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The Practice of Naturalization in Switzerland: A Statistical Overview

Philippe WANNER* and Étienne PIGUET*

Based as it is on a unique three-tiered decision system (communal, canton, and federal), naturalization in Switzerland is at the heart of a political debate framed by recurring discussions about migration policy⁽¹⁾ and about policy aiming at the integration of foreigners. The limits of the federalist system regulating naturalization have recently been exposed by the existence of discriminatory practices in certain communes and for certain groups of foreigners. This is one of the reasons why a consultation process is currently underway to modify the law in order to facilitate access to Swiss nationality for the second and third generations of migrants.

Naturalization does not have only political implications. It is also an indicator of the degree of openness and of reciprocal contact between the host society and its immigrants. Thus, highly restrictive practices in granting nationality suggest a desire to hold a minority population apart. Similarly, a weak interest in naturalization among a group of foreigners might suggest a limited desire for participation in collective choices, for example because only a temporary stay is planned. At the same time, changes in nationality modify the proportion of foreigners, as well as the size and structure of the Swiss and foreign populations. Over recent years, naturalization has led to a steady growth of the population with Swiss nationality, despite negative net migration and negative rates of natural increase. Conversely, naturalization limits the growth of the foreign population and its proportion of the total population. Although they affect neither the size nor the structure of the resident population, changes in nationality still carry a specific meaning in a country where, over the past few decades, the colour of the passport has acquired a symbolic significance in debates over immigration, and several popular initiatives seeking to limit the proportion of foreigners have been submitted to the people⁽²⁾.

Despite its important consequences, naturalization is still rarely investigated. Several studies have recently been carried out, at the initiative of the Federal Commission against Racism. These studies have addressed the statistical and legal aspects of the phenomenon, and the practices at the commune level (Piguet and Wanner, 2000; Boner, 2000; Steiner and Wicker, 2000). They sought to establish whether or not systematic discrimination existed toward certain groups of foreigners, and they showed that discrimination is practised in certain communes, particularly when dealing with people originating from the former Yugoslavia and from Turkey. Rejections of members of these groups are observed either at the moment the application is presented (the commune advises a longer wait before a request is

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⁽¹⁾ With a population that is 20% foreign, Switzerland is an important case for discussion and reflection on migration.

⁽²⁾ The most recent, dating back to 24 September 2000, aimed at limiting the proportion of foreigners in the population to 18%.

submitted) or at the moment of the commune's decision (refusal of naturalization by the communal representatives or as the result of a vote), usually on the grounds of an insufficient level of integration. Rejections at the canton and federal level, on the other hand, are rare, since these two levels rule on the background conditions for naturalization without taking a position on the candidate's degree of integration. The studies nevertheless show that, overall, naturalization rates do not reflect discrimination toward foreign communities. They are primarily influenced by the individual attitudes of the people eligible for naturalization, and these attitudes vary by nationality.

The other objectives of the analyses were to provide quantitative information on naturalization, to interpret the differences in observed practices by country of origin and by place of residence, and to discuss which individual or collective factors might play a role in naturalization. The current study develops certain of these points. After describing the data used and the legislative and socio-demographic context of naturalization, it estimates its impact on the size of national groups in Switzerland and discusses differences in practice by nationality of origin.

1. Naturalization data and methods used

The data used come from the Central Aliens Registry (RCE) for the period 1981 to 1998, and were made available by the Swiss Federal Statistics Office. They indicate, for each naturalized individual, the sex, age, nationality of origin, length of stay in Switzerland, place of birth and the naturalization procedure used. The same variables were available for each foreign national living in Switzerland at the end of each year.

Standardized naturalization rates were calculated according to three standardization criteria (Wunsch and Thiltges, 1995) and are expressed as the number of naturalizations per 100 foreigners living permanently in Switzerland (short term residents and asylum seekers being excluded). They are obtained by taking the sum of the naturalization rates by age, length of residence in Switzerland and place of birth (born in Switzerland or abroad), after having weighted these rates by a "standard" population that had the same structure by age, length of residence and place of birth as the average foreign population during the period studied. Standardization is justified by the strong influence of these three factors on the propensity to be naturalized. The rates thus obtained for each nationality of origin eliminate the effects of structure linked to these variables.

Although they are more reliable than the crude rates published regularly by the national and international statistics offices, these standardized rates have several limits. They do not take into account all the factors that may affect the probability of being naturalized. For example, certain economic characteristics probably produce variation in naturalization rates, but there are not sufficient data to incorporate these characteristics. The observed differences between foreign communities may thus be in part due to their socio-occupational structure, which can vary significantly. Similarly, the absence of data on the foreign population before 1981 means that the details of the naturalization behaviour of the groups of foreigners that arrived in Switzerland in the 1950s or 1960s cannot be captured. Among the latter group, only those who were not naturalized by 1 January 1981 are included in the analysis.

2. Legislation on naturalization

Swiss nationality is acquired primarily through naturalization. Other, less common modes of acquisition are: adoption by a Swiss citizen, recognition of citizenship following a change in the law, and reintegration. Naturalization is regulated by the law on nationality (LN) of 29 September 1952. The Swiss system is unique in that citizenship must be acquired on three geographic levels (commune, canton, and federal authority). The final decision is made at the commune level, in theory by a naturalization committee but also on occasion by a vote.

Two principal modes of naturalization exist: *ordinary* naturalization and *facilitated* naturalization. Ordinary naturalization is carried out after the foreign citizen files an application at the commune, which transmits it to the canton and to the Confederation for approval. The commune then makes its own evaluation of the candidate and makes the final decision on naturalization. Ordinary naturalization requires, first, integration into the Swiss community; adaptation to the laws, customs, and way of life; and respect for the internal and external security of Switzerland (article 14 LN). Secondly, naturalization requires twelve years' residence in Switzerland, of which three must be during the five years preceding the request (article 15). For the calculation of these twelve years of residence, time spent in Switzerland between the ages of 10 and 20 years counts double. With the exception of the cantons of Uri and Obwalden, all cantons facilitate the procedure for foreigners born in Switzerland (Boner, 2000). These simplifications of the procedure of ordinary naturalization are, however, of very different importance. They mostly concern the level of fees⁽³⁾ and the length of residence required. Facilitated naturalization is granted on demand, the commune having no authority to decide, when the applicant meets the following conditions: married for at least three years to a Swiss national and having lived a total of five years in Switzerland, including the past twelve months (article 27 LN). For this reason, the frequency of facilitated naturalization in foreign communities is primarily a result of the practice of inter-ethnic marriage and is less relevant than ordinary naturalization to the analysis of collective naturalization practices.

The laws dealing with nationality have been modified several times. The principal revision dates from 1992, when it introduced facilitated naturalization for people fulfilling the conditions cited above, and eliminated the automatic acquisition of nationality for foreign women marrying a Swiss citizen. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the law also authorizes foreign nationals who request Swiss nationality to keep their nationality of origin. On the other hand, reciprocity is not guaranteed, but depends on the legislation of the nation in question.

Seeking naturalization is a response to a symbolic desire to belong to the host community, but it also offers certain practical advantages. First of all, it provides the right to stay in Switzerland until the end of life. Foreign citizens never definitively acquire this right — it can be challenged, for instance, if they return to their country of origin for more than six months. Naturalization is also the key to certain civic rights, including the option of expressing an opinion on the occasion of the many federal, canton, and commune votes. On the other hand, since naturalization generally occurs after more than ten years of residence in Switzerland, it does little to assist family reunification. Naturalization exposes young men to military obligations, leading to naturalization rates that are slightly lower for men than for women between 15 and 20 years old (Wanner, 1998). Finally, people from countries of the European Union that do not authorize dual citizenship no longer benefit from free circulation within the European Economic Area after naturalization.

3. *The socio-demographic context of naturalization*

Over the course of time, Switzerland's foreign population has seen significant change. The 1960s were marked by a major turnover of foreign labour, while the last three decades have seen a growth in the length of stay of foreigners in Switzerland and the frequency of family reunification. In addition, the proportion of foreigners born and having spent their youth in Switzerland has grown: close to a quarter of resident aliens are in that situation.

(3) The granting of naturalization is accompanied by the payment of a naturalization tax calculated according to declared income. The tax can be as high as the equivalent of several thousand euros in some cantons, but is generally reduced to a symbolic level for foreigners born in Switzerland.

The lengthening of the duration of stay of foreign nationals leads to better social and economic integration, notably a mastery of the local language in the region of residence. It also increases the frequency of mixed marriages (Wanner, 2001). As a result, the number of people eligible for naturalization has grown: their number is now estimated at more than 600,000, as opposed to 400,000 at the beginning of the 1980s (Figure 1).

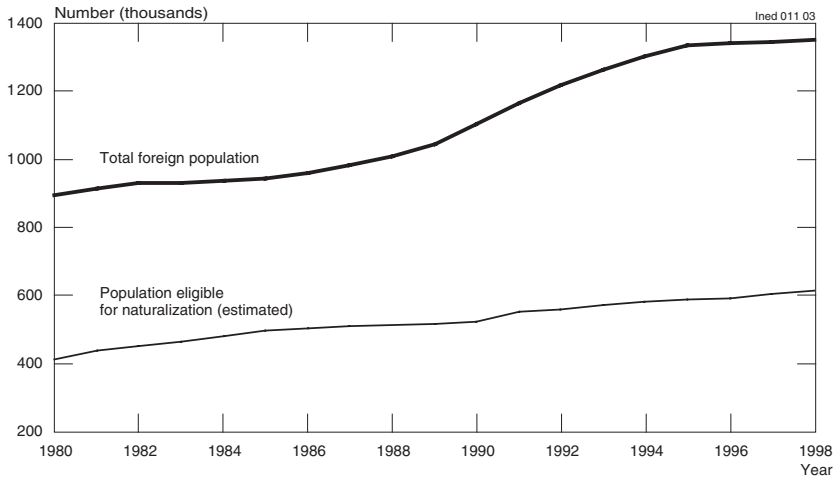


Figure 1. – The evolution of the foreign population and of the population fulfilling the conditions necessary for naturalization from 1980 to 1998

Source: Central Aliens Registry.

4. The demographic dimensions of naturalization

Over the last 18 years, a total of 244,040 changes of nationality have been registered. Naturalization — ordinary or facilitated — is now largely predominant, since it represented 96% of acquisitions in 1998 (14,277 ordinary naturalizations and 6,199 facilitated naturalizations) as opposed to 52.2% in 1986 (Table 1). Other procedures (adoption of a child with foreign nationality, recognition of citizenship, and reintegration of people claiming Swiss nationality) represent a marginal number of the acquisitions of Swiss nationality.

More or less restrictive naturalization policies can significantly modify the proportion of foreigners in Switzerland. The *foreign-born* population represented between 27% and 28% of the permanent resident population in 1998, while the percentage of foreigners is reduced to 19.2% if acquisitions of Swiss nationality are taken into account. In total, close to one third of the people who are foreign-born and reside in Switzerland have obtained Swiss nationality, approximately 500,000 to 600,000 people or 8% of the total population⁽⁴⁾.

(4) To estimate these figures, we took into account the acquisitions of Swiss nationality registered since the beginning of the century and made hypotheses about the mortality and emigration rates of people who have become Swiss (Wanner, 2001). The figures are confirmed by survey data (Buhmann, 1993) and by early results of the Population Census of 2000 (Haug et al., 2002).

TABLE 1. – ACQUISITIONS OF SWISS NATIONALITY BY TYPE OF PROCEDURE FROM 1981 TO 1998

Year	Total		Ordinary naturalization		Facilitated naturalization		Adoption		Marriage to a Swiss national		Recognition, reintegration	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1981	14,200	100.0	7,848	55.3	597	4.2	437	3.1	2,017	14.2	3,301	23.2
1982	12,615	100.0	8,689	68.9	636	5.0	532	4.2	2,155	17.1	603	4.8
1983	11,737	100.0	8,034	68.5	636	5.4	658	5.6	2,083	17.7	326	2.8
1984	11,758	100.0	7,821	66.5	734	6.2	695	5.9	2,258	19.2	250	2.1
1985	14,287	100.0	8,331	58.3	435	3.0	523	3.7	2,092	14.6	2,906	20.3
1986	14,325	100.0	7,423	51.8	52	0.4	665	4.6	2,045	14.3	4,140	28.9
1987	12,242	100.0	6,781	55.4	90	0.7	623	5.1	2,664	21.8	2,084	17.0
1988	11,243	100.0	6,558	58.3	80	0.7	603	5.4	2,296	20.4	1,706	15.2
1989	10,203	100.0	6,445	63.2	377	3.7	603	5.9	2,349	23.0	429	4.2
1990	8,508	100.0	5,127	60.3	328	3.9	534	6.3	2,251	26.5	268	3.1
1991	8,757	100.0	4,994	57.0	285	3.3	539	6.2	2,647	30.2	292	3.3
1992	11,133	100.0	5,380	48.3	4,418	39.7	655	5.9	517	4.6	163	1.5
1993	12,898	100.0	6,216	48.2	5,677	44.0	778	6.0	70	0.5	157	1.2
1994	13,739	100.0	8,340	60.7	4,592	33.4	613	4.5	51	0.4	143	1.0
1995	16,790	100.0	11,257	67.0	4,574	27.2	691	4.1	38	0.2	230	1.4
1996	19,159	100.0	12,331	64.4	5,832	30.4	719	3.8	16	0.1	261	1.4
1997	19,169	100.0	12,912	67.4	5,393	28.1	660	3.4	0	0.0	204	1.1
1998	21,277	100.0	14,277	67.1	6,199	29.1	578	2.7	0	0.0	223	1.0

Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office and Central Aliens Registry.

We know almost nothing about the population having acquired Swiss nationality, except that it is characterized by an age structure very different from that of the total population. Most of the members of this population are young adults (25-50 years old), especially the women (Figure 2). The socio-economic characteristics of this population are otherwise unknown, and it is impossible to make any hypothesis on, for example, its participation in the labour market and its integration into it, or on possible discrimination compared to Swiss nationals by birth.

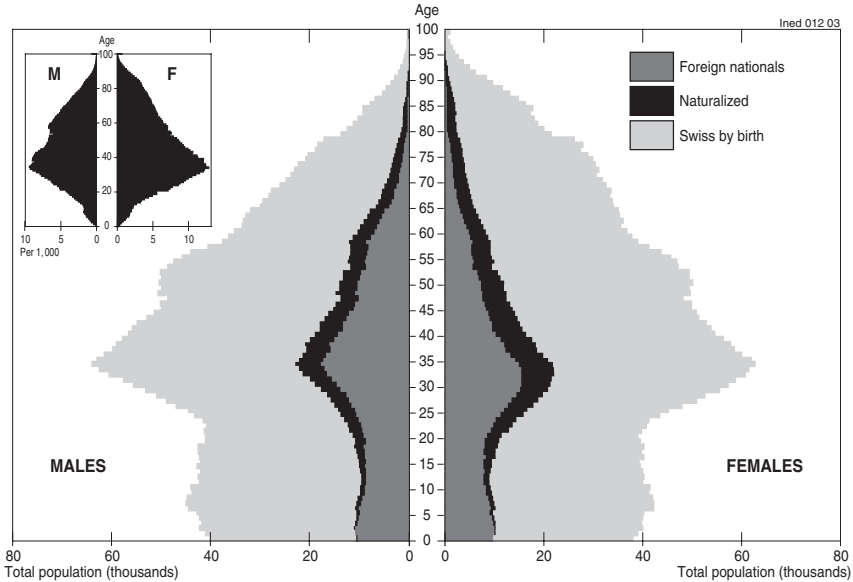


Figure 2.—Estimate of the Swiss population and the foreign population, and age distribution of the population having acquired Swiss nationality, end of 1998

Source: Central Aliens Registry and Annual Population Statistics.

5. Nationalization practices differentiated by origin

The importance of naturalization’s demographic impact is weighted by the fact that not all nationalities are involved with equal intensity. In certain cases, access to Swiss nationality can be very difficult. Several communes have recently refused to naturalize people of certain national groups (notably Turks and people originating from the former Yugoslavia), whatever their place of birth (in Switzerland or in the country of origin), their length of stay in Switzerland, or their level of integration. This refusal suggests discrimination, which seems to be confirmed by statistical analysis at the commune level (Piguet and Wanner, 2000). However, the discriminatory practices to which the groups mentioned above have been victim are not discernible when naturalization rates for the whole of the Swiss territory are analysed.

The standardized rate of *ordinary naturalization* for all foreigners was 0.67 per 100 foreign nationals during the period 1985-1991 and 1.33 per 100 foreign nationals between 1992 and 1998. There are major differences in rates according to the

nationality of origin: for the period 1992-1998, the rates vary from 0.23 per 100 for Spanish nationals to more than 10 per 100 for the Vietnamese (Table 2). Over the same period, the rates are also low for the Portuguese (0.39), the Italians and the Germans (0.29). They are high for Hungarians (5.23) and for people originating from an African country (4.11). Rates are at an intermediate level for French citizens (1.15), citizens of the former Yugoslavia (2.28) and Turks (1.40).

Two characteristics should be underlined. The first relates to differences in naturalization practices by sex. In most foreign communities, women become naturalized more frequently than men. Differences by sex are particularly high for people from Southern Europe; the rate of ordinary naturalization is three times higher for women than for men among Portuguese and twice as high among Spaniards.

The second characteristic has to do with the changes observed between the period preceding the revision of the law on nationality (1985-1991) and the one following it (1992-1998). For nationals of countries like Germany, Austria, and Spain, that do not authorize dual citizenship, Swiss passports have become progressively less attractive and naturalization rates have fallen. For other national groups, like Italians, the licence to keep one's original passport has encouraged naturalization, and rates have practically doubled. For people originating from countries outside Europe, the frequency of naturalization has generally risen.

Rates of ordinary naturalization clearly show that nationals of European countries outside the European Union are the most frequently naturalized. The discrimination noted in Switzerland toward Turks and nationals of the former Yugoslavia is not observed at the national level. We must turn to other factors to explain differences in naturalization rates by nationality of origin. These factors may be either "symbolic" in nature, reflecting the meaning of the Swiss passport for the applicant, or "instrumental," relating to the usefulness of Swiss nationality in everyday life (in looking for a job, travelling abroad, etc.). For instance, people benefiting from refugee status whose return to their country of origin seemed uncertain — Hungarians, citizens of the former Czechoslovakia and Vietnamese nationals — were naturalized in large numbers in the 1970s and 1980s (Wanner, 1998). Cultural distance between the country of origin and the host country is also involved (Yang 1994), which brings up the degree of integration in the host country (Portes and Curtis, 1987) and the level of training and work status (Evans, 1988; Dornis, 1999) as factors in naturalization. Finally, family status influences both the decision to migrate and the process of integration.

Since these factors can operate either consciously or unconsciously, their respective effects on the observed differences between naturalization rates of foreign communities are difficult to measure. Nevertheless it seems evident on reading Table 2 that cultural affiliation is a key influence on naturalization.

Conclusion

Naturalizations constitute the essential part of acquisitions of Swiss nationality. Although they change neither the size nor the composition of the resident population, they have important repercussions for Switzerland's demographic characteristics, notably the size and the evolution of the Swiss and foreign components of the population and the proportion of foreigners in the population. They are both a component of growth (for the Swiss population) and of decrease (for the foreign population). In the current demographic context, they serve as the starting point for a balancing of the growth rates of these two components of the population. This is welcome in a country frequently confronted with popular initiatives seeking to limit the proportion of foreigners. A more in-depth analysis highlighting the factors involved in the choice to become naturalized among different national communities would be desirable.

TABLE 2. — STANDARDIZED RATES OF ORDINARY NATURALIZATION BY PERIOD, SEX, AND COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 1985-1998

Country of origin	1985-1991						1992-1998					
	Total		Men		Women		Total		Men		Women	
	Number	Rate (%)	Number	Rate (%)	Number	Rate (%)	Number	Rate (%)	Number	Rate (%)	Number	Rate (%)
Germany	7,771	1.49	4,279	1.51	3,492	1.49	1,985	0.49	947	0.46	1,038	0.54
Austria	2,427	1.08	1,342	1.10	1,085	1.07	768	0.53	389	0.53	379	0.55
France	2,926	1.08	1,690	1.24	1,236	0.94	2,912	1.15	1,375	1.08	1,537	1.25
Italy	11,212	0.29	6,047	0.29	5,165	0.29	17,722	0.49	6,866	0.37	10,856	0.63
Portugal	216	0.41	106	0.39	110	0.44	734	0.39	265	0.21	469	0.62
Spain	2,502	0.36	1,226	0.32	1,276	0.41	2,051	0.23	727	0.16	1,324	0.32
Former Yugoslavia	2,953	1.31	1,557	1.47	1,396	1.18	13,314	2.28	6,357	2.03	6,957	2.58
Hungary	1,721	5.83	986	5.26	735	7.24	1,282	5.23	672	4.63	610	6.47
Turkey	1,330	0.52	733	0.48	597	0.60	7,173	1.40	3,463	1.24	3,710	1.63
Other European countries	7,477	2.02	4,015	1.98	3,462	2.07	8,028	1.99	3,742	1.71	4,286	2.33
All of Africa	1,037	2.44	697	2.20	340	2.89	3,049	4.11	1,672	3.55	1,377	5.45
Vietnam	876	4.00	470	3.62	406	4.18	4,320	10.23	2,251	9.69	2,069	10.86

Note: Rates standardized by age, length of residence in Switzerland, and place of birth.
Source: Central Foreigners' Registry.

The fact that more than one Swiss citizen in ten is of foreign origin and that this proportion is likely to grow in the future raises questions about the concept of citizenship. An answer to these questions, which are outside the scope of this research, should take into account the fact that overall, Swiss naturalization rates are on the low side compared to those observed in the other European countries.

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