

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

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Abstract :

We test the relationship between historical immigration to the US and political ideology today. We hypothesize that European immigrants brought with them their preferences for the welfare state, and that this had a long-lasting effect on the political ideology of US born individuals. Our analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we document that the historical presence of European immigrants is associated with a more liberal political ideology and with stronger preferences for redistribution among US born individuals today. Next, we show that this correlation is not explained by the characteristics of the counties where immigrants settled or other specific, socioeconomic immigrants' traits. Finally, we provide evidence that our findings are driven by immigrants who had been more exposed to social-welfare reforms in their country of origin. Consistent with a mechanism of transmission from immigrants to natives, results are stronger when inter-group contact, measured with intermarriage and residential integration, was higher. Our findings also indicate that immigrants influenced American political ideology during one of the largest episodes of redistribution in US history -- the New Deal -- and that such effects persisted after the initial shock.