



Immigration Laws Have It All Backward

You have to move heaven and earth to get a Green Card, but becoming a citizen of the U.S. is comparatively easy. Shouldn't it be the other way around?

Ilya Shapiro
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I've [wanted to be an American](#) ever since I can remember. I was born in Moscow and escaped to Canada with my family when I was 4. Like most Russian-Jewish immigrants, I was a fervent anti-communist and naturally looked to the United States as a beacon for the free world, the place where rule of law flourished.

In middle school, I pledged allegiance to the Star-Spangled Banner every morning at my locker, and, to this day, my childhood bedroom sports framed copies of the founding documents (and two American flags I picked up on a school trip at Bill Clinton's first inaugural parade). I soon decided that I prefer "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to Canada's "peace, order, and good government."

After attending college in the United States, then law school, interning for a senator, working on a presidential campaign, and clerking for a federal judge, I practiced law at two major firms in Washington. Still, I was no closer to a green card—the right to permanent residence—because I had not yet worked for an employer who could establish that no American had the "minimal qualifications" for my job. (And there was no way to simply "apply" for a green card because I didn't have a U.S.-citizen relative, wasn't a refugee, and didn't qualify for the "diversity lottery.")

I finally got my [green card](#)—through my current employer and after having volunteered to go to Iraq as a rule-of-law adviser—in 2009 after spending nearly 15 years (my entire adult life) in this country. It was easier for my family to leave the Soviet Union and immigrate to Canada! Indeed, earning a law degree and joining the Supreme Court bar was more straightforward than getting a green card!

With five years about to pass—it's three for those who get green cards through marriage—I put in my naturalization papers. In February I was fingerprinted for a criminal-background check, and last week went in for my naturalization interview.

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At this interview, the examiner first verifies your identity and confirms what you submitted in your application (name, address, [marital status](#), haven't tried to overthrow the government, not a Communist/terrorist, etc.), then has you write a sentence to test your English literacy (for me: "Columbus Day is in October,"), then asks up to 10 oral civics questions until you get six right (out of 100 [possibilities](#)). These were mine:

1. What did the Declaration of Independence do?
2. We elect a U.S. Senator for how many years?
3. If both the President and Vice President can no longer serve, who becomes President?
4. What does the President's Cabinet do?
5. How many justices are on the Supreme Court?
6. Name one branch or part of the government. [I joked beforehand that I had to study this, and indeed clinched my naturalization with the answer, "judicial."]

Other potential questions included naming a state that borders Canada or Mexico, three of the original colonies, your congressman or senator, and a right protected by the First Amendment. Although the sad truism is that most native-born Americans [wouldn't pass this test](#), it wasn't hard for me given that I write about law and politics for a living.

The examiner was both professional and friendly. I read *all* the materials that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services had sent me, so there were no surprises. And that's the last step before I take the citizenship oath, with my swearing-in ceremony expected in the next few months.

In general, this naturalization process has been the easiest, most stress-free interaction with any level of government I've ever had.

Of course, this six-month period is but the capstone on a decades-long journey—including plenty of less-pleasant bureaucratic encounters, plus prolonged periods of despair at ever having the opportunity to reach this goal. (Not many immigrants are in a position to have petitions filed for treatment as an "alien of exceptional ability," supported by a federal judge, a four-star general, and a senior administration official, among others.)

But shouldn't the tough parts come at this final, naturalization stage? Every other immigrant-attracting country makes it relatively easy for foreigners to come live peacefully but demands more of would-be citizens. It's [precisely backwards](#) to make it so much easier to naturalize than to be able to work here!

And that's the ultimate lesson from my journey: As chances for immigration reform fade ahead of this year's elections, both sides are wrong to focus on the "pathway to citizenship." They should instead provide more opportunities for residence.

If you ask people why they come to America, they'll tell you that it's to build a better life in a safer country. It's not to vote in elections, access welfare, or sit on juries, which are the only things citizenship gets you that a green card doesn't. Good policy here is good politics: expand legal immigration, allow productive members of society to come out of the shadows, and then crack down on the criminals and deadbeats who remain.

Becoming a U.S. citizen is the culmination of a dream I've had since childhood—I'm both proud and humbled to plant roots in the only nation founded on the idea of individual liberty—but taking these final steps feels more like a victory lap than the end of the race. There'd be something wrong with that even if my six questions had been more of a challenge.

Ilya Shapiro is a senior fellow in constitutional studies at the Cato Institute. Like most immigrants, he does a job Americans won't: defending the Constitution.