Dual Citizens as Forerunners of a Transnationalization of National Democracies

In light of the numerous advantages of dual citizenship for democracy, these problems should not, however, lead to dual citizens being deprived of the right to vote in multiple countries. Instead, national democracies should open up this opportunity to all citizens, i.e. both those who prefer to stay at home and the internationally mobile, both single and dual citizens. An outline of how this might work in practice is provided in the study carried out for the FCM, and described in more detail elsewhere by Joachim Blatter [see list of references]. Switzerland, with its high numbers of dual citizens, could therefore point the way toward how democracies can be transnationalized, without getting disconnected from the citizens. There is, however, an increasing problem when national states try to address common problems (e.g. in the protection of the environment) and mutual dependencies (e.g. in tax policy) through international cooperation. Dual citizens have influence on more than one government and their positions in such negotiations. Wherever binding rules are set down in bilateral and multilateral negotiations, there is therefore a breach of the fundamental principle of “one person, one vote.”

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“Identification with multiple countries is possible.”

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Further Reading


Joachim Blatter and Fabrizio Gilardi

The Mobility of Migration Policies

A project of the nccr – on the move

Joachim Blatter, University of Lucerne

The movement of people across national boundaries creates interdependencies among states. We investigate how (much) migration policies in other nation-states and/or on the supranational level influence national policies and the consequences of interdependent policy-making.

in a nutshell #13 is based on a study by Joachim Blatter, Martina Sochin D’Elia and Michael Buess, commissioned by the Federal Commission on Migration FCM.

The nccr – on the move is the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies and aims to enhance the understanding of contemporary phenomena related to migration and mobility in Switzerland and beyond. Connecting disciplines, the NCCR brings together research from the social sciences, economics and law. Managed from the University of Neuchâtel, the network comprises fourteen research projects at ten universities in Switzerland: The Universities of Basel, Geneva, Lausanne, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, Zurich, ETH Zurich, the Graduate Institute Geneva, the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland, and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Northwestern Switzerland.

“in a nutshell” provides answers to current questions on migration and mobility – based on research findings, which have been elaborated within the nccr – on the move. The authors assume responsibility for their analyses and arguments.

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What is meant by …

The phenomenon of dual citizenship can therefore play a role in overcoming thinking in terms of simplistic oppositions. One in four Swiss nationals now no longer feels they are properly accommodated by the political and social categories of “foreigner” on the one hand, versus “Swiss” on the other. Instead, they see themselves as both one and the other. This reduces opportunities for one group to be played off against the other in political discourse. Dual citizens therefore represent a bulwark against reawakened nationalism in Europe and the world.

The acceptance and increased prevalence of dual citizenship also has its disadvantages and risks, however. States are able to deprive dual citizens of their citizenship, for example, which is not the case for simple citizens. This represents a risk from the dual citizen’s perspective, although more and more European countries regard the option of deprivation of citizenship in connection with Islamic extremism as an opportunity. Dual citizenship also makes it easier for states to “sell” citizenship to wealthy individuals, who can thus become more international in nature. The right of naturalization is a bulwark against membership of a political community to be viewed as a form of property right, which can be sold, bought, or withdrawn for purely self-serving and instrumental reasons.

But dual citizenship appears problematic from the democracy perspective particularly in situations where dual citizens can vote and take part in elections in more than one country, and therefore have more political influence than single citizens. Recently, many countries have made it easier for their citizens abroad to exercise their political rights in their country of origin. Where dual citizens lead political lives in multiple political entities at local, regional, national and continental levels – they can also feel they belong to multiple entities on the same level: many dual citizens identify both with Switzerland and another country.

One in every four Swiss citizens residing in Switzerland or abroad is now a dual citizen.

— There are two main advantages to these trends:
  - it makes easier for immigrants to become naturalized, and therefore to have a voice in political decision-making, which strengthens Swiss democracy.
  - it makes it more difficult to adopt a simplistic view of “us” (Swiss) versus “them” (foreigners).

— Any efforts to restrict dual citizenship should therefore be rejected.

With the revision of the law on citizenship in 1992, which meant that a person who was naturalized was no longer forced to give up the citizenship of his or her country of origin, Switzerland became a forerunner of an international trend. Up until the middle of the 20th century, it was unusual for a person to hold dual citizenship, and under international norms this was a situation to be avoided. In 1963, the Council of Europe issued a statement calling for a reduction of cases of multiple nationality. In the European Convention on Nationality that entered into force in 2000, it is essentially left up to Member States to decide whether or not to accept dual citizenship. In some cases, however, they are required to tolerate dual citizenship, for children from binationial marriages, for example. This change is part of a worldwide process. In recent years, more and more countries have amended their legislation on citizenship rights, and allowed dual citizenship for both emigrants and immigrants.

The increased prevalence of dual citizenship in the Swiss context cannot, however, be explained by this trend alone. Other contributing factors include the equal treatment of women and men in citizenship law, and the sharp rise in international marriages due to migration. Formerly only Swiss males could pass citizenship by birth to their children, but Swiss women have also had this right since 1978, and without restriction since 1985. Accordingly, it is increasingly the case in Switzerland that dual citizenship is acquired by birth rather than through naturalization (see Graph 1). Today, one in four Swiss citizens holds at least one other national citizenship. This situation is particularly widespread among Swiss citizens residing abroad, with three of every four Swiss expatriates holding multiple citizenships. Of the population residing in Switzerland, around 13 percent hold a second passport (see Graph 2). The actual figure is very likely to be higher, however, since these statistics apply only to persons over 15 years of age. Given that one in three marriages in Switzerland are now binational, we may assume that the number of dual citizens among persons under 15 years of age is even higher.

In just 20 years (1996-2016), the number of Swiss citizens holding dual citizenship has not only increased significantly, but their percentage of the Swiss residential population has quadrupled. In terms of percentages of the Swiss residential population, out of Swiss dual citizens, foreigners and Swiss single citizens, it is the dual citizens group that shows the fastest growth.

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