

Rights or Needs: Fundraising for Stigmatized Groups

Nicholas A. R. Fraser

A Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative publication with funding support from the Othering and Belonging Institute.

“It is important to understand the roots of the racism we see affecting Asian American communities today in order to better address ongoing violence and prevent such attacks in the future.”

The Red Cross, International Rescue Committee and other cross-border aid groups send out regular appeals for help, whether to support Syrian refugees in Turkey or Ukrainians fleeing the fighting in their homeland. Closer to campus, non-profit organizations such as Berkeley’s East Bay Sanctuary Covenant provide legal and social services and advance community organizing for low-income immigrants and people fleeing violence and persecution. Good will is essential for these initiatives, but so too is financial backing.

Collecting money for those in need is thus a core function of charities. But would people who donate money to those in need be as generous if they knew the funds would help a negatively stereotyped minority group? If not, can prospective donors be persuaded to change their minds by appealing to human rights? These are important questions because those who often need the most help tend to be stigmatized minority populations.

A Real-World Fundraising Experiment

Professor of Law Dr. Katerina Linos and her colleagues Dr. Laura Jakli (Harvard University) and Dr. Melissa Carlson (Stanford University) investigate these questions in their 2021 study, “Fundraising for Stigmatized Groups: A Text Message

Donation Experiment.”¹ The results of this study are instructive for policymakers and for non-profit organizations that increasingly deliver public services. Their research shows that needs-focused appeals are more effective at persuading donors than messages which emphasize human rights or highlight group identity.

Partnering with a local NGO (Prolepsis) that serves free lunches in public schools (the Diatrofi Program)², Linos, Jakli, and Carlson designed an experiment embedded within a text-to-give campaign run across Greece. All participants received a text message asking them to donate to the campaign (1.5 euro [$<US\$2$]), but some people received messages that specified that the money would help a Greek or Roma child (as opposed to helping a non-specific child). As Europe’s largest ethnic minority group, Roma tend to live in poor, segregated communities and face discrimination based on negative stereotypes depicting them as aimless beggars³. By comparing donors’ responses toward Greek and Roma children, this experiment

1 Linos, Katerina, Laura Jakli, and Melissa Carlson. “Fundraising for Stigmatized Groups: A Text Message Donation Experiment.” *American Political Science Review* 115(1): 14-30.

2 For more information on the Diatrofi Program see: <http://diatrofi.prolepsis.gr/en/>

3 “EU presents plan to improve plight of its Roma minority,” AP News, October 7, 2020 (<https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-europe-poverty-archive-db4e97d579e94b8590191784708ad868>)



provides valuable insights about charitable giving to ethnic minority groups. The study revealed that Greeks were less likely to donate when they received information telling them that Roma children would benefit from the free school lunch program.

Understanding Discrimination and the Limits of Rights-Based Appeals

Several academic studies on prejudice argue that people prefer to help members of their in-group and simultaneously exclude out-groups (such as ethnic minorities and immigrants)⁴. Were the study results a simple affirmation of these in-group and out-group biases?

Not quite. Considering this possibility, Linos, Jakli, and Carlson compared responses from participants who were told their donations would help children, Greek children, and Roma children. Explicitly mentioning a Roma child as a beneficiary of the lunch program cut donations in half. Yet, prospective donors did not become more generous when told that their money would benefit fellow Greeks. Furthermore, those living in areas with larger Roma communities who were told their money would benefit a Roma child were the least likely to donate money. This suggests that people may seek to exclude out-groups even if it does not help members of their own group – a finding that disputes previous research on public support for policies that benefit ethnic minorities.

How might charitable organizations overcome potential donors' biases? Linos and colleagues' research also challenged the assumption that NGOs can expand charitable donations by appealing to human rights. Many NGOs place a lot of stock in the power of human rights to win support for their initiatives. Human rights are viewed as a universal appeal, one that underscores the dignity and humanity of all people, regardless of background. For instance, UNICEF's donation webpage makes a universal, rights-based argument to solicit donations ("Every child has the right to learn").⁵ NGOs have

4 For instance, ethnic diversity tends to undermine support welfare in the US (Luttmer, Erzo F. 2001. "Group Loyalty and the Taste for Redistribution." *Journal of Political Economy* 109 (3): 500–28). Similarly, Europeans tend to be less supportive of extending welfare benefits to immigrants (Larsen, Christian Albrekt, and Thomas Engel Dejgaard. 2013. "The Institutional Logic of Images of the Poor and Welfare Recipients: A Comparative Study of British, Swedish and Danish Newspapers." *Journal of European Social Policy* 23 (3): 287–99).

5 UNICEF (2020). "Education Program." United Nations Children's Fund. (<https://unicef.org/education>)

relied on this strategy to help Europe's Roma

communities for several years⁶.

While the language of human rights is attractive to those pushing for minority rights such as civil society organizations, lawyers, and academics, it is unclear how persuasive this rhetoric is with the general public. To test this, Linos, Jakli and Carlson's experiment randomly sent some prospective donors a rights-based appeal designed to persuade them to give ("Every child has a right to food."). They found that prospective donors were generally not persuaded by human rights language but especially when they were told their contribution would help a Roma child.

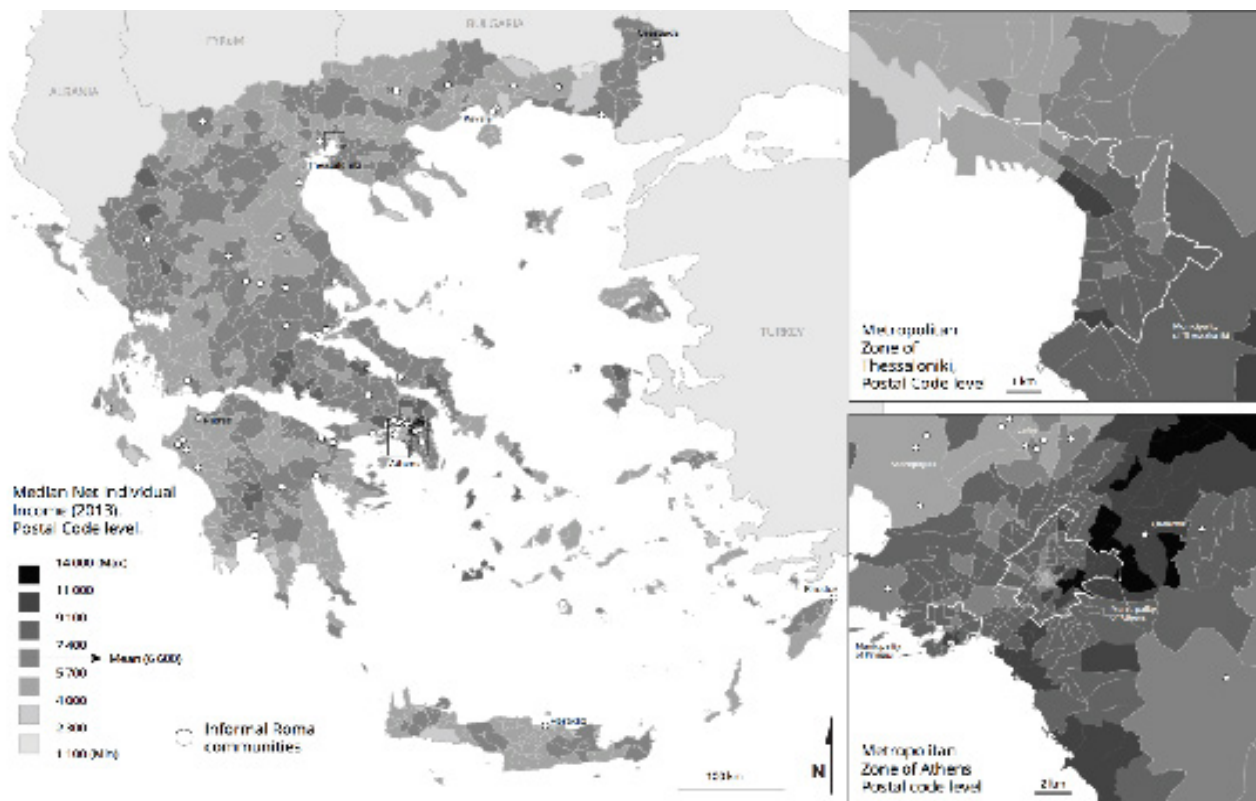
Can prospective donors be persuaded to give to out-groups? Though the results of their experiment suggest not, Linos and colleagues conducted interviews with Greek school principals that revealed several local efforts to help Roma communities. According to these school officials, campaigns to help Roma were largely supported by national and international NGOs. However, local residents (ethnic Greeks) mostly became involved in these efforts when helping Roma was presented as addressing basic needs, such as providing clothing or food. In other words, the key to maximizing donations that help stigmatized out-groups may be to emphasize needs instead of rights.

Implications for Vulnerable Migrants

For policymakers and those seeking to help vulnerable migrants, Linos and colleagues' study suggests that needs rather than rights-based appeals may be the wrong way to justify extending benefits to immigrants and refugees. In other words, calling attention to migrants' vulnerability may be the best way to win over of the public who otherwise might be indifferent to or even skeptical of policies designed to help immigrants and refugees.

6 Cortes, Ismael. 2015. "Interview with Zeljko Jovanovic, Director of the Roma Initiatives Office at the Open Society Foundations." (Romea.cz. <http://romea.cz/en/features-and-commentary/interviews/interview-with-zeljko-jovanovic-director-of-the-romainitiatives-office-at-the-open-society-foundations>)





7 Figure 1. Map of Donations and Income Distribution across Greece

This brief is produced by Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative with funding from the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley.

Citation

Fraser, Nicholas A. R. 2022. "Rights or Needs: Fundraising for Stigmatized Groups." BIMI-Othering & Belonging Institute Policy Brief Series. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative.

Design & Layout

Al Nelson, Carlin Praytor, Alexandra Gessesse

Contact

Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative
bimi@berkeley.edu
<https://bimi.berkeley.edu>

118 Moses Hall
Berkeley CA, 94720

About the Author

Dr. Fraser received his Ph.D. in political science at the University of Toronto, with a specialty in comparative politics and public policy. He holds a B.A. in political science from the University of Calgary, as well as M.A.s in political science from the University of British Columbia and Waseda University in Japan. His research focuses on how states attempt to control and manage the long-term impacts of immigration; it also engages questions about how interest groups, agencies, and courts influence policy and public attitudes in these fields. He has received numerous previous research grants, including the SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship, and was formerly a fellow at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy in Toronto.