Exposure to Immigrants and Voting on Immigration Policy: Evidence from Switzerland

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Abstract

This paper aims at explaining how changes in attitudes towards immigration are explained by the exposure of natives to immigrants at the local level. We use two referenda on restricting immigration in the years 2000 and 2014 to obtain a measure of anti-immigration attitudes at the municipality level. We find support for the contact hypothesis at the local level: anti-immigration attitudes decreases over time in municipalities having a high share of immigrants in 2000, while the variation in the immigration share does not matter. Moreover, in regions where the share of highly educated natives increases over time, the local response to immigration is even more favorable. However, in regions where the unemployment rate of natives and the housing prices increases, the contact with immigrants has a less favorable effect on attitudes towards immigration. We also find that the composition of the share of immigrants in terms of linguistic proximity to the natives does not affect their attitudes toward immigration.

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