

Integration Dispensation: Why Immigrants Face Stronger Social Norms

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While social norms and expectations shape all our lives, they do not apply to everyone in the same way. A new study shows that migrants in Switzerland are held to higher standards than the rest of society, for example, with regard to local social engagement and compliance with the legal order. This double standard confirms what many have pointed out: only some people are expected to integrate, while others are not held to the same expectations.

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“Hanna runs into Sue. Sue asks: ‘Do you want to stop by for a coffee some time?’ What is the best thing Hanna can do? (a) schedule a proper time with Sue to come over for a coffee; (b) stop by whenever Hanna has time; or (c)

wait until Sue again asks Hanna to come over.” (Orgad 2015)

Maybe you know the right answer to this question, which figured in the Dutch citizenship exam until recently. Maybe you don't. And maybe you don't have to know it. Native-born citizens are exempt from citizenship exams and, typically, from integration expectations, such as the one expressed in this question, more broadly. They are, in a sense, dispensed of integration (Schinkel 2018) – a critique that has become central in debates on immigrant integration. But what does it mean in practice? Do immigrants face stricter social norms than citizens?

The Migration Bias in Social Norms

In a recent [study](#), we tested this idea empirically for the first time (Manser-Egli and Lutz 2025). We asked: Do immigrants face higher normative expectations than everyone else? To answer this, we looked at Switzerland, a consensus-oriented country with a diverse society and heated political debates about immigrant integration – a context not unlike the Netherlands.

We surveyed people about the importance of social norms related to integration, such as participating in the neighborhood, being financially independent, obeying the law, and taking part in politics. For half the respondents, the questions specifically referred to immigrants, e.g., “Immigrants should have regular contact with their neighbors,” while for the other half, they referred to everyone in society, e.g., “People should have regular contact with their neighbors.”

By comparing these two ways of asking the questions, we were able to analyze whether people do indeed have higher normative expectations regarding immigrants than society as a whole. The results reveal that immigrants were held to stricter social norms than the broader society, particularly in terms of local social engagement and respect for laws and constitutional values. A phenomenon we call the migration bias in social norms.

A Swiss-german Phenomenon?

Interestingly, the migration bias is context-dependent, as it manifests in the German-speaking part of Switzerland but not in the French-speaking counterpart. This difference is not just a statistical fluke or the result of a smaller sample size but reflects a genuine lack of migration bias in the French-speaking region. While both language regions show similar support for general social norms, expectations directed at immigrants are significantly stronger in the German-speaking part.

One reason for this difference could be explained by how the two regions understand citizenship and belonging. The German-speaking part of Switzerland tends towards an assimilationist model of citizenship, based on the idea of cultural homogeneity, to which immigrants have to assimilate. The French-speaking part, by contrast, is closer to the multiculturalist model based on a civic (rather than ethnic) understanding of citizenship and cultural diversity.

French-speaking cantons tend to adopt more liberal and inclusive approaches,

resembling the French *ius soli* tradition (citizenship based on the place of birth), whereas German-speaking cantons tend to follow more restrictive approaches, closer to the German *ius sanguinis* model (citizenship based on descent). This is reflected in concrete policies: voting rights for non-citizens, for example, are common in the French-speaking part of Switzerland but largely absent in the German-speaking part. More broadly, the French-speaking region aligns more closely with cosmopolitan values and international openness, while its German-speaking counterpart leans more towards national closure.

Romanticized Integration Imaginaries

Why does this migration bias in social norms matter and what do the findings of our study reveal about the public understanding of immigrant integration? Policies often frame integration in local, community-oriented terms (see Anderson 2023) – encouraging immigrants to join associations, participate in neighborhood life, or form social ties. However, our findings suggest the public may romanticize these local imaginaries, holding immigrants to higher standards than citizens.

For citizens, participation in local life is largely a matter of choice; for immigrants, it is a social expectation and a benchmark of their integration. Their level of local participation is monitored and evaluated, both as a social norm and in bureaucratic practice, reflecting the unequal distribution of normative expectations. This gap – what scholars call the integration dispensation – creates a double standard: citizens are spared from formal and informal scrutiny, while immigrants are judged according to stricter standards.

Political Implications

The migration bias has broader political implications. Do the same social norms apply to everyone? Does the fact that integration policy targets immigrants only reinforce the very divisions it seeks to bridge, to the point that the policy itself becomes the problem? And is it consistent with democratic values to require immigrants to pledge allegiance to norms that are not equally expected and enforced for citizens (Manser-Egli 2025)?

Returning to our opening scenario, the answer is simple: (a) schedule a proper time with Sue to come over for a coffee. In fact, there is, of course, not actually a right or wrong answer here – and neither of the suggested responses is particularly “Dutch” or “un-Dutch.” The issue is more complex: when it comes to social norms, immigrants often do not get the same leeway as citizens. Understanding this bias is crucial to living up to the values of freedom and equality in a truly inclusive society.

References

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