

Indians in US scramble to get citizenship ahead of president polls

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Lubna Kably | TNN | Updated: May 22, 2019, 0:21 IST


Highlights

- The run-up to the US presidential elections has seen growing interest among green card holders to obtain citizenship
- A little over 5.44 lakh foreign nationals became US citizens during the first three quarters of fiscal year 2018
- This is a rise of 15% over the same period last year

NEW DELHI: The run-up to the US presidential elections has seen growing interest among green card holders (technically termed as lawful permanent residents) to obtain citizenship.

A little over 5.44 lakh foreign nationals became US citizens during the first three quarters of fiscal year 2018 (which is the nine month period ended June last year). Interestingly, this is a rise of 15% over the same period last year. On the other hand, 7.07 lakh immigrants had become US citizens during the fiscal year ended September 30, 2017 - this was a 6% decline from the previous fiscal. Data in this regard was released recently by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the immigration agency of the US government.

GRANT OF US CITIZENSHIP: TOP 3

Country Of Birth	9 Months Ended June 2018 (% Of Total)	9 Months Ended June 2017 (% Of Total)	Increase In Numbers (% Rise Between The Two Periods)	
Mexico	95,107 (17.5)	77,735 (16.4)	17,372 (22)	
India	37,431 (7.0)	31,480 (6.6)	5,951 (19)	
China	28,547 (5.2)	24,179 (5.1)	4,368 (18)	
Total*	544,475	472,658	71,817 (15%)	

*Global; Source: USCIS quarterly data

Advocacy groups, such as the National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA), through outreach programs and legal assistance, aim to mobilise one million 'eligible' foreign nationals in the US to apply in time, to enable them to participate in the democratic process.

During this nine month period ended June 30, 2018, as many as 37, 431 Indians became US citizens (nearly 7% of the total), making them the second-largest group following Mexico. Chinese were the third-largest group, with 28,547 (5% of the total) obtaining US citizenship.

As compared to the previous corresponding period, 5,950 more Indians were conferred US citizenship during the first three quarters of fiscal 2018, which is an increase of 19%. Similarly, the increase for Mexicans is 22% and for Chinese it is 18%.

Only green card holders can opt for naturalization (the process which confers US citizenship upon foreign nationals), they can do so after being a permanent resident for five years. For spouses of US citizens, the period is reduced to three years.

Immigrant experts view the rise in citizenship is owing to two key factors - uncertainty on the immigration policy front, which even renders green card holders vulnerable, and the desire to vote in the forthcoming elections.

At the same time, the backlog in processing of citizenship applications is on the rise. According to NPNA's communication release, citizenship application backlogs remain at record-level highs while processing delays have increased in fiscal 2018, showing that streamlining the citizenship process remains a critical issue ahead of the 2020 election.

Based on USCIS data, the group points out that the backlog has increased from 7.34 lakh in fiscal 2017 to 7.38 lakh a year later. The increase in backlog was despite a decline in the overall applications from 9.87 lakh in fiscal year 2017 to 8.04 lakh in fiscal 2018.

However, NPNA hastens to point out that the interest in obtaining citizenship showed a spike towards the last quarter of 2018. "More than 2 lakh lawful, permanent residents applied for citizenship in the last quarter ended September 30, 2018, confirming that foreign nationals yearn to become part of our nation's most critical civic traditions of voting," NPNA said in a statement.

Processing of the application (Form N-400) now typically takes over 10 months (the delay has doubled since 2016). This, in turn, increases the period before which an individual can become a citizen, after completing the other processes. - such as biometrics appointment, interview and exam for citizenship, awaiting the decision and the oath ceremony It could take a little over a year and a half from the date of the application to become a US citizen.

TOI, in its September 19 edition, had pointed out that NPNA and a few other associations have filed a law suit, as USCIS had failed to respond to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, to provide documents related to the backlog of citizenship applications. This lawsuit is still pending.

Added to the backlog woes is the spike in denials of naturalization applications "The grounds for denial are unpredictable, they could even relate to errors made when obtaining H-1B visas or green cards. This adds to the uncertainty," said Rajiv S

Khanna, managing attorney at Immigration.com.

"An entrepreneur had sponsored a green card for an employee without mentioning that he was a distant relative. He thought it was immaterial as the relationship was so distant. Today, this entrepreneur is unable to become a US citizen," Khanna said.

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