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New Test Asks: What Does 'American' Mean?

By JULIA PRESTON

Patrick Henry and Francis Scott Key are out, but Susan B. Anthony and Nancy Pelosi are in. The White House was cut, but New York and Sept. 11 made the list.

Federal immigration authorities yesterday unveiled 100 new questions immigrants will have to study to pass a civics test to become naturalized American citizens.

The redesign of the test, the first since it was created in 1986 as a standardized examination, follows years of criticism in which conservatives said the test was too easy and immigrant advocates said it was too hard.

The new questions did little to quell that debate among many immigrant groups, who complained that the citizenship test would become even more daunting. Conservatives seemed to be more satisfied.

Bush administration officials said the new test was part of their effort to move forward on the hotly disputed issue of immigration by focusing on the assimilation of legal immigrants who have played by the rules, leaving aside the situation of some 12 million illegal immigrants here.

Several historians said the new questions successfully incorporated more ideas about the workings of American democracy and better touched upon the diversity of the groups — including women, American Indians and African-Americans — who have influenced the country's history.

Would-be citizens no longer have to know who said, "Give me liberty or give me death," or who wrote "The Star-Spangled Banner." But they do have to know what Susan B. Anthony did and who the speaker of the House of Representatives is.

Alfonso Aguilar, a senior official at Citizenship and Immigration Services, the agency that designs and administers the test, said it was not intended to be punitive.

"We don't seek to fail anyone," said Mr. Aguilar, an architect of the test.

Immigration officials said they sought to move away from civics trivia to emphasize basic concepts about the structure of government and American history and geography. In contrast to the old test, which some immigrants could pass without any study, the officials said the new one is intended to force even highly educated applicants to do reviewing.

"This test genuinely talks about what makes an American citizen," said Emilio Gonzalez, the director of Citizenship and Immigration Services, speaking at a news conference in Washington.

The \$6.5 million redesign was shaped over six years of discussions with historians, immigrant organizations and liberal and conservative research groups. The questions were submitted to four months of pilot testing this year with more than 6,000 immigrants who were applying for naturalization.

The agency will begin to use the revised test on Oct. 1, 2008, leaving a year for aspiring citizens to prepare and for community groups to adjust their study classes.

The overall format has not changed. Legal immigrants who are eligible to become citizens must pass the civics exam as well as a test of English proficiency in reading and writing. In a one-on-one oral examination, an immigration officer asks the applicant 10 questions of varying degrees of difficulty selected from the list of 100. To pass, the applicant must answer 6 of those 10 questions correctly. The questions released yesterday will remain public along with their answers.

Immigrants are eligible to become citizens if they have been legal permanent residents for at least five years (or three years if they are married to a citizen) and have "good moral character" and no criminal record.

In the pilot runs of the revised test, Mr. Aguilar said, the pass rates improved over the current tests, with 92 percent of participants passing on the first try, as opposed to 84 percent now. At least 15 questions were eliminated as a result of the pilot because they proved too difficult. For example, a question about the minimum wage was dropped because test takers were confused between federal and state rates, Mr. Aguilar said.

In the new test, the pilgrims have been replaced by “colonists,” and they are the subject of fewer questions, while slavery and the civil rights movement are the subject of more. A question was added asking what “major event” happened on Sept. 11, 2001.

The new test drops questions about the 49th and 50th states, but adds one about the political affiliation of the president. There are no questions about the White House. Instead, one question asks where the Statue of Liberty is.

In a statement today, the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, one of the groups consulted in shaping the new test, denounced it as “the final brick in the second wall.” The group said the test included “more abstract and irrelevant questions” that tended to stump hard-working immigrants who had little time to study.

But several historians said the test appeared to be fair.

“People who take this seriously will have a good chance of passing,” said Gary Gerstle, a professor of American history at [Vanderbilt University](#). “Indeed, their knowledge of American history may even exceed the knowledge of millions of American-born citizens.”

John Fonte, a senior fellow at the conservative Hudson Institute, called the new test “a definite improvement.” But he said it should have included questions about the meaning of the oath of allegiance that new citizens swear. “I would like to see an even more vigorous emphasis on Americanization,” he said.

About 55 percent of the applicants who participated in the pilot test were from Latin American countries. Some Latino groups noted yesterday that no question on the new test refers to Latinos.

Mr. Aguilar said that the test was not intended to be a comprehensive review, but rather to include “landmark moments of American history that apply to every single citizen.”

Naturalizations have surged in recent years, to 702,589 last year from 537,151 in 2004, according to official figures. In July the fees to become a citizen increased sharply, to \$675 from \$405.

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