Ethnic and Racial Studies

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First Published: June 2009

To cite this Article Helbling, Marc (2009) 'Social influence networks and understanding of citizenship', Ethnic and Racial Studies, 32:5, 844 — 863
To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/01419870802270925
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870802270925

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Social influence networks and understanding of citizenship

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Abstract

I propose an analytical model to combine macro-sociological aspects of cultural boundary making with socio-psychological research on social influence networks. This model will help me investigate how the understanding of citizenship of Swiss local politicians is influenced by their interactions with their colleagues in the course of naturalization processes. I argue that the decision-making processes, and debates involving criteria for naturalization, have an impact on individuals’ understandings of citizenship. First, I will invoke Wimmer’s (2002) theory on cultural negotiation processes and cultural compromise, to lay the basis for a better understanding of how individual national identities converge. I will then extend my analytical model with theories in social psychology that discuss attitude and norm formations, as well as network theories of social influence, in order to understand why even politicians with strong opinions change their attitudes. The empirical part of the article draws on 180 interviews with Swiss local politicians.

Keywords: Citizenship; ethnicity; social networks; social influence; Switzerland; xenophobia.

Introduction

This article addresses the questions of why people hold certain conceptions about their nation and about the institution of citizenship and why they think that certain criteria must be fulfilled in order for a person to become a member of a national community. More specifically, I am interested in explaining the views held by local Swiss politicians on this matter, particularly those who are involved in decision-making processes regarding the naturalization of foreign residents. Why do some have a more restrictive national self-understanding than others? And why do they therefore require naturalization candidates to fulfil more criteria? In making this inquiry, I am
interested in the explanatory power of one specific factor – one that has been highlighted time and again in recent theoretical works: personal interactions with other people. I would like to know to what extent contact with other citizens influences one’s attitudes regarding foreigners.

Switzerland provides a unique opportunity for the study of citizenship politics since naturalizations happen at the local level. Swiss municipalities are accorded many rights that normally belong to the responsibilities of nation-states. Municipal politicians (or the entire local population) decide how candidates are naturalized, and what criteria applicants must fulfill to get a Swiss passport, within a relatively vague framework of national criteria. Consequently, it is possible to observe a broad variety of citizenship politics and distinctive ways of regulating access to the Swiss nationality. Since formal regulations are virtually non-existent even at the local level, decision-making procedures rely largely on the attitudes of local politicians and informal agreements. Previous analyses have revealed that the variance of rejection rates among Swiss municipalities can be explained to a large extent by the attitudes of the local population and municipal politicians (Helbling and Kriesi 2004; Helbling 2008a, 2008b, 2008c).

The purpose of this article is to go a step further, and to explain why some local politicians pursue a more restrictive naturalization policy than others. My main argument is that individual understandings of citizenship are shaped (among other things) by the local naturalization processes, wherein politicians debate the criteria for citizenship and who can be accorded Swiss citizenship. Citizenship decisions and individual national self-understandings are not simply shaped by abstract ethnic or civic-territorial national citizenship models. Rather, local negotiation processes can be considered as an autonomous force that lead to a large variety of municipal citizenship policies.

Wimmer’s theory on cultural negotiation processes and cultural compromise lays a strong basis for explaining how such processes have an impact on individual actors. Wimmer (2002) argues that culture should be defined as an open process of negotiating meaning that leads to temporal cultural compromises and a convergence of individual identities (or, in this case, understandings of citizenship). In other words, members of a group come to an agreement on how to define the social closure mechanisms of their group and thereby on whom to exclude from their group. To understand why people come to a specific agreement and why a particular identity prevails, Wimmer (2002) also introduces the concept of power into his theoretical framework. While Wimmer applied his model mainly to the study of nation-states and ethnographic work at the local level, I will invoke
some of his concepts in order to be able to test individual quantitative data.

Following Wimmer’s (2002) lead, I will argue that nation-states – and, in this particular case, even municipalities – must be considered as dynamic groups that define in ongoing processes what it means to be a member of their national group. In the context of nation-states the definition of membership, or the inclusion and exclusion of people, functions through the social closure mechanism of citizenship (see Brubaker 1992). In the course of political struggles it is decided which naturalization criteria must be fulfilled for a person to be included and how the cultural boundaries of the nation-state are drawn. Politicians confront their diverging understandings of citizenship, try to convince others of their opinions and revise them in the light of more convincing arguments, reaching temporarily stable compromises. Social influence network theory will help me combine macro-socio-logical aspects of cultural boundary making with socio-psychological research in clearly delimited local fields. Moreover, theories and experiments in social psychology will enable me to understand why even politicians with strong opinions change and adapt their attitudes over the course of these debates. My data consist of 180 interviews I conducted with Swiss local politicians. Using social network theory as my basis, I will generate indicators to investigate the influence networks. I will show that, even when I control for a variety of other factors, the contact network has a decisive impact on the individual understandings of citizenship of Swiss local politicians.

Contentious ethnicity and cultural compromise

Over recent decades, a significant part of nationalism and ethnicity research has been concerned with fighting essentialist and primordialist approaches (approaches that consider nations to be bounded and fixed groups). To a large degree, the discussion has turned instead the extent to which nations are socially constructed. It is often unclear what is meant by the term ‘social constructivism’ since various approaches – ranging from instrumentalism to post-nationalism – have been regrouped under this label. Common problems of these various forms of social constructivism are that they see ethnic and national groups as the artefacts of cultural engineers, or that they may completely deny the existence of any cultural groups by considering ethnicity and nationalism as a matter of free-floating, ubiquitous and undetermined construction.

A way to bridge the rigid divide between essentialists and primordialists, who occupy one end of the spectrum, and instrumentalists and post-nationalists, who could be said to constitute the other end, has been proposed by those scholars who emphasize the
processual and contentious character of nations (Tilly 1999, 2005; Wimmer 2002; Spillman and Faeges 2005; Helbling 2008a; see also Fearon and Laitin 2000, p. 874). These scholars consider the relationship between culture and individuals as mutually dependent and conditioning: a culture is neither a seamless web nor internally coherent, and individuals are not completely free to define and to use culture strategically, either. Emphasizing the processual character of nations does not mean adopting the developmentalist perspective of modernist exponents such as Gellner (1983), Anderson (1983) and Hobsbawm (1990) thereby running the risk of falling into the teleological trap. Rather, it points to the fact that people incessantly struggle over the question of who they are and how they want to apply the social closure mechanism of citizenship (Brubaker 1992). In the course of such struggles, national boundaries can be activated and constructed but also deactivated, deconstructed and transformed. Thus, the development of a nation can always change directions (Tilly 2005, pp. 171–84).

Wimmer (2002, 2005) offers one of the most sophisticated theoretical frameworks for the study of the processual aspects of nations and cultural transformations. He argues that culture should be defined as an open and unstable process of negotiating meaning, which leads to cultural boundary-marking, social exclusion and cultural compromises within specific power relations. Wimmer defines a cultural compromise ‘as consensus over the validity of norms and classifications and patterns of interpretation that lasts beyond the open process of its production’ (2002, p. 29). Put differently, a cultural compromise cannot simply be imposed or constructed from above; rather, it emerges when actors agree that certain modes of classifying the world make sense to them. It can be conceived of as a temporal consensus, abiding until new, more convincing arguments are put forward.

Wimmer draws part of his stance from Habermas’s theory of communicative action, which states that norms and values can be substantiated through a process of argumentative negotiation and thus, in principle, can be questioned. Contrary to Habermas, however, Wimmer (2002, p. 31) argues that norms are questioned not by referring to universal standards of rationality, but simply by relying on norms and modes of validation habitualized as schemes of cultural givens. Such a process depends on established and internalized modes of meaning making, as well as the interpretations, experiences and social positions of individual actors. In other words, to understand the outcome of these negotiation processes, we have to account not only for how people perceive their nation but also for the influence networks that help us understand why a certain conception of the nation prevails. By criticizing some social constructivists for not providing an analytical tool that helps us understand why a specific
interpretation of a social phenomenon emerges, Wimmer (2002, pp. 24–5, 36–8) introduces the concept of power into his theoretical framework. Not only must we detect how social phenomena are framed, but we must also figure out how the framing process functions, i.e. how one succeeds in divulging a certain understanding or in convincing others of one’s interpretation.

**Struggling over cultural boundaries in Swiss municipalities**

Negotiation processes that lead to cultural compromises can most typically be observed in nation-states. In his own work, Wimmer (2002) discusses these processes in countries as varied as Mexico, Iraq and Switzerland. It should be noted, however, that struggles over cultural identity can also be observed in more socially delimited environments, as we see when Wimmer (2005) applies his theoretical framework to the study of Mexican villages or neighbourhoods in Swiss towns, investigating the extent to which processes of exclusion and compromises also happen in daily life. In my study I am also interested in Switzerland, and more specifically in naturalization processes at the local level. Switzerland is a special and highly interesting case insofar as struggles over national boundaries are observed not only at the national level, but also (and more meaningfully) at the local level: within municipalities when naturalizations of foreign residents take place.

A Swiss is not only a citizen of his or her country but also a citizen of a canton (sub-national state) and of a municipality. Accordingly, each foreigner who intends to become a Swiss citizen has to pass naturalization procedures at all three levels. The sequence of decision-making between the three political levels differs from canton to canton. However, in each case the procedure at the local level constitutes the crucial part of the process. Whereas the decisions of the confederation and the cantons constitute rather formal and administrative procedures (based on very few but clearly specified criteria), municipalities make mainly political decisions. The federal law on citizenship merely stipulates that only those foreign residents who have lived in Switzerland for at least twelve years, who respect the legal order, who do not compromise the interior and exterior safety of the country and who are integrated and familiar with the Swiss habits and customs can be naturalized. The first three criteria are quite clear, easy to verify and are always checked by the federal administration. As for the questions of integration and familiarity, not only do they constitute vague requirements, but they are also judged exclusively by local actors.

Every municipality, be it a town of 100,000 or a village of 400 inhabitants, is accorded the right to decide who is integrated enough to
become a Swiss citizen. The candidates often have to pass a kind of exam or interrogation to verify that they are familiar enough with the Swiss political system, Swiss history and the language of the particular region. Since regulations at the national and cantonal levels are very sparse, each local political entity decides whether and to what extent candidates have to pass such tests or interrogations, as well as the formal procedure and criteria by which its alien residents will be naturalized. Given the high degree of autonomy possessed by municipalities in this policy field, the naturalization procedures, the applied criteria and consequently the ratio of rejected candidates vary greatly from one municipality to another. Formal regulations at the local level are rare, and, when they exist, the criteria that have to be fulfilled are formulated in a very general way. Therefore, decisions depend even more directly on the interpretations and informal agreements of municipal politicians.

Which local actors are involved in the decision-making processes and must therefore come to an agreement? In most cases, the local administration is in contact with applicants during the entire naturalization procedure. They inform the applicants about the formal aspects of the process and check whether certain criteria for naturalization are fulfilled. Often, they also speak with candidates about whether or not they have any chance of getting a Swiss passport, and make recommendations to political bodies involved in the process. In almost all municipalities a naturalization commission composed of local politicians discusses the dossiers in detail and makes recommendations to those who make the final decisions. Sometimes dossiers are circulated several times between the various collective bodies involved in the decision-making processes. It might also happen that the local parliament or the executive body makes recommendations before the final decisions are made. It appears that various actors are involved in municipal naturalizations and that the evaluation of the candidates’ dossiers occurs at different stages. Naturalizations can therefore be compared to decision-making processes in other political fields, where political actors must reach an agreement as to what policies should be adopted.

Interactions at the local level

My intention here is not to present and analyse these naturalization processes in more detail. I have already done this elsewhere (Helbling 2008a). I merely seek to investigate the extent to which the individual understandings of citizenship of Swiss local politicians are shaped by local citizenship politics. If Wimmer (2002) is right, the decision-making processes in the context of naturalizations must have an impact on the individual understandings of citizenship of local
politicians. We should observe that the various actors internalize the most convincing arguments. Local politicians do not simply and blindly adopt a possible Swiss national citizenship model or possible national norms. Rather, they interact with each other, discuss how to define Swiss nationality and then come to an agreement on which criteria must be fulfilled to become a full member.

When Wimmer speaks about negotiation processes he is referring to interactions between individuals who are defending differing ideas. This points to the relational nature of these negotiation processes, and forces us to pay special attention to social ties among the actors involved, and to the fact that individuals are incessantly interacting with others (these interactions decisively influence actors’ opinions and identity). Such an approach treats culture and related social phenomena – such as nations and ethnic groups – ‘as changing phenomena to be explained rather than as ultimate explanations of all other social phenomena’ (Tilly 1999, p. 411). Transactional thinking suggests that it is the very process of interactions that modifies culture and social relations (Emirbayer 1997, pp. 308–9). Such interactions can happen between groups of people that consider themselves different from each other – reflecting the interplay of self-identification and external categorization (Barth 1969) – but they are also present in various ways within groups (Tilly 2005, pp. 7–8). As Jenkins (1997, pp. 63–70) points out, the advent of identity and ethnic categorization happens in a variety of contexts, or more generally through primary and secondary socializations (see also Berger and Luckmann 1967, pp. 129–46). Primary socialization refers to the socialization an individual undergoes during childhood, when patterns for our receptiveness to being categorized are set. Secondary socialization refers to subsequent socializations in the various other settings an individual encounters. Every individual is born in a socially structured world and takes over, to an extent, the world in which others already live. However, internalized structures do not remain unchanged for ever. Each individual is incessantly confronted by new attitudes and has to find his or her way in new situations. Such confrontations happen at various levels and in different contexts. Social categorization can take place in routine public interactions, communal and associational life or market relationships (Jenkins 1997, pp. 66–7).

For my study, the influence exerted by the local social environment upon attitudes towards naturalization will be of primary importance. Indeed, local politicians are influenced in their individual life experiences when they get involved in local citizenship politics. They have already been socialized in various fields and have most likely adopted significantly strong attitudes towards foreigners who want to become Swiss citizens. When they decided to participate in local naturalization politics, they entered a setting different from all the
other contexts in which they had been socialized before, one that is common to all political actors in a specific municipality. While municipal politicians might have grown up in different regions (educated by different parents and teachers) and work at different places, they have all experienced citizenship politics in the same municipality. None of the interviewees has ever been active in the local politics of another municipality.

I can therefore conclude that, for the large majority of the persons interviewed, municipalities constitute an important political environment for forming ideas about citizenship. For the most part, the interviewees had expressed their opinions about naturalization along with those of other local politicians, confronting those other opinions, trying to impose their own or modifying them when convinced and influenced by other arguments. While we are now aware of the relational nature of struggles over cultural boundaries, and better apprised of how these local politicians interact with each other, we still lack a nuanced understanding of how such influence mechanisms work. How can it be that politicians who are assumed to have strong opinions about naturalization candidates, and who defend these beliefs against their political adversaries, begin to revise their attitudes when they get involved in citizenship politics? Social influence network theory and experiments in social psychology will help me to answer this question. Moreover, I will also discuss how power structures can be operationalized and measured.

Social influence networks and power structures

Social influence network theory takes up the basic assumptions and mechanisms that I discussed in the foregoing paragraphs and that I need to test my arguments (Friedkin 1999, 2001). Similarly to Wimmer’s (2002) theoretical framework, it combines negotiation mechanisms with the concept of power structures. More generally, this approach helps me link macro-sociological aspects of nationalism with socio-psychological research on social influence in small-scale networks. According to Friedkin, social influence network theory includes French’s (1956) formal theory of social power and DeGroot’s (1974) consensus formation model and ‘describes an influence process in a group of N persons in which the members’ attitudes and opinions on an issue change as they revise their positions by taking weighted averages of the influential positions [of] other members’ (Friedkin 2001, p. 171, emphasis in the original). Arguing that individuals form their opinions in a complex interpersonal environment, in which powerful opinions are in disagreement and liable to change, Friedkin (1999) has probably developed the most elaborate account of how social influence networks affect attitudes and opinions. His theoretical
model takes into account the ways in which actors modify their opinions: how these parties process their own circumstances and the influences of others, and how the configuration and strength of interpersonal influences depends on the prevailing social structure of a population.

In social psychology, the concept of ‘social influence’ refers to ways in which the attitudes of individuals impact on those of others – the process by which conformity and norms are created. Sherif’s (1935) seminal study on norm formation demonstrated that people’s judgments about the characteristics of an ambiguous phenomenon tend to converge when their disagreements are made visible, and that such emergent agreements shape people’s judgments about the same phenomenon when they experience it at a later point in time.

The insights of Asch’s (1960) experiments are highly relevant to the question of why local politicians, who are supposed to defend their personal convictions, so frequently adapt their personal judgments. He discovered that changes of judgement occurred even when the test persons were clearly convinced of their judgements at the beginning of the experiment. Festinger (1954) and social comparison theory more generally (Erickson 1988, pp. 101–2) explain that such adaptations occur because human beings tend to evaluate their opinions and skills by comparing them with those of other persons, through interpersonal communication. People feel uncomfortable when they are not sure whether their attitudes are correct. Especially in situations in which normative considerations influence the decision-making and when no objective standards are at hand, the advantages and disadvantages of alternative arguments are deliberated and measured. The judgement as to whether a foreigner may become a new citizen depends on the understanding of citizenship – a highly subjective concept.

If a person adapts his or her opinion to the attitudes of his or her social environment, a distinction must be made regarding whether such an adaptation happens because the individual in question has been convinced by new arguments (informative social influence) or because he or she changes his or her personal point of view for reasons of social desirability (normative social influence) (van Avermaet 1996). For politicians, the second mechanism is highly influential. Since politicians are also strategists, it is likely that they change their openly declared opinions in order to represent the attitude of a majority or to avoid antagonizing their electorate. In the interviews, however, all actors were explicitly asked in face-to-face interviews to tell us their personal opinions and not that of a particular party or organization of which they are a member. Indeed, they often told us that their personal opinion did not correspond to the official position of their party or they confided to us thoughts they would not express in public. For these reasons, I am convinced that the responses we have received from
our interviewees reflect the personal opinions of these actors, and are the result of informative social influence processes.

Arguing that local actors are influenced by the opinions of the actors surrounding them in their individual opinion-making processes, I must tackle the problem of the causal relationship. Indeed, similar attitudes among interacting individuals at a specific point in time could result from either selection or socialization (Kandel 1978, pp. 427–9; Baron and Tindall 1993, pp. 269–70). It could easily be argued that actors maintain relationships mainly with those persons who share the same opinions or that they deal with people of the same political party (Erickson 1988, p. 101). This problem mainly applies to situations in which individuals are free to choose their contact persons. The opinion formation that occurs before general elections or referendums, when voters compare their opinions or preferences with the persons surrounding them, could be such an example: are people influenced by the opinions of their friends and colleagues at work or do they choose people who espouse similar values as friends? It is understood that someone will compare and come to agree with close colleagues or friends rather than with political enemies (Erickson 1988, p. 102). However, there are many situations in which the choice of others is not free, and where relationships are constrained by impersonally determined opportunities to interact (Feld 1981). Many policy fields, including my own, constitute such examples. Eighty-two per cent of the actors are formally involved in the decision-making process. They are members of a naturalization commission, the local parliament, the executive body or the municipal administration. They were delegated by their party and/or elected by the local population and thus confronted with other politicians they did not choose to deal with.

Even if we are sure that each local actor talks to different colleagues during decision-making processes, however, we cannot attribute the same relevance to all relationships. While most politicians incessantly try to convince others of their opinions, not all are equally successful. It can be assumed that the more often two actors are in contact, the more they influence each other. The more frequently people interact, the more opportunities they have to interpret each other’s attitudes accurately, and the higher the chance is that one actor will be influenced by the other one.

However, in addition to having varying degrees of intensity, relations are often asymmetrical. Some actors have a greater reputation than others, have more convincing arguments and lay claim to particularly exceptional success in imposing their visions. Therefore, it is important not just to know what ties exist between actors. More specifically, I am interested in the nature of these ties and power structures among individuals of a specific group (e.g. Erickson 1988,
As I have established, it is difficult to imagine individuals whose attitudes are not in some way exposed to those of others. In addition, we must acknowledge the fact that social influence varies along a continuum according to the degree of pressure exerted on the individual.

**Explanatory model and data**

Let me now specify my explanatory model, the data I use and how I operationalize the main theoretical constructs, i.e. the influence networks and power structures. In his experiments on group consensus-reaching Friedkin (1999, 2001) generated data for four theoretical constructs monitored over two different temporal periods: the actors’ initial opinions, their final opinions, the relative interpersonal influence on an issue and the actors’ susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Since I was not in an experimental setting, and because resources and practical considerations prevented it, data for my analyses were collected for one period only.

In autumn 2004 we conducted 180 interviews with local politicians who were involved in citizenship politics in fourteen municipalities. In these case studies and interviews information on the attitudes towards naturalization politics, the contact networks and the degrees of influence of the individual actors were collected to operationalize my theoretical constructs. As a first step, and to find the influential actors, we studied various documents and conducted expert interviews with representatives of the local administration and some politicians, in order better to understand the local naturalization process and to formulate some general ideas about the role, influence and attitudes of the various local actors. Since I subscribe to the hypothesis that individual judgements are influenced by those from surrounding actors, it was important to include all the relevant actors in the sample of each case study (Wasserman and Faust 1994, pp. 30–3). Actors were selected on grounds of their formal position in the decision-making process and also for their reputation of being able to influence these procedures (in formal or informal ways) (see Mills 1956; Dahl 1961). In most cases the final lists contain the members of the local executive body and the naturalization commissions, several members of the municipal parliament, representatives of the local administration and representatives of political parties. In some cases individual citizens and journalists were added to these lists. Face-to-face interviews were carried out with the selected actors by means of standardized questionnaires. Depending on the size of the municipalities, ten to twenty interviews were carried out.

Since I analyse only one point in time, I use only information regarding the politicians’ ‘final opinions’, i.e. their understandings of
citizenship, in this study. To measure the ‘final opinions’, I rely on the attitudes of local decision-makers towards naturalization criteria. Unfortunately, there exists no pertinent theoretical framework for selecting and classifying naturalization criteria. Therefore, I have simply chosen criteria that often arise in debates about naturalization in Switzerland, in order to generate an indicator for understandings of citizenship. Attitudes towards the following eleven criteria were collected: required degree of integration or assimilation; required language knowledge; required knowledge of Swiss history and the Swiss political system; the right for Muslim women to wear a headscarf in public; allowance of dual citizenship; required membership in local associations; unemployment as an obstacle to naturalization; social security dependence as an obstacle to naturalization; disability insurance as an obstacle to naturalization; facilitated naturalization for the second generation of immigrants; and facilitated naturalization for the third generation of immigrants.

For each criterion the respondents indicated on a scale from 1 to 4 to which degree they expected candidates to fulfil it. With the information on these attitudes, I have generated a standardized additive indicator that varies between ‘0’ (generous) and ‘1’ (restrictive) and tells us for each actor how he or she thinks about citizenship and how restrictive or generous their national self-understanding is. Interestingly, a descriptive analysis of this indicator shows a large variety of national self-understandings that are equally distributed between the two extremes (results not shown here). It appears that a continuous indicator captures the perceptions of local politicians much better than a dichotomized variable that simply differentiates between restrictive (ethnic) and generous (civic-territorial) conceptions of citizenship.

To measure the extent to which actors are influenced by their colleagues’ opinions, I must analyse the contact networks of the local politicians and, more specifically, their ego networks. An ego network is the sum of all ties of an actor (ego) to others (alteri) (Wasserman and Faust 1994, p. 42). Such information is collected by asking an ‘ego’ about his or her relationships to the ‘alteri’. In our interviews, we asked all actors to identify the parties with whom they regularly discussed local citizenship politics. Since we were thorough in our efforts to speak to all of the influential actors within each municipality, we also interviewed ‘alteri’ identified by each ‘ego’, and were thus able to confirm the contact networks indicated by each ‘ego’. Speaking to the ‘alteri’ also enabled us to circumvent a common problem in some ego-network analyses. Information on opinions of the ‘alteri’ is often collected by asking ‘ego’ how he or she estimates personal attitudes. Asking the ‘alteri’ directly, as we have done, is certainly a more reliable approach.
How can we measure the degree of influence of particular actors, i.e. the power structures? In Friedkin’s (1999) experiments, the participants were asked to record their opinions at the beginning and at the end of the experiment. To solicit information on relative interpersonal influences, the participants had to estimate the extent to which each group member influenced their final opinion. As Friedkin (1999, p. 17) admits himself, there are obvious difficulties with such a measurement. Actors may over- or underestimates the importance of their or others’ susceptibility to external influence. Especially in a political field, actors may present themselves as resistant to other opinions. In my study, I have measured two constructs in order to weight the opinions surrounding an individual actor: the first weight concerns the intensity of contact. Each respondent was given the possibility of indicating a maximum of three persons with whom he or she was more often in contact than with other indicated actors. Subsequently, each interviewee also indicated which one of these three was the most intensive contact. Values of colleagues with whom a politician had intensive or very intensive contacts have been doubled or tripled respectively.

While this first weight is easy to measure, it should be noted that it does pose some analytical problems. As I have emphasized above, the politicians completing the surveys were in contact with colleagues from different parties, with whom they did not choose to communicate. However, they were free to decide with whom they would discuss matters in naturalization politics more often. In other words, while regular contacts exist between actors having diverging attitudes, it might be that intensive contact exists mainly between persons defending similar ideas. It can thus be assumed that the averaged attitudes of the social environment weighted with the intensity of contacts correlates relatively highly with the individual attitudes. In this case the correlations would reflect selection rather than socialization processes.

For this reason, I generated a second weight that is not dependent on individual decisions and thus takes us a step further in solving the ‘selection/socialization’ problem. This second weight reflects the relative power of each actor and has been measured by means of the reputational approach (see Hunter 1953). The reputational approach enables researchers to determine the local elite based on an assessment of the political, economic and social actors by local insiders. The subjective perceptions of these insiders constitute the main source of information. In interviews, people who know the local political environment well are asked to estimate the influence of individual actors. The strength of this approach is rooted in the fact that power bases will translate into direct interpersonal influence only if they are perceived as influential. Accordingly, it is individuals who succeed in convincing others of their interpretation of the world, and
who are perceived by others as the legitimate holders of power, who are actually influential.

This indicator is constructed using data collected in our face-to-face interviews. We did not merely question a certain number of insiders; instead, we asked all interviewees to indicate, from a provided list, all actors whom they believed to exercise influence in the naturalization politics of the respective municipalities. Then they were asked to indicate the three most important actors and, out of these three, the one whom they considered most influential. For the index, I summed up the number of times an actor was mentioned as being influential. Persons among the three most influential actors received an additional point, and those who were mentioned as the most important received two additional points. This indicator was then standardized so that the most important actor in the respective municipalities received the value ‘1’.

By applying this second power index, we can be sure that correlations between individual understandings of citizenship and those surrounding an individual actor can be explained by processes of socialization and not selection. As we have already seen, the individuals I investigate did not choose the parties with whom they were interacting. Now we know that they themselves did not decide how influential their colleagues were, since the second weight is based on information from all actors involved. A further advantage of this index is that it enables me to weight every single relationship, whereas the first index weights only the three most intensive contacts.

Results

Equations 1 and 2 describe how I constructed my main independent variable, the social environment (SE) of each local politician, i.e. the weighted attitudes of all colleagues with whom an actor was in contact. The actors with whom an individual \( y_i \) was in contact during the decision-making processes are \( y_1, y_2, \ldots, y_N \). The individual attitudes of the actors with whom an individual politician was in contact are weighted either by the intensity of contact (\( w_{11}, w_{12}, \ldots, w_{1N} \)) (Equation 1) or by their relative influence (\( w_{21}, w_{22}, \ldots, w_{2N} \)) (Equation 2). The individual values have been summed up and divided by the number of contact persons. By doing so, I produced an indicator for the social environment measuring the averaged and weighted attitudes of those colleagues with whom a local politician was in contact.

\[
SE1 = \frac{1}{n} (w_{11}y_1 + w_{12}y_2 + \ldots + w_{1N}y_N) 
\]

(1)
Equations 3 and 4 display the models with which I compare the impact of the two differently weighted indicators for the social environment (SE1 and SE2) (see models 1 and 2 in Table 1). As predicted, the indicator in model 1 has a higher impact than the second indicator in model 2. However, the impact of the second indicator also remains highly statistically significant for predicting an actor’s attitude towards naturalization candidates: it appears that local politicians have a more restrictive understanding of citizenship when they are in contact with influential actors who require a limitation on naturalizations.

As I have emphasized, I do not claim that contact with other politicians during decision-making processes comprises the unique explanatory factor for individual attitudes towards citizenship. Each human being has been socialized in various contexts during his or her life. In light of the fact that individual attitudes are shaped in interaction processes, I must account for, or at least control for, interaction processes with other groups of people in order to confirm my hypothesis. Although our interviews make clear that the actors discussed naturalization politics almost exclusively with politicians of their municipality, I can assume that their attitudes towards candidates for naturalization were also influenced by other people, for example, by representatives of the same political party at the national level or foreign residents.

Even if local politicians do not discuss naturalization matters with their colleagues outside their municipality, it could very well be that they are influenced by the official positions of their party at the national level. Naturalization politics are also discussed at the national level, and the left-wing parties and the Swiss People’s Party – a major right-wing party – in particular defend pronounced positions. While the Social Democrats and minor left-wing parties prefer a more liberal naturalization policy, the Swiss People’s Party fears mass naturalizations and incessantly warns of the depreciation in Swiss culture that will take place if too many people are granted Swiss citizenship. In models 3 and 4 of Table 1 I include two dummy variables for membership in the Swiss People’s Party and left-wing parties (Social Democrats, Green Party and others). It appears that belonging to a political party influences significantly (either positively or negatively)
Table 1. *Individual understandings of citizenship: non-standardized regression coefficients (standard errors)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
<th>Model 6</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social environment 1 (SE1)</td>
<td>0.43**(0.08)</td>
<td>0.31**(0.07)</td>
<td>0.31**(0.07)</td>
<td>0.25*(0.11)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social environment 2 (SE2)</td>
<td>0.36**(0.11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swiss People’s Party</td>
<td>0.20**(0.03)</td>
<td>0.24**(0.03)</td>
<td>0.13**(0.03)</td>
<td>0.17**(0.04)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Left-wing parties</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Contacts with foreigners</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social class: self-employed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social class: technocrats</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social class: skilled workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Authoritarianism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.19**(0.04)</td>
<td>0.29**(0.03)</td>
<td>0.28**(0.05)</td>
<td>0.36**(0.04)</td>
<td>0.21**(0.07)</td>
<td>0.33**(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ (adj.)</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes*

Level of significance: * p <0.05, ** p <0.01.

The dependent variable, the understanding of citizenship, as well as the two indicators for the social environment vary between ‘0’ (generous) and ‘1’ (restrictive).
one’s understanding of citizenship. Despite this influence, contact with other local politician remains highly significant.

It is also interesting to investigate whether contact with foreigners might have an impact. A common argument asserts that personal contact with foreigners in the neighbourhood or at the workplace reduces negative attitudes towards those people. Astonishingly, 96 per cent of the respondents told us that their relationships to foreigners were rather or very positive. Eighty-six per cent were regularly or very often in contact with foreigners. Only two persons indicated that they hardly knew any alien residents or immigrants. Given the very small variance in the frequency of contacts, it is unclear whether this variable has any impact at all. And, indeed, it appears in models 3 and 4 in Table 1 that the contact variable has almost no impact.

In addition to my differently weighted main variable (SE1 and SE2) and the variables informing us about the impact of contacts with other people, I include control indicators in models 5 and 6, generated on the basis of classic approaches to xenophobia: the social class of the respondents, the degree of their education and whether or not they have an authoritarian character. I operationalized social class with the job of the interviewees. Accounting for the rise of the new middle class in Western European countries, Kriesi (1998) has developed a useful class structure with eight categories, that goes beyond the traditional class divide of the working class and the old middle class and that discriminates between more and less privileged groups. The respondents belong to only four categories, which are retained in Table 1 as dummy variables, the category of office workers and managers serving as a reference category.

To measure the impact of education, I use a dichotomized indicator, differentiating whether or not a respondent possesses the qualifications for university entrance (A-level). This indicator also serves to operationalize the actors’ susceptibility to interpersonal influence. I assume that the ability to react critically to new ideas is more distinct among well-educated people. For the operationalization of an authoritarian character, we asked the interviewees whether they think that we need leaders who tell us what to do, whether they agree that children should follow their parents’ convictions, whether school should mainly teach discipline and performance, and whether criminality should be combated more aggressively. For each question, respondents had to indicate on a scale from 1 to 6 to what extent they agree with those statements. A summary indicator (authoritarianism) has been generated by averaging the attitudes towards those statements.

As models 5 and 6 reveal, the coefficients of my two indicators remain significant when I control for alternative hypotheses. Of course, other elements also influence one’s attitudes towards foreigners. While
social class seems to have no impact – at least for those groups for which I have respondents – it is demonstrated that better-educated actors are less susceptible to the influence of xenophobic ideas and that those with an authoritarian character have a more restrictive understanding of citizenship.

Conclusion

Citizenship models of nation-states are not fixed and stable, and cannot simply be instrumentalized by the political elite. Rather, naturalization politics can be considered as political fields in which different understandings of citizenship are pitted against each other, and temporarily stable agreements are negotiated regarding cultural boundaries and specific criteria. In line with Wimmer’s (2002) arguments, controversies over naturalization criteria can be seen as social negotiation processes, in which individuals adapt their attitudes when they are confronted with more convincing arguments. When we observe that a consensus and cultural compromise emerges within a group, these negotiation processes must have had an impact on the individual understandings of citizenship of local politicians. As various studies in social psychology have shown, such processes occur even among groups of people with strong opinions as individuals’ attitudes tend to be unstable in the absence of interpersonal agreement – especially when normative decisions have to be taken.

My theoretical framework enabled me to link theories of the formation of norms and individual identities with macro-sociological aspects of nationalism and ethnicity. The Swiss case constitutes a unique context for the investigation of such processes, as we can observe such negotiations and the way individuals adapt their understanding of citizenship in a clearly delimited field. I was in the position to show how processes of interaction shape individuals’ attitudes towards candidates for naturalization. In other words, I have revealed that individuals’ attitudes towards citizenship are not simply shaped by a national citizenship model but are rather influenced by the attitudes of those colleagues with whom an individual politician is in contact.

To corroborate my argument that such negotiation processes have an impact I had to make sure that the correlations between individual understandings of citizenship and the understandings of parties surrounding an individual politician do not result from selection processes. In addition to my theoretical arguments drawing on both Wimmer’s (2002) work and approaches in social psychology, my data did allow me to solve this problem of causal relation. I have revealed that the large majority of actors I interviewed had no opportunity to select the parties with whom they interact during naturalization.
processes. Moreover, I was in the position to generate a power index that does not depend on individual judgements.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Project-Nr. 404040-101055, from December 2003 to January 2007). I would like to thank Tom van der Meer, Jörg Stolz and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this paper and useful suggestions for revision.

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