Exploring the citizenship-belonging nexus: (How) does citizenship status interact with feelings of national belonging of migrants?

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Introduction

Globalization has brought people and cultures closer, disrupting what were once relatively homogenous societies with distinct national characteristics. Consequently, the ethnic makeup of states has become more diverse than ever, spurring discussions about the end of the nation-state (Mann, 1997) and the rise of the cosmopolitan identity (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2017) that could replace national affiliation. This trend is exemplified by the recent transnational mobilisations as a response to global challenges, from racial injustices and economic inequality to climate change (Triandafyllidou, 2022).

As globalization blurs the boundedness of nation-states and challenges conventional notions of sovereignty, it is necessary to understand how migrants' affective ties to states are changed and manifest through movement. Although states might be losing their hold, they still carry an important role: bestowing citizenship. While migrants' identities have become more fluid, their legal status remains determined by state bureaucracies. Citizenship allows people to claim rights and protections, while those without it fall in the cracks between states, losing their "right to have rights" (Arendt, 1962), with no law to protect them. Globalization has detached people's identities from the rigidities of the state they were born in – however, the importance of the citizenship status highlights the need for continued legal ties with states; it is now easier to belong elsewhere, so long as you still belong *somewhere*.

As states adapt to migration-induced super-diversity, citizenship policy is often discussed as one of the important factors of successful integration. Policymakers are faced with difficult questions: should citizenship be hard to acquire, and thus represent a "reward" for successful integration? Or should it be easily accessible, signaling the openness of a welcoming society? Both sides rest on the assumption that citizenship interacts with the feeling of belonging to the state, although the exact mechanisms of this relationship are not well understood.

This research aims to further the understanding of this connection. How do the words on one's passport matter for their perceived place within the state? How do individual-level factors influence the mechanisms through which citizenship is linked to a sense of belonging? Existing research has primarily focused on what makes people decide to naturalize (e.g., Mendoza, 2013) – however, their experiences once naturalized have frequently been overlooked. The main research question of this study is**: How does citizenship status interact with feelings of national belonging of migrants?** Through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with migrants, the research looks at how their decision (not) to naturalize has impacted their capacity and willingness to belong and feel connected to their host society.

The first chapter lays the theoretical foundations of the study, reviewing the arguments made by theorists of citizenship and migration in two parts: mechanisms that explain how citizenship interacts with belonging; and factors that mediate those mechanisms and make them more or less likely to occur. It also introduces the theoretical argument of the research, namely that naturalized residents find it easier to belong due to accessing a variety of citizen-exclusive activities and self-conceptions. The second chapter explains the methodological setup, describing the data collection method, case selection criteria and reviewing the techniques used to analyze the data. In the third chapter the findings of the research are thematically presented, while the final chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the results in relation to the theoretical expectations, and suggests avenues for further research.

Theoretical overview

Academic focus on citizenship has intensified after the effects of globalization became tangible not only in society but also in policy. Already in the 1990s, scholars observed that wealthy democracies were extending the scope of rights awarded to non-citizen residents (Schuck, 1998, 163) – sparking debates about if, and how, citizenship still mattered in the modern day.

Is citizenship too bureaucratized to be meaningful in shaping an individual's affective ties, and thus mentally detached from their criteria of belonging? Among policymakers, the prevailing view is that citizenship can be a powerful tool in promoting national unity and fostering social cohesion, making it easier for migrants to belong (Goodman, 2014, 18). Other authors (Lawy and Biesta, 2006; Isin, 2009; 368) claim that citizenship might be more important as a practice, rather than a status – the actual content of one's passport matters less than their everyday performance of acting citizenship .

This research builds on two kinds of scholarship. First, the theory of how naturalized migrants interact with their host society, and the ***mechanisms*** through which their citizenship status influences their likelihood to belong. Second, the theory of what ***factors*** mediate the citizenship-belonging relationship, and thus making it more or less likely to occur. The purpose of the two types of theoretical insights is to guide the research process and inform the design of the interviews, as well as the selection of respondents.

Mechanisms linking citizenship to belonging

The existing research focuses on three different types of mechanisms through which citizenship can positively influence belonging. The first group of mechanisms concerns the **political realm**. Citizenship enables migrants to participate in the political sphere to a greater extent, and contribute to local and national discussions while being seen as fully legitimate parts of society that are invested in shaping the future of their adopted national community.

There are two avenues of this mechanism; it can be direct and immediate, for example in states which restrict the ability of non-citizens to vote, form parties, or stand for election. In this case, citizenship is a key to enfranchisement. Holding these rights can also indirectly and implicitly contribute to the migrant's self-understanding as a politically active citizen – studies have found that holding citizenship increases the likelihood of voting even in elections that are

otherwise open to non-citizen residents (Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2011), as well as positively influences non-institutional political and civic engagement (Just & Anderson, 2011). The newly acquired access to certain social transfers may spur the desire to actively improve administrative and public services through political action (Dimitriadis and Quasolli, 2021, 1336). In a study on Swiss citizens, Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono (2015) found that naturalization increased the political knowledge of respondents. On the level of the state, Bloemraad and Sheares (2017, 826) posit that citizenship status bestows legitimacy in claims-making on the holder, making them more likely to be taken into account by policymakers. All these observations point to a connection between citizenship and political participation. Through acquiring incentives to educate themselves about common issues, participating in debates that concern the nation, and feeling like the elite listens and cares about their needs, naturalized migrants have unique political pathways to belonging.

Another strand of theory focuses on improved **economic outcomes** for citizens. Studies have shown (Bratsberg et al., 2002; Steinhardt, 2012) that citizens' wage premiums can be as high as five percent as opposed to non-naturalized workers. In cases where a passing language test is a requirement for naturalization, the resulting knowledge awards migrants with much more opportunities in the job market. Furthermore, citizenship has been linked to higher likelihood of investing in long-term financial commitments, starting businesses, or buying property (Bloemraad and Sheares, 2017, 850), which contributes to a sense of security as well as fosters interest in the state whose policies directly influence the stability of such investments. Finally, a less restricted access to social transfers and the welfare system improves the standard of living for citizens (Sainsbury, 2018) – even in cases where non-citizens can enjoy a similar level of financial benefits, the bureaucratic hurdles that are often insurmountable without employing lawyers or translators can deter eligible migrants from applying. The improved socio-economic prospects and the corresponding likelihood of being exposed to prevailing norms and values

(Reeskens and Wright, 2014) can make it easier for migrants to feel a sense of comfort and belonging in their host state.

The final set of mechanisms that link citizenship to belonging is purely **psychological**, based on the symbolic meaning and feelings that individuals derive from their legal status. In the dynamic and globalized world, migrants often feel disconnected both from their countries of origin as well as their places of residence – their experience of 'foreign-ness' is only partially accessible to other migrants with similar experiences (Kristeva, 1991, 23). Having a legal affirmation of belonging symbolized in one's passport can often provide the necessary grounding for people to feel more comfortable. Erdal et. al (2018, 717) found that for some non-naturalized respondents in Norway, lacking the country's passport represented an element of consistent insecurity. This was more pronounced in respondents that were often questioned about their place of origin on grounds of appearance, accent, or even just due to having a "wrong" last name (ibid, 718). Other than the objects that correspond to citizenship status, just the knowledge that one is a fully recognized legal resident can positively impact people's self-perception of legitimate residence, by being able to access the same rights and benefits as natives (Stevenson et al., 2015). Similarly, the duties that correspond to citizenship – either directly 'paying the country back' through taxation, complying with regulations, having to be eligible for armed service, or even just being invited to vote as a "national duty" – could increase the consciousness of both horizontal (connection to co-citizens) and vertical (connection to the state) belonging (Kabeer, 2005; 23). Jetten et. al (2012) link robust social identification to increased health and well-being indicators – people who are secure in their identity tend to be happier and live better, and may express that in a heightened sense of belonging.

In a perspective that focuses on external actors, some studies claim that societies tend to be more welcoming to citizenship-holders, providing them with easier access to service and

employment opportunities; in a study of migrants in Germany, Pietrantuono (2016) found that the level of discrimination in job callbacks was much high for respondents with Turkish sounding names without citizenship as opposed to those who have naturalized. This suggests that holding citizenship might mitigate the level of ethnic, racial, or religious discrimination immigrants face. The symbolic value of citizenship thus operates both on the level of the migrant, as well as the actors within the host society.

Intervening factors that moderate the citizenship-belonging link

Having outlined the theoretical positions that link citizenship status with a higher level of national belonging, it is worth mentioning the factors that make the mechanisms more or less likely to occur.

Firstly, it has been argued that **holding a non-national political identity** would mitigate the effect that naturalization has on belonging. Sassen (2002) posits that due to the global character of megacities, a city-based identity might trump national identity - specifically in cases where that city is not seen as representative of the nation as a whole, but rather as an international melting pot. Thus, citizens living in such cosmopolitan cities might hold an identity that is "simultaneously localized and transnational" (ibid**,** 4) – enjoying a sort of "denationalized freedom" (Favell, 2011, 9). Secondly, on the level of the European Union, identifying with the supranational institution might preclude levels of national attachment. Dimitriadis and Quasolli (2021, 1138) find that among intra-European immigrants, feeling attached to the European community is at times connected to the refusal to belong to the host society. Due to the characteristics of the EU, citizens of any member state can access extensive rights and freedoms in many others as well. Consequently, Joppke (2018; 13) claims that European citizenship is one "without identity", absolving holders of the grip of the nation-state.

The second set of factors that could influence the citizenship-belonging link is the **individual's conception of citizenship**. Specifically in the context of European citizenship often providing access to the freedoms of the Schengen area, many have noted the rise of the so-called "citizenship of convenience" (Nyers, 2018). This view takes citizenship in purely instrumental terms, claiming that people choose to immigrate and naturalize not because they feel any specific national identity, but because the legal membership offers them practical benefits like access to employment, social benefits, or healthcare.

A further factor to consider is the **perception of openness** of the host society. Citizenship policy is often branded as either "restrictive" and thus reflective of "ethnic and exclusive" national identities; or "liberal" and thus reflective of "civic and inclusive" national self-understandings (Brubaker, 1992). Due to the observed higher rates of naturalization in the latter group of countries (Dronkers and Vink, 2012, 392), some have theorized that liberal citizenship regimes signal an open society that offers better conditions for integration. On the contrary, others have argued that it might be more beneficial for immigrants to consider the citizenship policy as restrictive and thus see citizenship as a prize for successful integration (Ersanilli and Koopmans, 2010, 774). In those cases, citizenship should have a higher symbolic value to the naturalized immigrants – instilling feelings of pride and consequent heightening willingness to belong. Testing these theories in a large-N quantitative study, Simonsen (2017; 15) finds that citizenship only matters for immigrants' belonging in the countries where host nationals share this view – whether the society is considered open or restrictive does not have a significant impact. However, it should be noted that this analysis used pre-determined indexes of citizenship policy restrictiveness, which do not necessarily reflect the immigrant perceptions accurately; it also cannot account for any variation in how host attitudes are made known to immigrants.

Considering that one of the main sources of insecurity for immigrant respondents is being visually profiled as foreign by natives, **the perceived ethnic distance** to the host community could be an important mediating factor. Erdal et al. (2018) analyzed how immigrants' (lack of) citizenship implicitly or explicitly interacted with their sense of security in the host country – finding that for respondents who perceived themselves as more visually foreign, the notion of "racial hierarchies of belonging" (Skey, 2013, 82) was frequently implied in their interviews.

Finally, **prior interest and involvement in politics** are likely to be important factors that mediate the effect of political mechanisms of citizenship-belonging linkage. Koikkalainen (2019) finds that Finns who were politically active at home were less likely to apply for citizenship, as they would lose their right to vote in Finnish parliamentary elections. Furthermore, we could assume that a lack of political involvement at home would translate into a weak political rights-based mechanism of belonging in the host country.

Theoretical argument

The mechanisms and factors outlined in the theoretical section guide the research and data collection process, and dictate how the interview questions are structured. Furthermore, they inform the preliminary expectations of what kind of processes are at play when migrants develop feelings of belonging. However, as this research is primarily interested in understanding how individuals' experience of belonging is changed by naturalizing, it does not rely on hypotheses – the main expectation is that citizenship does matter for belonging, although the mechanisms through which this link operates will likely vary across respondents. Ultimately, the research hopes to either reinterpret existing linking mechanisms and mediating factors, or uncover entirely new ones to add to the existing corpora of knowledge related to processes of migration, belonging, and integration.

Methodology

This paper uses qualitative content analysis to uncover the internal processes of how immigrants understand belonging through the lens of the institution of citizenship – enabling respondents to offer their interpretations that do not necessarily align with theoretical expectations. This kind of approach also fills a qualitative gap in research of belonging – as it has so far mostly been observed by large-scale quantitative studies (Geurts et al., 2021, 72).

Data was gathered using 15 semi-structured interpretive interviews (Morse (1994, 225) suggests a similar sample size for in-depth qualitative research). Purposive sampling was used to gather respondents – they were recruited through social media networks for expats in the Netherlands. The sample consists of 8 migrants who have naturalized and acquired new citizenship, and 7 migrants who have satisfied the 5-year duration of stay required for naturalization – but chose to remain legal residents rather than naturalize. This criterion is necessary so that the respondents have enough time to feel the difference that living without host-country citizenship makes. The latter group is observed to analyze whether people without citizenship feel a lack of belonging due to the absence of the aforementioned mechanisms. Furthermore, assessing the alternative routes to belonging that people construct sans citizenship helps us understand the ways through which citizenship mechanisms can be replaced through other practices. Data on the respondents' country of origin and current citizenship status is compiled in the Appendix.

Interview questions were set deductively based on the theorized mechanisms and factors, and designed in a way where each respondent's understanding of citizenship and belonging was interrogated from different viewpoints. The questionnaire covered political, economic and psychological routes to belonging, as well as gauged the respondents' attitudes towards citizenship, the local society and their home country. The semi-structured nature of the

interview facilitated flexibility with the depth of interrogating specific areas, as well as enabled the emergence of new and unexpected themes.

Interviews were recorded with the consent of participants, transcribed, and analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis; coding the transcripts to establish recurring patterns of themes. For analyzing the gathered data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) principles of thematic analysis are used, which involve first reading over the interview transcripts to generate initial codes, then collating codes into larger themes that offer targeted insights, and finally the selection of quotes to illustrate the findings with first-hand accounts. Therefore, while theory was used to base the core set of interview questions on, the findings are analyzed and categorized inductively based on the gathered data.

This research asks respondents to report on experiences that are very personal and often traumatic – for this reason the interview environment was designed in mind of making the participants comfortable and secure. They were assured that their participation is anonymous and voluntary, as well as non-identifiable to anyone but the researcher. Furthermore, the researcher's migrant background was disclosed, with hopes that this might lead to a more relaxed atmosphere where respondents are willing to also talk about their negative experience with the local society and culture - as they did not have to fear offending their interlocutor. It is important to remain mindful that the effect of the researcher on respondents is impossible to completely mitigate, and that this kind of research inevitably pushes the interviewer into the study, rather than letting him stay as an objective observer (Bernard, 2006, 226).

Case selection

The selected category of migrants are **intra-EU migrants** – this is to mitigate the possibility of the "citizenship of convenience", as the respondents already had a European passport with access to all of its benefits prior to immigrating. This makes the respondents included in the

sample ideal for this study, as it is expected that their decision to naturalize is based less on practical considerations and more on innate feelings of attachment and changes in national affiliation. This expectation is also grounded in empirical research, as, intra-EU migrants are shown to be less likely to apply for citizenship than migrants from elsewhere (Dronkers & Vink, 2012, 405). Furthermore, the case selection allows to test for supra-national identification of being "European" as one of the mediating factors even among the respondents who chose not to naturalize. European respondents might also feel a lower social desirability bias to show belonging, as opposed to more stigmatized groups (i.e. refugees).

The selected host country is the Netherlands – not only is this made on grounds of easier access to respondents due to the location of the researcher, but the country is also characteristic of the trend of expanding the rights of non-citizens to be almost equal to nationals. Residents can vote in local elections, but are barred from doing so on the national level. It is also important to note that while Dutch nationalism has generally been considered civic-based due to legacies of religious conflict and linguistic diversity (Merolli, 2016, 6), the distinction between Dutch and *'allochtoon'* (foreign) values came to the fore during the early 2000s debates about new integration requirements. In the same context of debates about integration, the Balkende IV Government of 2007 relied on the notion of the 'absorption capacity' to legitimize the barring of "migrants of poor prospects" from entering the Netherlands - a category that has been criticized as racialized (Bonjour and Duyvendak, 2018, 891). The recency and social impact of these debates mean that the perception of the citizenship-belonging link is likely to be more salient than elsewhere. Finally, there is a consistently above-average rate of naturalization in the Netherlands (compared to other countries in the EU), signaling that mechanisms of national belonging are likely present (Eurostat, 2022).

All respondents held (or still do) a passport from a different European country before they immigrated to the Netherlands. Among the group of naturalized respondents, some were able

to keep their previous passports due to being married to Dutch citizens. There was also variation in the time since naturalization as well as time spent in the country before naturalization. This enriches the study by providing a wide variety of experiences and environmental factors that contribute to varying perceptions of the Netherlands. As the purpose of the study is to inform and add to the existing theoretical framework on migration and citizenship by relying on in-depth qualitative interviews, there is no need to control variation or to statistically analyze the results.

Findings

This chapter presents an analysis of the 15 qualitative interviews made with both naturalized and non-naturalized respondents. The findings are structured in 5 themes: Conceptions of citizenship, Socio-political impacts, Economic impacts, Psychological mechanisms, and Mediating factors. These reveal factors that influence the intensity and direction of the citizenship-belonging relationship, as well as the mechanisms of that relationship. It's important to note that the section Conceptions of Citizenship covers new findings that were not predicted by the theoretical overview, and is thus put first to emphasize this. Because theory was used to guide the interview process, the other sections directly overlap with subsections of the theoretical chapter on mechanisms and factors.

Although the research was initially based on a distinction between the naturalized and non-naturalized migrants, the analysis does not discuss them separately in an equivalent manner. This is because the findings contradict the initial assumption that the two groups would be distinctly homogenous in their attitudes toward citizenship and the host society - rather, the picture is more complex as similar attitudes sometimes crossed group boundaries. Furthermore, prioritizing thematic over stakeholder analysis better fulfills the goal of the study, which is to provide an overview of various ways through which citizenship and belonging might be linked.

Conceptions of citizenship:

The analyzed data shows that one of the most important factors that influence the dynamics between citizenship and belonging is an individual's conception of citizenship – what the legal status means to them in relation to the citizenship-granting country, sans the practical benefits of visa-free travel or eased access to loans.

For the non-naturalized respondents, citizenship status was most often described as just a 'piece of paper', with no real meaning other than the rights that it allows them to access. When asked if changing their citizenship would make them less tied to their country of origin, a majority didn't agree – naturalization was contemplated only within the scope of practical benefits that it might provide. On the other side, naturalized respondents were more likely to ascribe a meaning to citizenship further than just legal status.

Affirmation of belonging:

One of the non-naturalized respondents mentioned how changing citizenship would make no sense as it would "deny her roots", while a naturalized respondent said it made her feel like a traitor to her own country - illustrating a larger theme of citizenship as an affirmation of origin, or past belonging. This reflects how the same conception can be held by both groups of respondents, with the difference that naturalized migrants are more likely to focus on current belonging, and use citizenship as proof of their connection with their host country.

Duty

*"I believe you have to be responsible. You have to be a good citizen. You have to play your part in society, and you know and do what's right" (*Ana, Non-naturalized)

The theme of responsibilities and duties to the Netherlands came up among respondents from both groups. Non-naturalized respondents sometimes felt the duty shift from their country of

origin to the Netherlands simply due to the virtue of living here, as well as being reminded of their residence through paying taxes and enjoying a limited amount of voting rights. Nevertheless, there are some unique ways through which naturalized respondents described their newfound duty towards the Netherlands. One recalled being notified that he is now under Dutch military system and thus, in case of war, is eligible to be conscripted into the armed forces – not only did this spur another internal discussion of where his allegiances lie, but also provided another way through which he could feel connected to the Dutch.

Another respondent brought up the civic duty to vote, and pointed out that after naturalizing he felt more compelled to follow Dutch news and do more research about topics related to elections not only on a national, but also local level. As all intra-EU migrants otherwise have voting rights for local and municipal elections due to their EU citizenship, it is interesting to see that citizenship status heightened the usage of a voting right that naturalized migrants have already had prior to naturalizing.

Recognition

Citizenship can be seen as a way that the host country commends a migrant - either for his efforts to belong, to pay taxes to the country through a longer period of residence, or simply through the fact that they decided to learn the language and show a willingness to participate in this way. One naturalized respondent, who is a social worker and helps financially stabilize individuals on the outskirts of society, said that in his perception Dutch citizenship was earned through the work he's done for the country. He distanced himself from other migrants from his country, who preferred to stay within international companies and interact with the native sphere less – as opposed to them, he was "building the nation with his work".

When comparing the impact of their first passport and their acquired Dutch one, the latter was usually given more weight and importance by the naturalized respondents – this held true even

for those that could become dual (or triple) nationals. While the passport of origin was considered to be sentimental, it was not perceived as a result of the migrant's work and effort, which makes the acquired passport more meaningful. This is likely because migrating is a step into a lesser-known territory where one has to navigate the phase of being at the same time a foreigner, but wanting to belong. This initial hardship enables citizenship to be seen as a personal accomplishment and allows those who successfully naturalize to find comfort in their achievement, as well as be more likely to actively identify with the fruit of their efforts.

Selective belonging

A mechanism that might be uniquely effective for dual citizens is being able to relate with the international side of the Netherlands. The fact that they can add to the diversity while still being affirmed as being Dutch is a helpful step through which some respondents connect with the country. As a Spanish-Dutch dual citizen put it:

I enjoy an environment that's more diverse – if there's a lot of people from different places, and in the Dutch society you have people that are Dutch Moroccan, or Dutch Surinamese, or Dutch Caribbean… So, in a way, I feel like I'm with them. I do identify more with that - a different type of Dutch. Looking at these communities also helps me feel more Dutch because then it shows that there are many ways of being Dutch. That's something that makes me more comfortable, and makes me feel like I am part of the Netherlands that I like - the diverse part. (Pedro, Naturalized)

Socio-political mechanisms:

Although it carries meaning for many, citizenship also matters outside of what the migrants ascribe to the status itself. The first and most apparent change that naturalization brings for migrants is the right to vote in national elections. It's important to note that this pathway to belonging is strongest for politically active immigrants who regularly exercise their voting

rights - however, one respondent reported that while she used to be politically inactive, her interest changed once naturalizing. Although naturalized respondents could already vote *with* Dutch people on municipal level using their EU citizenship, they did not vote *as* Dutch people – rather, they were voting as *Amsterdamers* or *Leideners*. Citizenship allows migrants to partake in a political ritual that not only includes all Dutch people, it also excludes all non-Dutch residents.

There are many ways through which the mechanism of voting in the national elections fosters belonging. Firstly, the act of voting itself – respondents reported a unifying feeling when they stood in line with other Dutch people waiting to cast their ballot. Furthermore, becoming an active voter allowed naturalized respondents to access, and meaningfully participate in discussions about the election – they felt included and that their opinion was equally valid, whereas non-naturalized respondents often felt unheard or disregarded even in those political discussions where they could vote. Finally, voting rights motivated respondents to become more informed, follow the news and read up on party positions, and through these activities become closer to the Dutch way of life. Even for those that participated in political discussions with friends before naturalizing, the difference was apparent:

*The content of the conversation doesn't change much, but the perspective is different, because then you're also one of them technically. And "what **we're** going to do". We're not just talking about a topic, but we're all going on voting day to have our say. You become an equal participant in the conversation. Whereas, on the other hand, you're just talking about it like a third-party issue or something. (Pedro, Naturalized)*

Apart from the voting process, some respondents perceived a level of inequality between foreigners and Dutch citizens when accessing rights or interacting with state institutions. One noted that when getting a mortgage or applying for a loan, being foreign puts one in a higher

risk bracket. Once naturalized, the same respondent felt like they had to explain themselves less, which made them feel more secure. Another respondent had issues with getting student financing that she was entitled to:

They delayed the payout for a long time - maybe 6, 7 months. And they told me on the phone, after loads of phone calls, that they are hesitant to give these benefits to foreigners. Because in case they make a mistake, the foreigners already go back to their country, and then they don't pay back the difference. (Adriana, Naturalized)

A social worker described being discriminated at the municipality when he was escorting his client:

I went with my client, a 100% Dutch person. But with his psychological problems, he had problems expressing himself and what he really needed. Then I was quite aggressively discriminated by the municipality itself. They didn't trust me, and they didn't want to allow me to be next to my client because I was Polish. I still had at the time my Polish nationality, and they were telling me that they're going to check me on IND. And she was checking my contact info and information about my life next to the client! (Kordian, Naturalized)

Such interactions with state institutions and bureaucracy can make the lack of citizenship more salient for migrant's sense of foreignness, while also eventually providing those who naturalize with another reason for feeling secure in their dealings with the system. However, perceiving the system as being discriminatory towards foreigners is not contingent on any personal experience: many respondents noted how they don't trust the Dutch government due to the infamous *toeslagenaffaire* - a political scandal that revealed that the Tax and Customs Administration was relying on a biased system to declare thousands of benefit claims as fraudulent on the basis of arbitrary characteristics (Heikkila, 2022).

Economic mechanisms

Respondents unanimously shared the perception that language knowledge - rather than citizenship status - is the key difference that prevents foreigners from equally participating in the job market. However, citizenship status was able to both directly and indirectly influence economic outcomes.

Some respondents experienced a higher level of scrutiny in the screening process due to being foreign. Naturalization helps signal to employers that a prospective jobseeker is worth investing in, as they are likely to stay in the country – this can cause both real economic disparity between the naturalized and the non-naturalized, as well as the perception of having citizenship increasing economic prospects and desirability. One respondent also believed that Dutch citizenship would make her more likely to get a job at the European Commission due to nationality quotas, as there was a surplus of applicants from her native country.

Indirectly, acquiring citizenship can provide an incentive to learn Dutch better – not only to the level sufficient for the *inburgering* exam, but also to be fully conversational:

Having the passport also makes me more motivated to learn. The nuances of the language like, I can understand all the inside jokes. So it is this kind of motivation... Now I belong in this society. I even have the passport. So I need to learn all the nitty, gritty details of the language. (Adriana, Naturalized)

However, respondents rarely brought up the link between economic prospects and equality of opportunity, and ease of belonging. Most reported that it would be no easier to belong if their economic situation changed - implying that if economic mechanisms for belonging work, they likely do so on a subconscious level connected to general life satisfaction.

Psychological mechanisms:

Most naturalized respondents reported a higher feeling of belonging that wasn't clearly linked to any practical benefit, but rather to their identity:

Security of belonging

For one queer-identifying respondent, citizenship was most important for security – he felt that the Netherlands was more likely to protect him abroad if he faced any difficulties while travelling in countries that are dangerous for the LGBTQ+. Furthermore, many respondents pointed out that after Brexit-induced Euroscepticism, the ability to stay in the Netherlands if the EU and Schengen Union ever collapse was an important factor in their decision to naturalize.

A respondent who is partnered to another non-Dutch person also noted that having citizenship was important from the perspective of having children. Because the Netherlands is a *jus sanguinis* country, it does not grant citizenship to children born on its territory if at least one of the parents isn't Dutch – this would become important once that child is unable to access the same student finance benefits as their peers. The respondent also noted that he did not want his child to be branded as a "foreigner". In that way, naturalizing is also important from the perspective of fostering a future belonging of the child.

Grounded identity

Many respondents from both groups pointed out that living abroad has destabilized their identity. Not being able to fully belong in the host country is difficult by itself, but the feeling of foreignness is intensified by the fact that the relationship towards their country of origin has changed. While some reported at least being able to relate to other expats who left the same country, others found no community they could identify with fully at all. Most respondents

recognized a need to hold some kind of national identifier to feel secure and grounded, which makes it harder for expats:

I think the problem when you leave abroad for too long is that you start feeling a little bit from nowhere, it's difficult and confusing… But so my parents are getting older, at some point they're not going to be there. And you think: what a strange life? I am here in this country that is not mine. And then everything about my previous life back there, sort of this at some point disappears, and it's no longer there. And so you feel this - like you're from nowhere. I think that sometimes causes a lot of anxiety because you're always missing something. If I'm there, I want to be here, and if I come here, I want to be there. (Miguel, Non-Naturalized)

Respondents also noted that it was important to them to feel *at home* in the country where they live – naturalizing made a Polish respondent finally feel like the Netherlands was his home, as he previously felt confused about being homesick of the Netherlands when abroad. For many, having citizenship in a country they feel at home was also important to feel fully settled.

Likewise, citizenship was used as an affirmation of legitimacy and a signifier that respondents truly became a part of society. As one respondent put it:

So now I live here, but I don't just live here. I am here, I am part of it. I feel less foreign in a way. (Pedro, Naturalized)

Another respondent felt that although she could feel herself becoming Dutch through the 20 years of residence prior to naturalizing, she never felt completely settled before she was officially Dutch;

Learning the language was like packing the suitcase and then gaining citizenship was like getting the big bow wrapped around the suitcase! (Mary, Naturalized)

The heightened importance of citizenship after naturalizing

For many, making the decision to naturalize was already the part where the effect of (future) citizenship on their belonging made them feel more comfortable. As the process itself takes at least a year, getting citizenship at the end comes as a reward for staying committed to the change in nationality. However, for a Spanish respondent who had to give her previous passport away, the final experience was unexpectedly traumatic:

It was difficult. It wasn't easy. And I thought it would be because I thought: Oh, it's just a paper. But that day I had to go to the Consulate to give the passport away, I felt like a traitor to my country and I was crying... And I had to tell myself: Do it. This is the decision that I've made, and you know there's no way back now. Today I have to do it. (Elvira, Naturalized)

This shows how not only acquiring a new passport can make citizenship more meaningful, but also the loss of the former one makes one rediscover what the legal status really means (and what it meant) to them.

Naturalization as an escape

The intensity of feelings towards the country of origin – whether good or bad – also plays a role in how citizenship matters. In this way, a respondent from Bulgaria recounted that at least at the beginning, his nationality made him feel insecure.

Certainly, in the first years, I may have felt a bit ashamed or shy to say that I'm from Bulgaria because of the social sentiments towards people from Eastern Europe. I mean, it's not a lie to say that there are certain sentiments from people from Eastern Europe, from Western Europe, from Africa, from other places. As a young person without much confidence, moving to a new country, I want people to like me… (Anton, Naturalized)

Although in his case these feelings of shame changed before he naturalized, perception of national stigma is an important mechanism to consider – many respondents said they liked how the Netherlands was organized and that they felt proud to be a part of it, while comparing it to less functional parts of the system in their homeland. On the other side, being perceived as coming from a respected and liked nation made a Spanish respondent more secure in her foreign nationality.

Mediating factors:

While the previous sections highlighted the variety of mechanisms through which belonging is connected to citizenship, it is important to note that none of them operate universally and in the same way for every migrant. Aside from mechanisms of voting not being effective for politically apathetic individuals, other mechanisms are also strongly dependent and mediated by preexisting identities, perceptions of old and new homelands, as well as attitudes towards non-national identifiers. This section shows that understanding and predicting the impact of citizenship on belonging necessitates a deeper understanding of an individual's standpoint on a variety of issues.

Attitudes toward country of origin

The feeling they hold for their homeland plays a big part in what makes acquired citizenship matter for migrants. For example, a Catalan respondent reported no significant attachment to his Spanish passport simply because he felt a degree of animosity towards the country, and did not feel represented by its symbols. He pointed out that the thought of naturalizing and losing his Spanish passport did not pose him any difficulties, while his "pure Spanish" partner felt more uneasy with the prospect of changing citizenships. In a similar way, a Scottish respondent did not feel represented by her British passport, and thus did not face any issues in giving it up. While this matters for whether people decide to naturalize in the first place, it also can

contribute to a feeling of ease or comfort once naturalized – as the migrant is finally able to legally identify with the place that they live in.

Importance of agency

of their choosing.

Many respondents emphasized the importance of making "the decision" and sticking to it, thus exercising agency over where they belong. This highlights the variance between ascribed and achieved belonging - some naturalized respondents felt that one of the reasons why they can feel attached to the Netherlands is the facts that they could *choose* to naturalize, rather than being nationals of a country without their consent.

Attitudes toward the country of arrival

Being able to feel proud of a nation is a big factor in both one's decision to naturalize as well as the ability to connect with the positive aspects of the state. A Bulgarian respondent noted that he likes being Dutch because of a stronger passport that enables visa-free travel to more countries – being able to present himself as Dutch at airport passport controls filled him with pride and comfort. A respondent from Poland noted how he started feeling homesick of the Netherlands when he was abroad, and as he naturalized, he was able to feel a part of the things that made the country stand out to him:

The country got so nicely organized over the last couple of centuries. They're pretty smart. I also do have friends in the government, so I see a bit of how decisions are made there. I see that there are actually reasons to be proud about. (Emil, Naturalized)

Non-national identities

Many non-naturalized respondents reported feeling very low levels of national identity, neither was it important to them. One Spaniard claimed she does not feel any national pride or

attachment to the nation, rather just to the experiences and memories she made there – this also prevented her from feeling (or seeking) a closer attachment to the Netherlands. One respondent identified as "part of human kindness" – she felt connected to others by virtue of being human, regardless of their nationalities. At the same time, she felt most culturally connected to Europe, after which followed different national affiliations from countries she'd lived in. To her, feeling partly Dutch and connected to the Netherlands was not a question of citizenship:

I don't need to have a Dutch passport to feel that. As I mentioned earlier, there are some bits about this Dutchness – the feeling is already alive in me in different ways. (Lucia, Non-naturalized)

Others described their current identity as 'expats' – their international background and experience of migration made their experience unique. The comfort of such expat identity varied – for some it provided ease in being unique, for others it was an impetus to consolidate their belonging through naturalization. This variance can partly be explained by the type of environment one migrates into – respondents living in Amsterdam, Utrecht or Rotterdam (big international cities) seemed more comfortable in their foreign background, as their difference was made less salient. While one respondent found it harder to feel truly Dutch while living in Amsterdam – contrasting her experience before and after moving out of the city – another thought that it is exactly the internationalized center that gives the Netherlands its charm, and is thus an inextricable part of the country. This illustrates how the perception of belonging is tied to the perception of what the local society truly is, and what makes one part of an in-group. In turn, these perceptions are often defined by past experiences of exclusion or alienation.

Some respondents felt a strong sense of European identity but did not report it interfering with their national affiliation. Wanting to still feel European contributed to the decision to naturalize for British respondents, but they still ranked feeling Dutch more intensely as feeling European.

On the other hand, the Catalan respondent felt more European than Dutch – likely due to being used to not identifying on a national level before migrating.

Perceived benefits of holding specific identities

A naturalized Polish respondent noted that when traveling in Spain, he was met with much more enthusiastic reactions when he introduced himself as a Pole living in the Netherlands rather than as Dutch. That was part of the reason why he started seeing his country of origin in a more positive light, and thus changed his preferred way of identifying back to being Polish – even though he already gave up his citizenship.

Perceived ethnic distance

The extent to which migrants are immediately branded as foreign based on visual cues or accents interferes with how citizenship influences belonging. When asked about how open he perceives the Dutch society to be, a respondent reported feeling the need to defend his identity, but also affirm his belonging to the Netherlands:

When coming from a center/north European country (ie, Germany, France, UK, etc.), and looking as such, things might be rather easy when moving to The Netherlands. However the experience might be more difficult when coming from other countries like Turkey, Morocco, Poland... In my case, coming from Spain and looking to some people like a North-African person due to my tanned skin, I have faced situations where the unconscious bias played against me. I have had to reiterate my origins in several conversations or interactions. And even then, after sharing that I am originally from Spain, I need to fight against the thoughts that Spanish are lazy! This sort of judgment makes things a bit difficult, resulting in the need to remind them about my education, my job and position, for how long I live in The Netherlands, that you have a life in the Netherlands… (Miguel, Non-naturalized)

Although ethnic distance can provide an incentive for migrants to naturalize to acquire tools of legitimation, it can also be a contributor to the opposite effect. Many non-naturalized respondents felt like citizenship would not matter for the perception of the locals – they would always be branded as foreigners. This kind of attitude makes attempting to belong futile, and thus even naturalizing for practical reasons is less likely to improve a person's belonging.

Discussion:

The series of semi-structured interviews produced a clearer picture of the dynamics of migration, integration and belonging. The purpose of this research was not to test the extent to which certain mechanisms are stronger or more prominent than others, but rather enrich and inform the existing body of literature on citizenship and belonging with various collected first-hand accounts. The lived experiences of respondents varied, as well as their perceptions of the country. However, the sample produced some consistency regarding conceptions of citizenship and the practices through which it becomes important.

Theoretical predictions of economic mechanisms were not affirmed by any group of respondents. This is likely due to the strong perception of the EU as facilitating economic meritocracy for jobseekers that travel across countries. Furthermore, even if citizenship would translate to a higher earning potential, the step from financial stability towards belonging was never made explicit by any respondent. This might also be a product of perceived individualism - many respondents from more socially oriented countries (Spain) noted that while in their home country the state would help the most marginalized in case of unexpected hardship, they thought of the Netherlands as more neoliberal, with people expected to rely on the market rather than the state. Consequently, the private economic situations of citizens in the Netherlands were seen by many to be their own responsibility and thus detached from society or the state, therefore inhibiting the effect that economic status has on belonging.

Overall, the results paint a picturesque range of attitudes toward citizenship. Most participants agreed that locals do not care about citizenship status, and rather exclude based on the language barrier. Furthermore, many mentioned that the Dutch are culturally specific and do not like to widen their social circle and accept newcomers – however, respondents believed that this was also a problem for native Dutch people making friends in their adulthood.

Nevertheless, psychological mechanisms were present in the accounts of all naturalized respondents – showing that there exist clear and identifiable impacts on well-being that stem from individuals' own conceptions of secure identity. When respondents perceived citizenship as connoting a duty to the nation in question, they were more likely to ascribe it a higher meaning for belonging as well – this was true for both respondents that naturalized and those that kept their original nationality. In a similar way, conceptualizing citizenship as a recognition or a prize for successful integration also led to a higher feeling of belonging.

On the other side, it is not just attitudes toward citizenship that matter – it is also how the respondents perceived their host state regarding its general openness to foreigners, the hurdles that they experienced without formal belonging and the type of relationship they foster with their country of origin. What connects all these factors is that they are determined by the migrants' lived experiences, goals, priorities, and pre-existent beliefs. Some experienced intersectional inequalities in which life without citizenship is made selectively more difficult for those who are also racial, sexual or religious minorities – being in the 'wrong' category of legal status adds another layer of social exclusion that further complicates their experience. Others were not so much influenced by the vulnerabilities of their own identities but still heard stories of friends, relatives or strangers on the news being discriminated against.

Furthermore, the current geopolitical context contributes to the extent to which individuals think about their citizenship - the post-Brexit climate of insecurity about the resilience of the

European project made many respondents feel concerned about the future of the Schengen area and their ability to continue their lives as non-naturalized expats. One respondent pointed out that having lived in the UK during Brexit, she became more sensitive to being profiled as foreign, as well as not being able to vote on issues that concern her profoundly. On the national level, the social security scandals of the Dutch government reminded respondents of the different treatment foreigners experience in a country that many have beforehand considered as open and equal.

These considerations point us to a specific understanding of how citizenship interacts with belonging: it is selectively salient based on the external factors that drive people to become more or less aware of the implications of their legal status. Consequently, the conceptions are fluid and change over time as people adapt to new circumstances and gain different understandings of themselves and their host society.

While this insight holds true for any attribute or part of identity, it becomes very important to keep in mind when states design their integration strategies – from the formation of the naturalization process to the values that are promoted by official means of communication. A government that is aware of its image can choose to adapt its method of interaction with foreigners to shore up legitimacy, challenge the prevailing norms or reinforce them. The experience and success of the integration process depends on the state being cognizant of the kinds of migrants it receives, the types of bureaucratic hurdles it sets before them, as well as the prevailing social views that dictate local-foreign interactions.

Avenues for further study

While this type of research is important to help guide further endeavors of citizenship and migration studies, it is by design limited in testing how these mechanisms vary across different cases. It is recommended that qualitative studies are made to test and ground the variation based on countries of origin and perceptions of home countries - it is also important that in-depth

qualitative research is consistently complemented with large-N quantitative studies. Further qualitative research should also investigate the difference between ascribed and chosen belonging – whether agency makes a difference in how migrants belong.

Another avenue is to look at the variation in how people react to the prospect of *giving up* their citizenship. In countries with mandatory conscription, the conception of what it means to be a part of the country might decisively change, as well as acquire a gender dynamic. This requires further studies specifically targeted at the variety of intersectional belongings and marginalization of respondents both from their country of origin as well as their host country.

The outcome of this research paper is an in-depth thematic overview of different ways that citizenship is linked to belonging. Conclusions show that citizenship plays a significant role in shaping immigrants belonging: currently theorized mechanisms were shown to be present in various ways, their salience dependent on the other characteristics of respondents. The findings of this study can inform further citizenship policies and the way that integration processes are designed and studied. Ultimately, this research provides a much-needed insight into how newcomers come to relate to their environment, which is a crucial step in creating a cohesive community in societies fragmented through globalization.

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Appendix

Interviewee	**Naturalization Status**	**Current citizenship**	**Country of Origin**
Elvira	Naturalized	Dutch	Spain
Kordian	Naturalized	Dutch	Poland
Emil	Naturalized	Dutch	Poland
Anton	Naturalized	Dutch	Bulgaria
Mary	Naturalized	Dutch	UK
Adriana	Naturalized	Albanian-Greek-Dutch (Triple)	Albania
James	Naturalized	British-Dutch (Dual)	UK
Pedro	Naturalized	Spanish-Dutch (Dual)	Spain

Alicia	Non-naturalized	Spanish	Spain
Sofia	Non-naturalized	Spanish	Spain
Maria	Non-naturalized	Spanish	Spain
Ana	Non-naturalized	Spanish	Spain
Lucia	Non-naturalized	Spanish	Spain
Miguel	Non-naturalized	Spanish	Spain
Barbara	Non-naturalized	Czech	Spain