

More: Citizenship Exam

For the past decade, the United States has been experiencing a wave of immigration unsurpassed since the turn of the 20th century. Since 1990, millions of people have legally immigrated to the United States, yet most of them do not become US citizens when the law allows them.

Under current immigration law, an immigrant can petition to become a United States citizen after 5 years of lawful permanent residence, or 3 years if their permanent residence was based upon marriage to a U.S. citizen. An alarmingly high percentage of these immigrants do not become citizens when they are entitled. In 1999, an estimated 47 percent of documented immigrants who had been here at least 10 years had not become US citizens. This figure was based on a 14,000 person nationwide sample taken by the US census Bureau in March of 1999.

The reason most commonly given by immigrants for not becoming citizens is the language barrier. Along with showing a basic knowledge of US history and government, applicants for citizenship are required to display an ability to read, write and speak ordinary English.

The English proficiency requirement keeps many elderly immigrants from ever filing for citizenship. Most of them don't know that there are special rules for older immigrants who have lived here as permanent residents for certain periods of time.

Immigration law provides for 2 age-based exceptions to the English proficiency requirement: (1) Citizenship applicants who are over the age of 50 on the date of filing for naturalization and have lived in the U.S. for a total of at least 20 years as a permanent resident; or ; (2) Citizenship applicants who are over the age of 55 at the time of filing and have lived in the U.S. as permanent residents for at least 15 years.

These older immigrants do not have to display any knowledge of the English language in order to become U.S. citizens. INS tests these applicants on basic US history and government knowledge in their native languages.

Additionally, applicants with physical disabilities such as deafness and blindness are not required to display any English proficiency.

Many immigrants incorrectly believe that they must give up citizenship in their home country in order to become U.S. citizens. The United States allows dual citizenship; the INS does not prohibit new citizens from retaining citizenship in their home countries. However, many other countries forbid dual citizenship.

Today, naturalization no longer requires written tests. These tests often frightened older immigrants who were not accustomed to taking standardized tests. Instead, they are currently tested by interview. Applicants are usually asked between 8 and 15 questions from a list provided to them. They must correctly answer 70 percent of the questions in order to become citizens. Approximately 80 percent pass on the first attempt, and 50 percent on the second try.

These rules and procedures make it easier for many older immigrants to finalize the "American dream" by becoming U.S. citizens. However, through a basic lack of information, many older immigrants do not know that these special rules exist for them.