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**U.S. Citizenship  
and Immigration  
Services**

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## Memorandum

TO: USCIS Associate Directors and Program Office Chiefs

FROM: L. Francis Cissna   
Director

SUBJECT: **Revision of the Naturalization Civics Test**

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**Purpose:** To announce the upcoming revision to the naturalization civics test and, going forward, to formalize a decennial revision schedule of the civics test.

**Background:** Section 312 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) outlines the English and civics requirements for naturalization. By law, candidates for naturalization must have “an understanding of the English language, including an ability to read, write, and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language” and “knowledge and understanding of the fundamentals of the history, and of the principles and form of government, of the United States.”<sup>1</sup> The procedures for separate English and civics tests to fulfill these statutory requirements are outlined in 8 CFR §312.

Congress afforded U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) some discretion in defining what it means to assess an applicant’s “knowledge and understanding” of U.S. civics, and the regulations at 8 CFR § 312 speak very generally about how USCIS should establish that an applicant can demonstrate “knowledge and understanding” of U.S. civics. For this reason, USCIS has exercised this discretion by developing, administering, and occasionally revising the naturalization civics test. Through previous revisions of the naturalization civics test, USCIS has ensured that it administers the test with prudence, maintains the test’s integrity, and continually keeps pace with adult educational standards.

The former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) began a revision process in 1997 and published an updated naturalization test in 2000 that standardized test questions; however, the INS did not standardize the manner in which the test was administered. In 2009, USCIS

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<sup>1</sup> The English language requirement does not apply to individuals who, on the date of filing their application for naturalization, are (1) over 50 years old and have lived in the United States as a Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR) for at least 20 years; or (2) over 55 years old and have lived in the United States as an LPR for at least 15 years. INA § 312(b)(2).

**Revision of the Naturalization Civics Test**

Page 2

launched its most recent test revision, which implemented standardized test forms for both the English and civics test requirements. These revisions exercised the discretion Congress afforded USCIS and were driven by a commitment to meeting the statutory and regulatory requirements of INA § 312 and 8 CFR § 312 by creating a standardized and meaningful test for all applicants.

As we approach the 10-year anniversary of the latest revision, I am announcing that the next revision of the naturalization civics test is under way. We are currently formalizing a decennial revision process to ensure that USCIS will continue to responsibly exercise the discretion Congress afforded it by administering the civics test in accordance with best practices. In addition, the working group will also assess potential changes to the speaking test.

INA § 312 also states that the English test requires the applicant to demonstrate the ability to read and write in the English language at a level described as “simple words and phrases.” The statute prescribes that USCIS’ testing must be reasonable. The agency is currently reviewing and considering its options to revise this portion of the naturalization exam.

Citizenship is the culmination of an immigrant’s journey to fully join our nation and live with us in a common bond. It is the most meaningful immigration benefit our country offers. The civics test was instituted to ensure that applicants for naturalization understand American civics and can exercise their rights and responsibilities as new citizens. By revising this test every 10 years, we can ensure that the civics education requirements remain a meaningful aspect of the naturalization process.

**Best Practices:** Standardized tests are revised regularly to ensure accuracy and timeliness of content, as well as to counter ways that test takers may engage in fraud or nefarious actions that attack the integrity of the exam. The National Reporting System for Adult Education recommends that tests used for adult education be recertified every 7 years, although most standardized tests are recertified on a 4- or 5-year basis.<sup>2</sup>

The 10-year recertification period I am instituting for the naturalization civics test is reflective of the extraordinary effort that is required to update the test, which will include pilot initiatives to gather the data that will drive the revision process. A decennial revision schedule provides enough time for USCIS to gain meaningful data on the test after an updated version is fully implemented.

During the agency’s most recent efforts to revise the civics test, USCIS used the expertise of adult educators to ensure that the civics and English test was revised in a fair and transparent manner and incorporated many of the best practices found in the private sector. By incorporating these best practices, USCIS ensured that the civics test was rooted in Congress’ vision as expressed through the INA, demonstrated the agency’s commitment to public accountability, and reflected the consensus of adult education experts. USCIS will adhere to this formula in the current effort and subsequent revisions to ensure the integrity of the test.

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<sup>2</sup> 34 CFR § 462.14(a).



**Revision of the Naturalization Civics Test**

Page 3

**Test Revision:** Pursuant to these best practices, the Office of Citizenship and Applicant Information Services (CAIS) in the External Affairs Directorate has convened and chairs a naturalization test working group, which has commenced a review of the civics test and is outlining procedures for the decennial review. In addition, the working group will also assess potential changes to the speaking test. This working group also includes representatives from the Field Operations Directorate, the Office of Policy and Strategy, and the Office of the Chief Counsel.

The purpose of this test redesign is to create a meaningful, comprehensive, uniform, and efficient test that will assess applicants' knowledge and understanding of U.S. history, government, principles, and values.

This test revision will comply with the statutory requirement to provide special consideration to applicants who are over age 65 and have been living in the United States as a lawful permanent resident for periods totaling at least 20 years at the time of filing their application for naturalization.<sup>3</sup> The test revision will also comply with the regulatory provision regarding due consideration of applicants' education, background, age, length of residence in the United States, opportunities available and efforts made to acquire the requisite knowledge, and any other elements or factors relevant to an appraisal of the adequacy of the applicant's knowledge and understanding.<sup>4</sup> This test revision will be piloted extensively before implementation.

The civics test working group will work to ensure that USCIS' administration of the naturalization test is guided by the best practices and principles found in the private sector. The working group will actively solicit the input of adult education and testing experts outside of the government to ensure that this process proceeds in a fair and transparent manner that is accountable to the public.

Accordingly, I direct the civics test working group to report back to me on their work plan and progress within the next 60 days.

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<sup>3</sup> INA § 312(b)(3).

<sup>4</sup> 8 CFR § 312.2(c)(2).