these data shows that in five municipalities there are no grounds for concern. In one municipality, however, the rejection rate for applicants from the former Yugoslavia fell below the one for Turkish applicants, contradicting the ranking implied by the model.

Summary
This conclusion has to be taken with a large grain of salt, however. On the one hand, it is based on the assumptions of the model. On the other hand, the new data on rejections have neither been standardized across Switzerland nor otherwise validated. But this model-based approach generally offers many advantages. The model is not limited to the Swiss context and does not require detailed individual data or scrutiny of how this information was processed by the commissions. It also offers an explanation for a generalizable mechanism that can explain the observable rejection pattern. And with richer data about the general characteristics of the applicants, the model would allow for direct comparisons between administrative entities, independently of exogenous shocks. If one wants to drill down in more detail on the question of arbitrary disadvantage in naturalizations, my study should primarily be understood as a call for the standardized compilation and publication of the required data.

Further reading


Time and again, the rising numbers of naturalizations and the federal naturalization policy have been the subject of heated debate in Switzerland. There have been accusations of arbitrary disadvantage against certain groups of foreigners during the naturalization process. My research, however, shows that, given the currently available data, it is devilishly difficult to reach firm conclusions about systematic discrimination.

Switzerland currently naturalizes roughly two percent of its resident foreigners each year, i.e. around 40,000 individuals. This number has approximately quadrupled since 1992, when multiple citizenship was first allowed in this country. This increase has not been entirely uniform; the cantons and municipalities have already been reached at the turn of this century. In international terms, Switzerland is a relatively reluctant naturalizer, with a rate that is below the European average of two-and-a-half percent (see Fig. 1).

The majority of naturalizations granted in Switzerland are so-called ordinary naturalizations. This form of naturalization is primarily a matter for the cantons or municipalities, for without local citizenship it is not possible to gain Swiss citizenship. Although the Confederation carries out security checks on its own, which could prevent the granting of federal citizenship, its process is formal. Formal checks are also carried out at the cantonal and municipal level, for example to determine whether the applicant has resided locally for the required period (which varies widely from one region to another).

The cantonal and municipal Degrees of Strictness

Notably, cantons and municipalities also conduct checks on some less clearly defined aspects that can be lumped together as requirements of integration. On that note, article 14 of the Swiss Citizenship Act refers to social integration and familiarity with the Swiss way of life as elements that can only be judged by the canton.

The crux of this method is that, in Switzerland at the time of the controversial practice of secret ballots on naturalizations, the applicants’ characteristics were literally written down in electoral leaflets. Their study concludes that applicants from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia were severely disadvantaged. In 2003, the Swiss Federal Supreme Court banned this naturalization practice. Ever since, naturalization commissions have had to decide on applications with due regard to the applicants’ privacy. This, though, severely limits the data observable by researchers. These barriers to research are exacerbated by the fact that it is hardly possible to meaningfully capture the section of the naturalization interview that focuses on the applicant’s level of integration.

Switzerland has one of the most restrictive naturalization systems in Europe, with tougher criteria in some cantons and municipalities than in others.

The occasionally high rejection rates do not necessarily imply discrimination.

— Under the current circumstances, naturalizations have a generally positive impact on economic, political, and social integration.

For a more reliable assessment of the presence or absence of discrimination, Swiss-wide standardized data on rejections would be required.

What is meant by...

rejection rate

The number of rejected naturalization applications divided by the number of submitted applications. At national level, only the naturalization rate, i.e. the number of granted applications divided by the number of resident foreigners is compiled.

ordinary naturalization

Naturalizations other than on the basis of descent, marriage, or adoption. The Confederation sets minimum provisions in the Swiss Citizenship Act (BüG). The complete revision of the BüG will come into force on 1 January 2018 and standardizes the naturalization requirements with proper integration criteria. Even so, some discretionary leeway remains for the cantons and municipalities.

federal naturalization practice

Ordinary naturalizations are primarily a matter for the cantons and municipalities. This practice originates from earlier times, when each town was responsible for its own citizens. This meant, for example, that people in need without local citizenship could be sent back to their place of origin. Furthermore, only local citizens had input into local politics.

Messages for Decision-Makers

Granting and obtaining national citizenship are more than just symbolic acts of belonging. Citizenship opens the door to full political and territorial integration in the new country; new citizens can vote and have a permanent right of stay. They also gain pecuniary advantages. Studies from Germany and France suggest that naturalization has a positive impact on wages and access to the labor market. But the benefits are not limited to the new citizens themselves. A recent study concludes that in Switzerland naturalizations foster the political and social integration of the naturalized. In addition, there are direct benefits to the state, with higher wages boosting both tax revenue and funding of the social insurance system.

Discrimination in Naturalization

Given this scope, any accusations of arbitrary disadvantage against certain groups of foreigners weigh heavily, especially since the residence requirements in Switzerland restrict the alternative options available to applicants. What do we actually know about discrimination in naturalization? Generally speaking, very little.

Until recently, naturalization was one of the few uncharted territories remaining on the economic discrimination map. Economic methodology distinguishes between two types of discrimination: statistical (unprejudiced) and malevolent (prejudiced). Over recent decades, an enormous body of knowledge has been compiled on discrimination on the basis of race, religion, or ethnicity in areas such as the labor market, housing, justice, health care, and the area of naturalization has lagged behind, however, because the necessary data are generally not available. A rigorous empirical study would attribute different naturalization outcomes – rejection or granting – to the effects of the differences in applicant characteristics. For higher rejection rates do not necessarily imply discrimination. For example, a particular group of foreigners might fare worse in terms of a characteristic deemed relevant for granting citizenship and therefore be rejected at a higher rate. In Switzerland, for instance, Portuguese applicants could be at a disadvantage if they work disparately in the cleaning industry, exposing them less to the local language while at work. If, however, after controlling for all relevant characteristics, country of origin remains significantly negatively related to the naturalization outcome, we would conclude malevolent discrimination.

— “What do we actually know about discrimination in naturalizations? Generally speaking, very little.”

The crux of this method is that the relevant data are hardly ever available. An econometric study by Hamueller and Hangartner, who made use of the fact that, in Switzerland at the time of the controversial practice of secret ballots on naturalizations, the applicants’ characteristics were literally written down in electoral leaflets. Their study concludes that applicants from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia were severely disadvantaged. In 2003, the Swiss Federal Supreme Court banned this naturalization practice. Ever since, naturalization commissions have had to decide on applications with due regard to the applicants’ privacy. This, though, severely limits the data observable by researchers. These barriers to research are exacerbated by the fact that it is hardly possible to meaningfully capture the section of the naturalization interview that focuses on the applicant’s level of integration.

The nationwide shockwaves in 2003 when ballot-based naturalizations were prohibited reverberated beyond the affected municipalities. Even commissions that were already in place suddenly rejected fewer applicants in general, probably for strategic reasons. An empirically testable prediction of the model is therefore that the ranking of the municipalities with respect to country of origin should be the same before and after 2003, if the municipality in question is not prejudiced.

To test this prediction, I requested rejection data stratified by country of origin from all Swiss municipalities with more than 800 residents. In total, them, this involved an excessive outlay of administrative resources because these data often had to be compiled specifically for this purpose. Ultimately, six municipalities were able to provide sufficient data, with the assurance of complete anonymity. The analysis of

![Fig. 1: Acquisition of citizenship per 100 resident foreigners, 2014](Source: Eurostat)

![Fig. 2: Rejection rates in municipality “C” grouped by country of origin, 1998 – 2011](Source: My own research)