Individual Labor Migration Preferences: Culture, Context or Competition?

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Abstract: Existing literature theorizes that immigration has an impact on the wages and employment of native workers. At the same time, individual attitudes towards migration are also affected by other material, cultural or social concerns. Empirically, however, it is often hard to disentangle these different explanations. By taking advantage of the fact that different types of labor migration, namely either taking residence and working in a country vs. commuting over the border, equally affect labor market competition for natives, but have very different cultural and social implications, we strive to identify the effect of labor migration on attitudes towards migration. We argue that if economic threat was most important to natives' opinion formation, we should not see any differences in respondents' evaluation of our two groups of labor migrants, cross-border commuters vs. resident foreigners. Yet we would expect to see differentiated reactions if respondents also took additional cultural, material and social aspects into account. To empirically explore whether there is a difference in natives' evaluations of the two different types of labor migration, we embedded two experiments within a representative survey of the Swiss population, one priming and one conjoint experiment. By varying, among other things, whether immigrants live in Switzerland or merely commute for work and return to their home country we are able to show that - counter to our expectations – cross-border commuters are perceived more negatively than resident foreigners. Moreover, our results also show that citizens indeed react to the labor market threat posed by cross-border commuters, but that this effect is especially pronounced for natives most exposed to cross-border commuters.