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The Limits of Political Citizenship

Catherine Simpson Bueker

At the heart of the current immigration debate in the United States has been the question of what to do with the approximately 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. Should these individuals who have failed to abide by American immigration law and “wait their turn” to gain legal access be deported? Alternatively, if an individual can prove residency in the United States for a determined period of time, should her status be normalized, thus putting her on “the path to citizenship”? Formal citizenship, as it is discussed in the current immigration debate, is certainly one component of becoming incorporated into a society, but only one. Without extending social rights to all, civil and political citizenship as we conceive of it today cannot be fully realized.

Although Senator John McCain and President Barack Obama outlined dramatically different views in many arenas throughout the course of the 2008 election cycle, their respective positions on immigration, and particularly undocumented immigration, were not particularly distant from one another’s. McCain endorsed a plan that would require undocumented immigrants who had resided in the United States for an extended period of time to show proof of long-term residency, pay back taxes and fines, learn English and wait their turn to gain a green card and eventually citizenship. McCain’s Democratic opponent, Senator Barack Obama, outlined a similar policy. As President, Mr. Obama plans to propose legislation that would move the undocumented to a normalized status, and eventually towards citizenship. An editorial piece in the New York Times, entitled “Immigration Reform and Hard Times” (April 13, 2009), endorses an immigration overhaul that would include an amnesty component. The author states enthusiastically that such a policy would “yield bumper crops of new citizens.”

Be it President Obama, Senator McCain, or the author of the New York Time’s editorial, the end goal of citizenship acquisition for undocumented, as well as documented immigrants remains paramount. The extension of citizenship to and the acquisition of citizenship by long-term residents of the United States are viewed as critical for individual immigrants and their families, as well as for larger American society. Although potentially important to the well-being of all of these constituencies, legal citizenship is only one dimension of incorporation.

Citizenship Today

Citizenship is viewed as necessary for full membership in most societies around the world today. Although the precise meaning of citizenship varies from society to society, it frequently determines who can participate politically, what jobs can be held, whether or not social welfare benefits are available, and even whether one can own property.

Because holding legal citizenship in a society is a gateway for so many other aspects of social life, it is viewed as the most fundamental hurdle to overcome in order to be fully included. Unfortunately, politicians and policy makers in the United States tend to view naturalization as the end goal. Although never explicitly stated, the thinking is that once legal citizenship is acquired the rest will take care of itself as one has become a full member of society. We hear President Obama and Senator McCain discussing the “road to citizenship,” but never what
happens when the road comes to an end. The discussion around continuing to incorporate these individuals stops; you are a citizen now, you are like the rest of us. Citizenship first and the rest will follow. But will it?

Even academics who think of citizenship in a more multi-dimensional way are fairly limited in their conception of what it does or does not mean. Scholars tend to look at citizenship as a political act, particularly when it concerns those who acquire citizenship via naturalization. Among documented immigrants, naturalizing is viewed as a first step into the public realm. Although certainly naturalization is necessary for the most formal type of political participation in a democracy—voting—viewing citizenship as a marker of full membership because of the electoral access that it provides can be misleading.

For some, the decision to naturalize appears to grow out of, at least in part, a desire to formally engage in the political realm. We know, for example, that Cuban, Canadian, and British immigrants who naturalize have very high rates of voter participation. For others, the motivation to acquire U.S. citizenship may be to legally ensure their position within American society, assist with the migration of relatives, or attain social welfare benefits. Immigrants from China and Vietnam, for example, are very likely to naturalize, but much less likely to vote than other naturalized groups or the native-born, suggesting the decision is less based on a desire to participate in the electoral process (Bueker, 2006).

In today’s post-industrial democracies, the concern remains around having large numbers of politically disenfranchised residents who remain permanently part of the political underclass. The tens of thousands of Turkish immigrants living in Germany for decades with very limited ability to gain access to the polis is an oft cited example of exclusion. Certainly the possibility of significant social upheaval resulting from permanent political exclusion exists.

However, extending citizenship to immigrants does not necessarily translate into full inclusion in a society and could potentially lead to significant frustration as a promise of full membership translates into a reality of unequal citizenship. France has in recent years seen significant social unrest resulting from the marginalization of native-born and naturalized French citizens of North African descent. These individuals hold the legal status of French citizens, but remain unincorporated.

Citizenship of the Past

Citizenship has historically been viewed in a far more multifaceted manner than it is today. Although citizenship as state membership, i.e. political citizenship, is viewed as the oldest and most universal definition of the concept, it is by no means the only way it can be defined.

In addition to the political form of citizenship which Max Weber identified, Weber also recognized economic and cultural forms of citizenship. Economic citizenship suggests belonging to a particular class of people who have shared economic interests. Cultural citizenship comes in the form of belonging to a particular status group who share similar interests, honor, and prestige within a society. In defining citizenship in these various ways, we see a more nuanced understanding of membership, with the possibility of citizenship in one realm, but not in others.

Perhaps no one better understood or more clearly elucidated the fallacy of citizenship extension as the extension of equality than English sociologist T.H. Marshall.

Marshall outlines the levels of citizenship—the civil, the political, and the social—slowly extended over time to working class White Englishmen. Civil rights, granted primarily in eighteenth century England, came in the form of freedom of speech, religion, access to courts, and the right to own property. Political rights, dating to the nineteenth century, came in the form of access to the political realm: the ability to vote or hold office. Social rights, whose extension was just beginning to take place when Marshall was writing in the mid-twentieth century, are defined as basic standards of living, relative to a particular society. Social service and educational institutions are the means by which such rights will be transmitted.

Marshall notes, however, a paradox in the extension of these respective branches of membership. As civil and political rights were extended, social rights came to be increasingly separated out as a right or benefit of citizenship. If one has “equal” access to the courts and the legislature, then equality in other realms should follow. If it does not, it is not the fault nor the worry of the state; everyone has been given equal opportunity. Thus, the use of civic and political citizenship extension became a shill for declining social citizenship, a decreasing responsibility on the part of the state, and greater social inequality. Marshall went so far as to argue “citizenship has itself become, in certain, respects, the architect of legitimate social inequality” (Marshall and Bottomore, 1992).

T.H. Marshall in Twenty-First Century America

Holding U.S. citizenship, either through birth or naturalization, means belonging to an exclusive club to which only the most fortunate have access. Maintaining the exclusivity of this “club” has been a top priority throughout American history—limiting it by race, ethnicity, gender, and social class during earlier periods. White, working class men, mobilized by the elite, were often the ones most adamantly
about keeping others out, fearing they were the ones who would most easily be displaced.

We pride ourselves today as a society that no longer has these limits. Virtually anyone can become a “full” member of American society. Even better, we like to think that virtually anyone can rise to the top, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or social class. We can now even point to our current president as “proof” of the openness of American society. While Barack Obama, a Black man born of an immigrant father, has indeed risen to great heights, it is critical to recognize President Obama as far from the norm. Most would agree, regardless of his or her political leanings, that President Obama is an individual of tremendous intellect and communication skills. It is also important to note the President’s relatively middle class status as a child and consider the implications of this socioeconomic status and cultural capital on his opportunities.

Far more commonly, the extension of U.S. citizenship is much more limited in its practical implications. For most of American history, and perhaps even more so throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the common thinking has been that with the civil and political playing fields leveled, the state could bow out of many social responsibilities. United States citizenship has come to be viewed almost exclusively as civic and political in nature, with these two branches of citizenship closely intertwined in the American psyche. And though the extension even of civic and political rights are not equally granted in practice, they are so in theory, providing the argument for limited responsibility on the part of the state for citizens’ access to a basic standard of living. We thus see a reversion to Marshall’s pre-twentieth century conception of state membership and a significant retrenchment of the American welfare system (Pierson, 2001).

How did it come to be that as Marshall identified a need to extend social citizenship, the United States stood still or even backtracked in this realm over the course of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries? Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon argue that the limited nature of social citizenship in the United States arises out of a conflict between civil and political citizenship, premised on private ownership, and social citizenship, premised on reliance on public goods and services.

Fraser and Gordon’s theoretical explanation of the absence of social citizenship in the United States is compelling. I would argue that the problem is further compounded by the practical relationship between the political sphere of citizenship and the social sphere. Americans, particularly the native-born, have allowed and sometimes even encouraged the state to bow out of social obligations and fray the social contract as a result of our absence as political citizens.

Citizenship as Status Versus Process

Our absence as political citizens grows out of our conception of what citizenship is. For the native-born, citizenship is an ascribed characteristic which many blindly accept, rarely contemplating what it means, what we are owed from the state, or what we owe the state. For the foreign-born it is an achieved characteristic which people work to attain. Because it requires concerted effort on the part of immigrants to become American citizens, the status is likely more salient among this latter group, but it is still a status. We hold citizenship, we do not engage in it.

Political citizenship as process requires active engagement. It means, at a minimum, voting, but it also means being an informed citizen and engaging in serious, public debate over the distribution of resources. These latter aspects of political citizenship could be engaged in by both those who hold formal state membership and those who do not. The dilemma is that as individuals bow out of political citizenship as a process to an ever greater extent, social citizenship, as defined by guaranteed access to decent shelter, food, a quality education, and employment, becomes even less likely. By viewing political citizenship as a status, rather than as a process of ongoing engagement, we as a society have allowed the curtailment of social citizenship and thus the increase in social inequality, which has peaked in recent years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

The relationship between social citizenship and political citizenship is mediated through a variety of mechanisms. Those who hold fewer resources in the form of income, education, and social networks are less likely to engage in the political system at any level. These socioeconomic resources increase an individual’s knowledge of, interest and feelings of efficaciousness in the political arena. Those who lack such economic and cultural capital become disadvantaged across multiple spheres of society. Thus economic poverty translates into political poverty.

This trend is particularly acute among immigrants. Those with higher levels of education and income are far more likely to naturalize than are their counterparts with lower levels. Those struggling the most to reach some modicum of social citizenship thus become the least likely to attain it, as they lack the formal membership necessary for access to basic benefits. Certainly acquiring formal state membership does not guarantee full social citizenship, but its absence virtually promises social inequality for those most in need in a welfare state of limited breadth and depth.

This conflicting relationship between political citizenship and social citizenship becomes more pronounced among those who are considered full members of American society. Among both the native born and the naturalized, education and income are the major determinants of who engages in the electoral process and who does not. The
higher the level of income and education, the more likely
one is to engage politically. CNN exit poll data analyzed by
the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network found that in the
2008 election, individuals from households earning
$150,000 or more annually comprised 12% of all voters,
while those earning under $30,000 annually comprised
18% of all voters. According to the 2007 Annual Social and
Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey,
the former category is overrepresented at the polls, actually
comprising 8% of the population, while the latter category
is underrepresented at the polls, comprising 30% of the
population. Educational attainment has a similarly unequal
representation at the voting booth. In the 2004 election and
2008, going back to the 1960s, approximately 80% of those with
a college degree or more voted, while only about 50% of
those with a high school degree or less went to the polls.
Clearly, level of income and education has implications far
beyond the size of one’s bank account or the number of
degrees on the wall. Although this is far from novel, there
has been far too little attention paid to what the lack of
economic and cultural capital means in the political realm.

The schools, social service agencies, welfare system, and
other institutions that service social citizenship are chipped
away by those who do participate politically, but largely do
not rely upon these aspects of society. Those who suffer are
the low income workers and single mothers, both native-
born and foreign-born, who reside in inner cities, send their
children to the largest and most underfunded school
systems, live in subsidized housing, travel on broken public
transportation systems, and rely on food stamp, unemploy-
ment and job training programs. As these institutions so
necessary for the extension of social citizenship become
even more weakened, those who would most directly
benefit from them become even less likely to participate
politically. Social citizenship becomes farther and farther
out of reach; political citizenship as process becomes
limited to fewer and fewer citizens. A vicious cycle has
developed.

Rethinking our Measurement of Success

Incorporating immigrants into the host society is essential
for the host society’s longer term social and political
stability, not to mention its meeting of moral obligations.
The United States should continue to maintain the goal of
incorporation as a central one. The current problem is not
what the goal is—integration—but how it is measured. The
extension of citizenship as we construe it today is flawed.
We measure our success by counting the number or
percentage of immigrants who have taken on U.S.
citizenship, assuming our job is done. Our answer to those
who are currently undocumented is to “put them on the
road to citizenship,” assuming they will then advance from
there. We are stuck in the notion of extending status, but
not practice.

Michael Jones Correa, a political scientist at Cornell
University, has actually argued that the limitation of social
benefits to immigrants encourages naturalization, but not to
a positive end. He argues that many acquire political
citizenship purely to access those social welfare benefits
accessible only to American citizens. After naturalizing,
these individuals remain outside of the political sphere
(Weil and Randall, 2002). If this is indeed the case, our
traditional measurement of incorporation suggests we are
reaching our goals, while in reality we are simply
extending a status that fails to translate into full, active
citizenship that many of us view as critical to both the
individual and to larger scale society.

Research among American citizens, generally, has found
an inverse relationship between income inequality and voter
turnout. As income inequality in a state increases, voter
turnout decreases, even when taking individual incomes
into account (Galbraith and Hale, 2008). This suggests that
the lack of social citizenship experienced by both the
naturalized and the native-born translates into depressed
political engagement at a societal level, a troubling trend for
a democracy.

Extending Public Policy to Extend Social Citizenship

The Obama Administration may have the desire and public
support to move us closer to an extension of social
citizenship than has been the case since the New Deal
Era. President Obama’s focus on health care and education
suggests a desire to extend social citizenship. The creation
of some sort of universal health care system and the
strengthening of the American educational system would
go a long way toward including millions of marginalized
citizens and non-citizens as fuller members of society, even
if T.H. Marshall is never mentioned.

The extension of social citizenship to the undocumented
is certainly trickier than its expansion to those who are
citizens or are documented residents. Suggesting to
American taxpayers that those who have broken the law
to enter or remain in the United States should be eligible for
universal health care coverage, for example, is politically
tenable.

In terms of undocumented residents, one way to extend
social citizenship is to make clearer what rights those
individuals already hold. Although rarely discussed and
understood by either the undocumented immigrants them-
seves or Americans, more generally, undocumented resi-
dents hold some amount of civil citizenship, in the form of
certain Constitutional rights. The Courts have made clear
that undocumented immigrants are entitled to due process, equal protection before the law, minimum wage, safe working conditions, a limit on work hours, emergency healthcare and public education for their children. Were undocumented immigrants to be afforded these rights in practice, we would not only be extending social citizenship to them in some small and not so small ways, but to Americans, more generally. For example, the criticism of undocumented workers undercutting wages of Americans would come to be less true, were undocumented workers consistently paid the minimum wage.

But undocumented immigrants are often unaware that they have any rights. Even those who might be aware of such rights fail to fully realize their civil citizenship, due to their absence of political citizenship. The fear of deportation understandably overwhelms any willingness to engage in the civil sphere, even when rights are being violated. The government could do much to make public the rights that virtually all persons residing in the United States hold. For example, we could see the government interfacing with the ethnic media to a greater extent to inform communities of what rights they do hold, thus extending social citizenship in some ways to virtually everyone.

Revisiting Marshall’s Three Spheres of Citizenship

People do not participate politically for a variety of reasons, including a lack of time due to work and family commitments, ill health, an inability to access the polls, and a feeling that individual participation just does not matter and will not make a difference. By making a concerted effort to expand Marshall’s social citizenship to everyone within our borders—from non-citizens to the naturalized to the native-born—we may begin to see Marshall’s political citizenship move from status to process as the most marginalized members of society come to see that their concerns are the concerns of the U.S. government. For those who cannot participate in the electoral system because they remain outside of the citizenship group, we may see an increase in informal civic participation. If people know they have legal rights, they may begin to demand them. This demand will lead to greater social rights, which may help to increase feelings of political efficacy. For those who can become formal members of American society, we may see an increase in naturalization rates, but not as an end in and of itself. For those who are American citizens, either by birth or choice, we may see a growth in civic engagement, both formal and informal.

Marshall saw spheres of citizenship extended over generations, but we need to think about extending those spheres within a single lifespan of an immigrant, or a native-born for that matter. We also need to think of reordering the spheres of citizenship. Marshall was not advocating that civil citizenship come first, followed by political, followed by social. He was reporting on what trends he had identified (among White men) throughout English history. We should not assume that the order he outlines is the order to which we should adhere or aspire.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to recognize the relationships that exist among these spheres of citizenship and move beyond seeing them as distinct from one another. Political citizenship influences civil citizenship. Social citizenship influences civil and political citizenship. When individuals and groups lack one of these elements of citizenship, they essentially lack all three. Social citizenship, rather than being the third phase of membership, needs to come prior to or alongside political citizenship, otherwise political citizenship will be nothing more than a false promise.

My focus has largely been on the incorporation of the foreign-born via social citizenship, but we must apply these ideas to the native-born, as well. Although political citizenship is viewed as a given among the native-born, we need to think of the economic inequality we see in the United States as a denial of some aspect of citizenship, i.e. social citizenship, which translates into being a lesser citizen in the political and civic realms. Despite the fact that the notion of social citizenship is a hard sell in a society that prides itself on rugged individualism and holds as its national myth that anyone can rise to the top, it is essential that we move in this direction. It is only when we see the extension of social citizenship to all that we will see political citizenship in the United States fulfilling its promise to the individual and meeting the critical role it was intended to play in larger American society. We simply cannot have one without the other.

Further Reading


Catherine Simpson Bueker is assistant professor of sociology at Emmanuel College. She is the author of *From Immigrant to Naturalized Citizen: Political Incorporation in the United States* (2006).
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