IN THIS CHAPTER

- Planning your way to citizenship
- Understanding the immigration process
- Preparing to prove your case

Chapter 1
The Joys of Becoming a U.S. Citizen

The decision to become a U.S. citizen is one of the most important choices you can ever make. Before you can become a U.S. citizen, however, you first must be a lawful permanent resident of the United States. For this reason, before you begin the process, you need to know what you want to achieve — legal immigration or naturalization — and whether you can expect to qualify for it.

This chapter gives you an overview of your immigration options, helps you understand the benefits and disadvantages of becoming a U.S. citizen, and shows you what to expect during the process. Although we go into more detail later in the book, this chapter helps you determine what your immigration and citizenship goals are and shows you how best to pursue them.

Determining Whether You Really Want to Become a U.S. Citizen

Becoming a U.S. citizen carries important duties and responsibilities as well as rights, rewards, and privileges. Before you make the decision to pursue U.S. citizenship, you need to be aware of what you stand to lose and what you stand to gain and be sure that you're ready to fulfill all the obligations of a good citizen.

REMEMBER

Naturalization refers to the process by which immigrants become citizens. In most cases, if you were not born in the United States, you must be *naturalized* to become a U.S. citizen.

Understanding what you lose

Before you come to the United States, USCIS collects your biometric information to check for any criminal history or security risks. When you apply for naturalization, you agree that USCIS can scrutinize your activities both in the United States and in other countries. During this background check, USCIS is trying to find out if you have any problems that will stop you from fulfilling your obligations as a potential American citizen.

When you become a U.S. citizen, you must give up all prior allegiances to other countries. Although nobody will care if you root for your birth country in a soccer match (actually, some soccer fans may care, but the U.S. government certainly won't), you won't be able to defend that country against the United States in times of conflict or war. You must also be willing to serve your new country, the United States of America, when required. What this means is that if the United States is at war or in the midst of some other type of crisis, you need to be willing to take up arms or otherwise aid the U.S. military effort in whatever capacity is needed.

Giving up your allegiances to other countries doesn't necessarily mean you have to give up your citizenship in other countries. You may be able to maintain your original citizenship(s) *and* hold U.S. citizenship (having citizenship in more than one country is known as *dual citizenship*). The United States allows dual citizenship (though it is disfavored). Some countries do not allow dual citizenship. If you are a citizen of such a country, you will likely give up your citizenship upon naturalizing to U.S. citizenship. This information may affect your decision to apply for U.S. citizenship. To find out if your citizenship can be affected, check with the embassy of each country where you have or are considering citizenship.

Furthermore, giving up your allegiance to other countries does not mean that you must stop speaking your native language, teaching your children about your culture, or practicing your religion. These are gifts to be shared not only with your friends and family but also your fellow Americans.

Knowing what you gain

The United States Constitution, the country's most important document and essentially the rulebook for how the U.S. government runs, guarantees all people living in the United States, whether U.S. citizens or not, certain rights. Freedom of religion and speech, the right to peaceable assembly, and the right to a fair trial if

you're ever accused of a crime are all important freedoms guaranteed to everyone in the United States.

U.S. citizens, both born and naturalized, however, are eligible for many additional benefits based on their status as U.S. citizens. These include the following:

- The right to vote and, therefore, to have a voice in government.
- The right to hold elected office (except for the offices of president and vice president, which are reserved for natural-born citizens).
- The right to travel on a U.S. passport, which allows for visa-free travel to may counties.
- The right to seek the assistance of U.S. embassies when traveling abroad.
- Certain government jobs.
- Scholarships and/or grants.
- Your children under the age of 18 years automatically become U.S. citizens.
- The ability to petition for immediate relatives to join you in the United States without being subject to visa limits.
- Protection from forced removal from the country.
- Certain types of public assistance.
- Freedom from immigration paperwork — yay!

Understanding your rights and responsibilities as a U.S. citizen

When you become a naturalized U.S. citizen, you must take the *Oath of Allegiance.* The Oath of Allegiance is your promise to the government and the people of the United States that you will:

- Give up any prior allegiances to other countries.
- Support and defend the Constitution and the laws of the United States against all enemies.
- Support, defend, and obey the laws of the United States.
- Serve the United States, if required, in times of war or national emergency. You may be called to serve in the military or help U.S. military efforts in some capacity.
- Swear allegiance to the United States.

In addition to the responsibilities outlined in the Oath of Allegiance, U.S. citizens have other important duties:

- **Paying taxes:** A key duty of American citizenship is to pay taxes. It is required by law and by the U.S. Constitution, under the 16th Amendment. Everyone pays taxes to help fund the federal government and support public services, such as schools, roads, and national defense. Paying taxes is also a civic duty because it helps the country work and shows respect for the laws of the United States.
- **Serving on a jury:** One of the most important rights in the United States is the right to a trial by a jury in most cases. Serving on a jury when asked is an important obligation of U.S. citizens in order to protect the U.S. system of justice, in which the power still rests with the people.

  
  WARNING

  Although there is a small chance you may never be called to report for jury duty, know that if you do receive a notice to report, you're legally compelled to do so. Failure to report for jury duty can result in a fine, jail time, or both.
- **Voting:** The United States has a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. The ultimate political authority is not in the hands of the government or of any single government official — instead, the ultimate political authority is in the hands of the people. Citizens of the United States have the right to change or abolish the government or to amend the Constitution. U.S. citizens exercise their power by voting for elected representatives.
- **Being tolerant of others:** Some people say that the United States is a "melting pot," the assimilation of many different peoples to create one people; others say that the United States is more like a "tossed salad," a medley of different cultures — each separately identifiable — while still enhancing the common culture. People living here need to be tolerant of all races, religions, and cultures.


REMEMBER

Although you aren't legally compelled to perform some of these duties — for instance, no one will take you to jail if you don't exercise your right to vote — you will deprive yourself of the important benefits of living in the United States if you don't participate.

Mapping Your Way to America: Typical Ways People Immigrate to the U.S.

Before you can even think about becoming a naturalized citizen of the United States, you must be a lawful permanent resident of this country. A *lawful permanent resident* is a foreign national who has been granted the privilege of permanently

living and working in the United States. Most adult applicants (those 18 years old or older) must have been lawful permanent residents of the United States for the five years prior to applying for citizenship. If you're married to and living with your U.S. citizen spouse, and your permanent residence is based on that marriage, the residence requirement drops to three years, as long as your spouse has been a citizen for the three years prior to your application. (We go over the eligibility requirements for naturalization in further detail in Chapter 3.)

WARNING

Everyone entering the United States must have a Form I-94, except for U.S. citizens, returning permanent residents, immigrants with visas, and most Canadian visitors or travelers passing through. People arriving by air or sea will receive their I-94 during the entry process at the port of entry. If you were admitted or paroled into the United States by an immigration officer, you were issued or received a Form I-94, Arrival/Departure Record, which shows a specific date when you are required to leave. People who stay in the United States illegally for over 180 days past the I-94 Departure Date and then leave the United States can be barred from reentering the country for at least three years. Visitors who stay in the United States more than one year after their visa expires may be banned from returning for ten years. For further information, see U.S. Customs and Border Protection: For International Visitors (`www.cbp.gov/travel/international-visitors`).

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) won't count time you spent here illegally before April 1, 1997. People who have been granted asylum (with pending cases), minors under the age of 18, Family Unity beneficiaries, and battered spouses/children and victims of trafficking (who can prove a connection between the status violation and abuse) do not accrue unlawful presence.

THE FOUR 3'S OF ELIGIBILITY BASED ON MARRIAGE TO A U.S. CITIZEN

- You must be a lawful permanent resident for **at least 3 years** before you apply.
- You must be **married to and living with your U.S. citizen spouse** for those 3 years and continue to do so while your application is processed.
- You must have **lived in your state or USCIS district for at least 3 months** before applying.
- You must have **lived continuously in the United States** as a permanent resident for those 3 years.

For further information, USCIS.gov has a detailed web page about Unlawful Presence and Inadmissibility (www.uscis.gov/laws-and-policy/other-resources/unlawful-presence-and-inadmissibility), which includes a link to the USCIS Adjudicators Field Guide (ch.40.9.2) and several specific references to the Immigration and Nationality Act: INA 212(a)(9)(B)(i)(I), INA 212(a)(9)(B)(i)(II), INA 212(a)(9)(C)(i)(I) that describes special circumstances and remedies. For example, a person who was deported from the U.S. for staying illegally must wait ten years. After that, they can file USCIS Form I-212 to ask permission to come back. If USCIS approves the petition, the person can apply for an immigration visa, become a permanent resident, and later apply for citizenship. Please consult with an immigration legal service representative about lawful presence issues.

WARNING

Bottom line: Don't overstay your welcome. If you're in the United States on a temporary visa and you stay after your visa expires, you're putting your future chances for lawful permanent residence at risk. Being in the country illegally is grounds for removal and for denial of future immigration benefits. If you are currently in the country illegally, you should seek competent legal advice before leaving the United States to try to secure a visa.

TIP

To check whether your immigration status is currently legal, rely on your I-94 (Arrival-Departure Record). You receive this document from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (find out more about the CBP in Chapter 2) upon entering the country, or from the USCIS if you extended your immigration status while already in the United States. As of April 30, 2013, most Arrival and/or Departure records are created electronically upon arrival. Many people believe the visa is what determines the amount of time you can stay in the United States, but this isn't the case.

The CBP is supposed to give a person the amount of time for which a visa petition is approved, rather than the amount of time the visa is valid — which is sometimes less than the amount of time granted in the petition. Likewise, the CBP can approve entry for a lesser amount of time than the visa would indicate.

REMEMBER

If you stay in the United States for more time than your I-94 allows, you are out of status, even if your visa indicates a longer period.

Your visa can say it expires tomorrow, but the airport inspector can stamp your I-94 for six months. On the other hand, your visa can say it's valid through 2030, but the inspector can stamp you for only one month. The stamp is always your guide.

How can you achieve lawful permanent residence? Although there are other ways that we go into in Chapter 3, most people immigrate for one of two reasons:

- To reunite with family members already living in the United States
- To pursue a permanent employment opportunity in the United States

HOW IMMIGRATION LAW DEFINES CHILDREN

The definition of a child in U.S. immigration law depends on the type of petition or application. When you read government documents that say, for instance, that you're able to sponsor "children," that means you can sponsor an unmarried son or daughter under the age of 21 who was born in wedlock or is your legally recognized stepchild or adopted child. If, on the other hand, an immigration document refers to a "son or daughter," this refers to a child age 21 or older. For further info, consult the USCIS Policy Manual Volume 12 - Part H - Chapter 2 (`www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-12-part-h-chapter-2`).

Please note: There are two main ways a person can gain U.S. citizenship through their American parents: at birth or after birth but before turning 18. Even though a U.S. citizen can petition for an unmarried child under 21 to immigrate to the United States, a child under 18 living outside the U.S. does not automatically become a U.S. citizen when the parent becomes a citizen. However, after the child under 18 immigrates and becomes a lawful permanent resident, they may qualify for citizenship by filing Form N-600K if they meet the required conditions. See "Reuniting with your family" nearby in this chapter.

Reuniting with your family

To use family relationships to immigrate to the United States, you must have a *close* relative already living here who is willing to sponsor you. If you don't have sufficient documentation of a biological family relationship, USCIS or the State Department may ask for DNA testing. So how close is close? If your relative is at least 21 years old and a U.S. citizen, born or naturalized, they may sponsor you if you are their

- Husband or wife
- Unmarried child under age 21
- Unmarried son or daughter over age 21
- Married son or daughter
- Brother or sister
- Parent

Citizens may *not* sponsor their grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, cousins, or anyone else.

Lawful permanent residents (green-card holders) — those legally living and working in the United States who have not become naturalized citizens — may sponsor only their

- Husband or wife
- Unmarried children of any age

Lawful permanent residents (green-card holders) may *not* sponsor brothers or sisters, parents, grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, cousins, or anyone other than their spouse and children.

But wait, it's not so easy. Beyond having a willingness to sponsor you, your relative must meet certain criteria to be eligible to become a sponsor:

- Your relative must be able to provide documentation of their own immigration status — as a lawful permanent resident or as a United States citizen (born or naturalized).
- Your relative must be able to prove that they can financially support you (and any other family members they are financially responsible for) at 125 percent above the government-mandated poverty level. In other words, for a sponsor to bring a relative to live permanently in the United States, the sponsor must be both willing and able to accept legal responsibility for financially supporting that family member. You can find more information about how to meet this qualification in Chapter 3.

Pursuing employment opportunities

If you want to immigrate to the United States because you have a full-time, permanent employment opportunity waiting for you here, both you and your prospective employer must meet a list of specific qualifications. Although one of the goals of the U.S. Congress is to provide the United States with a strong and stable workforce, the USCIS also wants to be sure that immigrants aren't taking jobs that would otherwise go to unemployed U.S. citizens.

REMEMBER

Before you even get started, keep in mind that your prospective employer must first certify the position with the Department of Labor. This *Labor Certification* is required to show there are no qualified, available U.S. workers to fill the job. Check U.S. Department of Labor: Foreign Labor Certification (`www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/foreign-labor`) for recent updates.

The USCIS grants permanent residence based on employment skills in one of five categories:

- **Priority Workers (category EB-1)** have extraordinary ability in the arts, education, business, science, or athletics, or they are considered to be outstanding professors or researchers. Notice the superlatives: *extraordinary, outstanding.* This category is one of the most difficult ones to qualify for unless you're a Nobel Prize winner or hold other such prestigious and public accolades in your given field. You may qualify, however, by presenting extensive documentation proving your professional or academic achievements in one of the listed fields as well as evidence of your financial success in your field and your ability to substantially benefit the United States. Another way to qualify for the Priority Workers category is if you happen to be a manager or executive of a company that has transferred you to one of its branches in the United States.
- **Professionals with Advanced Degrees or Persons with Exceptional Ability (category EB-2)** are members of their professions holding advanced degrees, or their U.S. equivalent, or persons with exceptional ability in business, sciences, or the arts who will benefit the interests or welfare of the United States. To qualify for this category, you must be prepared to show how becoming a lawful permanent resident will be good for the economy or culture of the United States or how you can help meet the academic needs of the country. You may also qualify for this category if you're a qualified physician and you agree to practice medicine in an area of the United States that is medically underserved.
- **Skilled or Professional Workers or Other Workers (category EB-3)** have less stringent requirements for qualification than people who qualify under the EB-1 and EB-2 classifications, but this category sometimes has a much longer backlog of people waiting for visas, especially in the Other Workers category. You can qualify for a classification EB-3 employment visa in three ways:
  - **As a Skilled Worker:** If you can fill an open position that requires at least two years of experience or training, you can qualify as a Skilled Worker. The Department of Labor determines which jobs are considered skilled, as opposed to unskilled, labor.
  - **As a Professional:** Professionals must hold a U.S. baccalaureate degree or the foreign equivalent degree normally required for the profession. Education and experience may not be substituted for the actual degree.
  - **As an Other Worker:** Those who fall into the category of Other Workers have the skills to fill jobs that require less than two years of higher education, training, or experience. This category receives the most petitions, so if you fall in this group, you may have to wait many years before being granted a visa.

- **Special Immigrants (or category EB-4)** primarily are members of religious denominations that have nonprofit religious organizations in the United States. You must be able to prove that you have been a member of this organization and have worked for the organization for at least two years before you applied for admission, and you must be coming to the United States to work as a minister or priest or other religious vocation that helps the organization. You may also qualify if your work helps the organization in a more professional capacity; however, this means that a U.S. baccalaureate degree, or the foreign equivalent, is required to perform the job.
- **Immigrant Investors (or category EB-5)** must agree to make a "qualified investment" in a new commercial enterprise. All Immigrant Investors must demonstrate that their investment will benefit the United States economy, as well as create a specified number of full-time jobs for qualified U.S. citizens.

  This category is often known as the "million-dollar visa" because the minimum investment (which is subject to change) is, you guessed it, a million dollars. You can invest less and still qualify if you invest in a *targeted employment area* (a rural area or an area of high unemployment).

  A special pilot program allows an investor within an approved regional center to receive an EB-5 visa by showing that their investment will create jobs indirectly through revenues generated from increased exports, improved regional productivity, job creation, or increased domestic capital investment resulting from the new commercial enterprise. For updates, check USCIS: EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program (`www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/permanent-workers/eb-5-immigrant-investor-program`).

There are several categories of visas for nonimmigrants that allow the visa holders to temporarily live and work in the United States. Of special note are the following categories of essential workers:

- F-1 Student Visa (full-time student in academic or language programs)
- H-1B Specialty Occupations (and their H-4 family members)
- H-2A Agricultural Workers
- H-2B Non-Agricultural Workers
- L-1A Intracompany Transferee Executive or Manager
- L-1B Intracompany Transferee Specialized Knowledge
- M-1 Student Visa (students in vocational or nonacademic programs)

Corporations or research facilities can sponsor a visa-holding employee with exceptional merit and skills to apply for an "Adjustment of Status" (USCIS Form I-485, Application to Register Permanent Residence or Adjust Status), allowing the employee and their family to become U.S. lawful permanent residents, putting them on the path toward naturalization in five years. For further details, see USCIS: Temporary (Nonimmigrant) Workers (www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/temporary-nonimmigrant-workerswww.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/temporary-nonimmigrant-workers).

Winning the visa lottery

Even if you qualify for one of the visa categories listed in the preceding section, entering the Diversity Visa (DV) Lottery Program makes sense because it can speed up your process of receiving a visa, especially if you find yourself in one of the lower preference categories.

Natives of countries with historically low rates of immigration to the United States may be eligible to enter. Those born in any territory that has sent more than 50,000 immigrants to the United States in the previous five years are not eligible to receive a diversity visa.

Entering the visa lottery is easy. You can file online at Department of State: Diversity Visa Program (travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/diversity-visa-program-entry/diversity-visa-submit-entry1.html). Note: Submitting more than one application disqualifies you from the lottery.

If you receive a visa through the Diversity Visa Lottery Program, you'll be authorized to live and work permanently in the United States, as well as bring your spouse and any children under the age of 21 along with you.

Each year 55,000 immigrant visas become available to people who come from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. The Department of State randomly selects about 125,000 applicants from among the qualified entries. Why do they pick 125,000 when only 55,000 visas are available? Because they know that not all the applicants will be able to successfully complete the visa process. When 55,000 applicants have qualified and completed the immigration process, no further Diversity Lottery visas are issued for that year.

SURPRISE! YOU MAY ALREADY BE A U.S. CITIZEN

If you were born in the United States — including, in most cases, Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands — you're considered a U.S. citizen at birth. Your birth certificate serves as proof of your citizenship. The one exception to this rule is if one or more of your parents was a foreign diplomat at the time of your birth (you would be considered a permanent resident in that case).

People born in American Samoa are usually "noncitizen U.S. nationals," not U.S. citizens. They are loyal to the United States and can have a U.S. passport. They may live and work anywhere in the United States. However, they cannot vote in federal elections, serve on juries, or hold some federal jobs.

In 1952, the U.S. Congress passed a law not to apply the 14th Amendment rule of birth-right citizenship to American Samoa. This law allowed American Samoa residents to be U.S. nationals while protecting local land rights and traditional culture, known as *fa'a Samoa*.

Like other noncitizens, American Samoans may apply to become U.S. citizens through naturalization. They must be at least 18 years old and live in the United States, including in American Samoa, for five years without leaving for more than six months at a time.

In keeping with their cultural values, American Samoans also have a strong tradition of military service. The territory has one of the highest annual rates of enlistment in the U.S. Army and Army Reserves per person in the United States.

Are there ways to be born abroad and still be a U.S. citizen? Yes, under certain specific conditions. If you were born abroad but both your parents were U.S. citizens, and at least one of those two parents lived in the United States at some point prior to your birth, then you are considered a U.S. citizen in most cases.

If you were born abroad but only one of your parents was a U.S. citizen and the other parent was an alien, you will be considered a citizen in most cases if, before you were born, your citizen parent lived in the United States for at least five years. To qualify, at least two of those five years had to have taken place after your citizen parent's 14th birthday.

Notice how we keep saying "in most cases"? The previous explanation is current law, and it's a generalization. Whether you acquired U.S. citizenship at birth depends on the law that was in effect at the time of your birth. This is one of the toughest areas of immigration law, filled with loopholes and exceptions, so getting expert help in these cases is always a good idea. Be sure to seek and get competent legal help *before* you need it. (You can get more information on finding legal help in Chapter 7.)

Documenting Your Immigration Status

Your entry document (such as an I-94 card for nonimmigrants) or a green card (if you're a permanent resident) serves as the necessary documentation to prove that you're in the United States legally and that you're entitled to all the rights and privileges that come with that status. As long as you hold a valid USCIS entry document or green card, maintain lawful status, and have not committed a removable offense, you don't have to worry about being forced to leave the country. For naturalized citizens, a Certificate of Naturalization or a U.S. passport serves as the same proof of immigration status.

Depending on where you are in the immigration process, you'll need various forms and documentation.

REAL ID

A *REAL ID* is a special type of driver's license or identification card that meets federal security standards. It is required to fly within the United States or to enter secure federal buildings, such as courthouses or military bases, after May 7, 2025.

Getting a REAL ID is optional, but if you want to use your state ID for these federal purposes, it must be REAL ID–compliant. A REAL ID proves your identity and legal presence, but it is not proof of immigration status.

Who Can Get a REAL ID

You may apply for a REAL ID if you are legally living in the United States. This includes U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and noncitizens with legal status, such as students, workers, people with DACA, or those with Temporary Protected Status.

How to Apply for a REAL ID

To get a REAL ID, you must show documents that prove your identity, your Social Security number, and your address. Examples include a passport or birth certificate, a Social Security card or pay stub, and two proofs of address, such as utility bills or bank statements. If your name has changed, you must also show legal proof of the change. You can upgrade your current driver's license or ID to a REAL ID. For further information, see `www.usa.gov/real-id`.

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State Rules and Application Process

Each state has its own rules for issuing REAL IDs. The documents accepted may differ. For example, one state may accept a cellphone bill as proof of address, while another might not. Some states allow you to start the process online and finish in person, while others require you to apply in person at the DMV. The cost of getting a REAL ID also differs from state to state. Before applying, check your state's DMV website and prepare all required documents in advance.

Standard (Noncompliant) Driver's Licenses

Most states continue to offer standard, noncompliant driver's licenses or ID cards. These are marked with phrases like "Federal Limits Apply" or "Not for Federal Identification." They are valid for driving and identification, but they cannot be used for domestic flights or to enter federal buildings after May 7, 2025.

Some states offer these noncompliant cards to all residents, including people without legal status. Other states limit who may apply and may require new applicants to obtain a REAL ID. Always check your state's rules.

Enhanced Driver's Licenses (EDL/EID)

Enhanced Driver's Licenses and Enhanced IDs allow U.S. citizens to cross certain land and sea borders without a passport. They are also valid for domestic flights. As of January 2026, they are available only in Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Vermont, and Washington.

Special TSA Option without REAL ID

Starting February 1, 2026, travelers who do not have a REAL ID or passport may use the TSA ConfirmID service at airport checkpoints for a $45 fee to verify their identity and board.

Connection to Citizenship Preparation

The REAL ID application requires information and documents like those used in the naturalization process. For many applicants, obtaining a REAL ID is an important practical step on the path toward U.S. citizenship.

Just visiting: Nonimmigrant alien

A *nonimmigrant,* or temporary, visa allows you to legally stay in the United States for a given length of time, after which you must leave the country. To qualify for a temporary visa, you usually need to prove that you have a residence outside the United States, as well as binding ties to your home country, such as a family or a job. The U.S. government wants to be sure that you'll return home at the end of your visit. In most cases, you also need to show that you have enough money to support yourself while in the United States.

The type of temporary visa you get will depend on the reasons why you want to visit the United States. You can gain temporary access to the United States in many ways, including the following:

- As a visitor or tourist
- For business
- To seek medical treatment
- As a temporary worker or to receive work training
- As a student, either for academic or vocational training
- By participating in an educational or cultural exchange program
- As a fiancé(e) of an American citizen
- As a NAFTA professional

The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which replaced NAFTA, is a trade agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. It allows some Canadian and Mexican citizens to work in the United States for a short time under the TN (Trade NAFTA) visa. To qualify, the person must be a citizen of Canada or Mexico, have a job offer in a profession listed under the USMCA, and have the right qualifications for that job.

A TN worker can stay in the United States for up to three years. If they want to stay longer, their employer can apply to extend their stay using Form I-129. The worker's spouse and children under 21 can come to the United States with TD status. Family members with TD status cannot work, but they can study, and their stay ends when the TN worker's stay ends. For details, see USCIS: TN USMCA Professionals (`www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/temporary-workers/tn-usmca-professionals`).

TIP

Travelers from certain eligible countries also may be able to visit the United States (for business or pleasure only) without a visa through the Department of State's Visa Waiver Program; check to see if your home country qualifies. See the full list of visa categories at travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/all-visa-categories.html.

REMEMBER

Seek competent legal help if you have been in the United States illegally. If you leave the United States to obtain an immigrant visa abroad and the unlawful presence accrued after March 31, 1997, you will be barred from reentering the United States for three years (if the continuous unlawful presence was from 181 days to one year) or ten years (if the continuous unlawful presence was for more than one year).

Preparing to adjust your immigration status

A *nonimmigrant alien* is a foreign national who stays in the United States for a limited time rather than permanently. This status is for specific reasons, such as visiting, working temporarily, or studying. People with this status usually have a home in another country to which they plan to return.

To become a lawful permanent resident, a nonimmigrant alien must first be admitted as an immigrant. Most people get their immigrant visas because a qualified relative or employer has sponsored them as follows:

1. **Determine if you are eligible to apply for a green card.** The most common categories for eligibility for a green card include Family and Employment. Other categories, such as Religious Workers, Refugees, and Victims of Human Trafficking, are also possible. See USCIS: Green Card Eligibility Categories (www.uscis.gov/green-card/green-card-eligibility-categories).
2. **You or someone else must file an immigrant petition for you (if applicable).** Here are the most common forms that are available on USCIS.gov:
   - Form I-130, Petition for Alien Relative
   - Form I-140, Immigrant Petition for Alien Worker
   - Form I-730, Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition
   - Form I-589, Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal
3. **Check visa availability (if applicable).** See USCIS: Visa Availability and Priority Dates (www.uscis.gov/green-card/green-card-processes-and-procedures/visa-availability-and-priority-dates).

4. **File Form I-485.** Check USCIS: I-485, Application to Register Permanent Residence or Adjust Status (www.uscis.gov/i-485) carefully for information about where and when to send the application and supporting documentation, all of which depend on your category of eligibility. Do not send your original documents unless the form instructions or rules clearly ask for them. If you send any documents in a foreign language, you must include a full English translation. Here is quick list of required evidence:

   - A valid passport and government-issued ID with photo
   - Two photographs
   - Birth and police certificates
   - Marriage, divorce, or death certificates of your current and/or prior spouse(s)
   - Proof of financial support
   - Proof of medical examination

5. **Go to your Application Support Center (ASC) appointment.** Unless you sign up for e-mail notification, USCIS usually sends appointment notices by mail. During the ASC appointment, USCIS gathers biometrics information, such as fingerprint or photo.

6. **Go to your interview (if applicable).** During your green card interview, the officer will ask questions about your personal history, your marriage (if you have one), employment, and the information in your application to make sure you qualify. You may need to talk about how you entered the U.S., your job history, and any criminal record. You should also be ready to explain any changes since you applied and to answer questions about your future plans and security matters.

   If your petition is marriage-based, the officer will ask you for additional details about your marriage, such as when you met your spouse and how you live together. Sometimes, a marriage-based applicant goes to their Permanent Residence and Naturalization interviews on the same day. Other times, a conditional two-year green card is issued to an applicant (of any eligibility category), who then must file a petition within the 90-day period before the conditional green card expires.

7. **Respond to request for additional evidence (if applicable).** Sometimes, during a green card interview, questions come up that can be resolved by providing additional documents, such as airline tickets, W-2s, tax receipts, and so on. The officer will complete your interview and give you a paper saying that no decision has been made about your case. Then, USCIS will send you a letter with a list of specific items to submit by mail. Although you may be tempted to send EVERYTHING, send only the EXACT documents listed in the USCIS letter.

8. **Check your case status.** Use USCIS.gov: Case Status Online tool (egov.uscis.gov/) to see the progress of your immigration application, petition, or request. Your receipt number is a 13-character code with three letters and ten numbers and is at the top of your USCIS application receipt letter.

9. **Receive a decision.** If your case is approved, you will get your physical green card in the mail about two to four weeks after your interview. If your interview takes place outside the United States, you will first get an immigrant visa to enter the country. After you arrive, your green card will be mailed to you. If your case is denied or you are ordered to leave the country, you will get a notice that explains the reasons for the decision.

TIP

In many employment-based cases, USCIS does not require an interview. If you receive an interview notice, however, don't be nervous about your interview. Be prepared! Here's what to expect:

- At the beginning of the interview, the USCIS officer will place you under oath. This means that you swear to tell the truth at all times during the interview.
- The officer will then review your file and ask questions about the answers you gave on your application. Be prepared to answer questions about whether you have a criminal record or have ever been involved in deportation proceedings or any of the other permanent or temporary bars to immigration outlined in Chapter 8.
- The USCIS officer will also review your medical examinations.
- The officer will ask if there is anything you want to correct about the background and biographical information you provided to USCIS. If anything has changed or you feel your documents contain inaccurate information, now is the time to speak up.
- If your case is based on employment, the officer may also review your Department of Labor paperwork. They may ask questions about your job to determine whether you really worked in the occupation you claim when you lived in your native country. The officer may also want to know whether you have the necessary skills to perform the job in the United States.

  Be prepared to answer questions designed to determine whether you've been working illegally while waiting for your green-card application to be approved.

WARNING

- Some applicants aren't allowed to work in the United States while waiting to get their green cards — and working illegally provides grounds for the USCIS to deny your application. As long as you're truthful and have followed the rules, you should have nothing to worry about.

» If your case is based upon your marriage to a U.S. citizen, the interviewing officer will ask questions about your marriage and life together. The USCIS wants to feel confident that yours is a true marriage and not a union of convenience designed to get you into the country. The USCIS will require your spouse to come to the green-card interview, and they can choose to interview you separately or as a couple.

If you're already living in the United States, you may be eligible to adjust your immigration status from temporary to lawful permanent resident without leaving the country. And here's some good news: As an applicant, you may apply for a work permit while your case is pending. (You can find out more about this in Chapter 3.)

WARNING

Although you may think that it's not a big deal to travel back to your home country, the time you spend outside the United States can affect your petition to become a lawful permanent resident and ultimately a U.S. citizen. If you plan to leave the United States while applying for adjustment to permanent resident status, you must receive advance permission, called *advance parole,* to return to the United States. If you do not apply for advance parole *before* leaving the United States, the USCIS will assume that you have abandoned your application, and you may not be permitted to reenter the United States.

TECHNICAL STUFF

USCIS has started charging a new immigration parole fee of $1,000 for the 2025 fiscal year. This fee may change each year based on inflation. Do not send this fee when you file Form I-131. Starting October 16, 2025, if USCIS decides that your request for parole or re-parole can be approved and that you need to pay the fee, they will send you a notice. The notice will explain how to pay and give you a deadline. USCIS will not approve your parole unless you pay the fee as instructed and on time. For more info about travel during advance parole, see `USCIS.gov`: I-131, Application for Travel Documents, Parole Documents, and Arrival/Departure Records (`www.uscis.gov/i-131`).

TIP

You can get more specific details about what to provide at the Department of State: Immigrant Visa Process (`travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/the-immigrant-visa-process/step-1-submit-a-petition.html`); requirements vary slightly from consulate to consulate. Visit the Department of State: National Visa Center (NVC) (`nvc.state.gov`) for more information.

You can see the current status of your case or make updates by logging into the Consular Electronic Application Center (`ceac.state.gov`).

The latest updates for U.S. Embassies and Consulates, including operating status of the Consular Section, can be found at `www.usembassy.gov`. NVC cannot predict when Consular Sections will resume routine services, or when your case will be scheduled for an interview.

WARNING

The National Visa Center (NVC) is not open to the public. Unfortunately, some people have traveled long distances to inquire about their case in person, only to discover that NVC staff is unable to meet with them.

It's not easy being green: Lawful permanent residence

A Permanent Resident Card is evidence of your status as a lawful permanent resident. Although in popular lingo it's called a *green card*, the Permanent Resident Card is officially known as USCIS Form I-551.

TECHNICAL STUFF

The *green card* began during World War II when foreign nationals in the U.S. needed a registration card under the Alien Registration Act of 1940. Over time, the card changed name and appearance — for example, in the 1940s, the residence card was Form I-151 and was often printed on green paper, which led to the nickname. The card's color varied over the years (blue, tan, pink) due to design changes. In 2010 and later, USCIS redesigned the card to update its appearance and embed new technology (holograms, laser-engraving, biometrics) to make it more secure. Despite the many design changes, the slang term *green card* stuck because of its historical green-paper origin. For a more colorful history about the green card, famous naturalized citizens, and development of a federal "office" of immigration and naturalization, go to `USCIS.gov`: Stories from the Archives (`www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/stories-from-the-archives`).

Getting ready to join the club: Naturalization

Naturalization, the process by which lawful permanent residents become U.S. citizens, is the next step in the immigration process. Many lawful permanent residents stop before achieving citizenship, but if you bought this book, chances are you're interested in going all the way.

TECHNICAL STUFF

As a naturalized citizen, a person has the exact same rights, responsibilities, and benefits of natural-born U.S. citizens, with one exception: Only natural-born citizens may become president or vice president of the United States.

In most cases, naturalization applicants must prove they can meet these requirements:

- **A designated period of continuous residence in the United States (usually three or five years immediately prior to applying) as a lawfully admitted permanent resident.**

- **Physical presence in the United States for at least half the designated time.**
- **Residence in a particular USCIS district prior to filing, usually for at least three months.** Districts are geographical areas serviced by local USCIS offices. You can get up-to-date information about districts at USCIS.gov: Field Offices (www.uscis.gov/about-us/find-a-uscis-office/field-offices).
- **The ability to read, write, and speak basic English.**
- **A basic knowledge and understanding of U.S. history and government.**
- **Good moral character.** Applicants for naturalization must be "of good moral character," meaning that the USCIS will make a determination based on current laws. Conviction for certain crimes will cause you to lose your eligibility for citizenship. For example, if you have ever been convicted of a serious crime, such as murder or drug or human trafficking, you may never become a citizen of the United States. Other lesser crimes may delay your immigration or citizenship goals because they prevent you from applying until a specified amount of time has passed since you committed the crime.

  In 2014, USCIS added additional questions about violent activities and war crimes, as required by U.S. national security laws. These extra questions have greatly increased the number of good moral character questions asked during naturalization interviews. In addition, USCIS may review behavior that could be considered criminal, even if you were never arrested, charged, or convicted of a crime.

  On August 15, 2025, USCIS issued new rules about "good moral character" for people applying to become U.S. citizens. Before, officers mostly looked to see if you had serious disqualifying behavior (crimes, fraud, and so on). Now, they look at everything together ("totality of circumstances"). They place greater emphasis on your positive actions like volunteering or caregiving. (You can find more on good moral character in Chapter 3.)
- **Attachment to the principles of the U.S. Constitution.** This means you agree with and support the values and laws of the United States. Having a favorable attitude toward the United States shows that you respect and are loyal to the country. This also means you are willing to take the Oath of Allegiance, promising to be loyal to the United States and to give up loyalty to any other country.

Don't worry if this sounds like a lot. The purpose of this book is to help get you ready to successfully complete your immigration goals all the way to becoming a U.S. citizen. We go into greater detail on all these requirements later in the book.

SERVING YOUR WAY TO CITIZENSHIP

U.S. citizens and some noncitizens are allowed to join the U.S. military. However, if you are not a U.S. citizen, you must have a Permanent Resident Card (green card) and be able to speak, read, and write English fluently. You cannot join the military just to come to the United States or to get a visa. Previously, the Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) program that allowed certain noncitizens to enlist in exchange for a fast track to U.S. citizenship. This program was suspended in 2016 due to national security concerns and has not been reinstated.

If you currently serve or previously served honorably in the U.S. armed forces during a designated period of hostilities, you may be eligible to apply for naturalization. While some general naturalization requirements apply under INA 329, other requirements may not apply or are reduced.

For further information about eligibility based on military service, see the USCIS.gov: Naturalization Through Military Service (www.uscis.gov/military/naturalization-through-military-service). You can find further information in the online USCIS.gov Policy Manual Chapter 5 - Application and Filing for Service Members (INA 328 and 329).

Spouses of U.S. military members may qualify for faster naturalization even if they live outside the United States. Children of service members may also qualify for naturalization or may automatically become U.S. citizens. See USCIS.gov: Citizenship for Military Family (www.uscis.gov/military/citizenship-for-military-family-members).

If you are an immediate relative (spouse, child, or parent) of a U.S. armed forces member who died from combat-related injuries while on active duty, you may be eligible for certain "survivor" immigration benefits, including citizenship. You must be a lawful permanent resident and meet the other general naturalization requirements, except for the residence or physical presence requirements in the U.S. A nonimmigrant spouse, child, or parent may be eligible for adjustment of status as an "immediate relative" if they file Form I-360, Petition for Amerasian, Widow(er), or Special Immigrant, within two years after the service member's death. See USCIS.gov: Family Based Survivor Benefits (www.uscis.gov/military/family-based-survivor-benefits).

USCIS has a toll-free military help line, 877-CIS-4MIL (877-247-4645) exclusively for current members of the military and their families, as well as veterans. The help line provides support for military members and their families with immigration matters. It can help you check your naturalization application status, report address or duty station

changes, request citizenship for a deceased service member, or apply for faster processing of military applications. Service members and eligible family members can call the help line for free through their base operator or the Defense Switched Network (DSN), whether they are in the United States or overseas.

For more details, see USCIS.gov: Military (`www.uscis.gov/military/military`). More help for service members, vets, and military-families is available via their branch's Legal Assistance Office, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's ImmVets portal, the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) Military Assistance Program (MAP), the American Bar Association (ABA) Home Front, and Military OneSource.

Becoming a Naturalized Citizen

Presuming you plan on following the immigration path all the way to the final step of naturalization, you will be interviewed by the USCIS at least twice: once to qualify for your permanent resident status or green card, and again when you become a naturalized U.S. citizen (unless your visa processing took place at an overseas consulate, in which case you'll only interview with USCIS once — for naturalization).

The interviews fill many potential immigrants and citizens with terror. "How will I ever remember everything?" they worry. Relax. Passing the USCIS interview is easier (you are The Expert of your own life) *and* more difficult (uncommon vocabulary related to violent activities and war crimes) than you think.

For some people, the biggest challenge is learning how to speak a new, crazy language, English. Don't worry; study — not just with a book or watching YouTube videos but actually talk to people! Practice speaking and understanding *spoken English*. During the naturalization interview, you don't need to speak a lot, but you must understand and respond to the USCIS officer. They may ask you to explain some of your N-400 answers — respond simply and honestly.

But for other applicants, they worry about the Civics test — for most questions, you only need to remember one answer, and you don't have to explain the answer. In fact, you probably already have most, if not all, of the skills and information you need. And if you don't, this book has you covered.

Discovering the 10 steps to U.S. citizenship

TIP

Here are the 10 steps to become a U.S. citizen through naturalization:

1. **Determine if you are already a U.S. citizen:** Check if you are a citizen by birth or through your parents. If not, proceed to the next step.
2. **Determine your eligibility to become a U.S. citizen:** Ensure you meet the requirements, such as age, permanent residency duration, and other criteria.
3. **Check to see if you are eligible for a fee reduction or fee waiver:** Carefully review "USCIS.gov Fact Sheet: Form N-400, Application for Naturalization Filing Fees," which outlines the changes in fees, eligibility for fee waivers, and reduced fees for Form N-400.
4. **Prepare Form N-400, Application for Naturalization:** Complete the form, gather necessary documents, and review everything carefully.
5. **Submit Form N-400, Application for Naturalization:** File your application with USCIS, including fees and supporting documents.
6. **Go to the biometrics appointment (if required):** Attend the appointment to provide fingerprints and photographs for background checks.
7. **Complete the interview:** Attend your scheduled interview with a USCIS officer, answer questions about your application, and take the English and civics tests (unless exempt).
8. **Receive a decision from USCIS on your Form N-400:** USCIS will either grant or deny your application based on eligibility and evidence.
9. **Receive a notice to take the Oath of Allegiance:** USCIS will notify you of the date, time, and location of your oath ceremony.
10. **Take the Oath of Allegiance to the United States:** Attend the ceremony, complete Form N-445, turn in your Permanent Resident Card, take the oath, and receive your Certificate of Naturalization.

Obtaining U.S. citizenship

Assume you've been a lawful permanent resident of the United States for at least five years or, if your permanent resident status is based on marriage, you've been married to and living with your U.S. citizen spouse for at least three years. If you're a man between the ages of 18 and 26, you've registered for the draft with Selective Service. You've properly completed and filed your Application for Naturalization Form (Form N-400) and supplied USCIS with all the necessary documents and paperwork (you can find more on this in Chapter 4). Now comes the final step in the process of becoming a citizen: the USCIS interview.

Although it only takes about 10 to 15 minutes, the interview fills many prospective citizens with fear and dread. During the naturalization interview, the officer will ask questions about all the requirements for U.S. citizenship. Most questions come from your N-400 application. The officer may ask any questions needed to decide if you are eligible, and you will have a fair chance to answer each one.

First, the officer will place you under oath. The officer usually begins with the test about U.S. civics and then asks you to read and write a dictated sentence in English. After these tests, the officer will review your application in detail. The officer will ask about your personal history, such as your marital history, children, and military service. You will also be asked when you became a permanent resident, how long you have lived in the United States, where you have lived and worked, and whether you traveled outside the country.

Finally, the officer may ask about your moral character, any arrests or crimes, and your loyalty to the U.S. Constitution. The officer will also ask if you are willing to take the Oath of Allegiance. Suddenly, the interview will be over, and you will be amazed how quickly your interview, which you have long prepared for, went. The key is preparation. We dig into the details about every aspect of naturalization interview in the upcoming chapters.

We know it sounds intimidating, but if you do your homework, you'll have nothing to worry about. USCIS examiners don't expect you to know *everything* about the United States. Nor do you have to be an English professor to pass the language test. If you can read and understand this book, you can pass the English text. If you're having trouble, don't worry. We give you some fun and easy ways to improve your skills.

REMEMBER

As far as U.S. history and civics are concerned, the USCIS wants to know if you understand the principles that the United States stands for. Finding out about history helps you understand how the United States became the great nation it is today. Parts 3, 4, and 5 of this book help you prepare for the history and civics test, but we predict that you already know more than you think you do.

After your interview, you'll get a USCIS Form N-652, which simply tells you whether your application was granted, denied, or continued. Here's an explanation of what each of these three possibilities means:

- **Granted:** Congratulations! If your application is granted, you'll soon receive a notice of the time and location of your swearing-in ceremony, where you'll take the Oath of Allegiance. You don't become a U.S. citizen until you attend this ceremony and take the Oath of Allegiance.
- **Denied:** If USCIS denies your application for naturalization, you'll receive a written notice telling you why. If you feel you were wrongly denied, you can

ask for a hearing with another USCIS officer. On the back of your denial letter, you'll find USCIS Form N-336 "Request for Hearing on a Decision in Naturalization Proceedings." You'll also conveniently find full instructions on how to file and what fees you'll need to pay. If your application is again denied at your second hearing, don't give up — you still have one more chance: You can file to have your application reviewed in U.S. district court.

WARNING

Keep in mind that you have only 30 days after receiving your denial letter to file for an appeal hearing. After 30 days, the case is considered closed, and you'll have to start the entire process over again if you want to reapply.

- **Continued:** Cases are most often *continued,* or put on hold, because the applicant didn't provide all the documents the USCIS needed or because the applicant failed the English or civics test. If USCIS requires more information, they will give you a Form N-14, which explains exactly what information or documents they're looking for. The form will also tell when and how you should provide these papers.

WARNING

You're close to gaining citizenship, and details count. Follow the instructions on Form N-14 carefully. Not paying attention to details can result in your application being denied. If you don't understand the instructions, ask for help and make sure that you deliver what's asked for on time. (See Chapter 7 for information about finding competent and ethical help.)

If you failed the English test and/or the civics test, the USCIS will give you a time to come back and try again in another interview. Study hard, because if you fail the tests a second time, your application will be denied. Don't worry — you'll have plenty of time to prepare for your second test (usually between 60 and 90 days).

Recognizing Permanent and Temporary Bars to Naturalization

Are there any situations in which you can be automatically disqualified from ever becoming a U.S. citizen? You bet. Having committed certain crimes may cause you to lose your chance at citizenship — these are known as *permanent bars to naturalization.* A murder conviction on your record is a permanent bar to naturalization. If you were convicted of an aggravated felony, such as a sex offense, violent crime, or drug trafficking that was committed on or after November 29, 1990, you've also lost your chance of becoming a U.S. citizen. If these formerly undisclosed offenses are revealed, a federal judge will (most likely) cancel the individual's Certificate of Naturalization though the process of denaturalization.

DISABILITY AND AGE EXCEPTIONS TO THE ENGLISH AND CIVICS REQUIREMENTS

To accommodate those with disabilities, certain applicants — those with a physical or developmental disability or mental impairment — may not be required to take the English and/or civics test. If you think you, or an immigrant you are assisting, may qualify for these exceptions, be prepared to file USCIS Form N-648 "Medical Certification for Disability Exceptions" along with the naturalization application. Don't send in the application until a licensed medical or osteopathic doctor or licensed clinical psychologist with knowledge of the case has completed and signed Form N-648. If you qualify for the English language proficiency portion of the test, be prepared to bring a qualified interpreter with you to your interview.

When it comes to gaining U.S. citizenship, age has its privileges in the form of easier English and/or civics test requirements:

- **If you are over 50 years old** and have lived in the United States as a lawful permanent resident for periods totaling at least 20 years, you won't have to take the English test. You will, however, be required to take the civics test in the language of your choice.
- **If you are over 55 years old** and have lived in the United States as a lawful permanent resident for periods totaling at least 15 years, you won't have to take the English test. You will be required to take the civics test in the language of your choice.
- **If you are over 65 years old** and have lived in the United States as a lawful permanent resident for periods totaling at least 20 years, you won't have to take the English test. You'll also be given a simpler version of the civics test in the language of your choice.

You must meet the age and permanent residency requirements at the time you file your Application for Naturalization to qualify for an age exception. Your time as a permanent resident need not be continuous, but it must total a period of at least 15 or 20 years. (We cover this topic in more detail in Chapter 4.)

Other crimes are *temporary bars to naturalization*, meaning you must wait a designated time after committing the crime before you can become eligible to apply for citizenship. In Chapter 8, you can find out more about other ways you can be disqualified for citizenship.

WARNING

Failure to pay child support or support other legal dependents can present a bar to naturalization. Make sure that your legal financial obligations to any dependents are current and up to date before applying for citizenship.

Attending Your Swearing-In Ceremony

Assuming you pass your interview, you'll receive a notice of when to attend your swearing-in ceremony, where you'll take the Oath of Allegiance. (In some cases, the interviewing officer will give you the oath on the spot, and you'll become a naturalized citizen then and there, but most often you'll return another day for a ceremony.)

The Oath of Allegiance plays an important part in becoming a U.S. citizen, and it carries serious implications. The oath serves as your solemn promise to the government of the United States that you

- **Give up loyalty to other countries**

  You may still have feelings of respect and admiration for your former homeland. You may even have family and friends still living there. However, in order to take the oath, your government loyalty must be to the United States and only to the United States.

- **Defend the Constitution and laws of the United States**

  You promise to protect the Constitution and all laws from all enemies, from other countries, or from inside the United States.

- **Obey the laws of the United States**

  You promise to obey the Constitution, follow the rule of law, and support human rights.

  Be loyal to the United States

  You promise that your allegiance is to the United States only.

- **Serve in the U.S. military (if needed)**

  You promise to use a weapon as a member of the U.S. military to protect the country's safety and security (if the U.S. government asks you to do so).

- **Serve (do important work for) the nation (if needed)**

  You promise to do other nonmilitary work that is important to the country's safety and security (if the U.S. government asks you to do so).

- **Promise to keep the Oath of Allegiance**

  You solemnly and freely promise to exercise rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship.

Taking the Oath of Allegiance is also known as *Attachment to the Constitution.* In this case, the word *attachment* means loyalty or allegiance.

Receiving Your Certificate of Naturalization

After you've taken the Oath of Allegiance, you'll be presented with your Certificate of Naturalization. Congratulations! You are now officially a citizen of the United States of America, and you can use your certificate to prove it. This legal document is quite ornate in appearance, resembling a diploma — one personalized with your photograph.

TIP

Applying for a passport as soon as you receive your Certificate of Naturalization is a good idea. A passport can also serve as proof of your citizenship, and it's much easier to carry than the certificate itself. If you ever lose your certificate, getting a replacement can sometimes take up to a year. If the certificate serves as your only proof of citizenship, a year can feel like a mighty long time — especially if you want to travel. You can usually pick up a passport application at your swearing-in ceremony. If not, your local post office has passport applications, or you can download a DS-11 Passport Application from the State Department (`travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/passports.html`).

If it is not already in your seat at the ceremony, people from your county Registrar of Voters will hand you a voter's registration card on your way out. Don't wait another minute — register to vote and exercise your right to participate in democracy!

You should also update your record with the Social Security Administration by applying for a new Social Security Card (`www.ssa.gov/forms/ss-5.pdf`). Proudly

check the "U.S. Citizen" box on Line 5 Citizenship. You can also do this by ticking the box on the N-400, which saves you a trip to the SSA office.

If you have a U.S. driver's license or state-issued identification card (ID), take this opportunity to update your record with the agency that issues driver's licenses in your state. You may update your ID information and photo or apply for a REAL ID (see the sidebar on REAL ID earlier in the chapter).

Now that you are a citizen, share this gift with others. Volunteer at your local adult school or community center and help people prepare for their citizenship interviews. You can find volunteer opportunities at `www.volunteer.gov/s/`.

MODIFYING THE OATH

We take freedom of religion seriously in the United States, which is why the USCIS allows the oath to be *modified,* or changed, in some cases, by leaving out these phrases:

- **". . . that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law":** In order for these words to be left out of the oath, you must provide evidence that your objection to fighting for the United States is based on your religious beliefs and training.
- **". . . that I will perform noncombatant service in the armed forces of the United States when required by law":** If you can provide enough evidence that your religious training and beliefs completely prohibit you from serving in the armed forces in any capacity, the USCIS will also leave out this portion of the oath.
- **". . . so help me God":** If your religious beliefs keep you from using the phrase *so help me God,* the USCIS will omit the words.
- **". . . on oath":** If you are unable to truthfully swear using the words *on oath,* the USCIS will substitute the phrase with *solemnly affirm.*

If you think you qualify to take a modified oath, you'll need to write the USCIS a letter explaining why and send it along with your Application for Naturalization. Be aware that the USCIS will probably ask you to provide a letter from your religious institution explaining its beliefs and declaring that you are a member in good standing.

If you have a physical or mental disability that prevents you from communicating your understanding of the oath's meaning, the USCIS will probably excuse you from this requirement.