

Naturalisation, employment, and occupational outcomes: Evidence from immigrants in Italy

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1. The research problem

Host-country citizenship acquisition represents a fundamental step in immigrants' settlement trajectory, which entangles various integration outcomes. Citizenship attainment has been found to promote migrants' socio-political participation and engagement, reshape their aspirations and sense of belonging, and broaden their social networks. Furthermore, citizenship acquisition has been studied in relation to economic integration in destinations contexts (Gathmann and Garbers 2023). Evidence consistently suggests that naturalisation improves immigrants' labour market outcomes by increasing their employment chances, facilitating upward occupational mobility, and yielding better earnings over time (Bratsberg et al. 2002, Bevelander and Pendakur 2012). Several mechanisms have been identified as contributing to the advantage associated with naturalisation. First, citizenship attainment is likely to broaden immigrants' employment opportunities, providing them with access to jobs that were previously unavailable (e.g., in the public sector). Second, citizenship may encourage migrants (and employers as well) to invest in host country specific human capital, improving chances to find a more qualified and higher paid job. Third, acquiring citizenship provides immigrants with a stable and permanent legal status, reducing the uncertainty associated with temporary or precarious residence conditions. However, the positive effect of naturalisation on migrants' earnings and employment chances may be also due to self-selection mechanisms. Especially, if naturalised immigrants already have some (observable or unobservable) characteristics which are highly evaluated in the labour market *before* citizenship acquisition, then their economic advantage may be driven by selectivity. A recent study on the Italian case found no significant effects of citizenship attainment on employment or occupational qualification, highlighting that selection into citizenship is one of the main factors driving the observed labour market outcomes of naturalisation (Gritti et al., 2025).

Drawing on this debate, the paper investigates the relationship between citizenship acquisition and labour market outcomes among international immigrants. We focus on Italy as a destination country, which unless the exceptional growth of naturalisations in recent years and the relatively strict regulation on citizenship, so far has received little scholarly attention, primarily due to the lack of suitable data. First, we aim to assess whether, after accounting for key factors correlated with citizenship acquisition, naturalisation in Italy is associated with higher employment chances

and improved occupational outcomes. Second, we explore whether the (expected) positive impact of naturalisation on labour market outcomes varies according to certain migratory characteristics, such as country of origin and time since migration. Specifically, we aim to determine whether naturalisation has a differential impact on immigrants from EU versus non-EU countries, and whether its effect remains stable over the course of settlement or strengthens over time due to cumulative settlement effects.

2. Data & methods

To investigate these aspects, we use data from the Italian *Labour Force Survey* (LFS), combining four yearly waves from 2021 to 2024 (first wave only for each year). The LFS, provided by Istat, collects cross-sectional quarterly data on a representative sample of individuals residing in Italy at the time of the interview. The survey includes detailed information on respondents' labour market status as well as key socio-demographic characteristics. We restrict the analysis to immigrants (individuals born abroad) aged 15–64 at the time of the interview, who arrived in Italy between the ages of 15 and 60, and after 1985. Naturalised immigrants are identified as respondents who hold Italian citizenship at the interview date, were born abroad, and have both parents born abroad. We exclude all other current Italian citizens, as they are considered citizens by birth. The final sample therefore consists of immigrants residing in Italy ($N = 31,337$), divided between foreigners ($N = 24,851$) and naturalised immigrants ($N = 6,486$).

We consider a set of variables that may influence immigrants' likelihood of naturalisation and their labour market outcomes. These include socio-demographic characteristics (*age*, *education*, and *region of residence*), family-related factors (*number of children* and *marital status*), and migratory background variables (*years since migration*, *country of origin*, and *reason for migration*). As dependent variables, we first consider *employment status*, defined as a binary indicator distinguishing between non-employed and employed individuals. Second, restricting the analysis to employed respondents, we examine *professional qualification* using two measures: the International Socio-Economic Index (*ISEI*) and a dummy variable equal to 1 for *elementary occupations*, based on the ISCO-08 classification.

All the analyses are distinguished by gender, considering that immigrant men and women in Italy access different occupations. In the first step, we study the relationship between naturalisation and labour market outcomes using logistic regression models for employment status and elementary occupation, and linear regression for the ISEI score. The main independent variable is a dummy indicating citizenship acquisition, which allows us to compare naturalised and non-naturalised immigrants, while the remaining variables are included as controls. In the second step, we develop models on occupational qualification with interaction terms. On the one hand, to investigate

whether the effect of naturalisation is differentiated by migrants' origin, we include an interaction between citizenship acquisition and country of origin. On the other hand, to study whether the effect of naturalisation is constant over time since migration or it grows as far as time spent in the destination increases, we include an interaction between citizenship acquisition and years since migration.

3. Findings

Preliminary results (not shown) indicate that naturalised immigrants differ from non-naturalised ones in their socio-demographic composition. They tend to be older and are more likely to hold tertiary education qualifications. Furthermore, naturalised immigrants (both men and women) have a longer duration of stay in Italy and are more likely to originate from Albania, other non-EU countries, Morocco, and Latin America. Naturalised immigrants are also more likely to be employed than non-naturalised immigrants (especially men) and are slightly less likely to be unemployed.

Preliminary model results on professional qualification (Table 1) show that non-naturalised immigrants are associated with a higher likelihood of holding an elementary occupation for both men and women (Model 1, without controls), suggesting an occupational advantage for migrants who achieved citizenship in the Italian context. Once controls are included (Model 2), the disadvantage of non-naturalised men is reduced, but the difference with naturalised men remains statistically significant. For women, the gap remains largely unchanged.

In the next steps, we will model also the other outcomes (employment probability and ISEI). Furthermore, we will introduce other important variables (e.g., family status). Finally, we will develop models with interactions to focus on the possible heterogeneity of naturalisation effects.

References

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Table 1. Logistic regression model estimates (Odds Ratios) of Citizenship acquisition on the probability of having an Elementary occupation

	Male		Female	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Citizenship acquisition				
Naturalised	(ref.)	(ref.)	(ref.)	(ref.)
Foreigner	1.88*** (0.116)	1.64*** (0.115)	1.86*** (0.096)	1.90*** (0.116)
N	10,785	10,785	9,382	9,382
Pseudo R2	0.009	0.112	0.012	0.124

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.5

Note: Standard Errors in parenthesis; Model 2 also includes: Country of origin, Reason for migration, Years since migration, Age, Education, Region of residence.