Executive summary:
The UK ‘citizenship process’ subjects immigrants to a set of requirements ostensibly intended to enhance their identification with ‘British values’.
Policy-makers suggest the policy will facilitate immigrants’ integration: as they learn about ‘life in the UK’, they will become better able to understand and navigate core institutions. Many external observers, by contrast, believe that the requirements exacerbate marginalization, constructing immigrants as objects of presumptive suspicion and concern. To gauge integration in a political sense, I use data from ‘Understanding Society’ and investigate interest in politics among noncitizens at Wave 1, comparing those who became citizens by Wave 6 to those who remained non-citizens. Those who became citizens subsequently reported lower interest in politics, relative to those who remained non-citizens. This finding reinforces the concerns of critics: the UK citizenship policy appears to do more to alienate new citizens than it does to facilitate their integration in the political sphere.

Introduction
Do naturalization policies that require citizenship tests and ceremonies reinforce integration of immigrants? When governments adopt these policies, policy-makers commonly justify them by asserting that they will foster ‘shared values’ and ‘social cohesion’. Arguably, the real ‘targets’ of these policies are not the immigrants but rather the natives: assimilationist integration policies are perhaps intended primarily to reassure anxious natives that the government is ‘doing something’ about immigration (Fortier 2017, Byrne 2017). But political leaders can also claim, with some plausibility, that tests and ceremonies will result in benefits for immigrants as well: they are vaunted as ways to increase immigrants’ knowledge about core social institutions, encourage English language abilities, foster attachment to national identity, etc. If successful, citizenship policies of this type might improve immigrants’ ability to participate in core institutions on similar terms to natives.

Critics of these policies assert, by contrast, that the impact on immigrants is to exacerbate exclusion rather than to enhance inclusion. Insofar as the policies identify a remedy, they also signal a set of alleged deficiencies among immigrants: they don’t know enough, or they’re not ‘like us’. Many observers suspect that the policies mainly erect barriers and reinforce divisions, in part by making
naturalization itself more difficult to achieve. If those suspicions are correct, then one would expect to find negative consequences for immigrants’ experiences in a broad sense, consequences that would perhaps be evident in data e.g. on their subjective well-being.

But a prediction of that sort seems less plausible in connection with immigrants’ political participation. One might instead find grounds for optimism: naturalized citizens who had to pass a test and participate in a citizenship ceremony might well become more interested and more willing to participate in various forms of political activity. People who satisfy these requirements might regard it as an achievement that gives them a greater entitlement for participation. Especially if they have genuinely learned something via preparing for the test, their knowledge might foster greater interest in the institutions they have learned about.

Most academic observers of the UK ‘citizenship process’ are much more pessimistic about the likely consequences for immigrants’ integration. But critiques of the citizenship process are developed mainly via analysis of the policy itself: many observers describe the historical context of policy development, or write about the questions on the test. Using analyses of this sort, one can derive predictions about the consequences for migrants’ experiences. But what is also needed is direct empirical investigation of consequences, using data gained from immigrants.

This paper therefore uses panel data to investigate consequences for political engagement among immigrants in the UK who (at Wave 1) were non-citizens and then (by Wave 6) have become citizens, with comparisons to those who remained non-citizens. Use of panel data mitigates concerns about endogeneity and enhances the prospect of empirical results that could underpin statements about causality: since we have data about immigrants’ pre-naturalization interest in politics, we can be confident that if we see (for example) a positive association between naturalization and interest it is not simply the result of a greater tendency towards naturalization among those who are already more interested in politics.

Data and analytical strategy

The data for this analysis are drawn from ‘Understanding Society’, the UK household panel survey (University of Essex 2016). The survey is well suited for research on immigrants: there is a substantial ‘boost sample’ of ethnic minorities (enhancing coverage of immigrants beyond what is typically available through conventional sampling), and the questionnaires have been translated into many of the languages spoken by the largest immigrant groups in the UK.

The sample analysed here consists of 997 people who indicated at Wave 1 (data collected in 2009/10) that they did not hold UK citizenship (all were born outside the UK). As of Wave 6 (2014/15), 407 of these individuals had gained UK citizenship; 590 remained non-citizens. Concerns that attrition might lead to bias in results are addressed via use of longitudinal sampling weights (Lynn and Kaminska 2010).

The dependent variable is interest in politics. The variable is relevant inasmuch as those who are interested in politics are more likely to participate in some form of political action (a concept by no
means limited to voting – non-citizens can and do take part in demonstrations, work to support election campaigns by candidates, etc.).

The main independent variable is citizenship status at Wave 6. The goal is to distinguish between people who have become UK citizens – and thus who have met the requirements of the citizenship process, i.e., the ‘Life in the UK’ test and the naturalization ceremony – and those who have not. The analysis (panel regression models) also includes a wide range of control variables commonly used to explain political participation.

Results and discussion

The core result is that becoming a UK citizen is associated with lower interest in politics (relative to those who remain non-citizens). Postestimation analysis (marginal effects) reveals that 36 percent of those who become citizens are ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ interested in politics, as against 41 percent of those who do not become citizens (all else equal, via the regression model). Becoming a citizen, then, is associated with lower likelihood (by five percentage points) of reporting interest in politics at those levels (and thus a corresponding increase in being ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ interested). That difference might seem small – but in a context where roughly half the population expresses low interest in politics, a negative impact of any non-negligible size is surely a matter of concern.

This result is perhaps surprising. Proponents of the citizenship process would have hoped for evidence of a positive impact. But even critics might have expected to find only that the requirements do not produce tangible benefits for those who meet them – in other words, no impact of UK naturalization on one’s interest in politics.

The conclusion that the UK citizenship process instead has a ‘negative impact’ on political participation is reinforced via consideration of Just and Anderson’s (2012) finding that, among immigrants in Europe generally, those who become citizens are more politically active than non-citizens. That research found that naturalization in Europe (including the UK) generally led to an increase in political engagement. The analysis above demonstrates, at a minimum, that this pattern no longer prevails in the UK; gaining citizenship is not associated with an increase in engagement. Insofar as one might reasonably expect an increase among those who become citizens (and indeed this expectation was articulated by policymakers as a goal for the new requirements), the failure of an increase to materialize is reasonably construed as evidence of a negative impact emerging from the specific conditions that form the context for naturalization in the UK.

In other words, if the UK had not adopted new requirements (tests & ceremonies) for naturalization, perhaps we would observe continuation of a pattern in line with Just and Anderson’s research, i.e., an increase in political engagement among those who become UK citizens. That counterfactual formulation is best explored via a more historical approach: it would be useful to consider the consequences of UK naturalization before and after the adoption of the new requirements, using the same analytical framework. There are no longitudinal data for the UK enabling a direct comparison of that sort (the British Household Panel Survey, the predecessor to ‘Understanding Society’, did not track changes in citizenship status). Instead we are restricted to comparison of findings using different data: the analysis by Just and Anderson (2012) draws on data from the European Social Survey collected in 2002/2003,
i.e., before the new UK requirements were implemented. The comparison of findings across time offers support for the notion that the negative impact is not simply a consequence of naturalization per se but rather a specific impact of the particular context in which UK naturalization is carried out (the ‘citizenship process’).

Having found evidence that naturalization in the UK does not increase (and indeed perhaps inhibits) interest in politics, we are led to consider ways of accounting for such an unexpected result. One possibility is that the requirements alienate the people who must meet them – i.e., ‘must’, as a precondition for gaining secure status and the full set of rights that come with citizenship. That idea is suggested by a contrast with citizenship ceremonies in Norway: many participants interviewed by Hagelund and Reegård (2011) expressed positive views about their experiences with the ceremonies, and Hagelund and Reegård suggest that the voluntary nature of the ceremonies there (and indeed across all the Nordic countries) contributes to that outcome. In the UK, on the other hand, one might wonder about the notion of mandatory ceremonies where new citizens are required to recite an oath of allegiance to the queen (or a pledge of loyalty to the nation-state). Being forced to feign a loyalty one does not already genuinely feel might instead foster a sense of alienation. As with other areas of social life, policies governing naturalization can sometimes produce consequences other than those intended.

One might also wonder whether anything much is learned via preparation for the UK test, i.e., anything relevant to one’s interest in politics. Critics of the test have long suggested that passing the ‘Life in the UK’ test requires knowing things that do not seem pertinent to an immigrant’s actual life in the UK – especially with more recent versions of the test that are more focused on factoids about British history (as against more practical information about daily life).

In migration research generally, integration is defined broadly as adoption of patterns prevailing among natives. In the political sphere, it is not evident that integration in this sense is occurring among immigrants in the UK – certainly not among naturalized citizens (for whom expectations in this regard might be higher, relative to those who remain non-citizens). In comparison to native-born UK citizens, interest in politics among immigrants is lower – and their interest does not appear to move towards parity with natives following naturalization. Byrne (2017) suggests that migration can foster increased interest in politics and citizenship; we cannot know from the data here whether an increase has occurred relative to UK immigrants’ pre-migration situation, but it does not appear that interest increases in the period following their arrival.

The components of the UK citizenship process, then, would seem to hold little value in connection with political integration – and possibly the requirements are downright harmful. A recurring theme of scholarship on the UK citizenship process and the ‘social cohesion’ discourse is that they emerge from a faulty diagnosis of the 2001 northern riots (focusing on ethnicity rather than class and material inequality) – and so it should perhaps come as no surprise when citizenship tests and ceremonies prove to be an ineffective and even counterproductive ‘solution’ (e.g. Ratcliffe 2012). In a more cynical mode, one could take the view that this conclusion misses the real point about these requirements: again, the policy is arguably designed mainly to reassure natives, not to integrate immigrants (Fortier 2017, Byrne 2017). That political imperative carries its own internal logic – but
the findings presented above make it harder to justify assuaging citizens’ anxieties by claiming that the policy does good for the immigrants as well.

References


