MIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP IN SWEDEN

ABSTRACT

Citizenship legislation was liberalized in Sweden in the 1970s, making it easier to acquire citizenship. As well, local and regional voting rights were granted to permanently residing non-citizens. While Swedish immigration and integration policy has become highly contested over the past decades, there has been less conflict over citizenship. While proponents of citizenship reform emphasize the positive effects on immigrant integration, the results are mixed. Naturalization increases the chances by 80% that people will vote in elections. At the same time, voter turnout is about 15% lower for naturalized citizens than for native-born citizens. With respect to labour market participation, however, there are few signs of a naturalization effect.

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Modern migration and integration strategies

A simplified view of immigration to Sweden divides the post-war period into two distinct periods: primarily labour immigration until the early 1970s, and then a shift towards refugee immigration and family reunification. The Swedish economy expanded rapidly after the World War II and immigration was a way of solving labour shortages. Most migrants came from Finland, and increasingly in the 1960s from Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey.

By the mid-1960s, trade unions began to view immigration as a producer of negative side effects. The government therefore restricted migration in the late 1960s, and this led to a slowdown in labour migration. While labour migration dwindled during the 1970s, other types of migration – family class and refugees – started to increase. In the 1970s, the major groups of immigrants to Sweden were primarily refugees from Chile, Poland and Turkey. In the 1980s, the lion's share of this new immigration came from Chile, Ethiopia, Iran and other Middle Eastern countries. Immigrants from Iraq, former Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe dominated the 1990s.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, changes to immigration policy were tied to efforts to devise a more active integration policy. In 1968, Parliament adopted the first comprehensive package of integration strategies, stressing the importance of equal living standards for the immigrant and native-born population. While the emphasis on social and economic equality was widely shared across the political spectrum, debates about assimilation resulted in Parliament adopting a new cultural pluralist policy of integration in 1975. The policy was built on three pillars: equality, freedom of choice, and partnership.[1]

Integration policies have been much debated over the past decades, especially regarding labour market participation and issues of cultural pluralism. Reducing unemployment among immigrants and integrating newcomers into the labour market has been a central policy objective but, as discussed below, less successful in practice. Cultural pluralism has been criticized by some parties and associations for being relativistic, leading to, or exacerbating, problems of immigrant integration in society. A new integration policy was adopted in 1998, in which criticisms of the 1975 policy are partly reflected. Instead of focusing on ethnic differences in terms of the principle of freedom of choice, the government contended that it was important to focus on mainstreaming institutions from a diversity perspective.

Citizenship

Citizenship in Sweden is based on the *jus sanguinis* principle. Even if they are born in Sweden, the children of non-Swedish citizens are not automatically entitled to Swedish citizenship. Naturalization is possible after five years and for refugees, after four years of residence in Sweden. Citizens from other Nordic countries are exceptions to this rule and can obtain citizenship after two years of residence. In addition, the applicant must be 18 years of age or older and have no criminal record.[2] Acquiring citizenship by notification is also possible. This is basically a simplified juridical naturalization procedure that is mainly used by Nordic citizens. For notification, the applicant must meet the following requirements: 18 years of age or older, five years of residence in Sweden and no prison sentence during this time.

Citizenship legislation has been reformed over the past 40 years, with respect to naturalization, civil and political rights of citizens and non-citizens, as well as to dual citizenship. These changes have also led to debates about the meaning of citizenship. Sweden has, perhaps, the most liberal naturalization rules in Europe. The waiting period for citizenship was shortened in 1976; the subsistence requirement,[3]

Table 1
Citizenship acquisition in Sweden by country of birth, 2006

Country of birth	Percent (%)
Denmark	57
Norway	48
Finland	68
Netherlands	45
Germany	70
Greece	78
Italy	54
Yugoslavia	91
Bosnia-Herzegovina	87
Poland	81
Romania	93
Hungary	91
Turkey	87
Lebanon	96
Syria	96
Chile	76
Iran	93
Iraq	93
Ethiopia	92
Somalia	75

Source: Statistics Sweden.

which had been relaxed during the 1950s and 1960s, was also abolished, as was the language proficiency test. Despite a number of debates and proposals – most recently during the 2002 electoral campaign – about naturalization requirements, including language proficiency, no changes to legislation or policy have been made. Compared to other European countries, the issue has been less debated in Sweden.

Naturalization rates vary among persons of different nationalities (Table 1). Whereas most people from South-Eastern Europe and from the Middle East and Africa naturalize, fewer do so from the Nordic countries and North-Western Europe, with the exception of Finland and Germany.

The relation between residence and citizenship is also important. Most of the rights given to citizens are also granted to others residing in the country, with some exceptions – for instance, the exclusive right to enter the country and voting rights in national elections. As well, it is easier, legally speaking, to limit certain civil rights when it comes to foreigners. The citizenship requirement for several government positions has been relaxed over time and today only a few positions – including certain senior officials, judges and military personnel – are reserved for citizens.

Emphasis on social equality brought changes were made in the late 1960s to minimize the differences between citizens and non-citizen access to welfare arrangements and social rights. This has by and large remained the case. Occasionally, debates are held, for instance on the question of regulating labour migration from EU member states since 2004. Proponents of regulation argued that the Swedish welfare system is vulnerable to immigration because of the connection between residence and social rights. The flip side is that Sweden has one of the strictest systems in Europe regarding access to social rights for irregular migrants. Adult irregular migrants only have access to emergency hospital care; as well, access to education for minors was not guaranteed for a long time. With increasing numbers of irregular migrants in Sweden, this has recently become a topic of intense debate.

During the mid-1970s, a major change was made when voting rights were granted in local and regional elections to permanently residing non-citizens. The bill was adopted unanimously by Parliament in 1975 and was first applied during the 1976 election. At the time, there were high expectations that this legislation would lead to extensive participation in elections, but as discussed below, voter turnout has dropped over the past 30 years. Extending non-citizens' voting rights to national elections was discussed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Social Democrats and the Communists favoured this proposal, arguing that voting rights should be tied to residence, whereas the Centre-Right parties argued against it, maintaining that citizenship and voting rights are intrinsically linked.

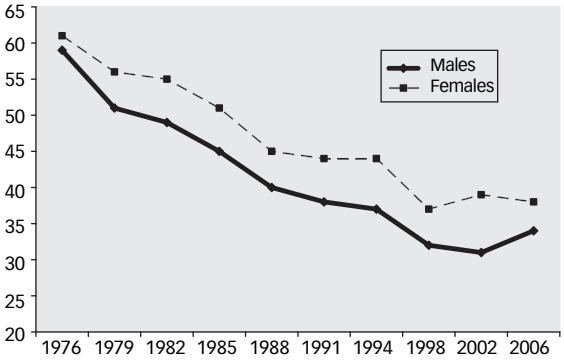
As shown by Spång (2007), the debate on voting rights affected the discussion of dual citizenship. An extensive *de facto* tolerance of dual citizenship evolved in the late 1970s. Authorities exempted persons from the obligation of renouncing their existing citizenship when becoming Swedish citizens in cases where it was impossible to renounce the existing citizenship, or very difficult and costly to do so. Despite some debates, no changes were made to dual citizenship legislation in the 1980s. When the issue reappeared in the late 1990s, all parties except the Moderate Party came to accept that dual citizenship should be allowed; consequently, the legislation was changed in 2001.[4]

These changes to citizenship legislation and practice have involved debates on the meaning of citizenship. Opponents to these changes have often remarked that citizenship is devalued and that the active stance on the part of persons wanting to become citizens should be emphasized. The latter argument is found in the debates about national voting rights, dual citizenship and in recent discussions on naturalization requirements. Proponents have emphasized on their positive effects for immigrants' social, economic and political integration. That persons who permanently reside in the country should have the opportunity to express their political views on matters of public concern has often been emphasized, as has the more recent argument that in today's globalized world, people feel at home in several places, and this does not weaken their ties to any one place. Opponents have stressed that notwithstanding such changes, it is central that persons make a choice about the political community to which they belong (Spång 2007).

Electoral participation: Citizens versus non-citizens

As participation in elections is a key feature of being part of a democracy, this section describes the voter turnout for immigrants. A distinct upward trend in voter turnout is visible until the mid-1970s. In 1976, 91.8% of the electorate voted in the national election; this represented the highest level of electoral participation in Sweden. Sixty percent of foreign citizens voted in municipal and

Figure 1
Participation in local elections by non-citizens in Sweden, 1976-2006



Source: Statistics Sweden.

provincial elections in 1976 (Figure 1).[5] Turnout gradually decreased until the election of 2006, which saw a slight upsurge.

Statistics Sweden has published voter turnout rates for foreign-born citizens since 1988. Their data suggest that participation rose between 1988 and 1991 and then fell substantially in the 1998 elections. However, Öhrvall (2006) notes that while foreign-born citizens are on average about 8% less likely to vote, the decline in voter participation by foreign-born citizens is lower than it is for native-born citizens.

Tracking voting probabilities of foreign citizens is more difficult, in part because a substantial number of foreign citizens leave the country without telling anyone (Örhvall 2006). Nonetheless, some research suggests that while initially assessed as high in 1976, participation rates have decreased substantially since then. In 2002 it was down to 35%.

The 2006 elections are of particular interest since they showed an increase in voting participation by native-born Swedes and immigrants, citizens and non-citizens (Bevelander and Pendakur 2008). Table 2 shows turnout rates by place of birth, generation and citizenship, based on an electoral participation survey. While over 80% of the population voted in these elections, there are substantial differences in terms of place of birth and generation. Moreover, non-citizens voted at much lower rates than did citizens. Only 36% or so of non-citizens voted in the 2006 municipal and provincial elections. Non-Swedes, with the exception of those born in North-America and Oceania, or those with only one immigrant parent, were also less likely to vote.

In a multivariate analysis controlling for demographic, socio-economic, and contextual factors, Bevelander and Pendakur (2008) find that age, schooling, generation, place of birth, type of housing, city-size and especially (higher) income and citizenship acquisition are factors that highly impact voting patterns in the 2006 elections in Sweden. Indeed, citizenship has an enormous impact, increasing the odds of voting by over 80%.

Sweden has, perhaps, the most liberal naturalization rules in Europe. The waiting period for citizenship was shortened in 1976; the subsistence requirement, which had been relaxed during the 1950s and 1960s, was also abolished, as was the language proficiency test.

Economic integration: Citizens versus non-citizens

Studies on the socio-economic integration of immigrants in Sweden show a very high labour market attachment during the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, incomes and employment rates were relatively high, with consequently low unemployment rates. Research on employment in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s shows a different picture. Since the early 1970s, there has been a gradually increasing negative gap in immigrant employment rates for both men and women compared to native-born Swedes. The deep economic recession of the early 1990s widened the gap between the native-born and

Table 2
Voter turnout rates (%) for citizens and non citizens, 2006

Place of birth	Municipal citizens	Municipal including non-citizens	Provincial citizens	Provincial including non-citizens	National
Sweden	84	47	83	48	85
Nordic countries, not Sweden	72	55	71	56	74
EU, not Nordic countries	70	62	70	62	71
Other, Europe	59	62	59	62	60
African	58	71	57	71	58
North America and Oceania	81	67	81	67	80
South America	72	62	72	62	73
Asia	63	58	63	59	64
2 Immigrant parents	73	69	72	69	75
1 Immigrant parent	80	64	79	64	82
Total	**82**	**64**	**81**	**65**	**83**

Source: Belevander and Pendakur, 2008.

Table 3
Employment rate (%) for Swedish-born and selected groups' foreign-born citizens and non-citizens,[6] males and females, ages 20-64, 2006

Country of birth	Male	Female	Citizens Male	Citizens Female	Non-Citizens Male	Non-Citizens Female
Sweden	82.5	79.2	82.5	79.2	–	–
Denmark	71.5	68.9	77.3	71.2	67.0	66.3
Norway	71.3	70.6	75.5	70.0	69.4	70.9
Finland	69.6	70.9	73.6	71.2	62.2	70.5
Netherlands	81.1	75.0	78.6	77.8	82.1	73.3
Germany	72.1	69.3	71.8	69.1	72.5	69.9
Greece	53.6	39.2	54.7	40.0	50.5	36.1
Italy	64.6	62.5	65.2	65.5	64.1	58.5
Yugoslavia	63.5	54.0	66.2	55.2	42.4	38.2
Bosnia-Herzegovina	72.8	66.3	75.3	68.2	54.6	45.0
Poland	66.4	65.9	69.1	67.9	55.8	57.8
Romania	68.6	69.3	69.6	70.4	50.2	47.0
Hungary	62.5	62.5	64.6	63.8	46.8	54.9
Turkey	63.4	45.9	66.1	47.5	45.3	31.3
Lebanon	58.3	42.8	59.8	43.4	34.4	23.6
Syria	61.2	46.5	63.0	46.9	36.1	29.7
Chile	69.8	65.8	72.4	67.5	63.3	58.6
Iran	64.2	57.3	64.4	58.5	35.8	30.6
Iraq	52.4	39.6	54.5	40.5	32.0	22.1
Ethiopia	64.1	66.3	66.6	67.3	41.6	46.4
Somalia	42.8	33.8	49.3	38.0	27.3	21.1

Source: Authors' calculations from register data collected by Statistics Sweden.

immigrants even more, whereas the economic recovery of the late 1990s and the early years of the new millennium seem to have reversed the negative development to some extent.

Research that explains the variation in employment rates among the foreign-born and native-born in Sweden can be explained by "classic" factors like differences in demographic and human capital, as well as by demand-side factors, institutional factors and various types of discrimination by employers and employment agencies (for an overview, see Bevelander 2004). As described earlier, certain occupations – deemed vital to national security – are closed to non-citizens. However, since these occupations comprise less than 3% of all occupations in the Swedish labour market, this exclusion for non-citizens should be of minor importance in explaining the employment gap between the native- and foreign-born.

Table 3 shows the employment rates for both foreign-born citizens and non-citizens by gender. Interestingly, with a few exceptions, it is found throughout all groups that citizens have a higher employment rate compared to non-citizens, indicating a "naturalization premium." However, earlier research on Sweden comes to another conclusion. Bevelander (2000) finds that naturalization status had negligible effects on the probability of being employed in data from the 1970 Census, but that naturalized immigrants did have better chances of being employed in the 1990 Census than foreign citizens. Moreover, Scott (2008) found that the so-called Swedish "naturalization effect" is a selection effect and not a function of citizenship itself. The effect of citizenship that turns up in cross-sectional data appears to be caused by characteristics inherent to the group that naturalizes, and not in the state of citizenship itself. This could be caused by aspiring citizens investing more in country-specific human capital with the intent of remaining in the country. This investment seems to pay off regardless of actual attainment of citizenship, which goes against the hypothesis stating that citizenship may be used as a device to signal intent to stay in the host country.

Concluding remarks

Sweden's citizenship legislation is among the most liberal in Europe. Differences between citizens and non-citizens regarding civil, political and social rights are generally small. Among the existing differences are voting rights in national elections and access to several social rights. The strong relationship between residence and access to rights and opportunities makes the effects of naturalization less visible. There is also little evidence of a naturalization effect in the case of labour market participation. There is, however, an effect on voter participation in local and regional elections. Naturalization increases the chances of voting in elections by over 80% when appropriate background variables have been taken into account.

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Notes

[1] Freedom of choice was the central cultural pluralist element of the new policy, the idea being that individuals should be able to choose whether to adopt a Swedish cultural affiliation, or retain that of their country of origin. Partnership can be seen as the need for mutual tolerance and solidarity between immigrants and native Swedes. These policies included mother tongue education and support of ethnic and cultural associations for immigrants.

[2] In this case the applicant has a waiting period before he or she can apply for Swedish citizenship.

[3] The subsistence requirement related to individuals' ability to support themselves in terms of work or other income.

[4] The Centre-Right parties, which had opposed dual citizenship in the 1980s, changed their position in the 1990s, partly due to *de facto* tolerance, and partly because of an increasing focus on Swedish citizens wanting to become citizens in other countries while retaining their bonds with Sweden.

[5] In Figure 1, voter turnout rates are based on an electoral survey. Individuals over the age of 75 were included from 1988 onwards. This means that prior to 1988, the participation rates shown in Figure 1 are somewhat higher than the actual electoral participation for the years preceding 1985.

[6] Citizens and non-citizens have been in the country for at least five years and are eligible to acquire citizenship.

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