Catalogue no. 36-28-0001
ISSN 2563-8955

Economic and Social Reports

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Release date: November 26, 2025

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.25318/36280001202501100001-eng

This study was jointly conducted by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and Statistics Canada.

Citizenship acquisition marks a pivotal milestone in immigrant integration, influencing social cohesion and political participation. While aggregate naturalization[1] rates provide macro-level insights, disparities by source country reveal diverse integration pathways. Through comparative analysis of Australia and Canada—nations with comparable immigration scales and broadly similar immigration approaches, yet notable differences in naturalization frameworks—this study investigates how source-country characteristics affect naturalization patterns. The findings illuminate the complex transition from immigrant to citizen, offering policy-relevant insights into differential integration experiences.

Variation in naturalization rates by source country reveals how citizenship acquisition is shaped by both destination-country policies and source-country characteristics (Alarian, 2017). Immigrants from nations with limited political rights, lower economic development or greater cultural distance from the destination society typically demonstrate higher naturalization rates, motivated by the security and mobility that citizenship provides. Conversely, those from high-income, politically stable countries often exhibit lower naturalization urgency (Vink et al., 2013).

These patterns also reflect evolving global contexts. Economic growth in source countries, changes in dual citizenship laws and shifting transnational linkages increasingly influence naturalization decisions. For instance, rising prosperity in China and India has altered cost–benefit calculations around retaining original citizenship, potentially dampening naturalization rates abroad (Tan & Liu, 2024).

This study compares changes in the citizenship rate from 2011 to 2021 among **recent immigrants** in Australia and Canada, focusing on differences across major source countries. It analyzes census data from both nations, with 2011 selected as the baseline because of Australian data availability. The study sample comprises immigrants who meet the following residency requirements:

- Australia: arrived 6 to 10 years before each census and held permanent residency for at least 1 year
- Canada: obtained permanent residency 6 to 10 years before each census.

1. Naturalization is the legal process by which an immigrant acquires citizenship of the receiving country after meeting residency and other eligibility requirements.

These immigrants were admitted from 2001 to 2015, prior to the significant increase in immigration levels and the share of immigrants selected from temporary residents already living in Canada.

The difference in eligibility criteria (arrival-based vs. status-based) between Australia and Canada reflects distinct policy approaches. However, the study populations selected in both countries represent cohorts completing the minimum residency period for naturalization (Hou et al., 2025).

Source-country composition of recent immigrant cohorts in Australia and Canada

Table 1 presents the 14 major source countries comprising the top 10 origins for recent immigrants to either Australia or Canada (2021). Despite substantial overlap in primary source nations, notable differences emerge: Australia had a much larger share of immigrants from the United Kingdom (12.0% in 2021) than Canada, while the Philippines represented Canada's largest source (17.3% in 2021).

Table 1 also presents indicators of source-country living standards, passport strength and dual citizenship policies—factors likely to influence immigrant naturalization (Vink et al., 2013).

Table 1
Source-country composition of recent immigrants and selected source-country characteristics

	Source-country composition of recent immigrants				Selected source-country characteristics						
	Australia		Canada		Gross domestic product per capita, purchasing power parity			Visa-free access to countries			Dual citizenship
	2011	2021	2011	2021	2011	2021	Change	2011	2021	Change	2010s
	percent				constant 2021 international $		percent	number of countries			
China	12.3	11.8	14.8	9.7	11,200	20,400	82	40	79	39	no
India	12.4	16.1	12.8	12.8	5,200	8,100	56	53	58	5	no
Philippines	4.2	6.5	7.7	17.3	6,400	8,900	39	58	65	7	yes
Pakistan	1.2	2.7	5.0	3.4	4,200	5,400	29	31	31	0	no
Iran	0.9	2.3	2.8	4.2	14,900	15,000	1	36	41	5	yes
United States	1.9	1.8	1.9	2.1	60,300	71,300	18	169	185	16	yes
United Kingdom	12.9	12.0	2.0	1.8	47,200	51,000	8	171	185	14	yes
South Korea	2.2	1.7	3.0	2.0	38,400	48,000	25	163	190	27	no
Colombia	0.4	0.7	2.1	1.5	14,800	17,400	18	54	129	75	yes
Sri Lanka	2.5	2.3	2.3	1.1	10,600	14,300	35	38	41	3	no
South Africa	4.8	2.4	0.6	0.5	14,500	13,700	-6	92	103	11	no
Vietnam	2.7	2.9	1.1	0.9	7,700	12,000	56	42	53	11	yes
Malaysia	2.6	1.9	0.2	0.1	24,100	29,800	24	158	179	21	yes
Iraq	2.2	1.8	1.0	1.8	12,300	12,700	3	28	28	0	yes
Other countries	37.0	33.3	42.8	41.1	…	…	…	…	…	…	…

… not applicable.

Sources: Australian Census and Migrants Integrated Dataset, 2011 and 2021; Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population and 2011 National Household Survey; World Bank, Gross Domestic Product Per Capita; Kaggle, Henley Passport Index; and Vink et al., Global Expatriate Dual Citizenship Dataset.

Source countries exhibited wide variation in living standards, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita purchasing power parity (PPP) (World Bank, n.d.). Except for the United States, all remained below Australia ($53,100[2] in 2011; $58,100 in 2021) and Canada ($53,600 in 2011; $56,500 in 2021). However, several nations—notably China (+82%), India (+56%) and Vietnam (+56%)—achieved substantial GDP per capita growth in the 2011-to-2021 period. These differential economic trajectories may help explain shifting naturalization patterns among immigrant groups from these nations.

Similarly, passport strength, measured by the number of countries with visa-free access (Kaggle, n.d.), varied widely. The United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea and Malaysia had a passport strength comparable to that of Australia (166 in 2011; 184 in 2021) and Canada (164 in 2011; 184 in 2021). Other major source countries had considerably lower passport values, though Colombia and China recorded notable improvements.

Among the 14 major source countries, 8 formally or informally allow dual citizenship, while the remaining 6 do not (Vink et al., 2020).

Declining citizenship acquisition rates in Australia and Canada across major source countries

Table 2 presents both observed and adjusted citizenship rates for recent immigrants aged 18 to 64 in Australia and Canada in 2011 and 2021. The observed citizenship rate is calculated as the percentage of eligible immigrants who acquired destination-country citizenship through naturalization. Adjusted rates are derived from regression models controlling for sociodemographic covariates: years since admission, age, sex at birth, education, language proficiency, income, country of birth, marital status, number of young children and region of residence. The adjusted rate assumes that the sociodemographic composition of immigrants did not change over the study period.

In Australia, the observed citizenship rate among recent immigrants declined by 13.4 percentage points over the 10-year study period, while the adjusted rate fell even more sharply, by 17.5 percentage points. The difference between the observed and adjusted rates indicates that changes in immigrants' sociodemographic characteristics partially offset the overall decline in citizenship rates.

Canada exhibited a steeper decline in the observed naturalization rate (-19.8 percentage points) than Australia. The adjusted rate decrease was slightly larger than the observed decline, by 1.1 percentage points, indicating that compositional changes had a minor impact on the observed trends in Canada.

Citizenship declines varied significantly by source country in both nations. Australia witnessed the steepest reduction in the adjusted citizenship rate among Chinese immigrants (-38.0 percentage points, or 67%), followed by Colombian (-30.7 percentage points, 37%), Vietnamese (-22.1 percentage points, 27%) and Indian (-21.3 percentage points, 26%) immigrants. South Korean immigrants showed the second-largest decline relative to their initial level (45%). Conversely, Iranian and Iraqi immigrants experienced minimal changes (less than 2 percentage points). This heterogeneity suggests source-country characteristics strongly mediate naturalization trends, beyond destination-country policy effects.

2. In constant 2021 international dollars, which use PPP for inter-country comparisons.

As in Australia, recent Chinese immigrants in Canada experienced the largest decline in the adjusted citizenship rate (-35.1 percentage points, or 51%). Large declines are also observed among immigrants from the Philippines (-29.7 percentage points, 37%), South Korea (-29.4 percentage points, 44%) and India (-24.8 percentage points, 33%). However, Canada's citizenship decline was more uniform across the top source countries compared with Australia's uneven pattern. For instance, Iranian immigrants in Canada experienced an 8.2 percentage point decrease in naturalization rates, while Iraqi immigrants saw a 14.3 percentage point decline—considerably larger than their counterparts in Australia. This contrast suggests that some factors unique to Canada may affect multiple origin groups more equally.

In both countries, the declines in immigrant citizenship rates were most pronounced among those from countries with substantial living-standard gains (e.g., China, with 82% growth in GDP per capita PPP, and India, Vietnam and the Philippines, with 39% to 56% growth) or enhanced passport strength (e.g., Colombia and China). These reductions contrast with minimal changes from nations showing slower growth (e.g., source countries with less than 15% GDP gains). Notably, source-country economic expansion (China's 82% vs. Canada's 6% and Australia's 10%) appears strongly correlated with falling naturalization rates, suggesting that improved economic conditions in the source country reduce immigrant incentives for citizenship acquisition in the destination country.

Table 2
Naturalization rates among immigrants to Australia and Canada admitted 6 to 10 years prior to the census year, ages 18 to 64, by major source country, 2011 and 2021

	Australia					Canada				
	Observed rates		Adjusted rates			Observed rates		Adjusted rates		
	2011	2021	2011	2021	Change	2011	2021	2011	2021	Change
		percent			percentage point		percent			percentage point
Total	64.9	51.5	67.9	50.4	-17.4	76.5	56.7	76.5	55.6	-20.9
China	53.2	17.6	56.9	18.9	-38.0	67.4	31.6	68.9	33.7	-35.1
India	79.7	64.5	82.7	61.4	-21.3	74.2	50.7	75.5	50.7	-24.8
Philippines	80.1	68.3	84.5	66.3	-18.3	80.8	52.2	80.1	50.4	-29.7
Pakistan	90.5	76.4	91.1	73.2	-17.9	84.7	73.5	82.7	72.4	-10.3
Iran	88.0	82.9	78.9	77.6	-1.3	84.6	76.7	81.5	73.3	-8.2
United States	40.2	36.5	50.0	39.8	-10.1	50.9	37.3	56.5	37.3	-19.2
United Kingdom	60.0	54.7	64.3	51.2	-13.1	55.9	39.9	59.5	37.1	-22.3
South Korea	36.9	23.2	37.7	20.8	-16.8	68.5	38.3	66.6	37.2	-29.4
Colombia	79.9	50.2	83.2	52.5	-30.7	84.8	71.4	82.9	66.4	-16.5
Sri Lanka	76.4	66.0	75.4	60.5	-14.9	74.5	49.4	74.0	52.7	-21.2
South Africa	81.5	74.4	78.6	66.3	-12.4	82.6	72.7	79.6	67.6	-12.0
Vietnam	72.9	52.7	83.3	61.2	-22.1	80.3	58.9	84.7	70.7	-14.0
Malaysia	24.9	26.3	26.2	21.3	-4.9	55.9	44.7	55.1	40.5	-14.6
Iraq	93.6	72.0	74.3	72.9	-1.5	85.9	69.4	83.5	69.2	-14.3
Other countries	64.6	48.5	64.8	49.5	-15.4	80.1	64.3	78.9	63.0	-16.0

Sources: Australian Census and Migrants Integrated Dataset, 2011 and 2021; and Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population and 2011 National Household Survey.

Dual citizenship recognition had minimal influence on naturalization patterns. Source countries with similar living standards but differing dual citizenship policies showed similar citizenship rates. Declines in citizenship rates occurred across major origin countries despite stable dual citizenship policies during the study period. This consistency means that dual citizenship regulations in source countries were not a driver for the reduced naturalization rates in both Australia and Canada. Furthermore, some countries have made acquiring foreign citizenship less prohibitive, even while dual citizenship is not allowed. For instance, China has introduced reforms granting residency and certain rights to skilled overseas Chinese people since 2010. Likewise, India's Overseas Citizenship of India program, established in 2005, offers eligible people of Indian origin various socioeconomic benefits, residency rights and long-term visas (Tan & Liu, 2024).

While source-country developments influenced citizenship trends, divergent declines between Australia and Canada suggest additional factors. Chinese, Colombian, Vietnamese and Pakistani immigrants showed steeper drops in Australia, while Filipinos, South Koreans, Britons, Americans, Sri Lankans, Malaysians, Iranians and Iraqis declined more in Canada. Notably, living standards changed very little in South Africa, Iran and Iraq, yet South African immigrants experienced about 12 percentage point decreases in both nations, whereas the rates for Iranian and Iraqi immigrants declined significantly in Canada but remained stable in Australia.

These differences between the two countries in naturalization trends among immigrants from the same source nation indicate that other explanations are at play. These might include differences between the two countries in the modification of their policies and regulations regarding citizenship acquisition, differences in the characteristics of immigrants from the same source nation, and other unknown factors.

In summary, this study analyzed changes in citizenship rates among recent immigrants from major source nations to Australia and Canada. By focusing on immigrants who have met residency requirements for naturalization, the analysis examined observed and adjusted citizenship rates—controlling for sociodemographic characteristics—across 14 major source-country groups. The findings revealed marked declines in citizenship uptake among recent immigrants in both countries over the 2011-to-2021 period. These declines were most pronounced among immigrants from countries that have seen significant improvements in living standards or passport strength, particularly China, India, Vietnam, the Philippines and Colombia. Dual citizenship policies in the source country appear to have little effect on naturalization trends. The magnitude of declines varied by country of destination and source country.

This study demonstrates that immigrant naturalization patterns must be understood transnationally. Improvements in source-country economies, expanded global mobility options and enhanced passport values collectively reduce immigrant incentives for citizenship acquisition in destination countries. The observed declines suggest a partial decoupling of permanent residency from citizenship. Notably, while destination-country integration and citizenship policies can clearly affect naturalization patterns, they appear to be increasingly contingent on immigrants' evolving motivations and source-country conditions. These findings challenge conventional integration models and underscore how dynamic global hierarchies and transnational migrant strategies can shape migration outcomes—in this case, the naturalization rate.

Authors

Feng Hou is with the Economic and Social Analysis and Modelling Division, Analytical Studies and Modelling Branch, at Statistics Canada. Yan Tan is with the Department of Geography, Environment and Population, University of Adelaide, Australia. Garnett Picot and Li Xu are with the Research and Knowledge Mobilization Division, Research and Data Branch, at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Chantel Goyette, Maciej Karpinski and Amélie Lafrance-Cooke for their advice and comments on an earlier version of this article.

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