

Trends in Naturalization

During the First Year of the Second Trump Administration

Introduction

Naturalization is the process through which a foreign-born individual acquires United States citizenship. Over the past decade, more than 7.9 million immigrants have naturalized, underscoring the central role of naturalization in shaping the political and civic incorporation of immigrants in the United States.

Administrative data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) indicate that 818,500 individuals naturalized in fiscal year 2024 (October 1, 2023–September 30, 2024). Naturalized citizens reside in every U.S. state, with geographic concentration in a small number of states. California, Florida, and New York alone account for over half of all naturalizations, followed by Texas, New Jersey, Illinois, Virginia, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Washington.

Newly naturalized citizens come from nearly every part of the world. In fiscal year 2024, the largest groups originated from Mexico, India, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, and Vietnam. The median age of newly naturalized citizens was 42 years, and women comprised a majority (55.1 percent) of new citizens.

Trends in Processing Naturalization Applications Under Trump 2.0

To begin, naturalization applications declined by 60,799 during the first year of the second Trump administration compared to the final year of the Biden administration. This sizable reduction raises concerns about a potential deterrent effect on individuals' willingness to apply for naturalization.

Moreover, when it comes to adjudication, there have been 8,945 more denials and 44,041 fewer approvals during the first year of the second Trump administration compared to the last year of the Biden administration. The increased number of denials during the first year of the second Trump administration is concerning, as it likely reflects stricter scrutiny of naturalization applications, which can include more stringent interpretation of "good moral character," expanded use of discretionary denial authority, and a harder naturalization civics exam, among other explanations. When coupled with decreased approvals, it is clear that the increased barriers to naturalization implemented during the first year of the second Trump administration is slowing the rate at which non-citizens become new Americans.

USCIS Data on Processing Naturalization Applications

USCIS provides monthly data on the processing of naturalization applications, including the number of naturalization applications received, the number approved, the number denied, and the number pending. An approved application means that the applicant has successfully completed the requirements for naturalization and will be granted U.S. citizenship. A denied application means that the applicant did not meet all of the eligibility requirements under the law. General grounds for denial include a failure to establish any of the following: "lawful admission for permanent residence, continuous residence, physical presence, 3 months of residence in state or service district, good moral character, attachment and favorable disposition to the good order and happiness of the United States, understanding of English (including reading, writing, and speaking), knowledge of U.S. history and government, lack of prosecution."¹ In the past, USCIS has also issued denials for public health-related concerns, criminality, threats to national security, likelihood of becoming a public charge, a lack of labor certification, fraud or misrepresentation, and prior removals and/or unlawful presence. Pending applications are awaiting decisions and will eventually be approved or denied.

USCIS provides data on the number of naturalization applications that have been pending for six months or more. This is a key measure of the naturalization backlog. USCIS also provides data on average processing times, more specifically, the average number of months it took for a naturalization application to be processed from receipt to completion.

TRENDS FOR FIRST YEAR OF THE SECOND TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

60,799 fewer naturalization applications

8,945 more denials

44,041 fewer approvals

1. Chapter 4 - Results of the Naturalization Examination. USCIS. (2025, August 29). <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-12-part-b-chapter-4>

To account for serial correlation in monthly data, we estimate Newey–West standard errors with a lag length of three months. This adjustment addresses potential autocorrelation in the error term that would otherwise bias conventional standard errors. Given the relatively small number of time periods ($n = 25$), we focus on effect sizes and consistency across specifications in addition to statistical significance. We also estimate models using alternative specifications, including different definitions of the post-period, to assess robustness.

Even more concerning is the fact that there is now sufficient data to identify statistically significant trends. We employ an interrupted time series (ITS) design implemented as a segmented regression model with a pre-specified structural break in February 2025. This break is chosen to reflect the timing of the presidential transition while avoiding contamination from partial exposure in January 2025.

During the last year of the Biden administration, denial rates exhibited a statistically significant downward trend of approximately 0.073 percentage points per month, meaning naturalization applicants were increasingly likely to be approved. However, beginning in February 2025, denial rates started to increase at a statistically significant rate of approximately 0.38 percentage points per month. This indicates a non-random and sustained shift toward less favorable adjudication outcomes. Altogether, during the last year of the Biden administration, the denial rate was 8.9 percent. During the first year of the second Trump administration, the denial rate has climbed to 10.5 percent. **Extrapolating pre-February 2025 trends forward, we estimate that approximately 32,420 fewer naturalization applications were approved during the first year of the second Trump administration.**

DURING THE LAST YEAR OF THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION...

denial rates **declined** by **0.07%**/month

8.9% denial rate

6.1 months average processing time

BEGINNING FEBRUARY 2025...

denial rates **increased** by **0.38%**/month

10.5% denial rate first year under Trump

6.6 months average processing time

Average processing times have also increased for naturalization applications in the first year of the second Trump administration compared to the last year of the previous Biden administration. In the first year of the second Trump administration, the average processing time for naturalization applications was 6.6 months. During the last year of the Biden administration, the average processing time for naturalization applications was 6.1 months. This trend is concerning because processing times for naturalization applications slowed significantly during the first Trump administration. More specifically, median processing times for naturalization applications climbed from 5.2 months in fiscal year 2016 to 7.9 months in fiscal year 2017. It climbed even further to 9.7 months in fiscal year 2018 and then to 10 months in fiscal year 2019.

Less Naturalized Citizens, fewer New American Voters

When analyzing this data, it is important to consider that additional barriers for immigrants, even those that are eligible to naturalize or already US citizens, are not happening in a vacuum. Lower naturalization rates, the SAVE America Act which seeks to require proof of citizenship for those registering to vote, DHS officials “not ruling out” ICE presence at polling locations, all point in the same direction. All of these are attempts to intimidate people from becoming naturalized citizens and perhaps most importantly for this administration, from becoming voters in a critical midterm election year.

Conclusion

It is not by chance that fewer non-citizens are naturalizing during the first year of the second Trump administration, it is by design. The mainstream narrative on immigration has focused largely on criminality and those without lawful status- however this data as well as various administrative policy changes within USCIS show the concerted effort to make the already difficult pathway toward achieving US Citizenship even more difficult to complete. In an effort to achieve a truly representative democracy, we must ensure accessibility to legal pathways that exist as a baseline and advocate to ensure they are economically and linguistically in reach for all eligible communities.