**Arnold Schwarzenegger Recalls Lessons From 25 Years as a U.S. Citizen—Learn English, Participate in Politics, and Give Back**

Advice for immigrants: Learn English, participate in politics, give back to the country.



By [Arnold Schwarzenegger](http://www.usnews.com/topics/author/arnold_schwarzenegger_)Sept. 17, 2008 | 10:51 a.m. EDT+ More

Twenty-five years ago this week, I became a United States citizen. I will always remember Sept. 16, 1983, as one of the greatest days of my life.

Like other newcomers to this country, I came here for my shot at the American Dream. Growing up in a small village in Austria, where if I worked hard I might be fortunate enough to follow in my father's footsteps and become a policeman, I knew America was the Promised Land. It was the place to go if you wanted your dreams to come true.

With hard work and determination, and because the American people were so generous and welcoming, I have succeeded beyond my wildest imagination.

I understand the immigrant yearning for freedom and opportunity. But I also believe immigrants have a responsibility to America as well. It is not enough to come here and take the best this nation has to offer without giving something back. To truly succeed as an American citizen, you have to do more.

First, learn the English language and blend into the American culture, even as you honor and remain proud of your own heritage. I don't say learn the language out of any sense of etiquette or duty. Do it so you can participate fully in the life of the nation and make the most of living in this country.

I came here in 1968 speaking only a little English. To make it in business and Hollywood, I knew I had to take English lessons, speech lessons, accent-removal lessons—anything to improve my chances of success. And I happily did it all.

Second, participate in the political process. In Austria, I was surrounded by countries like Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia where citizens did not have the right to vote. So I have always been keenly aware that this right should not be taken for granted. But too many Americans do.

Democracy is not a spectator sport. To keep it strong and to effect real change, you have to be involved. Learn about some of the sacrifices Americans have made over the years to build and preserve the greatest democracy in history. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have died defending freedom. If you visit just one Civil War battlefield or learn about World War II, it's hard to take for granted the right to vote.

Finally, give something back. Many immigrants come from cultures where service is not stressed. I was no different. In fact, it was not until I met my wife, Maria, and her parents, Sargent and Eunice Kennedy Shriver, that I discovered the true value of service.

They started so many programs that helped millions of people, from Special Olympics to the Peace Corps, Job Corps, and Head Start. Before I knew it, I was spending time with kids from the Special Olympics. That made me feel so good, I was soon working in after-school programs to give kids safe choices when the bell rang at the end of the day. I became chairman of the President's Council on Fitness and Sports and traveled around the nation talking to students about staying healthy by exercising and eating right.

I had the ultimate opportunity to give something back to California when I was elected governor in 2003. To promote service around our state and nation, I created the first cabinet-level position for service and volunteering, calling on the next president and other governors to do the same.

There are so many great immigrants who have performed outstanding public service for this nation that I could fill this entire column with a list of their names. Madeleine Albright and Henry Kissinger became great secretaries of state. Andrew Grove built Intel into a high-tech powerhouse. Max Frankel moved to America from Germany and went on to run the *New York Times* *.* Albert Einstein also came here from Germany. The list goes on and on.

These were immigrants who came here for the American Dream, but they were not looking for handouts. They did not ask only what they could get from their new country. They also asked what they could give to it.

Not everyone can become Albert Einstein, but as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Anybody can be great, because anybody can serve." Pitch in a few hours every week at a soup kitchen, clean up a local park or riverbed, mentor a child, or coach a youth sports team. Give something back, and not only will you lift up others, but you will lift yourself up, too. When you do these things, you will learn what I learned when I became a citizen: Once you're in, other than being able to run for president, you have all the same rights as descendants of those who came here on the Mayflower.

There is no second-tier citizenship. You are an American, period. With hard work, learning English, and getting involved, there is no limit on what you can achieve.

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