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# Citizenship Acquisition and Labour Market Outcomes Among Immigrants in Italy: Evidence From Linked Survey-Register Data

Davide Gritti[1] | Filippo Gioachin[1] | Anna Zamberlan[2] | Eleonora Meli[3] | Raffaele Grotti[1] | Paolo Barbieri[1] | Stefani Scherer[1]

[1]Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento, Trento, Italy | [2]Department of Sociology, LMU Munich, Munich, Germany | [3]Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), Rome, Italy

**Correspondence:** Raffaele Grotti (raffaele.grotti@unitn.it)

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## ABSTRACT

The literature shows that immigrants who acquire citizenship tend to achieve better labour market outcomes than those who do not, though this may reflect positive selection rather than a causal effect. This study is the first to examine the consequences of citizenship acquisition for immigrants in Italy, a country with rising naturalisation rates and persistent ethnic penalties. Using nationally representative survey and register data for 2016, we compared natives, naturalised and non-naturalised immigrants on employment, socio-economic attainment and earnings. To disentangle selection from causal effects, we applied growth curve models and two-way fixed effects. Results show that naturalised immigrants have higher socio-economic attainment and earnings than their non-naturalised counterparts, but similar employment trajectories. These advantages are more pronounced among women. Overall, findings suggest that improved outcomes among naturalised immigrants are largely driven by positive selection into naturalisation, rather than by the acquisition of citizenship itself.

## 1 | Introduction

Studies across various national contexts have generally supported the notion that acquiring host-country citizenship improves immigrants' socio-political and economic integration, as citizenship expands their social ties, intensifies their political engagement and gives them access to better employment opportunities (Gathmann and Garbers 2023; Gathmann and Monscheuer 2020; Pendakur and Bevelander 2014; Vink et al. 2021). This article focuses on the case of Italy, which has thus far received relatively little attention in the literature. This neglect is surprising given the country's evolving migration landscape and steadily rising rate of naturalisation. Once a low-immigration country, Italy has experienced both rapid growth in and the ageing of its immigrant population since the 1990s. Today, citizenship is granted approximately 200,000 times each year—well above the European average. By 2021, over a million foreign-born residents had acquired Italian citizenship, nearly doubling their share within the immigrant population over the preceding decade. As of the 2021 census, approximately 7 million residents—representing 12.5% of the country's population—had been born without Italian citizenship. Among them, roughly 1 million had been born abroad and later naturalised, while approximately 300,000 had been born in Italy to non-Italian parents but obtained citizenship afterwards (ONC 2024).

Beyond the demographic relevance of naturalised immigrants as a social group, Italy is a compelling case when it comes to the effects of citizenship acquisition on economic integration, as its naturalisation rules deviate significantly from those of countries that have received the most attention from research on citizenship acquisition, such as the United

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States and Northern European countries (e.g., Bevelander and Pendakur 2012; Gathmann and Garbers 2023; Vink et al. 2021). First, Italy's eligibility requirements are among the world's strictest, and its acquisition process ranks as one of the slowest, most complex and least certain among OECD countries (Saurer 2017). According to several policy indexes, including the Migrant Integration Policy Index (Solano and Huddleston 2020) and the Immigration Policies in Comparison dataset (Helbling et al. 2017), Italy is a relatively unfavourable country in terms of access to citizenship when compared to countries such as Germany, Belgium, France, Sweden and the United States.

Second, Italy's general model of immigration differs from that of many other countries. It falls within the Southern European model of immigration (Fellini and Fullin 2016; Fullin and Reyneri 2011), which is characterised by a mismatch between labour demand and native labour supply, limited demand for qualified labour, a residual welfare state and relatively rigid labour market regulations. Due to this model, immigrants in Italy exhibit particularly low unemployment levels while being largely segregated in the labour market, holding low-quality manual jobs (Cantalini et al. 2022; Fullin and Reyneri 2011) typical of the secondary, informal labour market—and this disadvantage generally persists throughout their careers (Avola and Piccitto 2020; Zamberlan et al. 2023).

To the best of our knowledge, there has yet to be any empirical research on the labour market outcomes of naturalised individuals in Italy. This is likely due to a general lack of data on naturalisation, which we overcame for this study by using a unique combination of survey data and register data. We investigated the economic consequences of citizenship acquisition in terms of employment chances, occupational status and income by comparing natives and immigrants (both with and without Italian citizenship) and their labour market trajectories from the early 1990s to 2016. Given the well-known gender inequalities in labour market outcomes (Ballarino and Panichella 2018; Cantalini et al. 2022; Panichella 2018), as well as the varying migratory experiences of men and women (Geist and McManus 2012; Pedraza 1991), we also considered gender to facilitate a separate study of men and women. We initially inquired as to whether Italian citizenship yields better occupational and earnings returns and, subsequently, whether the improved conditions (if they exist) stem from the acquisition of Italian citizenship or from positive selection into citizenship acquisition. In other words, we investigated whether it is reasonable to assert that acquiring citizenship in Italy improves immigrants' labour market outcomes or if, instead, acquiring citizenship is simply something that is more likely to be attained by immigrants who are already integrated into the Italian labour market.

## 2 | Background

The acquisition of host-country citizenship is a fundamental prerequisite for immigrants seeking integration, without which they may remain marginalised. Integration may be conceptualised along multiple dimensions, including political, cultural (Algan et al. 2010), linguistic, psychological (Hainmueller et al. 2019), social and economic ones. Integrating along these dimensions is essential to access resources and achieve a decent standard of living—and efforts to integrate in such a manner ultimately shape patterns of ethnic stratification (Gathmann and Garbers 2023).

In this study, we focus specifically on the economic integration (Gathmann and Garbers 2023) of immigrants, particularly their integration into the labour market and the associated economic returns. While some studies have identified naturalisation as having a causal impact on various labour market and economic outcomes, others have highlighted that the effects of citizenship acquisition vary considerably by context and social group. Meanwhile, others have uncovered no causal effect of naturalisation, attributing the superior labour market and economic outcomes of naturalised immigrants to positive self-selection mechanisms.

### 2.1 | The Effect of Citizenship Acquisition on Labour Market Outcomes

The acquisition of citizenship can have a positive impact on labour market outcomes through various mechanisms. First, citizenship is often a prerequisite for securing civil service and public-sector employment, accessing certain self-employment opportunities and relocating for work (Gathmann and Garbers 2023). In other words, citizenship directly shapes the employment opportunities available to immigrants and their prospects for occupational mobility.

Moreover, employers may be more inclined to hire individuals with host-country citizenship due to the lower administrative costs associated with establishing and maintaining the employment relationship (Peters and Vink 2016).

From a demand-side perspective, host-country citizenship may help to mitigate discrimination in the labour market. Employers, recruiters and supervisors may be reluctant to hire or invest in the training of non-naturalised immigrants over concerns that they will eventually leave the country (LaLonde and Topel 1997). Acquiring citizenship can (at least partially) mitigate these negative effects by signalling a long-term commitment to remaining in the host country.

Beyond broadening employment opportunities and mitigating employer discrimination, citizenship may also enhance immigrants' labour market outcomes by encouraging them to further invest in their skills, professional networks and career prospects in the host country. This effect may arise through psychological mechanisms whereby immigrants who feel accepted and welcomed in the host country are more inclined to actively invest in their own integration into the labour market (Finotelli et al. 2025; Gathmann and Garbers 2023).

One strand of the literature has indicated that citizenship acquisition has a positive impact on employment, income and income growth. Bratsberg et al. (2002), using panel data and fixed-effects estimators, analysed the effect of naturalisation on wage growth for male immigrants in the United States from 1979 to 1991. They found that the acquisition of US citizenship facilitated upward occupational mobility, particularly



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into white-collar and public-sector employment, and was associated with wage growth. Similarly, fixed-effects regressions on panel data revealed a citizenship wage premium for male immigrants in Germany (Steinhardt 2012), while the higher post-naturalisation wages observed among female immigrants were attributed to positive self-selection into citizenship acquisition.

In the Swedish context, Bevelander and Pendakur (2012) used register data from 2006 alongside instrumental variable regression techniques, ultimately identifying citizenship acquisition as having a positive effect on employment probability. Further evidence from Sweden and Denmark was provided by Helgertz et al. (2014), who employed fixed-effects estimators on register data from 1986 onwards and uncovered a naturalisation premium on income for immigrants—men and women alike—from Asian and African countries.

In Switzerland, Hainmueller et al. (2019) employed social security records and a natural experiment—leveraging the fact that some municipalities hold referendums to decide on naturalisation applications—and found a substantial positive effect of citizenship acquisition on immigrants' earnings.

However, another strand of literature has highlighted the considerable heterogeneity in the causal effects of naturalisation. Most notably, the economic consequences of acquiring citizenship appear to vary based on the institutional characteristics of both the country of origin and the host country (Fellini and Guetto 2022; Helgertz et al. 2014; Kogan 2003), the waiting period for obtaining citizenship (with shorter waiting times associated with stronger positive effects; Gathmann and Keller 2018), gender (with women gaining relatively more; e.g., Gathmann and Keller 2018; Scott 2008; Zimmermann et al. 2009) and prior labour market and economic conditions (where greater initial disadvantages lead to larger gains following naturalisation; Hainmueller et al. 2019).

The finding that naturalisation's positive effects are often confined to specific social groups or particular combinations of country of origin and destination raises questions regarding whether citizenship acquisition has a universally positive causal impact on economic integration or whether selection mechanisms may (in certain contexts and for specific groups) offer a plausible explanation for the superior labour market outcomes observed among naturalised immigrants compared to their non-naturalised counterparts.

### 2.2 | The Role of Selection Into Citizenship Acquisition

If immigrants whose characteristics are more highly valued in the host country's labour market are also more likely to acquire citizenship, then the positive association observed between citizenship acquisition and economic integration may be driven by a selection mechanism.

Several studies have identified some personal characteristics of immigrants as significant correlates of citizenship eligibility and acquisition. Among the most extensively researched socio-demographic factors is gender, though the findings pertaining to its impact remain mixed. Some studies have reported that men are more likely to meet citizenship eligibility criteria due to their employment rates generally being higher than those of women (Liversage 2009). However, other research has highlighted that women—being less likely to have a criminal record—may be more likely to qualify for citizenship (Walklate 2013).

Human capital also plays a crucial role, particularly higher education (and the location where it was obtained; Vink et al. 2021): Immigrants who earned their qualifications in the host country are more likely to acquire citizenship (Bevelander and Veenman 2006).

In line with the selection argument, several studies on the causal effect of citizenship acquisition on immigrants' economic integration have uncovered no significant impact. For instance, Kogan (2003) reported no relationship between obtaining Swedish citizenship and Yugoslav immigrants' labour market outcomes. Similarly, Bratsberg and Raaum (2011) investigated the acquisition of Norwegian citizenship among immigrants from lower-income countries and found it to have no positive effect on status or earnings in the labour market.

Additionally, Scott (2008) and Engdahl (2011), using longitudinal data to analyse the Swedish case, identified positive selection into citizenship applications as the primary factor behind the superior outcomes (employment and earnings) observed among naturalised immigrants relative to their non-naturalised counterparts. Scott (2008) interpreted this finding as evidence of aspiring citizens investing more in host-country-specific human capital. Engdahl (2011) further identified an anticipation effect (more specifically, income growth prior to naturalisation), reinforcing the notion that the superior economic integration of naturalised immigrants is primarily driven by their selective characteristics and pre-naturalisation investments.

Steinhardt (2012), using data from the German Institute for Employment Research and fixed-effects regressions, identified self-selection as a significant mechanism among immigrants who eventually naturalise. This mechanism accounted for the entirety of the wage advantage observed among women and part of that observed among men, highlighting the potential influence of unmeasured factors like ambition and ability.

Focusing on Switzerland as a destination country, Steinhardt and Wedemeier (2012) decomposed the wage gap between naturalised and non-naturalised immigrants, ultimately attributing it primarily to the higher human capital among those who had acquired citizenship.

While a substantial body of research has shown that immigrants' personal characteristics significantly influence their likelihood of eventually naturalising—thus influencing their labour market outcomes—the extent to which these characteristics matter is inevitably shaped by the host country's naturalisation policies. In other words, the degree to which individual attributes influence the relationship between citizenship acquisition and economic integration is contingent on the



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institutional context and the specific legal and administrative rules governing naturalisation (see also Helgertz et al. 2014; Kogan 2003). These regulations can either strengthen or weaken the role of selection mechanisms in accounting for the superior economic and labour market outcomes observed among naturalised immigrants.

In various destination countries, the process of acquiring citizenship is lengthy and entails meeting stringent requirements (Goodman 2015; Jensen et al. 2021; Joppke 2007; Mouritsen 2013; Van Houdt et al. 2011). These requirements can include extended periods of residence, stable employment and the successful completion of language and civics tests. The high level of integration required *before* citizenship is granted suggests that naturalisation itself may not have an independent effect on (economic) integration. When integration is a prerequisite for the acquisition of citizenship, the positive relationship between formal naturalisation and economic integration may be attributed to a selection mechanism. In such contexts, immigrants who acquire citizenship are those whose personal characteristics, labour market trajectories and economic standing closely mirror those of native-born citizens. Thus, citizenship acquisition functions as a form of recognition or reward for 'high-quality' immigrants who have already demonstrated a high degree of integration.

## 3 | Citizenship Acquisition in Italy

Beyond the general mechanisms outlined thus far, it is necessary to contextualise them in relation to the specific characteristics of the host country. Naturalisation in Italy presents certain advantages across various domains, including bureaucracy, family reunification and employment. First, citizenship allows immigrants to avoid needing to renew their residence permits—a cumbersome process they otherwise must go through every 1–5 years—and more broadly protects individuals from being forced to leave the country (Colombo et al. 2011; Della Puppa and Sredanovic 2017). Second, family reunification (Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Terzera 2018) is only possible for immigrants with a residence permit if strict criteria are met, whereas Italian citizens can apply for family reunification following a far less stringent procedure. Third, most public jobs in Italy are accessible only to Italian citizens based on Article 51 of the Italian Constitution. While the right to apply for public-sector jobs was partially extended, this extension covered only EU citizens and excluded executive, top-administrative and magistrate posts. In a similar fashion, even some self-employment activities are still reserved for Italian or EU citizens, most notably permanent contracts in public facilities.

However, the strict requirements to acquire Italian citizenship may undermine any potential benefits of naturalisation, or at least those pertaining to economic and labour market outcomes. To date, despite several reform proposals (Pasetti 2021), the acquisition of Italian citizenship has primarily been regulated by Law 91/1992, the 'Citizenship Act', which repealed Law 555/1912, the 'Nationality Act' (Arena et al. 2006). This legislation has been described as instituting a familistic (Zincone and Basili 2010) and ethno-culturally selective (Vink and Bauböck 2013) model of citizenship.

Italian citizenship is primarily granted *ius sanguinis* to those born or adopted by at least one Italian citizen and to those with Italian ancestry. However, there are three other modes (See Appendix S1: Table S1) by which one can become an Italian citizen. First, *ius domicilii* applies to individuals born abroad to non-Italian parents who have lived in Italy for 10 years (4 years for EU citizens; 5 years for refugees), have sufficient income and have no criminal record. It also applies to those born in Italy to non-Italian parents who live in Italy continuously until they reach the age of 18. Second, *ius conubii* applies to individuals married to or in a registered partnership with an Italian citizen. Third, *ius soli* applies to those who are born in Italy to unknown or stateless parents.

The acquisition of citizenship by parents (regardless of mode) allows for the automatic and immediate intergenerational transmission of citizenship to minors living with them. Adult children of naturalised immigrants may apply for citizenship *iure domicilii* after having resided in Italy for at least 5 years following their parent's naturalisation.

The main modes of Italian citizenship acquisition between 2014 and 2018 are summarised in Appendix S1: Figure S3. Throughout this period, the largest share of naturalisations has occurred through residence-based procedures (*ius domicilii*), accounting for approximately 50% of all cases among men and 40% among women. Citizenship acquisition through marriage or civil union (*ius conubii*) was the second most common route, though it was marked by a substantial gender difference, accounting for approximately 5% of all naturalisations among men and 25% among women. The remaining modes comprise naturalisations by descent or adoption and those granted to individuals born to foreign parents who had acquired citizenship through uninterrupted residence on Italian soil. These figures confirm the centrality of long-term residence as the primary pathway to naturalisation in the Italian context, particularly among the adult population. It further underscores that most individuals acquiring Italian citizenship have already spent a considerable amount of time living in the country. This is especially true alongside the relative restrictiveness of the Italian naturalisation regime, which demands twice the length of uninterrupted residence as that required by other countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Sweden (Saurer 2017).

In addition to the formal requirements of the citizenship application process, a critical prerequisite for accessing citizenship through *ius domicilii* is the possession of a long-term residence permit. For non-EU nationals, obtaining such a permit requires proof of uninterrupted legal residence, income above a minimum threshold, adequate housing and either employment or family ties. Applicants must also pass an A2-level language test. These requirements make residence permits—and thus citizenship—highly contingent on one's possession of human capital and attachment to the labour market (Calavita 2007). In Italy's deregulated labour market, where short-term and informal jobs are prevalent, immigrants are often pushed to accept low-quality or precarious employment to maintain legal status—a condition that is particularly common among women in the domestic care sector (Vianello et al. 2019). Moreover, the persistent attractiveness of the informal economy—especially in the early stages



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of settlement—limits opportunities for stable employment and deepens migrants' vulnerability.

It is important to note that the acquisition of citizenship is granted at the applicant's request through the Ministry of the Interior (*Ministero dell'Interno*). The application process requires extensive documentation from the authorities of both the applicant's country of origin and their host country as well as the payment of a fee. Effectively obtaining Italian citizenship is a notoriously lengthy process, with the law stating that the maximum period should be 48 months (reduced to 36 months in 2020).

Recent qualitative studies have provided valuable insights into how immigrants in Italy experience the process of acquiring citizenship and perceive the above-mentioned advantages. Finotelli et al. (2025), based on 50 semi-structured interviews with immigrants from Ecuador, Brazil, Morocco, the Philippines and Romania, showed that naturalisation is typically the culmination of a long-term process of *de facto* integration that is primarily achieved through participation in the labour market. Participants reported that acquiring citizenship brought them a sense of relief, freeing them from the burdens and uncertainties associated with residence permit renewal. However, these studies have also revealed important limitations regarding the benefits associated with naturalisation. The most mentioned advantages were not related to employment or economic mobility; rather, they concerned bureaucratic simplification and the facilitation of family reunification. Participants explicitly reported that naturalisation did not significantly impact perceived discrimination.

In addition, a recent study by Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi (2022), which focused on the most populous region in Northern Italy, found that while 80% of immigrants residing there were interested in becoming Italian citizens, only 25% had actually acquired citizenship. This rate falls far below that in other European countries, providing indirect evidence of the complexity of the naturalisation process preventing many of those who are eligible from applying.

The Italian case illustrates how the benefits of naturalisation depend on the institutional configuration linking legal status to employment. As long-term residence and stable income are prerequisites for citizenship eligibility, applicants are often already functionally integrated with respect to certain key socio-economic dimensions at the time of application. At the same time, the structural features of the Italian labour market (e.g., strong segmentation and limited mobility) can prevent citizenship acquisition from translating into real improvements in labour market outcomes.

## 4 | Expectations

Considering the specificities of the Italian context and the country's rigid and complex naturalisation regulations, we do not expect the acquisition of Italian citizenship to yield substantial labour market and economic advantages. Thus, economic outcomes being stronger among naturalised immigrants than among non-naturalised immigrants likely reflect a selection effect rather than a causal impact of citizenship acquisition. Notably, this selection is likely to operate not only through institutional filters—such as long residence requirements and complex application procedures—but also through immigrants' anticipatory behaviours. As discussed in Section 2, a demanding legal and bureaucratic path to citizenship may incentivise immigrants to invest in human capital and labour market integration in anticipation of naturalisation. Consequently, naturalised individuals may already exhibit stronger outcomes, as they have been preparing for eligibility long before formally acquiring citizenship.

In this study, we examine three distinct measures of economic integration—employment status, socio-economic attainment and labour income—which may be viewed as progressively capturing stronger levels of integration. Employment represents the initial (and often necessary) step, particularly in the Italian context where labour market participation is typically a prerequisite for naturalisation eligibility. Socio-economic attainment reflects broader occupational standing and may result from sustained investment in the labour market. Finally, income represents the most granular and direct measure of economic integration.

In contexts where a genuine causal effect of naturalisation is at play, one might expect the strongest impact to be on employment, followed by socio-economic status and only then on income, where discrimination and other structural barriers may still depress returns for immigrants. However, in line with the peculiarities of the Southern European model of immigration and labour market integration, immigrants in Italy can be expected to display exceptionally high levels of employment regardless of their naturalisation status. Moreover, in a context where selection mechanisms are likely to dominate the observed association between citizenship acquisition and economic outcomes, this pattern is expected to extend beyond employment, encompassing both socio-economic attainment and income.

## 5 | Data and Methods

### 5.1 | Data, Variables and Samples

In this study, we relied on a unique combination of survey and register data. The initial dataset was the ISTAT 'Multipurpose Survey on Households: Families, Social Subjects and Life Cycle' (ISTAT FSS). This survey was conducted in 2016 on a representative sample of the adult population of residents in Italy. Notably, FSS provides information on the respondents' migratory background and citizenship (Italian or foreign) of the respondents, as well as retrospective information on several domains of their lives, including education and employment. While retrospective data sources may raise concerns about potential recall bias, existing studies suggest that such bias is relatively limited when it comes to reporting on past occupations (Härkönen et al. 2016). This may be particularly true in a context like Italy, where occupational mobility over the course of one's career tends to be low.

Linking individuals in the survey with those in two administrative data registers—the register on citizenship acquisition and the integrated income register—enabled us to recover information on whether the respondents had acquired Italian



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citizenship by 2021 as well as information on their individual annual net labour market earnings in 2015, the year before the survey was conducted. We also incorporated the year that naturalisation was granted from 2012 to 2021. Prior to 2012, information on the year of naturalisation was not accessible. Considering that Italy witnessed a strong increase in the number of naturalised immigrants between 2012 and 2016 (see Appendix S1: Figure S1), this represents a convenient time frame for our investigation.

We looked at three labour market outcomes based on the yearly retrospective trajectories of (a) employment over 15 years since entry into the labour market; (b) socio-economic attainment over 15 years since entry into the labour market and (c) cross-sectional labour income in 2015 (administrative year). For employment, we considered whether, for each year, the respondent was employed or not employed (either inactive or unemployed). Our analysis required harmonisation of monthly data at the yearly level; to eliminate period effects throughout the year, we refer to respondents' status in January as a proxy for their status throughout the year. For socio-economic attainment, we adopted the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI) (Ganzeboom et al. 1992), which measures status attainment as a metric variable and has been used frequently in recent migration research in the Italian context (Avola and Piccitto 2020; Zamberlan et al. 2023). Given that ISEI is a continuous variable, we computed its yearly value as the average across all months of the year. Notably, income is expressed here in 2015 euros. In line with conventional procedures, we bottom- and top-coded values below the 1st and above the 99th percentiles and took the logarithm transformation.

As our analyses considered employment status and occupational attainment based on retrospective information from the first 15 years of one's career, we restricted our sample to individuals who have reported (retrospectively) at least one work episode over their life—meaning that those who had never worked were excluded—in line with other studies examining occupational and earnings-related outcomes. Moreover, the analysis of earnings attainment was necessarily restricted to employed individuals as of 2015.

The survey data also provided cross-sectional information referring to the survey year 2016 on sociodemographic variables, including gender, level of education, macro area of residence, household size and composition, marital status and housing tenure. Furthermore, FSS provides information on labour market characteristics, including whether the respondent had ever worked in the past and their current employment situation (e.g., type of current employment and current job contract).

All presented analyses were weighted using ISTAT-provided sample weights to correct for listing errors and non-response as well as to ensure that the estimates are representative of the overall population.

Regarding citizenship status, we distinguished between three groups. Natives (individuals born in Italy and with Italian citizenship) were contrasted with 'non-naturalised' individuals with immigrant backgrounds who had not obtained Italian citizenship by 2021 and 'naturalised' individuals who had obtained Italian citizenship by 2021. We restricted our focus to individuals born between 1940 and 1990 due to the insufficient number of individuals with immigrant backgrounds in Italy born before 1940. Our sample comprised 17,750 natives, 916 non-naturalised immigrants and 452 naturalised immigrants (N: 19,118). Descriptive statistics for both sociodemographic and labour market characteristics in 2016 (the survey year) are presented in Appendix S2 for the overall sample (Tables S2 andS5) and for the male (Tables S3 and S6) and female (Tables S4 and S7) subsamples.

Several sociodemographic differences between naturalised and non-naturalised immigrants are worth acknowledging here (for official statistics, see ISTAT 2023). First, despite being similar in age, naturalised immigrants were more likely to hold upper-secondary and tertiary educational qualifications and to hold educational titles obtained in Italy. Notably, differences in human capital to the advantage of naturalisation were only visible in the male subsample. Second, naturalised and non-naturalised individuals were unevenly distributed across the country, with the naturalised more likely to reside in Central and Northern Italy and the non-naturalised more likely to reside in the South and the Islands. Third, the two groups differed significantly in terms of marital status and household type. The vast majority of naturalised immigrants were married and had children, while those who were non-naturalised more commonly had other household types and marital statuses. Fourth, the employment rate in 2016 was lower among naturalised immigrants, driven by the far higher inactivity rates of naturalised women. Differences in the opposite direction may be noted when looking at other labour market outcomes; for instance, in 2016, naturalised immigrants enjoyed better occupational statuses and incomes and were more likely to hold permanent contracts.

### 5.2 | Methods and Analytical Strategies

To answer our research questions, we employed a complementary two-step strategy (see Table 1 for an overview). In the first step, we descriptively assessed the gaps between the analytical groups in their employment status, occupational achievements (ISEI) and labour income, focusing in particular on the gaps between the two immigrant groups. In the second step, we assessed the extent to which such gaps could be attributed to naturalisation—thus signalling a naturalisation *premium*—and, conversely, whether they could be attributed to selection.

The analyses of employment status and ISEI shared a comparable design, with the only difference being that the examination of ISEI achievements required the selection of employed individuals. For the first step, we estimated multilevel latent growth curves (Halaby 2003). By exploiting the multi-level structure of our data, this technique leveraged between- and within-individual variations to predict typical employment and occupational trajectories over the first 15 years of one's career ($car_{it}$) for the three groups ($group_i$) of interest. The subscripts $t$ and $i$ index time and individuals, respectively. According to Equation (1), our first two dependent variables were thus a function of the group-specific growth



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**TABLE 1** | Overview of analytical strategy.

| Outcome | Outcome measurement | Longitudinal or cross-sectional | Target population | Step 1: naturalisation gap | Step 2: naturalisation premium |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Employment | Employed at $t$ | Longitudinal | Residents born 1940–1990 who had ever worked | Multi-level growth curve models | Two-way fixed-effect regressions (among immigrants) |
| Socio-economic attainment | ISEI score at $t$ | Longitudinal | Residents born 1940–1990 who had ever worked | Multi-level growth curve models | Two-way fixed-effect regressions (among immigrants) |
| Labour income | Net labour market income | Cross-sectional in survey year (2016, income in 2015) | Residents born 1940–1990 with labour income in 2015 | OLS adjusted for observables | Yearly comparison adjusted for observables (among immigrants) |

function (and its square) expressed through the interaction term ($\beta_4 group_i * (car_{it} * car2_{it})$). We allowed the career coefficient to vary systematically across individuals by specifying it as a random slope, as indicated by the error term ($\mu_{2i}$). Finally, the vector ($controls_i$) includes the time-constant confounding factors: a dummy indicator for gender (in the full sample), region of residence, educational achievement, a dummy indicator for whether the highest educational title was obtained abroad, and age at first employment. Region of residence, education and gender were interacted with the career counter $car_{it}$ (only in the full model) to address their heterogeneous influence throughout one's early career:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{it} = \quad & \beta_0 + \beta_1 group_i + \beta_2 car_{it} + \beta_3 car2_{it} \\ & + \beta_4 group_i * (car_{ji} * car2_{ji}) + \beta_n \, controls_i \\ & + (\mu_{0i} + \mu_{2i} + \varepsilon_{it}) \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

For the second step, we restricted our focus to individuals who could have potentially been naturalised within our observation window and performed a before-after comparison. We specifically considered individuals who were non-naturalised prior to 2012 (the first year for which naturalisation dates were available) and who could have obtained citizenship by 2016 (or later). Thus, we excluded all natives from the analyses and leveraged all observable citizenship acquisitions in 2012–2016. To estimate the effect ($D_{it}$) of the transition from non-naturalised ($D = 0$) to naturalised ($D = 1$), we performed a two-way fixed-effect (TWFE) analysis, as described in Equation (2):

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \beta D_{it} + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{2}$$

Specifically, the inclusion of the unit (individual) fixed effect ($\alpha_i$) facilitated the exploitation of within-individual change in citizenship, determining whether moving from the status of non-naturalised to naturalised could induce a change in the outcomes of interest. All time-constant (unit-specific) observed and unobserved confounders were implicitly controlled for (the error factor $\mu_i$ cancels out). To further address potential time-specific (but unit-invariant) unobserved confounders, we included the year fixed effect ($\gamma_t$). Within this setting, the individuals' pre-naturalisation observations acted as the main control group, but we also retained individuals who did not acquire naturalisation within the observational window. Finally, for the TWFE analyses, we restricted the considered years to the 2006–2016 period so that each treated unit could have a minimum of six (naturalisation between 2011 and 2012) and a maximum of nine (naturalisation between 2015 and 2016) antecedent observations for the within-unit comparison. Following recent developments in the methodological literature (e.g., Callaway and Sant'Anna 2021), we replicated the TWFE results and tested the sensitivity of our results to a more robust consideration of the staggered experience of naturalisation over time and the related heterogeneous effect (see Appendix S3 for the results).

The cross-sectional nature of information on labour income (2015 fiscal information) required different analytical strategies. For the first step, we estimated the gaps in log labour income between the analytical groups ($group_i$) via ordinary



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least squares (OLS). The model controlled for the same series of covariates in a stepwise manner, which were taken from the survey items collected in 2016 (and, thus, not retrospectively; see Equation (3)). The included controls are discussed further below, alongside the interpretation of the corresponding results. Therefore, the sample was restricted to just one observation per individual:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 group_i + \beta_n controls_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

Concerning the second step—the effect of obtaining Italian citizenship—we leveraged the year of naturalisation and the available retrospective longitudinal information on citizenship acquisition to compare the logged labour income between those who obtained citizenship and those who did not in each naturalisation cohort. Thus, we conducted a comparison of 2015 labour income between individuals who were naturalised (or not) in the periods 2011–2012, 2012–2013, 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 (*cohort* of naturalisation) using a sample conditional on not possessing Italian citizenship in the previous year but being 'at risk' for such a transition. A single individual could be part of the control group (not acquiring citizenship) and later be part of the treated group (acquiring citizenship). Furthermore, to build credible counterfactual control groups, OLS models controlled for sociodemographic factors specific to the year prior to the potential transition (see Equation 4):

$$Y^{cohort}_{i(2015)} = \beta^{cohort}_0 + \beta_1 D_i^{cohort} + \beta_n controls^{cohort}_{i(t-1)} + \varepsilon_i^{cohort} \quad (4)$$

## 6 | Results

### 6.1 | Employment

The first set of results centres on employment status across natives and both naturalised and non-naturalised immigrants. Figure 1 presents the development of employment probability for the three groups of interest over the first 15 years following their initial entry into the labour market. It is important to note that naturalised immigrants could have obtained Italian citizenship at any moment during the observation window—even after 2016. (This is possible because the information comes from register data.) Therefore, growth curves model the labour market trajectories of the naturalised immigrants regardless of the moment at which they acquired Italian citizenship.

For men, noteworthy differences emerged between the levels and trajectories in the probability of being employed for natives and the two immigrant groups. Concerning the levels, we noticed a marginally higher overall probability of native men being (continuously) employed. Natives exhibited a slightly U-shaped trajectory in their employment probability. A similar trajectory—although with a weaker recovery over time—was observed for naturalised immigrants. Immigrants who did not acquire Italian citizenship demonstrated a different trajectory with persistently declining employment probabilities.

Despite exhibiting trajectories comparable to those of men, women of all groups had lower employment probabilities in the final years of their observational window than in the early years. Indeed, the gradual recovery in employment probability was stronger for men than for women. Only around 80% of native women were employed 15 years after their initial labour market entry, a percentage that declines to around 75% and 70% for naturalised and non-naturalised immigrant women, respectively. While beyond the scope of this contribution, this finding is interesting because it plausibly mirrors gender inequality in permanent employment dropouts for family-related reasons, with women being increasingly more likely to exit the labour market over the years. Furthermore, differences between native and immigrant women were mostly not statistically significant throughout the considered 15 years. This finding may be influenced by the peculiarities of the Southern European model of immigration and labour market integration, where immigrants

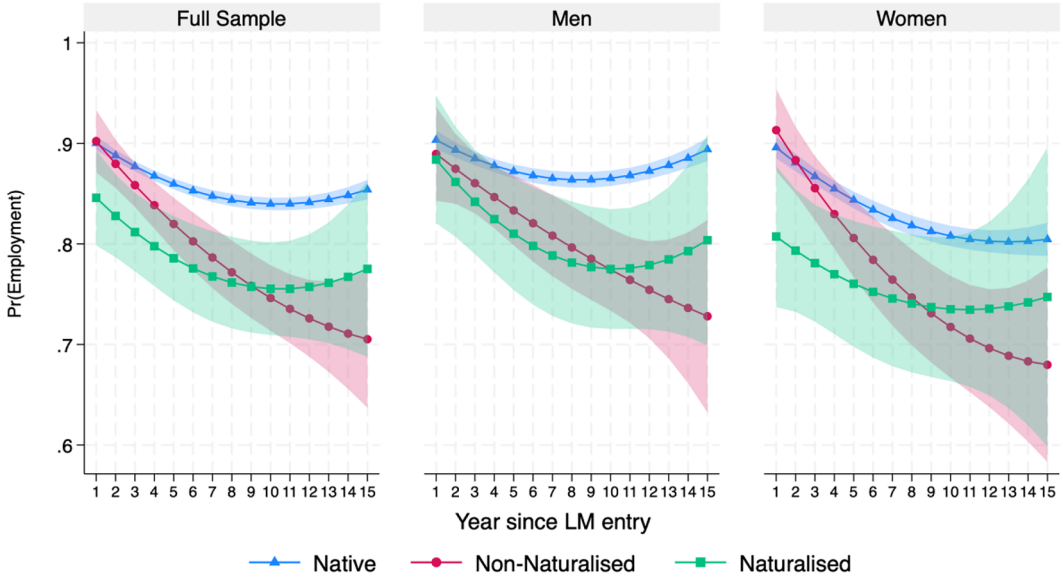


**FIGURE 1** | Growth curves: Probability of being employed over 15 years following labour market entry by citizenship status (Data: ISTAT FSS 2016. *N*: 3341).



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tend to exhibit relatively high levels of employment participation. The higher uncertainty that characterises the estimates for women is plausibly the result of the lower number (and, thus, the more selected sample) of women entering the labour market in the first place.

Regarding the effects of naturalisation, estimates from the TWFE analysis presented in Figure 2 indicate that citizenship acquisition had a negative effect on employment probability among men. For women, the estimate was close to zero and not statistically significant. However, it should be noted that more conservative model specifications point to a null effect for men as well (see Appendix S3); thus, we refrain from speculating on the negative coefficient for men. In substantive terms, although growth curves suggested that naturalised immigrants have a stronger labour market attachment than non-naturalised immigrants, the lack of a significant positive effect of citizenship acquisition indicates that the higher employment probabilities of the naturalised group do not constitute a direct consequence of citizenship acquisition. Notably, this result holds even when distinguishing between employment and self-employment (see Appendix S4).

## 6.2 | Socio-Economic Attainment

Looking at labour market outcomes beyond employment, Figure 3 presents the growth curves of socio-economic attainment (ISEI) for the three groups of interest. For both men and women, we observed significantly higher ISEI levels

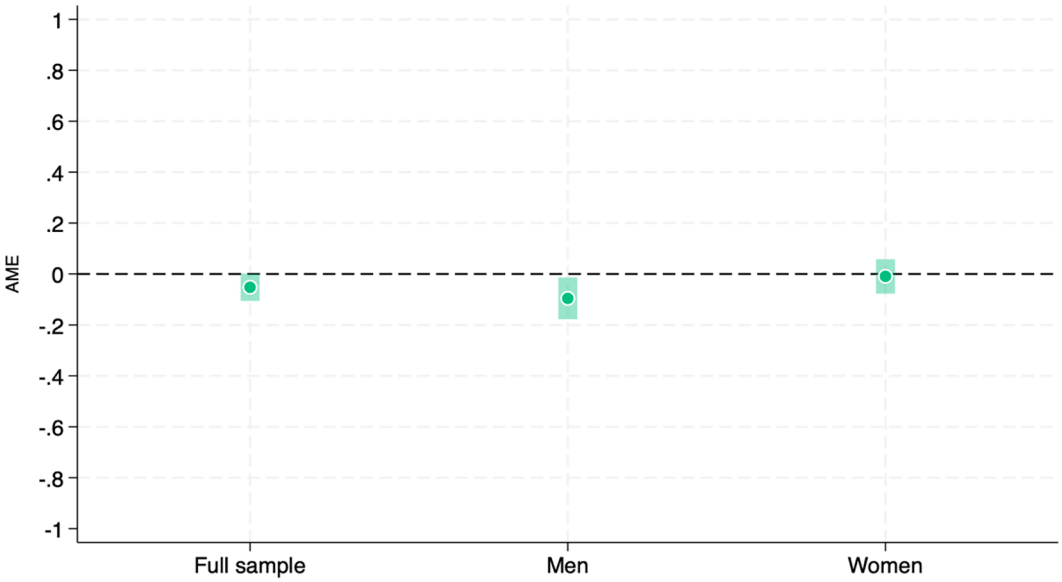


**FIGURE 2** | Average marginal effects (AME) of acquiring Italian citizenship on subsequent employment probability derived from two-way fixed-effect models (Data: ISTAT FSS 2016. *N*: 17,877).

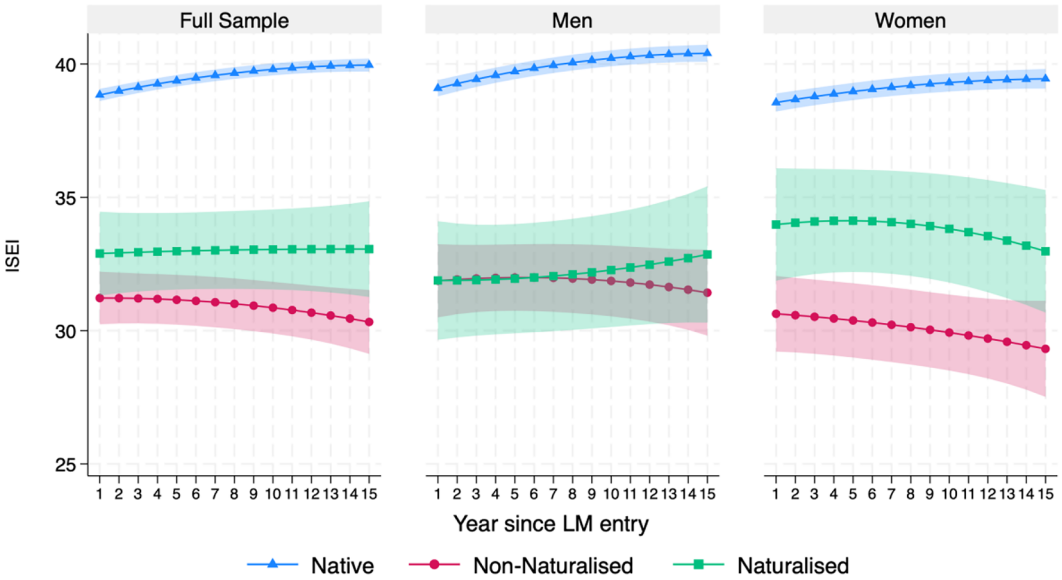


**FIGURE 3** | Growth curves: Socio-economic attainment (ISEI) over 15 years following labour market entry by citizenship status (Data: ISTAT FSS 2016. *N*: 3341).



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for natives (around 40) than for either immigrant group. For women, there was a ranking between the naturalised and non-naturalised groups, with the latter exhibiting the lowest ISEI levels (around 30). Among men, no significant differences were observed between the naturalised and non-naturalised groups. Finally, it is interesting to note that *trajectories* remained flat overall across all analytic groups, reflecting the scarce chances for mobility in the Italian labour market after first employment (Barbieri and Gioachin 2022; Passaretta et al. 2018; Raitano and Vona 2018).

Figure 4 illustrates the results from the TWFE models, exploiting the differences in ISEI before and after citizenship acquisition. There is no evidence supporting a positive effect of naturalisation on socio-economic outcomes for either men or women, suggesting that the ranking observed in Figure 3 is the result of an antecedent mechanism of selection into naturalisation. Interestingly (and in line with the findings on employment probabilities in Figure 2), point estimates were even negative for men, suggesting slightly *worse* occupational conditions following naturalisation—though these were not statistically significant.

### 6.3 | Labour Income

Previous results have pointed to a lack of a naturalisation premium on employment chances and occupational achievements. Even though naturalised immigrants have slightly better labour market outcomes than non-naturalised immigrants, this seems to reflect positive selection into citizenship acquisition rather than a causal effect of it. However, the question remains as to whether this also holds true for labour income. As previously discussed, income is perhaps the most widely studied labour market outcome in research on citizenship acquisition. Therefore, an examination of the differences in income between natives, non-naturalised immigrants and naturalised immigrants would represent a significant contribution to the existing literature.

Figure 5 presents the differences in labour income between natives and naturalised immigrants compared to non-naturalised immigrants (reference category) in terms of logged labour income across different model specifications. Model 0 is an empty model, whereas Model 1 incorporates controls for sociodemographic variables (age, sex, region and municipality). Model 2 supplements this by adding information on educational level and location of highest level of education (Italy or abroad). Model 3 further includes marital status, household type and housing tenure. The stepwise inclusion of these controls enabled us to assess the extent to which a potential positive gap in favour of naturalised immigrants could be attributed to compositional differences. Moreover, this stepwise inclusion aligned our findings with the literature on the ethnic income gap, which tends to distinguish between a *gross* income gap and a *net* income gap, the latter of which is estimated by controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, human capital and other individual attributes.

The comparison between naturalised and non-naturalised individuals indicates a potential naturalisation gap in income. Among men, we observed no such gap. Among women, however, we found a positive and statistically significant coefficient for income measured in 2015. Compared to the non-naturalised group, naturalised women had labour income around 45% higher. This observed gap in favour of naturalised women does not exhibit any significant variation along the different model specifications, pointing to the irrelevance of sociodemographic, educational and occupational attributes in explaining the higher incomes of naturalised women. Interestingly, their achieved naturalisation appeared sufficient to close the gap with native women, as both native

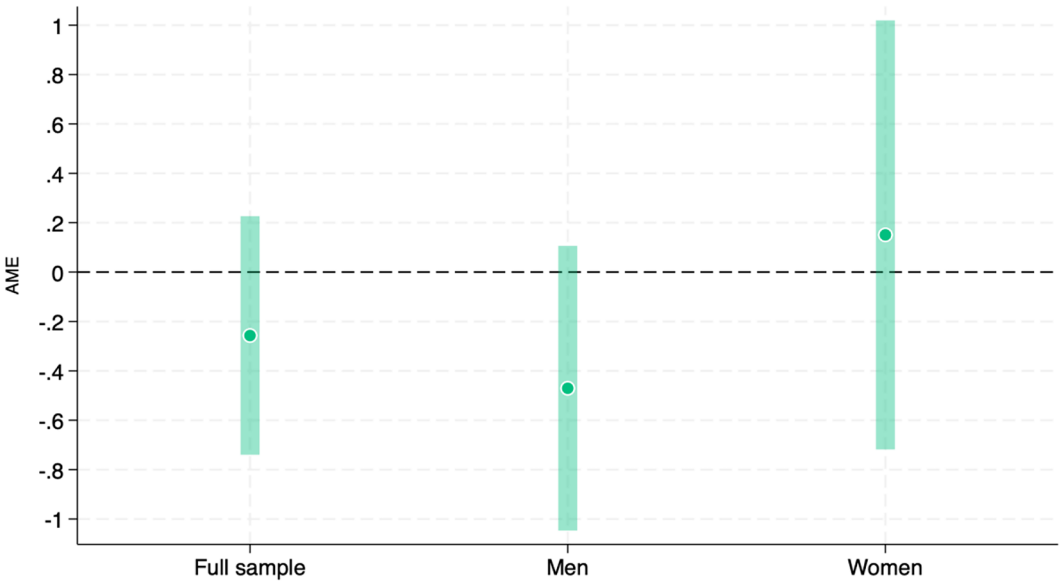


**FIGURE 4** | Average marginal effects (AME) of acquiring Italian citizenship on ISEI derived from two-way fixed-effect models (Data: ISTAT FSS 2016. *N*: 8601).



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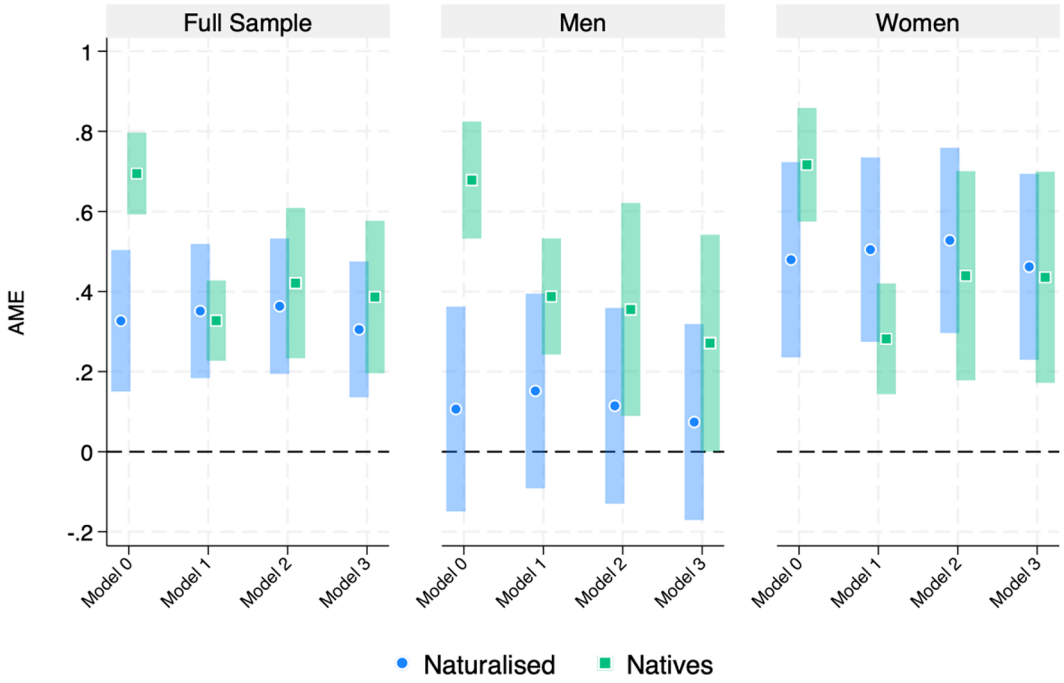


**FIGURE 5** | Average marginal effects (AME) of citizenship status on logged labour income in 2015 across different models (Data: ISTAT FSS 2016. *N*: 13,567). Notes: Effects were computed using OLS regressions, with the reference category being non-naturalised individuals. Regression results are presented in Appendix S2: Tables S8 (full sample), S9 (female subsample) and S10 (male subsample).

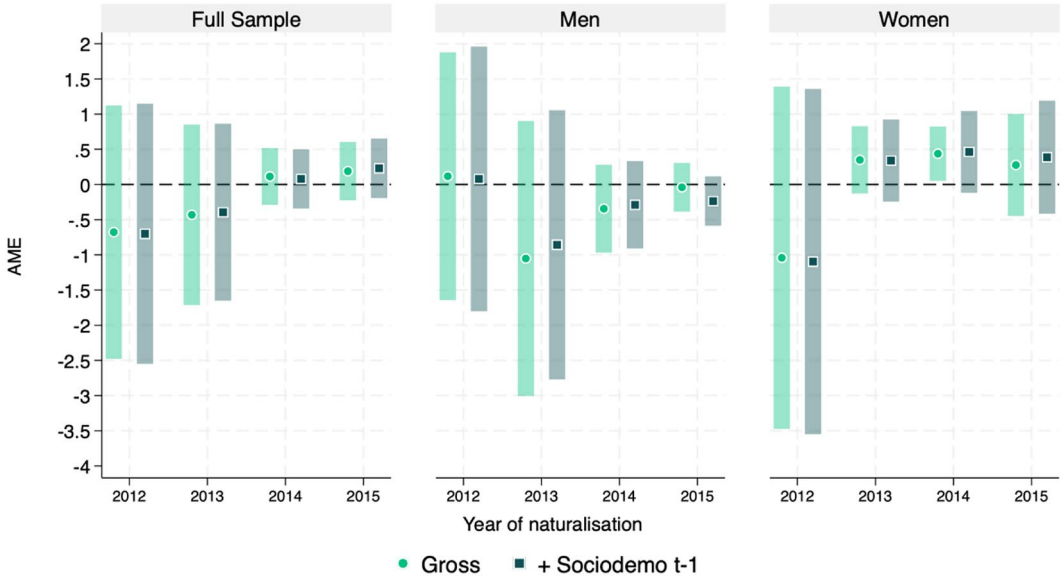


**FIGURE 6** | Average marginal effects (AME) of acquiring Italian citizenship on logged labour income in 2015 by year of citizenship acquisition (Data: ISTAT FSS 2016. *N*: 1912).

Italian and naturalised immigrant women demonstrated an economic advantage similar to that held by non-naturalised immigrant women once the model controlled for sociodemographic variables. The sizes of the observed ethnic income gaps between immigrants and natives are of similar magnitude to those measured by Cantalini et al. (2022), who also used survey data and employed a similar modelling strategy, suggesting that our estimates of the gaps between naturalised and non-naturalised immigrants are reliable.

Finally, the average marginal effects (AME) of naturalisation presented in Figure 6 are based on the comparison of income (measured in 2015) among individuals from different naturalisation cohorts, as expressed in Equation (4). Estimates are presented both controlling and not controlling for sociodemographic variables in the previous year. Results on the full sample exhibit non-significant effects, suggesting an overall lack of an economic premium from citizenship acquisition. Interestingly, however, the AMEs tend to be negative for men



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but positive for women after 2012, mirroring the results presented in Figure 5.

## 7 | Discussion and Conclusion

### 7.1 | Discussion of Results

The acquisition of citizenship by immigrants is an increasingly common but relatively recent phenomenon in Italy, and naturalised immigrants constitute an under-researched group in this context due primarily to a lack of data. Against the backdrop of a substantial body of research on other countries, we investigated whether citizenship acquisition yields better labour market outcomes and whether these potential advantages stem from Italian citizenship acquisition or are due to positive selection into citizenship acquisition. In doing so, we extended previous research on Italy, which had previously been limited to examining the motivations for applying for citizenship (e.g., Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi 2022) or the outcomes of obtaining European citizenship for certain ethnic groups (e.g., Fellini and Guetto 2022). We conducted longitudinal analyses on a representative sample of the population residing in Italy in 2016 using a unique combination of survey and register data. More specifically, we considered the trajectories of employment and socio-economic attainment over the first 15 years of one's career alongside income differentials in 2015, distinguishing between native, naturalised and non-naturalised individuals while also assessing within-individual changes in the outcomes of interest following citizenship acquisition.

Our results confirm the well-established gap between natives and immigrants in terms of employment, socio-economic status and earnings. Regarding the consequences of naturalisation, first, we found that after entering the labour market, naturalised immigrants were no more likely to be employed than non-naturalised immigrants. Second, we found that the naturalised group had a slightly higher socio-economic status (measured as ISEI) on average upon entering the labour market but did not differ significantly from the non-naturalised group in terms of socio-economic mobility over the course of their careers. However, in terms of both employment probability and socio-economic attainment, we found citizenship acquisition to have no effect. This finding supports the idea that selection into citizenship acquisition drives the observed differences between naturalised and non-naturalised individuals. Third, we found that naturalised immigrants had higher average labour incomes (35%) than their non-naturalised counterparts; again, however, the experience of being granted citizenship itself was not followed by a subsequent increase in income. Moreover, there was evidence of gender differences; the income gap between the naturalised and non-naturalised groups was larger among women, and there was a slightly positive effect of citizenship acquisition on labour income that was not present for men.

In conclusion, our results—which offer the first empirical evidence of the impacts of citizenship acquisition on outcomes for immigrants in Italy—diverge from previous findings pointing to a positive effect of naturalisation in other national contexts, such as Germany (Bratsberg et al. 2002; Steinhardt 2012), Switzerland (Hainmueller et al. 2019), Sweden (Bevelander and Pendakur 2012; Helgertz et al. 2014), Denmark (Helgertz et al. 2014), Belgium (Corluy et al. 2011) and the United States (Bratsberg et al. 2002). On the contrary, we found citizenship acquisition to have a rather weak, if not null, effect on labour market outcomes. In this regard, our results align partially with recent comparative research on European citizenship by Fellini and Guetto (2022), indicating, for Italy, either no effect or even a negative impact on employment probabilities.

As discussed above, the lack of a naturalisation premium in Italy may stem from the country's particularly slow, complex and uncertain naturalisation process, which is among the most restrictive in Europe. As a result, only a highly selected group of immigrants is generally able and willing to overcome the barriers and fulfil the requirements. This interpretation is supported by the relatively high median age at naturalisation (around 40 years old).[1] Moreover, given that a residence permit requires, among other things, stable employment and income above a minimum threshold, it is likely that many immigrants invest in host-country human capital well before acquiring citizenship. At the same time, it may be that the acquisition of citizenship does not translate into better economic opportunities simply because ethnic penalties persist for immigrants regardless of their citizenship status.

In conclusion, the acquisition of citizenship in Italy does not appear to represent a turning point in immigrants' economic integration; rather, it marks the culmination of a longer integration process. This interpretation is consistent with recent qualitative evidence regarding the experiences of naturalised individuals in Italy (Finotelli et al. 2025).

### 7.2 | Limitations and Further Research

This contribution is not without limitations, mostly related to the data that we used. First, we were unable to consider immigrants' geographical origins, which constitute a major predictor of both intention to acquire host-country citizenship (Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi 2022) and magnitude of ethnic penalties (Cantalini et al. 2022). As a result, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that citizenship acquisition may indeed be beneficial for certain groups. Here, we may refer to Italian official statistics (ISTAT 2023; see Appendix S1: Figure S2). In recent years, there has been substantial overlap in the top countries of origin between naturalised individuals and resident immigrants: Albanians, Romanians and Moroccans collectively account for approximately 40% of the resident immigrant population and 50% of naturalisations. This suggests that naturalisation is not confined to a narrow subset of the foreign-born population but instead broadly reflects the demographic composition of resident groups. However, one notable exception emerges: Chinese citizens are almost entirely absent among naturalised individuals despite representing about 8% of the resident immigrant population. This underrepresentation likely reflects a lower propensity to acquire Italian citizenship, possibly due to the loss of origin-country citizenship upon naturalisation.

Second, we were unable to identify the channels of citizenship acquisition so as to distinguish between those who obtained citizenship through prolonged residence (*ius domicilii*), through



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marriage (*ius connubii*) and through intergenerational transmission by a parent.[2] The examination of acquisition channels is critically important, as it would directly bring into play the role of family dynamics in the naturalisation process. Isolating the marriage channel would make it possible to shed light on the previously observed additional penalty for 'tied migrants', referring to the fact that women who migrate after their husbands experience a greater penalty in the labour market than those who migrate alone or before their husbands. Interestingly, Ballarino and Panichella (2018) found that, in Italy, the same penalty for 'tied migrants' is experienced by migrant women with a native husband who are granted citizenship through marriage. The null effect of naturalisation through marriage leads us to conclude that the evidence we found of the weak but positive effect of citizenship acquisition among women is driven by the other channels of acquisition, most notably prolonged residence—the dominant channel (see Section 3). However, in the absence of a direct empirical test, we encourage future studies to address this issue.

Furthermore, in terms of intergenerational transmission, the conditions of parental naturalisation could affect the subsequent outcomes of children who acquire citizenship through their parents, which has previously been examined in terms of educational intentions and attainment (Labussière 2023; Labussière and Vink 2020). Following this line of research, Ferrara and Brunori (2023) focused on second-generation students in Italy, showing that those with Italian citizenship often made more ambitious educational track choices than similar students without host-country citizenship. These more ambitious choices are likely to be a significant asset in closing the gap with the ancestral population; again, however, this remains to be seen, as most of these individuals are still in the education system.

While we have paved the way towards an understanding of the labour market experiences of naturalised immigrants in Italy, we have only touched on the overall complexity of the phenomenon of naturalisation. Much more must be done in the future to better understand the reality of this group, which is growing in both size and age in Italy. In our view, a line of research could be devoted to a systematic investigation of the extent to which naturalisation may be associated with improved conditions at different stages of one's life. Finally, this study's mixed empirical results on the existence of a naturalisation premium point to the pivotal role played by host-country context. Comparative longitudinal research is necessary to adequately address the heterogeneity of naturalisation premiums across national contexts (Helgertz et al. 2014).


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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The survey data are publicly available upon request from the Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT) at https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/236643. Restrictions apply to data use and availability from the respective government authorities. Data linkages and analyses were carried out at the offices of the Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT).

### Peer Review

The peer review history for this article is available at https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.70069.

### Endnotes

[1] This statistic could be calculated only for immigrants who obtained citizenship between 2012 and 2021 due to the limited information accessible from the registries. See Appendix S2: Figure S4.

[2] However, it should be noted that even if we had this information, investigating naturalisation premia across citizenship-acquisition channels would have been challenging due to the limited sample size of naturalised immigrants in the ISTAT FSS survey data.

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Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.



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