

International Migration Is Changing Perceptions of Citizenship

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Abstract: International migration, read through the terms of transnationalism, is undoing the tight fit between legal citizenship and felt belonging that the nation-state model once presumed. Cross-border ties — sustained by capital flows, selective migration policies, and widening economic stratification — rearrange the terms on which citizenship is claimed, granted, and withheld rather than simply layering new identities onto old ones. The children of transnational migrants often construct identities that straddle national lines, but this hybridity carries its own frictions: split loyalties, ambiguous legal standing, and the everyday strain of being read as not quite belonging anywhere. Citizenship, on this reading, operates less as a fixed legal status than as a field of shifting power — shaped by the movement of money, labor, and the administrative reflexes of states. Any migration policy that treats economic growth and social inclusion as separate problems to be traded off will misread what is happening on the ground.

Keywords: Transnationalism; Citizenship and Belonging; Hybrid Identity; Commodification of Citizenship

1. Introduction

The category "citizen" has come unstuck from the assumptions that held it in place through most of the twentieth century. Moves across borders are no longer exceptional; they are part of the ordinary biography of millions. The question this paper takes up is what that ordinariness does to citizenship as both a legal category and a lived experience.

The argument is built around transnationalism: the social fields, obligations, and identities that form across borders and persist over time — not simply the brute fact of people living between countries. When those fields thicken — when remittances flow, when political loyalties split, when children grow up speaking one language at home and another at school — the distinction

between formal membership and actual belonging begins to fray. The paper follows that fraying through two main case clusters. The first looks at the investment-migration programs of Portugal and Germany, where residency and citizenship have become commodities priced into national economic strategy. The second turns to Moroccan migrant women in Italy, for whom legal precarity and economic contribution sit uneasily together, and to second-generation Latino youth in the United States, whose experience of dual belonging tests the limits of legal definitions. These cases do not illustrate a single trend. They reveal a citizenship that is being pulled in different directions — commodified at one end, withheld at the other — within the same global moment.

2. Transnationalism and the Shifting Ground of Belonging

2.1 The Passport and Its Discontents

For much of the modern period, a passport did straightforward work: it named a person's nationality and signaled where they belonged. Bivand Erdal and Midtboen (2023) have shown how deeply that symbolic function runs — even for naturalized citizens, the passport carries weight beyond its legal utility. But the clean mapping of one person to one nation has been unsettled by the sheer volume and regularity of cross-border mobility. Alarian and Goodman (2016) document how dual-citizenship provisions reshape migration flows themselves, turning a legal permission into a behavioral driver. Migrants keep affective, financial, and familial ties to their countries of origin while building new attachments in receiving societies. Leitner and Ehrkamp (2006) argue that this doubling is a durable condition — not a transitional phase on the way to assimilation — and one that the nation-state model of citizenship was not designed to handle. Some Moroccan immigrants, for instance, have moved well past remittance transfers, investing in real estate and circulating cultural goods in ways that sustain a transnational social

field that national citizenship frameworks barely register.

2.2 Second-Generation Latino Youth in the United States

The experience of second-generation Latino youth in the United States makes the tension between legal status and felt belonging difficult to ignore. These young people were born on U.S. soil and hold American citizenship by law, yet the relationship between that legal status and their daily experience is fraught.

2.3 Dual Identity and the Reconfiguration of National Belonging

Second-generation Latino youth occupy a position that American public culture has few ready terms for. Spanish and English both function as native languages. Family life carries the rhythms, obligations, and expectations of their parents' countries of origin; school and peer life pull toward American norms. Sanchez (2007) describes this as a distinct form of cultural competence — a literacy in multiple worlds that is itself a kind of belonging — rather than a halfway condition between two fixed identities. But competence does not guarantee welcome.

The political environment has made that painfully clear. Vos et al. (2021) document the cultural stress that mass xenophobia imposes on Latino adolescents in U.S. cities — stress that takes concrete forms: open discrimination, hostile political rhetoric, and defensive postures from non-Hispanic white and Black Americans who perceive immigration as a threat to jobs, language, and social standing (CDC, 2018). These reactions are not abstract. McWhirter et al. (2017) link them to depression rates, school disengagement, and antisocial behavior among Latino youth. Being told — by peers, by teachers, by the ambient tone of public debate — that you are a second-class citizen has measurable consequences, and those consequences call into question any account of citizenship that treats legal status as the end of the story.

Sanchez's analysis foregrounds transnationalism as the key concept. Technology and social media give these young people daily, real-time connection to relatives and communities in their parents' home countries. A sense of belonging to a broader Latino community takes shape across geographical distance. Zolberg (2008) read this phenomenon as evidence of the limits of the nation-state model, which presumes a tight link

among territory, population, and political authority. That link, in an era of sustained transnational flows, is proving difficult to maintain. Second-generation Latino youth are born in the United States, raised in the United States, and may never set foot in their parents' country of origin, yet their family ties and cultural inheritance pull their sense of membership across borders (Getrich, 2013). They are building identities that draw from both cultures, producing something that the binary logic of national citizenship cannot easily classify.

3. The Blurring Boundary between Citizenship and Immigration

The line between citizen and migrant has become a zone of deliberate policy experimentation. States now routinely use residency and citizenship as instruments of economic strategy, selling access to wealthy individuals while maintaining barriers for low-wage labor that the same economies depend on.

Portugal's Golden Residence Permit program makes the logic explicit. Non-EU nationals who invest at least EUR 350,000 in Portuguese real estate or EUR 1 million in financial assets gain residency — and, eventually, a path to citizenship (Marin Consarnau & Rivas Nieto, 2018). Germany has taken a different but complementary approach, modernizing visa procedures and relaxing entry requirements for skilled non-EU workers, particularly in IT, as part of an explicit effort to address domestic labor shortages (Federal Foreign Office, 2023). In both instances, the state calibrates who gets in, on what terms, and for how long — not on the basis of birthright or national belonging but on assessments of economic utility. Bauder (2008) describes this as the operation of citizenship-as-capital, a form of value that states can grant, withhold, and price.

At the same time, temporary work visa programs create a growing population of residents who contribute to the economic and social fabric of a country without holding full citizenship rights (Salazar Parrenas, 2015). They pay taxes, raise children, and participate in community life, yet they cannot vote and remain vulnerable to deportation. The result is a practical decoupling of residence from membership — a decoupling that is economically convenient for receiving states but politically corrosive for the people it leaves in limbo.

The question of who is born a citizen is being

reopened along the same fault lines. *Jus soli* — citizenship by birthplace — and *jus sanguinis* — citizenship by descent — were long treated as stable, mutually exclusive principles (Goodman, 2014). In the United States, the Fourteenth Amendment makes *jus soli* a constitutional guarantee: "any person born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof" is a citizen. The legal text is unambiguous. But the political fight around it is not. Opponents argue that the amendment was never meant to cover children of undocumented immigrants and point to the phenomenon of so-called "anchor babies" — children whose U.S. citizenship can, under current law, eventually open a path to legal status for their parents (Chan & Lo, 2019). Critics frame this as a drain on social services and public education, a claim that has gained traction as demographic change reshapes the electorate. The *jus soli* principle remains the formal cornerstone of American citizenship, but the pressure on it — from immigration politics, from demographic anxiety, from the sheer difficulty of squaring a nineteenth-century amendment with twenty-first-century migration patterns — is unlikely to ease. Shachar (2009) has argued that alternatives such as residency-based or contribution-based pathways to citizenship are gaining ground internationally, though each carries its own distributional consequences.

Moroccan migrant women in Italy illustrate the other side of the citizenship-as-capital dynamic. Many work in domestic service and elder care, sectors where labor demand is high and native-born workers are scarce (Andall, 2000). Their work fills genuine gaps in the Italian economy. Yet without citizenship, they are excluded from national elections and have little formal leverage over the policies that govern their working conditions, their housing, and their families (European Parliament, 2024).

Neoliberal economic governance has deepened this asymmetry. Policies that prioritize market liberalization, deregulation, and the shrinking of state intervention do not operate on a level field; they intersect with existing patterns of class, gender, and legal status in ways that concentrate advantage. Labor markets sit at the meeting point of economic, political, and cultural processes, and they are regulated — formally and informally — by all three (Bauder, 2008). Under neoliberal governance, migration is treated as a labor-market instrument: mobility gets encouraged when it serves growth, restricted when it does not

(Gamlen, 2014).

For Moroccan women in Italy, the terms of this bargain are stark. The jobs available to them are precarious — low-wage, insecure, with few benefits and little upward mobility (Inanc, 2020). Language barriers compound the precarity. Ghio et al. (2022) find that for immigrants in Italy's low-skilled labor market, communication skills matter more for employment outcomes than formal qualifications. Women who cannot navigate Italian political and bureaucratic language face a double bind: constricted job access on one side, limited capacity to advocate for better conditions on the other.

4. Summary

The meaning of citizenship is shifting because the conditions that once made it legible as a single, stable status are disappearing. Belonging no longer maps neatly onto borders or passports. People move, and as they move they accumulate ties — to places of origin, to places of settlement, to communities that span both. These ties are not transitional; they are structuring. Second-generation Latino youth in the United States live their dual identities daily, negotiating the gap between legal membership and social recognition with a practical skill that the law has not yet caught up to.

At the level of state policy, the picture is no less unsettled. Citizenship and residency have become assets that states auction, ration, and withhold — calibrated to labor-market need in one instance, priced for wealthy investors in another. What has emerged is a patchwork of graded memberships: full rights concentrated at the top, precarity concentrated at the bottom. National citizenship, once imagined as a floor — a baseline of equal standing — now functions more like a ladder, with rungs that some people can climb and others cannot reach.

Migration policies that fail to reckon with this stratification will keep producing the same outcomes: formal members who feel like outsiders, non-citizens who carry the economy on their backs, and a legal architecture that describes a world that no longer exists.

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