



## Fact Sheet: Naturalization

Naturalization is the process by which an immigrant becomes a U.S. citizen. This fact sheet provides an overview of the steps and time required to naturalize. To date, approximately [nine million](#) immigrants [are eligible](#) to become U.S. citizens, which is more than the current population of New York City.

### What are the prerequisites for naturalization?

The [Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 \(INA\)](#) and other laws set the following requirements for becoming a U.S. citizen for immigrants:

- **Age:** 18 years old or older
- **Status:** Must have U.S. lawful permanent resident status for five years or more, or three years or more if married to a U.S. citizen
- **Residence:** Must prove continuous U.S. residence for five years and physical presence (days actually present) for a total of 30 months in that five years
- **State:** Must have resided in the current state for at least 3 months
- **Character:** Must have good moral character
- **English and Civics:** Must show ability to read, write and speak English demonstrated through testing and knowledge of U.S. history and civics
- **U.S. Constitution:** Must take an oath of commitment to the U.S. Constitution

### What is lawful permanent resident (LPR) status?

A “lawful permanent resident” (LPR) is a foreign-born person who has been granted an indefinitely renewable visa to live and work in the United States. Eligibility requirements for LPR status [depends](#) on immigration status, and those on non-immigrant visas are not eligible.

An LPR is often called a green card holder. LPR status allows immigrants to work, own property, and receive [certain government benefits](#) after meeting eligibility requirements. Because LPRs are not citizens, they cannot vote in federal and most local elections or hold certain U.S. government jobs. They may be referred to removal proceedings for violating the terms of their green card.

The length of time to become an LPR varies from months to many years depending on the visa type, country of origin, and the wait times for those countries. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) provides information on visa availability [here](#), and the most recent visa bulletin indicating estimated wait times is published [here](#).

Becoming an LPR is an important step in the naturalization process. The minimum time before an LPR is eligible to naturalize varies from three to five years. Immigrants often [wait longer](#) than required by law to begin the naturalization process. One study estimates [30% of LPRs](#) have

remained in LPR status without naturalizing for over 20 years, 26% for 11 – 20 years, 19% for 6 – 10 years, and 25% 1 - 5 years.

### **What is “good moral character”?**

Applicants must demonstrate good moral character to naturalize. The INA does not precisely define good moral character. It does establish certain unlawful acts that will bar an applicant from establishing good moral character. Those [acts](#) include [murder](#), genocide, torture, sexual assault, unlawful harassment, conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance, falsification of records, false claim to U.S. citizenship, failure to file or pay taxes, insurance fraud, and unlawful voting or registering to vote.

### **How does a lawful permanent resident become a naturalized citizen?**

An LPR can apply for naturalization 90 days before having met the application start date. Once LPRs have met all the prerequisites listed above, they must submit an “Application for Naturalization” (form [N-400](#)) and pay an application [processing fee](#) as well as a [biometrics fee](#). Those 75 and older are exempt from biometrics fees. The current N-400 form is 20 pages long, and [some people](#) rely on outside assistance to help with completing the application. The Application for Naturalization includes the following sections:

- Eligibility
- Information about the applicant (immigration history, illegal substance use, voter registration and voting history, military service, criminal records, history of providing false information or documentation to government officials)
- Information about residence
- Biographic information (school, employment, parents, marriage, children)
- Time outside the U.S.
- Oath of allegiance (applicants must understand and be willing to take the oath)

### **What happens after an LPR submits an Application for Naturalization?**

After an LPR has completed the Naturalization Application (N-400) and submitted it to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), the LPR will receive a [Form I-797C](#), Notice of Action confirming receipt of the application. Next, the applicant will receive a scheduled appointment notice indicating when and where to submit [biometrics](#) – fingerprints, photograph, and/or signature.

Processing time between application submission and the naturalization interview varies depending on the [USCIS office](#), the number of applications it receives and the backlog. The average wait time is currently about [14 months](#). [USCIS data](#) show that over 900,000 naturalization applications were pending at the beginning of the first quarter of fiscal year 2021.

### **What happens at a naturalization interview?**

About [91% of applicants](#) pass the civics and English exams, and an average of [78,000](#) naturalization applications are denied each year. Not all [naturalization interviews](#) are exactly the same, but they generally consist of the parts outlined below:

- An oath to speak only the truth

- Review of the completed N-400 form and supporting documentation, including criminal background and continuous presence.
- Assessment of the applicant's English understanding and speaking through the N-400 review process. Due to age and medical disabilities certain people are [exempt](#) from the English reading and writing test and the history and civics test.
- An oral U.S. history and civics test: All of the [history and civics questions](#) are available for study and include [questions](#) on the U.S. form of government, the branches of government, term limits, Presidents, the Declaration of Independence, wars, the Emancipation Proclamation, the States, rivers, oceans, and national holidays. Currently there are two sets of questions: the [2008 version](#) with 100 questions and the [2020 version](#) with 128 questions. Those taking the 2008 version will be asked 10 questions and must answer 6 correctly to pass. Once applicants have answered 6 correctly the test will end. Those taking the 2020 version will be asked 20 questions and must answer 12 correctly. The 2020 version of the civics test will [no longer be used](#) as of April 19, 2021. Before April 19, 2021 applicants will have the ability [to choose](#) between the two tests.
- English reading and writing tests: Applicants must read aloud correctly one of three sentences to pass the reading requirement, and write correctly one of three sentences to pass the writing requirement.

Once the naturalization officer completes the interview, the officer refers the case to a supervisor, or informs the applicant if they are recommending the individual's application for approval. While some individuals may be notified that their application is approved the same day, USCIS informs most applicants by mail and notifies them of the date and location of their [oath ceremony](#), which is the final step in the naturalization process. At the naturalization oath ceremony, immigrants take an oath to support the U.S. Constitution and laws, and become U.S. citizens.

As is evident from this U.S. naturalization overview, from entry into the United States to the oath ceremony it takes many years to complete the naturalization process.