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Publication Date

2013-10-10

Peer reviewed

Dreams of Citizenship, Naturalization Nightmare: New Naturalization Norms Needed

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In the state of California alone, there are currently over one million Mexican migrants eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship (Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration 2011). However, due to a series of institutional impediments, these legal permanent residents (LPRs) have not taken that first step toward political enfranchisement. In my political ethnographic research in citizenship classrooms in California and beyond, Mexican migrants who are navigating the naturalization process often speak of U.S. citizenship as “un sueño”—a coveted dream (see Félix 2008). Yet, these dreams of citizenship are often belied by Mexican migrants’ negative experiences with naturalization. As one female migrant shared with me in a citizenship class in Southern California, “I stay up late at night studying and I’ve had dreams about the immigration officer. He tells me I did not pass. He tells me I have to come back” (Félix 2008). The narratives of migrants who have had negative experiences with

the citizenship process infuse the broader Mexican migrant mythology surrounding naturalization (i.e. their collective understanding and anticipation of it), which in turn adds to the fear, anxiety and intimidation experienced by applicants and LPRs who are uncertain about applying. Ethnographic research shows that negative experiences with naturalization can have the effect of “disenchanted citizenship” among Mexican migrants (Plascencia 2012; see Levin 2013 for a survey-based analysis). Moreover, research in Latino politics has shown that during periods of anti-migrant politics, migrants seek naturalization as a strategy of political self-defense (Pantoja, Ramírez and Segura 2001; see also Félix 2012). Negative encounters with the state play a dual role in shaping pathways to citizenship. On one hand, they can motivate migrants to naturalize for self-protection; on the other, they discourage migrants who perceive the naturalization process as marred by institutional discrimination. Focusing on the interface between



migrants and citizenship bureaucracies, I argue that perceived discrimination—prior to, during and following the naturalization process—impacts Mexican migrants’ sense of political belonging and requires a radical refashioning of U.S. naturalization norms.

It is important to begin by unpacking the link between an anti-migrant political climate and the decision to naturalize. In an increasingly hostile and precarious political environment, migrants point to a palpable fear of deportability as the main impetus for seeking naturalization. As one male migrant remarked at a citizenship workshop that I organized: “it’s urgent for us to do this [naturalize] because one day policymakers may decide to throw us all out,” alluding to the growing anti-immigrant political climate spreading through U.S. localities at the time. A female respondent put it thusly: “legal permanent resident status

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does not guarantee security in this country.” Under the specter of deportability, migrants envision citizenship as offering a modicum of political protection and permanency. As one female migrant

remarked, “My family, my children are U.S. citizens and I am not,” alluding to the ever-present possibility of family separation, a real fear for mixed-status

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households. Another female respondent offered a similarly gendered perspective: “I, as a mother, am becoming a citizen to vote and fight for the rights of my family, of my children who were born here,” asserting a sort of maternal migrant militancy. Thus, migrants envisioned citizenship as providing a measure of safety in a racially hostile political climate and as a tool of political empowerment to redress community needs, as they could “vote out of office... politicians who take it out against our race.”

While an anti-migrant political climate is the mobilizing factor for migrants to seek naturalization, perceived discrimination throughout the naturalization process is also what prevents migrants from embracing the idea of singular political loyalty expected of new citizens. My ethnographic research among migrants who are negotiating naturalization reveals that applicants perceive the process as characterized by a high degree of

bureaucratic inconsistency, institutional intimidation, and discrimination. For one, there is a fear among noncitizens that the immigration officers who administer the naturalization interview abuse their discretionary powers, unjustly rejecting Mexican migrants (see Plascencia 2012). A female migrant shared a failed attempt at naturalization by one of her relatives, who was denied citizenship with the following words from the immigration officer: “I decide whether you become a citizen or not.” Feeling dejected, that person was discouraged to make a renewed attempt at naturalization. In another citizenship class where I conducted focus group interviews, an elderly male migrant described being rejected during his naturalization interview stating that the immigration officers “speak to you very fast and they want you to look them straight in the eye, as if they are threatening you with their eyes. When one tries to respond to them they have already stricken fear in your...” These negative encounters with immigration bureaucracies allow Mexican migrants to collectively uncover a central contradiction of U.S. citizenship: naturalization does not have the effect of denaturalizing their “illegality” in everyday social interactions or in formal political procedures.

In light of this inconsistent bureaucratic treatment, the second naturalization norm

that is problematic from the view of Mexican migrants is the expectation of singular political loyalty inscribed in the citizenship oath. The archaic Oath of Allegiance reads: “I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign... state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen...” Uniformly in my interviews, this expectation of singular political loyalty was met with

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skepticism by Mexican migrants: “The [oath] is the reason why I have not become a citizen. How are they going to require us to renounce from our roots?...I don’t want to renounce to what is mine...” said one male informant. Mexican migrants were extremely critical of the exhortation to renounce ties to their country of origin, precisely because they felt that their new country utterly rejected them: “They require us to swear by their country and by this constitution but at the end of the day they do not see us as fellow Americans,” said a female respondent. In the citizenship classes that I co-taught,



participants critically reflected on the course material to expose the contradictions of U.S. citizenship and constitutionalism—“just because we become a U.S. citizen, it doesn’t mean that we will be treated like an American,” said the same respondent. As mentioned earlier, an anti-migrant political context mobilizes migrants to seek citizenship, “suggesting a complex, almost contradictory relationship between their feelings of stigmatization and the process of naturalization” (Michelson and Pallares 2001: 66). On top

of this, discrimination throughout the naturalization process partly explains why migrants do not relinquish loyalties to their communities of origin. However, these enduring transnational attachments should not be read as disloyalty to the United States. When asked whether becoming naturalized U.S. citizens meant having “divided loyalties” between their home and host nations as the critics of dual nationality have argued, one male migrant tellingly remarked: “rather than detaching from one country, we are becoming attached to both.”

Policy Recommendations

- Greater federal, state and county funding for community organizations to engage in citizenship promotion and provide citizenship and English-language classes. Comparative citizenship research demonstrates that low naturalization rates in the U.S. are partly due to the “disconnected institutional configuration” between the federal government and nongovernmental organizations around the issue of citizenship promotion (Bloemraad 2002). Also, greater awareness about the N-400 fee waiver is important, as legal permanent residents often cite the financial cost of citizenship as a major impediment to naturalization.
- Given the large numbers of non-naturalized Mexican legal permanent residents, targeted citizenship campaigns are needed. The campaigns should be tailored to group-specific needs “in terms of language, ethnic media, messaging and the use of trusted messengers” (see Ayón 2012).
- Greater oversight, accountability and checks on immigration officers’ abuse of their discretionary powers in naturalization interviews. Citizenship applicants need an accessible, reliable and trustworthy feedback mechanism to channel complaints in case of immigration officer mistreatment or abuse, without fear of retribution.
- Remove the “Americanization” language and reframe the naturalization oath of allegiance to reflect the growing trend in dual nationality. Research shows that migrants coming from countries that allow dual nationality are more likely to seek naturalization in the U.S., which suggests that the two are not incompatible (see Jones-Correa 2001).



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