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Article — Accepted Manuscript (Postprint)

Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers: Evidence from Germany

Public Opinion Quarterly

Provided in Cooperation with:
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Hager, Anselm; Veit, Susanne (2019) : Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers: Evidence from Germany, Public Opinion Quarterly, ISSN 1537-5331, Oxford University Press, Oxford, Vol. 83, Iss. 2, pp. 412-422, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz023>

This Version is available at:
<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/222928>

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ATTITUDES TOWARD ASYLUM SEEKERS EVIDENCE FROM GERMANY

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Abstract What theories explain variation in public opinion toward asylum seekers? We implement a survey experiment in which a representative sample of German residents evaluates vignettes of asylum seekers, which randomly vary attributes that speak to deservingness, economic and religious threat, and gender considerations of attitude formation. We find strong support for deservingness theories. Economic and religious threat theories also receive empirical support. Gender plays a negligible role. Importantly, we also document that economic and—to a lesser extent—religious threat considerations only matter when respondents evaluate economic refugees. By contrast, political refugees are welcomed nearly unconditionally. Our paper thus replicates key findings from Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner (2016) and Czymara and Schmidt-Catran (2016) using a representative sample and points to an important interaction effect in public opinion formation toward asylum seekers: economic threat only gets activated when refugees' deservingness is in doubt.

In the last decade, requests for asylum in the European Union have nearly tripled. Germany alone witnessed the influx of over one million individuals in 2015. Almost all migrants apply for asylum on the grounds of the 1951 Refugee Convention. The public and academic debate has since intensified.

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Right-wing parties like the German Alternative für Deutschland are pushing for more restrictive immigration policies, while many civil society organizations support asylum seekers. Yet, few studies have systematically investigated attitude formation toward asylum seekers.

This paper hypothesizes that attitudes toward asylum seekers are shaped by deservingness attributions, economic and religious threat, and gender considerations. We replicate and extend existing studies by Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner (2016) and Czymara and Schmidt-Catran (2016) by administering a vignette experiment to a representative telephone sample of 1,503 German residents. Specifically, respondents were read a vignette of an asylum seeker, randomizing the person's deservingness, education, religion, and gender. Our outcomes are whether respondents support granting the person asylum and how respondents would feel if the person was accommodated in their city of residence.

Theoretical Background

What variables explain variation in support for asylum seekers? And do the different causal drivers of support interact? In line with recent experimental studies, this paper focuses on four key drivers of attitudes toward asylum seekers in Western Europe: deservingness, economic threat, religious threat, and gender. In a second step, we consider how the drivers interact so as to provide a more nuanced picture of attitude formation.

MAIN EFFECTS

First, German citizens may favor asylum seekers that display a greater level of **deservingness** (Newman et al. 2015). Starting from the basic welfare question of “who should get what, and why,” van Oorschot (2000) develops the concept of deservingness attributions to study attitudes toward different social groups (see also Fowler and Kam 2007; Petersen 2012; Garand, Xu, and Davis 2017). Given that *political* refugees fleeing persecution have no other choice than to leave their home country, they are likely viewed as deserving of support. By contrast, asylum seekers who primarily migrate for *economic* reasons may be perceived as less deserving.

Second, German citizens may favor asylum seekers that do not invoke **economic threat**. Theories based on economic threat argue that attitudes toward an out-group become more negative when the group is perceived as detrimental to the interests of the in-group (e.g., Gerber et al. 2017). Such considerations can play out both at the individual (egocentric) and at the group level (sociotropic; Citrin et al. 1997; Goldstein and Peters 2014). One variant—the fiscal burden model (Hanson, Scheve, and Slaughter 2007)—predicts that

attitudes become more hostile when migrants' level of human capital is low (see Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010).

Third, German citizens may favor asylum seekers that do not invoke **religious threat**. Drawing on symbolic racism research (Kinder and Sears 1981), Stephan and Stephan (2000) argue that attitudes toward migrants are driven by threats based on perceived differences in norms, values, and customs. Because immigrants often differ from host society members in their religio-cultural background, perceived religious threat takes a prominent role in research on public opinion toward migrants (Kinnvall 2004; Campbell 2006; Branton et al. 2011; Kauff et al. 2015).

Fourth, German citizens may favor **female** asylum seekers. While gender figures less prominently in the academic debate on attitudes toward migrants and ethnic minorities (Reed 2003; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015), public discourse, particularly in Germany, frequently homes in on gender dynamics. But academic research has not been silent. Notably, Mascini and van Bochove (2009) show that male asylum seekers have smaller success rates in asylum procedures.

INTERACTION EFFECTS

The four hypothesized drivers of attitude formation toward asylum seekers, however, do not operate independently from one another. The public debate in Germany was particularly hostile toward Muslim men (Stürmer et al. 2018), while political asylum seekers were portrayed as deserving. What interaction effects do we expect based on the theoretical literature and public debate?

First, if political asylum seekers are deemed deserving, this may imply that other detrimental drivers lose predictive power. By contrast, if migrants are deemed undeserving, one would expect respondents to be more likely to discriminate based on refugees' education, religion and, perhaps, gender. Deservingness is thus likely a critical element that renders other characteristics either salient or non-salient.

Second, the public debate in Germany would lead one to expect a penalty for uneducated men. The majority of refugees are males who emigrate from countries shaped by traditional gender roles and comparatively low levels of education (Bekhouche et al. 2013). Since classic gender roles highlight the importance of the "male breadwinner," low levels of education may be perceived to be particularly problematic among male asylum seekers.

Third, one might expect a negative interaction effect for Muslim men. Muslims are a majority in most countries from which refugees migrate to Germany, and men are strongly overrepresented—both facts may undercut norms about fairness. What is more, religious threat may be reinforced by refugees' gender. A common stereotype in Germany is that Muslim men are hostile toward women (Rettberg and Gajjala 2016). Muslim men may thus be evaluated particularly negatively relative to Muslim women.

Design

SAMPLE

To replicate and extend the existing literature, we recruited a representative sample of German citizens. The recruitment was as follows. First, in July 2015, as part of a different research project jointly conducted by the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB), and the Institute for Applied Social Sciences (infas), 3,004 German residents were recruited face-to-face. Of these residents, 2,728 agreed to have their contact information stored for future surveys. They were contacted subsequently and asked to provide their telephone number for a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI). Of the 2,093 respondents who provided their telephone number, 1,503 individuals could be reached and took part in the present study, producing a completion rate of 72 percent. Surveying took place from November to December 2015. Descriptive statistics of the final sample are provided in supplementary information table A1. With respect to pretreatment covariates, the final CATI sample differs marginally from the original face-to-face recruited sample. For this reason, the empirical section does not employ survey weights. Even so, we control for covariates in robustness models reported in table A6.

TREATMENT

After responding to several descriptive survey items, respondents were asked to evaluate the following profile of a fictitious asylum seeker: We would now like to discuss the following case of an asylum seeker with you who recently came to Germany. She [a] left her country to come to Germany because of political persecution [b]. She is a Muslim [c]. She obtained a university degree [d] in her country of origin. The vignette included four different treatments. The gender treatment [a] varied whether the asylum seeker was male or female. The migration cause treatment [b] varied whether the asylum seeker had left his/her country of origin because of political persecution or economic hardship. The religious treatment [c] varied whether the asylum seeker was a Muslim or Christian. Finally, the education treatment [d] varied whether the respondent had obtained a university degree, a vocational degree, or no degree. Overall, the design produced 24 unique and realistic vignettes to which respondents were randomly assigned. Tables A2–A5 show that balance across the four treatments is excellent.

OUTCOME

Following the vignette, respondents were asked two simple questions to which they could answer “yes” or “no.” First, “Do you think Germany should grant

this person asylum?” (*asylum*). Second, “Would you feel good about it if the person was accommodated in your city of residence?” (*accommodation*). The two questions allow us to tap slightly different dimensions of attitudes toward asylum seekers. The first question arguably captures a legal dimension. The second question taps into so-called “NIMBYISM” (Not in My Backyard; Craw 2010; Ansolabehere and Konisky 2009).

ESTIMATION

Our empirical model, estimated using OLS, is as follows:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times Political_i + \beta_2 \times University_i + \beta_3 \cdot Vocational_i \\ \times \beta_4 \cdot Christian_i + \beta_5 \times Male_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where Y_i represents the outcome of individual i and the remaining variables reflect the four treatments each respondent was randomly assigned to. We report robust standard errors for all models.

Results

In total, 1,455 respondents answered the asylum question and 1,449 individuals responded to the accommodation question. The mean agreement rates were 72 and 82 percent, respectively. The vast majority of participants gave the same response to both questions (88 percent). Few respondents agreed with the accommodation question, but opposed the asylum question (11 percent). Hardly anybody agreed with the asylum question while taking up a critical stance toward the accommodation question—a pattern that speaks against NIMBYISM.

Table 1 reports results from an OLS regression of the asylum outcome (column 1 and 2) and accommodation outcome (column 3 and 4) on the four treatment dummies. In columns 2 and 4, we add all possible two-way treatment interactions to the model. We underline the robustness of our findings by presenting the results of alternative models with pretreatment covariates (table A6) and three- and four-way interactions in the supplementary information (table A7).

MAIN EFFECTS

The first and third columns of table 1 show the main effects of the four treatments. In line with the findings from Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner (2016) and Czymara and Schmidt-Catran (2016), respondents show the greatest level of support for asylum seekers who are perceived as deserving, tested by manipulating the migration cause. Respondents are 42 percentage points more

Table 1. Regression of attitudinal outcomes on treatments

	Asylum			Accommodation		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)		
	B	s.e.	B	s.e.	B	s.e.
Political (vs. economic)	0.423	(0.021)***	0.557	(0.045)***	0.212	(0.019)***
Male (vs. female)	-0.023	(0.021)	-0.044	(0.045)	-0.006	(0.019)
Christian (vs. Muslim)	0.025	(0.021)	0.074	(0.046)	0.037	(0.019)
Vocational (vs. no education)	0.105	(0.025)***	0.178	(0.050)***	0.087	(0.023)***
University (vs. no education)	0.097	(0.026)***	0.159	(0.053)**	0.113	(0.024)***
Political*Male			0.011	(0.041)	-0.018	(0.039)
Political*Christian			-0.050	(0.041)	-0.058	(0.039)
Political*Vocational			-0.171	(0.050)***	-0.109	(0.047)*
Political*University			-0.167	(0.052)**	-0.146	(0.049)**
Male*Christian			-0.022	(0.041)	-0.011	(0.039)
Male*Vocational			0.010	(0.049)	-0.029	(0.046)
Male*University			0.074	(0.052)	-0.000	(0.049)
Christian*Vocational			0.010	(0.050)	-0.038	(0.047)
Christian*University			-0.044	(0.052)	-0.122	(0.049)*
Constant	0.449	(0.025)***	0.385	(0.040)***	0.634	(0.023)***
Observations	1,455		1,455		1,449	
R ²	0.239		0.250		0.095	
Adjusted R ²	0.237		0.243		0.092	

NOTE.—The table reports results from an OLS regression of the two indicated outcomes – accommodation (column 1 and 2) and asylum (column 3 and 4) – on the four treatment dummies. In columns 2 and 4, the models include all potential two-way interactions of the treatments. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

likely to support granting asylum to refugees fleeing political persecution (mean = 92 percent) compared to asylum seekers fleeing economic hardship (mean = 52 percent). Support for granting the hypothetical refugee accommodation is 21 percentage points higher for political refugees (mean = 93 percent) compared to economic migrants (mean = 74 percent).

The second theoretical driver, economic threat, also finds support. Asylum seekers with greater levels of education are more likely to be accepted than asylum seekers with lower levels of education. Specifically, university education raises support by 10 and 11 percentage points, while vocational training raises support by 11 and 9 percentage points, respectively. The third theoretical driver, religious threat, receives weak support. Christian asylum seekers are 3 and 4 percentage points, respectively, more likely to be supported compared to their Muslim counterparts (interestingly, the Muslim estimate in our sample is significantly lower compared to Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner [2016], which may be a product of the interview mode). Finally, our fourth theoretical driver, gender, finds no support.

INTERACTION EFFECTS

Since attitude formation is not unidimensional, we next explore potential interactions of the treatments. The second and fourth columns in table 1 report the estimates of all possible two-way interactions for both outcomes, respectively. The table produces two key pieces of evidence.

First, when interacting the dummy for political persecution with the remaining treatments, we see strong and significant interaction effects for education (table 1, models 2 and 4). This finding implies that, among the subset of economic migrants, education matters decisively more. Put differently, political migrants are welcomed regardless of their education level, while economic migrants benefit from higher education (see also figure 1). This “conditionality” result holds across both outcomes. A similar trend is visible for the interaction between migration cause and religion. The corresponding coefficients are moderately high but not statistically significant.

Second, the models show no meaningful interaction for education and gender. For the asylum outcome, male asylum seekers benefit from higher education somewhat more strongly than female asylum seekers (table 1, model 2). Relative to the interaction between migration cause and education, however, the effect is small. Moreover, this finding is not present when scrutinizing the accommodation outcome in model 4.

Third, the results do not confirm our third expected interaction: Among Muslim refugees, men are not more likely to be discriminated against compared to women (table 1, models 2 and 4). Combined with the lower level of opposition toward accommodation as compared to granting asylum and the high similarity in treatment effects for the two outcome measures, this finding is further evidence against a NIMBY-effect.

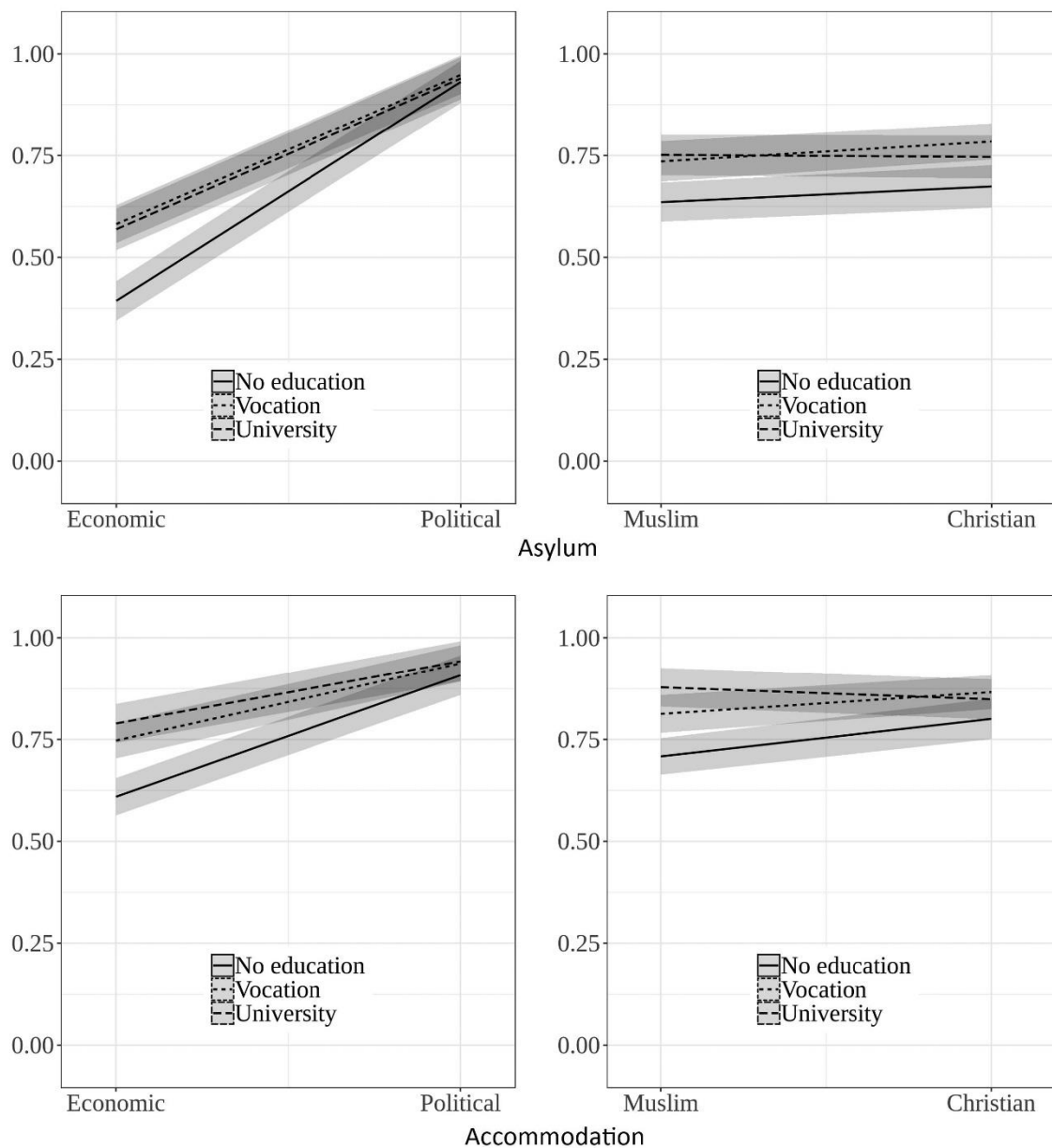


Figure 1. Two-way interaction effects. The figure plots two-way interactions for the two outcomes, respectively. All interactions are significant, except for the top right interaction. The underlying estimates are shown in Table 1.

Finally, for the accommodation outcome we observe an unexpected and significant interaction between education and religion (see figure 1 and table 1, model 4). Unskilled asylum seekers are penalized for being Muslim more strongly than highly skilled asylum seekers. For the asylum outcome, however, this interaction effect is much smaller and imprecise.

Conclusion

This paper explored the determinants of attitudes toward asylum seekers. We laid out four theoretical drivers that arguably explain variation in attitudes:

deservingness, economic threat, religious threat, and gender. Using a factorial vignette experiment administered to a representative sample of German residents, we found that, on the whole, deservingness considerations are the most decisive factor in determining support for asylum seekers. More than 90 percent of our respondents supported politically persecuted asylum seekers. There was also robust support for economic threat theories, and some evidence for religious threat. Gender played an insignificant role.

Our theoretically most salient finding is that the predictive power of threat theories depends on deservingness attributions: Characteristics related to economic and, to a lesser degree, religious threat become salient predictors of attitudes formation only when asylum seekers escape economic hardship. By contrast, the level of support for political refugees is sufficiently high such that discriminatory attitudes have little leeway to move the needle one way or another. Support for political asylum seekers is thus seemingly unconditional and unaffected by standard explanations based on self-interest. This finding qualifies studies that highlight such motivations (e.g., Gaikwad and Nellis 2016) and adds to the literature on altruism in public opinion (e.g., Fowler and Kam 2007).

We can only speculate as to the mechanisms that give rise to this conditionality finding. One likely explanation is implicit in the UN refugee convention. As was argued above, asylum seekers fleeing political persecution may be deemed more deserving given that their migration is largely forced. Because most people empathize with such hardship, solidarity with political asylum seekers is likely unconditional. By contrast, asylum seekers fleeing economic hardship may be perceived as having a greater degree of discretion on whether or not to migrate. As a consequence, the host country population may judge economic refugees on the basis of economic and religious considerations.

While providing causal evidence on the drivers of attitude formation and on the conditionality of economic concerns, our study is not without limitation. For one, questions about attitudes toward political refugees have a moral connotation and can therefore be plagued by social desirability bias. Second, the asylum question concerns a legal issue. Perhaps some respondents answered this question with legal regulations in mind, while others provided their personal opinion. Third, our empirical strategy relied on one experimental manipulation to test rather broad theories of public opinion formation. Simple primes run the risk of inducing respondents to contemplate about alternative constructs. The education treatment, for example, was intended to activate economic considerations, but may also have led individuals to infer about other issues, such as refugees' potential for integration.

With these caveats in mind, our study can be expanded on in at least three ways. First, we encourage scholars to use multiple related primes in order to provide a more robust measure of key theoretical constructs of interest. Conjoint studies are particularly helpful in this regard. Second, the

conditionality finding may have important implications for the study of public opinion more broadly. It is conceivable that similar variables are at play in public opinion toward migrants or ethnic minorities. Tracing out the precise mechanisms that give rise to such pivotal variables is thus a promising avenue for future research. A better understanding of the core drivers of solidarity seems pivotal in order to make sense of broader debates about migration. It may also help scholars predict at what point public opinion is likely to shift—a phenomenon that has received little empirical scrutiny. Third, and related, one potential explanation for the observed conditionality finding is that deservingness is considered an ethical value, which is not up for debate (Ginges et al. 2007). Whether, and if so why, this is the case is thus a particularly interesting avenue for future research.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available at *Public Opinion Quarterly* online.

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