

## Eligible Immigrants Should Become Citizens Now

**Juleyka Lantigua-Williams**

(MCT)

Right now is a crucial moment for qualified immigrants to become naturalized American citizens.

The political climate of the last two years has stirred many anti-immigrant sentiments. As a naturalized citizen, I have witnessed some of the strongest backlash against people like me: new Americans who came from somewhere else and made this country our home.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, in 2009 more than 743,000 people were naturalized. The largest number of new citizens were from Mexico (111,630), followed by India (52,889), the Philippines (38,934), China (37,130) and Vietnam (31,168).

Voter turnout by these new American voters may influence some of this year's hotly contested congressional midterm elections.

If you qualify to become a citizen, do it now and make your voice heard. And don't be dissuaded by the myths surrounding the process of becoming a citizen.

**Myth:** It's difficult to qualify.

**Fact:** It's simple. Here's all you need: You must be at least 18; you must have been a permanent resident for five years (three years if married to a U.S. citizen); and you must have lived continuously and physically in the United States for those years.

**Myth:** You must speak perfect English to qualify.

**Fact:** The written test and verbal interviews can be done in a language other than English, including Spanish, Chinese or Vietnamese. To qualify for this exception, you must have lived in the United States 20 years or more, or you must have been a legal permanent resident for at least five years and be more than 50 years old, or you must be 55 years of age and have been a legal permanent resident for at

least 15 years. There are also special exceptions for people 65 and older, as well as those with disabilities.

**Myth:** Special agencies and/or lawyers are needed to apply for naturalization.

**Fact:** Most people do not need to hire special agents or lawyers, who often charge exorbitant fees. For official information, forms and step-by-step guides, visit the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website, [www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov). You can do it yourself, and all by U.S. mail.

**Myth:** Dual citizenship is not possible.

**Facts:** Although the oath taken does include a renouncing of any other citizenship, the United States allows its citizens to maintain dual citizenships with many countries.

**Myth:** It costs thousands to apply.

**Fact:** The total cost is \$675, payable by money order to Department of Homeland Security.

For me, becoming a full-fledged citizen was a practical and defining step in establishing my life in this country. One of my first acts was to register to vote in the presidential election occurring a few months after I took the oath. I have been diligent in voting ever since and treasure my contribution to our thriving democracy.

Like me, there are millions of new Americans who should avail themselves of this precious opportunity.

### ABOUT THE WRITER

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