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Original Article

The causal effect of liberalizing legal requirements on naturalization intentions

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This study investigates the multifaceted factors influencing immigrants' naturalization intentions, with a primary focus on legal requirements and the implementation of naturalization laws. It distinguishes between different groups of non-citizens, such as refugees, European Union (EU) citizens, and non-EU citizens. Employing a vignette experiment among non-citizens in a large-scale representative data in Germany—the *German Socioeconomic Panel* (in 2022), the *IAB-SOEP Migration Sample* (in 2022), and the *IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany* (in 2021) (Total N = 6431)—the research empirically analyzes the effects of liberalizing legal requirements and the effects of more inclusive naturalization procedure on intentions to acquire German citizenship. This comparison, both for current versus liberalized requirements and less versus more inclusive naturalization procedures, offers a realistic scenario of how liberalization and inclusiveness impact naturalization intentions. The results reveal that liberalizing legal requirements, specifically dual citizenship availability and reduced waiting period, has a positive effect on naturalization intentions. Simultaneously, these effects differ between the three groups of non-citizens, particularly due to differences in the perceived benefits of naturalization. In contrast, a more inclusive naturalization procedure does not affect non-citizens' naturalization intentions. These results underline the importance of citizenship policy for the naturalization intentions of non-citizens. However, the results also show nuanced reactions to liberalized requirements stressing the importance of group-specific cost–benefit considerations.

Key words: naturalization intentions; refugees; immigrants; vignette experiment.

Introduction

Naturalization is an essential benchmark of the political, civic, and social integration of immigrants (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2017; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Ward 2019). Naturalization not only guarantees the same rights as natives but also eliminates the status of being a "foreigner" (Diehl and Blohm 2003, 159). This can be an important motivation, especially

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regarding social mobility (ibid.). In this study, we analyze the impact of destination country conditions on immigrants' naturalization intentions, recognizing that these conditions significantly influence immigrants' daily lives, societal integration, and ultimately their naturalization. Institutional and policy factors of the destination country are crucial for naturalization intentions (e.g., Bloemraad 2002, 2006; Jones-Correa 2001). The legal requirements for naturalization vary considerably between destination countries and contribute to cross-country differences in naturalization rates (e.g., González-Ferrer and Morales 2013; Reichel 2011). Upon this background, we ask which legal requirements mostly deter immigrants, and in particular non-citizens, from naturalizing and whether liberalizing legal requirements increases naturalization intentions.

When analyzing naturalization intentions, it is important to consider non-citizens' social context. The social context manifests itself in different legal rights of non-citizens in the destination country, which are incorporated into the naturalization decision (Peters and Vink 2016). As Yang (1994, 451) puts it, the social context influences non-citizens' "[. . .] naturalization decisions by shaping their perceptions of the costs, benefits and meaning of naturalization, which are probably the most direct determinants of naturalization decisions". To understand the relevance of legal requirements and their liberalization in the destination country, we consider the social context by studying different groups of non-citizens. Specifically, we focus on refugees, citizens from European Union countries (EU citizens) and non-EU citizens, all groups of non-citizens with fundamentally different legal rights. In differentiating between groups according to their legal rights, we follow Menjívar's (2023, 3) argument that formalized bureaucratic categories, which allocate resources and rights, directly contribute to persistent inequalities. In our study, this categorization translates into naturalization intentions differences among these groups. Accordingly, the importance of naturalization varies considerably across groups of non-citizens. For refugees, for example, the relative benefits of naturalization are particularly high because of their limited prospects of return migration (DeVoretz 2013). On the other hand, restrictive requirements refugees and other immigrants face can be too high an obstacle, especially for those from less developed countries.

Empirically, we consider liberalizing legal requirements by taking advantage of a vignette experiment. Vignette experiments allow us to vary different dimensions of legal requirements simultaneously and to make causal inference about their influence on the intention to naturalize. In a vignette experiment, respondents are shown short descriptions of situations, which respondents are then asked to evaluate (Auspurg and Hinz 2015). We present respondents a set of more liberal and stricter legal requirements and ask about their naturalization intention. This comparison between more liberal and stricter requirements offers a realistic scenario of how liberalization affects naturalization intentions. We vary the dimensions of dual citizenship, length of the waiting period, language test, naturalization test, duration of the bureaucratic procedure, bureaucratic fees, family application, and delivery of the certificate.

To consider the social context for differences in naturalization intentions, we integrated a harmonized vignette experiment among non-citizens in a large-scale representative data in Germany, the *German Socioeconomic Panel* (in 2022), the *IAB-SOEP Migration Sample* (in 2022), and the *IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany* (in 2021) (Total N = 6431). We focus on Germany because it is one of the major destinations of immigrants and Germany hosts many refugees. At the same time, even though Germany has the largest total and relative number of naturalizations in the EU-27, Germany reports relatively poor naturalization rates at 1.2 percent (Eurostat 2021).

While the literature on naturalization is manifold, we still know little how the conditions in the destination country affect naturalization decisions. Overall, studies that address the conditions in the destination country find a negative association between restrictive legal requirements and naturalization rates (e.g., Dronkers and Vink 2012). This negative association is even stronger for non-citizens from less developed countries (Jensen et al. 2021; Vink, Prokic-Breuer, and Dronkers 2013). While these studies prove the importance of the conditions in the destination country for naturalization rates, they can only assume the underlying mechanisms because their empirical design undermines possibilities for causal conclusions. In turn, our study advances the field by

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causally analyzing the influence of the destination country's legal requirements relying on an experimental design. We build on the few studies that causally analyze the influence of institutional context on non-citizens' naturalization behavior, such as dual citizenship acceptance (Peters and Vink 2023; Vink et al. 2021), fee waivers (Yasenov et al. 2019), information nudges (Hotard et al. 2019), discretionary decision procedures (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Ward 2019), and access to voting rights (Slotwinski, Stutzer, and Bevelander 2023). These studies use natural experiments, that is, changes in legal requirements, to draw causal conclusions. By their nature, these studies focus on changes in one individual legal requirement and consider their influence in isolation.

Our contribution to this research strand is a comprehensive examination of the influence of the design of legal requirements in the destination country on non-citizens' naturalization intentions. We combine research on naturalization that focuses on citizenship laws and legal requirements (e.g., Giugni and Grasso 2021; Shachar et al. 2017) with research that considers individual decision-making (Peters, Vink, and Schmeets 2016; Sredanovic 2022). We provide a causal interpretation of the extent to which liberalizing legal requirements affects naturalization intentions. In this framework, we consider the most important legal requirements simultaneously and are able to relate their importance to each other. We compare different groups of non-citizens, particularly refugees and citizens from European Union (EU) member states and non-EU countries, to consider that the relative benefits and the relative costs of naturalization differ across immigrant groups. Comparing these groups gives us a deep understanding of context-dependent effects of liberalizing legal requirements on naturalization intentions.

Naturalization trends and requirements in Germany

Naturalization trends and migration history

In 2021, Germany granted citizenship to 130,000 foreign citizens making it one of the largest contributors to new citizenships in the EU-27 both in absolute and relative terms to its population. It accounted for 16 percent of the EU-27 total naturalizations, following closely behind Spain (17%) and France (16%), and just ahead of Italy (15%), and Sweden (11%) (Eurostat 2021). Despite these high figures in absolute numbers, Germany's naturalization rates—measured at 1.2 acquisitions of citizenship per 1000 persons in 2021—remains modest, falling below the EU-27 average of 2.2 (Eurostat 2021) and considerably lower than rates in other OECD countries, like Canada, the US and the UK (OECD 2021, 41).

This discrepancy is surprising considering Germany's extensive migration history. Post-war economic expansion saw significant numbers of "guest workers" arrive from abroad (Kogan 2011). Although the economic downturn of the 1970s slowed economic immigration, family reunification continued to sustain immigrant numbers. The 1980s to the 1990s saw a new surge in immigration, fueled by asylum-seekers, refugees, and ethnic Germans, as well as Jewish immigrants with notably higher human capital (especially among the two latter groups; Kalter and Granato 2002). The EU enlargement in the 2000s introduced a new wave of skilled labor immigrants, students, and family arrivals. Family reunification dominated arrivals in 2014, making up 39 percent, followed by ethnic repatriates (17%) and asylum seekers and refugees (15%). A significant peak occurred in 2015-2016, with an influx of 1.2 million refugees (Brücker, Kosyakova, and Vallizadeh 2020). As of 2022, immigrants or direct descendants of immigrants constituted 17 percent of Germany's population, totaling ~14 million (DESTATIS 2022).

In Germany, labor immigration from highly developed countries is less emphasized, reducing the prevalence of economic criteria in immigrants' selection. This lower proportion of economically oriented immigrants—for whom citizenship benefits are a crucial consideration—contributes to Germany's lower naturalization rates. Moreover, Germany's naturalization policies, characterized by medium openness and inclusiveness (Huddleston and Falcke 2020), also play a role. Studies have shown that the openness and inclusiveness of naturalization policies significantly affect non-citizens' propensity to naturalize (Vink, Prokic-Breuer, and Dronkers 2013;

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Dronkers and Vink 2012; Reichel 2011; Stadlmair 2017). A critical factor in this dynamic is the allowance of dual citizenship (Stadlmair 2017). Peters and Vink (2023) demonstrated that a liberalizing reform of dual citizenship in Sweden in 2001 increased the naturalization rate by 6.7 percent, while a restrictive change in the Netherlands in 1997 decreased the rate by 6.4 percent. The restricted opportunities for dual citizenship in Germany likely contribute to its comparatively low naturalization rates.

Naturalization requirements and regulations

In order to obtain the German citizenship, the completion of formalities set by German law (*Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz,* StAG) is necessary (BMI 2021). Candidates are qualified for naturalization if they (1) have attained age of 16; (2) have an appropriate residence permit and a legal duration of stay of at least 8 years; (3) are willing to pledge allegiance to the German constitution; (4) have attained sufficient knowledge of German language (certified B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference); (5) have passed a so-called naturalization test on the knowledge of the German legal system, society and living conditions; (6) have no convictions on account of a criminal offence; (7) have self-sufficient income without resorting to state benefits; and (8) they are willing to give up or have lost their citizenship.

To acquire German citizenship, non-citizens must generally meet all of the aforementioned criteria, which apply uniformly across all applicant groups (BMI 2021). There are a few exceptions to these requirements. Requirement of legal duration of stay may be reduced to 7 years in case of successful completion of an integration course. Applicants can be exempted from the naturalization test if they obtained a school education in Germany or are disabled to take part in the test due to physical, psychological or mental health issues. The derivative naturalization further allows family members of eligible applicants to acquire German citizenship. Dual citizenship is possible only under certain conditions: for applicants with citizenship from another EU member state, Switzerland or of certain states such as Iran and Algeria, or ethnic German repatriates and their family members. The cost for regular naturalization amount to EUR 255 per person and an additional fee of EUR 51 for each dependent child. The fee can be reduced in case of financial hardship. The process takes between 2 and 3 years.

Naturalization intentions in context

The institutional context

As has been introduced in the previous section, the institutional context is important for naturalization decisions because it creates an opportunity structure that can either enhance or diminish the attractiveness of naturalization (Peters and Vink 2016). The study of naturalization laws have been a longstanding focus in academia (e.g., Howard 2009; Janoski 2010), with these laws delineating the requirements non-citizens must meet to be eligible for naturalization. Typically, non-citizens need to fulfill several criteria before they can get the new citizenship. In our vignette experiment, we vary the naturalization criteria with regard to dual citizenship, length of the waiting period, language test, naturalization test, duration of the bureaucratic procedure, bureaucratic fees, family application, and delivery of the certificate. All criteria reflect legal requirements. For theoretical reasons, which we discuss below, we categorize the naturalization criteria into two dimensions, legal requirements, and implementation of naturalization laws. We assign the first four naturalization criteria to the dimension legal requirements, the other four to the dimension implementation of naturalization laws.

An intuitive assumption is that stringent legal requirements impede naturalization intentions. Building on a cost–benefit framework on immigrant naturalization (Yang 1994), rigorous legal requirements represent high costs that, ceteris paribus, reduce naturalization intentions (Vink, Prokic-Breuer, and Dronkers 2013; Dronkers and Vink 2012; Reichel 2011; Stadlmair 2017). In contrast, less demanding requirements reduce the effort required for naturalization and should elevate naturalization intentions. Within this framework, the requirement to renounce prior

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citizenship upon naturalization is an apparent cost factor. This requirement restricts non-citizens' ability to travel back to their country of origin without a visa, maintain or inherit property, and to retain the right to vote in their home country. Moreover, dual citizenship allows non-citizens to continue identifying as citizens of their country of origin (Mazzolari 2009). Numerous studies demonstrate a positive correlation between naturalization and the option to retain the prior citizenship (e.g., Labussière and Vink 2020; Peters, Vink, and Schmeets 2016; Peters and Vink 2023).

Another substantial cost factor pertains to the minimum waiting period, which determines how long a non-citizen must reside in the destination country before becoming eligible for naturalization. Countries with shorter waiting periods generally experience higher naturalization rates (Reichel 2011; though, see Stadlmair 2017). Further requirements such as language and civic skills should also affect naturalization intentions (Reichel 2011; Stadlmair 2017). Demonstrating language and civic skills incurs costs and effort, involving certification and, if necessary, attending courses. If the cost or effort required to demonstrate these skills is reduced—for example, by lowering the required language level—naturalization intentions are likely to increase.

Besides legal requirements, the implementation of naturalization laws also creates opportunities and obstacles (Huddleston 2020). Naturalization laws provide the basic framework, but the way political actors apply these laws in practice can vary greatly. In other words, the naturalization process can be more or less inclusive depending on the law interpretation by the political actors. As Bloemraad (2006, 677) puts it, "institutions and policies affect understandings of citizenship and the ability to participate". The government creates a distinct "context of reception" by the way it implements naturalization procedures.

In a more inclusive context, for example, the length of the bureaucratic procedure and the associated fees are lower. In addition, some countries offer simultaneous naturalization of other family members and without limitation of naturalization to the applicant. Children of naturalized persons thus automatically become citizens as well (Street 2013). The way the state welcomes new citizens also symbolizes its inclusiveness. In a living culture of welcome, for example, the certificate is handed over in a citizenship ceremony. Citizenship ceremonies reflect the importance of belonging and integration, in particular if they are emotional and memorable (e.g., Damsholt 2018).[1] The implementation of naturalization procedures are likely to affect both, non-citizens' ability and interest to naturalize.

From these considerations, we derive the following hypotheses:

H1: Liberalizing legal requirements and more inclusive naturalization procedure should increase non-citizens' naturalization intentions.

H2: When comparing the importance of the different requirements with each other, liberalizing requirements that are associated with higher costs, such as dual citizenship, waiting period, and language and naturalization test, should have a greater impact on non-citizens' naturalization intentions.

The social context

The significance of naturalization is likely to vary among groups of non-citizens, and the cost–benefit framework underscores the pivotal role of relative benefits between destination and home country citizenship. Non-citizens from less developed and politically unstable nations are more inclined to pursue naturalization (Vink, Prokic-Breuer, and Dronkers 2013). This choice is driven by factors such as a lack of political freedom, high risks of conflicts and wars, destroyed infrastructure, and low living standards in their home countries, which make returning home a less appealing option for refugees. For refugees, naturalization offers unrestricted access to the national territory and the same rights as for native citizens. Correspondingly, Mossaad et al. (2018) found that in the U.S., refugees exhibit a swifter and higher rate of naturalization compared to non-refugees within the same cohort. Bloemraad (2004) underscores political motives as a key

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driver of naturalization intentions, with refugees, in particular, expressing heightened intentions due to the additional rights conferred through naturalization and limited prospects of returning to their home country.

In contrast, citizens from EU member states may have less motivation to pursue citizenship in another EU country, as they already enjoy the rights and freedoms associated with EU citizenship (Dronkers and Vink 2012; Peters, Vink, and Schmeets 2016; but see Peters and Vink 2023; and Vink et al. 2021). Non-EU citizens occupy a middle ground between these two groups. Many of them hail from less developed countries, making the potential benefits of acquiring citizenship more significant for them in comparison to EU citizens.

Anticipating greater naturalization intentions among non-EU citizens and refugees, the impact of relaxing requirements is nuanced. Liberalizing requirements generally benefits individuals coming from less developed countries (Peters, Vink, and Schmeets 2016). For example, lower language proficiency standards facilitate the naturalization process for a broader spectrum of non-citizens. However, strict language requirements are a significant obstacle, especially for low-skilled non-citizens, hindering their path to naturalization (Jensen et al. 2021). Therefore, we expect different effects of relaxing requirements for non-EU citizens and refugees compared to EU citizens, given that the first two groups consist to a greater extent of non-citizens from less developed countries. In contrast, we do not expect any significant differences between the groups of non-citizens with regard to the dimensions that reflect a more inclusive naturalization procedure. All groups should benefit from a more pronounced living culture of welcome, regardless of their status.

From these considerations, we derive the following hypotheses:

H3: Naturalization intentions should be most pronounced among refugees followed by non-EU citizens.

H4: Liberalizing legal requirements that are associated with higher costs, such as dual citizenship, waiting period, and language and naturalization test, should disproportionately amplify intentions for non-EU citizens and refugees compared to EU citizens.

Data and method

Data

To analyze the effect of the institutional context on non-citizens' intentions to naturalize, we conduct a harmonized vignette study introduced in the *German Socioeconomic Panel* (henceforth, SOEP-CORE) and the *IAB-SOEP Migration Sample* (henceforth, IAB-SOEP-MIG), and wave six of the *IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany* (henceforth, IAB-BAMF-SOEP-REF).

SOEP-CORE is an ongoing representative yearly panel survey of private households in Germany launched in 1984 in West Germany and enlarged to include East Germany after 1990 (SOEP Group 2024). The SOEP-CORE oversampled immigrants of Turkish, Greek, Italian, Spanish, and ex-Yugoslavian origin (in 1984; Sample B) and immigrants who arrived in Germany after 1984 mainly from Eastern Europe and from other developing countries (in 1994–1995; Sample D) (SOEP Group 2023).

The IAB-SOEP-MIG is a joint project of the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) and the SOEP, which was launched in 2013 and is conducted annually. Register data of the Federal Employment Agency (BA), the so-called Integrated Employment Biographies, were used as sampling frames. The data are representative of population immigrated to Germany between 1995 and 2013, and of second-generation immigrants born after 1976, and their household members (Brücker et al. 2014; Kroh et al. 2015). The refreshment samples in 2020 and 2021 cover more recent migration from the EU arrived in 2016-2018 and third-country nationals arrived before and after the skilled worker migration law implementation (between 2019-2020) (SOEP Group 2023).

The IAB-BAMF-SOEP-REF is a joint project of the IAB, research center of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugee (BAMF) and the SOEP, which was launched in 2016 and is conducted

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annually. The anchor persons in the survey were drawn from the Central Register of Foreigners (*Ausländerzentralregister*, AZR), the national registry of all foreign citizens in Germany. The data are representative of asylum-seekers and refugees arriving in Germany since 2013, and their household members (Brücker, Rother, and Schupp 2017; Kroh et al. 2017).

The vignette experiment was introduced in the survey years 2021 and 2022[2]. In the survey year 2021, only panel respondents of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP-REF without German citizenship were subject to the vignette experiment (80.5 percent of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP-REF; own calculation). The corresponding field period covers the second half of the year 2021. In the survey year 2022, respondents of the SOEP-CORE, the IAB-SOEP-MIG and the non-refugee respondents of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP-REF[3] without German citizenship taking part in computer-supported mode (CAPI, CATI, CASI, and CAWI) were eligible to participate in the vignette experiment (3.8 percent of the SOEP-CORE, 77.8 percent of the IAB-SOEP-MIG, and 10.4 percent of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP-REF; own calculation). The corresponding field period covers primarily the first half of the year 2022. To meet the challenges associated with a potential lack of German language proficiency, the survey instruments and other materials are regularly provided in the foreign languages of the major immigrant groups in addition to German (SOEP Group 2023).

Among the respondents eligible to the vignette experiment, we excluded those who refused to participate in the vignette experiment or did not provide any response on their intentions to apply for German citizenship (3.1%). After these exclusions, we had a sample of 2110 respondents from the survey year 2021 and sample of 4321 respondents from the survey year 2022 (for group-stratified analyses, those with missing on the country of citizenship were dropped, 19 observations).

Construction of the vignette experiment

In a vignette experiment, respondents evaluate short descriptions of situations. The situation descriptions vary with regard to a defined number of dimensions, which are randomly presented to the respondents. The randomization allows us to make causal statements about the influence of the dimensions on the evaluation of the situation (Auspurg and Hinz 2015).

In this vignette experiment, we describe the institutional context for naturalization in Germany. Table 1 provides an overview of the dimensions that vary experimentally across the vignettes, which are (1) dual citizenship, (2) length of the waiting period, (3) language test, (4) citizenship test, (5) duration of the bureaucratic procedure, (6) bureaucratic fees, (7) family application, and (8) delivery of the certificate. Following our theoretical considerations, dimensions (1) to (4) address legal requirements and dimensions (5) to (8) address implementation of naturalization laws. For each dimension, we have defined the current legal requirement and naturalization procedures as the base level, while the second level incorporates liberalized requirements and more inclusive naturalization procedures. The comparison between current and liberalized requirements as well as the comparison between less and more inclusive naturalization procedures provides a realistic scenario of how liberalization and inclusiveness affect naturalization intentions.

First, regarding the dimension dual citizenship, one must either renounce the old citizenship or be allowed to keep it. Second, we distinguish whether the length of the waiting period is 8 or 4 years. Third, the applicant must be able to express and communicate himself/herself very well linguistically both orally and in writing (corresponds to language level B1) and a formal language test proves applicants' skills. In the liberalized level, a formal language test is not necessary, and the applicant only need to be able to express himself/herself orally and in writing in simple sentences. Fourth, we vary whether or not a successful naturalization test is required that proves the knowledge of the German legal and social system. Fifth, we distinguish whether the duration of the bureaucratic procedure is 12 or 3 months. Sixth, we describe the cost of the procedure as 255 euros or that no costs are incurred. Seven, naturalization applications apply only to the applicant, not to the entire family. We formulate the possibility that family members are automatically entitled to naturalize as well if the applicant has successfully completed the

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Table 1. Dimensions and levels of the institutional context in the vignette experiment.

Dimensions	Levels
Dual citizenship	Old citizenship must be renounced
	Old citizenship does not have to be renounced
Length of the waiting period	Eight years living in Germany
	Four years living in Germany
Language test	Formal language test that one can express him–/herself orally and in writing in coherent sentences.
	No formal language test necessary, one must only be able to express him/herself orally and in writing in simple sentences.
Naturalization test	Formal naturalization test to prove knowledge of the German legal and social system.
	No formal naturalization test to prove knowledge of the German legal and social system.
Duration of the bureaucratic procedure	Twelve months
	Three months
Bureaucratic fees	255 Euro
	No costs
Family application	Individual application
	Family application
Delivery of the certificate	At the citizenship office, without an official naturalization ceremony
	Handed over in person, as part of an official naturalization ceremony

naturalization procedure. Eighth, we vary a procedural dimension that expresses the welcoming culture of the destination country. The government delivers the naturalization certificate either with or without an official naturalization ceremony.

In total, we have a vignette universe of 256 (2^8). In both samples, we randomly assign one vignette description to one respondent. The vignette description is followed by the question whether they would apply for naturalization under the described conditions. We show respondents only one vignette description due to the complex and challenging decision-making situation. With this approach, we deviate from other vignette experiments, which usually present the respondents with several different descriptions to rate. The large number of cases in the samples ensures that vignette dimensions are not confounded with respondents' characteristics. Auspurg and Hinz (2015, 58) recommend that each vignette description be answered by at least five respondents.[4]

Table 2 shows an example of the vignette description. The introduction to the vignette experiment provides some general information on the naturalization process in Germany to ensure that respondents have a comparable level of information. First, it explains the benefits that accompany successful naturalization such as voting rights, free access to the labor market, and freedom of movement and freedom to travel. Second, the introduction sketches necessary and non-negotiable requirements, such as the commitment to the free democratic fundamental order of the Constitution. It also informs that it is necessary to be able to secure one's livelihood and that of the dependents, and that one must not have been convicted of a criminal offense.

Following the introduction, each respondent is presented with one vignette describing a hypothetical institutional context, followed by a question on the respondents' intention to apply for German citizenship under these conditions ("yes, definitely"; "yes, probably"; "rather unlikely"; "definitely not"). In case of a decision against application for German citizenship (i.e., answers "rather unlikely" and "definitely not"), respondents respond on reasons (list of reasons is provided in Table 5) to refrain from application, and the order of importance for each reason marked.

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Table 2. Example of a vignette (best-case).

Introduction
In the following part of the survey, we would like to learn more about your naturalization intentions. Naturalization in Germany offers you a number of advantages, such as the general right to vote, legal equality and protection, as well as other opportunities to participate in society. You can choose your profession freely and have access to civil servant status. In addition, you benefit from freedom of movement and travel in Europe and can also travel outside Europe to many countries without a visa to many countries.
However, naturalization is subject to conditions. You need an unlimited or permanent right of residence at the time of naturalization, and you must be committed to the free democratic basic order of the Basic Law. In addition, you must be able to support yourself dependents and must not have been convicted of a criminal offense.
In addition, there are further requirements, but also exceptions and exemptions. In the following, we will show you a hypothetical situation, that is, one way in which naturalization could be legally structured. This does not mean that the naturalization requirements in Germany are actually as described here and we cannot offer you naturalization in the context of this interview. Please consider whether you would apply for naturalization under these conditions.
Vignette description
To become a naturalized citizen, you must have lived in Germany for at least 4 years.
No formal language test is required, you just need to be able to express yourself orally and in writing in simple sentences.
You do not have to take a naturalization test to prove your knowledge of the German legal and social system.
You do not have to give up your previous citizenship.
After you submit all the documents, the procedure takes an average of 3 months and there are no costs.
You will receive the naturalization certificate in person, at an official naturalization ceremony.
If you have successfully completed the naturalization procedure, your family members are automatically entitled to naturalize as well. Your family members then do not have to complete any further naturalization procedures.
Decision
Would you apply for German citizenship under these conditions?

- Yes, definitely
- Yes, probably
- Rather unlikely
- Definitely not

Variables and statistical method

Our dependent variables were derived from respondents' answer concerning their intention to apply for German citizenship under the experimentally varied circumstances in the vignette. Intentions were measured on the scale from 1 to 4 (1 = "definitely not", 2 = "rather unlikely", 3 = "yes, probably", and 4 = "yes, definitely"). We used logistic regression models with robust standard errors in the multivariate analyses and calculated average marginal effects of the predictors to facilitate interpretation and enable cross-model comparisons (Mood 2009). We generated two dependent variables: (1) naturalization intentions, where categories 3 and 4 are coded as 1 (indicating intent), and categories 1 and 2 are coded as 0; and (2) definite naturalization intentions, where only category 4 is coded as 1, and the other three categories as 0. We opted against using ordinal logistic regression due to the proportional odds assumption, which presupposes that the relationship described by the coefficients between the lowest category and all higher categories of the naturalization intentions variable is consistent across all category comparisons. We also dismissed Ordinary Least Squares regression due to violations of the normality assumption.[5]

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The variables used to proxy for legal requirements (giving up old citizenship, length of the waiting period, requirements of language and naturalization test) and the inclusiveness of the naturalization procedure (duration of bureaucratic procedure, bureaucratic fee, entitlement of family application, and official naturalization ceremony) were derived from the vignette experiment (see "Construction of the vignette experiment" section). All corresponding variables are coded to reflect the liberalization of legal requirements and a more inclusive naturalization procedure.

Dual citizenship is a dummy indicator for a possibility to retain respondents' old citizenship. *4 vs. 8 years length of the waiting period* is a dummy indicator for a 4-year versus 8-year duration of stay that is required before being eligible for naturalization. *No formal language test* and *no formal naturalization test* are dummy indicators that reflect the requirements for formal language and *naturalization* tests. *3 vs. 12 months duration of bureaucratic procedure* is a dummy indicator for an average waiting time of 3 versus 8 months, which the procedure takes after all documents have been submitted. *No bureaucratic fees* is a dummy indicator signifying that no fees are payable after document submission, as opposed to the standard fee of 255 Euro. *Naturalization ceremony* is a dummy indicator reflecting whether or not a naturalization certificate is delivered in person at an official naturalization ceremony. *Family entitlement* is a dummy indicator for the family being automatically entitled to naturalize after successful completion of the respondent's naturalization procedure.

To address the *non-citizen group* belonging, we consider respondents' citizenship, sample belonging and legal status at arrival and construct a variable with the following three categories: EU citizens, non-EU citizens, and refugees. All respondents of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP are classified as refugees. All other respondents are classified as non-refugee immigrants. Within this group, we differentiate between EU and non-EU citizens, with EU citizens covering 26 European Union Member States without Germany. Table A1 in the supplementary material provides an overview of countries of origin covered by our data. Overall, 11.0 percent of our sample are EU citizens, 56.1 percent are non-EU citizens, and 32.9 percent are refugees.

We control for common predictors of citizenship acquisition that may confound the relationship between our predictor variables, particularly, non-citizen group, and the dependent outcome. These controls include *age* (calculated as a difference between the survey year and birth year), *duration of stay* (calculated as a difference between the survey year and arrival year), being *female*, *size of the household*, *professional degree* (categorized into no degree, vocational degree, university degree), an indicator for being *employed*, an indicator for a *Muslim background* (based on self-reported personal or parental religious affiliation), and an indicator for residing in eastern Germany. Prior research has shown these factors significantly influence the likelihood of naturalization in different countries (Peters, Vink, and Schmeets 2016; Dronkers and Vink 2012; Diehl and Blohm 2003). Importantly, all of these factors are unevenly distributed across groups of non-citizens, with refugees being more male, younger, lower-educated and having larger household sizes compared to non-refugee non-citizens (Brücker, Kosyakova, and Vallizadeh 2020).

Table 3 illustrates the distribution of the independent and control variables across non-citizen groups in our dataset. EU citizens, with an average age of 45 years, are notably older than non-EU citizens by 11 years and refugees by 6 years. They also report a significantly longer average duration of stay in Germany—17 years compared to just 6 years for both non-EU citizens and refugees. Gender distribution shows that slightly over half of EU citizens are female, in contrast to only 39 percent among refugees. Household sizes also vary: EU citizens typically live in three-person households, non-EU citizens in two-person households, and refugees in households of four members, reflecting the differing age structures of these groups.

Educationally, both EU and non-EU citizens more frequently hold professional degrees than refugees, with EU citizens predominating in vocational degrees and non-EU citizens in university degrees. These groups are also more likely to be employed than their refugee counterparts. In terms of group preferences and experiences, refugees are much more likely to report a Muslim religious affiliation, either personally or in their family, especially when compared to non-EU and

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Table 3. Descriptive statistics.

		EU citizens		Non-EU citizens		Refugees		
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Min-Max
Vignette dimensions								
Dual citizenship	6412	0.50		0.52		0.50		0/1
4 vs. 8 years length of the waiting period	6412	0.46		0.49		0.48		0/1
No formal language test	6412	0.53		0.51		0.48		0/1
No formal naturalization test required	6412	0.51		0.49		0.47		0/1
3 vs.123 months duration of bureaucratic procedure	6412	0.49		0.48		0.50		0/1
No bureaucratic fees	6412	0.50		0.49		0.49		0/1
Naturalization ceremony	6412	0.50		0.50		0.47		0/1
Family entitlement	6412	0.49		0.51		0.51		0/1
Controls								
Age	6412	44.48	14.42	33.04	9.24	38.37	11.12	18–87
Duration of stay	5459	17.02	15.52	5.54	7.46	5.89	1.13	0–82
Female	6412	0.55		0.48		0.39		0/1
Size of the household	6412	2.76	1.25	2.34	1.45	4.05	2.08	1–12
Professional degree	5858							
No professional degree		0.32		0.27		0.75		0/1
Vocational degree		0.31		0.14		0.08		0/1
University degree		0.36		0.56		0.17		0/1
Gainfully employed	6410	0.77		0.83		0.45		0/1
Muslim background	5169	0.03		0.19		0.76		0/1
Eastern Germany	6356	0.07		0.08		0.10		0/1

Note: Variation in the sample size (column 1) is owing to differences in missing data across variables. SD, Standard deviation. *Data source:* IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2021 (v39), IAB-SOEP Migration Sample 2022 (v39), SOEP-CORE 2022 (v39).

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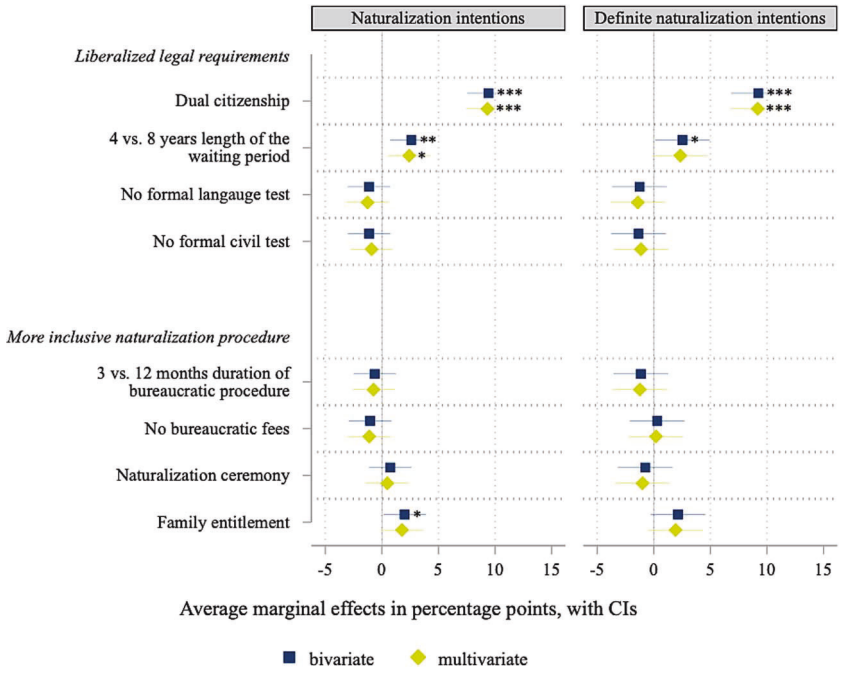


Figure 1. Logistic regressions of the (definite) naturalization intentions on vignette dimensions, average marginal effects in percentage points. Bivariate and multivariate analyses. *Notes*: $^{*}P < 0.05$, $^{**}P < 0.01$, $^{***}P < 0.001$(two-sided tests). Robust standard errors. CIs = confidence intervals. N = 6431. *Data source*: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2021 (v39), IAB-SOEP Migration Sample 2022 (v39), SOEP-CORE 2022 (v39).

EU citizens. Regarding residential patterns, ~10 percent of refugees live in eastern Germany, with slightly lower percentages for non-EU (7%) and EU citizens (8%).

To handle missing values within the control variables, we applied multiple imputation methods using chained equations (van Buuren 2012). We estimated 50 imputed datasets with complete information. Following Rubin's (1987) approach, we combined the results of the analyses performed on each dataset, considering the imputation variances within and between the imputed data sets. Note that we refrained from imputing the missing information on citizenship because such missing information is likely not to be random and is likely to correlate with education and literacy. Table 3 illustrates that missing information was present to varying degrees in the control measures.

Results

The role of liberalized requirements and more inclusive naturalization procedures for naturalization intentions

We begin with an examination of the pooled data and model the decision to naturalize based solely on cost–benefit considerations as presented in the vignette experiment, without incorporating additional controls into the model. The findings from both bivariate and multivariate regression analyses focusing on naturalization intentions are illustrated in figure 1. The figure displays the probability of naturalization intentions on the left and the probability of definite naturalization intentions on the right.

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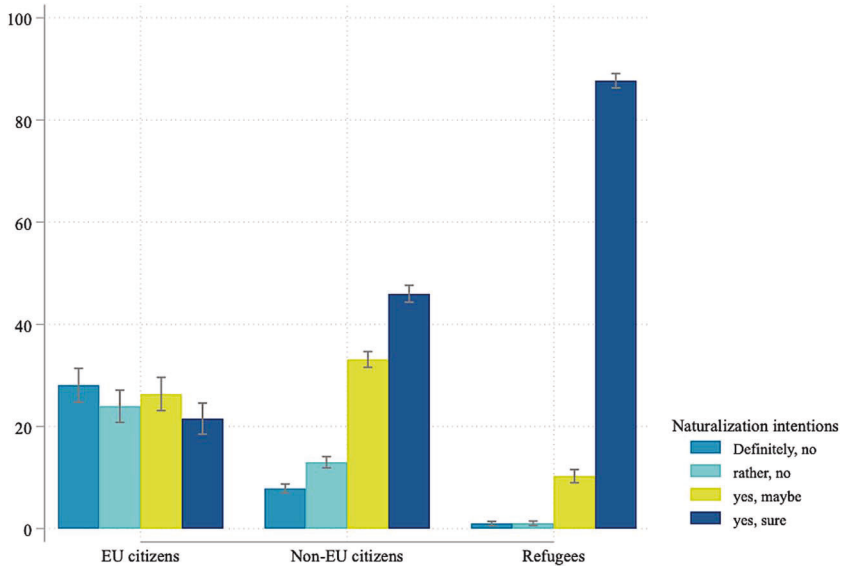


Figure 2. Descriptive distribution of opting for naturalization by non-citizen group, in percent (with 95% confidence intervals). *Data source*: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2021 (v39), IAB-SOEP Migration Sample 2022 (v39), SOEP-CORE 2022 (v39).

Our analysis of the vignette experiment's various dimensions reveals that only a few factors significantly impact (definite) naturalization intentions, namely dual citizenship and the waiting period. Specifically, the option to retain one's previous citizenship markedly raises the probability of naturalization intentions by 9 percentage points, a notable rise given that 57% of our sample initially expressed such intentions—an effective increase of 16% (Left panel in figure 1). Reducing the waiting period for eligibility from 8 to 4 years modestly increases the probability of naturalization intentions by 2 percentage points. When examining definite intentions to naturalize (right panel in figure 1), only the influence of dual citizenship reaches statistical significance at the 5% level. The shortened waiting period, while maintaining its effect size, does not achieve conventional statistical significance ($P = 0.056$).

Naturalization intentions across immigrant groups and the role of social context

Figure 2 presents the descriptive distribution of favoring a decision to naturalize among the three non-citizen groups, namely EU citizens, non-EU citizens and refugees, highlighting participants' responses concerning their intention to apply for German citizenship under the conditions outlined in the vignette experiment. The data clearly show that the decision for citizenship varies significantly between these groups.

Among EU citizens, the inclination towards naturalization is fairly evenly distributed across the response categories, with only 22 percent stating they would definitely opt for naturalization and an additional 26 percent considering it. Non-EU citizens demonstrate a stronger preference for naturalization, with 45 percent definitely intending to naturalize and another 33 percent are open to considering it. In stark contrast, refugees show the highest likelihood of opting for naturalization, with a substantial 88 percent expressing definite intentions and 10 percent contemplating it.

To examine the impact of the social context for naturalization intentions, we have refined our models by incorporating variables for the non-citizen group along with other control variables.

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Table 4 builds on the multivariate models initially presented in figure 1, now modeling the decision to naturalize as a function of cost–benefit analyses (from the vignette experiment) while also considering the varied social contexts of different groups of non-citizens, augmented with additional model controls. We proceed by disaggregating our analysis, replicating the model separately for each group of non-citizens. This approach enables a detailed examination of how distinct cost–benefit considerations affect each group, thus enriching our understanding of the diverse factors that influence naturalization decisions across different non-citizen populations.

The findings from our pooled models align with our descriptive results, showing notably lower propensity for naturalization intentions among non-EU citizens and, particularly, EU citizens when compared to refugees (Panel A in Table 4). Specifically, as shown in the pooled model, the probability of naturalization intention under the provided circumstances decreases by 35 percentage points for EU citizens and by 18 percentage points for non-EU citizens relative to refugees. This disparity is even more pronounced for definite naturalization intentions (Panel B in Table 4): The probability is 57 percentage points lower for EU citizens and 39 percentage points lower for non-EU citizens than for refugees.

Further dissecting the dimensions of the vignette experiment in the pooled model corroborates earlier findings that factors such as dual citizenship and the waiting period significantly influence naturalization intentions. When we analyze these effects separately for each group, we find that the potential for dual citizenship notably boosts naturalization preferences probability for non-EU citizens by 13 percentage points and for EU citizens by 10 percentage points—a markedly stronger influence than seen among refugees, where the effect is considerably weaker (2 percentage points). Reducing the waiting period from 8 to 4 years notably boosts naturalization intentions only for EU citizens, with the effect being quantitatively smaller and statistically insignificant for non-EU citizens ($P = 0.061$) and refugees ($P = 0.723$).

These conclusions are somewhat different when looking at definite naturalization preferences (Panel B in Table 4). While the effect of dual citizenship remains significantly positive for non-EU citizens' definite naturalization preferences, it is not statistically significant for the other groups. In turn, reducing the waiting period from 8 to 4 years for eligibility for naturalization significantly influences only non-EU citizens' definite naturalization intentions, with no statistically significant effect on either EU citizens ($P = 0.469$) or refugees ($P = 0.602$). Introduction of corresponding interaction effects in the pooled model support these conclusions (results in Table B2 in the supplementary material).

Impediments to naturalization

In the final step of the vignette experiment, respondents who opted against naturalization under the presented conditions were asked to report on their reasons for this decision with an option of a multiple choice. The results in Table 5 align with our benchmark analyses, as we observed that the majority of respondents did so primarily because they were unable to retain their original citizenship (61%). This was followed by those who did not perceive any advantages in obtaining German citizenship under the given conditions (30%), and those who cited the procedural complexities (15%) as their reasons.

Notably, the reasons behind this decision varied among the three different groups of non-citizens. While the need to renounce their existing citizenship was an important factor for all three groups in our study, refugees appeared to be particularly deterred due to their self-reported ineligibility (49%), as well as the perceived process's length (17%) and complexity (15%). Among the EU citizens who opted against naturalization in the described vignette conditions, approximately half cited a lack of perceived benefits, 16 percent found the procedure to complex, and 11 percent considered it too costly. In the case of non-EU citizens, factors such as a perceived lack of benefits associated with German citizenship (21%), the complexity of the process (15%), and intentions to return to their home country (13%) played a significant role.

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Table 4. Logistic regressions of the (definite) naturalization intentions on vignette dimensions and respondent characteristics, across non-citizens groups (average marginal effects, AME, in percentage points).

	Panel A: Naturalization intention				Panel B: Definite naturalization intention			
	Pooled	EU citizens	Non-EU citizens	Refugees	Pooled	EU citizens	Non-EU citizens	Refugees
	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)	AME (SE)
Non-citizens group (ref. refugees)								
EU citizens	−34.95***				−56.50***			
	(0.02)				(0.02)			
Non-EU citizens	−17.69***				−38.59***			
	(0.01)				(0.02)			
Dual citizenship	9.07***	9.61**	13.19***	1.52*	9.04***	4.49	13.45***	2.76
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)
4 vs.8 years length of the waiting	2.21*	7.59*	2.44	0.22	2.30*	−2.21	4.67**	−0.75
Period	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)
No formal language test	−0.43	−0.59	−0.97	0.58	−0.15	1.08	0.13	−1.04
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)
No formal naturalization test required	−0.47	−4.96	−0.20	0.52	−0.14	1.96	−1.32	1.07
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)
3 vs. 12 months duration of bureaucratic procedure	−0.09	−3.43	0.29	0.19	−1.21	−4.38	−1.76	1.24
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)
No bureaucratic fees	−0.64	0.84	−0.64	−0.98	0.76	−2.03	1.22	0.82
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Naturalization ceremony	1.13	2.16	0.70	1.08	0.08	2.15	−0.41	0.09
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Family entitlement	1.13	0.44	1.99	−0.06	1.41	−1.50	2.73	0.07
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Observations	6412	705	3597	2110	6412	705	3597	2110
N imputations	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50

Notes: * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$ (two-sided tests). Robust standard errors. Control variables include age, duration of stay, indicator for being female, size of the household, education level, indicator for being gainfully employed, indicator for having Muslim background, and indicator for residing in eastern Germany. *Data source*: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2021 (v39), IAB-SOEP Migration Sample 2022 (v39), SOEP-CORE 2022 (v39).

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Table 5. Reasons for deciding against naturalization in the vignette experiment, across non-citizens groups, in percent (multiple choice possible).

	Pooled	EU citizens	Non-EU citizens	Refugees
Reasons				
Giving-up old citizenship	61.37	54.67	66.16	34.15
No benefit	29.79	49.29	21.46	9.76
Complex	15.17	15.58	14.99	14.63
Long	11.06	9.63	11.42	17.07
Other	10.88	9.63	11.28	14.63
Return home	10.79	6.80	13.20	2.44
Non eligible	9.55	2.27	10.87	48.78
Costly	7.85	10.76	6.33	9.76
Feel not connected to Germany	7.67	6.23	8.67	2.44

Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2021 (v39), IAB-SOEP Migration Sample 2022 (v39), SOEP-CORE 2022 (v39).

Robustness checks

Following the pooled models, women are less likely to opt for naturalization (naturalization intention: −1.68 percentage points, $P = 0.057$; definite naturalization intention: −4.46 percentage points, $P < 0.01$). This observation aligns well with the study by Money et al. (2023), who found gender-specific paths to citizenship. Women and men may have distinct migration motives that influence their subsequent integration paths in host societies (e.g., Herrera 2013). Consequently, we separately examined the probability of opting for naturalization by gender (results in Table B4 in the supplementary material). Overall, men and women exhibit very similar patterns, with the duration of bureaucratic procedures and existence of bureaucratic fees being notable exceptions: (1) shorter processes decreased men's naturalization incentives but increased women's, and (2) abolishment of bureaucratic fees reduces naturalization incentives for women, while being for women positive and non-significant. Additionally, for women, the prospect of family entitlement to naturalization significantly increased their intentions. Men increase their intentions in response to the shorter waiting period.

Given the longitudinal nature of our data, we are uniquely positioned to compare respondents' actual naturalization preferences with their responses in the vignette experiments. For this purpose, we restricted our analysis to panel respondents, aligning their vignette responses with their most recent naturalization intentions surveyed using the same response options ("yes, definitely", "yes, probably", "rather unlikely", and "definitely not"). From this alignment, we constructed a variable to capture shifts in naturalization inclinations under the specified vignette conditions, categorized into three distinct groups: (1) no change between actual and vignette-reported preferences (baseline), (2) increased inclination towards naturalization under vignette conditions, and (3) increased disinclination under the same conditions.

Our findings from multinomial logistic regression analyses, adjusted for robust standard errors, affirm our primary conclusions (results in Table B6 in the supplementary material). Specifically, the availability of dual citizenship in the vignette scenario significantly decreases the likelihood of respondents to report more negative naturalization intensions compared to their actual preferences. At the same time, shorter duration of bureaucratic procedure seems to negatively shape the likelihood of respondents to report more positive naturalization intensions compared to their actual preferences.

Discussion

This study examined how legal requirements and the implementation of naturalization laws in the destination country influence non-citizens' intentions to naturalize, employing a vignette

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experiment integrated into a large-scale representative survey. Recognizing naturalization as a key marker for integration (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2017), our research sought to causally link the legal frameworks of the destination country with non-citizens' naturalization intentions. We analyzed a diverse group of non-citizens—refugees, EU citizens, and non-EU citizens—recognizing the distinct implications naturalization holds for each group due to varied social contexts. These contexts range from the limited return prospects for refugees, to the challenges faced by individuals from less developed countries, to the diminished incentives for EU citizens who already enjoy extensive rights across the European Union.

First, the liberalization of legal requirements significantly influenced non-citizens' naturalization intentions. Specifically, the possibility of retaining previous citizenship may significantly boost naturalization intentions, while reducing the waiting period from 8 to 4 years was positive but rather modest in size. The importance of the dual citizenship possibility was also supported by an additional test in which we compared respondents' actual naturalization preferences with the preferences reported in the vignette experiments. However, neither the elimination of a language test nor a formal naturalization test, additional dimensions measuring the liberalization of legal requirements, had an impact on naturalization intentions.

Second, a more inclusive naturalization procedure—measured by a shorter duration of the bureaucratic procedure, elimination of bureaucratic fees, the possibility that family members are automatically entitled to naturalize, and the introduction of a naturalization ceremony—did not significantly impact the non-citizens' naturalization intentions. From this perspective, our hypothesis *H1*, emphasizing the importance of liberalizing legal requirements and a more inclusive naturalization procedure for non-citizens' naturalization intentions, was only partially supported. Conversely, hypothesis *H2*, acknowledging the greater impact of liberalizing legal requirements compared to a more inclusive naturalization procedure, found more robust support in our results.

Third, our results underscored the role of social context by revealing distinct cost–benefit considerations among the three groups of non-citizens, with non-EU and particularly EU citizens showing a reduced propensity of opting for naturalization compared to refugees. These results align with our theoretical expectations formulated in hypothesis *H3* that naturalization intentions should be most pronounced among refugees followed by non-EU citizens. Refugees predominantly stem from economically disadvantaged or politically unstable countries, finding greater value in obtaining destination country citizenship for security and access. In contrast, EU citizens may not seek additional EU citizenship as they already benefit from EU rights in their destination country.

Fourth, not all naturalization criteria were equally important across groups of non-citizens. We found that the possibility to retain previous citizenship is much more important driver of citizenship intentions for non-EU citizens, followed by EU citizens, and is least important for refugees. Moreover, reducing the waiting period has no influence on refugees' naturalization intentions. These findings highlight distinctive influences of liberalizing legal requirements on non-citizens' naturalization intentions, emphasizing their significance for non-EU citizens. Note that these results contradict partially our hypothesis *H4*, which anticipated a greater effect of liberalizing legal requirements for non-EU citizens and refugees compared to EU citizens. The impact of liberalization was comparatively minor especially for refugees, who already demonstrated high naturalization intentions.

These results may be better understood through our explorative analyses of the self-reported reasons given by the respondents themselves for not naturalizing under the conditions described in the vignette. The primary factor was the impossibility of retaining their original citizenship, cited by the majority. Other significant reasons included a perceived lack of benefits associated with German citizenship and concerns about procedural complexities. Importantly, motivations varied across the different groups of non-citizens, with refugees expressing particular concerns about self-reported ineligibility and procedural complexities. EU citizens often based their decision on a perceived lack of benefits, while non-EU citizens cited factors such as perceived

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benefits, procedural complexity, and intentions to return to their home country. This nuanced understanding of the diverse reasons underlying naturalization intentions among different groups of non-citizens contribute valuable insights to the broader discourse on integration and naturalization, shedding light on the diverse motivations and barriers influencing non-citizens' naturalization decisions.

Conclusion

The availability of dual citizenship emerged as the most relevant factor influencing non-citizens' naturalization intentions. Nevertheless, there were differences between groups of non-citizens, which partly contradicts the studies by Vink et al. (2021) and Peters and Vink (2023). Both studies revealed higher naturalization rates among EU citizens in European countries after dual citizenship reforms. Our study showed that EU citizens experienced less benefits of dual citizenship compared to non-EU citizens. It is worth noting that the aforementioned studies concentrated on naturalization reforms more than two decades ago, a period in which EU citizens enjoyed even greater benefits form naturalization.

Furthermore, the factors representing a more inclusive naturalization process do not significantly affect naturalization intentions in our study. Our experimental design, focused on cost–benefit considerations, may have limited capacity to capture the full spectrum of favorable contexts of reception. As van Hook et al. (2006) emphasize, both economic benefits and positive social attitudes towards immigrants can significantly influence naturalization decisions. Accordingly, government integration efforts and a genuine welcoming culture may shape the institutional configurations that facilitate or hinder naturalization (Bloemraad 2002). These configurations involve government agencies, ethnic organizations, and the broader societal context, all of which contribute to the success of naturalization efforts. Complex interactions that influence naturalization decisions can also arise between the government's immigration policies, pathways to naturalization, and the implementation of application procedures (Del Real 2024). These interactions can lead to unequal patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Goldring and Landolt 2022), but our empirical approach can only partially accommodate them. Our findings therefore suggest that the effectiveness of naturalization measures depends not just on individual policy elements but on the overarching context in which they are implemented.

It is important to acknowledge that factors not covered in the vignette, such as legal awareness and willingness to engage with legal institutions, can also affect naturalization intentions. Additionally, we do not consider factors like navigating bureaucratic hurdles and the risk of discrimination in informal interactions with street-level bureaucrats (cf. Del Real 2024; Goldring and Landolt 2022). These factors are intrinsically linked to the broader naturalization intentions and were not directly examined in our analysis of how liberalizing legal requirements might influence these intentions. Notably, these potential disadvantages are more likely to impact non-EU citizens and refugees, who in our study showed higher naturalization intentions than EU citizens. These broader systemic challenges seem of secondary importance in the context of our focused analysis on legal reforms.

Our research provides important insights for policymakers and scholars, shedding light on the complex interplay between legal requirements, inclusiveness of the naturalization procedure, social context, and immigrant decision-making processes. We acknowledge certain limitations that may influence the interpretation of results. First, the research is context-specific, focusing on Germany as the destination country. A country's citizenship policy reflects its overall approach to immigrant integration (Huddleston and Vink 2015), meaning that different countries may have unique socio-political contexts that could affect the generalizability of findings. Second, while vignettes are a potent tool for modeling decision-making processes, they rely on the assumption that respondents can project real-world decisions from hypothetical scenarios (Auspurg and Liebe 2011). This can lead to discrepancies between stated preferences and actual behavior, as naturalization decisions might be less predictable and more contingent than the vignettes suggest

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(Sredanovic 2022, 3095). Literature on the external validity of vignette experiments show that hypothetical and actual decisions largely coincide (e.g., Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015; Telser and Zweifel 2007).

Finally, in August 2023, the German government passed significant amendments to the Citizenship Act (Deutscher Bundestag 2023), easing the naturalization requirements. Key changes include the allowance for multiple nationalities, reduced residency requirements from 8 to 5 years (or to 3 years in the case of particularly good integration), and simplified conditions for children born in Germany and former guest workers. While these changes post-date our vignette experiment (conducted in 2021 and 2022 for refugees and non-refugee citizens, respectively), they offer future research to link the importance of various vignette dimensions and factual naturalization behavior in the upcoming waves of the German Socioeconomic Panel, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany and the IAB-SOEP Migration Sample. According to our findings, we anticipate that easing the eligibility criteria could lead to a rise in naturalization figures, especially with the implementation of dual citizenship. Nevertheless, the precise upsurge in naturalization figures remains uncertain and is contingent upon various factors, including the ascent of nationalist parties and dynamic immigration patterns, such as the current refugee migration from Ukraine.

Endnotes

1. In some countries, citizenship ceremonies are mandatory (e.g., Australia, Canada, and U.K.) while in other countries they are voluntarily (e.g., Scandinavian countries). In Europe, only few countries provide citizenship ceremonies (Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, and U.K.) (Damsholt 2018). Germany does not (yet) offer a mandatory ceremony to its new citizens.
2. The experimental design was pre-registered in the SOEP following similar procedure as in the SOEP-Innovation Sample application process (Kosyakova and Damelang 2024).
3. Non-refugee respondents in the IAB-BAMF-SOEP-REF are household members without a refugee background or those who fled to Germany as minors.
4. In the IAB-BAMF-SOEP-REF, we identified 19 vignette combinations for which less than five person observations were available; exclusion of which (58 observations) did not alter our conclusions (see Table B1 in the supplementary material).
5. The replication of the main results using alternative specifications of the dependent variable and the estimation strategy did not alter our conclusions (see Table B5 in the supplementary material).

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Supplementary Material

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

Data Availability

Replication codes for data preparation and analyses are available at https://osf.io/x69e5/ (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/X69E5).

The data used in this study from the German Socio-Economic Panel and two integrated studies, the IAB- SOEP Migration Sample and the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, are part of an anonymized data set; the data user is not able to trace information back to individual participants. The personal data is processed in such a way that the rights of the subjects to the confidentiality and integrity of their data are not affected. Nevertheless, due to data security obligations, we are not permitted to publish the data underlying the study. Researchers can, however, apply for data access via the FDZ of the IAB or SOEP-FDZ at DIW. The data can be accessed from here: https://fdz.iab.de/en/FDZ_Individual_Data.aspx or here: https://www.diw.de/en/diw_01.c.601584.en/data_access.html.

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