

# The changing face of citizenship

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Standing together in Faneuil Hall, they raised their right hands: a nurse's aide from Haiti, a National Guardsman from Cape Verde, and a giddy couple from Nigeria who later twirled outside with joy.

"We are citizens of the United States," exulted Ted Onuoha, 33, looking to the sky earlier this month as his wife, Uchenna, 35, shivered next to him.

On the hard road to US citizenship, black immigrants are increasingly gaining ground in Massachusetts and the United States, expanding the possibilities for political power and changing what it means to be black in America. Though still small, the number of new black citizens in Massachusetts has more than doubled, to 76,000 since 2000, census estimates show, fueled by transplants from the Caribbean and, increasingly, fast-growing groups from Africa. Nationwide, the number of new black citizens has nearly doubled, to 1.8 million.

Rising black immigration is rapidly reshaping Massachusetts, where the black community is already one of the most diverse in the nation. A third of the roughly 470,000 black people in Massachusetts are immigrants, compared with nearly 9 percent nationwide.

Birth rates mirror the shift: For the first time in Massachusetts history, a majority of black babies born since 2008 have an immigrant mother, according to the figures from the state Department of Public Health. The single largest group of mothers of black children, since 2006, have been from Africa.

"It's not just Jamaicans, Trinidadians and Tobagans, and Panamanians anymore," said James Jennings, professor of urban studies and planning at Tufts University.

Though becoming a citizen gives them the right to vote, many immigrants said the surge toward citizenship is more personal than political. US citizens can bring relatives to America faster, qualify for more scholarships and financial aid, and are protected from deportation. For many, US citizenship is a point of pride.

"We love to become citizens of this great country," said Grace Anderson, an immigrant from Ghana who lives in Roslindale and plans to apply for citizenship when she becomes eligible. "It's prestigious to us to be a citizen. It's one thing that's on every African's mind."

At the citizenship ceremony in Faneuil Hall, some immigrants said they had put off becoming a citizen, while others said they had applied as soon as they legally could. Legal immigrants do not have to apply for citizenship, but in general, immigrants cannot apply until they have been legal permanent residents for five years.

Marie Rose Antoine, 65, a nurse's aide from Boston, said her husband had pressed her to apply as they got older. Pedro DaCruz, 27, a National Guardsman from Cape Verde who lives in Brockton, had also been here for years, but applied after serving in Afghanistan.

Henok Terefe, a 28-year-old accountant from Ethiopia, said he applied as soon as he was eligible, because he just wanted "to be part of it."

"Right away," Terefe said. "That's what I wanted."

Compared with Asians and Latin Americans, black immigrants are still a relatively small group, accounting for less than 10 percent of 40 million immigrants nationwide and 15 percent of nearly 1 million foreign-born residents in Massachusetts.

Haitians are the single largest group of black immigrants, with long roots in the Bay State, and other Caribbean immigrants include Jamaicans and Trinidadians. Another large group are Cape Verdeans, who come from an island off West Africa with long ties to Massachusetts. Newer African immigrants are from Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria.

They are coming for work or study, to reunite with family, or as refugees fleeing famine and war. Researchers say one major pipeline for black immigrants over the past two decades is the federal visa lottery, which grants green cards to people from countries that historically did not have a significant presence in the United States. Since the program began in the 1990s, African immigrants have soared from a relatively small group, 40 percent of whom were white, to more than 1 million people, 74 percent of whom are black.

Marie Rose Antoine, a nurse's aide who lives in Boston, became a US citizen in March. Antoine, 65, said her husband pressed her to apply as they grew older.

The shift marks the first large influx of black people from Africa since the forced migration of slavery, according to the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington-based think tank. But that could change if Congress dismantles the visa lottery, as lawmakers are considering in various forms of immigration legislation.

Black Africans are a smaller immigrant group than black Caribbeans, but researchers say that could change.

An analysis by the Institute for Immigration Research at George Mason University for the Globe shows the smaller group of African immigrants is growing faster and members are quickly becoming citizens.

Almost 45 percent of black Africans in Massachusetts were naturalized US citizens, according to census estimates in 2012, up from just 23.6 percent in 2000. More than half of black Caribbeans in Massachusetts were citizens, up from 44.1 percent in 2000.

“It’s a dramatic increase,” said James Witte, director of the institute. “We’re seeing it with both, but particularly with Africans. This is happening not only in Massachusetts, but across the country.”

How black citizens, native and foreign born, will change Massachusetts in the future is an open question.

Some say the growing black immigrant population could be a voting bloc on its own or could join with African Americans. In Boston, black people overall are the second-largest population, more numerous than Latinos and more than double the size of the Asian population. Last year, some black leaders were disappointed that black candidates for mayor came up short behind Mayor Martin J. Walsh, the son of Irish immigrants.

At the citizenship ceremony, Terrion Lewis-Francis, 41 and from Jamaica, said it was hard to imagine the different groups of black people banding together in Massachusetts.

“They can try,” said Lewis-Francis, a substitute teacher who also works at a pharmacy in Norwood. “But it’s going to take a lot of work to get everyone as one.”

And some immigrants reject the term “African-American” because they say it obscures their identities and particular needs, such as the hundreds of Cape Verdeans on waiting lists for English classes because they speak Portuguese or creole.

“I identify myself racewise as a black man, but as far as my ethnicity is concerned, I’m not African-American; I’m Cape Verdean,” said Moises Rodrigues, who last year became the first Cape Verdean elected to the Brockton City Council.

Others say greater unity help in confronting problems that disproportionately affect black people, such as lower incomes and higher unemployment rates.

“I certainly don’t have a crystal ball, and I can’t tell you how long it will take,” said Barbara Lewis, director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute for the Study of Black History and Culture at the University of Massachusetts Boston. “There will come a point where [the black community] will recognize that it is to mutual advantage to politically coalesce — and also economic advantage.”

Although black people are a diverse mix of professionals, laborers, wealthy and poor, no economic classes are immune to racism.

“The visceral experiences are a lot similar,” said Kevin J.A. Thomas, a sociology professor at Pennsylvania State University who researched black immigration for the Migration Policy Institute. “No matter how distinct you think you are from African-Americans, when you apply for a job, what people see on the outside is the color of your skin.”

In Massachusetts, at least two new groups have emerged to try to unite Africans and other black immigrants and Americans along common goals.

Voury Ignegongba, an immigrant from Chad, created Africans in Boston in 2011 to bring together a broader group of Africans, African-Americans, and friends. In recent weeks, they chatted about black history over mango juice in an Ethiopian restaurant in the South End, attended an art exhibit in Roxbury, and networked over sushi in Cambridge.

The goal, he said, is to create networks where information can flow, whether it is job opportunities, education, or cultural events. More than 4,000 people are on their mailing list.

“Each community tends to be in their own little corner trying to get politicians to deal with the issues,” he said. “It would make more sense and the message would be more powerful if it’s coming from a bigger group.”

A second group, the African Council, was created in 2010 to assemble the various African immigrant groups to support Governor Deval Patrick’s bid for reelection. More than 600 people showed up to a town-hall meeting to meet the governor. The organization continues to grow.

“To me the idea that we can organize even a fraction of that community, even if it was like 10,000 voters, that’s powerful,” said one of the founders, Georgina Wanja Kariuki, a young immigrant from Kenya.

Kariuki said getting immigrants involved in politics is challenging, because many are still deeply connected to their homelands. Some build schools back home, send money to relatives, or are working multiple jobs to save enough money to bring relatives to America. Many rely on their national networks to navigate their way in the United States.

On a recent Saturday night, hundreds of members of the Ghana Association of Greater Boston poured into the Sons of Italy Lodge in Watertown, to celebrate Ghana’s 57th independence day. They sang their national anthem — and the Star-Spangled Banner — dined on homemade goat stew, and smiled proudly as children sang Ghanaian songs, though some had to be pried away from video games to do it.

Organizers estimated that many, if not most, of the group are highly educated US citizens, thrilled to be in the United States. But many also want their children to know what it means to be from Ghana.

“It’s important that they know about it and maintain that culture,” said Kobena Bonney, association president. “There’s something special about having that connection with your folks, ways of living, and the tradition of respect.”

In Roxbury Crossing, Abdillahi Abdirahman, is trying to do just that from Butterfly Coffee, the hub of the Somali community and now other Africans in Boston. He is also constantly prodding immigrants to get involved in state and local politics. Many turn out to vote, but some resist.

Many need his help with more urgent tasks. Some need help with tax returns. A Somali woman in Maine cannot figure out the immigration system. For his work, some jokingly call Abdirahman “the mayor.”

But he knows the difference a real mayor can make. Mayor Thomas M. Menino helped clear the way for his cafe and for the soaring mosque across the street. Abdirahman wants the city to hire more Somalis.

He compares Somalis to the Irish who battled severe discrimination in Boston in the 1800s. They seized power through politics and eventually seemed to dominate the police and fire departments, and elected offices. He likes to quote the Speaker Tip O'Neill.

“Remember,” Abdirahman said, leaning forward in his chair. “He said, everything is local.”

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<http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/03/24/immigrants-from-africa-caribbean-changing-make-black-population-massachusetts/hYhp23NSlxyCDobXeHBD7L/story.html>