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Alberto Alesina (1957–2020)

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1 Introduction

Alberto Alesina was born in 1957 in Broni, Pavia, Italy, obtained his undergraduate degree in economics from Bocconi University and his PhD in economics from Harvard University. He was the Nathaniel Ropes Professor of Political Economy at Harvard, where he taught for more than three decades and where he also served as chairman of the Department of Economics from 2003–2006. Alberto was a member of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) and the director of the NBER Political Economy Program, which he created in 2006. He was a co-editor of the *Quarterly Journal of*

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Economics, an associate editor of many academic journals and was an active columnist in leading newspapers around the world.

He had a strong passion for research, which led him to open up new avenues and to go off the beaten track. 'If we want economics to survive as a discipline', he used to say, 'we need the courage to extend its frontiers to the sphere of history and sociology'. Indomitable were his curiosity and intuition. A curiosity for the dynamics of our society and for its history and about the life of the people close to him, his students, his colleagues, his friends, whether talking economics, physics or cognitive sciences. The curiosity of intelligent people, who never stop listening and learning. This was the quality that made him a great teacher and a mentor for so many students, many of whom over the years became collaborators and colleagues—because Alberto, though solitary and taciturn, was an insatiable collaborator in his work.

Infinite was his humanity. Alberto was a rare person in whom brilliance meets with pitiless self-irony. Only towards stupidity and banality was he impatient, often dismissive. Like all intelligent people, he was always ready to admit his mistakes.

He was stubbornly obsessed with the glass ceilings against which women's working lives clash. The last chapter of *L'Italia Fatta in Casa* (2009) written with Andrea Ichino, compares an evening in the home of two families: one in Italy, the other in the US, an analysis that in a few pages was worth many treatises on gender equality. Alberto tenaciously sought the origin of such phenomena, as was also demonstrated in his work "On the Origin of Gender Roles: Women and the Plough" (Alesina et al. 2013). With extraordinary vitality he also wondered about multi-ethnic societies and their destiny. 'Immigration is going to make Europe explode', he wrote in *The Future of Europe* (Alesina and Giavazzi 2006: 31), at least a decade before the arrival of boats from North Africa.

Alberto always retained a keen interest in public policy. His latest (prize-winning) book, *Austerity*, shows that the consequences of contractionary fiscal policies differ depending on how they are carried out. He was an influential contributor to policy debates, through his academic work and through a regular column in the widely read Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*.

Alberto was one of the most creative economists of his time. He had two characteristics that made his work so important and influential. First, he asked new fundamental questions, which nobody had asked before. Second, he had a powerful intuition, which enabled him to single out the key aspects of a problem. His explanations often seemed so simple and obvious that you often wondered why nobody had thought of them before. And yet, they were new and surprising, and opened up new theories and ideas in many fields of economics.

On a personal note, Alberto had a passion for the mountains: the Alaskan glaciers, as well as the hard grey rock of his Mont Blanc, which he contrasted with sharp irony with the "hills" of the Dolomites. He married Susan Adler, a graduate of Harvard Business School, in 2000. His survivors include his wife and a sister.

2 Political Economics

Alberto was one of the foundational pillars of political economy over many decades. His work was hugely influential and his research productivity unparalleled. He trained as a macroeconomist, and his PhD thesis opened up various aspects of the field of political economy in the heyday of rational expectations and applied game theory. Alberto was one of the first to apply the insights of these powerful new tools to explain policy choices by supposedly rational and strategic politicians.

The themes he explored in the first phase of his research career reflected his Italian background. He grew up in Italy in the 1970s. This was a period of stark ideological and political conflict, with extreme polarisation leading to frequent strikes, left-wing terrorism, and capital flight. It was obvious that these conflicts had a major impact on the economy, but they were mostly neglected by research economists in the 1980s. Politics was at the heart of the School of Public Choice, although the focus of this line of inquiry was on agency problems, or lobbying by special interests. Macroeconomics was mainly devoted to general equilibrium analysis of representative agent models, where politics did not matter. The main contribution of Alberto's early work was to show that political conflict has a central role in explaining several macroeconomic phenomena.

In Alberto's early work, he took seriously the idea that politicians are also motivated by partisan ideologies, and not only by opportunistic motives. This seems obvious now, but until then politicians were seen as exclusively guided by the desire to win votes, and policy convergence at the election was taken as the norm. He then went on to study how election outcomes affect business fluctuations, and how political polarisation and harmful policy divergence are moderated by voters at elections, or by cooperation between politicians alternating in office.

Alberto then took some of the insights of his earlier papers and applied them to dynamic economies. He showed that political conflict and polarisation are central to explaining the accumulation of government debt and procrastination when it came to painful policy choices, and explored how redistributive conflict influences economic growth. In a number of pioneering contributions, Alberto then explored the implications of political and economic conflict for secession or integration by sovereign nations.

This first phase of Alberto's research was mostly, though not exclusively, theoretical. It was also firmly grounded on the assumption that voters and policy makers are rational. But while the assumption of rationality is appropriate to study the behaviour of professional politicians, it is much less convincing when used to explain how people vote. Alberto was amongst the first economists to acknowledge this limitation, and to adapt insights from sociology to explain voters' behaviour. In several subsequent pioneering contributions, he showed how slow-moving cultural traits influence economic, political and administrative behaviour in a number of domains, including courts of justice, how conflict resolution is easier amongst co-ethnicities or people who trust each other, and what consequences this has for public good provision and preferences for redistribution.

This more recent line of research was primarily empirical. The microeconometric revolution changed how evidence is brought to bear to economic analysis, and imposed new standards for causal inference. Alberto was again amongst the first to realise what was happening. Directly through the example of his own work and indirectly through his leadership of the NBER Political Economy Program, he had a huge impact in changing how innovative research is done in political economy. What once was a field of applied theory is now primarily an empirical field of research.

This transformative impact on the field of political economy continued until his last days. For example, the collection and analysis of original survey data is now an important step in understanding voters' behaviour, and Alberto's final contributions in this area provided key new insights on how voters form their preferences and beliefs.

3 Fiscal Austerity

Reflecting on Alberto's contributions to fiscal policy is an excellent opportunity to remember him as his attitude towards budgetary matters was a reflection of his *weltanschauung*.

3.1 Government Debt and Younger Generations

As witnessed by his passionate work as a student adviser, Alberto cared enormously for younger generations of economists. Academic and public debates can sometimes focus strongly on the intragenerational distribution effects of government debt and much less on the intergenerational effects. Government debt transfers resources from future generations to the current generation, and future generations do not have a say in it. In advanced economies, government debt has been growing constantly over the last fifty years, mainly because tax revenues have not kept pace with the expansion in government spending. In a recent article, Yared (2019) analysed the three possible functions served by public debt according to normative economic theory: to facilitate tax smoothing, to provide a safe asset, and to sustain dynamic efficiency. He concluded that the broad-based long-run trend of debt accumulation seems inconsistent with any theory of optimal debt policy.

In the introduction of their recent book on austerity, Alberto, Carlo Favero and Francesco Giavazzi (Alesina et al. 2019) point out that if governments followed "adequate" fiscal policies most of the time, we would almost never see austerity: governments should run a deficit during recessions—when tax revenues are low and public expenditure is high—and during periods of temporarily high spending needs, say because of a natural calamity or a war. These deficits should be balanced by surpluses during booms and when temporary spending needs are low. In addition, forward-looking governments might want to accumulate funds for "rainy days" to be used when spending needs are temporarily and exceptionally high. If governments followed these prescriptions, austerity would never be needed. However, deficits often accumulate even when the economy is growing and the deficits produced during recessions are not compensated for by surpluses during booms. Alberto kept reminding us that only four out of 20 advanced countries have run a budget surplus for more than half the period since the 1960s.

Political economy theories can explain this trend as due to irresponsible governments who are short-sighted and promote immediate goals at the expense of long-term ones, this due to factors such as ageing populations, political polarisation and electoral uncertainty (see Alesina and Tabellini 1990, Alesina and Drazen 1991, Alesina and Passalacqua 2016 and Yared 2019). Alberto liked to organise his contributions on this issue around three questions: (a) Does composition matter? (b) Are fiscal adjustments always contractionary? and (c) Are fiscal adjustments politically costly?

Does Composition Matter?: Yes, indeed. Alesina and Perotti (1995, 1996) find that large fiscal expansions typically are biased towards increases in expenditure, while large fiscal adjustments on average rely more on tax increases. Fiscal adjustments that lead to permanent improvements in the fiscal balance are those implemented via cuts in transfer programmes and compensation of government employees. Instead, unsuccessful stabilisation programmes are typically carried out almost exclusively via tax increases. A fiscal adjustment cannot have long-lasting effects unless it tackles two types of expenditure—on government employment and on social programmes—often regarded as "untouchable" by policy makers and their advisers. Alesina and Ardagna (1998) expand on these results by identifying from the empirical evidence two ingredients for successful spending cuts: a wage agreement with the unions and a devaluation prior to the adjustment. Alesina and Ardagna (2010, 2013) examine the evidence on episodes of large changes in fiscal policy, both in cases of stimuli and in that of fiscal adjustments, in OECD countries from 1970 to 2007. Fiscal stimuli based upon tax cuts are more likely to increase growth than those based upon spending increases. As for fiscal adjustments, those based upon spending cuts and no tax increases are more likely to reduce deficits and debt-to-GDP ratios than those based on tax increases. In addition, adjustments on the spending side rather than on the tax side are less likely to create recessions.

Alesina et al. (2019) expand on the database built by Devries et al. (2011) as a consequence of the heated debate on the simple identification scheme introduced by Alesina and Ardagna (2010, 2013), based on the dimension of fiscal adjustment. Alesina and Ardagna (2013) consider narratively identified fiscal adjustment plans in OECD countries over the previous three decades. Narrative identification and the introduction of the analysis of multi-year fiscal plans strengthened the simple original identification scheme and confirmed the main results. Tax-based adjustments are deeply recessionary in the short to medium run (up to three or four years after they are introduced), inducing large declines in GDP. On the other hand, austerity policies based on spending cuts have relatively low costs in terms of output losses. Moreover, austerity based upon tax hikes has often resulted in an increase in the debt-to-GDP ratio, while austerity based on expenditure cuts stabilises the debt-to-GDP ratio.

What could explain these rather remarkable differences between expenditure-based and tax-based austerity? One possibility is that the difference is simply due to a systematic difference in accompanying policies: supportive monetary policy, exchange rate devaluations or supply-side reforms, all of which could "help" spending-based austerity more than tax-based austerity. The question is whether systematic differences in accompanying policies can explain the different output effects of expenditure- versus tax-based austerity. The answer to this question is negative. This of course does not mean that accompanying policies are irrelevant, but simply that they cannot explain the differences between the two types of austerity policies.

A second more promising explanation has to do with expectations and confidence. Imagine a situation in which an economy is on an unsustainable path with an exploding public debt. Sooner or later, a fiscal stabilisation must occur. The longer this is postponed, the higher the taxes that will need to be raised or the spending to be cut in the future. When the stabilisation eventually occurs, it removes the uncertainty about further delays which would have increased the costs of the stabilisation even more. The beneficial effects of the removal of uncertainty are more likely to occur with spending cuts than tax hikes. This is because the latter does not address the automatic growth of entitlements and other spending programmes; thus it does not produce a long-lasting effect on the budget. Our findings on the behaviour of business confidence during episodes of austerity support this view. The effects of confidence on demand might also be paired with a different response of the supply side of the economy to temporary versus permanent tax hikes and spending cuts.

Are Fiscal Adjustments Always Contractionary?: Alberto's answer is "no". As put by *The Economist* in 2020, 'Mr Alesina did not mind being a dissenting voice'. In a Keynesian single-period set up, intertemporal effects do not exist and fiscal adjustments are always contractionary, with the tax multiplier always larger than the expenditure multiplier. These effects change drastically in an intertemporal set up where expectations matter. The idea of finding evidence in favour of "expansionary austerity", which would be labelled an oxymoron by Keynesians, certainly stimulated Alberto's curiosity. Indeed, as illustrated by Giavazzi and Pagano (1990), Alesina et al. (1998) and Alesina et al. (2019), episodes of "expansionary austerity" have been observed. Alesina et al. (2002) contribute to explaining the "non-Keynesian" effects of fiscal adjustments by evaluating the impact of fiscal policy on investment in OECD countries. The main finding of a sizeable negative effect of public spending—and in particular of its wage component—on profits and on business investment is related to theoretical models in which government employment creates wage pressure in the private sector. However, the analysis of fiscal plans in Alesina et al. (2019) shows that the non-Keynesian features of low output costs of expenditure-based adjustments and high output costs of tax-based adjustments are a much more common and significant outcome in the data than "expansionary austerity".

Are Fiscal Adjustments Politically Costly?: Alberto investigated extensively whether the common wisdom according to which governments that follow tight fiscal policies tend to lose popularity as they cut the deficit and are replaced in office. His answers to both questions was an unambiguous "no".

Alesina et al. (1998) provide first, evidence for the "no", and then consider two alternative explanations for it: either voters are fiscally prudent themselves and approve of tight fiscal policies, or fiscally prudent governments choose the appropriate moment to implement unpopular policies. The first explanation is favoured by the authors. A question then naturally arises as to why fiscal adjustments are so politically charged and difficult. The answer proposed is that successful fiscal adjustments imply cuts in public sector wages and in transfers, including social security, directly affecting two constituencies that are very powerful in many countries: public sector employees and pensioners. Evidence which is contrary to the common view amongst commentators that deficit reduction policies are the kiss of death for the governments which implement them is also provided in Alesina and Passalacqua (2016) and Alesina et al. (2019). The electoral effects of austerity are not always clear cut or easy to predict. Several governments (and not only in Germany) have extended their time in office during periods of austerity.

3.2 What Would Alberto Make of the Large Fiscal Expansions During the Pandemic and After?

Alberto left us just a few months after the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world. But not too early to leave us some thoughts on the appropriate fiscal policy response. In an op-ed written with Francesco Giavazzi (Alesina and Giavazzi 2020: 24), Alberto wrote:

> [Faced with a pandemic,] avoiding a fall in aggregate demand should be the main task of economic policy. To avoid a cut in consumption, households need to be guaranteed that no matter the sector in which they work, no matter the labor contract they work under, if their firm shuts down because of the pandemic their income will not fall. In other words, nobody should lose her income because of the virus. And such a commitment should be unconditional. This is not the moment for half-baked measures which could end up costing even more.

This is indeed what governments around the world did. The result was that countries suffered very deep but also very short recessions: three years since the start of the pandemic, output in most countries is back to pre-pandemic levels. In the meantime, however, public debt has increased markedly in most countries. Alberto would say that the pandemic is like a war: as during wars, debt should be allowed to increase, to be cut when the war is over. He would add that when the time comes to rein in the deficit, remember the lessons on the effects of the composition of a fiscal adjustment.

One feature of recent EU fiscal policy has been the launch of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) programme, a large increase in public investment funded in part by national governments and in part through debt jointly issued by EU countries. Here we can only guess what Alberto's position might have been. We believe he would have approved of it because of the combination of spending focused to accelerate a "green transition" and reforms designed to make EU economies more competitive, all closely monitored by the Commission. However, an analysis of such a programme—Alberto would have noted—requires a different macroeconomic framework, one that moves beyond the study of short-run fluctuations and instead analyses the medium and long run, in the sense of Blanchard (2021). Within such a framework, fiscal policy can increase potential output, thus producing long-run supply-side effects. Nevertheless, the usual caveat regarding the short run still applies: whenever you try to accelerate the economy beyond its potential, higher inflation is more likely, and this puts at risk the expansionary effects of fiscal policy on output growth.

4 Preferences for Redistribution, Ethnic Diversity and the Economics of Culture

Alberto followed a multidisciplinary approach in many of his articles combining insights from sociology, psychology and cultural anthropology. He was one of the pioneers to a new and recent area of research on culture and economics, investigating the importance of norms, values and beliefs in shaping economic outcomes. Alberto contributed to this area by looking specifically at how culture and beliefs affect economic and political outcomes, how they are formed and how they are transmitted over time.

4.1 Preferences for Redistribution

In *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe: A World of Difference* (2004), Alberto and Edward Glaeser looked at why European countries have significantly larger welfare states than the US, and why these countries shift income from the wealthy to the poor. After examining the traditional economic explanations, such as the level of pre-tax inequality, differences in social mobility, the efficiency of the tax system and economic instability, they focused on the importance of racial diversity and political institutions. America's greater ethnic heterogeneity explains one-half of the difference in redistribution levels while the other half is explained by America's older and more pro-property institutions.

Interest in preferences for redistribution continued throughout Alberto's life. In "Preferences for Redistribution in the Land of Opportunities" (2005), Alberto and Eliana La Ferrara show that it is not general mobility that matters but the subjective perception of future mobility: people believing in the American Dream are more reluctant to redistribute, as the poor of today could be the rich of tomorrow. This is an important question, which could also explain differences in the size of the welfare state in the US and Europe.

Alberto continued this original line of work with Stefanie Stantcheva and Edoardo Teso in "Intergenerational Mobility and Preferences for Redistribution" (2018). They conducted large surveys in five different countries: France, Italy, Sweden, the UK and the US, finding that Americans are more optimistic about social mobility, and that this reduces their preferences for redistribution. Europeans are not only more pessimistic than Americans but also more pessimistic compared to the real level of mobility. One interesting aspect that the paper uncovered, which is also novel in the literature, is an important ideological divide: left-leaning individuals are more pessimistic about mobility and this is what drives their preferences for redistribution. They also support more redistribution after information is provided about the extent of mobility in a country. More pessimistic right-leaning individuals do not generally support redistribution, most likely because of their negative views about the role of government. The experimental treatment of making people more pessimistic has a strong effect and also polarises people, with Democrats becoming more pro-redistribution and Republicans reacting to the information treatment but not changing their preferences for redistribution accordingly.

The importance of beliefs is at the core of the connection between preferences for redistribution and different types of welfare state, a topic explored in *Fighting Poverty in the US and Europe*. In "Fairness and Redistribution" (2005), Alberto and George-Marios Angeletos show that when individuals believe that effort is the main driver of success in life, they are less inclined to redistribute and want a lower level of taxation. Individuals who, on the other hand, believe in the importance of luck, will prefer higher taxes and levels of redistribution. These societal and welfare arrangements will, in turn, reinforce initial differences in beliefs, and could also help explain some of the difference in the size of the welfare state in the US and Europe.

Historical experiences and indoctrination also shape preferences for redistribution. In "Goodbye Lenin (or not): The Effect of Communism on

People's Preferences" (2007), Alberto and Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln show that communism shaped individual preferences and values long after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

In more recent years, Alberto started to make fundamental contributions to another aspect of preferences for redistribution, namely the link with immigration. In "Immigration and Preferences for Redistribution in Europe" (2021), Alberto, Elie Murard and Hillel Rapoport find that individuals living in areas more exposed to immigration hold lower preferences for redistribution, using regional variation from European countries. In "Immigration and Redistribution" (2021), Alberto, Armando Miano and Stefanie Stantcheva creatively study if views about redistribution are correlated with the way in which people perceive immigrants. They find that people overestimate the number of immigrants, and think that immigrants are culturally and religiously more different than them, as well as being economically weaker (less educated, more likely to be unemployed and more reliant on government transfers). Perceptions of immigrants are systematically wrong and negative; just making people think about immigrants brings out baseline negative views and generates a negative impact on preferences for redistribution.

Alberto's interest in preferences for redistribution was an example of the way in which he was able to do research. He had a remarkable ability for finding important questions, figured out how to ask them and came up with interesting answers, all the time driven by a desire to study every aspect of the problem. Moreover, he did all this through the writing of books, contributing theoretical insights through journal articles, and providing empirical evidence collected from his own surveys.

4.2 Ethnic Diversity

Alberto's work on preferences for redistribution was related to another important area of his research, that on the political and public finance consequences of ethnic diversity. Together with Reza Baqir and Bill Easterly, he wrote a seminal paper on "Public Goods and Ethnic Divisions" (1999), showing that US localities characterised by higher ethnic fragmentation spend relatively less on local public goods such as education, roads, sewers, etc. The underlying idea is that different groups have differing preferences over the quality or quantity of these goods. Hence, when ethnic heterogeneity increases, the returns to each group from taxing themselves and providing the goods chosen by the median voter go down. This makes taxation and public good provision relatively less appealing.

This simple idea has given rise to a broad debate and a large number of contributions in the literature exploring the consequences of ethnic heterogeneity in a variety of settings and on a variety of outcomes. Not surprisingly, Alberto was a coauthor of many of these contributions. In work with Eliana La Ferrara, he shows that ethnic heterogeneity across US metropolitan areas negatively correlated with participation in social activities, so that more heterogeneous communities end up having lower levels of "social capital" (Alesina and La Ferrara 2000), as well as lower trust towards other individuals (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002). In subsequent work, Alesina and La Ferrara (2014) found that racial preferences can have dramatic consequences, including discrimination in death penalty cases in the US.

Alberto's work on ethnic heterogeneity was not confined to the US. Alesina and Zhuravskaya (2011) assembled a novel dataset on ethnic, linguistic and religious segregation of different groups across a large number of countries. They found that in countries where ethnic and linguistic groups live separately (i.e. with higher levels of segregation), there are lower levels of trust and quality of government. Alesina et al. (2016) use satellite images of night-time luminosity to construct a proxy for income inequality between ethnic groups in a variety of countries. They show that higher ethnic inequality is associated with lower levels of economic development. Furthermore, variations in geography across the homelands of ethnic groups explain a sizeable fraction of inequality. This research agenda points to the importance of factoring in disparities in the resources available to different social groups when designing development policies.

How different groups coexist and interact within societies is apparent in another line of research in which Alberto left a mark: the literature on endogenous jurisdictions. In a seminal paper, Alesina and Spolaore (1997) study the trade-off between the gains from economies of scale that large jurisdictions can achieve, and the costs in terms of preference heterogeneity among groups. Their model shows that democratisation can lead to secessions, and to the formation of an inefficiently large number of countries. A subsequent paper with Romain Wacziarg and Spolaore embeds trade restrictions in the model and shows that under free trade even small groups can have incentives to form separate jurisdictions (Alesina et al. 2000). They also present empirical evidence consistent with the idea that the degree of openness to trade acts as a mediating force on the benefits from country size.

In subsequent work with Baqir and Hoxby (2004), Alberto shows that the same trade-off between economies of scale and population heterogeneity uncovered in a cross-country setting also holds within the US. Looking at different types of administrative units, such as school districts and municipalities, they find evidence of a significant trade-off between economies of scale and racial as well as income heterogeneity. Research on inequality across social groups and unequal opportunities linked to the place of birth, which became prominent in subsequent years, demonstrates how forward-looking Alberto had been in identifying these as constraints to economic and social progress.

4.3 The Economics of Culture

In the second half of the 2000s, Alberto studied the importance of the family on economic outcomes. Together with Yann Algan, Pierre Cahuc and Paola Giuliano in "Family Values and the Regulation of Labor" (2015), he uncovered a connection between family structures and the regulation of labour, showing how societies with strong family ties are rationally inclined to choose stricter labour market regulations, which in turn could lead to lower wages and higher levels of unemployment, a topic broadly related to Banfield's (1958) amoral familism hypothesis: societies in which individuals only trust their family have low growth.

In Southern Europe, for example, strong family ties lead to lower mobility and fewer women working outside the home. As a natural continuation of this intellectual journey, Alberto then went back historically to study work specialisation by gender. In "On the Origin of Gender Roles: Women and the Plough", Alberto, Paola Giuliano and Nathan Nunn trace differences in the role of women in society to differences in agricultural technologies in pre-industrial times. Societies were broadly divided into two groups, those using plough agriculture, which required physical strength, and those using shifting agriculture, more compatible with female participation in agriculture and with childbearing. The main argument behind this line of research, originally investigated by the Danish economist Ester Boserup, is that the use of the plough in agriculture may have driven women out of agriculture and into household production. The paper, which combines pre-industrial plough-use data by ethnic group (from George Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967)), first shows that ethnic groups that used the plough in cultivation employed fewer women in agriculture. It then establishes that these differences in gender norms still persist today, including in societies where agriculture (and the plough) is much less relevant.

5 Conclusion

This chapter attempts to describe the enormous contribution of Alberto Alesina to the economics discipline, a "Scientific Odyssey", in the words of Ed Glaeser (2020). We had the privilege to be Alberto's coauthors and friends. He left us too suddenly and too soon, and it is impossible not to wonder what he could have achieved in the coming years. We are sure that his legacy will survive through the many students he mentored and the many friends he made everywhere. For all of us, Alberto is simply irreplaceable.

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