CITIZENSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

How Government Policy Matters for Immigrant Political Incorporation*

ABSTRACT

Levels of immigrant citizenship in Canada and the United States were very similar four decades ago, but today immigrants in Canada are much more likely to hold citizenship than compatriots in the United States, despite the greater benefits of US citizenship. The difference stems in part from the composition and legal status of immigrant populations. However, government policy also drives greater formal political incorporation in Canada. Immigration and citizenship agencies, multiculturalism policies and integration programs together send a symbolic message that immigrants are important, and provide material resources to help immigrants become active citizens.

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More than 700,000 people became US citizens in 2006. Ask them why and they may tell you that they want the security of citizenship. Without it, you can be subject to automatic deportation for even relatively minor crimes. Or they may say that they want political rights. Except for a few localities in the United States, voting or running for office requires citizenship. Some might point out that citizenship provides access to jobs in the public sector or defense industry. Citizenship also determines eligibility for various public benefits since the 1996 *Welfare Reform Act*.[1]

Finally, many will tell you that the United States is their adoptive home. Becoming an American makes it official.

The costs of becoming an American citizen seem small. Lack of citizenship does not offer protection from the draft, as many immigrant men found out during the Vietnam conflict, and non-citizens must pay taxes like everyone else. The naturalization oath requires renunciation of past allegiances, but in practice US citizens can hold multiple passports.

Why then do so few immigrants take out US citizenship? In 2006, the American Community Survey estimated that of the 37.5 million foreign born in the United States, only 15.7 million (42%) were naturalized citizens. In 1950, almost four out of five immigrants had sworn to uphold the American Constitution. The percentage of citizens among the immigrant population has since decreased significantly. While there has been a slight increase in naturalization since 2000, the change has been modest.

The decline in immigrant citizenship is all the more startling if we consider America's neighbour to the north. Canada, like the United States, is a country built on successive waves of immigration. In 2006 nearly one of every five Canadian residents had been born in another country. Indeed, in proportion to its population, Canada takes in about three times as many immigrants as the United States. Strikingly, the overwhelming majority of these foreign-born residents, 73% in 2006, had acquired Canadian citizenship.[2] For citizenship levels in the United States to mirror those in Canada, over 11 million people would need to acquire American citizenship overnight.

For most of the 20th century, immigrant citizenship in the United States and Canada looked remarkably similar. But beginning in the 1970s, as both countries welcomed "new" immigration from Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America, citizenship trajectories parted course. Many would have predicted higher citizenship rates in the United States, given its longer history of civic nationalism and arguably a stronger assimilationist impulse. In Canada, recurrent crises of national cohesion on the question of Quebec independence and, in the eyes of some, a divisive policy of multiculturalism, should have hindered immigrants' political integration. Furthermore, citizenship offers greater benefits in the United States. All non-citizen permanent residents in Canada can access social programs; this is not always the case in the United States. An immigrant who wishes to sponsor a family member to the United States has an easier time if he or she is a citizen; citizenship provides no such advantage in Canada. Given fewer benefits, why do so many foreigners take up Canadian citizenship while compatriots down South fail to become American?

Our research suggests that much of the difference stems from the relative "warmth of the welcome" that awaits immigrants in Canada compared to that in the United States. In the United

States, immigration policy largely starts and ends at the border. Government attention and resources revolve around border control; subsequent processes of integration are considered outside the purview of the state. In Canada, the government has adopted a more interventionist stance, providing public funds for the practical business of settlement and integration, and adopting a policy of official multiculturalism recognizing immigrant-generated diversity. These policies increase immigrants' ability to acquire citizenship and affect how interested they are in doing so. Minor variations in citizenship regulations and processing, as well as differences in the types of immigrants that choose to settle in Canada and the United States, also play a role in the citizenship gap, but less than we might think.

The legalities of citizenship

Those who do not have American or Canadian citizenship at birth must acquire it through naturalization. Naturalization procedures are remarkably liberal in both countries. Would-be citizens must prove a number of years of legal residence (three in Canada, generally five in the United States); they must demonstrate language ability (English in the United States, English or French in Canada); they must show some knowledge of the country; they must pay a fee and, to use the American phrase, they must demonstrate "good moral character."[3] In both countries, criminal convictions constitute grounds on which to refuse citizenship.

Refusal rates appear similar. Throughout the 1960s to the 1980s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) refused about 2% of naturalization applications, while 3% were formally rejected in Canada. In the 1990s, after some politicians adopted anti-immigrant platforms in the United States, refusal rates climbed to 15% as many immigrants applied for citizenship without first having fulfilled the residency requirement. In Canada, refusals stood at about 10% of the total.

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The long gray welcome

If key naturalization requirements do not differ, the attitude and administration of citizenship is more welcoming in Canada. David North called the naturalization process under the former Immigration and Naturalization Service the "long, gray welcome." Application forms are legalistic, unattractive and difficult to understand. Lines are long and wait times for processing can take years. Citizenship services take second place to border enforcement within the federal bureaucracy, whether counted by personnel, money or public attention. This was true when naturalization fell under the INS, and continues with US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) housed in the Department of Homeland Security. According to former INS Commissioner Doris Meissner, "[T]he dominant culture of the agency [is] rooted in a view of immigration as a source of security and law enforcement vulnerability more than of continuing nation building."

Negative perceptions of the immigration bureaucracy make immigrants more reluctant to apply for citizenship. Such negative perceptions can also be extrapolated to other government agencies, undermining newcomers' confidence in their welcome by government and political actors. Citizenship is thus rendered less attractive.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), the Canadian counterpart to USCIS, has also had problems with timely processing, but overall it has worked more on immigrant outreach and citizenship promotion. A senior official at CIC explained, during an interview, that "the Canadian policy is that we are a country of immigration. The only way an immigrant can influence how the country is run [is] to vote. And you can only vote if you become a citizen. The *Citizenship Act* ensures the facilitation of citizenship, so that immigrants can exercise their voting capacity. That is the main policy thrust." Instead of a strong enforcement mandate, CIC has developed various settlement policies. Initially run through the public service, these are now almost entirely administered through local community organizations funded by government grants. In 2003-2004, $173 million went to language training, job counseling, translation and other settlement services throughout English-speaking Canada.[4] In the United States, only officially designated refugees have access to such federal programs.

The upshot of these differences is that immigrants in Canada become more interested and able to apply for citizenship, and they do so sooner than in the United States. In 1970-1971, about two-thirds of foreigners who had lived for 11 to 15 years in Canada or the United States held the citizenship of their adopted country. Twenty years later, among those with a similar number of years of residence, only two of five in the United States had naturalized, as opposed to more than three-quarters in Canada. Significantly, citizenship regulations did not change appreciably over this period.

Illegal immigration and countries of origin

Unauthorized migration, by individuals crossing the border clandestinely or overstaying temporary visas, has become a significant political issue in the United States since the 1980s. Reasonable estimates of the unauthorized population range from 11 to 12 million in 2006. Of those, approximately 55% are thought to originate from Mexico. Since only legal permanent residents can apply for citizenship, a large population of undocumented migrants drives down aggregate naturalization figures.

Canada is also home to illegal immigrants, most of whom have overstayed tourist visas. Recent news reports put this number at about 200,000, but lacking any reliable

estimates from government or the academic community, this figure is speculative. It is certain, however, that illegal migrants constitute a smaller percentage of the foreign-born population than in the United States.

The origins of immigrants to Canada and the United States also differ. Following massive immigration to the United States from 1880 to 1920, Congress shut the door to immigration in the 1920s, letting in only relatively small numbers of Europeans and Canadians for permanent residency, or Mexicans for temporary work. In the 1950s, 53% of those granted permanent residency came from Europe while only 6% and 0.6% came from Asia or Africa, respectively. The 1965 *Immigration* (or *Hart-Cellar*) *Act* eliminated national origin quotas and raised the overall ceiling on admissions. By the 1990s, Europeans accounted for only 15% of legal immigrants to the United States, while those from Asia or Africa represented 31 and 4% of the total, respectively. Hispanic immigration, primarily from Mexico, but also from Central and South America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, makes up the bulk of the contemporary US immigration.

Canada also abandoned discriminatory selection criteria during the 1960s. As late as 1966, two-thirds of all immigrants to Canada came from just five countries: the United Kingdom, Italy, the United States, Germany or Portugal. By 2000, Europeans made up just 19% of immigrant admissions, while the majority of immigrants, 51%, came from Asia and the Pacific. Another 18% hailed from Africa and the Middle East, and only 9% came from Central and South America. Immigration to Canada is much less Hispanic, and much more Asian, than migration to the United States.

These differences matter because people from different countries view and acquire citizenship differently. Some believe that shared cultural traits, such as the civic culture immigrants bring with them, influence naturalization decisions. Others suggest that immigrants from different countries face different decision-making contexts over the costs and benefits of naturalization. For example, Canadian and Mexican immigrants in the United States are less likely to naturalize than most others, perhaps because they feel that the chances that they might return home are high.

Differences in citizenship among origin groups affect aggregate naturalization levels. The very large Mexican-born population in the United States – almost 30% of all foreign-born residents in 2000 – dwarfs the community in Canada, which constituted less than a percentage point in 2001. Mexicans' naturalization levels are among the lowest of all groups in the United States, and they make up a larger proportion of the illegal population, a group barred from citizenship. The large Mexican population consequently drives down aggregate US citizenship levels. In contrast, many Asian groups have relatively high citizenship levels. Significant Asian migration increases the level of citizenship in Canada.

Yet unauthorized migration and differences in country of origin cannot explain away the puzzle of diverging citizenship trajectories. The proportion of immigrant citizens increased to 48% in 2000 if we exclude Mexican migrants and those who did not fulfill residency requirements, but a similar adjustment to the Canadian figure increases it even more, to 84% in 2001. When we compare citizenship levels for immigrants born in the same country, citizenship is consistently higher in Canada across all immigrant groups.

The "quality" of immigrants and immigration policy

Certain people are more likely to apply for citizenship than others. Not surprisingly, given language and civic requirements, those with better English skills (and, in Canada, French) and more education are more likely to naturalize.[5] Some Americans consequently wonder whether the recent drop in immigrant citizenship reflects a decline in the "quality" of newcomers to the United States. Are today's newcomers too uneducated, unmotivated or otherwise lacking in the civic virtues needed for citizenship?

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Both Canada and the United States administer mixed immigration systems that accord entry based on skills and resources, family ties or the need for asylum. The relative proportion of these three categories varies, however. In the late 1990s, between two-thirds and three-quarters of legal immigrants to the United States acquired their status through family ties: a relative already living in the United States had sponsored their application to migrate. Under the current US preference system, about 20% of numerically limited visas are given based on employment. Refugees accounted for 8 to 16% of admission in the 1990s.

Canada depends more heavily on "independent" migrants, those with no family ties to Canada, but who can show that their skills or resources (such as investment capital) are needed in the Canadian economy. Since the mid-1970s, selection as an independent migrant is based on the points system. Potential migrants receive points for education, language ability, age and other personal characteristics. Those with enough points are granted an immigrant visa. In the second half of the 1990s, a little over half of all immigrants arrived as independent migrants (a figure which includes the dependents of the principal applicant), 25 to 30% entered under family reunification provisions and roughly 13 to 17% came as refugees or special admissions. Assuming that independent migrants are more likely to possess higher education and better language skills, could the higher proportion of economic migrants in Canada entirely account for citizenship differences?

Probably not. Over the period of declining citizenship levels in the United States, the average level of education among newly arriving immigrants increased, implying that these newcomers should find naturalization easier than those who came before. If we try to predict an immigrant's likelihood of acquiring citizenship using statistical models that control for education, language, length of residence and other potentially important personal attributes, chances for citizenship remain higher in Canada than in the United States. Immigrants' characteristics matter, but something about the society to which they migrate also affects citizenship.

A helping hand: The role of government

The Canadian welfare state is usually grouped with the United States for its market-oriented, relatively non-interventionist stance. Since the 1960s, however, Canadian governments have increasingly engaged in policy interventions, such as a universal health care system, which is non-existent in the United States. Within the field of immigration, Canadian governments have promoted a multicultural integration policy. First espoused by the federal government in 1971, public support for ethnic diversity was enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 and became federal legislation with the 1988 *Multiculturalism Act*. Public recognition – and funding – of ethnic diversity is accompanied by settlement programs in language learning, job counseling and citizenship classes. Relative to expenditures for welfare, health care and education, public funding for multiculturalism and settlement programs has been very modest. Nonetheless, it has been consequential. It is no coincidence that the divergence in Canadian and American citizenship occurs precisely at the moment that these policies gained steam.

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These programs have had two main effects. First, they provide immigrant communities with the resources necessary to acquire citizenship and exercise a political voice. Immigrant incorporation, including political integration, is a social phenomenon with newcomers calling on friends, family, co-ethnic businesses and local community organizations for assistance. In explaining how they became citizens, many ordinary immigrants tell stories of having paperwork filled out at a nearby community organization, buying a citizenship study guide from a co-ethnic notary public and asking a daughter to practice English conversation.

Government support provides a richer social infrastructure in Canada. Government sponsored language classes help immigrants feel confident that they can meet the citizenship language requirement. Grants to local community organizations provide extra citizenship classes to those worried that age or lack of education will prevent naturalization. More generally, government initiatives support a greater array of immigrant community organizations in Canada than they do in the United States. Not all communities need such outside assistance – many ethnocultural organizations survive on members' fees or fundraising efforts – but immigrant groups with relatively fewer resources benefit from a helping hand.

Second, the symbolism of government concern evident in public goods provisions and the rhetoric of Canadian multiculturalism make immigrants more interested in citizenship. The Canadian state's official endorsement of multiculturalism gives immigrants normative standing in the political system. Public programs for immigrants or refugees provide newcomers with a stronger sense of linkage between the state and themselves. Immigrants we interviewed in Canada felt that, despite problems, they could count on government, generating a sense of obligation to participate and give back. In the United States, the idea of citizenship evokes rights and economic opportunities, but entails a more modest sense of engagement.

A Portuguese immigrant who has lived 20 years in the United States and 13 in Canada offered an excellent summary of the trade-offs that are consistently heard. For him, the United States is economically "the best country in the world." Life is cheaper and he feels that America is truly a land of opportunity. However, while he currently lives in Massachusetts, he dreams of going back to Toronto: "It's just the place [where] I feel at home." This attachment stems in large part from his sense of welcome: "The respect for who you are, what you are, especially about ethnicity and for immigrants," as well as "the way the government runs things – I guess the great support, the multiculture stuff, the social assistance. We pay a lot of tax, that's true. But the great concern of government, the help for the citizens themselves."

Future citizenship trajectories

The current American administration is unlikely to adopt Canadian policies, but the refugee resettlement program shows that the country can, and has, initiated efforts to proactively support newcomers. For example, the *Homeland Security Act* of 2002 mandated a new Office of Citizenship whose Chief is responsible for promoting citizenship, fostering public-private partnerships and overseeing a staff of Community Liaison Officers. However, it is difficult to promote a proactive and service-friendly atmosphere when naturalization and immigration services are housed within a department dedicated to "homeland security," especially when security is understood as protection against foreign threats. The theme of USCIS's 2005 Strategic Plan, which is also used as a slogan on various customer service publications available to immigrants, is "Securing America's Promise." The promise is there, but it comes second to security.

In Canada, governments cut funding to multiculturalism and scaled back services offered to newcomers in the late 1990s and into 2000. The 2005 federal budget finally increased funding for integration and settlement services for the first time in five years. Future governments will need to consider that any short-term fiscal gains achieved through cutbacks might be undermined by the long-term exclusion of newcomer populations.

The decision to cut programming in Canada, or do broader immigrant settlement in the United States, is a political choice, one intertwined in debates that extend beyond immigration to include foreign policy, welfare state development and management of historic ethno-racial tensions in each country. The consequences of such decisions are significant. In countries with significant ethno-racial diversity such as the United States and Canada, the glue that binds strangers is common membership, or citizenship, in a political body. When immigrants do not acquire citizenship, a sense of shared enterprise is undermined, as are the institutions of democratic government. Immigrant citizenship is better served when governments extend a welcoming hand: offering concrete settlement assistance and recognizing immigrants' diverse identities and cultures within a framework of "future citizen" rather than foreigner or alien.

Notes

* This article is based on Irene Bloemraad's recently published book, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* (University of California Press, 2006). An earlier version of the article was published in the Canadian American Research Series (fall 2006).

[1] Officially, the US *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.*

[2] For ease of comparison, the US and Canadian figures simply take the number of naturalized citizens divided by the total foreign-born population in the country, regardless of whether they are eligible for citizenship. This includes the undocumented in both countries, and those counted as non-residents by the Census in Canada.

[3] The US residency requirement falls to three years for spouses of American citizens and can be waived entirely for those who have seen combat in the US military. Both countries offer easier rules for the elderly. Over the last decade, the United States substantially increased the fee for citizenship, raising it from $95 in 1996 to $675 in 2008. This has further eroded the "warmth of the welcome" and is beginning to place a real financial burden on immigrant families of modest means. The cost in Canada in 2008 stood at $200.

[4] The government of Quebec received an additional $164 million as a block grant under their 1991 federal-provincial settlement agreement. Another $45 million went to British Columbia and Manitoba for additional service support.

[5] Although there is also some evidence that the most educated immigrants are reluctant to do so.

Thinking About Immigration Outside Canada's Metropolitan Centres

Special Issue of Canadian Ethnic Studies



This special issue of *Canadian Ethnic Studies / Études ethniques au Canada* (Vol. XXXVII, No. 3, 2005) looks at the regionalization of immigration. The issue includes articles on regional dispersal in British Columbia, immigrant settlement in local labour markets in Ontario, on the settlement of refugees in Québec City and in smaller cities in British Columbia, on francophone Acadians, interculturalism and regionalization, and on the services available to new immigrants in Halifax. There is also a conference report from "Immigration and Out-migration: Atlantic Canada at a Crossroads."

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