

ESSAY

GLOBAL PATHWAYS TO CITIZENSHIP
ON THE DECLINE

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INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, immigration remains one of the most influential—and divisive—issues in politics, increasingly shaping voter preferences and national policy agendas.¹ This is especially evident in today’s landscape, where many governments have adopted more restrictive approaches not only to immigration but also to the acquisition of citizenship.² A key area of focus is the

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1. See Diana Roy et al., *The U.S. Immigration Debate*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELS. (Aug. 7, 2024), <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/us-immigration-debate-0> [https://perma.cc/U5KJ-94BL].

2. Luca David Opromolla, *Separating Immigration Rhetoric from Reality*, N.C. STATE UNIV. POOLE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP (Oct. 29, 2024), <https://poole.ncsu.edu/thought->

tightening of eligibility requirements for naturalization—the legal process through which non-citizens acquire citizenship after fulfilling conditions such as long-term residency, language proficiency, and civic knowledge.³ However, some countries have also moved to limit birthright citizenship (*jus soli*), which grants citizenship based on place of birth, while others have curtailed citizenship by descent (*jus sanguinis*), which is based on lineage.⁴ These shifts have significant implications for who is permitted to belong, ultimately reshaping national identity, social inclusion, and the meaning of citizenship itself.⁵

I. FRANCE: PARLEZ-VOUS FRANÇAIS? (DO YOU SPEAK FRENCH?)

On May 2, 2025, the French government announced a change to its Naturalization by Decree. The new requirement mandates that applicants seeking French nationality by means other than a declaration—such as marriage or a family relationship to a French citizen—demonstrate a higher level of French language proficiency. Specifically, applicants must now achieve a B2 level instead of B1 on either the Test of Knowledge (TCF) or the Diploma of French Knowledge (DELF).⁶ While officials argue that this will foster better integration, it will also create a barrier, especially for older applicants and those from less-privileged educational

leadership/article/separating-immigration-rhetoric-from-reality/ [https://perma.cc/5XGD-JDR4].

3. Sarah Groarke et al., *Supporting Integration? International Practices on Civics and Language Requirements Linked to Naturalisation: Policy Implications for Ireland*, ECON. & SOC. RSCH INST. (Sep. 2020), <https://doi.org/10.26504/bkmnext398> [https://perma.cc/4UWA-3WX9].

4. Greg Grandin, *The Revolutionary Idea that Remade the New World*, ATLANTIC (June 10, 2025), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/06/birthright-citizenship-new-world-ideal/683066/> [https://perma.cc/BF4U-6E65].

5. Edoardo Epiphane Yogo, *The Role of Populism in Redefining Citizenship and Social Inclusion for Migrants in Europe*, EUR. CTR. FOR POPULISM STUD. (Mar. 4, 2025), <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-role-of-populism-in-redefining-citizenship-and-social-inclusion-for-migrants-in-europe/> [https://perma.cc/63EY-GSZ7].

6. Géraldine Renaudière, *French Naturalization by Decree: Stricter Rules and How to Stay Compliant*, FRAGOMEN (May 28, 2025), <https://www.fragomen.com/insights/la-naturalisation-francaise-par-decret-des-regles-strictes-et-une-exigence-accrue-de-conformite.html> [https://perma.cc/3UEC-Y8X4]; Stephanie Graveron, *New French Immigration Law: Navigating French Language Requirements*, FRAGOMEN (July 22, 2024), <https://www.fragomen.com/insights/new-french-immigration-law-navigating-french-language-requirements.html> [https://perma.cc/AN3V-R2SF].

backgrounds.⁷ In addition to new language requirements, all decree applicants, as well as spouses naturalizing by declaration (through marriage to a French citizen) must pass a French civics exam on history, culture, and state institutions.⁸ This information was previously assessed through an oral assimilation interview and is being re-structured as a written exam.⁹ Other notable developments include stricter scrutiny over financial autonomy, in particular for applicants who rely on assistance from abroad, and those who have prior convictions or deportation orders.¹⁰ This type of behavior has been increasingly seen as contrary to the “fundamental rules and values of French society.”¹¹

II. ITALY: CITIZENSHIP BY DESCENT NOW LIMITED TO TWO GENERATIONS

Similarly, Italy has revisited its longstanding policy on *jus sanguinis* citizenship.¹² *Jus sanguinis* has traditionally allowed those of Italian descent to claim citizenship regardless of the number of generations removed from their Italian ancestor.¹³ Now, Italy will limit *jus sanguinis* to two generations, meaning an applicant will only be eligible if they can prove at least one parent or grandparent has or held Italian citizenship.¹⁴ The new decree also mandates that naturalization interviews, previously eligible to be conducted from consulates around the world, must be done

7. See *France Tightens Naturalization Requirements, Emphasizing Assimilation and Strict Enforcement*, LEXCASE, <https://lexcase-immigration.com/en/france-tightens-naturalization-requirements-emphasizing-assimilation-and-stricter-enforcement/> [https://perma.cc/T8N3-QQK9] (last visited July 15, 2025).

8. Zane Lilly, *Rules to be Toughened for French Citizenship, Announces Minister*, THE CONNEXION (May 12, 2025), <https://www.connexionfrance.com/practical/rules-to-be-toughened-for-french-citizenship-announces-minister/722389> [https://perma.cc/L2B3-ZSWA].

9. *Stricter Conditions for Naturalization in Force in France*, HAYWOOD MARTIN WISE (May 5, 2025), https://www.wiseavocats.com/stricter-conditions-for-naturalization-in-force-in-france_ad251.html [https://perma.cc/8DSU-Z9VC].

10. Renaudière, *supra* note 6.

11. *Id.*

12. Marco Mesina, *Italy Introduces “Genuine Link” Limitations on Citizenship by Descent*, IMI DAILY (May 31, 2025), <https://www.imidaily.com/europe/italy-introduces-genuine-link-limitations-on-citizenship-by-descent/> [https://perma.cc/ZPY8-6F6H].

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

within Italy.¹⁵ Officials have justified these changes as a means of combating abuse of the system.¹⁶ Nevertheless, these changes will unfairly deny citizenship to some with genuine ties to Italian culture and heritage but who are more than two generations removed from their Italian ancestors.¹⁷

III. FINLAND: EXTENDING RESIDENCY FROM FIVE TO EIGHT YEARS

In Finland, residency requirements have increased from five to eight years. Applicants who can demonstrate a strong command of the Finnish or Swedish language, have a Finnish spouse, are a Nordic citizen, the spouse of a Finnish diplomat, or stateless may receive reduced residency requirements ranging from two to five years.¹⁸ This change was introduced by Prime Minister Petteri Orpo who hopes the new legislation will ease the 28,000 case backlog the government is facing.¹⁹ Officials have also cited integration as a key rationale behind the legislation with longer residency requirements intended to encourage deeper language acquisition and cultural adaptation.²⁰ The Finnish government has even unveiled a proposal for a mandatory naturalization test for applicants with multiple-choice and true-false style questions on Finnish society and values.²¹ The policy shift fits into a broader European trend where the acquisition of citizenship is increasingly treated as a privilege earned, rather than a right extended after a fixed time period.²² Not only do the proposed changes burden

15. Alex Kozul-Wright, *Why is Italy Making it Harder to Get Citizenship?*, AL JAZEERA (Apr. 2, 2025), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/2/why-has-italy-tightened-citizenship-rules> [https://perma.cc/4T24-GWEX].

16. *Id.*

17. *See id.*

18. *See Finland Tightens Rules for Citizenship*, ETIAS (Oct. 16, 2024), <https://etias.com/articles/finland-tightens-rules-for-citizenship> [https://perma.cc/TB5C-GBVB].

19. *Id.*

20. Elin Hofverberg, *Finland: Parliament Adopts New Residency Requirements for Citizenship*, LIBR. CONG. (Aug. 5, 2024), <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2024-08-05/finland-parliament-adopts-new-residency-requirements-for-citizenship/> [https://perma.cc/BS7Q-GQZX].

21. *Finland to Introduce Mandatory Citizenship Test*, HELSINKI TIMES (Feb. 20, 2025), <https://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/finland-news/domestic/26176-finland-to-introduce-mandatory-citizenship-test.html> [https://perma.cc/QTE3-2HQA].

22. *See* Ministry of the Interior, *Government to Tighten Conditions for Permanent Residency Permits*, FINNISH GOV'T (May 6, 2025), <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/->

applicants with additional administrative requirements, but they also impose greater financial strain—effectively raising the costs of acquiring citizenship.²³ By extending residency periods and tightening eligibility, the reforms delay or restrict access to the social protections and benefits that come with Finnish citizenship.²⁴ In doing so, they risk creating a tiered society in which long-term residents remain excluded from full participation and protection under the welfare state.²⁵

IV. JAPAN: AFFIRMING ITS BAN ON DUAL CITIZENSHIP

Last year in Japan, the Fukuoka High Court upheld the country's ban on dual citizenship.²⁶ Petitioner, Yuri Konto, argued that the Japanese Nationality Law, which stipulates that “a Japanese national shall lose Japanese nationality when he or she acquires a foreign nationality by his or her own choice,” violated Articles 13 and 14 of the Japanese Constitution pertaining to the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and the right to equality, respectively.²⁷ Konto, born in Japan, acquired US citizenship through naturalization after spending four decades in the United States.²⁸ When traveling between the two countries, officials discovered that Konto held dual citizenship which then

/1410869/government-to-tighten-conditions-for-permanent-residence-permits [https://perma.cc/4LHZ-8V73].

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.*

25. *Top Reasons Why Finland is a Great Place to Migrate To*, FINNCARE, <https://finncare.fi/why-finland-is-a-great-place-to-migrate-to/#:~:text=Strong%20Healthcare%20and%20Social%20Security,by%20employers%20to%20their%20employees> [https://perma.cc/2DCE-ERZW] (last visited July 15, 2025) (Delaying the residency period required to apply for Finnish citizenship prolongs the time individuals remain without full civic and legal protections—such as the right to vote in parliamentary and presidential elections, run for national office, or enjoy absolute protection from deportation—even if they already participate in and contribute to the welfare system as permanent residents.).

26. Karin Kaneko, *Ban on Dual Nationality is Constitutional, Fukuoka High Court Rules*, THE JAPAN TIMES (Oct. 10, 2024), <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/10/10/japan/crime-legal/dual-nationality-ruling/> [https://perma.cc/L7V3-39AK].

27. *High Court Rules Japan's Dual Nationality Ban Constitutional*, JAPAN WIRE (Oct. 11, 2024), <https://english.kyodonews.net/articles/-/50511> [https://perma.cc/P4TP-AVX5].

28. Ishrat Chahal, *Japan Court Rules Ban on Dual Citizenship Constitutional*, JURIST (Oct. 11, 2024), <https://www.jurist.org/news/2024/10/japan-court-rules-ban-on-dual-citizenship-constitutional/> [https://perma.cc/78FM-JANR].

resulted in the termination of her Japanese citizenship.²⁹ Konto's case is not unique. In fact, according to the Japanese Ministry of Justice, over the last decade more than 20,000 people have lost their Japanese citizenship, some through renunciation but many against their own will.³⁰ While exceptional cases allow for dual nationality, these are few and far between.³¹ Even dual citizenship children must decide which nationality they choose by the time they reach the age of twenty.³² While officials cite the need to preserve Japanese culture and tradition, the policy fails to acknowledge the realities of international mobility, transnational families, and increasingly multicultural identities denying—and in certain instances, even revoking—citizenship for those otherwise eligible for Japanese citizenship.³³

V. *THE UNITED STATES: SCOTUS DOES NOT MAKE
A DECISION ON BIRTHRIGHT CITIZENSHIP*

On May 15, 2025, the Supreme Court of the United States of America (“SCOTUS”) heard oral arguments regarding a dispute over the Trump administration’s Executive Order 14160 ending birthright citizenship (*jus soli*) to children born in the United States if neither parent is a US citizen or lawful permanent resident.³⁴ The dispute arose out of three consolidated cases: *Trump v. CASA*, *Trump v. Washington*, and *Trump v. New Jersey* challenging the Fourteenth Amendment’s clause that “all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside.”³⁵ While “subject to the jurisdiction thereof” originally generated some uncertainty, in 1898 the Court clarified that

29. *Id.*

30. Takeuchi Maiko, *Japan to Cut Off Japanese? Protecting the Ties Between Japan and the Japanese Citizens Who are Successful Overseas*, RSCH. INST. OF ECON., TRADE AND INDUS. (Jan. 12, 2024), https://www.rieti.go.jp/en/columns/s24_0008.html [https://perma.cc/D9LY-S4N9].

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

34. Raul Pinto & Lalia Khan, *Breaking Down Trump’s Attempt to End Birthright Citizenship*, AM. IMMIGR. COUNCIL (Feb. 7, 2025), <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/breaking-down-trump-end-birthright-citizenship/> [https://perma.cc/3PN2-AMYK].

35. *Id.*

anyone born within the United States regardless of their parents' citizenship status would automatically become a US citizen in the landmark case of *Wong Kim Ark* and that the language was instead intended to exclude the children of foreign diplomats.³⁶ The recent US Supreme Court decision avoided this issue altogether and instead only addresses procedural aspects of the argument, lifting the universal injunction blocking the executive order.³⁷ Now, federal courts will consider relief on a case-by-case basis.³⁸ In other words, the rights and status of individuals born in the US to undocumented parents or parents holding temporary visas may vary from state to state. This variation will depend on how lower federal courts in their respective circuits rule on existing and future lawsuits.³⁹ The debate itself exemplifies the decline in global pathways to citizenship—whether through birthright or naturalization—as countries adopt increasingly restrictive policies.⁴⁰

VI. WHAT CITIZENSHIP TRENDS SIGNAL FOR THE FUTURE

Rising immigration restrictions and increasingly complex bureaucratic processes are making citizenship harder to attain than ever before.⁴¹ In many countries, even long-term residents who contribute economically and socially face prolonged uncertainty, legal hurdles, and exclusion from full participation in

36. *Id.*

37. Amy Howe, *Supreme Court Sides with Trump Administration on Nationwide Injunctions in Birthright Citizenship Case*, SCOTUSBLOG (June 27, 2025), <https://www.scotusblog.com/2025/06/supreme-court-sides-with-trump-administration-on-nationwide-injunctions-in-birthright-citizenship-case/> [<https://perma.cc/BLZ8-JQXU>].

38. *Id.*

39. *Id.*

40. See Michelle Lapointe, *In Birthright Citizenship Decision, the Supreme Court Expanded Trump's Power*, AM. IMMIGR. COUNCIL (July 1, 2025), <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/in-birthright-citizenship-decision-the-supreme-court-expanded-trumps-power/> [<https://perma.cc/F6HH-RJHR>]; Scott Bomboy, *What Do Other Countries' Constitutions Say About Birthright Citizenship?*, NAT'L CONST. CTR. (Aug. 26, 2015), <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/what-do-other-countries-constitutions-say-about-birthright-citizenship> [<https://perma.cc/LW37-QPAX>].

41. See David J. Bier, *Why Legal Immigration is Nearly Impossible*, CATO INST. (June 13, 2023), <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/why-legal-immigration-nearly-impossible> [<https://perma.cc/JX94-J8FA>].

civic life.⁴² This growing inaccessibility in many countries threatens the foundational purpose of citizenship: to offer security, identity, and a sense of belonging.⁴³ To remain relevant in a rapidly globalizing and digitally connected world, citizenship must become a more flexible, inclusive, and meaningful system of belonging.⁴⁴

42. U.N. DEP'T OF ECON. & SOC. AFFS., LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: THE IMPERATIVE OF INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT, U.N. Doc. ST/ESA/362 (2016).

43. See generally Anna Paula Della Rosa, "Home is Here!" – Or is it?: Exploring the Influence of Place and Politics on Identity, Belonging, and the Dreamer Consciousness (Apr. 22, 2024) (M.A. Thesis, University of Memphis), <https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/3735> [<https://perma.cc/6F3D-N7ST>].

44. Greta Gilbertson, *Citizenship in a Globalized World*, MIGRATION POL'Y INST. (Jan. 1, 2006), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/citizenship-globalized-world> [<https://perma.cc/NNW7-CM8Z>].