

Understanding U.S. citizenship can be complex, especially if you are unsure whether you are a naturalized citizen, a birthright citizen, or eligible to become one. Two main types of citizenship exist under U.S. law: birthright citizenship, which is acquired automatically at birth, and naturalization, which is a legal process that allows eligible non-citizens to become U.S. citizens later in life. Naturalized citizens are not born in the U.S. but become citizens by meeting specific eligibility requirements, filing an application, and completing an interview and tests, while birthright citizens gain citizenship automatically at birth in the United States or in certain situations through U.S. citizen parents.

The path to naturalization involves several steps, requires specific forms and supporting documents, and can take many months from filing to oath ceremony. Applicants must generally meet residency and physical presence requirements, demonstrate good moral character, and pass tests on English and U.S. history and government. This article explains how naturalization works, how it differs from birthright citizenship, what documents you need, and when it may be helpful to speak with an experienced [immigration attorney](#) who focuses on citizenship cases.

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## What is a Naturalized Citizen?

A naturalized citizen is someone who was not born a U.S. citizen but becomes one later through the formal naturalization process administered by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Unlike birthright citizens, who acquire citizenship automatically at birth, naturalized citizens must actively apply, show that they meet specific statutory criteria, and complete an interview and civics examination.

Most applicants must first become lawful permanent residents (green card holders) and then maintain continuous residence and physical presence in the United States for a required period, usually five years, or three years if applying based on marriage to a U.S. citizen. They must also demonstrate “good moral character,” which generally includes obeying U.S. laws and meeting tax obligations, and be willing to take the Oath of Allegiance to the United States.

Learn How to Become an American Citizen Through [Naturalization](#)

Once naturalized, individuals enjoy virtually all the same rights as birthright citizens, including the ability to vote in federal elections, work in many federal jobs, and apply for a U.S. passport. For many people, naturalization represents the final step in a longer journey that began with obtaining lawful permanent residence; readers who are still at the green

card stage can learn more about those options in Lunel Law's guide on [green card and citizenship options in the U.S.](#)

## Naturalized Citizen Meaning

The term “naturalized citizen” refers specifically to a foreign national who has completed the legal process of naturalization and has been formally granted U.S. citizenship. Before naturalization, these individuals are non-citizens—often lawful permanent residents—and do not yet have full citizenship rights, such as voting in federal elections.

Through naturalization, they acquire the same core rights and responsibilities as citizens by birth, including equal protection under the law, the ability to live and work permanently in the United States, and eligibility to sponsor certain family members for immigration. Naturalized citizens must attend a naturalization ceremony and take the Oath of Allegiance, which formally completes the process and marks the moment they legally become U.S. citizens.

Because eligibility rules and personal histories can be complex, many applicants choose to work with a [naturalization attorney in Atlanta](#) who can analyze their case and help avoid avoidable delays or denials.

## Overview of the Naturalization Process

The naturalization process is a structured pathway that allows eligible foreign nationals to become U.S. citizens after meeting all requirements. In most cases, applicants must be at least 18 years old, hold a green card for a required period, and satisfy continuous residence and physical presence rules before they apply.

A key step is filing **Form N-400, Application for Naturalization**, with USCIS, along with the required fee and supporting evidence. After USCIS receives the application, the agency schedules a biometrics appointment for fingerprints and background checks, followed by an interview that includes English and civics tests. If USCIS approves the N-400, the applicant attends an oath ceremony, takes the Oath of Allegiance, and receives a Certificate of Naturalization—at that moment, the person becomes a U.S. citizen.

### Steps in the Naturalization Process:

1. Determine eligibility for naturalization.
2. Complete and file **Form N-400, Application for Naturalization**.
3. Attend the biometrics appointment.
4. Appear for the naturalization interview and take the English and civics tests.
5. Take the Oath of Allegiance and receive the Certificate of Naturalization.

Because each step has specific legal and documentary requirements, applicants often benefit from guidance by an experienced [U.S. naturalization lawyer](#) who can prepare the N-400, advise on supporting evidence, and represent them if issues arise.

## Difference Between Naturalized Citizens and Birthright Citizens

Understanding the distinction between naturalized and birthright citizens is essential for grasping how U.S. citizenship is acquired and retained. Birthright citizens gain citizenship automatically at birth, typically because they were born on U.S. soil or, in certain circumstances, because they were born abroad to U.S. citizen parents who meet specific statutory conditions. This concept of birthright citizenship is rooted in the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which provides that all persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to its jurisdiction are citizens of the United States.

Naturalized citizens, by contrast, begin life as non-citizens and must complete the naturalization process to acquire citizenship after birth. They meet eligibility requirements, submit **Form N-400**, attend biometrics and interview appointments, and ultimately take the Oath of Allegiance at a naturalization ceremony. Although the paths to citizenship differ, both birthright and naturalized citizens are recognized as full U.S. citizens under the law, with nearly identical rights and protections.

For children born abroad to U.S. citizen parents, special rules may allow them to acquire or apply for citizenship without going through the standard N-400 process, including procedures under **Section 322 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)** that are discussed in Lunel Law's guide to the [Section 322 citizenship application process](#).

## Legal Definitions

U.S. law provides specific definitions for birthright and naturalized citizens, which determine who is a citizen at birth and who must apply later.

### Birthright Citizens:

- Defined primarily by the Fourteenth Amendment and related statutes.
- Generally include individuals born in the United States and its territories, subject to U.S. jurisdiction.
- May also include some individuals born abroad to U.S. citizen parents who meet statutory residency and transmission requirements.

### Naturalized Citizens:

- Defined under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) provisions governing naturalization.
- Become citizens after birth by completing the legal naturalization process.
- Typically must file **Form N-400, Application for Naturalization**, and satisfy all eligibility criteria before USCIS approves their application.

These legal definitions affect not only how citizenship is obtained but also how it is documented, for example through U.S. passports, Certificates of Naturalization, or Certificates of Citizenship.

## Rights and Responsibilities

Despite different paths to citizenship, birthright and naturalized citizens share nearly all the same rights and obligations under U.S. law. Both can vote in federal, state, and local elections (subject to state rules), serve on juries when called, obtain U.S. passports, and receive the full protection of U.S. laws, with very limited exceptions such as eligibility to serve as President.

All U.S. citizens have core responsibilities, including obeying laws, paying taxes, serving on

juries when summoned, and supporting and defending the Constitution. Naturalized citizens also formally pledge allegiance to the United States during the oath ceremony, affirming their commitment to the country. Many citizens—both by birth and naturalization—choose to further contribute by participating in civic life, such as voting, volunteering, or even running for public office where eligible.

Green card holders, such as those with an [IR6 Green Card](#), enjoy many important protections but do not have full citizenship rights, including the right to vote in federal elections, which is one key reason many permanent residents eventually decide to pursue naturalization. If you have questions about how your rights and responsibilities might be affected by your immigration history, speaking with an [immigration lawyer in Atlanta](#) who regularly handles citizenship matters can provide clarity and peace of mind.

## Naturalization Forms and Documents

Successfully navigating the naturalization process requires careful attention to the forms and documents USCIS requires. Incomplete applications, missing evidence, or mistakes on key forms like the N-400 can lead to delays, requests for additional evidence, or even denials in some cases.

Being organized from the outset—by gathering required identity documents, immigration records, and supporting evidence—makes the process smoother and helps you and your attorney spot potential issues early.

### Essential Naturalization Papers

To apply for naturalization, applicants must submit certain core documents that prove identity, immigration status, and eligibility.

#### Key documents typically include:

- Permanent Resident Card (green card).
- Two passport-style photographs (if required based on how you file).
- Completed **Form N-400, Application for Naturalization**.
- Government-issued photo identification and, in many cases, copies of tax returns, marriage

certificates, or court records if relevant to your case.

All documents should be up to date, consistent, and legible, and foreign-language documents generally must be accompanied by certified English translations. Working with a [naturalization attorney](#) can be especially helpful if your history includes arrests, long trips abroad, or prior immigration issues.

## Naturalization Form N-400

**Form N-400** is the primary application used to request U.S. citizenship through naturalization. The form asks detailed questions about your biographic information, immigration history, travel, employment, marital history, and any criminal or security-related issues.

Key sections of **Form N-400** include:

- Personal and biographic information.
- Residence and employment history.
- Marital and family history.
- Trips outside the United States.
- Eligibility basis and good moral character questions.

Carefully following the official N-400 instructions and providing full, accurate answers is critical to avoiding delays or a denial. An experienced [U.S. naturalization lawyer](#) can prepare and review the form with you, ensure eligibility is properly documented, and represent you in communications with USCIS.

## Naturalization Form PDF

The **Form N-400 PDF** and its instructions are available to download online from official government resources, allowing applicants to review the form and prepare their information before filing. Many applicants now choose to file online through their USCIS account, but others still opt to complete and mail the paper form using the PDF version.

Before filing, applicants should always confirm that they are using the current edition of the form and instructions, because USCIS periodically updates forms and fees. Checking the latest guidance on naturalization requirements and procedures—and getting help from a qualified [immigration attorney](#) when needed—can help avoid relying on outdated information.

## Required Documents for Citizenship

In addition to the N-400 itself, USCIS expects applicants to provide supporting documents that prove eligibility for citizenship.

### Commonly required documents include:

- Proof of lawful permanent resident status (e.g., copy of the green card).
- Evidence of residence and physical presence, such as leases, utility bills, or employment records.
- Certified court or police records for any arrests or convictions.
- Marriage certificates, divorce decrees, or death certificates if marital history is relevant.

Providing clear, well-organized copies of all required evidence supports the application and reduces the chance of a Request for Evidence (RFE) or delay. If you are not yet a permanent resident, you may want to review Lunel Law's article on [8 ways to get a U.S. green card](#) to better understand how people first become eligible for naturalization.

## Citizenship Document Checklist

Creating a document checklist before you file can help ensure you do not overlook anything important.

A basic naturalization checklist often includes:

- Completed **Form N-400**.
- Copy of the front and back of your green card.
- Two passport-style photographs (if required).
- Government-issued ID and any relevant civil documents (marriage, divorce, name change).

- Tax transcripts or returns for recent years.
- Biometrics appointment notice once USCIS issues it.

Every case is different, so some applicants will need additional evidence such as military records, proof of selective service registration, or documentation of trips outside the U.S. A [family-based immigration](#) or naturalization lawyer can help build a tailored checklist based on your specific history.

## Petition for Naturalization

Sometimes people informally refer to the N-400 as a “petition for naturalization” because it is the formal request that USCIS review and approve an applicant’s eligibility for citizenship. When an applicant files Form N-400 with all required fees and evidence, USCIS opens a case, conducts background checks, and ultimately decides whether to grant or deny naturalization.

Submitting a complete, accurate petition with strong supporting documentation increases the chances of approval on the first attempt. If you are considering filing soon, scheduling a consultation with [Lunel Law](#) can help you understand your options and prepare a strategy that fits your timeline and goals.

## Understanding the Certificate of Naturalization

The **Certificate of Naturalization** is the official document USCIS issues after a person completes the naturalization process and becomes a U.S. citizen. It is typically handed to the new citizen at the oath ceremony and includes identifying information and the date on which citizenship was granted.

This certificate serves as primary proof of citizenship for many purposes, including applying for a U.S. passport, demonstrating eligibility for certain benefits, or updating immigration and employment records. Because replacing a lost or damaged certificate can be time-consuming, USCIS advises keeping it in a secure location and using other forms of ID, such as a passport, for everyday purposes when possible.

## What is a Certificate of Naturalization?

A **Certificate of Naturalization** is an official government document that confirms someone has become a U.S. citizen through the naturalization process rather than by birth. It typically lists the person’s full legal name, country of former nationality, USCIS registration number, date and place of naturalization, and contains a photograph and security features.

This certificate may be required in various legal or administrative situations where a person must prove they are a U.S. citizen, especially if their place of birth is outside the United States. New citizens should keep the original certificate safe and use certified copies or a U.S. passport when proof of citizenship is requested.

## Difference Between Certificate of Naturalization and Certificate of Citizenship

Although they look similar and both prove U.S. citizenship, the **Certificate of Naturalization** and the **Certificate of Citizenship** serve different groups of people.

| Certificate of Naturalization                                                                                                                                                     | Certificate of Citizenship                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A <b>Certificate of Naturalization</b> is issued to individuals who become citizens through the naturalization process after filing Form N-400 and taking the Oath of Allegiance. | A <b>Certificate of Citizenship</b> is generally issued to individuals who are already U.S. citizens by law—often because they acquired or derived citizenship through a U.S. citizen parent—and who apply using <b>Form N-600, Application for Certificate of Citizenship</b> . |

Both documents serve as official proof of citizenship, but the eligibility rules and application procedures differ. For children living abroad who qualify through a U.S. citizen parent under Section 322, Lunel Law’s [Section 322 citizenship process](#) article provides an in-depth overview.

Because filing fees for forms like N-600 are generally non-refundable, even if USCIS denies the application, it is important to ensure that you qualify, that the form is completed correctly, and that all necessary supporting evidence is included. Consulting a

knowledgeable [immigration attorney](#) before filing N-600 can help avoid costly mistakes and delays.

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## Frequently Asked Questions

### What Documents Do I Need to Apply for Naturalization?

Applying for naturalization typically requires a valid green card, a properly completed **Form N-400**, and supporting documents that prove eligibility. Common items include passport-style photos (if required), copies of tax returns, proof of residence and employment, and certified court records for any arrests or convictions.

#### Essential documents often include:

- Green card (Permanent Resident Card).
- Completed **Form N-400, Application for Naturalization**.
- Passport-style photos (as required).
- Recent tax returns or IRS transcripts, if requested.

Organizing these materials before filing helps prevent delays and reduces the chance of receiving a Request for Evidence (RFE) from USCIS. If you are still exploring how to obtain a green card before becoming eligible for citizenship, Lunel Law's article on [8 ways to get a U.S. green card](#) is a helpful starting point.

### What Immigration and Naturalization Form is Used?

The primary immigration form used for naturalization is **Form N-400, Application for Naturalization**. This form collects detailed information about your immigration history, residence, employment, marital status, travel outside the United States, and any criminal or

security issues.

USCIS uses the information on the N-400, along with background checks and the naturalization interview, to decide whether you meet all legal requirements for citizenship. You can learn more about the process and eligibility in official resources like USCIS's "A Guide to Naturalization" and through Lunel Law's dedicated [naturalization](#) practice page.

## **Additional Evidence for Naturalization**

Some applicants must submit extra evidence beyond the standard checklist to fully document eligibility. Examples can include proof of continuous residence after long trips abroad, documentation of military service, or additional records to address complex marital or criminal histories.

### **Supplementary documents may include:**

- Employment records and pay stubs.
- Financial statements and tax transcripts.
- Evidence of community involvement or rehabilitation, where relevant.

Because every case is unique, customized legal advice can be especially valuable when your history is more complicated than a straightforward five-year green card holder case. To discuss your situation and plan the best path to citizenship, you can contact [Lunel Law](#) or schedule a consultation with [David Lunel](#), an immigration attorney in Atlanta focused on green card and citizenship matters.