

Swantje Falcke

Naturalization as a Catalyst for Integration: A Heterogeneous Picture

In 2018, 672,270 people were naturalized in the EU-27 countries (Eurostat 2020). If one looks at the naturalization rate, the number of naturalizations per 100 foreign residents, the variation within Europe becomes clear. With 7.2 naturalizations per 100 foreign residents, the naturalization rate was in 2018 highest in Sweden and lowest in Estonia with 0.4 percent. Germany is below the European average with 1.2 naturalizations per 100 foreign residents.

Naturalization is not only relevant to the integration process, but is also the foundation of a democratic society, since citizens can play the most active role in shaping it. This also plays an important role in Germany, where the foreign population in 2019 was 11.2 million, a third of whom (4.2 million) have lived in Germany for more than 15 years (Destatis 2019).

NATURALIZATION AND INTEGRATION

Integration is a broad term. This paper follows the definition of Penninx (2003), which describes integration as a process where immigrants are accepted in a society, both as individuals and as groups. In this sense, integration is a process without a clear end point, which is influenced by immigrants as well as by society and institutions in the destination countries.

Naturalization can have a positive effect on the integration of immigrants, since the acquisition of citizenship is linked to unlimited residence and voting rights, and also because naturalization is a signal that immigrants see their future in the country in which they live (Bloemraad 2017).

Integration can refer to different areas. The most well-researched aspects regarding naturalization are socio-economic integration, especially work and income, and political participation.

In view of the fact that immigrants often experience disadvantages in the labor market, naturalization represents a potential means of mitigating these disadvantages. With the acquisition of citizenship, immigrants gain access to certain jobs in the public sector and the employer's costs (e.g., checking work permits) are reduced. Obtaining citizenship can also have an impact on political participation. Naturalization often provides access to rights that are reserved exclusively for citizens, such as the right to vote in national elections. In addition to voting rights, naturalization can also promote political participation in a broader sense. Citizenship, as the most secure legal status, can also encourage immigrants to become politically active.

When empirically addressing the question of whether naturalization influences integration, there are certain methodological challenges because the relationship is reciprocal: not only can naturalization influence integration, but integration could also have an impact on the likelihood of naturalization. Studies with long-term data or quasi-experimental designs, which have become increasingly common in recent years, can investigate the effect of naturalization on integration.



Swantje Falcke

is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Political Science at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Maastricht.

NATURALIZATION AS A CONTEXT-DEPENDENT CATALYST

Empirical studies show that such positive effects of naturalization on integration can indeed be observed. However, these effects are not the same for all immigrants.

On the one hand, the timing of naturalization is important. The sooner immigrants receive citizenship after arrival in the destination country, the stronger the effect of naturalization on integration. Studies in the Netherlands and Germany have shown that naturalization has a positive effect on the labor market integration of immigrants, and that this effect is greater if citizenship is obtained relatively quickly after migration (Gathmann and Keller 2017; Peters, Vink and Schmeets 2018). In the Netherlands, immigrants can usually apply for Dutch citizenship after five years. Peters et al. (2018) show that in the Netherlands, the likelihood of employment for immigrants increases by 24 percent for men and 36 percent for women if they acquire Dutch citizenship after five years. If immigrants acquire citizenship after more than eight years, the positive effect decreases to 10 percent. Studies in Switzerland have found similar results with regard to social integration (Hainmueller et al. 2017).

On the other hand, the impact naturalization has on integration depends on where one comes from. Immigrant groups that have the highest incentive to acquire citizenship of the destination country because of the situation in their country of origin or destination, also experience a stronger positive effect of naturalization on integration. Peters et al. (2020), who examined the effects of naturalization on the income of immigrants in the Netherlands, show that naturalization has a strong positive effect, especially

for immigrants from less-developed countries. The positive effect of naturalization on socio-economic integration may also be stronger for immigrants from countries of origin, who are more likely to experience discrimination (Helgertz, Bevelander and Tegunimataka 2014; Hainmueller et al. 2017, Hainmueller et al. 2019). Hainmueller et al. (2019) show that acquiring Swiss citizenship increases the annual income of marginalized immigrant groups by USD 5,000. Helgertz et al. (2014), who have examined the effect of naturalization on economic integration in Denmark and Sweden, find that in both countries there is a positive effect of naturalization on the economic integration of immigrants from Asia and Africa, whereas this effect cannot be observed for other immigrant groups. The fact that the same effect can be observed in Denmark and Sweden, two countries with quite different naturalization laws, leads the researchers to conclude that restrictive naturalization laws do not promote the economic integration of immigrants.

A PASSPORT IS NOT A PANACEA—BUT IT CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

Political debates on naturalization and integration are often based on political beliefs rather than facts. The question whether naturalization is seen as a reward for successful integration or as part of the integration process is then often the result of those political beliefs. Given the naturalization requirements in all European countries, obtaining a passport always requires a certain amount of preparation and investment. Naturalization is a catalyst if it has a positive impact on the integration process. Naturalization is seen as a reward for successful integration by those who fear that obtaining citizenship of a country demotivates immigrants to integrate further in the destination country. Following this line of argumentation,

one would expect no, or even a negative, effect of naturalization on integration.

While the empirical results on the impact of naturalization on integration show a mixed picture, one thing is clear: for certain immigrant groups, naturalization is a catalyst for integration. Furthermore, stricter naturalization requirements are associated with both lower naturalization rates and later naturalizations. In short, the passport is not a panacea—but it can make a big difference.

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