

** This essay was to appear in the *Washington Post* in March 2020 but got derailed by the covid-19 pandemic. It is a preview of my book-in-progress: *Capable Citizens: How Disability Shaped American Citizenship*. Please do not quote or circulate without permission of the author. **

Recently an applicant was denied a braille citizenship test. It's the opposite of what the Founders would have wanted.

Sari Altschuler

Many Americans were appalled to learn recently that Lucio Delgado had been denied U.S. citizenship [because he could not read English](#). Delgado, a lawful permanent resident who otherwise met the requirements for citizenship and who was born completely blind, requested a braille copy of the citizenship test but was given, instead, a large-print version. Unsurprisingly, he failed.

This outcome — the rejection of an aspiring citizen on the basis of an ableist technicality — runs counter to the country's founding ideals. Indeed, it is the opposite of what the Founders envisioned as they established a nation where residents were often born elsewhere. If the United States wants to embrace its origins as a country that welcomes immigrants and enables their naturalization, it must make the citizenship test fully accessible.

The idea that people of various abilities could become American citizens was a key part of early ideas about citizenship. Founding Father Benjamin Rush wrote that no one was inherently prepared for the duties of citizenship, but that through proper education, almost everyone could be “convert[ed.] into republican machines,” by which he meant well-functioning participants in the US republic. “This must be done,” he continued, “if we expect them to perform their parts properly, in the great machine of the government of the state.” For Rush, Americans could not simply be expected to perform their roles as citizens but needed to be trained to do so. In this, their understanding needed to be “fitted to each other by means of education before they can be made to produce regularity and unison in government.” The explicit expansiveness of Rush's vision was left out of the constitution (which declined to define either citizenship or naturalization), but, at least in terms of disabilities, it was present through omission. Twelve months after the first congress was convened, it racially limited the process of becoming a citizen to “any alien, being a free white person” in the [1790 Naturalization Act](#), but citizenship was notably not limited by ability, remaining open to any white man with a “good character” who would swear allegiance to the country.

This is less surprising given the more malleable [understandings of disability](#) in the period. Disability was not conceived so much as a permanent state, but more often a circumstantial one. The word *disability* was frequently used to describe individuals disabled *by* or *from* something, as in Article 2, Section 1 (clause 6) of the constitution, which describes the circumstances under which a president might be removed from office in the case of “his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said office,” at which point a surrogate would be appointed “until the Disability be removed, or a President shall be elected.” The schools for Americans with disabilities that opened in the early nineteenth century expressed a popular optimism that physical impairments like deafness and blindness could be rendered, through education, no longer disabling.

In 1830, the [Federal census](#) began counting Americans who were blind, a move instigated by Deaf educators, so that schools to educate citizens with disabilities could receive appropriate government funding. It was at this time that the first schools for the blind also opened, like the [Perkins School for the Blind](#) in Massachusetts and the [Overbrook School for the Blind](#) in

Pennsylvania, which continue to operate. One central aim of the schools was to enable people with visual impairments to participate as fully as possible in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Making it possible for Americans with visual impairments to read was essential to this work. These schools invested in their own printing presses from the very beginning because raised print made documents essential to the practice of citizenship accessible and allowed blind readers to educate themselves. Unlike the presses with which we are largely familiar today, those presses did not print in ink or braille but in three-dimensional raised letters. Each devised its own form of raised print and spent decades competing over who could make reading most accessible to blind Americans. The Pennsylvania school, for example, hoped its monthly magazine would reach [“the homes of all the blind.”](#) It celebrated the abilities of blind Americans to read and write as a demonstration of their citizenship, and featured essays authored by the school’s students, addressed to their “fellow citizens,” “friends and countrymen.”

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, things were changing. As the [infamous 1840 census](#) revealed, people with disabilities were increasingly stigmatized: fraudulent recording sought to show freedom was pathological for black individuals, making them mad and deaf. By the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, eugenic laws and marital exemplified the restrictions being placed citizens with disabilities. Historian Douglas Baynton writes, [“the menacing image of the defective was the principal catalyst for the rapid expansion of immigration law and the machinery of its enforcement. A great variety of disabled immigrants were refused entry, among them the deaf, blind, epileptic, and mobility impaired.”](#) The exclusion of other immigrants was also [justified by classing them as disabled or “defective”](#) in order to justify their exclusion. Even as the borders of legal belonging shifted to include non-white citizens, as historian Barbara Welke [has argued](#), the prototypical citizen was still a white, able-bodied man.

The part of the test used to disqualify Delgado was added in the twentieth century. In [1906](#) the federal government added a basic knowledge of English to its citizenship requirements followed by a literacy test in 1917. The literacy test was initially conceived to [stop African Americans from voting after emancipation](#). When it was finally added to the citizenship test after decades of debate, it aimed to [“Americanize” the influx of new—especially non-white—immigrants](#) and insist they demonstrate their fitness for naturalization. In [1973](#) accommodations were added for people with disabilities that were expanded explicitly for naturalization in [1994](#), but a braille version of the literacy test [was not available](#) until this past [November](#), months after Delgado sat for the test.

Braille should make the literacy test accessible for people with visual impairments, but even here the situation is complicated. According to a study conducted by the National Federation of the Blind a decade ago, less than 10 percent of the people who were legally blind in the US can read braille. This failure of US education has led the NFB to declare a [“braille literacy crisis in America.”](#) Today, [according to the National Braille Press](#), the number of school-age children who are blind who can read braille stands at only 12 percent—[less than one quarter](#) of what it was forty years ago.

This makes it even more egregious that Delgado was denied citizenship. Delgado, [who had been studying English for the past six years](#) and could read braille, is in the small minority of people with visual impairments who could pass a printed literacy test. Leaving aside the very real issue of whether such a test should be required for applicants who are blind given the low numbers of braille literacy, Delgado was *especially* qualified for US citizenship. That Delgado spent years educating himself to become a citizen, should make him a shining example of what the Founders envisioned Americans citizens could be.