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Webinar: The Economics of Migration

Growing up in a Recession Increases Compassion? The Case of Attitudes towards Immigration

ABSTRACT

Macroeconomic conditions during young adulthood have a persistent impact on people's attitudes and preferences. The seminal paper by Giuliano and Spilimbergo (2014) shows that people who grew up in a recession are more likely to favor government redistribution and assistance to the poor. Moreover, they are more likely to believe that bad luck rather than a lack of hard work causes poverty, i.e. they seem to be more compassionate towards the poor. In this paper, we investigate how inclusive this increase in compassion is by studying how macroeconomic conditions when young affect attitudes towards immigration. Using data from the General Social Survey and the World Value Survey, we find strong evidence that bad macroeconomic circumstances when young strengthen attitudes against immigration for the rest of people's lives. In line with this, we also find that people who grew up in a recession are more likely to agree that, when jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to native-born citizens rather than

to immigrants. Our results thus suggest that the underlying motive for more government redistribution in response to a recession does not originate from a universal increase in compassion, but rather seems to be more self-interested and restricted to one's own in-group.

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