Naturalization Update: Historic Decline and New Barriers to U.S. Citizenship

November 2026

INTRODUCTION

The New Americans Campaign (NAC) is the leading national collaborative dedicated to increasing naturalization, working with hundreds of organizations across the country to expand access to U.S. citizenship through direct services, capacity building, and policy advocacy. Drawing on the experience of frontline practitioners, public data, and national trends, the NAC monitors and analyzes federal policies that shape access to naturalization.

The NAC's most recent policy brief, published in March 2026, warned that policy changes made during the first year of the current administration would lead to a very different naturalization landscape in comparison to years past, and ultimately fewer immigrants would become U.S. citizens. Since then, this warning has come true as recent data from United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the federal agency responsible for processing naturalization applications, shows a sharp decline in naturalization, reaching historic lows.

This policy brief analyzes the most recent USCIS data on naturalization application (Form N-400) submissions, approvals, denials, and wait times, in addition to what NAC nonprofit organizational partners are experiencing. This brief also examines recent policy changes and summarizes the current state of naturalization to inform practitioners, policymakers, and the public about how these changes have impacted access to U.S. citizenship for approximately nine million eligible people.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

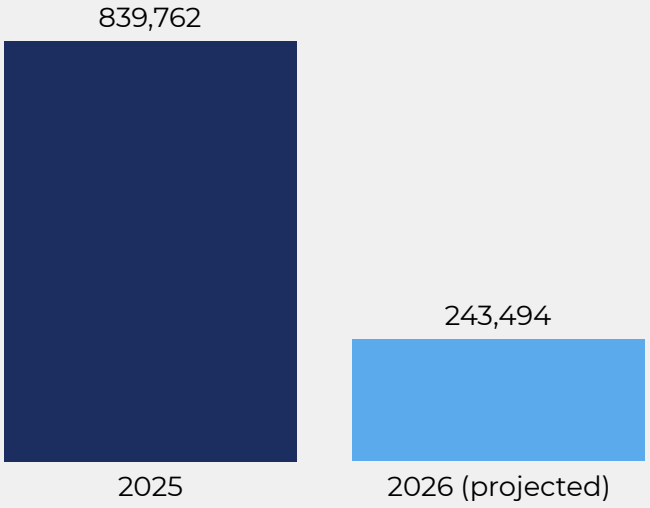
- The rate of naturalization has declined to historic lows.
- USCIS is deliberately slowing down naturalization application approvals and implementing practices and policies that make citizenship less accessible.
- New policies recently announced by the administration may push naturalization further out of reach, especially for low-income lawful permanent residents (LPRs).
- Citizenship is still possible, but applicants should seek legal assistance, consider potential risks, and be prepared for longer wait times.
- NAC partners remain committed to making citizenship accessible for as many eligible people as possible and are adapting their services to meet current policy challenges.

FEWER PEOPLE ARE BECOMING CITIZENS

There has been a historic decrease in naturalization this year. From January-September 2026, the number of naturalization applications approved by USCIS dropped 72% compared to the previous year. If approval rates stay steady based on the most recent data, we project approximately 243,000 citizenship application approvals in 2026, compared to nearly 840,000 in 2025.

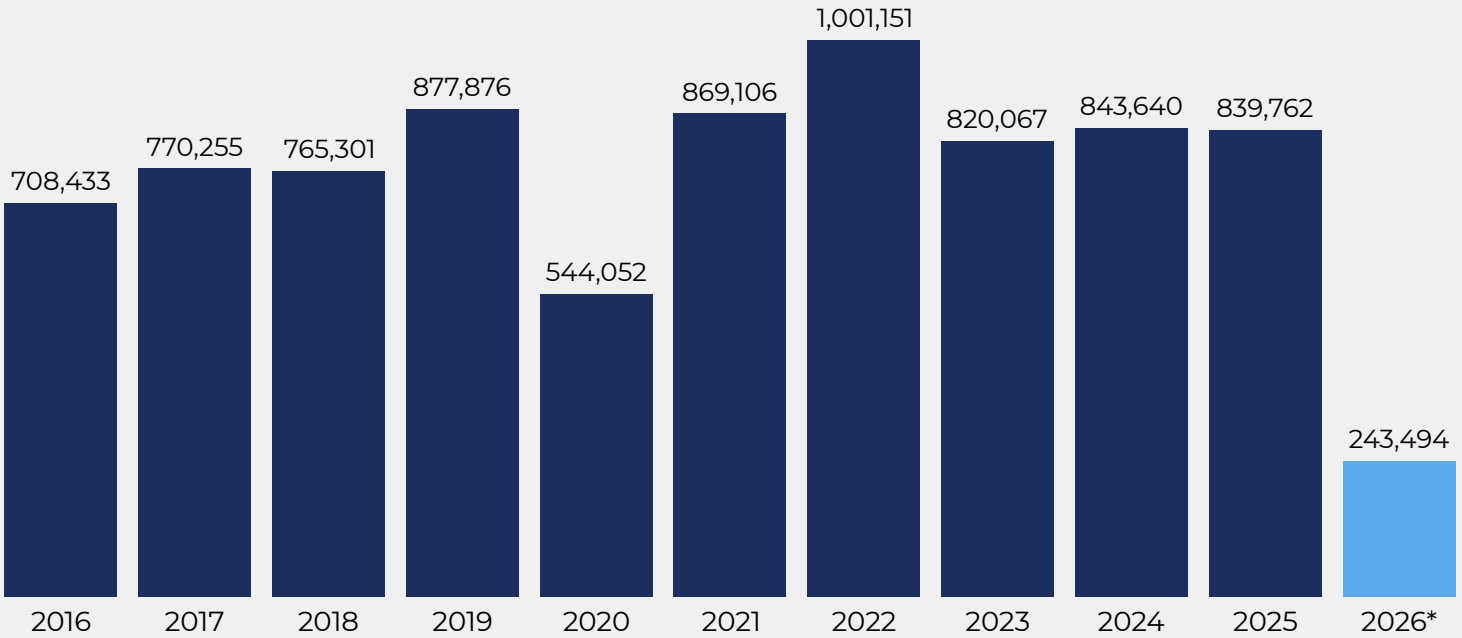
These numbers are unprecedented in recent decades. Even during the first Trump administration, including the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, average annual approvals for naturalization applications were around 740,000.

Naturalization approvals are projected to be about 70% lower than last year



Naturalization applications approved by USCIS
**2026 projection is based on approval rates from July-September 2026*

Naturalization approvals are at the lowest rates in decades

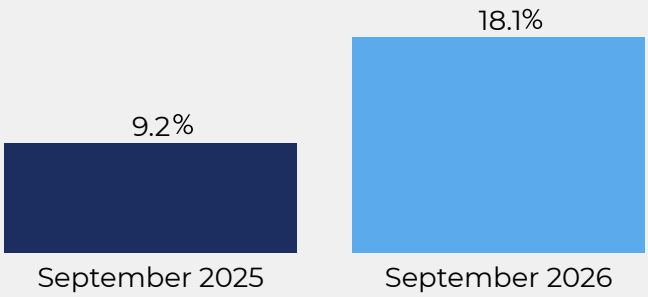


Naturalization applications approved by USCIS

**2026 projection is based on approval rates from July-September 2026*

MORE NATURALIZATION APPLICATIONS ARE RESULTING IN DENIALS

USCIS denied nearly 1 in 5 naturalization applications in September 2026



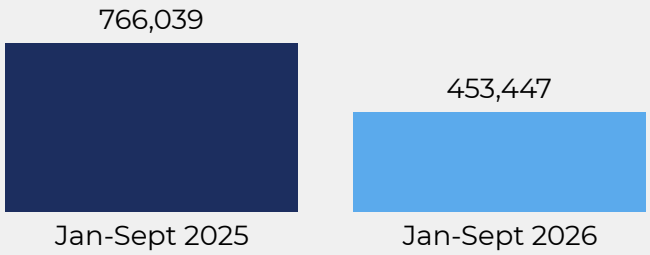
% of naturalization application decisions resulting in denials

While the total number of naturalization application denials in 2026 slightly decreased from 2025 due to overall lower adjudication numbers, the proportion of denials has doubled. This is part of a pattern of unnecessary increased scrutiny, wrongful application of the law, and more restrictive policies around naturalization.

FEWER PEOPLE ARE APPLYING FOR NATURALIZATION

Naturalization applications received by USCIS also dropped significantly in 2026, about 41% lower than the same period in 2025. It is important to note that while there has been a decrease, hundreds of thousands of people are still applying for naturalization.

Naturalization applications received by USCIS dropped 41% compared to last year



Naturalization applications received by USCIS

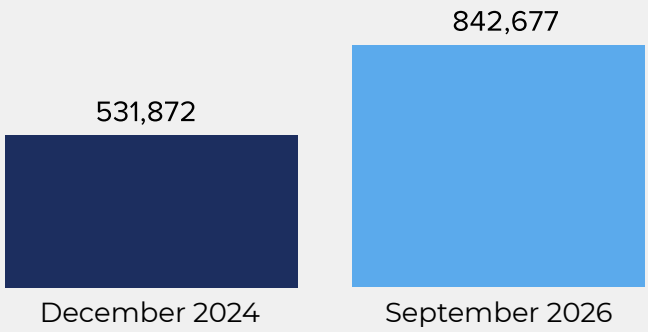
APPLICANTS FACE LONG DELAYS TO NATURALIZE

Even though fewer people are applying, there has been a significant increase in the backlog of pending naturalization applications and wait times. The average wait time for naturalization applications as of September 2026 was 13.5 months, compared to 6.7 months in 2025. Wait times also varied among different USCIS field offices – for example, in early November 2026, the average wait time in San Jose, CA was 16 months, while it was 10 months in Miami, FL.

Current published wait times do not indicate how long someone who applies right now would have to wait. In theory, if USCIS continued adjudicating applications at the same rate as in recent months, and if they processed applications in the order received, someone applying today would have to wait as long as 40 months (around 3.5 years) to receive a decision. In practice, there are many factors that can impact wait times, and adjudication times vary on a case-by-case basis.

The number of pending applications is reaching levels we last saw during the pandemic. Based on submission and adjudication rates, we know that the backlog increase is more greatly impacted by the purposeful slowdown in processing applications rather than a high number of submissions. If these trends continue, the backlog will continue to increase.

Pending naturalization applications increased 58% since the end of the Biden Administration



Naturalization applications pending with USCIS

BEYOND THE NUMBERS

In addition to analyzing data from USCIS, the NAC also gathers information from more than 140 naturalization programs across the United States. What NAC partners in the field have described matches what the data shows: the application process has slowed down, and naturalization cases take more time and effort.

- **Longer wait times**: Naturalization applicants wait much longer to be scheduled for their naturalization interview, and some interviews and oath ceremonies are canceled or postponed with little or no explanation.

- **Policy uncertainty**: Practitioners and applicants need to navigate uncertainty and unpredictability as the government rapidly rolls out new policies with unclear implementation. For example, NAC partners have reported that USCIS is erroneously rejecting fee waiver applications, delaying the application process without a clear rationale.

- **More preparation for each case**: Increased vetting – reexamining an applicant's entire immigration history, running extra background checks, and holding applicants to new, higher standards that are usually inappropriate – means applicants and immigration legal service providers need to be more cautious and thorough. Legal practitioners are spending more time screening each naturalization applicant to ensure they do not face additional risks for themselves and their families. Applicants must also prepare for extensive questioning during the naturalization interview and intense scrutiny around fee waivers, disability waivers, good moral character issues such as delayed tax payments, and other inquiries related to their immigration history.

- **Hesitancy to apply**: Sudden changes in naturalization policy and increased immigration enforcement have led to fear about applying, with some eligible LPRs sharing that they will wait for a future administration. The introduction of a longer civics test has also presented new obstacles for certain applicants who are concerned about failing the test.

- **Immigration programs are stretched thin**: Many nonprofit organizations providing naturalization services are struggling with funding and staff cuts. As applying for naturalization has become more complex and time-consuming, nonprofits are finding it difficult to keep up with the demand for services.

- **NAC partners are adapting and responding**: Even with more limited resources, immigration legal services programs are training their staff on new USCIS policies and practices, adjusting service delivery models to meet their communities' needs, and educating immigrants on policy changes affecting them. NAC partners are also pushing back against harmful immigration policies by submitting comments on regulatory proposals, engaging in advocacy with elected officials, and participating in litigation and informational campaigns.

POLICY CHANGES

The NAC's March 2026 naturalization policy brief documented most of the policies enacted during the first year of the current administration. This included the travel ban for nationals from 39 countries, a stricter review of Form N-648 (the form used to request an exemption from the English and U.S. civics testing requirements based on a medical disability), a more difficult civics test, and a renewed focus on denaturalization. As anticipated, these policies helped drive the sharp naturalization decline in the past year.

Over the last few months, the administration has announced additional plans that will create more barriers and delays in the naturalization process.

- **Proposed fee increase and end of fee waivers**: In June 2026, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) proposed raising the naturalization application fee to $1,330 for paper filing (a 75% increase) and $1,280 for online filing (an 80% increase). This proposal would also eliminate fee waivers and reduced fee requests for the naturalization application. If finalized, citizenship could be out of reach for many low-income lawful permanent residents.

- **Mandatory online filing**: Historically, USCIS has always allowed applicants and legal practitioners to complete naturalization applications on paper and submit them by mail. A rule that took effect in August 2026 allows USCIS to require online filing for certain forms, including the naturalization application. This change will disproportionately impact people with limited access to technology or low digital literacy. It will also require many practitioners to adjust their service models, introducing extra steps, and requiring additional resources.

- **Neighborhood investigations**: In August 2026, USCIS published guidance on how they will be implementing neighborhood investigations for naturalization applicants. Under the new policy, there is a presumption that USCIS will carry out in-person investigations, though they may use their discretion to waive the visits. Although we have not yet seen widespread neighborhood investigations in practice, this policy has created a chilling effect and new barriers for prospective applicants.

- **Good moral character and public benefits**: In November 2026, USCIS published a policy memo explaining how they intend to evaluate good moral character for naturalization applicants in relation to failure to support dependents, failure to comply with obligations as a sponsor for another immigrant (for example, if they have petitioned for a family member to come to the U.S.), public benefits fraud, and receipt of means-tested benefits "as intentional avoidance of self-sufficiency." We do not yet know what the changes will look like in practice, but this policy unfairly impacts low-income immigrants, deterring them from using necessary public benefits or applying for naturalization.

- **Potential changes to the naturalization test**: USCIS described the October 2025 civics test as the first in a multi-step overhaul and said more changes would follow. No further changes have been announced yet, but applicants and citizenship instructors should be prepared for future revisions to the test.

CONCLUSION

USCIS has made a choice to decrease the number of eligible immigrants who achieve U.S. citizenship. This agency went from processing nearly a million applications per year to under 300,000 applications projected in 2026, without a coherent or fair rationale. The administration has even boasted about the drop in naturalizations this year.

If the government successfully enacts more restrictive policies, such as increasing the naturalization application fee, eliminating the fee waiver for low-income applicants, and expanding neighborhood investigations, 2027 will be an even more challenging year.

By documenting the current challenges facing immigration practitioners and eligible-to-naturalize residents, the NAC hopes this brief helps advocates and policymakers to work on expanding access to citizenship and reverse the impact of actions delaying the benefits of U.S. citizenship for which millions of people are eligible.

Citizenship is still achievable, but prospective applicants should be aware of increased scrutiny and long wait times. NAC partners do the important work of supporting applicants as they consider the risks and benefits of naturalization. They remain committed to making citizenship as accessible as possible and are adapting to an increasingly challenging policy environment. Sustained, flexible funding can help organizations strengthen their naturalization programs and continue being responsive to immigrant communities.

We encourage all eligible lawful permanent residents to explore their options. Learn more about naturalization and find assistance at the New Americans Campaign website.