

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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§ 1.1 Introduction to Citizenship

There are five ways one can become a United States citizen. First, the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution provides that anyone born in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction of the United States is a U.S. citizen.¹ Second, people can become U.S. citizens through a process called “naturalization.” Third, people who are born in another country to parents who are U.S. citizens may, depending on certain rules explained in **Chapter 14** of this manual, become U.S. citizens at birth automatically through **acquisition of U.S. citizenship**. Fourth, people who are lawful permanent residents of the United States and whose parent or parents are U.S. citizens through naturalization, birth in the United States, or other ways, such as acquisition of citizenship, derivation of citizenship, or § 322 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), may, depending on certain rules explained in **Chapter 14** of this manual, become U.S. citizens automatically through **derivation of citizenship**. Fifth and finally, some children of U.S. citizens born and living abroad may become U.S. citizens through a process authorized by INA § 322. See **Chapter 14**.

There are many advantages to becoming a U.S. citizen. Some of these include: the right to vote in U.S. elections, the right to travel with a U.S. passport, the right to help relatives immigrate to the United States more quickly, the right to obtain certain government jobs, the right not to be denied admission into the United States or removed (deported) from the United States, and the right to live in another country without losing the right to legally return to the United States.²

IMPORTANT NOTE: The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was for many years the main federal government agency that administered U.S. immigration law. However, effective March 1, 2003, Congress dissolved the INS, and the then newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS) assumed all of INS’s functions. Immigration laws are now administered and

¹ U.S. Const. amend. XIV § 1; *see also* INA § 301(a). Children born to high-ranking foreign diplomats while in the United States are not U.S. citizens. *See* 8 CFR § 101.3(a); 7 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Policy Manual (USCIS-PM) O.3.

² Green card holders (i.e., lawful permanent residents) can lose their permanent residence status and be removed (deported) from the United States if they have “abandoned their residence” due to having moved to another country with the intention of residing there while still a U.S. permanent resident. For more information on this subject, refer to Chapter 4.

enforced by three separate divisions within DHS: U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

CBP's main immigration responsibility is apprehending immigrants attempting to enter the United States illegally and checking freight and baggage entering the United States for compliance with customs and trade laws. ICE's mission includes managing investigations of document, identity, visa, and immigration fraud; investigating immigration violations and migrant smuggling; and detaining, prosecuting, and deporting immigrants. USCIS's mission is the adjudication of immigration related petitions and applications for relief, including naturalization and citizenship applications.

Becoming a U.S. citizen is not necessarily the right path for everyone who is a lawful permanent resident. An estimated ten million people are eligible to naturalize but have not yet applied for naturalization. For some, U.S. citizenship may mean they have to give up citizenship in their own country, which some people are not willing to do. For others, the naturalization application may actually start an investigation by USCIS or ICE, which could lead to the applicant losing their green card and being deported. Still others may feel reluctant to go through what could become a difficult, costly, and, at times, unpleasant process. Both the advocate and the client must thoroughly consider all of the facts in order to make an informed decision about whether or not to apply for naturalization. Such a discussion between the advocate and client cannot take place until the advocate gives a complete and understandable explanation of the legal requirements to the client and together, they decide whether the client is eligible to naturalize.

In spite of these concerns, for many, naturalization is the right path. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants naturalize each year. This trend began decades ago, during the mid and late 1990s, when a record number of immigrants applied for naturalization. There were four major reasons for the large increase in the number of naturalization applicants. First, close to three million people who legalized their status through the amnesty program became eligible to apply for naturalization starting in the mid-1990s. Second, USCIS instituted a green card renewal program³ that forced green card holders to obtain new green cards and encouraged many to apply for naturalization rather than go through the green card renewal process. Third, during the Citizenship U.S.A. program of the mid-1990s, INS made naturalization adjudications and outreach a priority. Fourth, the increased anti-immigrant hysteria of the mid- and late 1990s encouraged many immigrants to become citizens so they could legalize their loved ones, vote, and better organize to combat anti-immigrant sentiments. From 2017-2020, former President Donald Trump's administration created many legal and logistical barriers to gaining legal status in the United States and renewed xenophobic rhetoric unjustly attacking immigrants, which inspired more immigrants to come forward to get involved in social and political change. For example, more than one million people applied to naturalize in 2016, although due to the backlog

³ This program requires all lawful permanent residents to renew their green card every ten years. Additionally, everyone with an I-151 green card (generally the permanent resident cards issued prior to 1978) instead of an I-551 green card was supposed to apply for a new green card by March 20, 1996. The official name for a "green card" is an Alien Registration Card. It is important to note that even if a person did not apply for a new green card by this date, they remain a permanent resident. Starting in the late 1980s, all green cards issued by USCIS expire ten years after issuance. The expiration date is noted on the card.

of cases, many were not naturalized until the following year(s). Former President Biden’s administration prioritized working through the backlog and approved a record number of naturalization applications in 2022.⁴ Immigrants know that one important way to try to change the anti-immigrant landscape is to naturalize and vote. Hopefully, this manual will assist you in helping more immigrants apply for naturalization and realize an American Dream.

§ 1.2 Overview of the Basic Requirements for Naturalization

To become a naturalized citizen, an applicant must meet eight basic requirements. The requirements for naturalization are found in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) §§ 312 through 337 and 8 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) §§ 310 through 331.⁵ To qualify for naturalization, an applicant must:

- Be a lawful permanent resident (see **Chapter 4**);
- Be at least eighteen years old (see **Chapter 14**);
- Have good moral character, keeping in mind certain specific “bars” to naturalization (see **Chapters 6 and 7**);
- Be able to pass an English exam (see **Chapter 8**);
- Be able to pass a test on U.S. history and government (see **Chapter 8**);
- Have lived continuously in the United States for at least five years (except in certain circumstances, such as being married to a U.S. citizen or being in the military—see **Chapter 5**);
- Have been physically present in the United States for at least half of the five-year period (except in certain circumstances, such as being married to a U.S. citizen or being in the military—see **Chapter 5**); and
- Swear loyalty to the United States by taking a loyalty oath (see **Chapter 11**).⁶

When a client wants to apply for naturalization, one of the first things their legal representative should do is explain the legal requirements for naturalization. There is obviously not a single correct way to explain the requirements, but any explanation must be thorough and easily understood. See **Chapter 2** for an example of how to explain the legal requirements to a client. It is also useful to give the client something in writing that explains naturalization. For sample sheets in English, Chinese, and Spanish, please see **Appendix 2-A**.

⁴ USCIS, Naturalization Statistics, https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-and-studies/immigration-and-citizenship-data?topic_id%5B%5D=33692&ddt_mon=&ddt_yr=&query=&items_per_page=10.

⁵ Practitioners should become familiar with both the INA and 8 CFR when helping clients prepare naturalization applications. The INA is the immigration law passed by Congress, and 8 CFR contains the regulations used to implement the law. Often the INA and 8 CFR have analogous section numbers. Thus, if a practitioner finds a part of the INA that is relevant to their client’s case, chances are they can find the relevant 8 CFR section under the same number as the INA section dealing with the same topic. For instance, the requirements for good moral character can be found in INA § 316 and 8 CFR § 316.

⁶ There are some exceptions to these requirements for several special classes of people. Some of these exceptions are discussed in this manual in Chapters 4 and 5. See 8 CFR §§ 319-331.

One very efficient and effective way to explain the requirements for naturalization is in a group setting, often called an information session. This way, all the potential applicants can listen to the requirements together and learn from each other's questions. Additionally, it saves the advocate time because they do not have to explain the requirements to each individual separately. For a more complete discussion of information sessions and group processing of naturalization applications, please see **Chapter 12**.

§ 1.3 How to Use This Manual

This naturalization and citizenship manual is designed to assist attorneys, paralegals, volunteers, and other advocates. We wrote this manual for people working at nonprofit agencies, pro bono attorneys, and private immigration lawyers. Lawyers with varying degrees of experience in naturalization and citizenship cases will find this manual extremely useful.

This manual will guide you through the entire process of handling a naturalization case, beginning with the first time you meet a potential applicant through the completion and filing of the N-400 (the naturalization application), the naturalization interview, the appeal (if necessary), and the swearing-in ceremony.

This manual is not simply a discussion of legal requirements and procedures. Because the active participation of the naturalization applicant is so essential to the success of the case, this manual also has many ideas about how to communicate legal requirements and procedures to applicants, so they can be active and informed participants in their own naturalization process. Applicants, their families, and friends can do much of the work while applying for naturalization. For instance, most applicants can complete a draft of the N-400, collect the necessary documentation, and prepare for their naturalization interview and naturalization exams. Engaging with applicants on their case is more efficient, and it helps to build a stronger case. A client who has a handle on the naturalization requirements and process will be more active in gathering relevant information in partnership with the attorney or another legal worker and in organizing answers to questions on the application. Additionally, an applicant who knows the legal requirements and what to expect from the naturalization process may be better prepared to deal with the stress of applying, answer questions more accurately, and have a higher possibility of success.

In the appendices to this manual, there are checklists, completed applications, sample explanations of the legal requirements, and outreach flyers containing a list of the requirements that will facilitate the applicant's participation in building their case. We encourage you to use these appendices as much as possible. Feel free to copy them onto your own letterhead and make any changes you feel are necessary.

Parts of this manual are dedicated to presenting and discussing the basic legal requirements for naturalization. Some of the legal requirements are clear-cut and probably inflexible. Yet others are murky, not clearly defined, and probably flexible depending on the circuit court jurisdiction and USCIS office you are working with, the facts of your case, and which USCIS naturalization adjudicator is reviewing the applicant's case. We strongly encourage you to investigate challenging USCIS's interpretation of any legal requirement that is not firmly grounded in the INA, the regulations, or in caselaw. Our legal staff would be more than happy to discuss any ideas you have about USCIS's interpretations or conduct that you think is unfair or wrong.

Although we have thoroughly researched the legal requirements presented in this manual, we do not suggest that you use it as a substitute for your own research and knowledge. Immigration law changes constantly and can be complex. At times, further research must be done on issues discussed in this manual or on new developments in the field. Additionally, each circuit court jurisdiction and USCIS office (and to some extent, even each USCIS naturalization adjudicator) has different procedures and different interpretations about some of the legal requirements. It is very important for you to research the interpretation that the USCIS office in your jurisdiction has for each legal requirement. To do this, ask other, more experienced local practitioners.

Another way to obtain information about how USCIS handles specific issues in your jurisdiction is to set up a periodic USCIS citizenship branch liaison meeting between local community agencies and the local USCIS office. These meetings will give you an opportunity to ask USCIS officials what their interpretations are on each of the specific legal requirements. These meetings are presently occurring in many USCIS districts. The meetings have been a valuable asset to legal workers handling naturalization cases. For more information on how to set up such a meeting, feel free to contact Eric Cohen at the Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC) at (415) 321-8526 or ecohen@ilrc.org.

The ILRC first published this manual in 1995. We have continued to update it on a regular basis since then. Reader input is one source of information we use to help improve this manual. We encourage you to read it with a critical eye and give us any input about changes in (or differences of opinion about) the law, the application procedures, how to work with clients, or anything else in this manual. We would greatly appreciate information on specific tendencies of how the different USCIS offices treat certain situations. Please send any suggestions to:

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§ 1.4 Contents of the Manual

This manual is divided into sixteen chapters. **Chapter 3** is an overview of the legal requirements and the procedures when applying for naturalization. **Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 11** contain detailed explanations of these legal requirements. **Chapters 2, 10, and 12** explain application procedures and suggest ways to work with clients when helping them apply for naturalization. **Chapter 12** outlines group processing, which is an efficient and very effective way to help many naturalization applicants at the same time. **Chapter 13** discusses what to do if USCIS denies a naturalization application. **Chapter 14** covers topics involving children and citizenship, including acquisition and derivation of citizenship, as well as citizenship through INA § 322, and **Chapter 15** provides a summary of how a naturalized citizen can lose their citizenship. We strongly encourage you to read **Chapter 16** very carefully because it covers many of the ways people can immigrate to the United States. Additionally, **Chapter 16** discusses ways to work with immigrants in trying to improve the naturalization process and includes suggestions about how to

use the media, organize with the immigrant community, and train and work with lay advocates around naturalization issues.

§ 1.5 Key Definitions

Although we have attempted to remove unnecessary legalese or technical words from this manual, some terms are unavoidable. The technical terms you encounter frequently in this manual are defined below.

USCIS: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is the federal government agency in charge of adjudicating naturalization and other immigration applications.

USCIS Policy Manual: As part of an ongoing review of its internal adjudication policies, USCIS has created an online policy manual, available at <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual>. USCIS intends for the online USCIS Policy Manual (USCIS-PM) to be the central repository of its policies and replace other policy repositories. The manual is structured to house several volumes pertaining to different areas of immigration benefits administered by the agency, such as citizenship and naturalization, adjustment of status, admissibility, protection and parole, nonimmigrants, refugees, asylees, immigrants, waivers, travel, and employment. The USCIS Policy Manual specifically supersedes the Adjudicator’s Field Manual and the USCIS policy memoranda. It is unclear whether this Policy Manual also replaces the INS Interpretations. The ILRC urges advocates to use the Policy Manual as well as continue to use helpful clarifications and guidance from INS Interpretations unless and until it is specifically superseded by the USCIS Policy Manual.⁷

Lawful permanent resident: Someone who has an immigrant visa, or a “green card,” is a lawful permanent resident, or LPR. Lawful permanent residents have been granted the right to reside permanently in the United States and can work and travel freely.

Green card: A green card is proof of status as a lawful permanent resident. It looks like an ID card and is not actually green. The official name of a green card is an “Alien Registration Card,” or Form I-551.

Removed: This term is used to describe what happens when the U.S. government makes an immigrant leave the United States. Immigrants can be removed if they fall within the grounds of deportability or inadmissibility. The term “removed” has combined into one term what used to be called “deported” and “excluded” from the United States. For more information on this topic, please see INA § 237, *A Guide for Immigration Advocates* (ILRC 2024), and *Inadmissibility and Deportability* (ILRC 2021).

⁷ This manual cites the USCIS Policy Manual where applicable. This manual also points out inconsistencies between the USCIS Policy Manual and previous policy memoranda, the Adjudicator’s Field Manual, and INS Interpretations. In many places, the USCIS Policy Manual is silent on subjects discussed at length in prior USCIS policy statements. In the absence of guidance to the contrary from the Policy Manual, the ILRC believes advocates should continue to use helpful clarifications and guidance from prior USCIS policy statements. As the USCIS Policy Manual is an evolving document, please check the USCIS Policy Manual updates page for recent additions and changes at <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual>.

Grounds of inadmissibility: “Grounds of inadmissibility” is the term for the group of acts that may bar persons from being *admitted* into the United States. These grounds used to be called the “grounds of exclusion.” The grounds of inadmissibility can be found in INA § 212(a) and apply to those seeking admission at a U.S. border or applying for admission within the United States through an adjustment of status. For more information on this topic, please see *A Guide for Immigration Advocates* (ILRC 2024) and *Inadmissibility and Deportability* (ILRC 2021).

Grounds of deportability: The grounds of deportability are the laws that Congress passed to determine what types of acts can cause people to be deported (also called “removed”) from the United States. The grounds of deportability generally apply to someone who has been “admitted” to the United States, such as someone who entered on a tourist visa or adjusted status. For more information on this topic, please see INA § 237, *A Guide for Immigration Advocates* (ILRC 2024), and *Inadmissibility and Deportability* (ILRC 2021).

INA: The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) is the complete law that Congress passed regarding all issues of immigration and naturalization. All immigration advocates should have a current copy. The INA can be accessed for free through the USCIS website, <https://www.uscis.gov>. These laws may also be found in Title 8 of the United States Code (8 U.S.C.) and are accessible online.

8 CFR: Volume 8 of the Code of Federal Regulations (8 CFR) contains the rules that USCIS established to implement the immigration laws. These codes change frequently. All immigration law offices should have an updated copy of the regulations contained in 8 CFR and learn how to use them. If a provision in 8 CFR conflicts with the intent of the INA or with the U.S. Constitution, it may be challenged in court and be declared void. One can access 8 CFR for free through the USCIS website, <https://www.uscis.gov>.

INS Operations Instructions: The INS Operations Instructions (OIs) provide useful insight into the internal guidelines and procedures to be followed by USCIS personnel when doing their job and implementing the law. These instructions are not the law, and if USCIS is following OIs that go against the U.S. Constitution, the INA, or 8 CFR, the OIs can and should be challenged. The USCIS uses the Policy Manual instead of OIs. The ILRC urges advocates to use the Policy Manual as well as continue to use helpful clarifications and guidance from OIs unless and until they are specifically superseded by the USCIS Policy Manual.

INS Interpretations: The INS Interpretations are the internal USCIS policies about what the law is. They act as guidance for USCIS officers. If they conflict with the U.S. Constitution, the INA, or 8 CFR, the interpretations can and should be challenged. For the most part, USCIS has replaced the INS Interpretations with the USCIS Policy Manual. However, when INS Interpretations are beneficial on a subject, we encourage advocates to use them.

Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), and Federal Circuit Courts of Appeal decisions: The EOIR is the court system set up to adjudicate certain immigration issues. The trial court is called the immigration court. The BIA is the appeals court of the EOIR court system. The BIA and the immigration courts are part of the Department of Justice. Often cases decided at the BIA can be appealed to the federal circuit courts (Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in California, for instance) and even eventually to the U.S. Supreme Court. A naturalization applicant can appeal a denial to the federal district court.

