

One way to make Houston more resilient? Citizenship. | Opinion

Never mind Hurricane Beryl's blackout. On July 10, thousands of new citizens took their oaths at NRG.

By **Claudia Ortega Hogue, Steve Stephens, Michael Treviño**

July 26, 2024



On July 10, only two days after Hurricane Beryl made landfall, more than 2,200 new Americans took the oath of citizenship at NRG Arena. Courtesy of Chelsie Kramer

Hurricane Beryl's destructive trek across Houston knocked out power to millions, shuttered businesses and canceled summer classes across the region, bringing normal life to an all-too-familiar halt for weather-weary Houstonians.

But there was one thing the storm didn't stop: A historic naturalization ceremony at NRG Arena — the largest ever in Harris County since COVID — went on without a hitch just two days after landfall.

More than 2,200 Houstonians from 121 different countries officially became U.S. citizens. And it shouldn't go unnoticed that they braved the heat, traveled storm-ravaged streets and interrupted their own personal Beryl struggles to secure the most important document in the world: a U.S. passport.

In the context of the collective trauma our region is experiencing, it is a bright spot.

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

Hurricane Beryl's destructive trek across Houston knocked out power to millions, shuttered businesses and canceled summer classes across the region, bringing normal life to an all-too-familiar halt for weather-weary Houstonians.

But there was one thing the storm didn't stop: A historic naturalization ceremony at NRG Arena — the largest ever in Harris County since COVID — went on without a hitch just two days after landfall.

More than 2,200 Houstonians from 121 different countries officially became U.S. citizens. And it shouldn't go unnoticed that they braved the heat, traveled storm-ravaged streets and interrupted their own personal Beryl struggles to secure the most important document in the world: a U.S. passport.

In the context of the collective trauma our region is experiencing, it is a bright spot.

This group of new Americans — who have chosen to put down roots here and contributed to Houston's prosperity for years — can now reap all the benefits of citizenship, including higher rates of home ownership, increased earning power, freedom of travel and voting.



We should all applaud ceremonies like the one this week at NRG. That's because citizenship doesn't just benefit the person taking the oath — it benefits everyone who calls Greater Houston home.

Houston is one of the most diverse cities in the nation. According to the Migration Policy Institute, [close to 1 in 4 people living in our metro area is foreign-born](#), and nearly 50% of Houston children live with at least one immigrant parent.

The institute estimates that Houston is home to [more than 300,000 lawful permanent residents](#) who are eligible to become U.S. citizens. The vast majority of these Houstonians — 80% — have lived in the United States for more than 10 years, and 40% have lived here more than 20 years.

But although they are eligible to take the final step toward citizenship, [less than 10% do every year](#).

Imagine if we removed the barriers to naturalization and made this milestone more accessible.

If more eligible Houstonians were to naturalize, they could participate in future elections, giving Houston a bigger voice to address our region's unique needs. (Storm preparedness and resilient infrastructure come to mind.)

Volunteers with the [League of Women Voters of Houston](#) registered 1,905 new American voters at the July 10 ceremony — about 85% of those naturalized — and have registered more than 11,500 newly naturalized citizens this year alone.

Despite recent rhetoric, new Americans are not a voting monolith. [Recent polling](#) shows that while new citizens care about many of the same bread-and-butter issues as those born here — with the economy ranking most important — they hold a range of political beliefs, with party identification relatively split down the middle.

Encouraging naturalization makes business sense, too.

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

Research shows that citizenship leads to [more stable and better-paying jobs](#) and opens up employment opportunities, including positions with the federal government and those that require international travel. Immigrants already [play a crucial role](#) in many sectors important to Houston, including medicine, engineering and construction — 42% of our doctors and 36% of our engineers are foreign-born, as are more than half of our construction workers.

Immigrants in Houston also contribute to the tax base, having [paid](#) \$16.3 billion in federal, state and local taxes between 2016 and 2021. Expanding their employment opportunities would pay off for everyone. According to research from Thai V. Le at the University of Southern California, if all eligible Houstonians became citizens, wages here would grow by more than \$950 million, boosting the local economy and tax revenue.

There are reasons why less than 10% of eligible immigrants take the step toward naturalization each year. The [cost of the application](#) has risen to \$760 — 100 times the minimum hourly wage. In 1994, the fee was only \$95. The high fee forces many families to choose between putting food on the table or saving for citizenship.

The process can also be overwhelming and confusing to navigate, and it involves completing a long and complex legal document.

Community partners and civic leaders across Greater Houston [are working together](#) to address these barriers and put more people on that path to citizenship. Efforts include the national [New Americans Campaign](#), as well as [Naturalize Now, Houston!](#), a first-of-its-kind, public-private partnership that aims to help Houston's more than 300,000 eligible residents become naturalized U.S. citizens over the next three years.

This innovative collaboration pairs “community navigators” at local organizations with eligible-to-naturalize residents, helping them access language services and legal support, complete the application and study for the citizenship exam.



Some of those helped were at NRG on July 10. After taking their oaths, they streamed out of the arena by the thousands, waving their certificates and American flags and wearing proud smiles while surrounded by family and friends.

Though the national conversation around immigration has become divisive, we should not overlook the hundreds of thousands of eligible-to-naturalize immigrants already living, working and raising families here. By helping more eligible Houstonians become naturalized citizens, our region will experience greater economic growth and civic engagement and become more resilient as a whole — no matter what the next storm brings.

Claudia Ortega Hogue is president of the League of Women Voters of Houston. Steve Stephens is a founding executive and CEO of Amegy Bank. Michael Treviño is a senior adviser of Treviño Consulting Group and Houston organizer for the American Immigration Council.