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MANY AVOID TOUGH PATH TO CITIZENSHIP

By Miriam Jordan
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The move to overhaul the nation's immigration system has stirred controversy in part over the issue of offering citizenship to the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the country.

But judging by the last time the U.S. opened such a path for illegal immigrants then in the country, many fewer than 11 million likely would become citizens. After the 1986 immigration overhaul, fewer than half of those eligible became naturalized.

A key reason: the government's requirements for would-be citizens. The immigrants must shell out at least \$680, pass an oral exam, present five years' worth of tax returns and submit to a background check for things such as criminal convictions.

"People think it's automatic, short and easy," said Dan Siciliano, a Stanford Law School professor who studies immigration. In reality, he said, "the pathway to citizenship is onerous."

A bipartisan Senate proposal supports a path to citizenship; some House Republicans have taken a skeptical position.

Under the 1986 move to open the way for illegal immigrants to eventually become citizens, only 40% of the 2.7 million immigrants who received a green card, or permanent legal residency, had become naturalized citizens by 2009, according to a 2010 study by the Department of Homeland Security.

Individuals who demonstrate continuous permanent residence in the U.S. for at least five years, in most cases, are eligible to apply for naturalization.
Immigration Law in America

Among other things, applicants must pay a \$680 fee and pass an interview with an immigration officer who tests their ability to speak, read and write English, and their knowledge of U.S. history and government. Individuals who have trouble navigating the red tape often hire a lawyer, who typically charges \$500 to \$2,000.

"I haven't become a citizen because I am terrified of not passing the exam," said Maria Jimenez, a 47-year-old Mexican who benefited from the 1986 amnesty to gain legal permanent residency. Ms. Jimenez, who works at a nonprofit in Oakland, Calif., called Mujeres Unidas y Activas (United and Active Women), said the fee is another impediment.

Her main regret: "I can't vote as long as I'm not a citizen."

More than eight million green-card holders currently are eligible to become citizens, the majority of them Latin American immigrants, according to the U.S. government.

Nearly two-thirds of the 5.4 million legal immigrants from Mexico who are eligible to become citizens haven't yet taken that step, according to an analysis of census data by the Pew Hispanic Center. Some immigration experts say that suggests legal status suffices for

many immigrants because it removes the threat of deportation and enables them to work legally.

"We keep talking about citizenship as if it's the ultimate thing," said Vivek Wadhwa, an academic who writes and lectures on U.S. competitiveness. "We should just get this immigration reform done and come back 10 years from now and solve the issue of citizenship."

Some opponents of citizenship for illegal immigrants, or those who want more restrictions placed on the process, say Democrats are in favor because converting millions of Latinos into new voters would benefit their party down the road. Latinos lean Democratic and were crucial to President Barack Obama's election victory last fall.

But meeting the demands of opponents could require Congress to create a new category of legal immigrant without the opportunity for full citizenship.

"It would be unprecedented for Congress to create a status that doesn't allow citizenship," said Jim Ziglar, a Republican who was commissioner of the then-Immigration and Naturalization Service in 2001 and 2002.

Mr. Ziglar, now a senior fellow at the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute, deems such a possibility "demeaning to American history."

A nationwide Pew survey of legal Hispanic immigrants released Feb. 4 found that 93% of those who hadn't yet been naturalized said they would do so if they could. They cited administrative, language and financial barriers to not becoming citizens.

Immigrant-advocacy groups, which offer assistance with the application process, say citizenship is integral to civically engaging newcomers. "Acquiring citizenship gives many immigrants the confidence and ability to become more involved" in their communities and the country at large, said Joyce Noche, an attorney with the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, a Los Angeles organization that helped 3,000 people nationally with the process last year.

Mr. Siciliano of Stanford, who studies immigrant entrepreneurship, believes there would be economic consequences of denying citizenship. "It would slow assimilation and reduce the formation of businesses," he said.

Once an undocumented immigrant, Guatemala-born Edgar Orellana was among those who benefited from the 1986 legalization. Eager to become a citizen, he enrolled in English and civics classes at a community center to prepare.

After taking the oath, "I felt like a first-class citizen and truly a part of this country," he said. He quit restaurant work and opened a martial-arts school in Los Angeles, something he said would have been more difficult to do as a noncitizen.

His daughter, Suzel, who came to the U.S. as a child, derived citizenship through her father and then won scholarships to attend Brown University and Columbia Law School. "Everyone wants to be part of this country's story if they can," said Mr. Orellana. "I feel very proud to be an American citizen."