants: A 2009 Update

BRYAN C. BAKER

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 provided a path to legal permanent residence and citizenship for several categories of unauthorized immigrants. The two primary groups¹ were immigrants who had continuously and unlawfully resided within the U.S. since before January 1, 1982 (“pre-1982s”) and special agricultural workers (“SAWs”), who were required to have worked at least 90 days in agriculture during each of the years ending on May 1, 1984, 1985, and 1986 (Group 1) or solely during the year ending on May 1, 1986 (Group 2). In addition to the residency requirement, pre-1982 IRCA immigrants were required to meet certain standards for English proficiency and knowledge of U.S. history and government as a prerequisite for legal permanent resident (LPR) status.² SAWs were not subject to English or civics requirements. This Fact Sheet compares the naturalization rates of IRCA-legalized immigrants through 2009 to the naturalization rates of other immigrants who arrived or obtained LPR status during the same period.

DATA AND METHOD

The data were obtained by matching administrative records of LPRs and naturalizations maintained by the Department of Homeland Security. Naturalization rates were calculated by dividing the number of LPRs within a given category who naturalized before the end of 2009³ by the total number of LPRs within the same category. Category definitions were based on legal provision (pre-1982 provision of IRCA, SAW provision of IRCA, and all other provisions⁴) and country of birth (Mexico and all others). Records were restricted to immigrants 18 years of age and older on the date LPR status was obtained to exclude children who may have derived citizenship from their parents.

¹ The other categories, Cuban and Haitian immigrants and Registry immigrants, were small by comparison and are not discussed in this Fact Sheet.

² For a complete list of the requirements and conditions for both pre-82s and SAWs, see Sections 210A and 245A of the Immigration and Nationality Act.

³ In this report, year refers to fiscal year (October 1 to September 30).

⁴ Excludes refugees and asylees.

The naturalization rate for pre-1982s immigrants who obtained LPR status in 1989-1991 was compared to the rates for other immigrants who obtained status in 1979-1981 (control group 1) or in 1989-1991 (control group 2). These ranges were selected because most (95 percent) of the pre-1982s obtained LPR status in 1989-1991 and all arrived prior to January 1 1982. The naturalization rate for SAWs who obtained status in 1990-1992⁵ was compared against the rate for other immigrants who obtained status in the same period (control group 3). These comparisons were repeated for the Mexican-born and again for the non-Mexican-born.

Table 1.

Naturalization Rates among IRCA Immigrants and Control Groups through 2009

Immigrant group	Country of birth		
	All countries	Mexico	All other countries
Pre-1982 IRCA immigrants and control groups			
Pre-1982 IRCA immigrants	53%	46%	68%
Control group 1 (1979-81)	59%	44%	62%
Control group 2 (1989-91)	58%	37%	61%
SAW (IRCA) immigrants and control group			
SAW IRCA immigrants	34%	28%	60%
Control group 3 (1990-92)	58%	36%	60%

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

FINDINGS

Nearly 2.7 million persons became LPRs under IRCA, including 1.6 million pre-1982s and 1.1 million SAWs. By the end of 2009, 1.1 million IRCA immigrants had naturalized. The data in Table 1 show that immigrants who obtained LPR status through IRCA provisions had lower rates of naturalization than immigrants who obtained status through other provisions (see Table 1). The naturalization rate was 53 percent for pre-1982s, compared to 58 percent for other immigrants who obtained status in 1989-1991 and 59 percent for other immigrants who obtained status in 1979-1981. The naturalization rate was 34 percent for SAWs, compared to 58 percent for other immigrants who obtained status in 1990-1992.

⁵ 99 percent of SAWs obtained LPR status between 1990 and 1992.



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Although the rates were lower for IRCA-provision immigrants in general, controlling for differences in country of origin demonstrates the prior legal status generalization to be an oversimplification. IRCA immigrants were disproportionately born in Mexico (see Figure 1), and naturalization rates have historically been low for the Mexican-born (Rytina, 2002, Baker, 2007). Naturalization rates were actually higher for pre-1982s than for other immigrants when distinguishing between those born in Mexico and those born in other countries (46 vs. 37 percent for those born in Mexico and 68 vs. 61 percent for those born in other countries). Naturalization rates for those born in countries other than Mexico were equivalent for SAWs and other immigrants (60 percent for both). Among those born in Mexico, however, rates were indeed lower for SAWs (28 percent) than for other immigrants (36 percent).

CONCLUSIONS

The differences between the naturalization rates of Pre-82s, SAWs, and other immigrants, when controlling for Mexican origin, are consistent with expectations regarding assimilation. Pre-1982s were required to meet certain conditions associated with assimilation prior to obtaining LPR status and had higher rates of naturalization than other immigrants who were not subject to those conditions. Non-Mexican-born SAWs were not required to meet those conditions and naturalized at about the same rate as other immigrants. Mexican-born SAWs had a lower naturalization rate than other immigrants, but the group may have included a substantial number of persons who used the program for employment or travel rather than for permanent residence.

REFERENCES

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