

Naturalized immigrants more politically integrated citizens, research shows

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Research by Stanford political scientist Jens Hainmueller shows that naturalization, or the legal process by which immigrants acquire citizenship, helps them become more socially and politically integrated into their new country. In this photo, people are receiving U.S. citizenship. Credit: National Park Service

Naturalization acts as a catalyst that builds greater social and political integration for immigrants and their new countries, according to Stanford research.

Heated debate surrounds the political integration of [immigrants](#) and their access to citizenship. But unlike welfare and tax policy, virtually no systematic data exists to causally examine policies that affect immigrants, said Stanford political scientist Jens Hainmueller.

A new study by Hainmueller in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences shows how citizenship can strengthen these social and political bonds. His research focused on Switzerland, which currently has a very high number of immigrants relative to population size, with many of them marginalized socially and politically.

As Hainmueller noted, one in four residents of Switzerland is a foreigner, and a considerable anti-immigration sentiment exists in the country.

"Understanding the effect of naturalization on long-term integration of immigrants is an important question in light of these problems," said Hainmueller, co-director of the Immigration and Integration Policy Lab and faculty affiliate of the The Europe Center.

Impact of citizenship

To conduct this study, Hainmueller and his collaborators used a natural experiment in Switzerland that allowed them to uniquely isolate the effect of naturalization. Between 1970 and 2003, Swiss residents decided on individual naturalization requests based on secret ballot referendums, a practice shown to be highly discriminatory and no longer used. Applicants had to win at least 50 percent of "yes" votes to receive citizenship.

Hainmueller compared applicants who barely got accepted to those who were barely rejected. All applicants had similar characteristics, including educational background, financial stability and language skills. The difference between them was just a few votes, he said.

"It was luck if they got it or not," said Hainmueller, "similar to random assignment in a randomized experiment."

Nearly 15 years later, researchers tracked down the immigrants who faced these votes. It took almost two years to conduct over 750 personal interviews – they got a 45 percent response rate. According to the results, those who became citizens were integrated much better socially and politically, according to Hainmueller.

To determine political integration, Hainmueller asked the study participants questions regarding information on the current president and if they voted. Immigrants who gained citizenship voted at the same rate as rooted Swiss natives. They also had the same political knowledge as rooted natives, if not more.

Hainmueller and his team also asked the immigrants a series of social questions. Compared to immigrants who did not earn citizenship, those who were naturalized were more likely to read the Swiss newspaper and not a foreign newspaper. Naturalized immigrants were also more likely to express the desire to stay in Switzerland long term.

Results from the study indicate that more socially marginalized groups, such as immigrants from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia, or those with less education, benefited the most from naturalization.

"This is what you would hope," said Duncan Lawrence, executive director of the Immigration and Integration Policy Lab. "Those groups that are more negatively affected benefit the most from naturalization."

Though this study did not examine why naturalization increased political integration, Hainmueller suggests it is related to becoming a more active participant in the democratic process.

He and his colleagues plan to expand this work to measure the impact of naturalization in other European countries and the United States.

Immigrants in America

In recent decades, immigration has increased across Western countries. In 2013, 41.3 million immigrants lived in the United States. In September, the Obama administration announced the Stand Stronger Citizenship Awareness Campaign, which is a new campaign that encourages the 8.8 million eligible immigrants to take steps toward [citizenship](#).

"But nobody really knows what the impact of naturalization is in the United States because immigrants self-select into becoming citizens. If you simply compare naturalized and non-naturalized immigrants as most studies do, it is like comparing apples and oranges," said Hainmueller.

To answer these questions further, Hainmueller and his team have designed a study to evaluate the impact of naturalization on immigrants in the United States. He plans to set up a lottery in which people can win a fee voucher to cover the cost of application fees (\$680), which provides a financial encouragement to apply. Then he can make comparisons between those who won the lottery and became naturalized to those who did not.

The Immigration Lab is looking at a whole array of policies and programs that affect various types of immigrants, including refugees, [undocumented immigrants](#) and long-term residents. The next step is systematically analyzing the economic impact of naturalization, said

Hainmueller. He hopes this work can provide evidence to inform policymakers, practitioners and advocates leading to more evidence-based policy-making.

In Switzerland, immigrants have to wait 12 years to become naturalized. "Lowering the stringent residency requirements might be beneficial to realize the full integration benefits from naturalization," said Hainmueller.

More information: Jens Hainmueller et al. Naturalization fosters the long-term political integration of immigrants, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2015). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1418794112](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1418794112)

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