

More opportunities, better integration? Citizenship rights at birth and educational outcomes of young migrants

My talk today complements what we have just heard from Professor Massella, in that I am going to present evidence that the introduction of birthright citizenship in Germany had strong positive effects on the educational integration of children with migratory background.

Institutional Background

Before I describe our research in detail, let me briefly comment on the institutional background in Germany.

In May 1999, the German parliament undertook a major revision of the German Citizenship and Nationality Law, which included two main elements. First, it adjusted the eligibility criteria for naturalization. And second, it introduced birthright citizenship.

In my talk, I am going to focus on the second change, the implications of which are summarized in this table.

What you can see in this table is that, until 1999, citizenship for children was granted according to *ius sanguinis*, meaning that children became citizens at birth only in cases in which at least one parent was a German citizen. Under *ius sanguinis*, the legal status of immigrant children born to non-German citizens was either that of a temporary or a permanent resident.

As of January 1, 2000, the prevailing regime changed from *ius sanguinis* to *ius soli*, meaning that each child born in Germany gained a conditional

right to German citizenship at birth. The condition attached to birthright citizenship was that at least one parent had been a legal resident in Germany for at least eight years when the child was born. And in cases where parents satisfied this residency criterion, German citizenship was automatically registered in the child's birth record, that is, there was no need for parents to apply for it nor could they disclaim it.

Implications of the Reform for Immigrant Children's Citizenship Status

In this next figure, we see the implications of the reform in terms of children's citizenship status. Panel (a) of this figure shows that the reform resulted in a pronounced increase in the share of immigrant children who were granted German citizenship at birth. In particular, among children born before the reform was implemented, 35 percent acquired German citizenship at birth, while among children born after the reform took effect, 78 percent became German citizens at birth.

What is also worth mentioning is that, due to the residency condition attached to birthright citizenship, not all immigrants in Germany benefited from the reform in the same way. The group for whom the reform had very strong bite were children with Turkish background. This can be seen in panel (b) of the figure. It shows that, among children with a Turkish background, 32 percent of those born pre-policy have held German citizenship since birth, while among those born post-policy this share increased by 62 percentage points to 94 percent. In other words, almost all Turkish children born after the reform automatically became German citizens at birth.

Why Should Birthright Citizenship Matter?

The next question I would like to ask is: Why should we believe that Germany's introduction of birthright citizenship could have made a difference for immigrant children and youth?

Now, in answering this question, I would like to reiterate the points Professor Masella has made.

In particular, because citizenship rights improve immigrants' long-term economic and political perspectives in the host country, there is reason to believe that they might act as a catalyst for integration efforts in immigrant families. Moreover, they can also create incentives for immigrant parents to invest in the human capital of their children, which ultimately should foster immigrant children's educational integration.

Our Research

This is exactly the hypothesis we have tested in our research. Specifically, we have examined whether the introduction of birthright citizenship has affected immigrant children's educational outcomes at the first three key stages of the German education system, namely preschool, primary school, and secondary school. By focusing on these three stages of the education system, we are able to tease out whether the introduction of birthright citizenship had effects on immigrant children that persist into adolescence or early adulthood.

Some specific questions we have addressed are as follows. First, did the introduction of birthright citizenship affect immigrant children's participation in preschool and their developmental outcomes at this educational stage? Second, did it accelerate their progress through primary school? And third, was there an effect on immigrant children's selection

into different secondary school tracks and on their educational achievements in secondary school?

We have addressed these question using a broad range of different data sources. First, we have used administrative records from school entry examinations as well as school register data which covers the whole student population of one German federal state, namely Schleswig-Holstein. Second, we have used data from the German Microcensus, which is a household survey representative of the German population and the largest of its type in Europe. Finally, we have collected own data, including information on academic achievements, from more than 4,500 fifteen to sixteen year old students in 57 German schools.

Results at the Preschool Level

Let me first summarize our results at the preschool level.

First, we have found that the introduction of birthright citizenship led to an increase in the preschool enrolment rate of immigrant children. In particular, the share of immigrant children not enrolled in preschool decreased by almost 40 percent. This is an important finding because preschool participation is known to have a positive effect on children's language and social skills, especially for disadvantaged children at risk for poor outcomes.

And indeed, when we examined immigrant children's language proficiency, we found that the share of immigrant children speaking fluent German increased substantially due to the introduction of birthright citizenship.

Finally, we also observe an improvement in immigrant children's socio-emotional development.

Results at the Primary School Level

Let me now turn to the effects of birthright citizenship on immigrant children at the primary school level. Here, we have two interesting findings. First, the introduction of birthright citizenship has caused immigrant children to enter primary school earlier, that is, their school starting age decreased. Now, starting school earlier can be an advantage for immigrant children because they might learn more in school than at home or preschool environments.

And indeed, when we look at immigrant children's progress through primary school, we find that the introduction of birthright citizenship led to a sizeable reduction in the probability that immigrant children had to repeat a grade in primary school. In particular, the probability of grade retention among immigrant children decreased by approximately 25 percent.

Results at the Secondary School Level

Finally, let me describe how the introduction of birthright citizenship has affected immigrant children at the secondary school level.

However, before I do that, it may be useful to give you some background on the German education system. Specifically, what happens after children in Germany have completed primary school is that they are referred to different secondary school tracks. There are, in essence, three secondary

school tracks. The lowest track only continues until the end of compulsory schooling and gives students a basic education in preparation of an apprenticeship. The intermediate track goes one year beyond compulsory schooling and can either lead to an apprenticeship or to a higher-level vocational school. Finally, through the academic track, students enter Gymnasium, which prepares students for university.

Against this background, we have examined whether the introduction of birthright citizenship has increased the probability that immigrant children attend the academic track of secondary school. Our findings show that this is indeed the case. In particular, we found that the introduction of birthright citizenship led to a significant increase in immigrant children's likelihood of attending Gymnasium of almost 40 percent. What is also interesting is that this increase closes the academic track enrollment gap between immigrant children and native German children by more than half.

Finally, we have also investigated how the introduction of birthright citizenship has affected immigrant children's educational achievements at age 15. To that end, we have collected data from 4,500 students in 57 German schools, including information on their grades in the subjects „German“ and „Mathematics“. When we used this data to examine how the introduction of birthright citizenship affected immigrant children's academic achievements, we found that it had large positive effects. In particular, we found that the policy improved immigrant children's grade point average by almost 30 percent. As a consequence, the academic achievement gap between immigrant children and native German children decreased by almost 90 words. In other words, the introduction

of birthright citizenship had the effect of bringing immigrant children educationally on par with their native peers.

Putting the Findings into Perspective

Before I conclude, let me try to put our results into perspective. If I compare our findings with other studies that have examined alternative early-life interventions, such as the introduction of universal preschool in Germany, Head Start in the United States, or targeted tutoring programmes in Italy, then it would not be an exaggeration to say that the positive effects of birthright, in terms of magnitude, are quite comparable to the effects of these alternative interventions.

However, birthright citizenship is arguably associated with much lower costs than these alternative interventions. Indeed, the main direct costs of introducing birthright citizenship were administrative, which were low given that citizenship was simply recorded on children's birth certificates.

In contrast, the alternative early-life interventions I just mentioned involve direct costs such as the hiring of new personnel, the construction or expansion of childcare facilities, or the training of tutors. For example, in Germany, the costs of a preschool slot amounts to 850 Euros per child per month, and the costs of Head Start in the United States comes more than 7,000 US dollars per child per year.

Overall, therefore, there is an argument to be made that birthright citizenship, in terms of a cost-benefit assessment, is highly effective policy.

Concluding Remarks

Let me now offer some concluding remarks. Our results suggest that birthright citizenship is policy that comes with substantial benefits. In Germany, it increased immigrant children's participation in non-compulsory preschool education. It had positive effects on important developmental outcomes at the end of preschool period. It caused immigrant children to progress faster through primary school. Finally, it enabled them better access to the academic track of secondary school and improved their academic achievement at the secondary school level.

Given these findings, my overall conclusion is that granting citizenship rights to immigrant in places where they poorly integrated into the education system can be an effective policy lever for reducing educational disparities.