



Information campaigns can reduce barriers to naturalization

A study on a recent outreach action by the City of Zurich shows that information campaigns can increase naturalization application rates by lowering important hurdles to citizenship.

Naturalization is both an important incentive and catalyst for successful integration. Research shows that acquisition of the host-country citizenship improves the economic¹, political², and social³ integration of immigrants. Despite these benefits, naturalization rates are low in many countries. In an attempt to change this, local governments across Switzerland and other countries have carried out information campaigns encouraging eligible immigrants to apply for citizenship.

The City of Zurich's information campaign

In May 2017, the City of Zurich sent letters to the nearly 40'000 immigrants in Zurich who met the residency requirement informing them about the possibilities for naturalization. The City launched the information campaign in anticipation of a change in the naturalization law that came into effect on January 1, 2018. The campaign aimed to draw immigrants' attention to the new naturalization rules and to motivate them to apply for citizenship. Following this campaign, naturalization application rates in the City of Zurich went up significantly, a change directly attributable to the effects of the information letters⁴.

1 Bevelander, Veenman: Naturalisation and Socioeconomic Integration: The Case of the Netherlands, *The Economics of Citizenship* (2008); OECD: *A Passport for the Better Integration of Immigrants* (2011); Hainmueller, Hangartner, Ward: The Effects of Citizenship on the Long-Term Earnings of Marginalized Immigrants: Quasi-Experimental Evidence from Switzerland, *Sciences Advances* (2019).

2 Hainmueller, Hangartner, Pietrantuono: Naturalization Fosters the Long-Term Political Integration of Immigrants, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (2015).

3 Hainmueller, Hangartner, Pietrantuono: Catalyst or Crown: Does Naturalization Promote the Long-Term Social Integration of Immigrants?, *American Political Science Review* (2017).

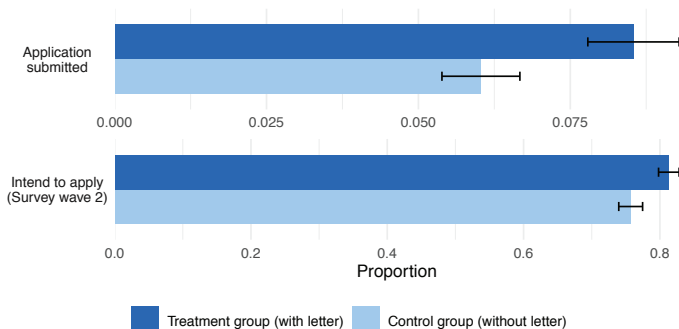
4 Ward, Pianzola, Hangartner: Information Campaigns can Increase Naturalization Rates, Working Paper (2019).

Against this backdrop, the City of Zurich resumed their campaign in autumn 2019, sending information letters to immigrants newly eligible for naturalization. Studying the effects of this second round of letters will shed more light on the barriers that prevent immigrants—especially those who are most marginalized—from applying for citizenship and how information letters can help to overcome them.

Field experiment and survey

To estimate the causal effects of the information letter on both attitudes and behavior, the research team combined an experimental research design and a targeted survey. In the experimental design, the approximately 11,000 immigrants who first met the residency requirement for naturalization between the first letter, in May 2017, and October 2019 were randomly split into two groups. The first group—the treatment group—received the City's information letter in October 2019, while the second group—the control group—received the letter in May 2020. In November 2019, after the treatment group had received the City's letter, the research team invited both groups to a survey on life in Zurich. Additionally, the research team invited all respondents to the first survey to a second survey wave in March 2020. "This so-called stepped-wedge experimental design allows us to precisely estimate the short and medium-term effects of the letter without depriving individuals eligible for naturalization of the letter," says Dominik Hangartner, Professor at ETH Zurich.

The survey results together with register data from the City of Zurich show that the information letter increases not only the intention to submit an application, but also the number of submitted applications.

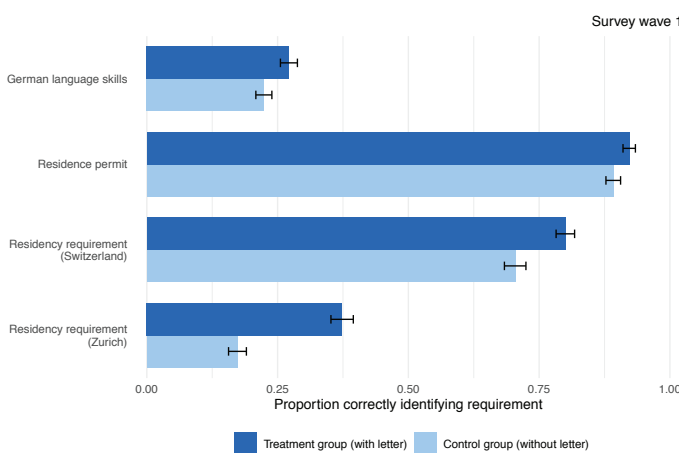


Another frequently mentioned hurdle on the path to citizenship is the feeling that naturalization is not welcome: “I wonder if I want to be part of a country that does not want me or rejects people like me for the most part. What speaks for it, is, that as a future Swiss citizen, I could help to improve integration and acceptance. What speaks against it, is that I will never be considered equal, even with a passport,” said a survey participant from Germany. The information letter also counteracts this feeling: it increased the sense that immigrants are welcome to naturalize.

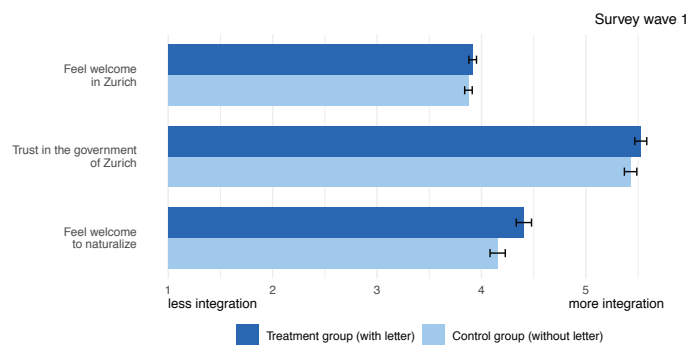
Reduced naturalization barriers

Which mechanisms explain the effects of the naturalization letter? One possibility is that the information letter lowers hurdles that immigrants must overcome before applying for citizenship.

A closer look at the survey data confirms this. Respondents often mentioned barriers such as the complexity of the naturalization process or that they did not know the requirements for citizenship. Comparing survey responses from the treatment and control groups, the research team found that those in the treatment group knew the requirements for naturalization better than those in the control group (who had not yet received the letter):



In addition, respondents in the treatment group estimated both the time required to prepare a naturalization application and the perceived complexity of the procedure to be lower. “Misperceptions about the naturalization process can deter naturalization-eligible immigrants from submitting an application. Our results suggest that the information letter can change this, leading to more positive assessments and deeper engagement with the procedure,” says Dalston Ward, postdoctoral researcher at ETH Zurich. For instance, the letter did not mention language requirements for naturalization, which means that the recipients not only read the letter but also actively informed themselves about the naturalization process.



The research team also found that the information letter increased the expected benefits of naturalization: those who received the information letter prior to the survey estimated slightly higher benefits of a Swiss passport in the housing and labor market than the control group.

This study provides direct empirical evidence for policymakers who want to reduce the hurdles that prevent eligible immigrants from applying for citizenship. The findings show how naturalization barriers, such as a lack of information and public encouragement, can be efficiently and effectively lowered. Because citizenship can counteract discrimination, promote social mobility and foster cohesion, reducing barriers to naturalization not only benefits newly naturalized citizens, but also society as a whole.

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Illustration: Fruzsina Korondi



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