Understanding priority dates is the first step to navigating the U.S. immigration process with confidence. Whether you're applying for a green card through family or employment, your priority date determines **when** you can move forward in your immigration journey. In this easy beginner-friendly guide, we break down what priority dates mean, why they matter, and how they affect your wait time—so you can plan your future with clarity.

Your priority date marks your official place in the immigration queue. Think of it as a timestamp that determines when you can take the final steps toward obtaining a green card. For most people, this date represents the day USCIS received and accepted the immigrant visa petition filed on their behalf.

## How priority dates affect green card wait times

The priority date plays a crucial role in determining how long you'll wait for your green card. This waiting period exists because Congress limits the number of immigrant visas available annually. Moreover, these visas are further restricted by preference category and country of birth.

Various factors influence your wait time, including:

- The demand for and supply of immigrant visas in your category
- Per-country visa limitations

- The number of visas allocated for your preference category

When demand exceeds supply in a particular category or country, the category becomes “oversubscribed.” Consequently, USCIS must impose cut-off dates to keep visa allocation within legal limits.

Your place in line becomes current when your priority date falls before the cut-off date shown in the USCIS bulletin for your preference category and country of chargeability. Until then, you must continue waiting, even if your petition has already been approved.

## Who needs a priority date and who doesn’t

Not everyone applying for a green card needs to worry about priority dates. Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens—spouses, unmarried children under 21, and parents of U.S. citizens over 21—are exempt from the visa bulletin wait. These applicants can file their green card applications immediately after petition approval.

However, if you fall into any family preference category or employment-based preference category, you’ll need to monitor your priority date carefully. These categories include:

- Family preference categories (F1, F2A, F2B, F3, and F4)
- Employment-based preference categories (EB-1 through EB-5)

It’s worth noting that your country of birth—not your citizenship—determines your wait time. Hence, if you were born in a high-demand country like India or China, you might face longer waits despite holding citizenship elsewhere.

Fundamentally, understanding your priority date helps you track your progress through the immigration system and plan accordingly for the next steps in your journey toward permanent residency.

## How Priority Dates Are Assigned

Each immigration pathway has its own rules for establishing your priority date. Understanding these assignment methods helps you track your progress through the system while following the USCIS bulletin updates.

### Family-based petitions (Form I-130)

For family-sponsored immigrants, the priority date is straightforward—it’s the date when USCIS properly receives your Form I-130 (Petition for Alien Relative). Filing this form is the first step in helping a family member obtain a green card and officially establishes your place in line.

This date becomes particularly important for family preference categories where waiting periods exist. Once USCIS receives your petition with all required fees, signatures, and supporting documentation, your priority date is established.

## Employment-based petitions (Form I-140)

For employment-based immigrants not requiring labor certification, your priority date is the day USCIS accepts your Form I-140 (Immigrant Petition for Alien Worker) for processing. This applies to categories like EB-1 (extraordinary ability, outstanding professors/researchers, and multinational executives) and certain EB-2 cases with National Interest Waivers.

The approved I-140 confirms that USCIS has determined you meet the requirements for your employment-based green card category.

## Cases requiring PERM labor certification

If your employment category requires labor certification (most EB-2 and EB-3 cases), your priority date is established earlier in the process—it's the date the Department of Labor accepts your PERM labor certification application for processing.

This distinction is important as the PERM filing date effectively locks in your place in line. Additionally, to preserve this priority date, your employer must file Form I-140 within 180 days of the labor certification approval[111].

## Where to find your priority date

After your petition is approved, you can find your priority date on Form I-797 (Notice of Action) that USCIS sends you. This

document serves as official confirmation of your application's receipt and processing.

Ultimately, you'll need to compare this date with the dates listed in the monthly visa bulletin to determine when you can take the next steps toward permanent residency.

## Understanding the Visa Bulletin

The visa bulletin serves as your navigation tool through the complex immigration queue system. Published monthly by the Department of State (DOS), it determines when you can take the final steps toward obtaining your green card.

### What is the Visa Bulletin?

The USCIS bulletin provides current immigrant visa availability information based on individual priority dates. This system exists because Congress limits the annual number of available visas—366,000 in total, with 226,000 for family-based categories and 140,000 for employment-based categories. Furthermore, no single country can receive more than 7% of green cards in any particular category. When demand exceeds these limits, DOS establishes cut-off dates to regulate visa distribution.

## Dates for Filing vs Final Action Dates

The bulletin contains two distinct charts for both family-sponsored and employment-based categories:

- **Final Action Dates (Chart A)**: Indicates when green cards can actually be issued
- **Dates for Filing (Chart B)**: Shows when you may submit your adjustment of status application, even if a visa isn't yet available

USCIS decides each month which chart to use based on visa availability. Although filing early allows you to obtain employment authorization and advance parole while waiting, your green card can only be approved when your priority date becomes current under the Final Action Dates chart.

## How to check if your date is current

Your priority date is considered current if:

1. The chart shows "C" (meaning visas are immediately available regardless of priority date), or
2. Your priority date falls before the listed cut-off date for your preference category and country

Conversely, "U" indicates visas are unavailable regardless of priority date.

### Using the USCIS priority dates chart

Visit the USCIS website after each month's bulletin publication to determine which chart applies. The date format in the bulletin follows DAY-MONTH-YEAR (dd-mmm-yy). Once you locate your category and country, compare your priority date to the listed date. If your date is earlier than the cut-off date, you can proceed with your green card application.

## What Happens When Your Date Becomes Current

Once your priority date becomes current in the USCIS bulletin, you have two paths to obtain your green card, depending on your location.

### Adjustment of Status vs Consular Processing

If you're legally present in the United States, you can apply for adjustment of status (Form I-485) without returning to your home country. Alternatively, if you reside outside the US, you'll proceed through consular processing at a US embassy or consulate abroad. Both paths lead to permanent residence, though each follows different procedures. For consular cases, the National Visa Center (NVC) handles document collection and verification before forwarding your case to the appropriate consulate for interview scheduling.

## Documents to prepare in advance

Gathering necessary documentation early helps avoid delays. Essential documents include:

- Birth certificates (or alternate evidence if unavailable)
- Marriage certificates (for married applicants)
- Police clearance certificates
- Medical examination reports
- Financial support evidence

For missing or incomplete birth records, obtain a certificate of non-availability plus two birth affidavits and secondary evidence like school records.

## Common issues that delay approval

Even with a current priority date, several issues can delay your application:

- Expired documentation requiring updated submissions
- Incorrectly reflected priority dates on notices
- Pending background checks

- Medical exam expiration

### What to do if your date retrogresses

Sometimes priority dates move backward due to overwhelming demand. During retrogression, USCIS holds your application in abeyance until your date becomes current again. Meanwhile, maintain valid immigration status, update your address with USCIS within 10 days of moving, and keep supporting documents current.

## Conclusion

Understanding priority dates serves as the foundation for navigating your immigration journey successfully. Throughout this guide, we've seen how these dates essentially reserve your spot in line for a green card – a crucial concept whether you're applying through family sponsorship or employment-based categories.

First and foremost, remember that your priority date directly impacts your waiting period. While immediate relatives of U.S. citizens can bypass this waiting game altogether, those in preference categories must monitor the visa bulletin regularly to track their progress.