

Migrant Voices

Martín Fernández Sánchez and Etienne Bacher

Abstract :

Migrants' experiences abroad can shape the information they share with their families left behind, having profound implications in these communities. This paper leverages unique historical data to provide novel evidence on the content of migrants' communications, the factors that shape them, and their potential effects at origin. Focusing on Irish migrants in North America, we construct a unique dataset of over 6,000 letters from the 19th and early 20th centuries. We identify key themes in the letters using Large Language Models (LLMs) and characterize the writers' local environment using census data. First, we examine how individual and local factors - such as gender, time abroad, or diaspora size, influence the presence and salience of economic, religious, and political themes. Next, we turn our attention to religion, given its prominent role in Irish identity and the anti-Catholicism faced by migrants. We exploit the staggered expansion of the Catholic Church in North America to assess its causal impact on religious content in the letters. Finally, we use full-count Irish census data to investigate whether this unexpected increase in religiosity manifested in migrants' letters contributed to a revival of the Catholic faith in migrants' home communities.