



CMS Research Conference 2025

## **Migration, Mobilities, and Changing Political Landscapes**

### **Problematizing Virtual Naturalization Ceremonies: State Versus Public Narratives of Canadian Citizenship**

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Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the accelerated adoption of virtual social engagement has reshaped many people's engagement with institutions and their communities. In particular, the synchronous virtual administration of government services (such as court hearings) and performance of rituals (such as weddings, funerals, and graduation ceremonies) introduced profound changes to long-standing traditions. In addition to debates between the inclusive potential of online efficiency versus the exclusionary impacts of the 'digital divide,' these shifts raise important questions about the ability of online rituals to replicate meaning and foster cohesion.

Naturalization ceremonies, which mark immigrants' acquisition of citizenship in a new country, stand at the crossroads of these transformations. In countries where the recitation of an oath is central, they represent both a government service and ritual. In other words, naturalization ceremonies are not only a procedural step necessary for immigrants to acquire certain rights. They also represent public affirmations of national values and belonging which construct and communicate legal and national identities, attempt to legitimize the state, and, for some, are emotionally linked to a sense of self.

In Canada, the creation of an online ceremony – while justified during COVID-19 – produced a fierce debate when the government decided to continue the online ceremonies post-pandemic. In this paper, we compare the problem representation of Canadian virtual naturalization ceremonies as constructed by the (1) state narrative (through policy discourse) and (2) public narrative (as mediated by mainstream hegemonic news media). Using the 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) approach (Bacchi 2009; 2012a; 2012b), we analyze two sets of texts produced between March 1, 2020, to May 31, 2024: (1) public-facing, parliamentary, and internal texts produced by IRCC, and (2) news articles, opinion pieces, and editorials from major Canadian media outlets. In doing so, we uncover competing narratives not only of naturalization ceremonies and virtuality, but also 'becoming Canadian' itself.