NEW AMERICANS IN THE PALMETTO STATE:
The Political and Economic Power of Immigrants, Latinos, and Asians in South Carolina

Immigrants, Latinos, and Asians account for large and growing shares of the economy and population in the state of South Carolina. Immigrants make up 4.3% of the state’s population and more than one-third of immigrants in South Carolina are naturalized U.S. citizens who are eligible to vote. “New Americans”—immigrants and the children of immigrants—account for 1.3% of all registered voters in the state. Latinos and Asians wield more than $5 billion in consumer purchasing power. At last count, businesses owned by Latinos and Asians had sales and receipts of $2.8 billion and employed more than 20,000 people. At a time of economic recession, South Carolina can ill-afford to alienate such a critical component of its labor force, tax base, and business community.

Immigrants and their children are growing shares of South Carolina’s population and electorate.

- The foreign-born share of South Carolina’s population rose from 1.4% in 1990, to 2.9% in 2000, to 4.3% in 2007, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. South Carolina was home to 190,014 immigrants in 2007, which is more than the entire population of Little Rock, Arkansas.

- 35.1% of immigrants (or 66,603 people) in South Carolina were naturalized U.S. citizens in 2007—meaning that they are eligible to vote.

- 1.3% (or 25,812) of all registered voters in South Carolina were “New Americans”—naturalized citizens or the U.S.-born children of immigrants who were raised during the current era of immigration from Latin America and Asia which began in 1965—according to an analysis of 2006 Census Bureau data by Rob Paral & Associates.

Nearly 4% South Carolinians are Latino—and they vote.

- The Latino share of South Carolina’s population grew from 0.9% in 1990, to 2.4% in 2000, to 3.8% (or 167,493 people) in 2007. The Asian share of the population grew from 0.6% in 1990, to 0.9% in 2000, to 1.2% (or 52,893 people) in 2007, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

- Latinos comprised 0.9% (or 18,000) of South Carolina voters in the 2008 elections, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.
Latino and Asian entrepreneurs and consumers add billions of dollars and tens-of-thousands of jobs to South Carolina’s economy.

- The 2008 purchasing power of South Carolina’s Latinos totaled $3.3 billion—an increase of 797.3% since 1990. Asian buying power totaled $1.9 billion—an increase of 516% since 1990, according to the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia.15

- South Carolina’s 4,414 Asian-owned businesses had sales and receipts of $2.1 billion and employed 15,011 people in 2002, the last year for which data is available.16 The state’s 3,015 Latino-owned businesses had sales and receipts of $691 million and employed 5,584 people in 2002, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Survey of Business Owners.17

Immigrants are integral to South Carolina’s economy as workers.

- Immigrants comprised 5.4% of the state’s workforce in 2007 (or 118,443 workers), according to the U.S. Census Bureau.18

- Unauthorized immigrants comprised 2.2% of the state’s workforce (or 50,000 workers) in 2008, according to a report by the Pew Hispanic Center.19

- If all unauthorized immigrants were removed from South Carolina, the state would lose $1.8 billion in expenditures, $782.9 million in economic output, and approximately 12,059 jobs, even accounting for adequate market adjustment time, according to a report by the Perryman Group.20

Naturalized Citizens Excel Educationally.

- In South Carolina, 34.7% of foreign-born persons who were naturalized U.S. citizens in 2007 had a bachelor’s or higher degree, compared to 23.1% of noncitizens. At the same time, only 16.6% of naturalized citizens lacked a high-school diploma, compared to 34.5% of noncitizens.21

- The number of immigrants in South Carolina with a college degree increased by 63.7% between 2000 and 2007, according to data from the Migration Policy Institute.22

- 27.6% of South Carolina’s foreign-born population age 25 and older had a bachelor’s or higher degree in 2007, compared to 23.2% of native-born persons age 25 and older.23

- In South Carolina, 68.8% of all children between the ages of 5 and 17 in families that spoke a language other than English at home also spoke English “very well” as of 2007.24

Endnotes

2 Ibid.
3 2007 American Community Survey (1-Year Estimates).
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 2007 American Community Survey (1-Year Estimates).
12 Ibid.
18 2007 American Community Survey (1-Year Estimates).
21 Migration Policy Institute Data Hub, *South Carolina: Language & Education*.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.