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Birthright Citizenship Closes Second-Generation Immigrants' Political and Social Integration Gap to Native Citizens

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Abstract

The awarding of citizenship to immigrants' children born in the host country is widespread but increasingly contested; however, empirical evidence on whether birthright citizenship shapes long-term social and political outcomes in adulthood remains scarce. We exploit a natural experiment in Germany, where a birthright citizenship reform on January 1, 2000, allows comparing immigrants' children born just before and after the cutoff. Using a targeted survey of 1,060 second-generation immigrants born between November 1999 and February 2000, we use a regression discontinuity approach to estimate the impact of birthright citizenship on a range of social and political attitudes ~24 years later. This includes the extent to which birthright citizenship affects integration into the host society, and well as the extent to which such citizenship shapes democratic preferences. Our findings show that eligibility for birthright citizenship significantly enhances both inter-group integration and attitudes towards democracy among adult children of immigrants. These results are driven by increased levels of social integration, whilst political incorporation also rose in line with a range of pro-democratic attitudes. These gains effectively close the integration gap between second-generation immigrants and native citizens, primarily among those with parents from Muslim-majority countries. In addition, they speak to the wide-ranging beneficial effects of granting birthright citizenship at a time when such policies are coming under threat.