

Delays are a new tactic against legal immigrants, advocates say

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Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., suggested a political motivation to keep applicants for citizenship from completing applications was driving Trump administration policies.

The Trump administration is facing accusations that it's cutting off pathways to citizenship for long-term residents of the United States.

A report by the Partnership for New Americans released Monday, said the backlog of pending naturalization cases surged to 729,400 in the first quarter of fiscal 2018, up 87 percent from 388,832 applications two years earlier.

Further, the amount of time a pending application takes has increased from six months to over a year, and in some locations as long as 20 months.

The partnership, a research, public policy, and community organizing group, has been critical of Trump's immigration policies.

“With the election coming up this November, and the control of House and Senate hanging in the balance, it’s hard to believe there isn’t a political motivation to keep applicants for citizenship from actually completing their applications,” said Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., who joined the partnership on a conference call with news media to unveil the report.

Lofgren acknowledged there was a large increase in citizenship applications in the months following the election of Donald Trump.

"I don't think that's a surprise," she said. "If you listen to Trump's rhetoric people felt the need to protect themselves."

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services spokesman Michael Bars called the report "dishonest."

"The current pending workload does not equate to a backlog — it's a statistic used in the USCIS report to include every application for naturalization filed including those filed in recent days and weeks — and is being inaccurately portrayed as evidence of delays," Bars said in a statement Monday.

Reports: Denaturalization explored

Meanwhile, reports suggest the Trump administration has begun exploring ways to denaturalize already-naturalized U.S. citizens.

The Associated Press reported in June that Citizenship and Immigration Services had hired “several dozen” lawyers and officers to review the cases of people who had misrepresented themselves on applications for green cards, and later citizenship.

Mae Ngai, a Columbia University history professor, said the U.S. government last worked to denaturalize citizens during the McCarthy era, though the government has routinely followed up on cases of fraud that are referred to it.

In the 1950s, Sen. Joe McCarthy, R-Wis., claimed large numbers of Communists had infiltrated the U.S. State Department, and conducted hearings in which he baselessly accused people of communist subversion.

If a naturalized citizen is found to have committed fraud — such as failure to acknowledge a criminal conviction, membership in a terrorist group or dishonorable discharge from military service — the person could lose citizenship.

“It’s easy not to focus on an issue of naturalization,” Lofgren said. “But we need to do so.”

As the administration reduces unauthorized immigration and reduces legal immigration — such as attempts to make hundreds of thousands of young people protected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program or taking away Temporary Protected Status to longstanding immigrant groups — the backlog in naturalization is one more way legal immigration is being challenged.

“These policies will increase the undocumented population by about 20 percent by the time of the end of the first term of this administration,” said Peter Schey, president of the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law.

The application backlog in Arizona increased more than it did nationally, spiking 129 percent, from 6,307 pending applications in the first quarter of fiscal 2016, to 14,445 pending applications in the first quarter of fiscal 2018.

At a naturalization ceremony held at the South Mountain Community College on the Fourth of July, 231 people from 43 countries gained citizenship. Some came from Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Venezuela, countries that had been subject to Trump's so-called travel bans.

“I did know it was going to take a while,” said Elizabeth Hernandez, who was among the newly minted citizens. “I’m very happy I get to vote, that’s important to me.”

Hernandez's application took 13 months. She was originally from Mexico and spent 37 years in the United States before deciding to apply for citizenship. Her mother, Gloria, became a citizen in 1999, and said the process was closer to six months.