



AMERICAN IMMIGRATION COUNCIL

September 2012

CITIZENSHIP DAY 2012: Realizing the Potential of the Immigrant Vote

For many aspiring immigrants, achieving citizenship means full participation in civic life—and that means the right to vote. Every year, thousands of immigrants become naturalized U.S. citizens and exercise their new right. In the 2010 national elections, naturalized citizens comprised 6.4% of all voters. The voter registration rate among immigrants as a whole has risen since 2000. Just as importantly, a growing number of U.S.-born children of immigrants are now coming of age and becoming voters.

However, the full potential of the immigrant vote has not been reached. There are more than eight million legal immigrants in the United States who are eligible to naturalize but have not yet done so.¹ The latent electoral power of these voters-in-waiting is enormous. In many parts of the country their votes could potentially swing elections. As described in a series of *Immigration Impact* blog posts by [Rob Paral](#), there are numerous counties across the country where the number of Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs) who have arrived since 1985 exceeds the margin of victory in the Obama-McCain election. Moreover, the voter rolls of many counties would grow dramatically if LPRs who are eligible to naturalize² actually did so and registered to vote. Although this could not happen in time for the 2012 election cycle, it could make a difference in future elections.

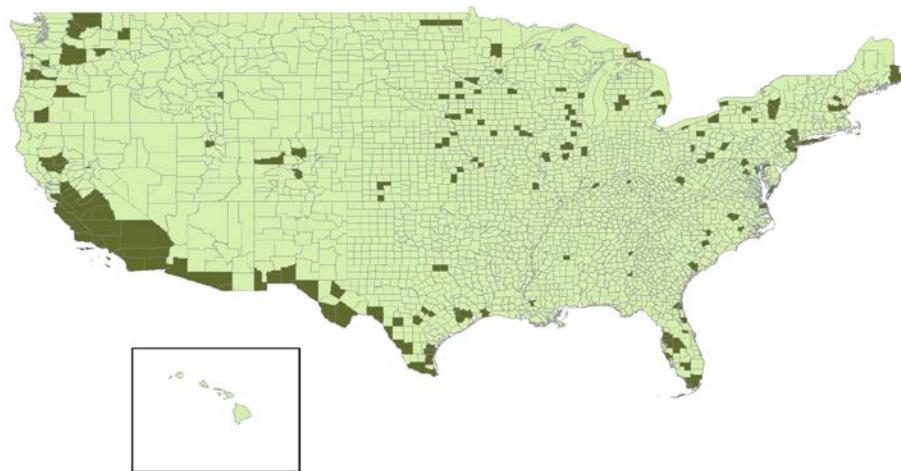
In many U.S. counties, the number of Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs) who have arrived since 1985 exceeds the Obama-McCain margin of victory.

- [Data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services \(USCIS\)](#) reveals how many Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs) arrived in each county of the United States since 1985. Some of these LPRs went on to become U.S. citizens, while others remained LPRs despite being eligible to naturalize. Using the USCIS data, it is possible to compare the number of post-1985 LPRs in each county against the margin of victory in the 2008 McCain-Obama contest.
- Of the 3,114 counties in the United States, excluding Alaska (which does not report election data by county), the number of post-1985 LPRs exceeds the McCain-Obama margin of victory in 189, or about 6 percent of all counties. In these counties, if the entire post-1985 LPR population were naturalized and registered to vote, their numbers would have been large enough to change the result of the election one way or the other.

- The counties where post-1985 LPRs are potentially a swing vote are found in both Democratic and Republican territory. Of these counties, 79 were won by McCain and 110 by Obama in 2008. These counties are located in all major regions of the U.S., but with notable concentrations {Map 1}:

- A near contiguous band of counties running from north central California through the Rio Grande Valley in Texas and up to Houston.
- A group of counties scattered across Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa (many of these counties have few immigrants, but had close margins of victory).
- 12 of 67 Florida counties.
- 16 counties in metro New York City.

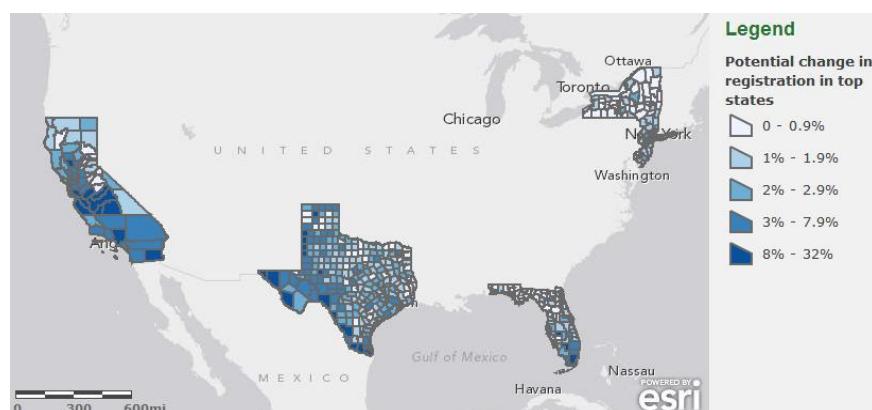
Map 1



If eligible LPRs naturalized and registered to vote, the voter rolls would jump dramatically in many counties.

- If eligible LPRs were already U.S. citizens, and if they registered to vote at the same rate as other naturalized citizens (61 percent), counties across the nation would see their voter registration rolls jump dramatically {Map 2}. ([Click here for interactive map link.](#))

Map 2

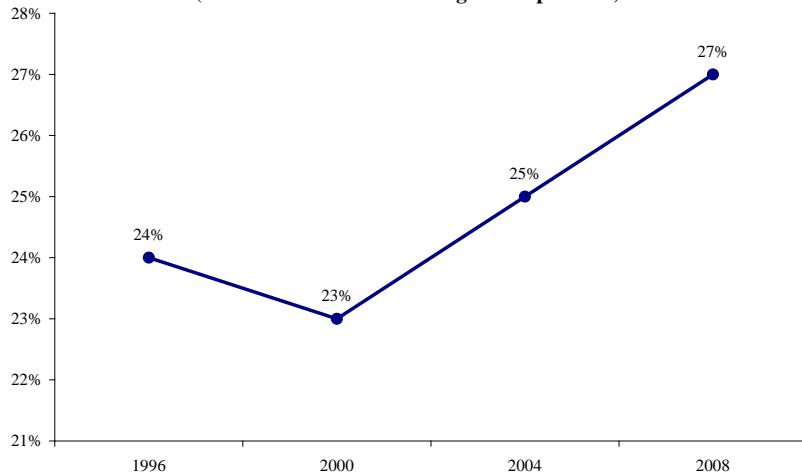


- If eligible LPRs naturalized and registered to vote in the five largest immigrant-receiving states, the greatest numerical increases in registered voters at the county level would be:
 - 442,000 in Los Angeles County, California
 - 147,000 in Miami-Dade County, Florida, and
 - 123,000 in Kings County (Brooklyn), New York
- The highest percentage increases in voter registration would be:
 - 32 percent in Imperial County, California
 - 28 percent in Presidio County, Texas, and
 - 24 percent in Hudspeth County, Texas

The immigrant voter registration rate—based on the entire foreign-born population, not just the naturalized—has risen since 2000 despite the arrival of millions of new immigrants, both legal and unauthorized.

- When measuring immigrant voting patterns, voter registration is typically defined as the percent of naturalized immigrants (those who have become U.S. citizens) who are registered to vote. The number of registered immigrant voters is not usually compared to the total number of immigrants, both documented and undocumented.
- Yet most immigrants are legally residing noncitizens or they are undocumented. Therefore, a measure of overall voter registration requires the inclusion of these immigrants in the base when calculating the registration rate. This provides a more realistic assessment of how many immigrants are able to vote and whether that percent is rising or falling over time.
- Using this calculation, it is clear that immigrant voter registration has increased over the past few election cycles, from 24 percent in 1996 to 27 percent in 2008 {Figure 1}.

**Figure 1: Immigrant Voter Registration Rate, 1996-2008
(Based on Total Adult Immigrant Population)**

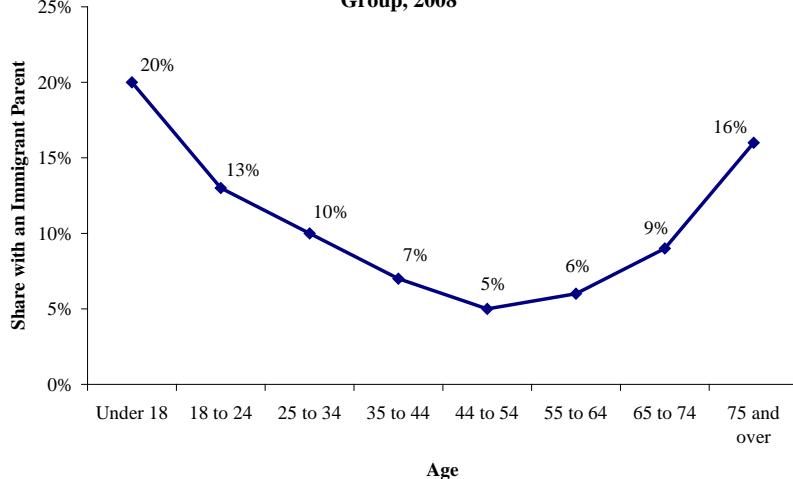


- Demographically speaking, it is no small feat for the immigrant voter registration rate to increase in an era of significant immigration. It means that naturalization is outpacing immigration of noncitizens who don't or can't register to vote.
- Experiencing this level of growth in the immigrant voter rolls implies a significant rise in naturalization and voter registration rates that offsets the overall increase in the size of the immigrant population.

The U.S.-born children of immigrants are growing in number and becoming voters.

- Both immigrants and their children are showing tremendous growth and voting potential. Although many second-generation Americans are still children, more and more of them will come of voting age in future elections.
- At the time of the last presidential election in 2008, only 5% of U.S. citizens age 45-54 had an immigrant parent. But the share with an immigrant parent jumped to one-fifth (20%) among U.S. citizens under the age of 18. In fact, the “under 18” group represents the largest group with at least one immigrant parent {Figure 2}.

Figure 2: Share of U.S. Citizens With an Immigrant Parent, by Age Group, 2008



- In some states, the still-unrealized electoral potential of the children of immigrants is enormous. Take California, where 47% of U.S. citizens under the age of 18 had an immigrant parent in 2010, while more than 30% did in Nevada, Texas, New York, and New Jersey {Chart 1}.

Chart 1

Percent of U.S. Citizen Children With at Least One Immigrant Parent					
Alabama	6%	Kentucky	5%	Ohio	6%
Alaska	11%	Louisiana	5%	Oklahoma	10%
Arizona	27%	Maine	5%	Oregon	21%
Arkansas	9%	Maryland	21%	Pennsylvania	9%
California	47%	Massachusetts	23%	Rhode Island	22%
Colorado	19%	Michigan	9%	South Carolina	8%
Connecticut	20%	Minnesota	13%	South Dakota	4%
Delaware	13%	Mississippi	3%	Tennessee	8%
District of Columbia	17%	Missouri	6%	Texas	31%
Florida	27%	Nebraska	12%	Utah	13%
Georgia	17%	Nevada	34%	Vermont	5%
Hawaii	26%	New Hampshire	10%	Virginia	19%
Idaho	11%	New Jersey	31%	Washington	24%
Illinois	24%	New Mexico	19%	West Virginia	2%
Indiana	7%	New York	31%	Wisconsin	9%
Iowa	8%	North Carolina	15%	Wyoming	4%
Kansas	12%	North Dakota	5%	United States	21%

Source: American Community Survey, 2010

Compiled by Rob Paral and Associates

Endnotes

¹ Nancy Rytina, [*Estimates of the Legal Permanent Resident Population in 2010*](#) (Washington, DC: Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, October 2011), p. 1.

² “In order to qualify for U.S. citizenship, an individual must have had LPR status (a green card) for at least five years (or three years if he obtained his green card through a U.S. citizen spouse or through the Violence Against Women Act, VAWA). There are other exceptions for members of the U.S. military who serve in a time of war or declared hostilities. Applicants for U.S. citizenship must be at least 18 years old, demonstrate continuous residency, demonstrate ‘good moral character,’ pass English and U.S. history and civics exams, and pay an application fee” {Immigration Policy Center, [*How the United States Immigration System Works: A Fact Sheet*](#) (Washington, DC: American Immigration Council, November 4, 2010).}