

U.S. Citizenship: Just the Facts

Name: _____

Already A U.S. Citizen?

Citizenship means being a member of a country and having full rights and responsibilities under that country's law. Some people are born a United States citizen. People who are born in the United States are automatically citizens at birth. So are people born outside the U.S. to parents who are both citizens. The rules can get a bit complicated for people born outside the U.S. who have only one citizen parent, but generally they are also citizens at birth.



Citizen Parents



Born in the U.S.



Naturalized



New citizens take the Oath of Allegiance at a naturalization ceremony in Boston.

Becoming a U.S. Citizen

What if you weren't born in the U.S. and neither of your parents are U.S. citizens? You can still become a citizen through a process called **naturalization**. To qualify, applicants must be at least 18 years old and have been permanent residents of the United States for 5 years. (There is one shortcut: People who serve in the U.S. military for at least one year can become citizens sooner because they have demonstrated their commitment to the United States.) Applicants must also have good character, speak English, and pass a civics test and an interview. As a final step, they must take an **Oath of Allegiance** swearing loyalty to the United States and our Constitution.

Allegiance: Citizens Owe It

People who go through the naturalization process aren't the only ones who must be loyal to the United States. All U.S. citizens owe allegiance to our country. **Treason** is the act of betraying your country, and the U.S. Constitution makes this crime punishable by death! People who were born citizens may not think about allegiance as much as those preparing to take the Oath, but you can probably remember a time when you've said this word... Maybe even this morning! Americans often say the **Pledge of Allegiance** to show loyalty to the United States flag and the nation it stands for.



The U.S. flag has one stripe for each of the 13 original states and one star for each current state. Right now there are 50 stars.

Love of Country

Beyond owing allegiance to the United States, most U.S. citizens feel a deep bond with their country. We call this feeling **patriotism**. Many citizens get emotional when they hear the national anthem, which is called **The Star Spangled Banner**. Every July 4th, Americans celebrate **Independence Day**—the day the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, when the American colonies declared their independence from Great Britain. Other national holidays, such as **Presidents' Day** and **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**, honor the lives and sacrifices of important Americans. **Memorial Day** and **Veterans Day** are two national holidays honoring those who lost their lives or served in the U.S. military, and they can be very emotional days for many U.S. citizens.



Each Memorial Day, Americans in towns across the nation line up to watch local parades honoring those who have died.

Citizenship: Just the Facts

Rights in the United States

The United States is known for the rights and freedoms given to those who live here. The first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution are called the **Bill of Rights**. They list important rights that are guaranteed to all people in the United States—not just citizens! These are rights like the freedom of expression and the freedom to worship, assemble peacefully, and petition the government, as well as the right to be free from unreasonable searches by government officials. But some rights are only for U.S. citizens. These include the right to vote in federal elections, the right to run for federal political office, and the right to serve on a jury.



Those accused of a crime in the U.S. have the right to a speedy trial.



If needed, the Selective Service would use a lottery to draft men to serve.

Responsibilities, Too!

Along with all these freedoms come some responsibilities. Everyone in the U.S. is responsible for obeying laws. Citizens are also responsible for voting in elections and serving on juries when asked. (Yes, these are both rights *and* responsibilities!) Male citizens between ages 18 and 26 must also register with the **Selective Service System**. In a time of national emergency, this agency is authorized to call up these citizens to serve in the armed forces.

U.S. Citizenship Timeline

- 1776 You must be a white male *and* own property to **vote!**
- 1791 All white males may vote even if they don't own property!
- 1795 "Free white persons" will become **citizens** after living in the U.S. for five years.
- 1848 80,000 Mexican residents of the Southwest are granted **citizenship** after the Mexican-American war.
- 1857 In *Dred Scott v. Sandford* the U.S. Supreme Court rules that African Americans who were brought into this country as slaves could never be citizens.
- 1868 The **14th Amendment** overrules *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, giving citizenship to African Americans.
- 1870 Laws changed to say that "white persons and persons of African descent" can be citizens; The **15th Amendment** gives African Americans the right to vote!
- 1913 Several states enact Alien Land Laws prohibiting non-citizens from owning property.
- 1920 The **19th Amendment** allows women to vote!
- 1924 All **Native Americans** are granted citizenship.
- 1940's All laws banning **Asians** from becoming citizens are overturned.
- 1947 Native Americans are given the right to vote!
- 1952 U.S. Congress passes a law that citizenship cannot be denied because of **race** or **gender**
- 1965 The **Voting Rights Act** gets rid of all barriers to voting, such as taxes and literacy tests
- 1971 The voting age is lowered from 21 to 18 by the **26th Amendment!**

