

Individual Preferences towards (Labour) Migration: Culture, Context or Competition?

Immigration in general and the free movement of persons in particular have been prominent and at times even dominating issue within newsmedia as well as academic discourses for the past years. An extant literature has sought to explain variation in individuals' opposition to immigration and has mostly focused on two main forms of natives' threats when evaluating immigration: economic and cultural sources. The apparent problem within studies on this cultural vs. economic threat literature is that it is hard to disentangle the economic threat immigration poses to a certain individual from the cultural impact of immigration. In our paper, we attempt to separate the economic and the cultural impact immigrants have by making use of a specific particularity of Switzerland as a rather small landlocked country within Europe. It shares long stretches of borders with Germany, France and Italy and thus attracts an unusually high number of cross-border commuters. In contrast to labour migrants from EU/EFTA states, these individuals only come to work in Switzerland but otherwise do not partake in everyday social life within the communities. While economically these commuters pose the same threat as foreigners living in Switzerland, culturally they should not. This gives us a unique opportunity to test whether the labor market competition hypothesis prevails or whether cultural or other factors need to be figured in more closely. Preliminary evidence from our survey experiment within the Swiss context, however, indicates that cross-border commuters are viewed much less favorable than resident foreigners (this holds when controlling for exposure in various ways), weakening both potential explanations.

To look more closely at the mechanisms driving the acceptance of labour migrants in Switzerland, we scrutinize the impact that different characteristics of foreign workers have on their public acceptance. As we know from the literature, acceptance of migration is rarely a one-dimensional phenomenon but rather depends on various different characteristics of potential migrants, such as gender, age, their jobs and level of education. We adopt this idea of multidimensionality to our area of interest and therefore ask respondents to compare persons with varying characteristics (origin, gender, age, high-skilled vs. low-skilled, living vs. commuting to Switzerland, etc.) within a conjoint experiment. Results corroborate our initial findings that people actually seem to prefer labour migrants to settle and contribute to society.