

## Under what conditions do Germans support refugees and refugee causes? Evidence from survey experiments\*

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What explains variation in pro-migration attitudes and how stable are such preferences? We present experimental evidence from Germany, the country shouldering the highest number of asylum requests, to explore the determinants and stability of attitudes toward migrants.

In a first experiment including a panel structure, we investigated how characteristics of refugees affect public opinion. Using a conjoint design, we ask respondents to evaluate different migrant profiles. We randomly vary whether migrants are fleeing political persecution (refugees) or economic hardship (economic migrants), and vary the education, religion and sex of the migrants in order to test economic, ethnocentric and gender-related theories of attitude formation. We find that attitudes toward political refugees are 30 percentage points more positive than attitudes toward economic migrants, despite otherwise identical characteristics. Education, religion and gender are decisive factors, but only when respondents evaluate economic migrants. By contrast, political refugees are unequivocally welcomed. Our findings point to a threshold model of attitude formation: Self-interest becomes decisive only when refugees' deservingness is in doubt. We also test whether a significant change in the German political climate had an effect on public opinion by repeating the experiment. Our results survive virtually unchanged, calling into question concerns of a "political tipping point."

In a second experiment, we investigated directly how public debates about refugees affect public opinion. Traditionally, people support positions that their favored party puts forth. In 2015, however, Angela Merkel's decision to open Germany's borders for refugees while other EU countries kept them closed blurred traditional party lines. In this unusual context, we wondered how party endorsement of pro- vs. contra-refugee arguments would affect citizens' support for the arguments if at all. We presented one pro and one anti-immigrant statement and experimentally varied the party of a politician who ostensibly made the statement: CDU, SPD, versus no party control condition. Interestingly, we found that unlike what traditional theories of party persuasion would suggest, people are most likely to support a statement when it is endorsed by the political party whose position is typically not in line with the statement. That is, people are most likely to support a restrictive statement coming from the SPD, and a liberal statement coming from the CDU. We discuss general skepticism towards Elites and perceived self-interest as possible mechanisms for our effect.

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