

The Portuguese American Citizenship Project

A non-partisan initiative to promote citizenship and civic involvement

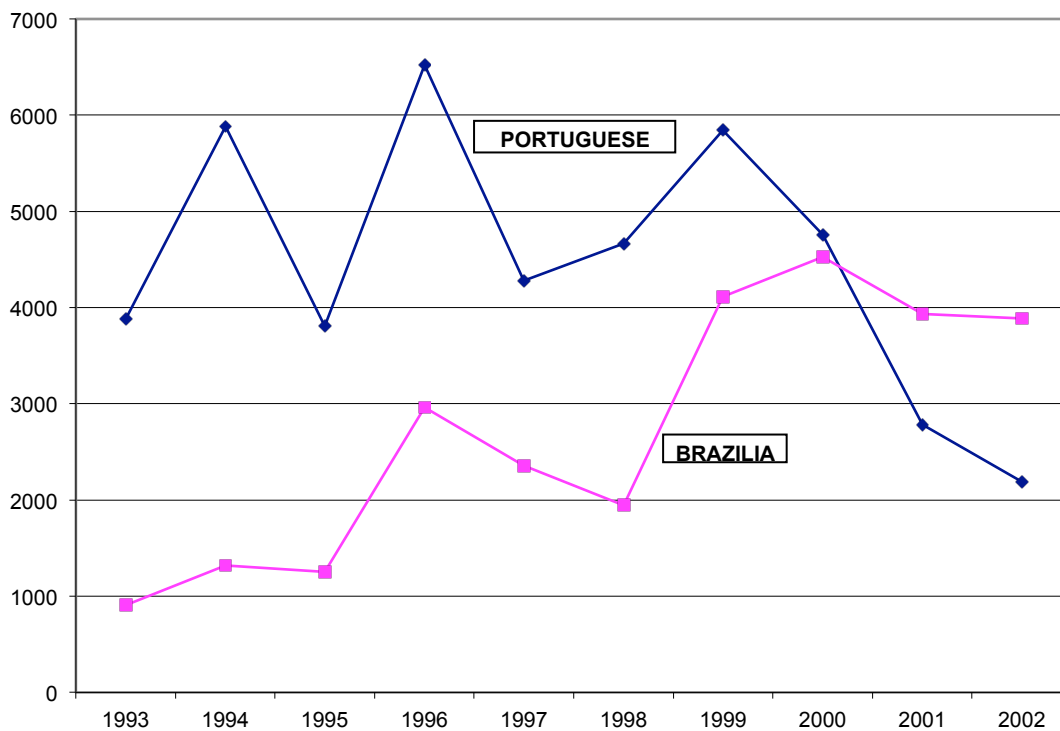
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NOTES ON INVOLVEMENT OF BRAZILIAN COMMUNITY

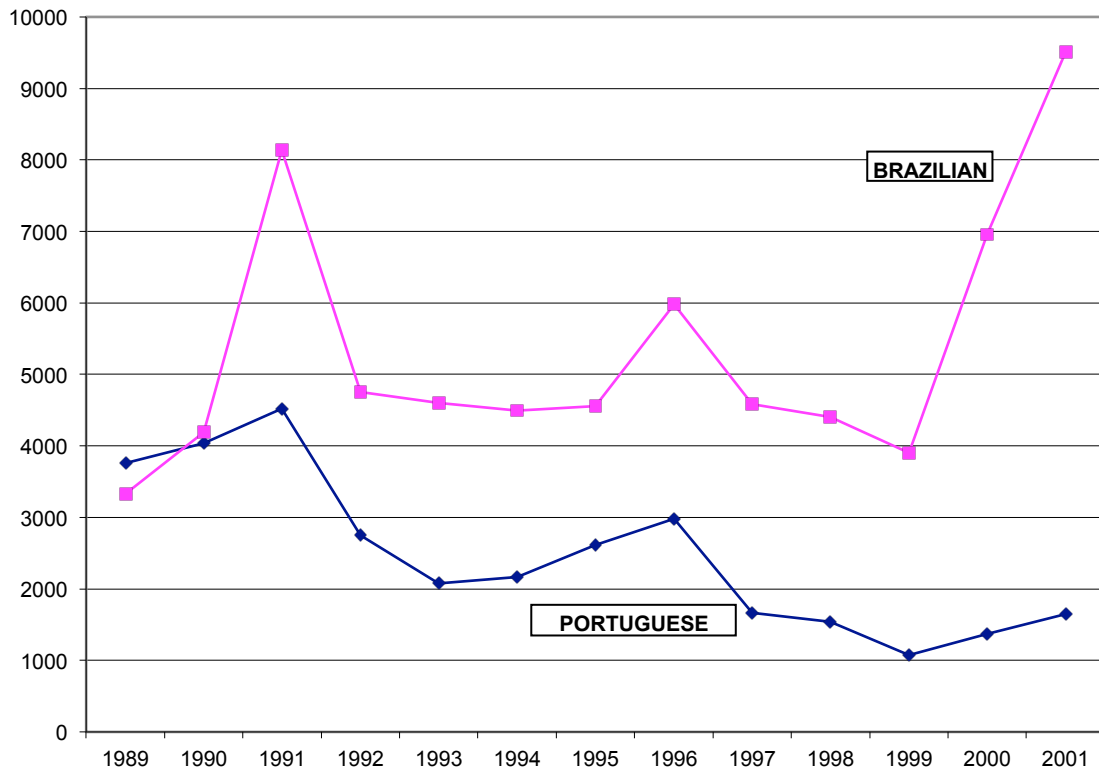
Background: The Project is currently involved in soliciting support from U.S. foundations in order to expand the outreach of the citizenship effort by increasing staff to three paid professionals. As part of this expansion, it is proposed to bring other Portuguese-speaking communities into the initiative – primarily this involves the Brazilian community.

The Current Status: The following graphs present official U.S. data on the comparative legal immigration and adoption of citizenship by Portuguese and Brazilian migrants.

ACQUISITION OF CITIZENSHIP



LEGAL IMMIGRATION



Most observers believe that the legal immigration from Brazil to the States is a small fraction of the illegal immigration rate. In communities like Newark, New Jersey and Fall River, Massachusetts, local leaders said that the vast majority of Brazilian residents are not legal immigrants i.e., they have either entered the U.S. illegally or have overstayed their tourist visa. The sheer numbers of new arrivals have changed the character of long-standing Portuguese American communities like the Ironbound section of Newark.

The above data indicates, however, that there is a significant number of Brazilians who have entered the U.S. legally and have adopted U.S. citizenship— especially compared to the declining Portuguese rates.

The question of how to extend the Project to the Brazilian community is complex. First, if additional funding and staff is not secured, it will be impossible to approach any new communities – the bounds of personal and financial resources have already been reached. Without additional support, the Brazilian question is moot.

If there is additional support, the details of involvement with Brazilian community now become the issue. Working with undocumented migrants is an entirely different problem – one that the existing community organizations are unwilling and unable to address.

Illegal immigrants require an entirely different set of skills. The Project has worked to encourage adoption of citizenship, voter registration and voting. It appears that working with legal Brazilian residents does not pose a problem but the more serious and intractable situation of illegal immigrants is beyond our competency.

Interviews/Additional Steps: In June, I met with Sueli Bonaparte of the Brazilian American Chamber of Commerce to discuss the possibility of Brazilian involvement in the Citizenship Project. Ms. Bonaparte was supportive and very interested in the Project. She proposed further discussions among other Brazilian leaders who meet on a regular basis. (Comment: In the Portuguese community, discussions at this level, versus meetings at the grass-roots level, are general in nature and have not led to any specific action. I am not optimistic about any result from these meetings were they to take place.)

The local committees in Massachusetts have proposed future face-to-face meetings with Brazilian leaders in established Brazilian communities such as Cambridge and Hyannis, Massachusetts and Newark, New Jersey. As the opportunity arises in the coming months, I will meet with these leaders to investigate if there is a possible benefit to collaboration.

Note, however, that all of these efforts are contingent on the securing of additional resources.

Conclusion: The integration and normalization of Brazilian migrants seems lost in the heated debate surrounding Hispanic/Mexican migrants. Operating under the radar screen is a preferred modus operandi for both Portuguese and Brazilian communities.

Nonetheless, while no one has a reliable count of illegal Brazilian residents in the U.S., the numbers are widely acknowledged to be very large and growing. Like the more publicized problems attached to Mexican migration, the existence of a large population of undocumented Brazilian workers is clearly harmful to both the migrants themselves and to the U.S. society at large. The problem will no doubt get larger and more difficult in the near future.