

Immigrants in Switzerland are far more likely to have their application for citizenship rejected if the decision is made using a referendum.

Blog Admin

*When immigrants in Switzerland apply for citizenship, the decision is made in the municipality where they reside. While in some parts of Switzerland these decisions are made by elected representatives, in other municipalities individual applications are subject to a public referendum. **Dominik Hangartner** and **Jens Hainmueller** assess the impact of direct democracy on citizenship applications, finding that far fewer applications are accepted when a referendum is used. The applicant's country of origin is the most important factor in determining success, with applicants from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia over ten times more likely to be rejected than those from other countries, such as Italy.*



Eligible immigrants that seek Swiss citizenship have to apply at the municipality in which they reside and municipalities use different institutions to decide on the naturalisation applications. Some municipalities have adopted the purest form of direct democracy: citizens vote on each application in a secret ballot referendum. How do immigrants fare when their naturalisations are decided with referendums?



We have collected and analysed data for more than 2,400 applicants that faced popular votes between 1970 and 2003. The results show that success in naturalisation referendums depended strongly on the applicant characteristics. Whereas the applicants' language skills, economic success, and integration status played almost no role, the applicant's country of origin was by far the most important driver of naturalisation success. Among otherwise similar applicants, the risk of being rejected by voters was more than ten times higher for immigrants from Turkey and (the former) Yugoslavia compared to immigrants from Italy or Spain. The statistical evidence also showed that this origin-based discrimination was much stronger in more xenophobic municipalities. The results of the study are detailed in the video below, and a more comprehensive review of the findings is available in a recent [American Political Science Review paper](#).

Video: How does direct democracy influence citizenship applications?

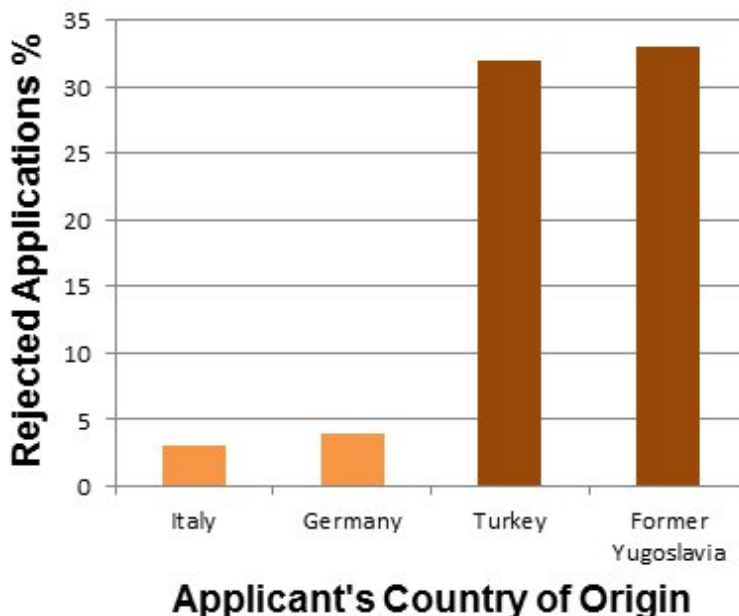
But do immigrants fare better if naturalisation requests are decided by elected politicians, instead of voters? We collected data on naturalisation decisions from over 1,400 municipalities for the period between 1991 and 2009. In the early 1990s, over 80 per cent of municipalities used some form of direct democracy. However, in the early 2000s – following a series of landmark rulings by the Swiss Federal Court – about 600 municipalities switched to representative democracy and delegated application decisions to the elected municipality council.

The results show that there was no differential trend in the naturalisation rates during the four years prior to the switch. However, once municipalities switched from direct to representative democracy, naturalisation rates dramatically increased by about 50 per cent in the first year, and by more than 100 per cent in the following years. Overall, the statistical results demonstrate that, on average, immigrants fare much better if their naturalisation requests are decided by elected officials in the municipality council instead of voters in referendums. The data also showed that the effect of switching to representative democracy varied by origin: naturalisation rates increased by only 3 per cent for immigrants from Italy and

by only 35 per cent for immigrants from Germany, but by 68 per cent for immigrants from Turkey and by 75 per cent for immigrants from Yugoslavia. Taken together, the findings show that representative democracy led to far fewer rejections for more marginalised origin groups, as detailed in our [second paper](#). The effect of an applicant's country of origin on the results of citizenship referendums is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Percentage of Swiss Citizenship Applications Rejected in Municipal Referendums

Overall, many qualified immigrant applicants who were rejected by voters in naturalisation referendums would be Swiss citizens today, if their application had been decided by elected officials in the municipality council. Direct democracy provides a significant barrier for access to citizenship and it has a disproportionately large effect on those immigrant minorities who are the most marginalised in society. The empirical evidence suggests that naturalisation applications should be decided by elected municipal councils in order to minimise the risk of discriminatory rejections.



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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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