

The Seeds of Ideology: Historical Immigration and Political Preferences in the United States

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on “*Historical Immigration and Political Preferences in the United States*”

Immigration is one of the most important political and social issues around the world. The political discourse is often reflected in the rise of anti-immigrant, right-wing parties that emphasize the lack of immigrants’ assimilation, painting it as a vital threat to host societies. While a large and growing body of work has examined the short run political impact of immigration (Dustmann et al. 2019; Tabellini, 2020), much less is known about the effects of immigration on natives’ political ideology in the long run. And yet, the long-run effects of immigration on natives’ political preferences can vastly differ from their short-run counterpart. First, consistent with the “contact hypothesis” (Allport, 1954), natives can change their attitudes towards minorities after prolonged interactions, which may gradually eliminate initially negative stereotypes. Second, although the immigration literature typically views the process of immigrants’ assimilation as one sided – with immigrants converging towards the new, local culture (Abramitzky et al., 2020; Fouka, 2020) – it is possible for immigrants’ culture to spill-over into that of natives, eventually creating a diverse and “melting pot” society.

Our recent work explores these ideas, by studying the long-run effects of the 1900-1930 migration of millions of Europeans to America on the political ideology of US born individuals today.

The advantages of studying the Age of Mass Migration in the US

Focusing on this historical period, part of the commonly known as Age of Mass Migration (1850-1930), has a number of advantages. First, as today, also at the time natives’ concerns about the lack of immigrants’ assimilation loomed large (Abramitzky and Boustan, 2017; Higham, 1955). Second, the composition of immigrants changed dramatically during 1900-1930, thereby allowing us to leverage variation in the cultural background and in the political preferences of different European groups. Third, by focusing on the Age of Mass Migration we can estimate the effects of immigration on American ideology over more than a century.

The 1900-1930 decades also represent an almost ideal “quasi-natural” experiment to causally identify the effects of immigration (Abramitzky



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and Boustan, 2017; Abramitzky et al., 2019; Tabellini, 2020). Between 1910 and 1930, immigration from different European countries was differentially impacted by nation-wide shocks – World War I and the Immigration Acts – that were arguably unrelated to cultural, political, or economic conditions prevailing in individual US counties at the time. Because immigrants tend to concentrate in areas with larger ethnic enclaves, the differential effect of these shocks across European countries generated significant variation in the number as well as in the “cultural mix” of immigrants received by US counties between 1910 and 1930.

How did European immigration affect US political ideology in the long run?

Our main findings, reported in Figure 1 below, indicate that American born respondents who today live in counties with higher historical immigration are significantly more likely to vote for the Democratic Party and to support more generous welfare spending. These effects are quantitatively large, and comparable to those of key

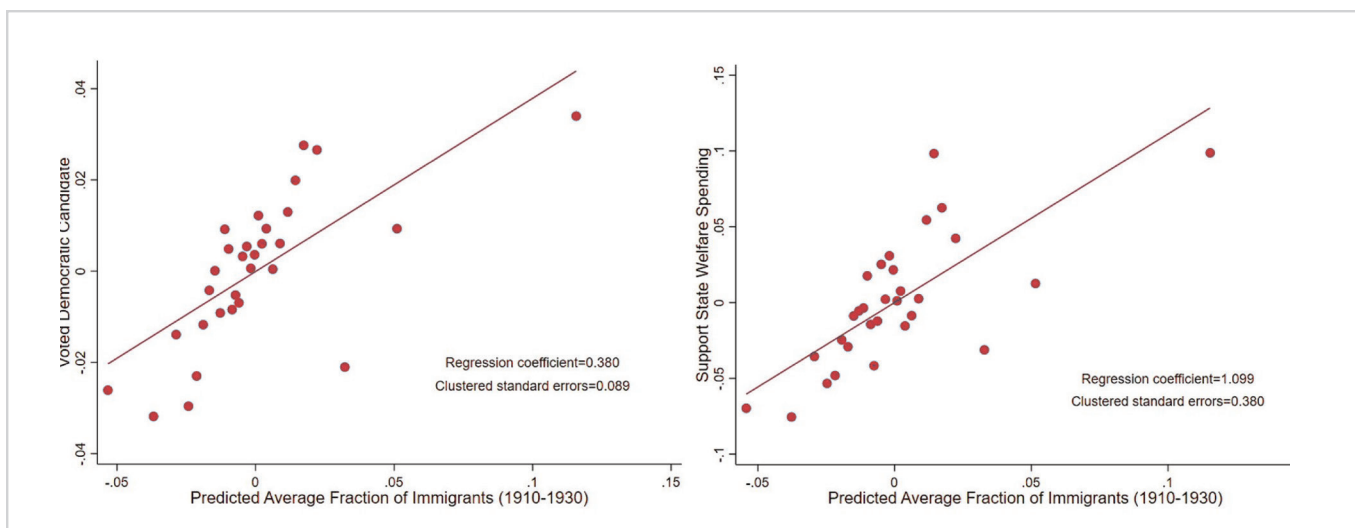
determinants of political preferences in the United States. For instance, a 5 percentage point increase in the average immigrant share has an impact that is roughly equivalent to that estimated in other work for the effects of race or that of moving from an income of 100,000 to an income of 20,000 US dollars per year (Alesina and Giuliano, 2011). We obtain similar findings for several other proxies of left-leaning political preferences and preferences for redistribution, such as party identification or support for an increase in the minimum wage.

In counties highly exposed to historical immigration individuals support more welfare spending

Figure 1:
Effect of Historical Immigration on Political Ideology

Notes: The y-axis reports individuals' response to whether they voted for a Democratic candidate in the last presidential elections and their preferences for redistribution, respectively. The x-axis refers to the instrumented 1910-1930 average fraction of immigrants in the county. The scatterplots pool observations into 30 bins. Each point in the scatter diagram represents the residuals of the two variables, after partialling out state and survey wave fixed effects, historical county controls, and individual characteristics.

Source: adapted from Giuliano and Tabellini (2021).



European immigrants' support for social welfare influenced the attitudes of US-born individuals soon after the end of the Age of Mass Migration. Tracing out the dynamics of the political realignment induced by the arrival of immigrants, we document that the 1910-1930 average immigrant share in a county is not significantly associated with the Democratic vote share prior to 1928. However, a large, upward jump occurs in the Presidential elections of that year, when Alfred Smith, a Roman Catholic with immigrant background, ran as candidate for the Democratic Party, against the Republican opponent, Herbert Hoover, who emphasized the idea of "*rugged individualism*" (Bazzi et al., 2020). The 1928 increase in support for the Democratic Party persisted until today, suggesting that the initial political mobilization of immigrants was an important factor behind the positive association between historical immigration and left-leaning ideology today. In addition, and consistent with political realignment, we find that the presence of European immigrants, with their strong support for government spending and redistribution, influenced the allocation of New Deal spending across US counties.

Mechanisms of cultural transmission

We provide supportive evidence for our argument that immigration left its footprint on American ideology via cultural transmission from immigrants to natives by constructing an index of exposure to historical social welfare reforms in immigrants' countries of origin. This index counts the number of years elapsed between the introduction of different reforms and the year in which an individual emigrated. It includes reforms on education, pension, health, unemployment insurance, and occupational injuries. We first validate with modern data from

the European Social Survey that the index indeed proxies for preferences for redistribution. Next, we exploit variation in the "cultural mix" of immigrants received by different US counties over time. Consistent with our conjecture, we find that, after controlling for the direct effect of immigration, higher exposure to social welfare reforms in immigrants' countries of origin is predictive of stronger preferences for redistribution and a more liberal ideology today among US born respondents (see Figure 2).

Immigrants exposed to welfare reforms in Europe influenced American's attitudes right after the 1920s

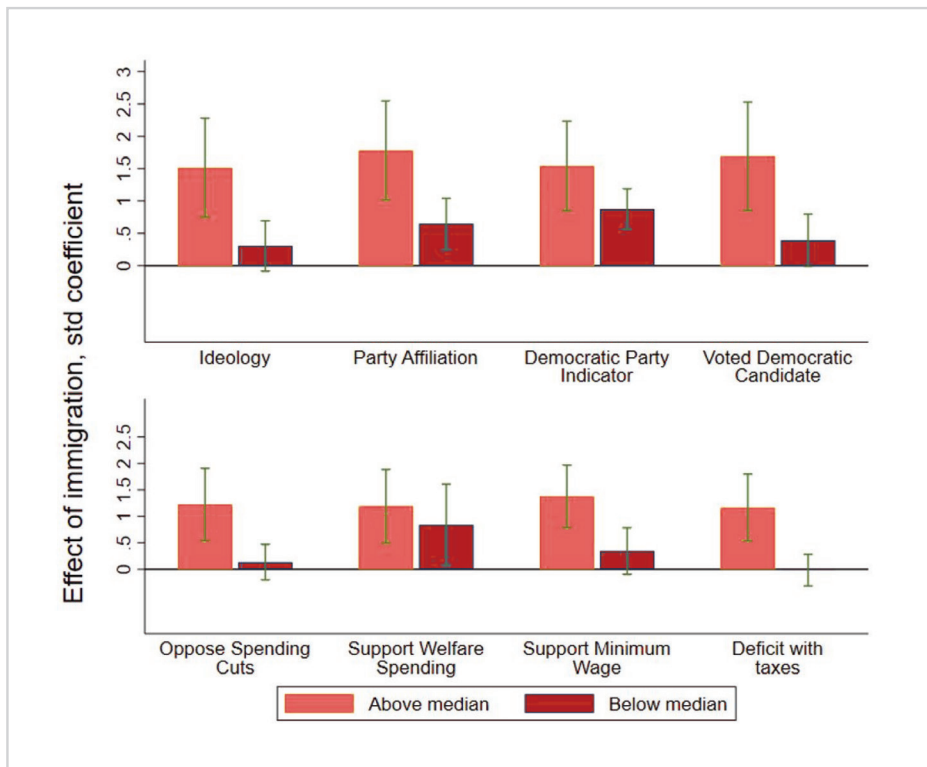


Figure 2:
Effect of Immigration,
by Exposure to Social
Welfare Reforms

Notes: The bars report 2SLS coefficients of historical immigration (with corresponding 95% confidence intervals) on political ideology and preferences for redistribution of US born individuals, split for counties with exposure to social welfare reforms above (resp. below) the sample median in light red (resp. dark red).

Source: adapted from Giuliano and Tabellini (2021).

We dig deeper into the mechanism of horizontal transmission from immigrants to natives, by exploiting differences in intergroup contact. If preferences for redistribution of US born individuals were, at least partly, driven by immigrants, results should be stronger in counties where immigrants had more frequent contacts with natives. We show that the effects of immigration on natives' ideology are stronger in counties where, historically, intergroup contact – proxied for by using inter-marriage and residential integration – was higher, and where immigrants' preferences could thus be more easily transmitted to natives.

Our results are unchanged when controlling for respondents' ancestry and restricting attention to individuals with US born grandparents. We also show that the presence of contemporaneous county ancestral composition does not alter our results. We interpret these results as evidence against a mere mechanism of “vertical transmission”.

Conclusion

The findings in this paper have important policy implications. First, they highlight the importance of distinguishing between the short and the long-run effects of diversity and immigration on political preferences and ideology in receiving countries. Although immigrants might be opposed, generate backlash, and reduce natives' preferences for redistribution upon arrival (Tabellini, 2020), they might eventually lead to higher social cohesion and stronger desire for generous government spending over a longer horizon of time. Moreover, our results indicate that immigrants' assimilation is not a one-sided process. While immigrants likely converge towards natives' culture, they might also transmit their values and ideology to locals. In our context, European immigrants imported their political preferences and desire for the welfare state, transmitting them to US born individuals. In doing so, immigrants contributed to a diverse and complex culture, and to the development of a "melting-pot" society.

We conclude reflecting briefly on the extent to which our findings apply to other contexts, and the recent inflow of refugees to Europe in particular. First, at the time of our study, the US was a relatively young country, and its culture may have been more "malleable" than that of many European countries that, today, are experiencing large influx of immigrants and refugees. For this reason, one might expect immigration to Europe to have a smaller effect on long-run ideology and culture today relative to what we found for the Age of Mass Migration in the US context. Second, we focused on a specific set of beliefs: political ideology and preferences for redistribution. More evidence is needed to tell whether our results apply to other cultural and socio-economic domains, since different

cultural traits may be more amenable to horizontal transmission than others. Finally, the setting considered in our work entailed two groups – Anglo-Saxon descendants and European immigrants – that were relatively "similar" along many dimensions. It is thus possible that at higher levels of diversity (ethnic, religious, and racial), as those prevailing today between Europeans and incoming refugees, the transmission mechanism identified in our work might be less likely to operate.

Our findings could change in other contexts, as some cultural traits may be easier to diffuse than others

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