



Becoming a U.S. Citizen

Becoming a U.S. citizen gives LPRs new rights and privileges. Citizenship also brings with it new responsibilities. This section offers some reasons to consider becoming a U.S. citizen and describes what you need to do to become a citizen.

To become a citizen, you must be willing to swear your loyalty to the United States. You must give up your allegiance to any other country. You must agree to support and defend the U.S. Constitution. When you become a citizen, you accept all of the responsibilities of being an American. In return, you get certain rights and privileges of citizenship.

Why Become a U.S. Citizen?

LPRs have most of the rights of U.S. citizens. But there are many important reasons to consider becoming a U.S. citizen. Here are some good reasons:

- **Showing your patriotism.** Becoming a citizen is a way to demonstrate your commitment to your new country.
- **Voting.** Only citizens can vote in federal elections.
- **Keeping your residency.** A U.S. citizen's right to remain in the United States cannot be taken away.
- **Obtaining government benefits.** Some government benefits are available only to U.S. citizens.



- **Bringing family members to the U.S.** U.S. citizens generally get priority when petitioning to bring family members permanently to this country.
- **Becoming eligible for federal jobs.** Certain jobs with government agencies require U.S. citizenship.
- **Becoming an elected official.** Many elected offices in this country require U.S. citizenship.
- **Meeting tax requirements.** Tax requirements may be different for U.S. citizens and LPRs.
- **Becoming eligible for federal grants and scholarships.** Many financial aid grants, including college scholarships and funds given by the government for specific purposes, are available only to U.S. citizens.
- **Serving on a jury.** Only U.S. citizens can serve on a jury. Serving on a jury is an important responsibility for U.S. citizens.
- **Traveling with a U.S. passport.** A U.S. passport enables you to get assistance from the U.S. government when overseas, if necessary.

- **Obtaining citizenship for children born abroad.** In most cases, a child born abroad to a U.S. citizen is automatically a U.S. citizen.

Naturalization: Becoming A Citizen

The process of becoming a U.S. citizen is called “naturalization.” You can apply for naturalization once you meet these requirements.



Live in the U.S. for at least 5 years as an LPR (or 3 years if married to and living with a U.S. citizen).

Be present in the U.S. for at least 30 months out of the past 5 years (or 18 months out of the past 3 years if married to and living with a U.S. citizen).

Live within a state or district for at least 3 months before you apply.

You may have to follow different rules if:

- You are married to and living with your U.S. citizen spouse.
- You, or your deceased parent, spouse, or child, have served in the U.S. Armed Forces.

- You are a U.S. national.
- You obtained permanent residence through the 1986 amnesty law.
- You are a refugee or asylee.

GETTING NATURALIZATION INFORMATION



People 18 years or older who want to become citizens should get Form M-476, *A Guide to Naturalization*. This guide has important information on the requirements for naturalization. It also describes the forms you will need to begin the naturalization process.

To see if you are eligible to apply for naturalization, see Form M-480, *Naturalization Eligibility Worksheet* at the end of *A Guide to Naturalization*. Use Form N-400 to apply for naturalization.

To get Forms M-476, M-480, and N-400, call the USCIS forms line at 1-800-870-3676 or get a copy from <http://www.uscis.gov>.

- You have a U.S. citizen spouse who is regularly stationed abroad.
- You lost U.S. citizenship under prior law because of marriage to a non-citizen.
- You are an employee of certain types of companies or nonprofit organizations.

Consult *A Guide to Naturalization* for more information. You may also wish to consult an immigration attorney or other qualified professional.

Requirements for Naturalization

The general requirements for naturalization are:

1. Live in the U.S. as an LPR for a specific amount of time (Continuous Residence).

MAINTAINING CONTINUOUS RESIDENCE (CR) AS AN LPR



If you leave the U.S. for:

More than 6 months

More than 1 year

Your CR status is:

Possibly broken

Broken

To keep your status you must:

Prove that you continued to live, work, and/or have ties to the US (e.g., paid taxes) while you were away.

In most cases, you must begin your continuous residence over. Apply for a re-entry permit before you leave, if you plan to return to the US as a permanent resident.

2. Be present in the U.S. for specific time periods (Physical Presence).
3. Spend specific amounts of time in your state or district (Time in District or State).
4. Behave in a legal and acceptable manner (Good Moral Character).
5. Know English and information about U.S. history and government (English and Civics).

6. Understand and accept the principles of the U.S. Constitution (Attachment to the Constitution).

1. Continuous Residence

“Continuous residence” means that you must live in the U.S. as an LPR for a certain period of time. Most people must be LPRs in continuous residence for 5 years (or 3 years if married to a U.S. citizen) before they can begin the naturalization process. For refugees, this means 5 years from the date you arrived in the U.S., which is usually the

EXEMPTIONS FOR 1-YEAR ABSENCES



If you work for the U.S. government, a recognized U.S. research institution, or certain U.S. corporations, or if you are a member of the clergy serving abroad, you may be able to preserve your continuous residence if you:

1. Submit Form N-470, Application to Preserve Residence for Naturalization Purposes, before leaving the country.
2. Physically reside in the United States for 1 year after you return.

For more information, contact the USCIS Form Line at: 1-800-870-3676 and ask for Form N-470, Application to Preserve Residence for Naturalization Purposes. You can also get the form on the USCIS website at <http://uscis.gov/graphics/formsfee/forms/n-470.htm>.



date you obtained LPR status. For those granted asylum status in the U.S., this period begins one year before you got LPR status. The date on your Permanent Resident Card is the date your 5 years begins. If you leave the United States for a long period of time, usually 6 months

or more, you may “break” your continuous residence.

If you leave the United States for 1 year or longer, you may be able to return if you have a re-entry permit. You should apply for this re-entry permit before you depart

the United States. In most cases, none of the time you were in the United States before you left the country will count toward your time in continuous residence. This means that you will need to begin your continuous residence again after you return to the United States, and you may have to wait up to 4 years and 1 day before you can apply for naturalization.

Be aware that absences from the United States while your naturalization application is pending could cause problems with your eligibility, especially if you accept employment abroad.

EXEMPTIONS FOR MILITARY PERSONNEL



If you are on active-duty status or were recently discharged from the U.S. Armed Forces, you may be exempt from the continuous residence and physical presence requirements. You can find more information in the M-599 Naturalization Information for Military Personnel brochure. Every military base should have a point-of-contact to handle your naturalization application and certify a Form N-426, Request for Certification of Military or Naval Service. You must submit Form N-426 with your application forms. To get the forms you need, call the USCIS Form Line at: 1-800-870-3676 and ask for the Military Packet. You can find the M-599 and Form N-426 at <http://www.uscis.gov>.

2. Physical Presence in the United States



“Physical presence” means that you actually have been present in the United States. If you are an LPR at least 18 years old, you must be physically present in the United

States for at least 30 months during the last 5 years (or 18 months during the last 3 years, if married to a U.S. citizen) before you apply for naturalization.

3. Time as a Resident in District or State



Most people must live in the district or state where they apply for naturalization for at least 3 months. Students can apply for naturalization either where they go

to school or where their family lives (if they depend on their parents for support).

“PHYSICAL PRESENCE”



Q: What is the difference between “physical presence” and “continuous residence”?

A: “Physical presence” is the total days you were inside the United States and does not include the time you spend outside the U.S. Each day you spend outside the U.S. takes away from your “physical presence” total. If you are away from the U.S. for long periods of time or if you take many short trips outside the U.S., you may not meet your “physical presence” requirement. To count your “physical presence” time, you should add together all the time you have been in the United States. Then subtract all trips you have taken outside the United States. This includes short trips to Canada and Mexico. For example, if you go to Mexico for a weekend, you must include the trip when counting how many days you spent out of the country.

“Continuous residence” is the total time you have resided as an LPR in the United States before applying for naturalization. If you spend too much time outside the United States during a single trip, you may break your “continuous residence.”

4. Good Moral Character



To be eligible for naturalization, you must be a person of good moral character. A person is not considered to be of “good moral character” if they commit certain

crimes during the 5 years before they apply for naturalization or if they lie during their naturalization interview.

If you commit some specific crimes, you can never become a U.S. citizen and will probably be removed from the country. These crimes are called “bars” to naturalization. Crimes called “aggravated felonies” (if committed on or after November 29, 1990), murder, rape, sexual abuse of a child, violent assault, treason, and trafficking in drugs, firearms, or people are some examples of permanent bars to naturalization. In most cases, immigrants who were exempted or discharged from serving in the

BEHAVIORS THAT MIGHT SHOW A LACK OF GOOD MORAL CHARACTER



- Drunk driving or being drunk most of the time.
- Illegal gambling.
- Prostitution.
- Lying to gain immigration benefits.
- Failing to pay court-ordered child support.
- Committing terrorist acts.
- Persecuting someone because of race, religion, national origin, political opinion, or social group.

U.S. Armed Forces because they were immigrants and immigrants who deserted from the U.S. Armed Forces are also permanently barred from U.S. citizenship.

You may also be denied citizenship if you behave in other ways that show you lack good moral character.

Other crimes are temporary bars to naturalization. Temporary bars usually prevent you from becoming a citizen for up to 5 years after you commit the crime. These include:

- Any crime against a person with intent to harm.
- Any crime against property or the government involving fraud.
- 2 or more crimes with combined sentences of 5 years or more.
- Violating controlled substance laws (e.g., using or selling illegal drugs).
- Spending 180 days or more during the past 5 years in jail or prison.

Report any crimes that you committed when you apply for naturalization. This includes crimes removed from your record or committed before your 18th birthday. If you do not tell USCIS about them, you may be denied citizenship and you could be prosecuted.

5. English and Civics



In general, you must show that you can read, write, and speak basic English. You must also have a basic knowledge of U.S. history and government (also known as “civics”). You will be required to pass a test of English and a test of civics to prove your knowledge.

Many schools and community organizations help people prepare for their citizenship tests. You can find examples of test questions in Form M-476, A Guide to Naturalization. You can get materials to help you study for these tests and practice tests on the USCIS website at <http://uscis.gov/graphics/services/natz/require.htm>.

6. Attachment to the Constitution



You must be willing to support and defend the United States and its Constitution. You declare your “attachment” or loyalty to the United States and the Constitution

when you take the Oath of Allegiance. You become a U.S. citizen when you take the Oath of Allegiance.

A person does not have to take the Oath of Allegiance if they show that they have a physical or developmental disability that makes them unable to understand the meaning of the oath.

EXEMPTIONS TO THE ENGLISH AND CIVICS REQUIREMENTS



Some people who apply for naturalization have different test requirements because of their age and the length of time they have lived in the U.S.

If you are	Lived as LPR in the U.S for	You do not take the	You must take the
Over age 50	20 years	English test	civics test in your language
Over age 55	15 years	English test	civics test in your language
Over age 65	20 years	English test	simplified civics test in your language

If you do not have to take the English test, you must bring your own translator for the civics test. If you have a physical or mental disability, you may not have to take either test if you file Form N-648, Medical Certification for Disability Exceptions, with your application. To get more information, contact the USCIS Form Line at: 1-800-870-3676 and ask for Form N-648 or get a copy from the USCIS website at <http://www.uscis.gov/graphics/formsfee/forms/n-648.html>.

If you have a pending naturalization application and you move, you must notify USCIS of your new address. You can call 1-800-375-5283 to report your new address. You must also file Form AR-11 with DHS (see page 12 for instructions).

Naturalization Ceremonies

If USCIS approves your application for naturalization, you must attend a ceremony and take the Oath of Allegiance. USCIS will send you a Form N-445, Notice of Naturalization Oath Ceremony, to tell you the time and date of your ceremony. You must complete this form and bring it to your ceremony.

If you cannot go to your ceremony, you can reschedule your ceremony. To reschedule, you must return Form N-445 to your local USCIS office along with a letter explaining why you cannot attend the ceremony.

You will return your Permanent Resident card to USCIS when you check in at the Oath ceremony. You will no longer need your card because you will get a Certificate of Naturalization at the ceremony.

You are not a citizen until you have taken the Oath of Allegiance. An official will read each part of the Oath slowly and ask you to repeat the words. After you take the Oath, you will receive your Certificate of Naturalization. This certificate proves that you are a U.S. citizen.

The Oath of Allegiance ceremony is a public event. Many communities hold special ceremonies on Independence Day, July 4th, of each year. Check to see if your community holds a special July 4th citizenship ceremony and how you can participate. Many people bring their families and celebrate after the ceremony.

THE UNITED STATES TODAY



FEDERAL HOLIDAYS

The federal government observes the following official holidays. Most federal offices are closed on these days. If a holiday falls on a Saturday, it is observed on the preceding Friday. If a holiday falls on a Sunday, it is observed on the following Monday. Many employers also give their employees a holiday on these days.

New Year's Day	January 1
Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.	3rd Monday in January
Presidents' Day	3rd Monday in February
Memorial Day	Last Monday in May
Independence Day	July 4
Labor Day	1st Monday in September
Columbus Day	2nd Monday in October
Veterans Day	November 11
Thanksgiving Day	4th Thursday in November
Christmas Day	December 25

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR THIS GUIDE

Page 11, right photograph courtesy of <http://www.goarmy.com>.

Page 40, text box, top photograph by Gerald L. Nino.

Page 85, top right, Oval Office photograph by Paul Morse.

Pages 1, 14, 29, 66, 68, and 70 (left column), photographs by John Vavricka.