

The less democracy at home, the more propensity to naturalize?

Comments on “The Prior Socialization of Immigrants and Their Political Participation in the United States” by Michael Jones-Correa (Cornell University), presented during a seminar organised by FIERI and T-Wai and the Political Science Department of the University of Torino, 26 January 2012

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1. This is a study on the determinants of political participation of immigrants in the US, with particular regard to the effects of prior political socialization. The core question is: *How does a migrant's political experiences, both direct and indirect experiences, in the country of origin, affect his/her political attitudes and behaviours after emigration, in the country of destination?*

I think it is evident that such a very specific question is of a great practical and theoretical importance in a context of globalization and increased human mobility, where the political subject is also, ever more often, also a mobile subject and where boundaries among national polities are increasingly porous.

The sedentary citizen, with one and only political belonging, who is socialized in the same country where he/she participates (or not) in the political life probably remains the statistical norm, but is not any more, by any means, the only standard.

2. Political participation in the US is thus here what has to be explained. And this complex *explanandum* is articulated by Michael Jones -Correa in a number of dependent variables, each of them catching one specific dimension of attitudes to politics or of non-electoral political participation.

My first remark is that, with the United States as an empirical field of research, this multidimensional dependent variable, is a *real variable*, and quite an elastic one. In other words, we are talking about a country where the opportunities for political participation of immigrants are real and in any case more significant than in most European states, and certainly in Italy.

In general terms, this depends from the radically different approach to nationality which has historically prevailed in the US; more specifically it depends from the recognition of a legal opportunity to naturalize and obtain full political rights after 5 years.

One should add that probably – although this is more difficult to substantiate – that also opportunities for non-electoral participation are bigger and this is suggested by how the sample in Jones-Correa's study answers most of the key questions.

So, when we look at the picture described by Jones-Correa and we try to draw parallels with the European and especially Italian case, we should never forget this fundamental difference.

At the same time, however, I would like to stress that we should neither *idealize* this fundamental difference. We should not consider “inclusiveness” a static and almost

natural attribute of the US democracy, nor exclusiveness a given and immutable feature of European polities. Things are obviously changing on both sides, in complex ways which are never easy to predict.

3. But let us get back to the paper. What does this study show, then? I don't want and I wouldn't be able to go deep into the methodological details of a rather sophisticated quantitative model. I will rather try to focus on what seemed to me the most interesting and, in some cases, unexpected findings.

Well, actually, we should first stress that some of the findings are luckily *not unexpected*.

The most evident, sweeping and macroscopic correlation is the one between the level of education and the intensity and richness, so to speak, of political participation in the country of immigration. This is not a surprise. And Jones-Correa carefully lists the research precedents going in the same direction.

It is not a surprise, but it is an important confirmation. And one that we probably should not take for granted. *Education is not a necessary condition for integration, but it certainly helps*, and this is true also – maybe particularly so - for the political dimension of integration, namely for assimilation to political behaviours of the native majority.

This evidence-based statement contains a number of *obvious* lessons for migration policymakers. Although obvious here does not mean easy and maybe not even viable lessons. In the sense that the margins of top-down politically driven choice of the type of immigrants that one country gets are obviously limited. Picking the most educated is never easy, often not possible, and certainly not a recipe valid in absolute terms.

The second finding which is not particularly surprising is that political participation in loco increases and improves with time. This is also not surprising, because, in general, apart from very specific situations that can be considered exceptional, integration is always a function of time. And this is another important confirmation coming from this study.

4. But what is less foreseeable and for me more exciting is what the study tell us about the *impact of contextual independent variables in the state of origin*. How does the political experience – both direct and indirect – in the country of origin affect participation after emigration?

The necessary background to start looking for an answer is that, at the end of the 1980s, Mexico has entered a *phase of political transition* towards more democracy, at least in formal electoral terms. This transition has been uneven in many respects, and particularly from a geographical point of view.

Not all the Mexican states have experienced the same pace of transition, with some going faster and more steadily towards a functioning democracy at sub-national level, and others following a bumpier and more winding path.

Jones-Correa had the excellent idea to exploit these sub-national variations for research purposes. And he had very interesting results. In quite rough and simplified terms he found that:

- ♣ the more democracy you had at home (especially in terms of rate of openness of the political system in the state of origin, i.e. in terms of frequency of *alternancia*, i.e. of change of political majority in the state government) the less propensity to naturalize you have in the US, but the more active your attitude to politics will be (particularly as shown by the frequency of contacts with govt. in the US, aimed at promoting personal or group interests)
- ♣ On the other hand, the less democracy you had at home the more passive you

tend to be in the States, but also the more incline to naturalize.

As Jones-Correa summarizes this key finding:

“Those with more negative experience of politics in the country of origin, are those who see the greatest promise in adopting political practices in the US”.

In other words, one could say that migrants who make less active use of democracy, are also those who cherish it more.

5. It is obviously very tempting to immediately try and apply the same logic to the analysis of naturalization rates by nationality in Italy.

This is not the purpose of my brief comments, but if one throws a quick glance at figures, it rapidly becomes evident that these are not easily interpreted.

Romanians are the national group with the lowest propensity to naturalize: only 0.37% out of 100 residents were naturalized in 2010 (see table below, extracted from: Potosi, *Cittadini si nasce e cittadini si diventa*, 14 September 2011, www.neodemos.it: http://www.neodemos.it/index.php?file=onews&form_id_notizia=523).

And this would be broadly coherent with Jones-Correa’s “law of attraction by opposites”: the more democracy at home, the weakest incentive to naturalize. But then you have to explain why Brazilians have the highest naturalization rate (3.16% every year), or why Tunisians – before the fall of Ben Ali – had a relatively low 1.17%.

Tab. 1 – Countries with highest number of successful naturalization applications, 2010

Country	Total positive outcomes	By marriage (law 91/1992, art.5.)	By residence (law 91/1992, art.9)	% by marriage	Totale foreign residents of each nationality (at 1 Jan. 2010)	Positive outcomes per 100 residents
Morocco	6952	2135	4817	30.7	431529	1.61
Albania	5628	1166	4462	20.7	466684	1.21
Romania	2929	1570	1359	53.6	796477	0.37
Perou	1377	589	788	42.8	87747	1.57
Brazil	1313	1210	103	92.2	41535	3.16
Tunisia	1215	373	842	30.7	103678	1.17
Ukraine	1033	984	49	95.3	174129	0.59
Poland	974	657	317	67.5	105608	0.92
Egypt	912	341	571	37.4	82064	1.11
Russia	861	745	116	86.5	87308	0.99
First 10 nat.	23194	9770	13424	42.1	2376759	0.98
Others	17029	8823	8206	51.8	1858900	0.92
Total	40223	18593	21630	46.2	4235659	0.95

Note: Total residents of Brazilian and Russian nationality at 1 Jan. 2009. For “Total first 10 nationalities” these numbers are used - Source: Ministry of the Interior-Istat, elaborated by Neodemos.

6. But let us get back once again to the paper. As I said, the somehow paradoxical

conclusions on the effect of country of origin contextual variables are only one of the findings of this study, but definitely the one which I found more stimulating and intriguing. And I would therefore like to add a couple of remarks essentially centred on this part of the paper.

As I said, I am not willing nor able to assess the methodological tools used by Michael to get to these conclusions. They look like very sound and solid tools and I am sure they are. But I would like to do is asking a couple of questions on the conceptual foundations for this kind of argument.

I don't know Mexico, but one could expect that states which scored better in the transition process over the 1990s are also the most advanced ones in broader social and economic terms. So the question comes: *to what extent might the rate of alternancia in the sending state in fact "hide" other contextual variables of a more economic nature which could be even more powerful in explaining willingness (or lack of willingness) to assimilate in the American polity?*

What I mean, is that the argument could perhaps be reframed in more general terms:

Coming from a more backward society might condemn you as a migrant to adopt a more assimilationist strategy, while issuing from a richer, more dynamic and advanced region could be key in affording you to keep strong linkages with the home country.

7. The second question is somehow more fundamental. You take naturalization (around 20% of your sample is of naturalized immigrants if I am correct) as a key indicator of political participation. But one can ask: On which bases have this fundamental conceptual and methodological choice been made?

By taking naturalization as a key indicator of political participation, Jones-Correa implicitly gives a very high interpretation of naturalization, as a sort of "opting in" the democratic polis. But in many cases, at least in the European context, naturalization is something more prosaic. It is a way to:

- secure a permanent status,
- to escape in a definitive way the bureaucratic servitude associated with indefinite residence permit renewals,
- it might be a way to be able to access public employment,
- it might also be a way to try and get rid a heavy stigma which you felt on your shoulders since your arrival,
- and so on.

In all these cases, opting for the country of immigration's nationality may have little to do with willingness to participate and with political subjectivity, or at least not in an affirmative way.

Naturalization could even – somehow counterintuitively - be a tool to secure a more protected status in order to be able to carry out political activities back home in a more secure and visible way. This is for instance the case for many refugees.

So, I see a risk in loading the decision to naturalize with a whole set of political, moral, ideal meanings which are most of the time not there.

8. To conclude, just a couple of words on what we could draw from this research as lessons for a European research agenda.

I think we could and should draw a lot. *Quantitative research on integration and assimilation patterns is still underdeveloped in Europe.* And most of what is done is done by economists, often on the basis of rather abstract and sometimes misleading research questions.

What I find extremely valuable in this piece of research is that it clearly combines a sophisticated and mature quantitative methodology with a deep qualitative

knowledge of the sociological reality of immigration.

This is definitely a blend that, in Europe and in Italy, we should try to pursue and develop much more. And indeed studies on political integration, political transnationalism etc. could be one of the primary areas where such an epistemological attitude could be applied and could yield richer and more relevant results.

For instance, the European Union, with its unique institutional characteristics, offers some exceptional research opportunities. I think for instance of the interest that could have a research – to my knowledge non existent – on the different rates of use of municipal voting rights by different nationalities of EU mobile citizens. And obviously, considering the role of prior socialization in forging these different attitudes towards and understandings of European citizenship would be an obvious avenue for interpretation of such data.

9. Finally, I would like just to mention another group of current and future immigrants which would be of particular empirical and political interest for such research approach in Europe, and this is the quite heterogeneous macro-group of Arab and North African migrants.

With the Arab Spring turning now into something less seasonal and more structural, although surely also much more complex and less “easy” than what some naively hoped, opens up *huge research questions on linkages between large-scale political transition and migration* (in a broad sense, including integration, transnationalism, etc.).

Applying some of the tools so brilliantly used by Michael Jones-Correa in the study of latinos in the US to this new empirical universe could be a very promising avenue for Transatlantic learning and maybe also for Transatlantic cooperation and comparison.