

“Immigrants with High Socioeconomic Status and Citizenship Acquisition”
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The acquisition of American citizenship is an important component in the process of immigrant incorporation into the host society. By becoming citizens, immigrants formally join the national community, at least in principle abjure allegiance to other countries, and gain the right to vote and run for most elected offices. From the point of view of the host country, high rates of naturalization are desirable because they signal allegiance and membership of individuals who were previously foreigners residing within the country’s borders. Understanding the process of naturalization, including the role played by socioeconomic status, is crucial for American demographers because the emphasis on the policy of family reunification – legal provisions that allow naturalized citizens to bring their family members – ensures that immigration trends are closely related to trends in naturalization (Jasso and Rosenzweig 1986).

In this paper, I examine the relationship between socioeconomic status of immigrants and naturalization, with a particular focus on immigrants with high socioeconomic status. This group of immigrants is interesting because the costs and benefits of naturalization, as well as the role that social context plays, may differentiate it in important ways from immigrants with fewer resources. Common theories of naturalization may not be adequate in explaining the behavior of the most successful immigrants, endangering the accuracy of demographic analyses and projections of immigrant populations.

Two main strands of theory are usually used in trying to explain the decision-making process regarding naturalization: the rational choice model and the social/institutional context model. The rational choice approach considers the costs and benefits of naturalization. In the United States, the costs include the loss of citizenship in the sending country for countries that do not allow dual citizenship, the psychological pain of symbolically rejecting one’s homeland, and the time lost from and material expenses of going through the naturalization process and preparing for language and civic exams. The benefits, on the other hand, are access to welfare benefits (although many states provide coverage for legal residents), ability to sponsor relatives from abroad under family reunification laws, ability to vote and run for office, access to certain government jobs, and possible widening of beneficial social networks. Immigrants with the highest levels of resources may not be as affected by the costs of the naturalization process and exams or care as much about access to welfare benefits as those with fewer resources. At the same time, loss of home country citizenship, ability to vote and run for office, access to government jobs, and expanded social networks may be particularly salient for them. Also, investment in American property may make successful immigrants especially interested in protecting it by becoming full-fledged members of the polity.

The social/institutional context approach emphasizes the context in which decisions to naturalize are made. Bloemraad (2006), for instance, has demonstrated the effect of institutional settings on naturalization in Canada and the U.S. Yang (2002) has explored the way ethnic concentration and the size of co-ethnic community affect incentives to naturalize. The contexts in which immigrant elites find themselves, however, may not be the same as their less well-off peers in terms of the need for

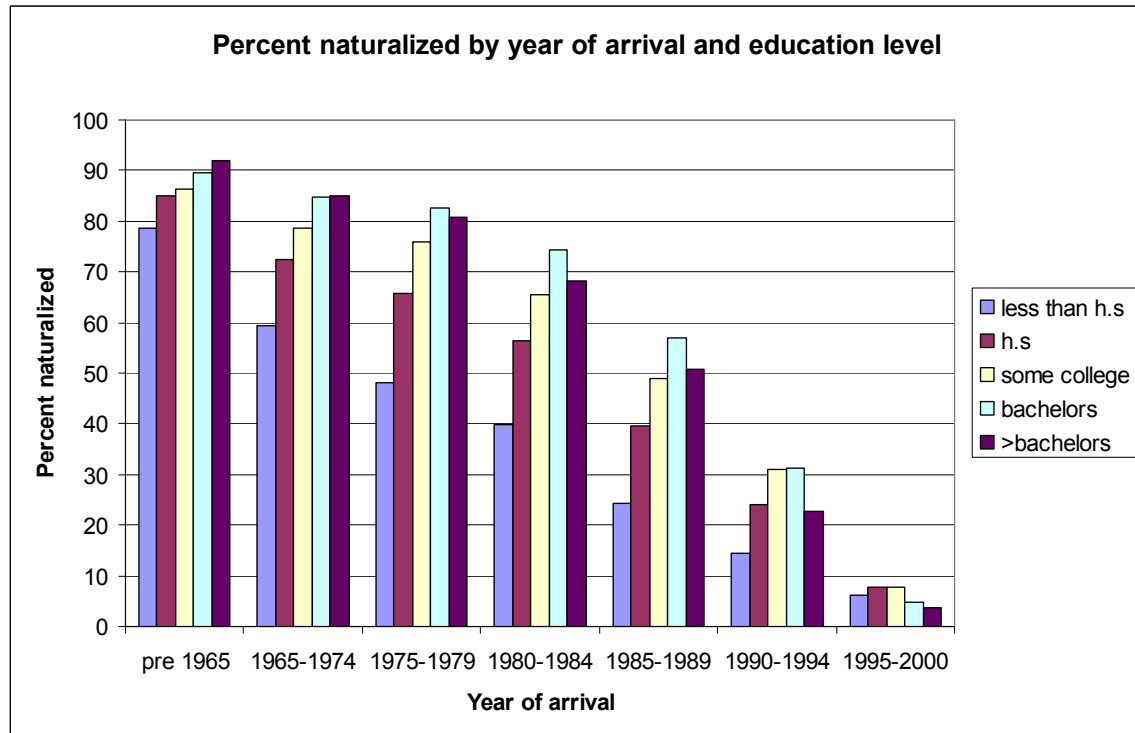
institutional support in the naturalization process or the effect of the co-ethnic community. They may not require such support due to the resources at their disposal, and the intersections of class and ethnicity complicate the effects of the ethnic group.

Thus, it is difficult to establish clear expectations regarding naturalization of economically successful immigrants using existing theoretical approaches. Most empirical work on immigrant naturalization points to a positive relationship between socioeconomic status and citizenship take-up (e.g. Aguirre and Saenz 2002; Balistreri and Hook 2004; Bueker 2005; Jones-Correa 2001; Pantoja and Gershon 2006). However, there is some evidence that the most economically successful immigrants may be less likely to become naturalized and have lower levels of attachment to the host country in general (Liang 1994; Massey and Akresh 2006; Yang 1994; Yang 2002). The latter findings point to an existence of a class of immigrants who migrate across borders without much commitment to the United States, motivated primarily, perhaps, by extracting resources from the economy for the moment (Massey and Akresh 2006). This is consistent with theoretical work pointing to the declining significance of citizenship (Soysal 1994), particularly at a time when the global economy is de-nationalized (Sassen 1996).

In this paper, I will explore the naturalization patterns of the highly educated and economically successful immigrants to the United States in an attempt to determine what factors help explain their uptake of American citizenship. Using the 5 Percent Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) of the 2000 U.S Census, I will conduct multivariate analysis predicting the odds of being a citizen for the foreign-born population aged 25 and older who arrived to the United States between 1965 and 1995. I will consider such measures of socioeconomic status as family income, occupational status, level of education, homeownership and value of the home. Based on factors found to be important in previous research, controls will include age, sex, age at migration, marital status, presence of children, country of origin and dual citizenship in country of origin, entry cohort, English competence, and veteran status. A serious limitation of the Census data are its cross-sectionality, which does not allow me to determine the timing to naturalization or to account for return migration, making naturalization rate estimates conservative. On the other hand, the PUMS immigrant sample is very large and permits detailed disaggregating by origin and other factors.

Preliminary results indicate that immigrants with master's, professional, or doctorate degrees are less likely to be naturalized than immigrants who have bachelors' degrees only. For some immigrant cohorts, the rates of naturalization for the most educated are on par with immigrants who have less than a college education (see Figure 1). Multivariate logistic regression will allow me to control for differences in factors other than socioeconomic status affecting naturalization. Naturalization patterns of highly successful immigrants have repercussions for the demographics of the American population as well as for immigration policy. Moreover, these patterns have broader implications on the integration of immigrants, their political involvement and engagement with the American society.

Figure 1.



Source: 5% PUMS, 2000 Census

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