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Noah Pickus: True Faith and Allegiance

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Introduction

IN THE United States of America, naturalizing citizens must declare an oath of “true faith and allegiance” to the Constitution.¹ What does this oath mean? If it is a blanket promise to obey the law then it may exclude people who would make excellent American citizens—those who have deep moral convictions about right and wrong and the limits of legitimate political authority. Perhaps this oath merely requires a willingness to abide by a new political system, although the invocation of faith and allegiance seems to suggest something deeper, a change in one’s sense of self and belonging akin to religious conversion.² Native-born citizens are not required to profess their allegiance—what, then, must newcomers give up in order to abide by their declaration of “true faith”?³ What does it mean to become an American?

These questions have come to the fore with great force since the events of September 11, 2001, but they had already generated increased attention and concern over a decade before. Some observers argued that the notion of immigrants becoming citizens of an American nation was outdated and should be replaced by an emphasis on group representation, cultural rights, and membership in multiple political communities. In their view, the United States was on the verge of developing new forms of citizenship and community, ones that could successfully weave together plural allegiances from the local to the universal. Others contended that these new forms of transnational and multicultural citizenship threatened basic principles of American democracy. They worried that the shared national identity that makes both self-governance and the protection of rights possible would erode if these changes came to pass.

These arguments took place in the context of an increasingly fragile sense of public commitment to the commonweal and the weakening of institutional capacities for incorporating newcomers. A slew of changes including the dislocation caused by global markets, the rise of a rights-oriented culture, the dissolution of common military service, and the attenuation of local government created greater uncertainty as to whether new arrivals and American citizens would regard one another as equals bearing mutual obligations. The decline of traditional civic associations made “bowling alone” a national metaphor for the loss of social bonds and institutional sinews that made a diverse democracy function.

Changes in immigration patterns also raised thorny questions about the meaning of citizenship and national identity in the United States. Traditional models of migration assume migrants settle in one place and take on a new, singular political identity. But a more closely interconnected world means that

links between countries are no longer severed and can even be strengthened by migration. As one indication of this change, dual citizenship is increasingly prevalent in the United States. “At a time when so much of the American public is disengaged from civic life,” muses the sociologist Alejandro Portes, “what does it mean to have so many citizens who are, in a very real sense, neither here nor there?”⁴ A different but equally important set of issues was raised after September 11 by the growing cultural conflict between Islam and the West, political friction in the United States among Muslim, Arab, and other Americans, and the link between immigration and terrorism—not, as the political scientist Robert Leiken notes, “because all immigrants are terrorists but because all, or nearly all, terrorists in the West have been immigrants.”⁵ Immigration policy, previously focused on Latin America and the Caribbean, now had to wrestle with the racial profiling of Arabs, the mandatory registration of men from Muslim countries, and the broader relation between assimilation and national security in the case of migrants from the Middle East.

The incorporation of new or previously excluded groups into American life and politics is a place where conflicts over citizenship and nationhood erupt with special ferocity. In this book, I examine those conflicts in one key aspect of the process by which immigrants become part of the United States: naturalization. Over the last half-century few paid attention to naturalization’s role in the creation of new citizens, though recently concerns have been raised in Congress and in many regions of the country over the integrity of the naturalization process and the value of American citizenship.⁶ (These concerns have contributed to a major effort to revise the naturalization examination by the federal government.) But naturalization has been a critical focus at other times in U.S. history, and understanding how concerns over naturalization played out in those periods illuminates deeper conflicts over belief and belonging then and today. Naturalization policy is integrally linked to *immigrant* policy—policies that regulate immigrants who reside in the United States. The distinction between citizens and aliens, dual citizenship, and broader forms of assimilation and incorporation are all aspects of immigrant policy, and I analyze naturalization in relation to them. Naturalization is a particularly good primary focus because it so explicitly invokes the formative aspects of citizenship. It suggests the rather odd, if not oxymoronic, notion that a person can be “made natural.” What this phrase means (now and in the past) opens into the broader question of what it means to be and to become an American.

Throughout U.S. history Americans have given different answers to those questions. In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson told a group of newly naturalized citizens in Philadelphia that they had just sworn allegiance “to no one,” only to “a great ideal, to a great body of principles, to a great hope of the human race.”⁷ Six years later, a district court in the state of Washington expressed a far more restrictive view. Not every immigrant was capable of becoming an American. Asians, one judge concluded, were properly excluded from citizenship

because the “yellow or brown racial color is the hallmark of Oriental despotisms,” and the subjects of these despotisms “were not fitted and suited to make for the success of a republican form of Government.”⁸

The views of Wilson and the district judge represent two traditions in the history of American citizenship. In the inclusive view, national identity is defined by consent to a set of shared principles—the “American Creed.” This civic tradition forms the basis for rights and political structures that advance personal freedom, protect minority groups, and encourage civic involvement. America, in this view, is the first truly “universal nation” because immigrants from the entire world have become citizens by accepting universal principles of individual liberty, equal opportunity, democracy, and constitutionalism. Proponents of this civic tradition interpret laws and policies that exclude or coerce newcomers as running contrary to a basically welcoming American citizenship. They reject the equation of American citizenship with any single cultural heritage. “American symbols and ceremonies are culturally anonymous,” writes the political philosopher Michael Walzer, “invented rather than inherited, voluntaristic in style, narrowly political in content: the flag, the Pledge, the Fourth, the Constitution.”⁹

This traditional interpretation of American citizenship has been countered in recent years by one that focuses on a racial ideology of nationalism. This latter view sees a strong illiberal trend operating from the beginning, in which for most of U.S. history Americans have failed to adhere to universal principles. Rather than an heroic struggle to put its principles into practice, American history is the story of discrimination against minorities. In fact, these commentators observe, citizenship has always had a differential status based on one’s race or ethnicity. This revisionist approach to citizenship has called attention not only to restrictionist immigration policies based on race but to the laws governing American citizenship itself. Revisionists especially emphasize the crucial role played by the first naturalization act of 1790, which limited citizenship to “free white persons” and which is, in their view, an unequivocally white supremacist law. “The law’s wording denotes an unconflicted view of the presumed character and unambiguous boundaries of whiteness,” declares the historian Matthew Frye Jacobson.¹⁰

This view has challenged the story of a gradually unfolding and expanding American citizenship. The free white clause was not abolished until 1952, and it had significant long-term consequences in determining the subordinate status of minority groups and in generating crises in American citizenship. Nonetheless, this perspective is also fundamentally misleading. Its proponents are wrong to say that restrictive definitions of nationhood have predominated. Instead, American definitions of citizenship have blended civic principles and national belonging. The meaning of America has not been static or uncontested. Treating it as if it has been, notes the historian David Hollinger, has especially deflected energy “from the analysis of what kinds of nationalism have

actually existed and what kinds are now defensible in what contexts.”¹¹ In America, nationalism has changed its shape depending on who is invoking it and for what reasons.

Some political leaders have seen a communal sense of belonging derived from a specific cultural, racial, ethnic, or religious background: to be American is to possess one or more of these particular characteristics. This sense of belonging is not treated as an unthinking or irrational allegiance or quality; it is backed by scientific claims and enjoys widespread support as an intellectually respectable position.¹² Other supporters of the notion that the nation is a community have emphasized the importance of scale. Democratic rule, they contend, is difficult to maintain when individuals become more distant from one another, unable to maintain the ties of social solidarity that come from shared experience and interaction. Hence, characteristics like language and custom, as well as, to varying degrees, ethnicity and religion, are necessary.¹³ A third variant of the nation-as-community approach has urged the creation of a common sensibility rather than depending on it as natural and preexisting. This approach regards political, legal, and educational institutions, as well as language and literature, as essential in forging a sense of communal obligation and responsibility. It often includes civic education and patriotic ceremonies, a narrative stressing a shared history and experience, and an emphasis on the sacrifices made to achieve the community’s present state. This approach claims not that the nation is an organic community but that it has progressively become one.¹⁴

These various definitions of the national community have had both exclusionary and inclusionary consequences. Appeals to ascriptive categories of belonging have served diametrically opposed positions, such as when defenders of slavery appealed to the “natural order of things” and critics invoked God’s punishment for slavery. At times, national identity has been inclusionary, while more liberal, rights-oriented persuasions have been exclusionary. In the eighteenth century, for example, the Federalists secured individual rights partly by rooting a new national identity in assertions of shared blood and religious mission, while Republicans, who upheld religious freedom and more open immigration, justified slavery. In the post–Civil War era, a strong sense of national identity had both inclusionary and exclusionary consequences: Republicans advocated using national power to safeguard former slaves, but they also supported using severe measures against Indians and Chinese immigrants.¹⁵ In the twentieth century, defenders of national authority and communal identity countered exclusionary appeals to democratic principles of states’ rights and local control, as well as to the primacy of smaller, homogeneous identities. Nationalist movements to limit corporate power, provide economic security, and protect civil rights recast and broadened the definition of full membership in the American community.¹⁶

This complex history of inclusion and exclusion poses a difficult dilemma for political leaders: how to meld the national and civic dimensions of citizenship

in ways that honor rather than undermine the moral commitments and political dynamics that underlie each. Nationalism, which is commonly construed as an emotional or organic bond, sits uneasily with civic-mindedness, which implies rational commitment to a common creed based on abstract ideals and values. Nationalism values tradition, inherited opinion, and a set of obligations that flow from sharing a distinctive history and culture. By contrast, the civic tradition favors individual liberty, critical judgment, and chosen obligations. Where nationalism prizes reverence, the civic tradition treasures reason. Where nationalism venerates peoplehood, the civic tradition cherishes principles. “If the United States strives to rest American citizenship solely on adherence to liberal principles, as many liberal theorists and policy analysts still advocate, it may fail to respond to the desires, and indeed, moral claims for community solidarity that have always been potent in American politics,” observes the political theorist Rogers Smith. “Yet if America departs from liberal principles and instead takes its bearing from its more communitarian traditions, it risks encouraging impulses that have led to some of the nation’s ugliest abuses.”¹⁷

Finding ways to combine liberal principles and communal solidarity is paramount today when reason and reverence are regarded as enemies and the civic and national dimensions of citizenship are pitted against each other, a division especially apparent in contemporary debates over immigration and citizenship. Advocates in these debates appeal to civic ideals or national belonging in ways that avoid rather than address the perennial tensions between the two. They traffic in one-dimensional notions of culture or creed: on the left, nationalism is vilified and democratic civic principles are reduced to immigrant and minority rights; on the right, nationalism is heralded and debate over civic ideals is circumscribed. These one-dimensional views have marginalized more complex and constructive traditions of dealing with the relation between culture and creed, especially the tradition of civic nationalism. That tradition has taken different and often radically divergent forms and gone by different names. Despite these differences, its proponents shared the conviction that America’s civic principles, its commitment to individual rights and democratic deliberation, could best be realized if they were rooted in a robust sense of national identity. Civic nationalists in our history—especially James Madison and John Marshall at the Founding and Theodore Roosevelt and Randolph Bourne in the Progressive Era—regarded America as a remarkable nation and were deeply attached to its history, institutions, and people. They defended that nation against the cultural, political, and economic forces they believed threatened to undermine its great promise. At the same time, these leading figures aimed to treat the nation as an instrument in the service of individual liberty and communal self-governance, not as an object in itself. In their mind, civic principles and American nationalism reinforced each other.

Civic nationalism has, nonetheless, been fraught with tensions. Its proponents have had to negotiate continually between the particularistic demands of

communal solidarity and the universalistic thrust of individual freedom. They have not always found a workable balance between the two. At times, the nationalist dimension has been unable to forestall more repressive measures; at other times, it has facilitated or tolerated significant violations of America's civic principles. For its part, the civic dimension has struggled to secure a common identity based on abstract principles, and its efforts to establish loyalty have also sometimes become coercive and exclusionary. These are significant drawbacks and I explore them in this book. I probe the complexities of the civic nationalist tradition, examining both its limitations and strengths.

In the end, I find in civic nationalism a capacity to strengthen civic resources and foster common aims, which is much needed today. It can be a powerful bulwark against more exclusionary forms of nationalism while offering a sense of belonging more robust than one based on principles alone. It offers our best chance to incorporate immigrants, sustain a robust American nationalism, and foster a meaningful, democratic form of citizenship. The history of civic nationalism shows that there is no single balance between principles and peoplehood that is good for all time. Instead, policies and institutions must be modified and adapted to meet contemporary challenges. Civic nationalism emphasizes the art of politics and illuminates the constant work that must be done to fuse the civic and national traditions.

NATURALIZATION AND NATIONHOOD IN THREE ERAS

In debates over naturalization, the difficult but necessary task of combining principles and peoplehood is particularly evident during the Founding and in the Progressive Era, when leading figures engaged in a family argument over the relation between the civic and the national dimensions of citizenship and the consequences of that relation for immigration and naturalization. The terms of that argument continue to inform the incorporation of immigrants and the treatment of aliens today, and I concentrate on them (as well as touch on developments shaped by other periods in American history). They demonstrate in particular the enormous promise of civic nationalism as well as the risks that must be guarded against in reviving it today.

At the Founding and in the early Republic, restrictions on naturalization and the rights of aliens developed as logical extensions of mainstream nationalism. Proponents of these restrictions advocated extensive residency requirements for owning land, becoming a citizen, and holding office; they flirted with the idea that only native-born citizens could be eligible for election to the House and Senate, demanded character references before immigrants could qualify for citizenship, and rejected claims based on aliens' rights. In their view, multi-ethnic societies were too discordant, and peace and prosperity depended on citizens' possessing an instinctive sense of attachment to the nation. Critics of

these policies regarded immigrants as part of the broader project of creating a national identity. This inclusive approach set the dominant tone for the rules regulating naturalization, officeholding, and the rights of aliens, though the more exclusionary side made its mark as well.

The Founding also provides a cautionary example of how quickly nationalist concerns can be pressed to extreme ends in unsettled times. The Alien and Sedition Acts and the Naturalization Act of 1798 show how exclusionary and inclusionary impulses developed into competing visions of national identity. The same set of concerns about community and creed that aroused the civic nationalism championed by James Madison and John Marshall also provoked a far more narrow, exclusionary nationalism. And while Madison and Marshall's more moderate civic nationalism resisted the most extreme claims of its opponents, it, too, placed significant limits on citizenship when it came to issues of racial difference. The attention devoted to the civic and the national dimensions of citizenship thus had both exclusionary and inclusionary origins and in practice produced policies that combined both impulses.

By the end of the nineteenth century, new doctrines of social Darwinism and eugenics had begun to strengthen the beliefs of legislators, opinion leaders, and the public that immigrants from Asia and from southern and eastern Europe were racially deficient. Such views contributed heavily to the exclusion of Asians from citizenship and the establishment in 1924 of immigration quotas that discriminated against southern and eastern Europeans. In contrast to those who wanted to restrict immigration, a disparate group of moderate civic nationalists continued to believe that a shared national identity could be constructed. They worried primarily that civic processes of incorporation were not functioning adequately and proceeded to formalize the rules governing naturalization and to consciously mold immigrants into citizens.

A wide variety of these "Americanizers," from cosmopolitan pluralists such as the philosopher John Dewey, the journalist Randolph Bourne (a critic of formal Americanization programs), and the social reformer Jane Addams, to the new nationalists led by Theodore Roosevelt, the writer Herbert Croly, and the civic activist Frances Kellor, offered alternatives to the most coercive and exclusionary forms of nationalism. The Americanizers who followed Roosevelt believed that immigrants had an obligation to identify completely with America, and their nationalism excluded the possibility that non-whites could assimilate. Pluralists and social reformers treated immigrants' ethnic heritage with greater respect and envisioned a dynamic exchange between immigrant and American cultures that would provide both stability and vitality. Both strands of the Americanization movement wanted immigrants to participate in the public life of their new country and, in doing so, help revitalize citizenship. By the 1920s, Americanization had shifted in a more coercive and exclusionary direction, in part because of the country's entry into World War I and in part for reasons internal to the movement. The Americanization movement exemplifies the

difficulty of sustaining a moderate, middle ground, even as its Rooseveltian proponents offered a realistic alternative to racial supremacists and successfully expanded who was included in the American nation.

The pragmatic, flexible, and ultimately political sensibility that characterized civic nationalism at the Founding and during the Progressive Era contrasts sharply with modern conceptions of citizenship. From the 1960s through the early 1990s, the moderate civic nationalism represented by Madison and Marshall at the Founding and Roosevelt and Bourne in the Progressive Era was displaced by a range of views, each of which separated rather than blended the civic and national dimensions of citizenship. One position contended that democratic civic principles required the United States to protect the rights of all human beings who are physically present in the country, whether nationals or not. This view was articulated by leading political theorists, law professors, and sociologists, such as Joseph Carens, Jamin Raskin, and Robert Bach, and was embodied in immigrant and ethnic rights organizations and philanthropic foundations. This position had much in common with a second position, which emphasized political and legal strategies as the best way to protect the rights of immigrants and to strengthen the standing of minority groups. Advocates for this position included political scientists who were deeply involved in Latino empowerment strategies, such as Louis DeSipio and Harry Pachon, and advocacy groups like the National Association of Latino Elected Officials.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, as these claims to greater global rights and group representation became more firmly rooted (especially among ethnic advocates and academics), a significantly different set of views became prominent in popular political discourse. Voters and legislators grappled over a series of policies that sought to restrict immigration, strengthen citizenship, and limit the rights of aliens. Two nationalist versions of a robustly American citizenship were particularly visible in these debates. The first staked the future of the United States on its capacity to maintain a European culture and a homogeneous definition of American identity. Its proponents included conservative journalists like Peter Brimelow and Lawrence Auster and the presidential aspirant Patrick Buchanan, as well as conservative advocacy organizations like the Federation for American Immigration Reform and the American Immigration Control Foundation. This group of American cultural nationalists was censured by a second brand of nationalism, one that saw U.S. nationhood stemming from a distinctly American commitment to universal political principles. This latter view emerged most clearly in neoconservative journals and think tanks and was expressed by writers like John J. Miller at the Center for Equal Opportunity, John Fonte at the American Enterprise Institute and the Hudson Institute, and Peter Salins at the Manhattan Institute, as well as by nationally syndicated columnists like Georgie Anne Geyer and *U.S. News and World Report* commentator Michael Barone.

These competing conceptions of citizenship each drew on ideas and formulations that emerged from earlier debates at the Founding and in the Progressive Era. The modern debate differed from those periods in the significantly reduced attention participants paid to finding a workable balance between civic ideals and national allegiance.¹⁸ Advocates of immigrant rights and proponents of cultural nationalism both disdained this task because, despite their radical differences, they shared the view that prepolitical social identities take precedence over politically forged affiliations. For rights advocates, personhood and social membership sufficed for receiving the rights and benefits of citizenship. For cultural nationalists, cultural affinity, not attachment to civic ideals or the exercise of self-governance, formed the basis for membership.

Proponents of increased minority group representation and advocates for a distinctly American definition of universal nationalism paid greater attention to the effect of political institutions on immigrants and citizenship. But they, too, evaded the challenge of combining the civic and national dimensions of citizenship in ways that are responsive to the challenges posed by global markets, clashing cultures, and weakened political institutions. These two approaches especially limited the search for ways to recognize the critical role played by group identity while avoiding the problems caused by group rights. The proponents of minority representation schemes reduced citizenship to electoral and organizational arrangements that are designed to reinforce subnational group identity. For their part, universal nationalists tended to deify individual liberty, neglecting to account for the role of group identity in fostering assimilation and downplaying the extent to which individualism can be at odds with nationalism.

All these approaches are antipolitical in their intent to circumscribe radically the issues, institutions, and identities that a democratic people can rethink and restructure. Serious difference of opinion is restricted to marginal issues, as answers to core questions about the rights and benefits of citizenship, the meaning of U.S. ideals, and the nature of American nationhood have been predetermined by fixed and often simplistic notions of culture and creed. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to address a range of issues relating to immigration and citizenship. Immigrant and minority group advocates often limit opportunities to generate trust and forge alliances by casting newcomers largely as supplicants who demand special rights rather than engaged citizens or dedicated Americans. Proponents of cultural and universal forms of American nationalism, meanwhile, stoke social fragmentation and increase civic alienation by seeking to suppress rather than to engage and, where possible, to mediate conflicts among contending allegiances and among divergent views of America's civic principles. These antipolitical approaches have contributed to a climate characterized by extreme proposals—deport all illegal aliens or offer them amnesty; slash social benefits for immigrants or increase them substantially; raise naturalization standards or junk them entirely—which generate enormous controversy but rarely result in sustained or systemic change. This

climate means that public and private efforts are less likely to focus on forging new approaches and strengthening the institutions that can incorporate newcomers while building a common citizenship. It means that both the realities of immigrant life and the demands of a civic nation are disregarded.

To turn away from this policy of neglect requires reclaiming a political sensibility that melds the civic and national dimensions of citizenship. The tradition of civic nationalism that held sway at the Founding and in the Progressive Era exemplifies that sensibility. It offers the best chance today to foster a common sense of peoplehood and generate attachment to civic ideals in ways that strengthen social and civic capacities for incorporating immigrants. In the mid-1990s, a new approach to citizenship emerged that draws explicitly on that tradition.¹⁹ This new civic nationalism rejects a narrow definition of citizenship even as it insists that American identity requires more than a commitment to democratic political principles. Although it must address longstanding questions about the relation between its civic and nationalist dimensions, this new civic nationalism promises to revalue American identity in a manner that turns aliens into allies and forges the broadest possible political commitments.²⁰

Modern civic nationalists include conservatives and liberals who draw extensively on Roosevelt and Bourne in formulating their proposals for America in the twenty-first century. I argue that contemporary civic nationalism should draw on James Madison as well. A Madisonian civic nationalism would focus on social and political practices at the subnational and supranational level that develop civic capacities. At the same time, it would understand that those practices will not flourish if they are too readily detached from a shared sense of national citizenship. Madison's flexible and adaptive nationalism is especially appropriate for confronting the problems posed by both too forceful and too feeble a sense of American nationhood. This versatility is necessary today to overcome the general neglect of programs to incorporate newcomers effectively into the nation. It can take advantage of significant domestic and global changes that have made the time ripe for reshaping the public debate over immigration, assimilation, and citizenship and for building a civic nationalist approach that invests more in immigrants and expects more of them and native-born citizens.

In this book, I analyze civic nationalism in essentially chronological fashion. The main part of the book, chapters 1–6, focuses on the Founding (1787–1802) and the Progressive Era (1903–24). These chapters are followed by a more selective account of the modern period (1965–97) in chapters 7 and 8, and an epilogue. In chapter 1 I show how law and policy governing immigration and citizenship emerged from competing ideas about the meaning of American nationhood at the Founding. Chapter 2 concentrates on the Alien and Sedition Acts and the Naturalization Act of 1798. In chapter 3 I return to the Naturalization Act of 1790 to consider the origins and implications of the “free white clause,” which denied citizenship to non-whites. In doing so I replicate the

Founders' own approach to the issue of citizenship, which considered the profoundly disruptive question of membership for non-whites separately from the more everyday problems of immigration and membership.

In chapter 4 I analyze the rise of the Americanization movement, particularly its culturally pluralist and social reformist wing. Chapter 5 explores the new nationalism of Teddy Roosevelt and its influence on the Bureau of Naturalization and the Bureau of Education. Chapter 6 describes the turn to a more coercive approach to Americanization and analyzes the dynamics that brought about this change. In chapter 7 I discuss the evolution of a shared American citizenship from the 1930s to the 1960s, and the subsequent domestic and global challenges to that citizenship; this chapter sets the framework for assessing the revival of civic nationalism at the end of the millennium. In chapter 8 I characterize and assess the dominant conceptions of civic nationalism, compare them to the models of citizenship described in the previous chapter, and advance my own version of civic nationalism. The epilogue sketches the policy implications of this vision.

CITIZENSHIP IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

My analysis focuses on controversies in public policy while pressing us to recognize the ways in which our politics is itself structured by deeper and more constitutive issues. Efforts to fix immigrant policy without careful attention to competing conceptions of citizenship will result in bad theory and bad policy. Thinking about citizenship does not, however, mean concentrating solely on policy; nor does it entail trying to find the most pristine theory and then apply it to the raw material of social and political life. Instead, it uses history and politics as guides. This kind of analysis examines public debates that involve a range of institutions and actors. It teases normative claims out of political practices as well as applying them to policy.

Those who believe we should concentrate on policy alone suggest that the way questions about immigration and citizenship will get answered is a matter of economic interests.²¹ This hard-nosed approach offers an important corrective to what is often unqualifiedly praised as America's "immigrant tradition" of accepting newcomers. Economic interests have played a significant role in regulating the admission and incorporation of immigrants. Economic interests do not, however, fully explain America's treatment of newcomers. Waves of restriction have not followed the turns of the economy. Neither the Naturalization Act of 1790 nor the National Origins Act of 1924 was passed in a period of extensive economic turmoil.²² Nor, as Rogers Smith has noted, have important political actors always "play[ed] the role dictated by class interests."²³ Industrial leaders, for example, have supported policies that restrict the flow of inexpensive labor. Moreover, it is far from clear what policy toward immigrants serves

whose economic interest. As the sociologist Nathan Glazer remarks, the economic data on immigration are “contradictory and ambiguous.”²⁴ Studies vary widely, for instance, over whether immigrants’ contributions to the general welfare outweigh the social costs they impose. Even if we agreed on the data, the political scientist Peter Skerry observes, determining what level of competition is too much still requires interpretation of those data.²⁵

The political process shapes how immigration issues are interpreted, but those interpretations are not simply conditioned by economic or narrow political interests. Jews, for example, whose political and economic standing might be threatened by newcomers, nonetheless support high levels of immigration, as do conservatives who worry about multiculturalism but see America as a universal nation open to all. A significant part of political life involves ideas about group and national identity, as well as aspirations based on civic principles of freedom and equality. These views are rarely separable from the self-interest of political leaders and groups, but they are also not reducible to those interests. Thus, how Americans perceive their identity will help determine a series of pressing issues of public policy: how many immigrants become citizens and under what conditions; what those newcomers learn—and teach—about the meaning of citizenship; what benefits are available to immigrants; and whether Americans regard newcomers as intruders or as partners with whom they share a common fate. We need to account for these competing conceptions of citizenship because they lie at the root of our deepest disagreements and play such a crucial role in shaping public policy.

The other prevailing method of analyzing citizenship uses moral and political philosophy to focus on the normative dimensions of public policy. Many practitioners of this approach employ abstract analysis to construct theories of justice or equality and then judge policies by those values. This method of analysis can help clarify murky discussions by pressing arguments to their first principles. At its best, it shows where tradition is defended entirely on the ground that it is a tradition, rather than on the reasons for supporting that tradition. The theoretical approach, however, can be misleading as philosophy and a poor guide to practice.²⁶ It often invokes hypothetical cases that leave out precisely what is at stake in public debate. For example, some arguments for preferential hiring, as the political theorist Robert Goodin points out, avoid analyzing whether “affirmative action means hiring less-qualified candidates and what *less-qualified* might mean.”²⁷ Other examples include arguments for welfare that avoid claims about moral responsibility, or arguments for open borders that treat the relation between sovereignty and security as a regrettable necessity.²⁸

The abstract approach is also insufficiently realistic in refusing to account for considerations of human nature—pride, envy, lust, dominion, cruelty, and passion, as well as the need to belong and share commitments.²⁹ By considering these aspects of social life as unfortunate impediments to elegant philosophical solutions, theory does not take seriously the social resources necessary to engage

fellow human beings in common projects. It fails to assess policies in the context of whether they are necessary to make the system function.³⁰ It therefore judges as wanting a system that may have the best practical chance of achieving its aspirations. Despite its focus on the normative dimension of public policy, the theoretical approach for a long time largely ignored questions regarding what kinds of citizens are necessary to support a political system and how political institutions might form such citizens. Eager to avoid the coercive aspects of such a project, it has instead concentrated on assessing whether basic institutional arrangements fulfill abstract theories of justice.³¹ The policy approach is no better in this regard; it also has disregarded the formative nature of political institutions, emphasizing instead strategic considerations of what can be done within established parameters.³²

In recent years it has become clear that, as the political philosophers Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman point out, the “health and stability of modern democracy depends on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens.”³³ Increasing voter apathy, long-term welfare dependency, and renewed racial and religious conflict are among the trends that have recently focused attention on citizens’ “sense of identity and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic and religious identities; their ability to tolerate and work with others who are different; to participate in and promote the public good; to show self-restraint.”³⁴ We cannot, it seems, take for granted that democratic citizens will simply sprout of their own accord; they must be fashioned actively.

My approach picks up on precisely these issues and concerns. It emphasizes that conceptions of citizenship matter in designing institutions and formulating policies. This approach recognizes, however, that we do not begin thinking about citizenship in a vacuum. To understand American citizenship we must examine actual practices. Hence, I pay attention to public policies such as naturalization as concrete expressions of principles, as well as to a wide range of institutions and actors that play an indispensable role in shaping citizens. I also recognize that our traditions of citizenship are not simply the product of what academics or intellectuals have conjured up over the years but are actual historical attempts to carve out workable understandings of citizenship. I do not expect to find a single coherent tradition; instead, I make room for the contentiousness that surrounds debates over citizenship.

The practice of citizenship—testing what works and is feasible and adapting our approach “as we go”—becomes a part of our tradition when the concepts are actually applied and affirmed by the people themselves. By identifying the traditions that characterize the history of American citizenship we can develop a good sense of the normative constraints and possibilities that shape our political life. Understanding those constraints and possibilities can then help us better negotiate future crises. This understanding is especially important in managing the tensions between belief and belonging that shape what it means to be and to become an American citizen.