

# REPORT:

## Disenfranchisement Danger Zones

USCIS Backlogs Threaten to Block Half a Million Potential Voters

Tara Raghuveer

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The National Partnership for New Americans advances the integration and active citizenship of immigrants to achieve a vibrant, just, and welcoming democracy

## USCIS Backlogs and Impact on Potential Voters

According to United States Immigration and Citizenship Services (USCIS) data published in mid September, 928,713 individuals have applied to become American citizens since this time last year.<sup>1</sup> The data from the third quarter of FY 2016 show a 32.1 percent spike in Form N-400 naturalization applications over the same quarter of FY 2015, and a 24.8 percent spike in applications, year to date.<sup>2</sup>

National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) and partners, beginning last September, drove coordinated campaigns in several key geographies to promote citizenship, support the naturalization process, and encourage civic engagement.<sup>3</sup> Based on normal processing times, we determined that those who applied to become citizens before June of this year should have been able to complete their exams, take their oaths, and register to vote by November.

While the overall increase in citizenship applications received has been significant since our efforts began, so has the ballooning backlog in naturalization applications pending. The backlog of pending applications has grown by 31.2 percent over the same period last year.<sup>4</sup> The extent of this backlog is extremely troubling, especially in an election year. Motivated to naturalize in order to vote this November, many **potential citizens may be disenfranchised if USCIS does not swiftly process the backlog of 524,014 pending naturalization applications** as of the third quarter data.

These backlogs were avoidable. Naturalization rates are known to be sensitive to price and politics.<sup>5</sup> This year, we face a divisive Presidential election, races for every House seat and 35 Senate seats, and an

impending naturalization fee increase.<sup>6</sup> USCIS should have anticipated the surge in applications and dedicated the appropriate staff and resources to reducing the delays at the Federal agency, as well as in field offices around the country.

Citizenship processing includes background checks, and those should not be taken lightly. The checks are conducted to protect national and community security, especially because citizens can hold public sector jobs like those in law enforcement. Indeed, immigrants applying for citizenship volunteer themselves for these background checks.

Still, safeguards are not an excuse for backlogs; checks should be an established part of an efficient process. USCIS must avoid politicizing citizenship by succumbing to party pressures on this matter. It is unconscionable that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) spends billions of dollars to deport immigrants and destroy their families, but that the same department cannot identify adequate resources to serve aspiring American citizens.

The 8.8 million legal permanent residents currently eligible for American citizenship deserve a robust investment in the USCIS citizenship program, a core component of the agency's charge. USCIS, run almost exclusively by fee-based revenue in the Immigration Examinations Fee Account (IEFA), must be supported to perform its dual functions of service and security by seeking appropriated funding from Congress. As long as the agency operates as it does now, critical services will remain under-resourced.



## Disenfranchisement Danger Zones

At the state and local levels, where the USCIS field offices schedule interviews and oath ceremonies, backlogs vary. While some have manageable backlogs, **several states have become “Disenfranchisement Danger Zones” in which the naturalization backlogs are large, growing rapidly, or both.**

15 states account for 441,111 pending cases, or 84.2 percent of the overall backlog (See Table 1). 20 states have experienced backlog growth of at least 10 percent more than their application spikes. In some states, like New Hampshire and Virginia, the percent increase in applications pending is nearly or more than double the application spikes.

Of those applications pending nationally, we estimate that 117,112 potential citizens are at the highest risk of disenfranchisement this November. Those individuals live in states that have seen over 50 percent backlog growth over last year. We anticipate that in these states, it will be extremely difficult for a course correction at this stage. Six states have seen such increases: Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Utah.<sup>7</sup>

The worst backlog growth is in Nevada, widely understood to be a battleground state for this year’s election. **Nevada saw a 53.8 percent spike in applications received but a 89.4 percent spike in applications pending** over the same quarter of last year. Over 6,874 cases remain in limbo, jeopardizing potential citizens’ ability to register and vote this November.

In other states, the backlog growth is not as dramatic, but the size of the backlog itself—the number of total cases pending and, therefore,

individuals at risk of disenfranchisement—makes the situation nonetheless dire. New York’s five field offices received 38,279 citizenship applications in the third quarter of 2016. As of the same quarter, 76,945 cases are pending in New York. In particular field offices, like New York, Long Island, and Albany, the backlog growth is more acute than in others. Those offices saw 47.5, 37.7, and 25.6 percent backlog growth respectively.

Table 1

### Disenfranchisement Danger Zones

State/Territory	Pending Cases*	Backlog Growth**
California	99,677	31.1%
New York	76,945	35.2%
Florida	66,113	59.9%
Texas	50,382	27.1%
New Jersey	27,099	58.9%
Illinois	17,679	22.8%
Massachusetts	15,643	34.3%
DC	14,576	35.4%
Maryland	14,262	14.5%
Pennsylvania	13,621	49.4%
Georgia	13,156	7.9%
Minnesota	9,326	15.8%
Washington	9,235	-23.8%
Nevada	6,874	89.4%
North Carolina	6,523	40.2%
<b>Pending Cases in 15 Danger Zones</b>	<b>441,111</b>	
<b>% of Total Backlog</b>	<b>84.2%</b>	

\*Pending Cases as of Q3 FY 2016

\*\*Backlog Growth indicates growth over Q3 FY 2015

Florida, another key state in this year's election, has both huge backlogs and rapid backlog growth. In Florida, 66,113 cases are pending, and the backlog has grown 59.9 percent over last year. In Florida's Kendall field office, the backlog has more than doubled since last year as 10,144 cases await processing, compared to last year's 4,963.

In many of these Disenfranchisement Danger Zones, potential citizens could have a significant impact on the outcomes of Federal and down-ballot races. In the 2012 presidential election, several key states were decided by small margins of victory. For example, according to recent analysis by the Center of the Study of Immigrant Integration at the University of Southern California, the margin of victory was less than one percentage point in Florida, where 6.2 percent of the citizen voting age population is recently naturalized, and nearly 10 percent are somewhat recently naturalized.<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

The naturalization of foreign-born residents benefits America. Aspiring citizens study English, our history and government, and they pledge to defend our Constitution. Naturalized immigrants are likely to see a boost in family incomes, which adds millions in tax revenue to their cities and states.<sup>9</sup> And, for those applying, the ability to participate in our democracy is just one benefit of American citizenship. Citizenship also brings protection from deportation and the ability to petition for family members to gain legal status.

USCIS exists to secure America's promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information, granting immigration services and citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship, and ensuring the integrity of our immigration system.<sup>10</sup>

**USCIS will fail at its mission if it does not address the huge and ballooning naturalization backlogs.** The agency will disenfranchise potential citizens who are eager to participate in our democracy as a consequence of their inadequately funding and managing the citizenship program.

USCIS must take swift and significant measures to address these backlogs and serve those who are eligible to become citizens this year. They should urgently redistribute pending cases to field offices with capacity and/or deploy supports to stressed offices.

In the future, USCIS must develop systems to adequately project demand and anticipate need, seek discretionary funding for citizenship services, and maintain regular communication with stakeholders in the naturalization process, including service providers and applicants.

Our deepest concern is not simply this year's backlogs, which are inexcusable; it is that they were allowed to grow at the most critical time in our democratic process. Under-resourced services and mismanaged systems at USCIS do not merely prolong ineffectiveness—they corrode the foundation of American democracy.

## Acknowledgements

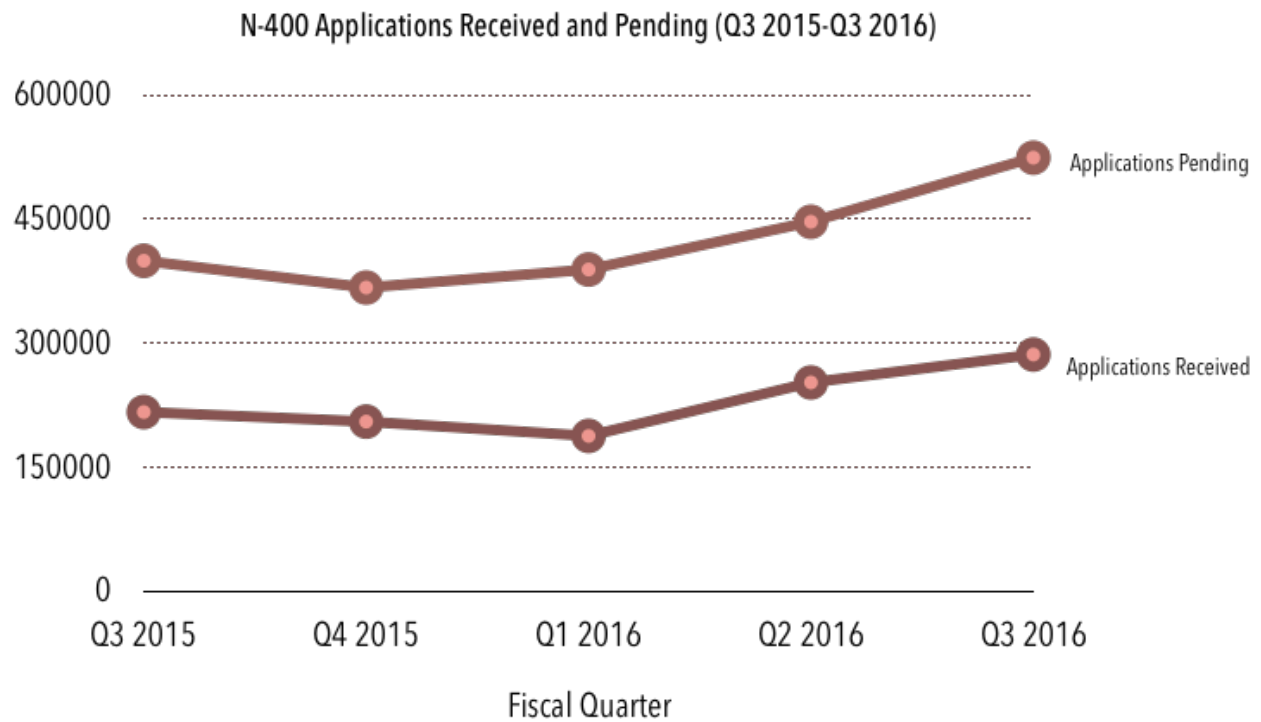
NPNA thanks our partners working on naturalization, including Cities for Citizenship, Dr. Manuel Pastor and his team at the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration at the University of Southern California, Mi Familia Vota, United Food and Commercial Workers, UNITE HERE, SEIU, Latino Victory Project, the New Americans Campaign, and the Naturalization Working Group.

## About NPNA

The National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) is a national multiethnic, multiracial partnership. We represent the collective power and resources of the country's 37 largest regional immigrant and refugee rights organizations in 31 states. Our members combine service delivery with sophisticated organizing tactics to advance local and state policy. NPNA exists to leverage their collective power and expertise towards a coordinated strategy.

**NPNA works with new Americans as powerful participants and leaders in creating a more vibrant, just, and welcoming democracy for all.** We believe America's success is rooted in our ongoing commitment to welcoming and integrating newcomers into the fabric of our nation, and to upholding equality and opportunity as fundamental American values.

## National Data



	Q3 FY 2016		Q3 FY 2015	
	Received	Pending	Received	Pending
United States				
Total	286,036	524,014	216,500	399,397
<b>% Increase Receipts Over 2015</b>	<b>32.1%</b>			
<b>% Increase Pending Over 2015</b>	<b>31.2%</b>			

## Data by State

	Q3 FY 2016		Q3 FY 2015	
	Received	Pending	Received	Pending
Alaska				
Total	297	753	309	623
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	-3.9%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	20.9%			
Arizona				
Phoenix	3,863	8,015	2,889	5,512
Tucson	950	1,481	700	1,015
Total	4,813	9,496	3,589	6,527
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	34.1%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	45.5%			
Arkansas				
Total	484	738	338	551
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	43.2%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	33.9%			

Red = % Increase Pendings Over 2015 exceeds the % Increase Receipts Over 2015

	Q3 FY 2016		Q3 FY 2015	
	Received	Pending	Received	Pending
California				
Chula Vista	1,105	1,172	2,388	3,768
Fresno	3,322	5,140	2,332	4,582
Imperial	582	844	378	509
Los Angeles	6,126	9,208	4,702	7,964
Los Angeles County	7,543	12,481	5,081	8,464
Sacramento	3,945	6,559	3,523	5,262
San Bernardino	5,755	8,882	3,824	6,626
San Diego	3,990	11,045	1,834	4,340
San Fernando Valley	4,800	8,376	3,813	6,622
San Francisco	8,113	16,604	6,390	10,716
San Jose	5,102	9,581	4,157	6,118
Santa Ana	5,236	9,785	4,110	11,086
Total	55,619	99,677	42,532	76,057
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	30.8%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	31.1%			
Colorado				
Total	3,208	5,491	2,469	5,100
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	29.9%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	7.7%			
Connecticut				
Total	3,389	5,768	2,543	5,057
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	33.3%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	14.1%			
DC				
Total	6,592	14,576	5,010	10,764
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	31.6%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	35.4%			



	Q3 FY 2016		Q3 FY 2015	
	Received	Pending	Received	Pending
Florida				
Hialeah	7,147	10,601	4,241	6,047
Jacksonville	1,620	3,435	1,405	2,584
Kendall	6,701	10,144	3,769	4,963
Miami	6,381	10,266	3,902	6,355
Oakland Park	6,173	9,864	3,992	6,036
Orlando	4,331	7,744	3,099	6,010
Tampa	5,107	8,823	3,715	5,365
West Palm Beach	3,618	5,236	2,548	3,993
Total	41,078	66,113	26,671	41,353
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	54.0%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	59.9%			
Georgia				
Total	7,451	13,156	5,866	12,197
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	27.0%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	7.9%			
Hawaii				
Total	1,388	1,943	1,077	1,819
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	28.9%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	6.8%			
Idaho				
Total	537	826	400	586
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	34.3%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	41.0%			
Illinois				
Total	9,299	17,679	8,105	14,397
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	14.7%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	22.8%			
Indiana				
Total	1,601	2,599	1,292	1,948
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	23.9%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	33.4%			

	Q3 FY 2016		Q3 FY 2015	
	Received	Pending	Received	Pending
Iowa				
Total	943	2,606	756	1,767
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	24.7%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	47.5%			
Kansas				
Total	445	782	364	545
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	22.3%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	43.5%			
Kentucky				
Total	1,021	1,670	938	1,269
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	8.8%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	31.6%			
Louisiana				
Total	1,268	2,161	1,020	1,730
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	24.3%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	24.9%			
Maine				
Total	265	390	283	529
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	-6.4%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	-26.3%			
Maryland				
Total	6,374	14,262	5,079	12,453
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	25.5%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	14.5%			
Massachusetts				
Boston	5,915	10,634	4,873	7,737
Lawrence	2,726	5,009	2,139	3,914
Total	8,641	15,643	7,012	11,651
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	23.2%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	34.3%			
Michigan				
Total	4,178	7,534	3,773	7,261
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	10.7%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	3.8%			

	Q3 FY 2016		Q3 FY 2015	
	Received	Pending	Received	Pending
Minnesota				
Total	3,891	9,326	3,474	8,056
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	12.0%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	15.8%			
Missouri				
Kansas City	1,668	2,330	1,106	2,134
St. Louis	766	2,684	784	2,011
Total	2,434	5,014	1,890	4,145
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	28.8%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	21.0%			
Montana				
Total	102	156	81	114
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	25.9%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	36.8%			
Nebraska				
Total	995	1,440	944	1,199
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	5.4%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	20.1%			
Nevada				
Las Vegas	3,332	6,061	2,107	3,155
Reno	411	813	327	475
Total	3,743	6,874	2,434	3,630
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	53.8%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	89.4%			
New Hampshire				
Total	551	907	454	645
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	21.4%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	40.6%			
New Jersey				
Mount Laurel	2,696	4,047	1,997	2,750
Newark	13,372	23,052	9,080	14,300
Total	16,068	27,099	11,077	17,050
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	45.1%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	58.9%			

	Q3 FY 2016		Q3 FY 2015	
	Received	Pending	Received	Pending
New Mexico				
Total	673	1,211	456	664
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	47.6%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	82.4%			
New York				
Albany	746	1,528	690	1,217
Buffalo	1,528	2,753	1,519	2,513
Long Island	7,825	15,205	5,997	11,041
New York	21,193	45,020	15,499	30,522
Queens	6,987	12,439	5,403	11,608
Total	38,279	76,945	29,108	56,901
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	31.5%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	35.2%			
North Carolina				
Charlotte	2,373	3,577	1,897	2,507
Raleigh	2,025	2,946	1,551	2,144
Total	4,398	6,523	3,448	4,651
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	27.6%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	40.2%			
Ohio				
Cincinnati	783	1,348	683	925
Cleveland	1,112	1,673	1,081	1,639
Columbus	1,429	2,394	1,141	1,620
Total	3,324	5,415	2,905	4,184
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	14.4%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	29.4%			
Oklahoma				
Total	1,479	2,669	943	2,495
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	56.8%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	7.0%			
Oregon				
Total	2,233	3,457	2,055	4,630
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	8.7%			
% Increase Pendings Over 2015	-25.3%			

		Q3 FY 2016		Q3 FY 2015	
		Received	Pending	Received	Pending
Pennsylvania					
Philadelphia		6,277	11,963	4,768	7,326
Pittsburgh		862	1,658	722	1,793
Total		7,139	13,621	5,490	9,119
% Increase Receipts Over 2015		30.0%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015		49.4%			
Rhode Island					
Total		1,152	1,752	826	1,265
% Increase Receipts Over 2015		39.5%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015		38.5%			
South Carolina					
Total		2,063	3,277	1,555	2,567
% Increase Receipts Over 2015		32.7%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015		27.7%			
Tennessee					
Total		2,150	4,108	1,814	3,938
% Increase Receipts Over 2015		18.5%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015		4.3%			
Texas					
Dallas		8,063	16,616	6,017	13,747
El Paso		2,220	4,486	1,328	2,597
Harlingen		1,523	2,537	984	1,725
Houston		9,156	18,902	6,694	16,073
San Antonio		4,408	7,841	3,234	5,487
Total		25,370	50,382	18,257	39,629
% Increase Receipts Over 2015		39.0%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015		27.1%			
Utah					
Total		1,307	2,194	1,277	1,464
% Increase Receipts Over 2015		2.3%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015		49.9%			



	Q3 FY 2016		Q3 FY 2015	
	Received	Pending	Received	Pending
Vermont				
Total	208	392	205	297
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	1.5%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	32.0%			
Virginia				
Total	1,460	3,497	1,408	2,781
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	3.7%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	25.7%			
Washington				
Seattle	4,495	7,785	3,978	11,006
Spokane	269	615	256	393
Yakima	602	835	409	724
Total	5,366	9,235	4,643	12,123
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	15.6%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	-23.8%			
Wisconsin				
Total	1,313	2,058	1,039	1,588
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	26.4%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	29.6%			
Guam				
Total	223	389	210	388
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	6.2%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	0.3%			
U.S. Virgin Islands				
Charlotte Amalie	138	219	119	194
Christiansted	78	228	81	178
Total	216	447	200	372
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	8.0%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	20.2%			
Puerto Rico				
Total	1,008	1,763	881	1,318
% Increase Receipts Over 2015	14.4%			
% Increase Pending Over 2015	33.8%			

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). 2016. Immigration and Citizenship Data: Citizenship and Naturalization. <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-studies/immigration-forms-data/data-set-form-n-400-application-naturalization>

<sup>2</sup> Raghuv eer, Tara. 2016. Fact Sheet: Naturalization Data – September 2016. Chicago, IL: National Partnership for New Americans. <http://bit.ly/2cVhJav>

<sup>3</sup> NPNA ran the Stand Up to Hate Campaign with Mi Familia Vota, UFCW, Unite HERE, SEIU, and the Latino Victory Foundation. NPNA is a partner of the New Americans Campaign (NAC).

<sup>4</sup> In this report, we measure “backlog growth” by calculating the percent increase in pending applications in the third quarter of fiscal year 2016 over the same quarter 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Pastor, Manuel, Jared Sanchez, Rhonda Ortiz, and Justin Scoggins. 2013. Nurturing Naturalization: Could Lowering the Fee Help? Los Angeles, CA: Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, University of Southern California.

<sup>6</sup> United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). 2016. Proposed Rule Change: USCIS Fee Schedule. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/05/04/2016-10297/us-citizenship-and-immigration-services-fee-schedule>

<sup>7</sup> Pennsylvania and Utah had backlog growth on the brink of our “high risk” designations (over 50 percent). Pennsylvania had 49.4 percent backlog growth. Utah had 49.9 percent.

<sup>8</sup> Pastor, Manuel, Justin Scoggins, and Magaly N. López. 2016. Rock the (Naturalized) Vote II: The Size and Location of the Recently Naturalized Voting Age Citizen Population. Los Angeles, CA: Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, University of Southern California.

<sup>9</sup> Pastor, Manuel and Justin Scoggins. 2012. Citizen Gain: The Economic Benefits of Naturalization for Immigrants and the Economy. Los Angeles, CA: Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, University of Southern California.

<sup>10</sup> United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). 2016. About Us. <https://www.uscis.gov/aboutus>

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