NATION-BUILDING THROUGH COMPULSORY SCHOOLING: Evidence from the United States during the age of mass migration from Europe

Compulsory schooling for immigrants was used as a nation-building tool in the United States in the early twentieth century, according to research by Oriana Bandiera, Myra Mohnen, Imran Rasul and Martina Viarengo, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Geneva in August 2016.

Migration from Europe to the United States in the twentieth century was one of the largest voluntary migratory flows in modern history. Many of those migrants came from countries with no compulsory schooling, and the research uses historical sources to show that legislation to introduce compulsory schooling in English was used as a tool to introduce common civic values; that it was introduced earlier in states with a larger population of migrants with low exposure to civic values before they migrated; and that the demand for this type of schooling increased more in areas with large numbers of European migrants.

The authors say: ‘Prior research has shown the fundamental role of a state’s education system in nation-building. This study highlights the link between mass migration and the policy responses of American-born voters in receiving states by showing that compulsory schooling was used by Americans as a nation-building tool.’

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Understanding the long-run consequences of large-scale migratory flows is a key issue for academics and policy-makers. This study contributes to our understanding of the consequences of migration on shaping institutions in the host country by taking a long-run perspective and focusing on one of the largest voluntary migratory flows ever recorded in modern history – the phenomenon of mass migration, (largely) from European countries to the United States, at the turn of the twentieth century.

The researchers examine the introduction of an institution, compulsory schooling, which provides the foundations of the Americanisation movement and was followed by other pieces of legislation linked to migration, such as the introduction of the statutes requiring English as the language of instruction (English-only laws), the 1917 Literacy Act and the Quota Acts of the 1920s.

Prior research has shown the fundamental role of a state’s education system in nation-building. This study highlights the link between mass migration and the policy responses of American-born voters in receiving states by showing that compulsory schooling was used by Americans as a nation-building tool to homogenise the civic values of migrants coming from countries with no compulsory state schooling system. It advances our knowledge with three main findings.

First, by drawing on a large body of qualitative evidence, derived from a variety of historical sources, it shows that the desire to homogenise the migrant population was first-order among school reformers and in the political debate surrounding the passage of the compulsory schooling laws across the US states.

Second, the empirical analysis suggests that compulsory schooling was introduced at an earlier stage in those states with a larger share of migrants with a lower exposure to
civic values in their country of origin. Results are robust to alternative explanations based on other sources of within-migrant diversity such as religion, region of origin and language. Moreover, several robustness checks confirm the validity of the nation-building motives vis-à-vis other mechanisms that may explain state intervention in education.

Third, the study shows that the demand for the provision of public schooling was lower in those counties with a larger share of migrants from countries that had not yet introduced compulsory schooling. Over time, following the passage of the legislation, the demand for the provision of public schooling increased, and the increase was greater for this subgroup of European migrants, suggesting that compulsory schooling led these migrants to be more exposed to the American common schooling system.

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Notes for editors: ‘Nation-Building through Compulsory Schooling during the Age of Mass Migration’ by Oriana Bandiera, Myra Mohnen, Imran Rasul and Martina Viarengo.

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