

New citizen exam is Democracy 101

Questions now stress core beliefs of U.S. system



By Wendy Koch
USA TODAY

A new U.S. citizenship exam that will be tried out in 10 cities early next year asks applicants less about historical facts and more about the meaning of democracy.

The 144 new questions were previewed Thursday by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Instead of asking how many stripes are on the flag, the new test asks why there are 13 stripes (one for each colony). Instead of asking who was Martin Luther King Jr., it asks what his dream was (equality for all). Instead of having to name the branches of government, an applicant is asked why there are three (so no single branch is too powerful).

To become a naturalized U.S. citizen, an immigrant takes a three-part test. The first part consists of civics questions like those, asked and answered orally. The second tests the ability to read and write English sentences. The third asks the applicant to answer other questions in spoken English.

Only the civics questions for the first

part were revealed Thursday. Revisions of the other parts are still underway.

"The goal is to make it more meaningful," says Emilio Gonzalez, director of Citizenship and Immigration Services. He says the current test relies too much on memorization. Immigrants who study and pass the new one, he says, will gain a better "understanding and respect" for U.S. values.

"You really ought to know what you're swearing allegiance to," he says.

English-language experts, government and history scholars and immigrant groups were consulted in developing the new test.

"The questions certainly needed to be revised. Our main concern is the level of difficulty," says Paul Tsao, policy director of the Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

Tsao's group has led an effort by more than 220 immigrant and labor organizations to ensure that the new test is fair to less-educated immigrants.

He says it covers a lot of material, including geography, that will require more work on the study materials given to applicants. He says some questions seem odd, such as which World

War II general became president (Dwight Eisenhower).

'Stuff they should know'

A class of high school sophomores at Washington-Lee High School in Arlington, Va., a suburb of Washington, D.C., answered 10 questions from the old civics test and 10 from the new one at USA TODAY's request.

The mock examination followed the same procedure as the real one: A test taker is asked 10 questions from 100 available. At least six must be answered correctly to pass. The 144 questions on the new exam will be pared to 100 before it is adopted.

The 23 government students scored higher on the new test: 22 passed it, and 18 passed the current one. Fifteen answered at least eight of the new questions correctly. Only four did as well on the current test.

The students had not seen the study materials. Half said the new test might be harder for immigrants with limited English, but most thought it was a better test.

"It's stuff they should know," Andrew

McDaniel says.

Classmate Lisa Hines says the new test requires more thinking about U.S. government, which could be a tough challenge for immigrants. "We've had a longer time to think about what it means," she says.

Ahmad Helmy, an immigrant from Saudi Arabia, says the new test will better prepare applicants for citizenship, but it is more demanding and requires longer answers. Both versions, he says, ask "too much."

Exam intimidates some

"We don't want to make the test harder," says Alfonso Aguilar, director of the citizenship office. He says that if

some questions prove too difficult, they'll be removed. The current test has an 85% pass rate.

Aguilar says changes to the test's English-language segments will help standardize them. Those segments now vary in difficulty from one city to the next. For the new test, applicants will get a standard vocabulary list in their study materials, and the questions will use those words.

Tsao says only a small fraction of eligible immigrants take the citizenship test because many are intimidated by it. He says he's concerned about two other things that may dissuade applicants: the agency's plan to require that applications be filed electronically, with an extra fee and longer forms, and

the rising charge for the test, which has increased from \$95 in 1994 to \$400 today.

Gonzalez says his agency plans to propose an increase next year, but he declined to say how much. He says immigrants can seek a waiver based on financial need.

The new test will be given to immigrants who volunteer for it next year in Albany, N.Y.; Boston; Charleston, S.C.; Denver; El Paso; Kansas City, Mo.; Miami; San Antonio; Tucson; and Yakima, Wash. Someone who fails the new test can take the current one without paying again.

The citizenship office plans to replace the current test in spring 2008.

What does 'We, the People' mean?

A new U.S. citizenship exam aims to see whether immigrants understand the meaning of U.S. democracy, not just historical facts. These questions and answers are from the Citizenship and Immigration Services website. Test scorers may allow other correct answers.

Current test	New test
<p>Question 1. Name the amendments that guarantee or address voting rights. Answer: 14th, 15th and 19th.</p>	<p>Question 1. There are four amendments to the U.S. Constitution about who can vote. Describe one of them. Answer: Any citizen over 18 can vote. A citizen of any race can vote. Any male or female citizen can vote. You don't have to pay to vote.</p>
<p>Question 2. What is the most important right granted to U.S. citizens? Answer: The right to vote.</p>	<p>Question 2. Name two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy. Answer: Vote, join a political party, help out with a campaign, join a civic group, join a community group, tell an elected official your opinion on an issue, call your senators or representatives, publicly support or oppose an issue or policy, run for office, write to a newspaper.</p>
<p>Question 3. In what year was the Constitution written? Answer: 1787</p>	<p>Question 3. Name one important idea found in the Declaration of Independence. Answer: People are born with natural rights. Power of government comes from the people. The people can change their government if it hurts their natural rights. All people are created equal.</p>
<p>Question 4. What are the three branches of U.S. government? Answer: Executive, legislative and judicial.</p>	<p>Question 4. Why do we have three branches of government? Answer: So no branch is too powerful.</p>
<p>Question 5. What is the Constitution? Answer: Supreme law of the land.</p>	<p>Question 5. What does "We the People" mean in the Constitution? Answer: The power of government comes from the people.</p>
<p>Question 6. What U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services form is used to apply for naturalized citizenship? Answer: Form N-400</p>	<p>Question 6. When is the last day you can send in federal income tax forms? Answer: April 15th</p>

Source: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service

Introduction: Reciprocal teaching encourages readers to interact with a text by summarizing, clarifying, questioning and making predictions about it. The graphic organizer below helps students use these strategies to monitor their understanding of the article, "New citizen exam is Democracy 101."

Predicting

Review the article's headlines and graphics, and write two questions that you think the story will answer.

Questioning

Read the first three paragraphs to yourself. Answer this question: How does the new citizenship test differ from the current one?

Questioning

Read until you reach the heading, "Stuff they should know." Answer this question: What effect will the new test have on immigrants?

Clarifying

Read the section entitled, "Stuff they should know." What information needed clarifying in this section?

Predicting

Predict what the article will address in the remaining section, "Exam intimidates some."

Summarizing

Write a summary of the last section of the article.

DISCUSSION

What knowledge does the new U.S. citizen test measure?

How is the English portion of the citizenship test being revised?

Why is it important for all citizens to have a better "understanding and respect" for civic values?

What are the foundations of American democracy?

ACTIVITY

With a partner, take turns asking and answering the test questions on the previous page. Then, together, develop a set of 10 high-level questions about citizenship, politics, leadership, geography and international relations. Make sure your questions ask "why" and "how" and do not just require test-takers to recall facts. Trade tests with another pair, and answer as many questions as you can based on your own knowledge of our government system. Discuss and evaluate your answers with the other pair. Then, as a group, select the five questions from your pool of 20 that are most important for immigrants to answer. Explain your decisions in writing, and share your insights with the class.