

Gerhards, Jürgen; Hans, Silke; Schupp, Jürgen

**Article**

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# German public opinion on admitting refugees

By Jürgen Gerhards, Silke Hans, and Jürgen Schupp

Since the beginning of 2016, the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study has been conducting a monthly survey of German attitudes, expectations, and fears concerning migration. The third wave of the survey,—the Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany (Stimmungsbarometer zu Geflüchteten in Deutschland)—, conducted in March 2016, shows that more than half of all respondents still associate the influx of refugees with more risks than opportunities. Nonetheless, a clear majority (81 percent of respondents) are in favor of admitting refugees and those fleeing political persecution, in accordance with international law. At the same time, however, the majority are of the conviction that refugees should be sent back to their home country once their reason for leaving it no longer pertains. Only 28 percent of all respondents are in favor of allowing refugees who have already been living in Germany for some time to remain in the country even after the situation in their country of origin has improved.

Since September 2014, surveys conducted by the elections research group (*Forschungsgruppe Wahlen*) have consistently ranked issues concerning migration, foreigners, and refugees as the most important problem in Germany.<sup>1</sup> In each of the SOEP's January, February, and March 2016 surveys conducted for the Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany, approximately three-quarters of respondents felt that the recent influx of refugees brought more risks than opportunities for Germany, at least in the short term.<sup>2</sup>

Does the German population's perception of this influx as a problem imply that the majority are not in favor of allowing any more refugees and persecuted individuals into the country? Which groups of refugees do Germans think should be granted asylum and which groups would they rather keep out? Should individuals who have been granted asylum be allowed to stay in Germany even when the reason they fled their home country no longer pertains? The third wave of the Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany, which is a representative survey of around 2,000 individuals conducted in Germany in March 2016,<sup>3</sup> provides information that will help us to answer these questions.

## Clear majority of German public in favor of temporarily admitting refugees and persecuted peoples in accordance with international law

The conditions under which refugees and politically persecuted individuals are admitted into the European Union and Germany is codified in various laws. At the

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Langzeitentwicklung\\_-\\_Themen\\_im\\_Ueberblick/Politik\\_II/#Probl1](http://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Langzeitentwicklung_-_Themen_im_Ueberblick/Politik_II/#Probl1), accessed April 24, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the January 2016 findings, see Philipp Eisnecker and Jürgen Schupp, "Flüchtlingszuwanderung: Mehrheit der Deutschen befürchtet negative Auswirkungen auf Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft," *DIW Wochenbericht*, no. 8 (2016), and for an update of the February 2016 findings, see Philipp Eisnecker and Jürgen Schupp, "Stimmungsbarometer zu Geflüchteten in Deutschland," *SOEPpapers on Multidisciplinary Panel Data Research*, no. 833 (Berlin: 2016).

<sup>3</sup> For more in-depth information about the survey, see Eisnecker and Schupp, "Flüchtlingszuwanderung."

Table 1

**Public opinion on the admission of different groups of refugees**  
In percent

Reason for seeking asylum	Disapproval	Ambivalence	Approval	Mean <sup>1</sup>
Subsidiary Protection (EU-Law)	10	8	81	8.9
Political Persecution because of ... (Geneva Convention)	20	16	63	7.4
Human rights activities	14	12	74	8.3
Labor union activities	31	20	49	6.5
Religion (Christian)	14	14	72	8.2
Religion (Muslims)	31	18	51	6.7
Ethnic Minority	21	15	64	7.6
Homosexuality	27	16	57	7.1
Overall assessment of all reasons for seeking asylum	19	13	69	7.4

<sup>1</sup> Values 1 to 11.

Source: CAPI-Bus, Module "Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany", February 25, 2016 – March 21, 2016. Calculations made by authors.

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A clear majority of respondents approves of those fleeing from war or civil war being granted the right to reside in Germany.

national level, Article 16a of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany sets out the right of asylum for persons persecuted on political grounds. In international law, the UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Refugee Convention) is the most pertinent: according to Article 1a of the Convention, a refugee is an individual who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." Whether or not there is evidence that an asylum-seeker has been persecuted, is established in an asylum procedure.<sup>4</sup>

The 1951 Refugee Convention, ratified by 146 countries, does not, however, apply to individuals who are fleeing war or civil war in their country of origin. The protection of this category of refugees is codified by what is known as the Qualification Directive<sup>5</sup> in EU law and is regulated in the national laws of the EU member states. Refugees

who fall outside the scope of the 1951 Refugee Convention are eligible for "subsidiary protection" if they face a real risk of suffering "serious harm,"<sup>6</sup> such as the death penalty, torture, or a threat to their lives caused by situations of international or internal armed conflict in their country of origin.<sup>7</sup>

Even if, in a democracy, a given law can be said to have a high level of legitimacy because it is either ratified by a government which was elected by the people or by the country's parliament, the public may not necessarily feel it to be legitimate. People may deem the legally defined conditions under which asylum status may be granted to be more or less legitimate. Accordingly, they will tend to either be in favor of or against admitting refugees or those fleeing political persecution.

The picture depicted by the Barometer is unambiguous (see Table 1): citizens largely perceive the law to be legitimate. The clear majority of respondents are of the conviction that people who seek refuge in Germany due to armed conflict in their country of origin should receive *subsidiary protection*. Popular support, at 81 percent and with a mean value of 8.9 on a scale from one to eleven (see box), is very high and, in fact, compared with all other reasons given for seeking asylum, represents the highest level of approval<sup>8</sup>.

### German public not in strong support of all reasons for seeking asylum

A majority of the public feel that persons who are protected under the 1951 Refugee Convention should be admitted into Germany. While popular support is relatively high at 63 percent with a median value of 7.4 and spans all reasons for persecution, it is considerably lower than in the case of refugees fleeing war and civil war. Around one in five respondents (compared with one in ten in the case of war refugees) is against Germany admitting persecuted people according to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Further, respondents apparently do not deem all reasons for seeking asylum set out in the Convention as equally legitimate. With respect to political persecution in the broadest sense, for instance, per-

<sup>6</sup> Directive 2011/95/EU, Article 15.

<sup>7</sup> In Germany, Section 4, para. 1 of the Asylum Act (AsylG) legislates for such obstacles to refoulement specific to the country of destination.

<sup>8</sup> This is important, since armed conflict in the country of origin will increasingly be the primary reason for Syrian refugees, currently the largest group of refugees in Germany, to be granted asylum in the future. For a transitional period, Syrians were awarded automatic refugee status under international law (1951 Refugee Convention). This is a higher protection status which accords more rights but has more stringent criteria. With the reintroduction of case-by-case assessments for Syrian refugees—the asylum procedure was simplified for them from November 2014 to December 2015—subsidiary protection status will once again become increasingly important.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent explanation of the German terms *Flucht*, *Asyl*, and *Migration*, see Robert Bosch Stiftung, *Chancen erkennen – Perspektiven schaffen – Integration ermöglichen. Bericht der Robert Bosch Expertenkommission zur Neuausrichtung der Flüchtlingspolitik* (Stuttgart: 2016), 27–35.

<sup>5</sup> Council Directive 2004/83/EC of April 29, 2004 as well as Directive 2011/95/EU of December 13, 2011.

## Box

**The data source of the Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany**

The Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany is a survey conducted in conjunction with DIW Berlin's longitudinal survey, Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study, and with the survey institute *TNS Infratest Sozialforschung* in Munich. The data source of each survey is a multi-layered, representative random sample with around 2,000 face-to-face interviews per wave, including questions on multiple issues. The survey's target group is Germans living in households, aged 14 and older. The field time of the survey results presented here was from February 25 to March 21, 2016.

In the refugee survey conducted in March 2016, respondents were asked, among other things, which groups of people, in their opinion, should be allowed to stay in Germany for several years as refugees and/or as those fleeing political persecution, and which should not. The questions were formulated in line with the two existing laws. First, respondents were asked about those eligible for subsidiary protection. Second, they were asked about various groups covered by the Geneva Convention, who are considered to be victims of political persecution. Here, a distinction was drawn between different reasons for persecution:

those at risk of persecution on the grounds of their commitment to *human rights* or *labor unions*, and those persecuted because of their religion as *Muslims* or *Christians*, as members of an *ethnic minority*, or as *homosexuals*. Respondents were asked in each case to indicate on a scale of 1 to 11 whether the relevant groups should be deported (1) or be allowed to remain in Germany (11).

The data in the tables show, for each reason for seeking asylum, the arithmetic mean of the level of support for the right of residency (minimum: 1, maximum: 11) as well as the share of respondents whose attitude toward the right of residency is negative (values of 1 to 5 on the scale), neutral (6), or positive (7 to 11). For each of the legal dimensions (subsidiary protection due to war, recognition on account of persecution in accordance with the Geneva Convention), and for all reasons for fleeing, the mean value of agreement with the various items was also calculated. Here, values between 5.5 and 6.5 are considered to be "neutral" while lower and higher values represent rejection of and agreement with the right of residence, respectively.

secution as a result of involvement in human rights activities is seen by 74 percent of respondents as a legitimate reason to be given asylum in Germany, compared with persecution for labor union activity, which meets the approval of just 49 percent of respondents.<sup>9</sup>

Similar differences are evident when we examine the persecution of individuals belonging to certain minority groups. While almost three-quarters of respondents are in favor of granting the right of residence to persecuted Christians, that figure is far lower in the case of persecuted ethnic minorities, homosexuals, and particularly persecuted Muslims.

The discrepancies with regard to religion are particularly striking. In this context, clearly the fact that around half of all respondents feel that refugees pose a threat to German cultural life and core values plays a role. This

threat is primarily projected onto Muslim refugees. Respondents who believe that refugees predominantly undermine rather than enrich Germany's cultural life and core values, tend to oppose the admission of persecuted Muslims, as is illustrated with the bivariate correlations of  $r=0.45$  and  $r=0.47$ , respectively. The correlation with opposition to persecuted Christians being admitted into Germany in contrast is substantially lower ( $r = 0.31$  and  $r = 0.32$ , respectively).

### **Majority of German public in favor of temporary residence for those granted refugee status**

Overall, the Barometer findings show that German perceptions of the legitimacy of admitting politically persecuted individuals into Germany corresponds, by and large, with existing law. This also applies to the permitted length of stay in Germany. Asylum law limits the right of residence as a matter of principle and makes it contingent on the continued existence of the reason for admission. Persons granted asylum under Article 16a of the Basic Law of Germany and those awarded refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention are subject to the same residency regulations and both initially receive a temporary three-year residence permit. Provided

<sup>9</sup> It is possible that survey respondents in Germany may find it difficult to imagine that people in other countries could be persecuted for labor union activity. In any case, this topic receives much less media attention than the persecution of human rights activists. Perhaps, labor union activity has more negative connotations than human rights activism. Labor union activity often involves the representation of an individual's own particular interests whereas human rights activists tend to be driven by more universalist motives.

Table 2

**Public opinion on the duration of residence rights granted to refugees**  
In percent

	Opinion on the admission of refugees <sup>1</sup>			Total
	Approval	Ambivalence	Disapproval	
When people granted refugee status have been living in Germany for some years, and the situation in their country of origin has improved, those refugees should...				
...be repatriated (values 1 to 5)	82	65	45	55
neutral (6)	10	18	19	17
... be allowed to remain in Germany (values 7 to 11)	9	17	35	28

<sup>1</sup> According to the overall assessment of all reasons for seeking asylum in the final row of table 1.

Source: CAPI-Bus, Module "Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany", February 25, 2016 – March 21, 2016. Calculations made by authors.

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Majority of Germans is in favor of repatriating those granted refugee status when the situation in the country of origin has improved.

there is no justification for revocation of the entitlement to asylum or refugee status, a permanent residence permit is then granted. Persons granted subsidiary protection, however, are generally initially awarded a one-year residence permit which can then be extended repeatedly by a further two years.<sup>10</sup> For each extension, the authorities must assess whether the conditions for awarding protection status continue to exist, for example, whether the armed conflict in the country of origin is ongoing. Only after seven years can an individual granted subsidiary protection receive a permanent residence permit under very strict conditions.<sup>11</sup> Thus, refugee status and subsidiary protection are not the same as the right to permanent residency in Germany.

According to the present survey, this aspect of the law also meets with the approval of the German population. The Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees asks whether respondents feel that refugees who were admitted into Germany and who have been living in the country for some years should be repatriated as soon as the situation

in their country of origin has sufficiently improved. At 55 percent, the majority of respondents believe that, in such cases, refugees should indeed be repatriated (see Table 2). Just 28 percent are in favor of granting individuals the right to remain. One in six are undecided on this question. Of those respondents who are neither for nor against admitting refugees into Germany, around half advocate repatriation in the event that the situation in the country of origin improves. Among those in favor of admitting refugees into Germany, around one-third believe they should receive a permanent right to reside in Germany (see Table 2).

Overall, the analysis shows a clear overlap between the German public's belief in the legitimacy of admitting refugees into the country and existing law. This applies both to their willingness to accommodate people in need and to provide them with protection, as well as to their interpretation of the right to protection as a temporary right of residence.

### Strong normative anchoring of refugee protection

How firmly are attitudes toward granting refugee status to those in need of protection anchored in the public consciousness? There are two arguments suggesting that the attitudes described above are stable and strongly internalized norms. First, the willingness to admit asylum seekers is still high despite the fact that many respondents fear disadvantages and risks for Germany as a consequence of the influx of refugees. Second, there are only relatively moderate socio-structural and politically motivated differences in respondents' belief in the legitimacy of admitting refugees into the country—high levels of support for accepting asylum seekers can be observed in almost all sections of the population.

With regard to the first argument, research into the low-cost hypothesis has shown that people stray from their normative attitudes if there are drawbacks to adhering to the norm.<sup>12</sup> It follows from this that the more firmly anchored the norm is, the more willing people will be to accept the disadvantages associated with it. The majority of adults in Germany tend to see the effects of the influx of refugees as negative and are of the opinion that this immigration brings more risks than opportunities in its wake.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For more detail on the different laws, see the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge), *Der Ablauf des deutschen Asylverfahrens* (last updated July 2015) (Nuremberg: 2015), accessed April 25, 2016, [http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Downloads/Infothek/Asyl/schema-ablaufasylverfahren.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile](http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Downloads/Infothek/Asyl/schema-ablaufasylverfahren.pdf?__blob=publicationFile)

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.bamf.de/DE/Migration/AsylFluechtlinge/Asylverfahren/Rechtsfolgen/rechtsfolgen-node.html>, accessed April 25, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> For an example of this hypothesis in a study of environmental behavior, see Andreas Diekmann and Peter Preisendörfer, "Persönliches Umweltverhalten – Diskrepanzen zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 41 (2) (1992): 226–251.

<sup>13</sup> See Eisnecker and Schupp, "Flüchtlingszuwanderung."

Table 3

**Assessment of the consequences of refugee migration**

In percent

	Consequences are ...			Approval of the admission of refugees from war or civil war among those who expect <i>negative</i> consequences from refugee migration
	rather negative	ambi-valent	rather positive	
Social consequences of refugee migration				
Is good or bad for the economy	39	23	39	71
Cultural life is undermined or enriched by refugees	44	21	35	70
Germany becomes a worse or better place to live because of the refugees	47	30	23	72
The core values of our society are undermined or enriched by refugees	51	30	18	70
The influx of refugees bears more risks or opportunities in the <i>short term</i>	74	11	15	78
The influx of refugees bears more risks or opportunities in the <i>long term</i>	48	15	37	70
Personal consequences of refugee migration				
	high (60–100)	medium (50)	low (0–40)	
Likelihood of <i>negative</i> personal consequences	19	9	72	62

Source: CAPI-Bus, Module "Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany", February 25, 2016 – March 21, 2016. Calculations made by authors.

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Despite the rather negative expectations regarding the social consequences of the influx of refugees, only one in five Germans expect negative effects for themselves or their families.

In the March 2016 survey of the Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany, respondents were asked again for their views on various issues such as how they thought immigration would impact on the economy or cultural life in Germany (see Table 3). It is only in relation to the consequences for the German economy that positive and negative assessments are more or less equally balanced. In all other dimensions, the expectation that the influx of refugees will have primarily negative effects prevails. This applies in particular to the short-term effects. Almost three-quarters of respondents believe that the influx of refugees brings more risks than opportunities in the short term. 15 percent of respondents see more opportunities than risks, although the Barometer's latest survey shows that negativity levels are slightly lower in all dimensions, compared to the results from January and February 2016, and the positive assessments are higher. It is remarkable, however, that, given their negative expectations for society as a whole, almost three-quarters of adults consider the probability of negative *personal* consequences to be low.

People's overall negative view has only a limited impact on their acceptance of granting people asylum in Germany. Table 3 shows the share of those who see primarily negative effects of refugee immigration but still support accepting those fleeing war and civil war. Even in this rather pessimistic group, over 70 percent of respon-

dents are in favor of granting refugees the right to remain in Germany. In particular, the fear of short-term problems appears to have virtually no effect on people's willingness to take in refugees. It is only among those who fear an increased chance of negative effects for themselves or their family that proportionally fewer respondents advocate a right of residence for (civil) war refugees. At 62 percent, however, here, too, supporters are still in the majority. In any case, at 19 percent, this group includes only a minority of respondents.

With regard to the second argument,—the high level of consistency in the findings across different groups of persons—election and attitude research has shown that belonging to particular social groups is associated with a higher probability of supporting xenophobic attitudes and of voting for right-wing parties.<sup>14</sup> We can assume that this also applies to attitudes toward acceptance of refugees. However, Table 4, which shows support for refugees across different groups, indicates that this is only the case to a very limited extent. Although there are certainly differences according to the respondents' level of education, place of origin (region), religious affiliation,

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Kai Arzheimer, "Die Wahl extremistischer Parteien" in *Handbuch Wahlforschung*, eds., Jürgen W. Falter und Harald Schoen, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: 2014), 523–561.



Table 4

**Approval of the admission of refugees from war or civil war in different social groups**

In percent

Social background and political orientation					
Education	low (9-year-degree)	medium (10-year-degree)	high (12-year-degree)		
	79	77	87		
Region of residence	East Germany	West Germany			
	74	83			
Place of residence	rural	small town	urban		
	74	86	86		
Political orientation	left	moderately left	medium	moderately right	right
	88	85	80	79	73
Religious denomination	none	Catholic	Protestant	Muslim	
	76	83	81	89	
Contact with refugees					
Professionally	never	occasionally	weekly	(almost) daily	
	79	86	84	79	
Day-to-day live	never	occasionally	weekly	(almost) daily	
	77	83	82	82	
Larger refugee shelter near place of residence	no	place of residence	neighborhood		
	78	79	88		

Source: CAPI-Bus, Module "Barometer of Public Opinion on Refugees in Germany", February 25, 2016 – March 21, 2016. Calculations made by authors.

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### Socio-demographic groups hardly differ in their approval of the admission of refugees from war or civil war.

and political leaning, these are comparatively less pronounced. Even in the groups that are least in favor of granting residence—those living in rural regions, eastern Germans, individuals with a lower level of education, and supporters of right-wing politics—an overwhelming 70 percent of respondents are nevertheless in favor of refugees being granted temporary residence in Germany. This also applies to respondents describing themselves as belonging to the right-wing of the political spectrum.

It also has very little effect whether respondents have contact with refugees, be it professionally, in their day-to-day lives, or from living near a mid- to large-sized refugee shelter. It might seem reasonable to assume that the type of contact would affect attitudes to right of residence, either positively or negatively. Here, too, the differences are minor, however, and there is a high level of support across all groups.

## Conclusion

Willingness to admit refugees is clearly based less on self-interest and considerations of the benefits than on a normative imperative to provide protection for those in

need. The German people support the current legal regulations although they believe that admitting refugees is not without its risks and disadvantages for their country.

However, the data also show that in the view of many Germans, the normative obligation to assist no longer pertains if the reason for fleeing and the persecution cease to exist. Only 28 percent of all respondents were in favor of allowing refugees who have already been in Germany for several years to remain if the situation in their home country improves. Here, too, German opinion is in agreement with applicable laws. The exceptional acts of fleeing war and persecution are regulated in *international* law. Permanent immigration is decided on the basis of *national* immigration law and the right of residence. The criteria regulating admission here are quite different and these do not so much follow universal norms as national interests first and foremost. Due to demographic change in Germany, it might be entirely in the national interest not to send refugees who, in the space of a few years, have become well integrated in the labor market and society back to their home countries as is typically done today but instead to offer them long-term prospects in Germany.

**Jürgen Gerhards** is Professor of Sociology at Freie Universität Berlin | [j.gerhards@fu-berlin.de](mailto:j.gerhards@fu-berlin.de)

**Silke Hans** is Professor of Sociology with a Focus on Migration and Ethnicity at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen | [silke.hans@sowi.uni-goettingen.de](mailto:silke.hans@sowi.uni-goettingen.de)

**Jürgen Schupp** is Director of the Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) at DIW Berlin and Professor of Sociology at Freie Universität Berlin | [jschupp@diw.de](mailto:jschupp@diw.de)

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DIW Berlin – Deutsches Institut  
für Wirtschaftsforschung e. V.  
Mohrenstraße 58, 10117 Berlin  
T +49 30 897 89 -0  
F +49 30 897 89 -200

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Renate Bogdanovic  
Tel. +49-30-89789-249  
presse@diw.de

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