Citizenship over the years

1840–1948
New Zealanders had the status of British subjects.

1844 - Naturalisation in New Zealand began – those naturalised became British subjects. Those who were not British subjects were known as ‘aliens’.

1866
‘Alien’ women married to British subjects (including men who were naturalised British subjects) became British subjects themselves. The Aliens Act discouraged some immigrants from becoming naturalised citizens by imposing a £1 naturalisation fee. Chinese people had to continue to pay this fee after it was abolished for all other applicants in the 1890s. Later, the poll tax discriminated further against Chinese. Chinese people became denied naturalisation (or even permanent residence) between 1908 and 1951. The Aliens Acts of 1866 and 1870 permitted the subjects of ‘friendly States’ to hold personal property and real estate under the same conditions as British subjects.

1882
Children of naturalised fathers or naturalised widows who had accompanied them to New Zealand became automatically naturalised, unless they were Chinese.

1901
The Cook Islands and Niue both became New Zealand territory; their inhabitants were already British subjects.

1914–1918
During the First World War, there was no naturalisation.

1914
Western Samoa came under New Zealand control.

1916
Tokelauans became British subjects.

1917
During and immediately after the First World War all adult ‘aliens’ had to register with the police. Some 9,000 had registered by 1921.

1920
New Zealand administered Western Samoa from this year under a League of Nations mandate.

1923
The criteria for citizenship took on a more modern appearance: applications for naturalisation could be made to the Minister of Internal Affairs by those of ‘good character’ who had lived in New Zealand for at least three years, had ‘an adequate knowledge of the English language’, and did not suffer from any ‘disability’.

1923
British Nationality and Status of Aliens (in New Zealand) Act allowed naturalisation of residents of Western Samoa without the English language requirement.

1926
‘Aliens’ gained the right to vote – but not to stand as candidates – in local authority elections.

1935
‘Alien’ women were no longer automatically naturalised along with their husbands, but had to make their own statutory declaration. British women whose husbands took up another nationality could retain the rights (and after 1946, the legal status) of British citizens. The poll tax was abolished in practice and by law in 1944.

1939–45
Second World War. ‘Aliens’ were again required to register with the police. Naturalisation suspended for the duration of the war, except for ‘aliens’ serving in the armed forces.

1948
Tokelau was formally annexed by New Zealand. Tokelauans along with Cook Islanders and Niueans were New Zealand citizens from 1 January 1949.

The Aliens Act bans ‘aliens’ from owning shares in New Zealand-registered ships, holding parliamentary office, or voting in parliamentary elections. They could be deported if convicted of any offence punishable by more than a year’s imprisonment, or if it was ‘not conducive to the public good’ that they remain in the country. ‘Aliens’ could not be admitted as barristers or solicitors, or as members of some other professional bodies. Parts of the Act remained in force until 1977.

New Zealand citizenship was established by law in 1948, but citizens were also legally ‘British subjects’.

1948–1973
The British Nationality and New Zealand Citizenship Act 1948 gave New Zealand citizenship to all current New Zealand residents who had been either born or naturalised as British subjects. Almost all children subsequently born in New Zealand would become New Zealand citizens. New residents who were citizens of the British Commonwealth or Ireland could become New Zealand citizens simply by registering.
1955
The modern form of citizenship ceremony was introduced – with groups of new citizens publicly swearing or affirming allegiance. At first new citizens from countries where Queen Elizabeth was the head of state did not have to attend ceremonies.

1959
The registration of Commonwealth citizens as New Zealand citizens was tightened: the criteria for registration became basically the same as for naturalisation.

1962
Western Samoa became independent.

1974
The words ‘British subject’ were removed from new passports.

1975
All people ‘ordinarily resident in New Zealand’ were permitted to vote in general elections, but only citizens were able to stand as candidates (as now).

1977
‘Naturalisation’ became known as ‘citizenship by grant’. The Citizenship Act 1977 imposed the same requirements on all people who applied for citizenship by grant regarding length of residence in New Zealand, character, and knowledge of the English language. The distinction between Commonwealth and foreign citizens was replaced by one between New Zealanders and foreigners. Resident ‘aliens’ were no longer required to register with the police, and to notify changes in their circumstances.

1982
The Privy Council reinterpreted the 1923 and 1928 British Nationality and Status of Aliens (in New Zealand) Acts and ruled that all Western Samoans born between 1924 and 1948 were British subjects. Therefore, in 1949 they and their descendants (more than 100,000 living people) had become New Zealand citizens. New Zealand was reluctant to give citizenship to almost all Western Samoans, as the Privy Council ruling required. The New Zealand and Western Samoan governments negotiated a compromise. The Citizenship (Western Samoa) Act 1982 overturned the effect of the Privy Council ruling. But all Western Samoan citizens who were in New Zealand on 14 September 1982, and those subsequently granted permanent residence, became entitled to New Zealand citizenship.

1983
New Zealand citizens ceased legally to be ‘British subjects’.

1992
From this year immigrants seeking citizenship had to prove their intention to remain ordinarily resident in New Zealand.

1996
From this year all citizens by grant were required to attend a public ceremony unless in special circumstances. Before, those from countries with the same head of State as New Zealand were not required to attend public ceremonies.

2005 – 2010
In 2005, the law was changed to limit citizenship by birth to people born here with at least one parent who is entitled to live in New Zealand indefinitely. Before, in almost all cases, everyone born in New Zealand was a citizen. This applied from January 1 2006.

In 2005 the Citizenship Act 1977 was amended to:
• ensure recent and serious criminal convictions would, except in exceptional circumstances, prevent the granting of citizenship. (s9A)
• make clear that public citizenship ceremonies are the usual practice. s11(2).
• change the old residence requirement from three years ‘ordinary residence’ to the current five year presence requirement. This also removed the reduced residence period for spouses of citizens. Transition arrangements brought this completely into force in 2010.