
Chapter One

The Citizenship Decision

What you can do, or dream you can do, begin it!

Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.

–Goethe

In this Chapter:

- Benefits of Becoming a United States Citizen
- Dual Citizenship
- Challenges in the Process
- Native Country Concerns



Why should you become a United States citizen?

This chapter outlines the many benefits of becoming a United States citizen. It also addresses some concerns you may have about becoming a citizen. In the end, after considering all the benefits, the decision is yours.

FAMILY-RELATED BENEFITS

Apply for Permanent Resident Visas for Family Members

United States citizens can apply to bring certain family members to live permanently in the United States. Citizens can apply for a spouse, married and unmarried children, parents, and brothers and sisters. Lawful permanent residents, by contrast, can apply only for unmarried children and spouses.

See Chapter 10, page 326 for more information.

The waiting time for receiving a visa is also much shorter for many relatives of United States citizens. The spouse of a citizen, the parents of a citizen over age 21, and the unmarried children (under age 21) of a citizen are called immediate relatives. They usually can get a lawful permanent resident visa about one year after applying. Other family members may have to wait for many years. Children who are married and/or over 21, as well as brothers and sisters, are on long waiting lists behind others from their country.

As a citizen, you can also speed up the arrival of family members who you have already applied to bring to the United States. This is called upgrading your petition from lawful permanent resident to United States citizen.

I miss my family a lot. It's hard to live so far away from them. I want to bring them here when I am a citizen. I can hardly wait.



spouse = Husband or wife. *"My spouse came with me to the United States."*

relative = Family member. *"I don't have any relatives in this country."*

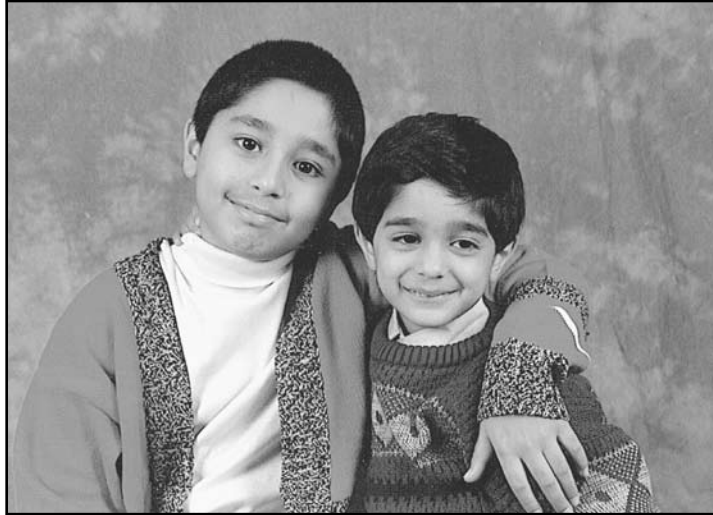
immediate relative = The spouse of a U.S. citizen, the parents of a U.S. citizen over age 21, and the unmarried children (under age 21) of a U.S. citizen. *"I filed a petition for my immediate relatives."*

petition = Application. *"I want to upgrade the petition I filed for my son now that I am a citizen."*

See Chapter 8, page 273 for information on derivative citizenship and obtaining a Certificate of Citizenship. See Chapter 10, page 324 for information on obtaining a United States passport.

Derivative Citizenship for Children

When either you or your spouse becomes a United States citizen, your children may become citizens automatically through derivative citizenship. To qualify, the children must be unmarried lawful permanent residents under age 18 when the parent becomes a United States citizen. In addition, the children must be in the legal and physical custody of the citizen parent. The children will need one of two official documents to prove derivative citizenship: (1) a Certificate of Citizenship or (2) a United States passport.



Obtain Citizenship for Your Spouse More Quickly

See Chapter 2, page 17 for more information.

The noncitizen husband or wife of a United States citizen can apply for United States citizenship after three years as a lawful permanent resident. He or she must be married to the same citizen for those three years and stay married up to the naturalization ceremony. Other lawful permanent residents must wait five years to apply for citizenship.



derivative = Something you get because of your relationship with another person.
"I received derivative citizenship from my mother when she became a citizen."

FULL CIVIC PARTICIPATION BENEFITS

Have the Right to Vote in Local, State, and Federal Elections

Voting is one of the most important ways to make your voice heard in the United States. However, lawful permanent residents cannot vote. As a United States citizen you can vote for the elected officials that best represent your opinions. Immigrants have many reasons to voice their opinions and vote based on issues of concern to them, such as immigration laws, education resources, taxes, crime, and foreign policy.

By registering to vote, you can also help your neighborhood and your ethnic group. Politicians often pay attention to communities with large numbers of registered voters. This can help bring more government tax dollars to your community to pay for parks, schools, and jobs.

The first time I voted, I was so nervous, but after I filled out my ballot, I had a big smile on my face.

Become a Candidate for Elected Office

Naturalized United States citizens can be elected for all offices except president and vice-president. You can run as a candidate for mayor, judge, sheriff, state's attorney, state or congressional senator or representative, and other elected offices.

Serve on Juries in Courts

Only United States citizens can serve on a jury. A jury is a group of people who together decide whether or not a person on trial is guilty of breaking the law. It is important for the jury to reflect the community.



Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL), a naturalized U.S. citizen from Cuba

INTERNATIONAL BENEFITS

Travel to Other Countries More Easily with United States Passport

The United States passport is recognized in almost every country. Some countries do not even require a visa for United States citizens but may require it for citizens of other countries. Also, you may not be able to get a visa from some countries using your native country passport or travel document.

As a United States citizen, you can travel outside the United States for unlimited periods of time and re-enter. Lawful permanent residents may be unable to re-enter the United States if they leave for one year or more.

Receive Help from the United States Embassy

Most countries have a United States embassy and many major foreign cities have consulates as well. Tourists and residents living in the country who are United States citizens can use their services. Embassies and consulates can usually replace a lost passport or help citizens in an emergency. In a serious crisis, they will help all United States citizens leave the country as quickly and safely as possible.

Live Outside the United States for Unlimited Periods of Time

Citizens can live outside the United States for an unlimited period of time. However, lawful permanent residents can lose their green cards if they live outside the United States for one year or more. They may be unable to return to the United States to live or even to visit. Citizens can come and go as they please.

PUBLIC BENEFITS

Receive All Public Benefits for Which You are Eligible

Public benefits are services or money provided to low-income people by the government, such as food, education, medical care, and cash. Non-citizens may find that they are not eligible for certain benefits and eligible for others on a very limited basis. However, United States citizens can receive all public benefits without the complicated rules and limits placed on non-citizens.

There are four federal public benefit programs that are especially important to low-income people:

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provides a monthly cash payment to people in two categories: 1) people with certain disabilities and 2) elderly people age 65 and older. To be eligible you must be low-income. To qualify as disabled, your disability(ies) must prevent you from working and be approved by the Social Security Administration.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provides a monthly check to some unemployed people and to low-income parents with children under age 18. This was formerly known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). This form of cash assistance can have different names in each state.

Medicaid reimburses doctor and hospital costs for certain low-income people, primarily pregnant women, families with children, the disabled, and elderly nursing home patients.

Food Stamps are for low-income families to buy food necessary for good health.

OTHER BENEFITS

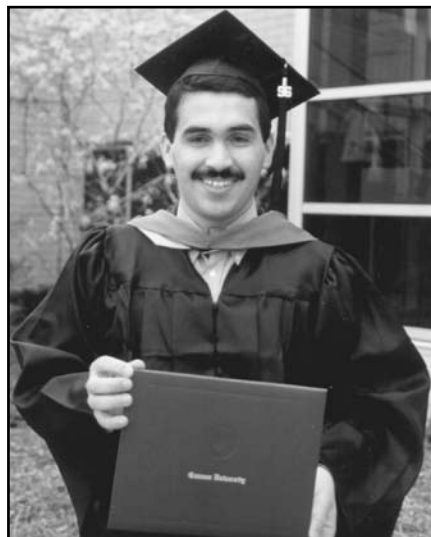
Be Eligible for All Government Employment

Many federal, state, and local government jobs require United States citizenship. While you do not have to be a citizen to enlist in the military, lawful permanent residents are not eligible for many positions in the military that require a security clearance. Also, some positions in businesses and universities that involve contracts with the government may require a security clearance that includes United States citizenship.



Be Eligible for Certain Educational Scholarships

Many scholarships for higher education require United States citizenship. For example, applicants for the Rhodes Scholarship, the Fulbright Program, and United States Service Academies must be citizens.



security clearance = United States government permission to work with access to secret or sensitive information. *"She needed a security clearance to be hired for the job."*

Be Protected from Deportation (Removal)*

New immigration laws make it much easier for the government to deport lawful permanent residents. You can be deported for a crime you were convicted of many years ago, even if you think the crime was not serious and you never went to jail. However, a United States citizen can never be deported.

Crimes that may lead to deportation include:

- selling or possessing drugs;
- assault with a deadly weapon;
- hiding your money to get welfare;
- contributing to the delinquency of a minor; and
- helping a friend enter the U.S. illegally.

Be Protected from Inadmissibility

When they travel outside the United States and then try to return, lawful permanent residents can be barred from re-entering the country if they have certain criminal convictions. A United States citizen cannot be barred from re-entering the country.

* This book will use the word “deportation,” an older and more commonly known term for what is now called “removal.”

removal proceedings = A legal process in which the government tries to force a person to leave the United States because he or she broke a law. *“She was put in removal proceedings when USCIS learned of her criminal conviction.”*

contributing to the delinquency of a minor = A legal definition of a crime in which an adult has sex with a minor. A minor is usually under 18 years old. However, each state has its own law that defines the age of a minor. In some states this crime is called statutory rape. *“He was arrested and charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor.”*

DUAL CITIZENSHIP

You may be able to have citizenship of more than one country. This means you may keep citizenship from your country of birth when you become a United States citizen. Dual citizenship gives you the rights of both countries. It depends on the law of your native country. The United States does not encourage dual citizenship, but does not prevent it.

Dual citizenship laws come from your native country. Like any laws, they may change. A country that currently allows dual citizenship could decide to end it by passing a new law. A country may not allow dual citizenship at the present time, but might allow it in the future.

Contact your country's consulate to find out:

- if your native country allows dual citizenship;
- what rights you will have as a dual citizen; and
- what, if anything, you must do to be a dual citizen.

Some countries that allow a form of dual citizenship are:

Albania	Finland	Nigeria
Antigua and Barbuda	France	Peru
Australia	Ghana	Philippines
Barbados	Grenada	Poland
Belize	Hungary	Portugal
Benin	Iran	Romania
Brazil	Ireland	Russia
Burkina Faso	Ivory Coast	St. Lucia
Canada	Jamaica	Sierra Leone
Colombia	Lebanon	Slovenia
Costa Rica	Lichtenstein	Sri Lanka
Croatia	Macedonia	Switzerland
Dominica	Mali	Turkey
Ecuador	Mexico	United Kingdom
El Salvador	New Zealand	

CHALLENGES IN THE PROCESS

Problems with USCIS

Some people who had difficulty with USCIS when getting their green cards may avoid applying for citizenship so they do not have these problems again. Problems may include impolite officers and incorrect or confusing information. USCIS is now working internally and with community-based organizations to solve these problems and improve its services to immigrants.

Requirement to Learn English

To become a United States citizen, most applicants must be able to speak, read, and write basic English. They must also take a history and government (civics) test in English. You may need to study for a long time to pass the test. However, no one can deny the value of learning another language.

When I started I thought 'I'll never know enough English.' I went to class every week and studied hard. I told myself 'give it a try.' It worked. I passed the test.

Financial Cost

There are many monetary costs involved in applying to be a United States citizen. You must pay USCIS an application and fingerprint fee. You must also pay to have your photos taken. In addition, you may have to take time off work for the fingerprints, interview, and oath ceremony. USCIS offers a waiver of the application fee for certain low-income people. If you think you qualify, ask a non-profit immigration agency how to apply for a fee waiver.

*See Chapter 3,
page 65
for more
information about
fee waivers.*

Long Wait from Application to Oath

The wait between submitting a naturalization application and taking the oath can be longer in some parts of the country where more immigrants live.

waiver = Permission to avoid a requirement for a specific reason. *"I applied to USCIS for a fee waiver because I am low-income."*

NATIVE COUNTRY CONCERNS

Loss of Rights and Benefits from Native Country

Immigrants and refugees who become naturalized United States citizens may lose certain rights and benefits from their native countries. You may lose the right to own land, receive an inheritance, or receive an old age pension. You may also lose the right to own a business. If you are concerned about losing rights and benefits, contact your country's consulate.

I have land in my country from my great grandfather. If I become an American citizen I might lose it.

Desire to Return to Native Country

Many immigrants and refugees dream of returning to their native countries. Some may return. For others, it is just a dream. When return is likely, the question is whether life will be better and more secure with United States citizenship.

I often dream about my childhood... drinking tea with my classmates, visiting my cousins, fishing in the river, eating my mother's food. I want to go back, but I know it will never be the same.



A Question of Betraying Native Country

Some people feel that becoming a United States citizen means betraying one's native country. They may fear they will lose something very important to their identities, while others may feel more attached to the values and activities of the United States. Although it is a difficult decision, few people regret it and most experience it with pride.

betray = When you fail to be loyal to someone or something important to you. "My boyfriend betrayed me by dating my best friend."

