



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Becoming and Belonging? Lived experiences of naturalization and the implementation of citizenship law in Germany and Canada

Bliersbach, H.

Citation

Bliersbach, H. (2025, May 13). *Becoming and Belonging?: Lived experiences of naturalization and the implementation of citizenship law in Germany and Canada*. Meijers-reeks. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4246246>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4246246>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Summary

Citizenship and our ability to identify ourselves through legal documentation when we want to cross borders or access rights have never been more important. As security concerns are increasingly used to justify the surveillance and monitoring of people's legal identity and status, asking questions concerning the allocation of citizenship and how nation-states determine who belongs to their citizenry has become a vital part of migration scholarship. Naturalization literature has long sought to determine and evaluate the precise factors deciding whether someone will acquire formal membership. Citizenship policies are often argued to reflect a state's identity – what it values in a citizen – and are commonly used as an indicator of a country's overall approach to immigration. Certain challenges can be extrapolated from a state's respective naturalization requirements. Some migrants might struggle to learn a new language, they might be on benefits and hence not financially independent, or they might have committed crimes that disqualify them from naturalizing. However, citizenship law alone does not determine whether someone will become a citizen. Throughout their migration trajectories, migrants navigate all kinds of legislation, which can lead to (unintended) interactions between different bodies of law. This thesis thus conducts its analysis on the basis of migrants' lived experiences as the interplay of legislation becomes tangible and observable in individual trajectories. It examines the implementation of citizenship law by answering the following central research question:

How does naturalization impact new citizens' notions of citizenship?

Based on the lived experiences of new citizens in Germany and Canada, I examine the process of citizenship acquisition asking how one acquires citizenship formally, administratively, and emotionally and how that citizenship is interpreted. This analysis is conducted across five articles and two case studies: Germany and Canada. The first article sets up the theoretical foundation of the dissertation conceptualizing naturalization not only as a formal administrative process, but as being impacted by an individual's entire migration trajectory, which in turn is shaped by legal frameworks beyond citizenship law. Articles two and three focus on the German case illustrating the implementation of citizenship policy first solely from the migrant perspective and second through an analysis of both migrant and caseworker experiences. The fourth

article centers new Canadians' perspectives on naturalization and their sense of belonging. Article five provides a comparative analysis of the legal consciousness of new German and new Canadian citizens.

– *Methodology*

The empirical foundation of this project consists of 42 in-depth interviews with new German citizens (15), Canadian naturalized citizens (15), German naturalization caseworkers (9), and three individuals working for the Canadian government (one Canadian Member of Parliament (MP), one employee of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), and one office staff member of a Canadian MP). The interviews were conducted during fieldwork in the governmental district of Cologne, Germany, and in the city of Toronto, Canada, between the fall of 2021 and spring of 2023. Interviews with new citizens chronicled the interviewees' migration histories and then focused on the interviewees' memories of the naturalization procedure itself. During the interviews with the German street-level bureaucrats, they were first asked to describe a typical naturalization procedure and their role in it. In a second step, they were asked to a set of three real-life vignettes. These vignettes were based on interactions between applicants and caseworkers as respondents who had naturalized in Germany has described them to me. These vignettes served as a bridge between both sets of interviewees and facilitated a deeper level of conversation than would have otherwise been possible in the one to two hours of interview time with each caseworker. The interviews were transcribed and coded manually in Atlas.ti.

– *Findings*

Research on the acquisition of citizenship has incorporated a number of determinants of naturalization outcomes over the past decades but lacks the contextualization of immigration law in its relation to criminal law. *Chapter 2*, a systematic literature review of the 140 most-cited papers across the naturalization and crimmigration literatures, seeks to construct a theoretical bridge between the disciplines. The term crimmigration describes the increased interweaving of criminal law and immigration law. The chapter reviews the prominent streams of both strands of literature first utilizing a bibliometric analysis of the respective citation networks and subsequently delves into the substantial developments and parallels in naturalization and crimmigration research. I argue that the inclusion of crimmigration as a factor impacting naturalization is essential for citizenship scholarship in order to accurately use citizenship policies as an indicator of a state's overall approach to immigration. Crimmigration developments result in the heightening of criminal and immigration law's exclusionary powers making any status aside from citizenship more insecure and formal membership less attainable for immigrants.

Concretely, this means that the same requirement for naturalization in one country – in particular residence requirements – might be harder to fulfill in another. Two states might prerequisite six years of residence in order to naturalize, but if one state reserves itself the right to remove immigrants from its territory for traffic law violations, while the other has established a significantly higher threshold for deportation, then those respective sets of policy cannot be categorized as equally restrictive. Recent crimmigration scholarship indicates that groups negatively affected by racialization are more likely to be subjected to crimmigration systems, removed from the territory in question and consequently excluded from naturalization.

Chapter 3, titled *'I'm not German, I am a naturalized German'*, turns to the German case study and examines motivations for naturalization of 15 new citizens in the governmental district of Cologne. The story of naturalization in Western liberal democracies in the past decades has been one of liberalization. With women having gained the right to pass on their citizenship to their children, *ius soli* provisions being added to citizenship regulations, and the holding of multiple citizenships becoming increasingly accepted, states claim to have paved the way for immigrants to gain formal membership. This chapter focuses on the lived experiences of those moving through the process of acquiring German citizenship. The thematic analysis of these interviews offers unique insights into (1) the motivations of those choosing to apply for citizenship and (2) the sets of bureaucratic and societal structures influencing these motivations. The analysis finds that the acquisition of German citizenship is especially potent for third-country nationals, who wish to become or remain (in case of British migrants) EU citizens and who are highly aware of the freedoms granted to citizens of the EU. Naturalization does not only improve new citizens' ability to access other countries through travel but also the quality of said mobility, as interviewees report feeling safer travelling as German nationals. Those acquiring German citizenship, who already hold an EU nationality, report identifying rather as 'European citizens' than as nationals of either country specifically. For non-EU-citizens who grew up in Germany and identified as German, naturalization constitutes tangible evidence of their membership and belonging. However, while they can gain legal recognition and align their legal and personal identities, those who are not perceived as ethnically German are unable to acquire full social recognition – a circumstance some interviewees view as unlikely to change in the future.

Chapter 4 further deepens the German case study by including the perspective of naturalization caseworkers. Based on 15 semi-structured interviews with new German citizens as well as nine interviews utilizing real-life vignettes with caseworkers evaluating citizenship applications, this chapter explores the impact of discretionary power and the perception thereof by migrants on the naturalization process. As the perception of discretion is seldom centered in studies of policy implementation, this chapter offers a unique glimpse at both sides of the naturalization process. The analysis offers three key findings:

Firstly, caseworkers refer to departmental regulations as well as individually created guidance to manage the evaluation of indefinite legal concepts. This process might not be considered discretionary decision-making under German administrative law, yet it *de facto* requires the caseworkers to use discretion in their assessment. Secondly, the immense workload burdening the naturalization offices has led some caseworkers to pre-evaluate applications before they have been officially submitted in order to avoid having to write lengthy formal rejections. In some instances, new citizens report having their applications delayed for unjust reasons by their caseworkers with one street-level bureaucrat admitting to delaying the processing of certain applications. Thirdly, it is apparent that negative interactions with their caseworkers often have an overall effect on migrants' perceptions of the immigration authorities. Even interviewees who rejected the idea that their caseworker was representative of the state, felt that the administrative system was failing in its duty to supervise front-line workers. Caseworkers reporting feeling personally betrayed or hurt by the behavior or attitudes of their clients highlights the personal aspect of the applicant-caseworker relationship. An overburdened administrative structure, where comprehensive oversight is not possible and front-line workers are required to make decisions using significant discretionary power cannot guarantee procedural justice.

'*Am I really a full Canadian? I am not*', the fifth chapter of the dissertation, shifts the focus to the second case study exploring the lived experiences of naturalized Canadians mirroring *Chapter 3*. Canadian citizenship policy operates under the broader human-capital citizenship paradigm, which impacts not only the naturalization process but immigration legislation overall. While the requirements for Canadian citizenship have been liberalized over the years, it is permanent residence (PR) that presents the main hurdle to those wanting to gain formal membership in Canada. What used to be a one-step trajectory towards citizenship as the majority of migrants arrived with PR on Canadian soil, has evolved into a two-step trajectory of temporary statuses, which turned the attainment of PR into the bureaucratic bottleneck for immigrants. Based on 15 semi-structured interviews conducted in the Greater Toronto Area, Ontario, this chapter examines the experiences of Canadian citizenship acquisition beyond the formal naturalization procedure highlighting the crucial role of permanent resident status regulations. The analysis finds that both deportability and defensive citizenship constitute major factors in the decision whether to naturalize. Immigrants' felt reduction to their economic contributions produces a hierarchy between the migration classes as well as stark competition between economic migrants. Interviewees report a lessened sense of belonging as they view their naturalization in transactional terms. Similarly to *Chapter 3* and the German case, some interviewees voiced doubts whether they would ever be perceived as 'fully' Canadian.

The final empirical chapter, *Legal Consciousness of New Citizens*, provides a rare comparative case study of naturalization experiences finally bringing

together both case studies. Nation state citizenship is often conceptualized as a universally equal status, while migrants' perceptions of citizenship and belonging do not always reflect said normative conception. Based on 30 semi-structured interviews with naturalized citizens in Canada and Germany, this chapter examines two aspects of legal consciousness: Firstly, it makes use of Ewick and Silbey's approach of studying legal consciousness through the narratives of 'ordinary' people about the law in their daily lives differentiating between stories of being before the law, with the law, and against the law. Secondly, the analysis pays special attention to the relational dimension of legal consciousness. As Canadian naturalization procedures are implemented through a centralized bureaucracy while this process has been heavily decentralized in Germany, different kinds of relationships are cultivated between new citizens and their state as well as their new citizenry. Hence, this chapter explores where new citizens see themselves in relation to the law and how this perception is further influenced in its relational dimension by the respective state's citizenship policy implementation. The analysis finds that (1) in both cases migrants experience the law as arbitrary, obscure, and producing inequality; (2) new Canadians' and new Germans' legal consciousness differ in their experiences of which part of the state system produces this felt inequality. While Canadians are more likely to see legislation and regulations themselves as unfair, Germans perceive those who implement these regulations to be the creators of inequalities. Bureaucratic structures do not necessarily impact which 'story' of law is told the most, but that there is a difference in how it is told: The closest point of contact will be the one that is seen as responsible for perceived inequalities, which can be an impersonal system like the IRCC or an individual like a caseworker.

– *General Conclusions and Contributions*

Coming back to the overall research question of the dissertation – how does naturalization impact new citizens' notions of citizenship? – *naturalization impacts new citizens' understanding of citizenship in three ways: through its requirements, its relevance, and its implementation.*

The formal *requirements* for naturalization communicate to citizens what needs to be achieved prior to being able to apply for membership. A focus on economic accomplishments as is the case for most PR trajectories in Canada creates both a hierarchy between the classes of migration (with economic migration being valued over immigrating as a refugee) and a sense of competition between migrants as permanent status is a scarce resource given to a set number of people each year. Canada's move away from a one-step model where most migrants had already been granted PR by the time they gained access to Canadian territory and towards a two-step system that first doles out temporary statuses might account for the slow decline in Canadian naturalization rates. In the German case, the requirement of relinquishing one's

original nationality serves as proof of allegiance with the state and for some interviewees meant a mismatch between identity and nationality.

The *relevance* of naturalization describes the tangible difference made by citizenship status in a migrant's life: In how far is citizenship a choice for additional civic rights and duties and in how far is it perceived as a necessity to safely continue living in one's country of residence? New citizens in both Germany and Canada report naturalizing due to fears of being deported despite having permanent resident status. In Germany, these fears were voiced by third-country nationals while EU-citizens tended to feel more secure in their legal status. A context in which citizenship constitutes the only status that is perceived as safe is prone to reduce citizenship to its legal dimension and to lessen the sense of belonging, which states stress is a crucial aspect of citizenship. A growing awareness of the possibility of losing one's formal status through denationalization further depletes understandings of citizenship that go beyond its legal relevance.

The *implementation* of naturalization impacts notions of citizenship through how implementation is structured and how it unfolds. The respective approaches to citizenship law implementation demonstrate to new citizens what value the state apparatus assigns to the procedure. The specialized naturalization departments in Germany often serve to separate the naturalization procedure from the Foreigners' Office. For many new citizens, applying for citizenship constituted a much smoother process than any prior status application they had to go through. However, the highly decentralized structure of German policy implementation installs caseworkers as the face of the bureaucracy with many new citizens blaming injustices and irregularities of immigration procedures on said caseworkers. In the Canadian case, long waiting times and untransparent proceedings within the IRCC meant that some new citizens viewed naturalization as deprioritized by the Canadian state. This de-prioritization in turn lead to frustration for those seeking citizenship as it denoted a certain disinterest of the state in its newest members. During the naturalization procedure itself, the concrete interactions with the state also influenced new citizens' notions of citizenship. Experiences of perceived inequalities affected migrants' overall perception of the (immigration) authorities and in how far these authorities are able to ensure procedural justice.

The key-contributions of this thesis are threefold: Firstly, the new theoretical bridge between the naturalization and crimmigration scholarships highlights the necessity of considering the legal frameworks in which citizenship policies are implemented. Examining the impact of crimmigration systems, particularly regarding questions of legal residence, I argue that taking citizenship policy at face value limits the validity of said analysis. Citizenship outcomes – naturalizing or not naturalizing – are not solely determined by the formal naturalization process. The observation of naturalization only from the point of the application for citizenship onwards means disregarding, at best discounting, the previous stages of an individual's migration trajectory such as entry and

temporary stay within the destination country, which are not directly governed by citizenship law.

Secondly, I extend the growing naturalization literature centering the perspective of those governed by it through the analysis of lived experiences of citizenship acquisition in Germany and Canada. In the German case, this work provides a unique insight in the naturalization procedure as I gather experiences of both new citizens and their caseworkers at the relevant citizenship offices. Shedding light on both sides of the application for and allocation of formal membership allows for a deeper understanding of naturalization's procedural dimension. Here, I am further able to explore the understanding of discretionary power of those imbued with it and the perception thereof by those impacted by it.

Lastly, by making 'real-life vignettes' a part of my interviewing methodology I add to the exploration of vignettes as tools in qualitative interviewing. Traditionally used as stimulus material in quantitative research and most often in the form of hypothetical scenarios, vignettes based on the lived experiences of my interviewees aided the discussion of socially undesirable behaviors and attitudes within Foreigners' Office.

The focus of this dissertation lies on the perceptions of injustice as well as unfair treatment of migrants navigating the immigration apparatuses in Germany and Canada. I want to stress that this does not mean that the experiences shared by the interviewees were exclusively difficult or discriminatory. Not one person I spoke to regretted becoming a citizen. For many, immigrating and acquiring citizenship meant feeling more secure in their status and identity. These feelings of security were especially pronounced for those fleeing war or persecution. Although frustrations about bureaucratic proceedings and caseworkers were omnipresent, relief and gratitude towards the parts of the system that functioned sufficiently were so as well. This might of course be owed to the fact that this dissertation concentrates on the 'success stories', those that gained citizenship. But nonetheless, it is worth stating that in an imperfect, often unjust system that has established borders both between and within territories, naturalization improves people's lives. Civic inclusion serves as a tool of integration but also enables people to align their felt identity with their legal status. This in turn means that naturalization's undue challenges and incidences of mistreatment merit special attention.

