

CITIZENSHIP

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.*

*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

- *The New Colossus*, Emma Lazarus, excerpt printed on the Statue of Liberty (1903)

The United States of America has a complex and difficult history of trying to define what it means to be an American and deciding how a person becomes an American citizen. For many Americans, the idea that the U.S. is a place of opportunity for all people is central to their sense of pride in their country. From before its founding to today, the country has been a kaleidoscope of ethnic and cultural groups, and where a wide variety of people call home.

Every community has perks that come with being a member, as well as requirements for members to contribute back to the community. Being a citizen of the United States entitles you to rights and comes with corresponding responsibilities.

Rights include:

- Right to express yourself without censure from the government.
- Right to worship as you wish.
- Right to a prompt, fair trial by jury.
- Right to vote in elections for public officials.
- Right to apply for federal employment requiring U.S. citizenship.
- Right to run for elected office.
- Right to go after "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Responsibilities include:

- Support and defend the Constitution.
- Stay informed of the issues affecting your community and to take action to address them.
- Participate in the democratic process by talking to your representatives and voting.
- Respect and obey federal, state and local laws.
- Respect the rights of others.
- Pay income and other taxes honestly and on time, to federal, state and local authorities.
- Serve on a jury when called upon.
- Defend the country if the need should arise.

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There are two ways to become a citizen of the United States:

1. Be born in the U.S., or to American parents serving abroad.
2. Complete the naturalization process.

Birthright citizenship in the U.S. is more recent than you might imagine; it's only been in place since the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution on July 9, 1868. The amendment states:

"All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."

This amendment was a sweeping change; the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* Supreme Court decision from before the Civil War had declared that it was impossible for anyone of African ancestry to be a citizen of the United States. The Fourteenth Amendment, a Reconstruction-era change to the Constitution, still serves as the foundation of citizenship today. It means that many American citizens did nothing of their own accord to gain their citizenship.

The other way to obtain citizenship is through a process called naturalization. Before an individual applies for naturalization, they must meet a few requirements, depending on their individual situation. The process usually is marked by the time a person turns in their Form N-400 - Application for Naturalization.

Before you turn the form in, you must:

- Be at least 18 years old
- Be able to read, write and speak basic English
- Have a basic understanding of U.S. history and government
- Be a person of good moral character
- Be a permanent resident (have a "green card") for at least five years
- Demonstrate an attachment to the principles and ideals of the U.S. Constitution

You also must prove, when you submit the form, that you met the below residency requirements:

- You were a permanent resident (had a "green card") for at least five years
- You lived in the U.S. for at least five years immediately before turning the form in
- You were physically present in the U.S. for at least 30 months (2.5 years) of the five years in question
- You have lived for at least three months in the state or district where you're turning in the form

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In general, the naturalization process includes the following steps:

- Determine if you are already a U.S. citizen
- Determine your eligibility to become a U.S. citizen
- Prepare and submit Form N-400, Application for Naturalization
- Go to a fingerprinting appointment, if applicable
- Complete an interview with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) staff
- Receive a decision from USCIS on your Form N-400
- If accepted, receive a notice to take the Oath of Allegiance
- Take the Oath of Allegiance to the United States at a naturalization ceremony

During the naturalization interview, a USCIS officer will ask questions about all the things an applicant turned in with their Form N-400, Application for Naturalization, and about their background. An applicant will also take an English and civics test unless they qualify for an exemption or waiver. The English test has three components: reading, writing and speaking. For the reading component, an applicant must read aloud one out of three sentences correctly to demonstrate their ability to read in English, and then write out one of three sentences correctly. The content of these sentences is typically U.S. history and civics topics. The interview with the USCIS officer serves as the speaking part of the test. Finally, there are 100 possible civics questions that can be on the naturalization test. During an applicant's interview, they will be asked up to 10 questions from that list of 100. An applicant must answer correctly six of the 10 questions in order to pass.

If all goes well with the series of tests, the person in question must appear at a naturalization ceremony where they recite the following Oath of Allegiance to the United States:

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

The naturalization process can be arduous and requires serious work and serious promises. The people who complete it are dedicated to their citizenship and can be more aware of its responsibilities than those who were born into citizenship.