To: Marlo G. Ball, Deputy Secretary

From: John Kearns

Subject: Discrimination Against Immigrants in Switzerland

Date: December 1, 2022

You requested a memo evaluating claims of discrimination along racial and ethnic lines in votes on citizenship applications in Swiss municipalities. While there has been substantial variation in the origin of immigrants over time, **our analysis shows that Turkish applicants receive are 50 percentage points more likely to be rejected for citizenship.** This result is robust even after controlling for human and social capital like education, language, and degree of assimilation. **Bias against certain applicants surges when there is a rise in their relative share of total immigrants to Switzerland**.

**Background**

*Switzerland has historically been a homogenous country with a low population growth rate*

Over most of its history, the central European country of Switzerland has been racially and ethnically homogenous. While the Swiss Federal Statistical office does not collect data on racial or ethnic identity of residents, which makes further analysis difficult, information on religion gives some insight into the diversity of the country.[[1]](#endnote-1) In 1900, 0.6% of the population Switzerland followed a religion other than Catholicism or Protestant Christianity; by 1960, this number had remained unchanged.[[2]](#endnote-2) Likewise, the share of the Swiss population that was foreign born increased by only 0.3 percentage points over the same timeframe.

The population growth rate, especially for European Swiss natives, has been remarkably low since World War II. And despite increasing immigration in recent years, Switzerland’s total fertility rate has been below replacement level since 1970.[[3]](#endnote-3)

*Switzerland has seemed a dramatic increase in the flow and makeup of immigrants since 1970*

However, Switzerland has increasingly become diverse and an attractive destination for immigrants around the world. Since 1970, the share of the Swiss population that is foreign born has grown from 10.8% to 25.7% in 2021.[[4]](#endnote-4) This is the third highest proportion among OECD countries, and it is more than 7 percentage points greater than the current US figure.

Figure 1 presents data from Hainmeuller and Hangartner on the number of applications for Swiss citizenship processed from 1970 through 2009 from select towns. Switzerland is unique in that it leaves the decision for naturalization up to the residents of the immigrant’s community; the town votes simply yes or no to allow them to become a Swiss citizen. The figure shows that the number of applicants has increased substantially over time, more than tripling from the 1970s to the 2000s. Further, the origins have changed even more dramatically. **While citizenship applicants had initially hailed from Northern and Western Europe, flows of immigrants from Asia, Yugoslavia, and Turkey picked up beginning in the 1980s. Increased immigration from Turkey seems to account for a majority of the rise in applications over this time period.**

**Figure 1: Number of applications by origin, since 1970**

Chart

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**Descriptive statistics**

For this analysis, I rely on data from Hainmeuller and Hangartner on the outcomes of roughly 1500 citizenship application elections between 1970 and 2003 in 44 Swiss municipalities. Provided are the percentage of no votes received, region of origin, and demographic statistics on sex, family structure, age, education, occupation, language, and social integration.

This data is particularly strong for analyzing attitudes towards immigrants because the results are unlinked to individuals, therefore indicating the voter’s true opinion at the time of submitting. In a survey-based study, one must worry about self-censoring of controversial opinions. However, there is a drawback that we do not have municipality identifiers for the applications. It is possible that there is substantial correlation between voting patterns and immigrant location. This will not be accounted for in my analysis. We also do not know for how long immigrants have been in Switzerland prior to their application. It could be that certain groups wait relatively fewer years before applying, which likely leads to less success. Other useful pieces of information that are not provided include religion of the applicant and occupation in their origin country, for example.

*Immigrants from Turkey and Yugoslavia are more similar to more accepted immigrant groups than voting statistics would imply.*

I begin by analyzing descriptive statistics across different immigrant groups to motivate analysis of racial sentiment in voting behavior of Swiss residents on citizenship applications. If the Swiss people were consistent in selecting only highly-educated or Swiss-speaking immigrants, it may be that differences across ethnic groups are artefacts of greater Swiss preferences and not evidence of bias against one specific group.

Table 1 summarizes statistics by the region of origin for immigration applicants. Turkish applicants receive the most negative responses by far; on average, Turkish applicants get approved for citizenship only 46% of the time. Immigrants from Western and Southern Europe are approved at a 95% success rate. While Turks may be slightly younger, more male, and relatively less educated than the average applicant, Turkish applicants are as educated as immigrants from Asia and are the most well-assimilated group among non-European immigrants at the time of application. A scan of the descriptive statistics seems to suggest a consistent application of preferences does not explain all of the variation in success by different immigrant groups.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics, by origin**

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1 Source: Hainmeuller and Hangartner. Note: Orange indicates highest value for a statistic among groups, while blue indicates the lowest value.

**Analysis**

*Origin remains an important determinant of acceptance, regardless of personal qualities*

The first examination of Table 1 does not resolve what really drives the pattern in acceptance of immigrants. Table 2 (found in the appendix) presents my second attempt to understand the underlying mechanisms at play. The coefficient for each area of origin reports the change in the probability of approval relative to a comparable applicant from Southern Europe. Without accounting for any demographics (Column 1), two groups are at a significant disadvantage: Turks (-49 percentage points) and Yugoslavians (-21). This trend remains incredibly consistent after controlling for age, sex, family structure, language proficiency, and community-reported levels of assimilation and integration. When controlling for all of these factors together, the coefficient for Turks remains significant at the 1% significance level and consistently around the -50 percentage point threshold. **The main takeaway is that for two given identical immigrants, the immigrant from Southern Europe is twice as likely to be approved than the Turkish immigrant.**

Additional insights from Table 2 are as follows: (1) the likelihood for the Swiss to approve any application, holding demographics constant, has declined by nearly 21 percentage points since the 1970s; and (2) while demographic controls are significant in aggregate, the only factors with individual significance relate to the level of integration in the Swiss community.

*Animus against Turkish immigrants has increased over time and is unrelated with specific characteristics*

Given this stark result, what drives such a negative Swiss reaction towards Turkish immigrants? Figure 2 presents the results from a regression that identifies the difference between Turks and all other immigrants in approval probability prescribed to certain characteristics (significant differences at the 5% level are colored in blue). In other words, the size of the bar shown in the figure shows the extent to which Swiss voters discriminate against Turkish people on certain characteristics. For example, Turkish applicants over the age of 60 are penalized, but they represent only 2% of all Turkish applicants. The disparity we see against Turks remains stark regardless of age. In other words, the discrimination is not explained by other characteristics apart from country of origin.

**Figure 2: Swiss biases against Turkish immigrants, observable characteristics**

Chart, waterfall chart

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However, Swiss attitudes have differed dramatically over time. Figure 3 summarizes the difference in acceptance of Turks relative to other groups over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, there seemed to be no significant bias against Turkish immigrants. However, coincident with the surge in immigration from Turkey in the 1990s and 2000s, Swiss attitudes drastically change. **Independent of any of the immigrant’s individual characteristics, the sudden influx greatly worsened Swiss residents’ willingness to accept Turkish immigrants.**

**Figure 3: Swiss biases against Turkish immigrants, over time**

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**Policy implications and conclusions**

After controlling for time-varying attitudes towards Turks, there is no evidence that the Swiss people are categorically biased against Turkish immigrants. This is a slight silver lining that attitudes may return to their previous levels over time, or efforts to increase familiarity between communities at a national level could improve the situation. It should also be noted that a negative narrative surrounding Turkish immigrants is not unique to Switzerland among European countries. However, it is a great moral concern that government policy allows prejudice to dictate immigration outcomes, undermining the values Switzerland, the European Union, and all Western nations profess.

At the conference, I recommend that you come prepared to engage European leaders in an honest dialogue on a responsible narrative on immigration that Western leaders want to foster in their countries. Immigrants from all backgrounds should be afforded the respect and dignity that is offered to the lucky citizens that have been born in Switzerland.

**Appendix**

**Table 2: Regressions for the probability of an application being approved, by origin**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Area of Origin | Baseline | Demographic Controls | Education Controls | Language Controls | Integration Controls | All Controls |  |
|  |  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |  |
|  | Intercept  (Percentage of Applications Approved for Southern Europeans) | 94.40\*\* | 97.74\*\*\* | 88.60\*\*\* | 86.42\*\*\* | 81.23\*\*\* | 102.13\*\*\* |  |
|  | (1.51) | (5.05) | (2.69) | (9.51) | (3.70) | (13.85) |  |
|  | From Turkey | -48.79\*\*\* | -44.82\*\*\* | -47.89\*\*\* | -57.68\*\*\* | -55.57\*\*\* | -51.12\*\*\* |  |
|  | (2.42) | (2.99) | (2.48) | (3.58) | (3.31) | (5.10) |  |
|  | From Yugoslavia | -21.36\*\*\* | -21.80\*\*\* | -22.94\*\*\* | -13.60 | -25.60\*\*\* | -17.18 |  |
|  | (4.95) | (5.27) | (5.06) | (8.24) | (6.51) | (9.11) |  |
|  | From Asia | -4.20 | -1.40 | -3.13 | -11.52 | -6.31 | -4.04 |  |
|  | (3.32) | (3.93) | (3.83) | (6.96) | (5.14) | (9.20) |  |
|  | From Non-European Poor | -14.40 | -11.77 | -15.90 | -24.74 | -29.25\* | -28.45 |  |
|  | (7.47) | (7.72) | (7.38) | (14.86) | (12.90) | (17.31) |  |
|  | From Other Countries (Mainly Northern and Western Europe) | 1.99\*\*\* | -0.78 | -0.39 | 3.11 | 0.32 | -8.59 |  |
|  | (1.92) | (2.52) | (2.11) | (2.98) | (2.92) | (5.62) |  |
|  | Observations | 1,397 | 1397 | 1,397 | 551 | 851 | 461 |  |
|  | Adjusted R2 | 0.25 | 0.26 | 0.26 | 0.29 | 0.34 | 0.38 |  |
|  | RMSE | 40.19 | 40.09 | 40.08 | 41.52 | 39.11 | 38.75 |  |
|  | Decade Controls | N | Y | N | N | N | Y |  |
|  | Age, Sex, Family Structure Controls | N | Y | N | N | N | Y |  |
|  | Education and Occupation Controls | N | N | Y | N | N | Y |  |
|  | Language Controls | N | N | N | Y | N | Y |  |
|  | Integration and Assimilation Controls | N | N | N | N | Y | Y |  |

Note: This table presents regressions for the probability of approval on indicators for origin and a suite of control variables. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are in parentheses. \* p < 0.1; \*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\* p < 0.01.

1. <https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=SDD/DOC(2018)9&docLanguage=En#page=50> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://rm.coe.int/16804fb7b1> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=CH> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Switzerland#Census> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)