**Whom Do We Naturalize? A Factorial Survey on Naturalization Preferences in Germany**

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**ABSTRACT**

German citizenship law, historically viewed as an ethnocultural regime, is undergoing reforms, including a reduction in required years of residence and a shift towards accepting dual citizenship. These changes not only reflect alterations in legislation but also propel the broader society into a discourse on membership criteria. Leveraging data on public opinion towards naturalization requirements from three waves (1996, 2006, and 2016) of the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) and existing studies, this research implements vignettes of hypothetical naturalization applicants in a representative survey with 1.500 respondents (resulting in 6.000 vignette evaluations). The analysis reveals that respondents are more inclined to support naturalizations when integration of the applicants is demonstrated through language proficiency and employment, coupled with an extended period of residence. Additionally, origin-related preferences are evident – British citizens are given priority for naturalization compared to individuals from Turkey and India. Older respondents tend to reject dual citizenship, expressing a preference for applicants willing to renounce their former citizenship upon naturalization. In summary, the analysis documents a shifting landscape of attitudes toward naturalization in Germany, with instrumental consideration gaining salience. Although ethnic considerations remain important, instrumental considerations dominate. The analysis suggests that dual citizenship, currently a reason for exclusion primarily for older respondents, may be viewed more positively in the future.

**KEYWORDS**

Citizenship; naturalization; migration; factorial survey

**Introduction**

Naturalizations are sensitive membership decisions for any political community, as they require an agreement on who belongs or should belong in the future (Orgad 2017). These decisions also convey specific rights and duties which can have substantial bearing on life chances (Bloemraad and Sheares 2017). Beyond enabling access to a relatively prosperous territory, German citizenship facilitates global mobility by granting visa-free entry to XXX states (Mau et al. 2015), showcasing the tangible impact of citizenship on individuals’ opportunities. The access to these benefits is intricately structured by citizenship and naturalization laws, rendering citizenship “a powerful instrument of social closure” (Brubaker 1992: 23).

Regarding naturalization and citizenship acquisition, states can be less or more open (Vink 2017). Different regime typologies have been proposed to capture underlying understandings of citizenship. Many typologies are derived from Brubaker’s (1992) influential comparison of nationhood in France and Germany which follow a civic or ethnocultural understanding, respectively. While civic conceptions underscore acquired criteria, ethnocultural understandings emphasize nativity and ancestry. Legal traditions that enable naturalization to persons born within a state’s territory (*jus soli*) and those that emphasize “blood” descent (*jus sanguinis*) are often mapped onto this civic/ethnic dichotomy. However, empirical evidence shows that naturalization policies often integrate elements of both conceptions (Reeskens and Hooghe 2010). In addition, states can overcome legal traditions and reform their naturalization laws over time (Vink 2017).

Germany serves as a compelling case in this context. Post-reunification, the country transformed from a paradigmatic case of an ethnocultural regime, allowing naturalization only through descent, to a more liberalized system introducing birthright citizenship and reducing access requirements (Gerdes and Faist 2006; Palmowski 2008). Subsequent amendments, such as the naturalization test, linked naturalization to measurable integration efforts (Goodman 2011). Despite ongoing debates between political parties, a recent reform initiative suggests a further liberalization of citizenship law. This includes proposals to reduce the required residence period and to generally accept multiple citizenship.

While extensive research exists on citizenship policy and politics, scant attention has been given to individuals’ perspective on naturalization (Levanon and Lewin-Epstein 2010: 428). Yet, research on *everyday nationhood* indicate that individuals’ views on citizenship may diverge from policy content (Miller-Idriss 2006; Reijerse et al. 2013). This article aims to bridge this research gap by using a factorial design (i.e., vignette study) to examine how individuals weigh attributes of hypothetical naturalization applicants when deciding whom to grant German citizenship. The study thus enhances our understanding of the relational process of recognition, including both the definition of membership criteria the evaluation of whether a specific applicant satisfies these conditions (Bloemraad 2018).

**Background**

***German Citizenship Law and Reform***

As previously mentioned, German citizenship law has often been regarded as a paradigmatic case of an ethnocultural regime, primarily allowing acquisition through descent.[[1]](#footnote-1) Initial adjustments were made shortly after reunification with the introduction of the Foreigners Act (*Ausländergesetz, AusG*). However, a departure from *jus sanguinis* was only achieved with the enactment of the new Citizenship Act in 2000 (*Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz, StAG*). This regulation introduced *jus soli*, albeit under strict conditions, marking what has been described as “a seismic shift in German citizenship law” (Green 2000: 114).

The 2000 Citizenship Act notably reduced the required residence period for naturalization from fifteen to eight years. More significantly, it allowed children born in Germany to immigrants to acquire citizenship if at least one parent has eight years of residency and a permanent residence permit. However, the intended acceptance of dual citizenship was not implemented due to need to strike a political compromise (Gerdes, Faist, and Rieple 2007).

Initial expectations suggested an increase in naturalizations following this reform, but the effect proved unsustainable, resulting in a steady decline in naturalizations (see Figure 1). Apart from the notable surge in naturalizations by British citizens just before the United Kingdom left the European Union (EU) in 2020, the annual naturalization numbers remained relatively stable, hovering around 110,000 per year.[[2]](#footnote-2) The new citizenship law also imposed additional requirements, such as a declaration of loyalty to the principles of Basic Law and demonstration of proficiency in the German language. Furthermore, the naturalization fee was raised from €55 to €255. Scholars emphasize that Germany’s formal rejection of dual citizenship stands out as a significant obstacle for many foreigners (Green 2012; Weinmann 2022).[[3]](#footnote-3)

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**Figure 1**. Naturalizations and major policy reforms 1995–2022

Later legislation such as the 2004 Immigration Act (*Zuwanderungsgesetz, ZuwandG*) and its reform in 2007 extended the mandatory integration requirements outlined in the Citizenship Act of 2000, thereby placing an “’integration’ price tag” (Hartnell 2006: 61) on the liberalizations. The policies introduced a state-mandated integration course and subsequently an integration test (Green 2012). As highlighted by Goodman (2012), these policies are “defining in an explicit way—for the first time—what it means to be (…) German (…) for status-seeking immigrants” (674).

The current citizenship reform, passed by the federal government and awaiting parliamentary approval, proposes a general acceptance of dual citizenship. Additionally, the required residence period is set to be reduced from eight to five years (in specific cases, to three years). Plans also include lowering requirements for immigrants who arrived in Germany as guest or contract workers (Schmid 2022). In many ways, the current political debate echoes arguments that already accompanied the Citizenship Act of 2000. While the largest opposition party, the CDU/CSU, underlines that a reduction of the required residence period may hamper immigrants’ integration efforts, the governing coalition emphasizes that naturalizations are an integral element in the integration process. They argue that facilitating citizenship acquisition can contribute positively to the overall integration of immigrants.

***Public Attitudes toward Naturalizations***

Immigration stands as a highly salient issue across European societies, with long-term surveys indicating that it currently ranks as the foremost concern in Germany (Politbarometer). While prior research has successfully identified individual characteristics such as age and education as explanatory factors for attitudes toward immigrants (Dražanová et al. 2023), a crucial gap in our understanding persists regarding one of the immigrants’ most pivotal claims – the demand for equal membership.

Drawing on data from the 1996 and 2006 waves of the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS), Diehl and Tucci (2011) contribute valuable insights by demonstrating a shifting landscape in the criteria deemed important for acquiring German citizenship. Their findings unveil a diminishing significance of ethnic criteria, such as being born in Germany or German descent, among respondents. Simultaneously, cultural considerations, including German language proficiency and lifestyle adaptations, have gained prominence over time (also see Worbs 2009). The authors posit that citizenship law reforms may have played a role in shaping this changing of public opinion (Diehl and Tucci 2011; Worbs 2009).

In a study examining individual-level drivers of attitudes toward naturalization requirements, Levanon and Lewin-Epstein (2010) find that individuals who perceive economic or cultural threats are more likely to support restrictive citizenship policies. Their research thus underscores that factors explaining general attitudes toward immigrants also influence membership decisions.

Finally, scholars have employed factorial surveys to probe into attitudes toward hypothetical naturalization applicants (e.g., Atzmüller and Steiner 2010; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015; Donnaloja 2022). In an investigation involving a sample of British respondents, Donnaloja (2022) highlights that British citizens express a preference for applicants who have resided in the United Kingdom (UK) for several years, are employed, preferably in high-status jobs, and possess a strong command of the English language. Intriguingly, British respondents do not differentiate between applicants from various countries of origin once additional factors are considered. While Donnaloja interprets her findings as aligning with a merit-based perspective on citizenship, her analysis also uncovers disparities: Muslim immigrants are less likely to be granted citizenship compared to their Christian counterparts. In addition, hypothetical applicants with British ancestry are preferred over individuals without ancestral ties to the UK.

By and large, these findings are confirmed by Harell et al. (2012), who find for Canada and the United States that the job status of hypothetical applicants is more important than their ethnicity in regard to naturalization preferences. In contrast to these findings, Hainmueller et al. (2015) report a distinct preference among Swiss nationals for applicants from EU countries. Similarly, Kobayashi et al. (2015) reveal that Japanese respondents favor Korean over Chinese nationals. They also highlight that hypothetical applicants who show a willingness to integrate and have a high-status job are preferred by Japanese nationals. In sum, these findings underscore country-specific differences that may be rooted in specific citizenship regimes.

***Hypotheses***

Building upon the historical legacy of Germany’s citizenship law and existing studies of public attitudes toward naturalizations, I formulate hypotheses regarding stated preferences for specific hypothetical naturalization applicants in Germany.

The trajectory of German citizenship law and analyses of public opinion both underscore a growing emphasis on measurable integration efforts. Consequently, I hypothesize that respondents are inclined to prefer applicants with a high proficiency in the German language and stable employment (*Hypothesis 1a*).

Existing research highlights a persistent in-group preference among states that traditionally have not been considered immigrant countries. In alignment with this finding, I assume that hypothetical immigrants from countries of origin perceived as culturally distant are less likely to be granted citizenship (*Hypothesis 1b*).

Despite the widespread acceptance of naturalizations with the allowance of multiple citizenships in Germany, I propose that the historical rejection of multiple citizenships may still influence the rejection of candidates wishing to retain their previous citizenship (*Hypothesis 1c*).

At the individual level, I align with studies emphasizing the significance of education and age for more liberal attitudes towards immigrants. Hence, I hypothesize that respondents with a higher educational level are more likely to accept immigrants as fellow citizens than their counterparts with lower educational level (*Hypothesis 2a*). Additionally, older respondents are expected to be less willing to grant citizenship to immigrants than younger individuals (*Hypothesis 2b*). Finally, I hypothesize that respondents who express concern about the economic situation (economic threat) and cultural diversity (cultural threat) are less likely to extend citizenship to immigrants than individuals with lower threat perception (*hypothesis 2c*).

**Data and Measures**

I use a factorial survey, a vignette study, to test the proposed hypotheses. For the vignette study, 1,500 individuals were surveyed online in early September 2023. Respondents were sampled to be nationally representative of age, gender, and federal state.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the vignettes, six dimensions were varied, each with up to three attributes, resulting in a vignette universe of 2432 = 144 vignettes (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Vignette dimensions and balance

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Attribute** | **Level** | ***N*** | **Percentage** |
| Gender | Female | 3,007 | 50.1 |
|  | Male | 2,993 | 49.9 |
| Country of origin | United Kingdom | 1,998 | 33.3 |
|  | India | 2,012 | 33.5 |
|  | Turkey | 1,990 | 33.2 |
| Residence period | 3 years | 2,018 | 33.6 |
|  | 5 years | 1,992 | 33.2 |
|  | 10 years | 1,990 | 33.2 |
| Employment | Seeking employment | 2,988 | 49.8 |
|  | Employed | 3,012 | 50.2 |
| German proficiency | Little | 3,008 | 50.1 |
|  | Very good | 2,992 | 49.9 |
| Dual citizenship | Retain | 2,999 | 50.0 |
|  | Renounce | 3,001 | 50.0 |
| Total | — | Vignettes: 6,000  Respondents: 1,500 | 100 |

In the survey, all vignettes were used in a “full factorial” design and divided into 36 blocks. Consequently, each respondent evaluated four vignettes.[[5]](#footnote-5) The vignettes were presented in a random order within each block. In the resulting sample, the vignette dimensions are orthogonal and exhibit level balance (see Table 1 and Appendix). Using the full factorial allows the estimation of all relevant interaction terms. Figure 2 shows an example deck of four vignettes.

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**Figure 2.** Example vignette deck

Factorial surveys combine the advantages of experimental designs and surveys, thereby enabling researchers to study the causal effect of multiple treatments within larger samples (Auspurg and Hinz 2015: 9-12). In contrast to direct questioning, factorial surveys have proven effective in mitigating social desirability bias (Auspurg et al. 2015). Benchmark studies have shown that treatments effects observed in factorial surveys closely align with real-world behaviors (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015; Petzold and Wolbring 2019).

However, to take advantage of factorial surveys, the experiments must be well planned and implemented.[[6]](#footnote-6) Methodological research recommends limiting the number of vignette dimensions to 7 ± 2. This ensures that respondents are not overwhelmed by too many dimensions, while maintaining enough experimental conditions to prevent boredom. Simultaneously, it is imperative to keep the number of level per dimension to a minimum to obtain precise estimates (Auspurg and Hinz 2015: 19-20).

Additionally, careful design of vignettes is essential to minimize illogical combinations (Auspurg and Hinz 2015: 41). For example, citizens from EU member states can already naturalize in Germany under the current legal situation without renouncing their previous citizenship. Consequently, individuals from countries of origin who can already be naturalized by accepting multiple citizenships were intentionally excluded from the selection process.

The survey also gathered socio-demographic and additional attitudinal data on the respondents (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Respondent characteristics

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Attribute** | **Level** | ***N*** | **Percentage** |
| Gender | Female | 766 | 51.1 |
|  | Male | 734 | 48.9 |
| Education | No diploma/in school | 10 | 0.7 |
|  | Hauptschule (8/9) | 227 | 15.1 |
|  | Realschule (10) | 519 | 34.6 |
|  | Abitur, Fachhochschulreife | 744 | 49.6 |
| Citizenship | German | 1,331 | 88.7 |
|  | Dual citizenship | 108 | 7.2 |
|  | Third country | 52 | 3.5 |
|  | Prefer not say | 9 | 0.6 |
| Age group | 18–29 years | 249 | 16.6 |
|  | 30–39 years | 229 | 15.3 |
|  | 40–49 years | 226 | 15.1 |
|  | 50–59 years | 292 | 19.5 |
|  | Over 60 years | 504 | 33.6 |
| Party preference | CDU/CSU | 296 | 19.7 |
|  | SPD | 212 | 14.1 |
|  | Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen | 165 | 11.0 |
|  | Die Linke | 85 | 5.7 |
|  | AfD | 217 | 14.5 |
|  | FDP | 75 | 5.0 |
|  | No preference | 388 | 25.9 |
|  | Other | 62 | 4.1 |
| Region | West Germany (incl. Berlin) | 1,268 | 84.5 |
|  | East Germany | 232 | 15.5 |
| Total | — | Respondents: 1,500 | 100 |

The resulting data has a multilevel structure, with vignettes (*level 1*) nested in respondents (*level 2*). Accordingly, the methodological literature suggests using multilevel models to account for the hierarchical data structure (Auspurg and Hinz 2015; Baguley, Dunham, and Steer 2022). The data analysis follows a stepwise procedure – bottom-up strategy – whereby (1) only vignette variables are included, (2) respondent level characteristics are added, and (3) cross-level interactions are investigated (Auspurg and Hinz 2015: 91; Luke 2020: 24). The first analytical step captures the shared understanding of vignette variables, while the subsequent models shed light on subgroup differences (Auspurg and Hinz 2015: 91).

**Main results**

*Vignette variables*

In the initial stage of analysis, I assess how respondents evaluate the vignettes of hypothetical naturalization applicants. Figure 3, illustrating the main effects of the vignette variables, highlights a clear preference for naturalization applicants from the United Kingdom over individuals from Turkey and India. On the seven-point scale, individuals from Turkey and India are rated 0.37 and 0.32 points lower, respectively, than British citizens, aligning with the expectation outlined in Hypothesis 1b.

In comparison to characteristics that measure integration, however, the effect sizes are relatively low. Naturalization candidates with “very good” German language skills are 1.35 points more likely to be granted citizenship than those with limited language proficiency. Similarly, employed individuals are 0.95 points more likely to be granted citizenship than those who are seeking employment. These findings strongly support Hypothesis 1a in the results. Moreover, respondents exhibit a preference for individuals seeking naturalization with a longer duration of residence, with applications from individuals with a ten-year residence period being more likely to garner support than those with three or five years of residence.

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**Figure 3.** Linear multilevel regression model for naturalization preference on vignette dimensions; see Tables XX in the Online Appendix for the full regression table. *N* (Respondents) = 1.500; *N* (Vignettes) = 6.000

Consistent with Hypothesis 1c, naturalization candidates willing to renounce their previous citizenship are strongly favored over individuals intending to retain their current citizenship. Those willing to renounce their previous citizenship are 0.78 points more likely to be granted citizenship than their counterparts opting for a second citizenship.

Finally, the results reveal no significant gender disparities in the likelihood to be granted German citizenship.

*Respondent characteristics*

In the second step of the analysis, I include respondent characteristics as predictors to examine whether they impact vignette evaluations. Figure 4 shows that only a few respondent characteristics exert a significant effect on vignette evaluations. Individuals who themselves have dual citizenship are 0.48 points more likely to grant citizenship than respondents with only the German citizenship. Additionally, individuals with a party preference for the incumbent Social Democrats (SPD), whose Minister of the Interior, Nancy Faeser, is also responsible for the reform, evaluate naturalization applications 0.48 points more favorably than individuals with a preference for the largest opposition party (CDU/CSU). Supporters of the other coalition parties, *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* and *FDP*, are also more likely to grant citizenship than individuals in support of the CDU/CSU; however, the respective coefficients are not statistically significant. Finally, individuals who prefer the anti-immigrant *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) are much less likely to grant citizenship compared to individuals in favor of the *CDU/CSU* (-0.37 points).

The results are neither in support of Hypotheses 2a nor 2b. Respondents’ educational level does not affect preferences to naturalization applications. Additionally, respondents age is not associated with the general preference to award citizenship to hypothetical naturalization applicants. However, Hypothesis 2c finds partial support. Although the economic situation of respondents does not influence the preference toward citizenship applications, respondents who are concerned about immigration are less likely to grant citizenship. Increasing immigration concerns, which are measured on a seven-point scale, by one point, decreases the preference toward naturalization applications by 0.24 points.

Including respondent characteristics improves model fit as measured by AIC and BIC. Additionally, the intra-class correlation (ICC) is reduced by seven points.

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**Figure 4.** Linear multilevel regression model for naturalization preference on respondent characteristics. Vignette effects included in the model are not reported; see Tables XX in the Online Appendix for the full regression table. *N* (Respondents) = 1.491; *N* (Vignettes) = 5.964

*Cross-level interactions*

In the last step of the analysis, I examine cross-level effects between vignette variables (*level 1*) and respondent characteristics (*level 2*), thereby revealing subgroup differences in the vignette effects.

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**Figure 5.** Conditional-Effects plots of cross-level interactions from a linear multilevel regression model for naturalization preference on respondent characteristics; see Table XX in the Online Appendix for the full regression table. *N* (Respondents) = 1.491; *N* (Vignettes) = 5.964

**Conclusion**

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1. Although the ethnocultural understanding is evident in the Reichs- und Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz (RuStAG), which was regulating German citizenship from 22 July 1993 until 2000, it has been argued that reforms were not only stifled by ethnocultural undercurrents but also West Germany’s claim towards the GDR to be the sole representative of Germany’s interests (Green 2000: 109; Gerdes and Faist 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The recent uptick in naturalizations is primarily attributed Syrian refugees, whose heightened interest in becoming a German citizens overwhelmed many naturalization administrations, leading to extended waiting periods. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. However, there are exemptions for EU and Swiss nationals, recognized refugees, and elderly. In fact, most naturalizations are today carried out while accepting multiple citizenships. In 2022, 74.2 percent of all naturalizations were conducted with acceptance of dual citizenship (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Using secondary data from the ALLBUS it can be shown that the respondent characteristics closely resembles the general population (see Appendix). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The block design was implemented using the “AlgDesign” (Wheeler 2022) software package in the R programming language (R Core Team 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In setting up the factorial survey, I followed the guidelines formulated by Auspurg an Hinz (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)