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Naturalization: Policy Overview and Selected Trends

Naturalization is the process by which a foreign national becomes a U.S. citizen under requirements established in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). In 2021, approximately 24 million naturalized U.S. citizens were residing in the United States, representing 53% of the foreign-born population.

Naturalization is voluntary and affords certain rights, benefits, and eligibility; including eligibility for a U.S. passport, the right to vote and run for elected office, eligibility for certain civil service and law enforcement jobs, and protection from deportation. In addition, U.S. citizens may sponsor a broader range of family members for permanent residence than lawful permanent residents (LPRs, also known as *green card holders*; foreign nationals authorized to live permanently in the United States), and the immediate relatives of U.S. citizens (as defined in the INA) are not subject to numerical limits.

Generally, in order to naturalize, a foreign national must be an LPR, meet certain U.S. residence and physical presence requirements, demonstrate knowledge of U.S. history and civics and English language ability, have good moral character, and show attachment to the U.S. Constitution by taking the Oath of Allegiance in a public ceremony. Individuals must be at least 18 to naturalize; children derive citizenship through their parents. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agency, adjudicates naturalization applications.

Eligibility Requirements

U.S. Residence and Physical Presence

Generally, an LPR becomes eligible to naturalize after five years of continuous U.S. residence preceding their application. During at least half that time (30 months), the individual must have been physically present in the United States. LPRs who are married to U.S. citizens and have been for at least three years may naturalize after three years of U.S. residence and 18 months of physical presence.

The INA contains special provisions for the naturalization of noncitizen members of the U.S. Armed Forces. Those who apply while in service or within six months of discharge are exempt from residence and physical presence requirements. Those who serve during designated periods of military hostilities may also naturalize without having first been an LPR.

Good Moral Character

Naturalization applicants must demonstrate that they have been persons of good moral character (GMC). GMC is determined on a case-by-case basis by USCIS based on the totality of the circumstances, considering factors such as

community involvement, employment history, and absence or presence of criminal history. The INA contains certain statutory bars to GMC (e.g., conviction of certain crimes).

English and Civics Knowledge

Naturalization applicants must demonstrate an ability to read, write, and speak English and take a civics exam that demonstrates understanding of U.S. history and government. Individuals aged 50 and older with qualifying U.S. residence may be eligible for modifications to these requirements. In addition, exemptions are available to individuals who are unable to comply with these requirements because of a physical or developmental disability or mental impairment.

Process

Individuals apply to naturalize by filing an Application for Naturalization (Form N-400) with USCIS with required fees (currently \$640 plus an \$85 biometric fee). Next, applicants undergo biometric screening, during which USCIS collects an applicant's fingerprints, photograph, and signature. Applicants then complete an interview with a USCIS officer in which they answer questions about their application and background and complete their civics and English tests. Those who pass their interviews and exams become U.S. citizens after taking the Oath of Allegiance. The Oath may be administered by USCIS in an administrative ceremony or by a federal judge in a judicial ceremony.

Dual Citizenship, Expatriation, and Revocation

An individual who naturalizes in the United States may retain the citizenship of another country if that country permits it. The United States has no authority to prohibit another country from continuing to treat an individual as its citizen.

A native-born or naturalized U.S. citizen may lose their citizenship by committing certain *expatriating acts* if those acts are committed with the intention of relinquishing U.S. citizenship. These include voluntary naturalization in a foreign country after age 18, making a formal declaration of allegiance to a foreign country after age 18, serving in the armed forces of a foreign country engaged in hostilities against the United States, and serving in the armed forces of a foreign country as an officer. An individual may also voluntarily renounce their U.S. citizenship before a U.S. diplomatic or consular officer abroad (e.g., because the individual wishes to run for elected office in another country).

A naturalized citizen may have his or her citizenship revoked in federal court on the basis that he or she procured

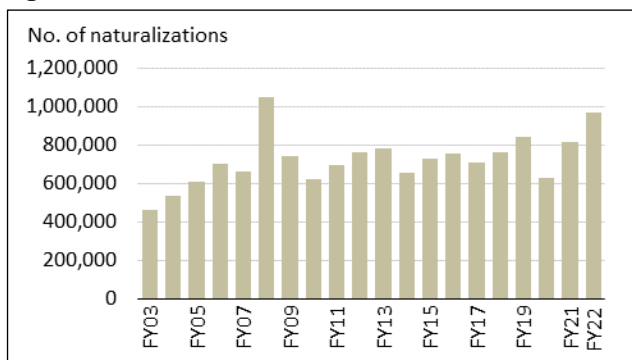
citizenship illegally by concealment of material facts or by willful misrepresentation.

Naturalization Trends

Annual Naturalizations

On average, 723,000 individuals naturalized annually in the United States during the last 20 years. In FY2022, nearly 1 million individuals naturalized, the highest number since FY2008 (**Figure 1**). Naturalizations were relatively low during FY2020 in part because of the COVID-19 pandemic—USCIS suspended in-person services at its field offices from March-June 2020. In addition, some naturalization applications were delayed because applicants' immigration records were held in Federal Records Centers operating with reduced staffing during the pandemic.

Figure 1. Annual Naturalizations, FY2003-FY2022

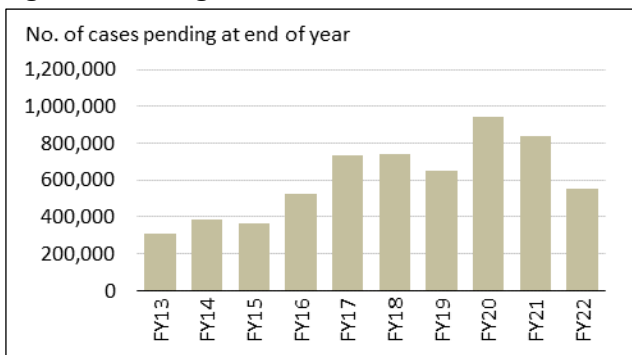


Source: FY2003-FY2021: DHS, *2021 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*; FY2022: USCIS, *Fiscal Year 2022 Progress Report*, December 2022.

Application Backlogs

In recent years, USCIS has come under scrutiny for its large backlogs of pending applications and long processing times, including for naturalization applications. At the end of FY2020, the number of pending Forms N-400 reached 943,000 (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2. Pending Cases, FY2013-FY2022



Source: USCIS, "All USCIS Application and Petition Form Types," multiple years.

Notes: Number of cases pending at the end of each fiscal year.

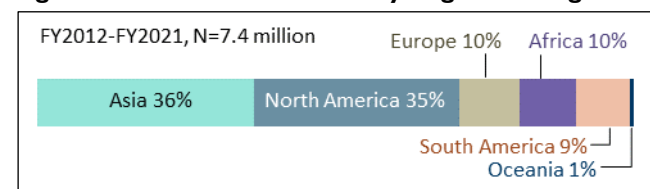
In 2022, USCIS announced new efforts to reduce processing times, with a goal to process Forms N-400

within 6 months. The median processing time for the N-400 decreased from 11.5 months in FY2021 to 6.9 months in the first quarter of FY2023. The number of pending N-400 applications declined by 42% from the end of FY2020 (943,000) to the end of FY2022 (550,000).

Origins of Naturalized Citizens

From FY2012-FY2021, the largest proportion of individuals who naturalized were from Asia and North America (including Mexico and Central America), each representing more than one-third of those naturalized (**Figure 3**). Individuals born in Europe and Africa each represented approximately 10%, followed by South America (9%) and Oceania (1%). The top 10 countries of origin for naturalizations during that period were Mexico, India, the Philippines, China, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Colombia, El Salvador, and Jamaica, cumulatively representing about half of all naturalizations.

Figure 3. Naturalized Citizens by Region of Origin



Source: DHS, *2021 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*.

Eligible to Naturalize

DHS's Office of Immigration Statistics estimates that as of January 2022, 9.2 million LPRs were eligible to naturalize, based on meeting age and residency requirements, representing approximately 72% of the 12.9 million LPRs residing in the United States. Nearly half of those eligible to naturalize were from North America, with more than a quarter from Mexico.

Additional Information

For more information, see the following:

CRS Infographic IG10028, *Naturalization: The Process of Becoming a U.S. Citizen*

CRS Report R43366, *U.S. Naturalization Policy*

CRS Infographic IG10035, *Expedited Naturalization through Military Service*

CRS In Focus IF12089, *U.S. Citizenship Through Military Service and Options for Military Relatives*

CRS Report R47223, *U.S. Citizenship for Children Born Abroad: In Brief*

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