

Immigration Timelines: Category by Category

A comprehensive guide from EB5 Attorneys

Immigration timelines range from under a year for the fastest categories to over two decades for the most backlogged. The total time from initial filing to green card depends on the immigration category, country of birth, filing location, case complexity, and whether a visa backlog exists. This guide provides realistic timeline ranges for every major immigration category as of April 2026, based on published USCIS processing times, Visa Bulletin data, and practitioner experience.

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Family Based Immigration Timelines

Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens (spouses, parents, unmarried children under 21): 12 to 24 months total. No visa backlog. I 130 processing (5 to 12 months) plus adjustment of status or consular processing (6 to 14 months). Concurrent filing of I 130 and I 485 can compress the timeline to 12 to 18 months.

F1 (unmarried adult children of U.S. citizens): varies by country. Most countries: 7 to 10 years. Mexico: 20+ years. Philippines: 10+ years.

F2A (spouses and minor children of LPRs): most countries: 2 to 4 years. Mexico: 2 to 5 years.

F2B (unmarried adult children of LPRs): most countries: 6 to 10 years. Mexico: 20+ years. Philippines: 10+ years.

F3 (married adult children of U.S. citizens): most countries: 10 to 15 years. Mexico: 20+ years. Philippines: 20+ years.

F4 (siblings of adult U.S. citizens): most countries: 12 to 15 years. Mexico: 20+ years. Philippines: 22+ years.

These ranges include the visa backlog wait time plus USCIS/consular processing. The visa backlog portion is determined by the monthly Visa Bulletin and changes as dates advance or retrogress.

Employment Based Immigration Timelines

EB 1A (extraordinary ability, self petition): most countries: 12 to 18 months (no backlog). India: 2 to 3 years (moderate backlog). China: 2 to 3 years. Premium processing available for I 140 (15 business days).

EB 1B (outstanding professors/researchers): similar to EB 1A timelines. Requires employer sponsorship but no PERM.

EB 1C (multinational managers/executives): most countries: 18 to 24 months. India and China: 2 to 4 years. Requires employer sponsorship but no PERM.

EB 2 (advanced degree/exceptional ability): most countries without PERM backlog: 2 to 4 years total. India: 10+ years due to per country visa backlog. China: 3 to 5 years. Timeline includes PERM (6 to 18 months) + I 140 (6 to 12 months or 15 business days with premium) + visa backlog wait + I 485 (8 to 24 months).

EB 2 NIW (National Interest Waiver, self petition): most countries: 18 to 30 months (no PERM required). India: 10+ years (same visa backlog as regular EB 2). The NIW advantage is skipping PERM, not the visa queue.

EB 3 (skilled workers/professionals): most countries: 2 to 5 years. India: 10+ years. China: 3 to 5 years.

EB 4 (special immigrants): most countries: 1 to 3 years. Some categories (religious workers) have annual caps that create waits.

EB 5 (investors): most countries (set aside categories: rural, high unemployment, infrastructure): 2 to 5 years total (I 526E processing + AOS). Set aside categories have been current since March 2022. China (unreserved category): 8+ years due to per country backlog. India (unreserved): 3 to 5 years and growing.

Humanitarian and Special Category Timelines

Asylum (affirmative, filed with USCIS): initial interview typically scheduled within 6 to 12 months of filing. If approved, the applicant receives asylum status and may apply for a green card after one year. If not approved at the interview stage, the case is referred to immigration court, adding years to the timeline.

Asylum (defensive, in immigration court): timeline depends on the court backlog. Detained cases may be resolved in weeks to months. Non detained cases: 1 to 5 years to merits hearing, depending on court location.

Asylum to green card: one year after asylum grant, the asylee files I 485 (no filing fee). Processing: 6 to 18 months. Total from asylum grant to green card: approximately 18 to 30 months.

Refugee to green card: one year after admission as a refugee, file I 485 (no filing fee). Similar processing timeline to asylum adjustment.

TPS to green card: TPS itself does not lead to a green card. A TPS holder must qualify independently through a family or employment based petition. If the TPS holder entered lawfully and has an approved I 130 or I 140 with a current priority date, they may adjust status.

Diversity Visa: registration in October, selection notification in May of the following year, visa processing within the fiscal year. Total: approximately 10 to 14 months from registration to entry as LPR, if selected and processed in time.

U visa (crime victims): current I 918 processing backlog exceeds 5 years for initial review. After U visa approval, the applicant waits three years before applying for adjustment to LPR status. Total: potentially 8 to 12 years from filing to green card.

Naturalization Timelines

After obtaining a green card, the path to U.S. citizenship (naturalization) has its own timeline:

Standard naturalization (INA section 316): eligible after 5 years as an LPR. May file N 400 90 days early (at 4 years and 9 months). USCIS processing for N 400: 6 to 18 months depending on field office. Total from green card to citizenship: approximately 5.5 to 7 years.

Three year rule for spouses of U.S. citizens (INA section 319): eligible after 3 years as an LPR if married to and living with a U.S. citizen spouse for those 3 years. May file 90 days early. Total: approximately 3.5 to 5 years from green card to citizenship.

Military naturalization (INA section 328/329): reduced or eliminated residence requirements for qualifying service members. Processing can be completed in months rather than years.

The naturalization interview includes an English language test and a civics test (10 questions from a pool of 100, must answer 6 correctly). Applicants who fail either test receive one additional opportunity within 60 to 90 days.

Factors That Extend or Shorten Timelines

Several factors can significantly affect actual processing times relative to published estimates:

Requests for Evidence (RFEs): an RFE adds 3 to 12 months depending on the complexity of the evidence requested and the adjudicating officer's workload after receiving the response.

Security background check delays: FBI name checks can take weeks or months. Common names may trigger false positives requiring additional investigation.

Consular appointment availability: interview wait times at U.S. embassies and consulates vary widely. Some consulates schedule interviews within weeks of documentary completion; others have waits of 6+ months.

Premium processing: available for I 140, I 526E, I 129, I 539, and certain I 765 categories.

Guarantees a USCIS response (not approval) within the stated timeframe.

Concurrent filing: filing I 130 + I 485 or I 140 + I 485 simultaneously when eligible saves months by running processing in parallel.

Administrative Appeals Office (AAO) review: if a case is denied and appealed to the AAO, add 6 to 18 months for the appeal decision.

Federal court litigation: mandamus suits and petitions for review add months to years, though they often result in case adjudication before trial.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the fastest way to get a green card?

The fastest pathway is as an immediate relative of a U.S. citizen (spouse, parent, or unmarried child under 21), which typically takes 12 to 18 months with concurrent filing. Among employment based categories, EB 1A with premium processing and no backlog can be completed in under 12 months for applicants from most countries. EB 5 in set aside categories (rural, high unemployment) is also relatively fast at 2 to 4 years for countries without unreserved backlogs.

2. Why does it take so long for Indian applicants?

India generates more demand for employment based green cards than any other single country, but INA section 202 limits each country to approximately 7% of total employment based visas. This creates a structural mismatch between supply and demand. The result is that Indian born EB 2 and EB 3 applicants face backlogs of 10+ years, while applicants from countries with lower demand receive green cards in 2 to 4 years. The EB 5 set aside categories offer an alternative path without per country limits.

3. Can I speed up my immigration case?

Options for acceleration include: premium processing (available for I 140, I 526E, I 129, I 539, and certain I 765 categories); concurrent filing of the petition and I 485 when eligible; expedite requests based on qualifying circumstances (severe financial loss, humanitarian reasons); congressional inquiries; and mandamus lawsuits for unreasonable delays. The most effective strategy is filing a complete, well documented application that minimizes the likelihood of RFEs.

4. How do I know when my priority date will be current?

Check the monthly Visa Bulletin at travel.state.gov and compare the cutoff date for your category and country to your priority date. Historical data on how quickly dates advance for each category can help project when your date may become current, but projections are inherently uncertain because they depend on filing rates, visa number availability, and State Department allocation decisions. The eb5status.com visa bulletin page provides historical trend data for EB 5 categories.

5. Does the green card timeline include the time to become a citizen?

No. Green card processing timelines measure the time from initial petition filing to receipt of permanent resident status. Citizenship (naturalization) requires an additional 5 years as an LPR (or 3 years for spouses of U.S. citizens), plus 6 to 18 months for N 400 processing. The total time from initial petition to citizenship can be substantial, particularly for applicants in backlogged categories.

6. What happens if my case takes longer than the posted processing time?

If your case exceeds the outer range of the published processing time for your form type and filing location, you can submit an inquiry to USCIS through their Contact Center (1 800 375 5283), schedule an InfoPass appointment at your local field office, or request assistance from your congressional representative. If the delay is prolonged and USCIS provides no adequate response, you may consult an attorney about filing a mandamus action in federal court to compel adjudication.

Disclaimer: This guide is provided for general informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. Every immigration case is unique. Consult a qualified immigration attorney for advice specific to your circumstances.

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Source: <https://eb5attorneys.com/guides/immigration-process-timeline>