

# The millions of Americans who are ineligible to be president are excluded from an important part of the American Dream.



*More than 20 million Americans are ineligible to become president because they were not born in the United States and obtained citizenship by naturalization. [Valere Gaspard](#) looks at the “tiers” of citizenship that Article II of the US Constitution creates by requiring the president to be a “natural born citizen”, writing that this restriction makes the US an outlier compared to most other liberal democracies which do not use a hierarchy of citizenship in determining eligibility for elected or appointed leaders.*

The American Dream is the idea that regardless of where you were born and the circumstances, if you work hard, you can be successful in the United States. Dreaming of becoming President is the [embodiment](#) of this idea for many Americans. As President Ronald Reagan said: “[everyone wants their dreams to come true... And America, above all places, gives us the freedom to do that, the freedom to reach out and make our dreams come true](#)”.

However, over [20 million American citizens](#) are excluded from this part of the American Dream if they would like to become President, because one must be a [natural-born citizen of the United States](#) to do so. In short, if you are a citizen of the United States but were not born there (a naturalized citizen) you are not eligible to be its [Head of Government and Head of State](#). Since there [are more immigrants in the United States than any other country in the world](#), this requirement to become President touches on the very relationship between candidacy and citizenship: why is someone who was born outside of the United States (but who holds citizenship) not eligible to become its President?

## Tiers of US citizenship

More specifically, why is it acceptable for this rule in [Article II of the American constitution](#) to tacitly create tiers of citizenship in the United States? Let’s start by going to the history books of 1787. At the time, John Jay (the would be first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court) wrote to George Washington about providing “[a strong check to the admission of Foreigners into the administration of our national Government](#)”. This may have been more understandable at the time due to general fear of foreign influence and [rumours of people allegedly designing a monarchy in the United States in secret that would be ruled by a foreign power](#). However, this rule – which assumes that loyalty is rooted in one’s birthplace – is more difficult to justify 235 years later.

Despite present day concerns of foreign interference (especially during federal elections), potential foreign threats are primarily related [to how foreign actors can undermine public trust in the electoral system or spread inaccurate information](#); not about if a foreign power could rule the United States from the office of the President. Therefore, justifying the natural-born citizen rule based on threats of foreign influence is likely an outdated explanation, especially when considering how advanced the country’s security infrastructure is.

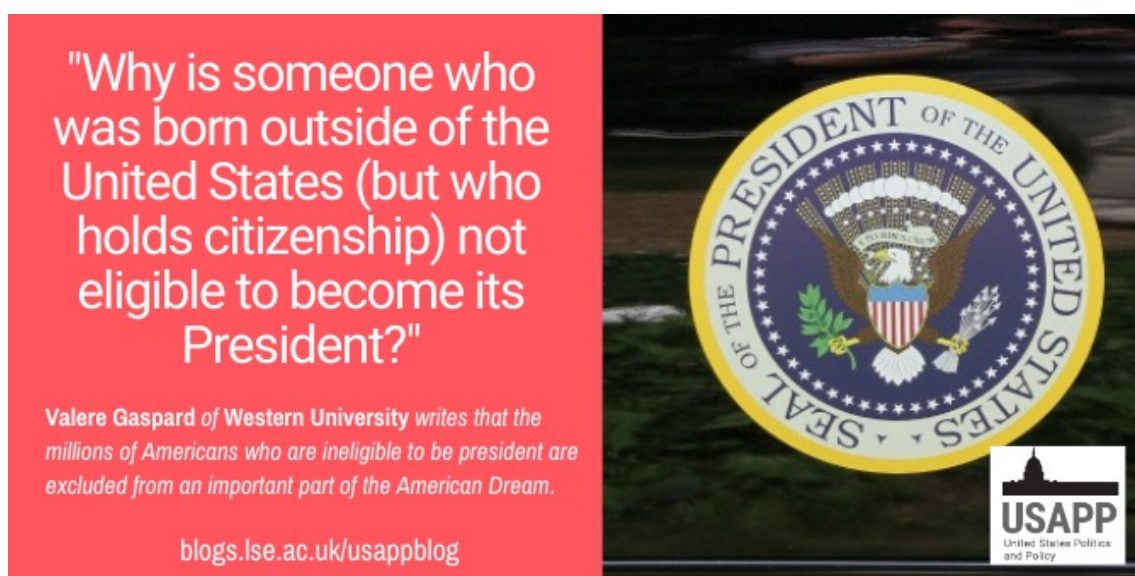
## The US is an outlier among the G7

Furthermore, while it could be easily argued that the natural-born rule [discriminates against naturalized citizens, that other political offices in the United States do not have being a natural-born citizen as a requirement](#), or that there are [gray areas for what it means to be a natural-born citizen](#), one can also look to other democratic countries to demonstrate that this rule is an anomaly.

Out of the G7 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States), the United States is the only of these wealthy democracies with the natural-born citizen requirement to run as a candidate in an election to be the Head of Government or Head of State. This shows that out of the world’s leading liberal democracies, the United States is an outlier regarding its candidacy rules for running for one of the highest positions in the country.

G7 Country	Requirements to run as Head of Government	Requirements to run as Head of State
Canada	<b>Prime Minister:</b> <a href="#">be a Canadian citizen and be 18 years old on election day.</a>	<b>Governor General:</b> <a href="#">Appointed by The Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister.</a>
France	<b>Prime Minister:</b> <a href="#">Appointed by the President.</a>	<b>President:</b> <a href="#">be a French citizen that is 18 years old, eligible to vote, and is not subject to any disqualifications under the law.</a>
Germany	<b>Chancellor:</b> <a href="#">Elected by the Bundestag and must receive the votes of an absolute majority of the Members.</a>	<b>President:</b> <a href="#">any German who is entitled to vote in Bundestag elections and has attained the age of forty may be elected.</a>
Italy	<b>Prime Minister:</b> <a href="#">Appointed by the President.</a>	<b>President:</b> <a href="#">be an Italian citizen that is 50 years old and enjoys their political and civil rights.</a>
Japan	<b>Prime Minister:</b> <a href="#">Appointed by the Emperor as designated by the Diet (must be a Japanese national and at least 25 years old).</a>	<b>Emperor of Japan:</b> <a href="#">Dynastic and succeeded to in accordance with the Imperial House Law passed by the Diet.</a>
United Kingdom	<b>Prime Minister:</b> <a href="#">be a British citizen or citizen of a Commonwealth country or the Republic of Ireland and must be over 18 years of age.</a>	<b>British Monarch:</b> <a href="#">Succession to the throne.</a>
United States	<b>President:</b> <a href="#">Must be a natural-born citizen of the United States, be a resident for 14 years, and be at least 35 years old.</a>	<b>President:</b> <a href="#">Must be a natural-born citizen of the United States, be a resident for 14 years, and be at least 35 years old.</a>

Looking at the different criteria of the G7 countries, while the United States has a natural-born citizen requirement to be President, it is at least an elected position. Compare this with the various appointment processes for the positions in five out of the seven countries.



*"Presidential Seal" (CC BY 2.0) by ahisgett*

Although the comparison of 'elected vs. appointment' may initially be a compelling argument, it is important to acknowledge that it misses a key point: the appointment processes in the other countries do not create a hierarchy of citizens within their own state.

Simply put, in the United States, a naturalized citizen is considered to be "less" of citizen and not eligible to run for President; for the sole reason of being born outside of the country. If they moved to a different G7 country and earned a citizenship there, they would hold the same rights as any natural-born citizen of that country to become its Head of Government or Head of State (for those countries which are not constitutional monarchies).

## How all Americans could become eligible to be president

While this reality in the United States is discouraging for many naturalized citizens, there is still hope for potential changes. The easiest of changes would be for the Supreme Court to clarify some of the gray areas around what it means to be a natural-born citizen. One of these is ruling on whether a [person born outside of the United States whose parents are both American citizens qualifies as a natural-born citizen](#). For example, in the latest of many debates over potential presidential candidates' eligibility to become president, in 2016 there were discussions about whether [Senator Ted Cruz](#) was eligible, because he was born in Canada to a US-citizen mother and a Cuban US-resident father, but was naturalized at birth by a statute provided by Congress.

A more challenging change would be to allow all American citizens to run for President, [since it would likely require a constitutional amendment](#). Additionally, amending the constitution would require either a [joint resolution that is passed by a two-thirds vote or have applications from two-thirds of the state legislature that would have Congress call a convention in response](#). Although a difficult feat, and one which would require a substantial national campaign, it is one worth pursuing to make sure that all citizens – both natural-born and naturalized – hold the same rights and opportunities in the United States.

Until naturalized American citizens gain the ability to run for President, the freedom Reagan spoke of does not apply equally to all American citizens. Unfortunately, for any who wish to run for President, they will have to wake up from the American Dream.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.*

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