



Published: 11.24.2007

U.S. citizenship candidates face new test

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHOENIX — Rather than having to know who the first president was, future U.S. citizens will be asked other questions on citizenship exams like what does the Constitution do and how many branches of government are there?

The questions are part of the changes the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has developed for its new citizenship exam.

The federal government thinks the new test will better gauge how well immigrants understand what it means to be an American while testing their knowledge of democracy and how the U.S. government works.

"The point (now) is to know the concept so the exact answer is less important so that when they study they will understand the concepts better, which we think will help them integrate into society," said Marie Sebrechts, regional spokeswoman for Citizen and Immigration Services.

Some immigrant advocates fear the new test will make it more difficult for immigrants to become citizens. "Most people who are applying for naturalization have been here a long time. Why are we putting up roadblocks," said Luis Ibarra, chief executive officer of Friendly House, a nonprofit organization that helps immigrants prepare for the naturalization test.

Ibarra said he didn't think there was anything wrong with the old test. "If it was broken, I'd say fix it, but it wasn't," Ibarra said.

Immigration officials began redesigning the naturalization test in 2000 after lawmakers in Washington raised numerous criticisms about the old test.

Officials talked over changes with immigrant advocates, testing experts, teachers and other stakeholders to come up with a new version with 143 possible questions broken down into five categories: American democracy, government, rights and responsibilities, history and geography.

In February, the new exam was rolled out and given to 6,000 volunteers in 10 cities including Tucson.

From May to July, the agency expanded the test to 64 other communities after receiving criticism that the first round failed to include a large enough pool of immigrants. The second round was conducted in 13 states including Arizona.

The pilot testing was to make sure the test was fair for all immigrants, regardless of their nationality, language or educational background, Sebrechts said.

The new version ended up with a passing rate of 92 percent, Sebrechts said.

Sebrechts added the current test has an 88 percent passing rate for first-time applicants.

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