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Local Elected Officials’ Receptivity to Refugee Resettlement in the United States

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1. Introduction

What factors lead local elected officials to support refugee resettlement, yet we know little about their attitudes toward refugees. In this article, we use a conjoint experiment to evaluate how the attributes of hypothetical refugee groups influence local policymaker receptivity toward refugee resettlement. We sample from a novel, national panel of current local elected officials, who represent a broad range of urban and rural communities across the United States. We find that many local officials favor refugee resettlement regardless of refugee attributes. However, officials are most receptive to refugees whom they perceive as a strong economic and social fit within their communities. Our study is the first in a growing literature on individual attitudes toward refugees to systematically examine the preferences of US local elected officials, and offers unique insights into the views of this influential and policy-relevant group.

This article investigates the attitudes of local elected officials toward refugees, with a focus on how refugee group attributes (e.g., educational attainment, religion, and region of origin) affect officials’ attitudes. While the US Refugee Admissions Program’s stated intent is humanitarian, an abundance of scholarship shows that members of the public favor refugees with particular attributes, such as language proficiency and in-group religious identity. We intervene in this literature by providing the first large-scale study of local elected officials’ views on refugee resettlement. To do so, we fielded a conjoint survey experiment asking local elected officials to read pairs of randomly-generated refugee group profiles, and recorded whether respondents were receptive to such groups settling in their communities. This design allows us to build on existing knowledge while generating novel insights into the views of local elected officials, who exert a powerful influence over refugee resettlement outcomes.

We find that many local elected officials support refugee resettlement, regardless of refugee characteristics. While substantial variation in preferences exists, approximately half of our respondents supported all refugee group profiles they considered, while approximately one in ten opposed all such profiles (see also 3). Though local officials in Democratic-voting

Significance Statement

The recent global surge in forcibly displaced persons has produced grave humanitarian consequences. This surge has prompted close scrutiny of public sentiment toward refugees in recipient countries. But less attention has been paid to local governments, despite the outsized influence they wield over refugee resettlement and well-being. We provide the first experimental study of US local elected officials’ attitudes toward refugees seeking to settle in their communities. We find that local elected officials support a broad range of refugee groups, though they are most supportive of refugees whom they believe will contribute to the local economy and fit with community values. Our results offer guidance to advocates seeking to improve resettlement outcomes and a rejoinder to national-level suspicion toward refugee resettlement.

J.C. and L.P. led on initial project development. J.C., L.P., R.S., and B.S. contributed to research design. J.C. led on design of the questionnaire. R.S. programmed the survey. J.C., L.P., and R.S. contributed to pilot and final data collection. L.P. and R.S. analyzed data. L.P. and R.S. led on writing the manuscript. J.C., L.P., R.S., and B.S. all provided critical feedback and survey/manuscript revisions, and shaped the research, analysis, and writing.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author order was determined randomly and does not reflect degree of contribution. Please see note for description of contributions.

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Data deposition: The data reported in this paper have been deposited in the Harvard Dataverse (doi: 10.7910/DVN/UBWWR).
counties supported more refugee groups on average, their counterparts in Republican-voting counties also supported over half of the profiles they viewed.

However, this overall pattern of support conceals important attribute-based differences in local officials’ attitudes toward refugees. Our experimental evidence shows that officials favor refugee groups that are better-educated, possess stronger English skills, are predominantly female, and identify as Christian. Local officials are also more likely to support refugees who are sponsored by a business compared with refugees without sponsorship. Descriptive data from an open-ended follow-up question suggest that a plurality of respondents focus on refugees’ economic contributions, potentially eroding the stated humanitarian intent of the US resettlement program. Approximately 40% of respondents mentioned refugees’ economic contributions or local resource constraints, compared with approximately 25% who mentioned refugees’ social or cultural fit.

Our study encourages researchers to pay closer attention to the role of local governments in refugee resettlement. Though we caution against re-orienting resettlement policy discussions toward refugees’ economic contributions or social fit, our research provides guidance for both academics and refugee resettlement stakeholders.

2. Policy Context

A refugee is “any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality […] and who is unable or unwilling to return […] or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” Refugees are resettled in the United States as a multi-stage, multi-level process. Each year, the US government sets a cap for refugee admissions. Based on this cap, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees submits cases to the US from a pool of approved applicants. Upon referral, potential refugees undergo an interview, security clearance, and assignment process. Successful applicants are paired with one of nine non-governmental resettlement agencies, which coordinate with federal agencies on location selection and services.

Before 2019, US law required the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement to regularly consult state and local governments about the sponsorship process and geographic distribution of refugees prior to resettlement. Local governments have occasionally used this consultation process to voice grievances with resettlement decisions. For example, during the 2008 Financial Crisis, officials in Fort Wayne, Indiana and Manchester, New Jersey requested moratoria on refugee resettlement due to funding constraints and lack of economic opportunity (4). But formal state or local consent was not required for refugee resettlement.

More recently, local policymakers have assumed new, formal powers over refugee resettlement decisions. In September 2019, President Trump issued an executive order directing the Secretaries of State and Health and Human Services to create a process for states and localities to provide written consent for the initial resettlement of refugees. Starting July of 2020, the order directed federal agencies to resettle refugees only with the consent of both the state and local governments. Refugee resettlement agencies sued to block the order, which led to a preliminary injunction halting implementation and a subsequent appeal. Nevertheless, more than 111 localities and 41 states gave written consent for refugee resettlement ahead of the injunction. Texas was the only state to refuse. Whether or not the executive order stands, the political debate surrounding the order highlights local officials’ influence over the refugee resettlement process. Deliberation and votes on refugee resettlement by local elected officials reflect community priorities. When community priorities differ from the legal criteria for refugee admission, empowering local leaders to debate and vote on refugee resettlement could alter refugee resettlement outcomes.

3. A Local Government Perspective on Refugees

Determinants of Officials’ Receptivity Toward Refugees. In this study we examine local elected officials’ attitudes toward refugee resettlement in their communities. We investigate two broad sets of factors that might lead to greater receptivity toward some refugee groups: economic/material and social/cultural factors. While these considerations are not mutually exclusive, and indeed often influence one another, they are useful to distinguish conceptually.

Beginning with economic and material considerations, we expect local elected officials to favor refugee groups that can participate in and contribute to the local economy (see, e.g., 5–7, for related findings). Local officials are particularly attuned to budgetary issues and economic constraints in their districts. We expect signals of employability and self-sufficiency to be especially attractive to resource-conscious officials. Refugee education, business sponsorship, language skills, and status as working-age adults are likely indicators of economic productivity, which should increase officials’ receptivity toward refugee groups with these attributes.

\[10\] Trump, Donald J. “Executive Order 13888 of September 26, 2019, Enhancing State and Local Involvement in Refugee Resettlement.” Federal Register 84(190):52355-52365.

\[11\] 19

\[12\] 19

\[13\] 19

\[14\] 19

\[15\] 19

\[16\] 19

References

8 USC § 1101(a)(2)(A).
8 USC § 1522(a)(2)(A).
We also expect local elected officials to favor refugee groups they view as a sociocultural fit for their communities. Whether because of in-group favoritism or out-group animus, existing scholarship reports that members of the public favor migrants with attributes associated with sociocultural proximity (see, e.g. 5–7, 9, 10). In the context of our survey, refugees’ religion, religious sponsorship, language, gender/family composition, and age affect evaluations of sociocultural fit. Religion, in particular, is strongly associated with in-group moral principles and identity (11). Since Christianity is the majority religion in the United States, we predict that local elected officials will favor Christian-identifying refugees and refugees who are sponsored by faith-based organizations. Local officials should also favor English-speaking refugees, since English is both the dominant language and a strong signal of in-group belonging to the US. Furthermore, local officials should be more inclined to support older and female migrants compared with younger male migrants, since residents might associate an influx of young, male residents with a higher probability of criminal activity (9). This expectation also reflects conventional gender-based notions of vulnerability, which advocates and refugee resettlement organizations have been known to replicate (12).

An additional possibility is that local officials may prefer refugees originating from some regions compared to others, but we do not view this scenario as likely once education, language skills, religion, and other demographic attributes are taken into account.¹⁷

Lastly, while these economic and social factors imply that local officials’ attitudes will depend on refugee group attributes, there are also reasons to believe that officials will be indifferent to these traits. The legal definition of refugee status is based on a well-founded fear of persecution, rather than an individual’s ability to contribute materially or assimilate culturally. If local officials have internalized this legal designation, then they should be receptive overall toward refugees, and their level of receptivity should not significantly vary by refugee attributes.

Examining Elected Local Officials. Our theoretical expectations draw from a substantial empirical literature on mass—as opposed to local official—attitudes toward refugees and immigrants more broadly. While officials clearly share some of their constituents’ concerns and attitudes, we should be wary about generalizing from the mass public to learn about officials’ attitudes toward refugee resettlement.¹⁸ To be clear, our study does not attempt to test hypotheses about whether citizen and elite attitudes diverge, which is outside the scope of this study. Instead, in this section we outline ex ante why scholars and policymakers cannot necessarily generalize from existing public opinion scholarship to understand official attitudes.

First, local government officials represent jurisdictions, and rural, sparsely populated jurisdictions are more common than more densely populated ones. As a result, the average local official’s district is older, whiter, poorer, and has lower educational attainment compared to the overall US population.¹⁹ Furthermore, rural communities like those in our sample contain relatively homogeneous social networks (16), and local jurisdictions are more conservative, contain more Christian constituents,²⁰ and are more ethnoracially homogeneous than the broader US public (16). Imbalances in political participation also lead to overrepresentation of white, wealthier, more educated, and older voters within these relatively rural and poorer districts (17–20). These demographic and turnout patterns likely bias officials’ attitudes toward those of their more politically engaged constituents, and away from a nationally representative sample of residents.

Second, owing to their professional responsibilities and experiences, local officials may differ systematically from the citizens they represent. Because they manage their governments’ personnel and budgets, local officials are likely to be acutely aware of the resource constraints their communities face. Since rural communities tend to face tight budget constraints (21), the average local government official might be more sensitive than ordinary citizens to refugees’ impacts on schools, public transportation, and other public goods. In sum, local leaders not only represent a different demographic than the general public, but they are also likely to consider a different set of factors when evaluating refugee policy.

Table 1. Demographics of Localities Represented by Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Counties</th>
<th>Municipalities &amp; Towns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>221,973</td>
<td>38,007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion Urban</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016 GOP Vote Share</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion College Educated</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Gov. Official Respondents</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We contracted with CivicPulse to deploy an online survey experiment to a sample of local government officials in the United States in April 2020. The University of Pennsylvania’s Institutional Review Board determined the survey was eligible for IRB exemption; respondents were recruited through email and volunteered their participation.²¹ CivicPulse invited a sample of local officials randomly drawn from the population of all US town, municipal, and county elected officials serving populations above 1,000 (see Table 1). Geographically, our 574 respondents are divided across 48 states. More than 60% serve in municipalities, with the rest split almost equally between townships and counties. The localities represented by officials in our sample are modestly larger, more urban, more educated, and less conservative than the average locality in the United States.²² However, as with the true population of US localities, the average locality represented in our sample is still much less urban, less educated, and more conservative than the population of the United States as a whole. Individual respondents display a similar pattern. Compared with the American public, our sample of local government officials is conservative-leaning with 39% of respondents self-identifying as conservative, 30% as moderate, and 29% as liberal. 66% received at least a college degree and 69% identify as male, with an average of 12 years of experience in government.²³

¹⁷ Members of the American public express little preference for migrants of any specific ethnicity or national origin (5), though results from Europe are more mixed (contrast 6, 13).

¹⁸ See (14) as an example of the role of local governments in refugee settlement.

¹⁹ See CivicPulse Omnibus Survey Reference Guide in S1, and (15)’s Appendix B.

²⁰ As of 2019, approximately two-thirds of Americans identified as Christian, with higher rates in rural and suburban communities overrepresented in our sample. See “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.” Pew Research Center October 17, 2019.

²¹ This study qualifies for exemption to human subjects review under 45 CFR 46 101(b)(2). The University of Pennsylvania’s Human Subject Committee granted exemption on March 30, 2020 (UPenn HSC Protocol #942278). Prior to the receipt of the data, this design was registered with EGAP (#020020417AC).

²² See CivicPulse Omnibus Survey Reference Guide in supplementary materials. CivicPulse also provided us with the sample means for the 574 conjoint respondents, included in Table 1.

²³ See Appendix 1 for a full description of survey administration, sampling process, and sample de-
4. Experimental Design

We use a paired conjoint design to identify the causal effects of group-level attributes on local elected officials’ receptivity toward refugee resettlement. Though officials are not provided with the demographic characteristics of potential refugee groups when voting to allow refugee resettlement, basic information about past and current refugees is publicly available and informs public discourse surrounding refugee resettlement decisions. As a result, this design presents respondents with a hypothetical that closely resembles their real-world decisions while allowing us to identify key concerns that underlie respondents’ preferences.

Survey respondents first read a short prompt, which included a definition of the term “refugee,” and then viewed two randomly generated refugee group profiles, labeled Group A and Group B. These profiles consisted of one randomly selected value for each of seven theoretically relevant attributes that might affect a local government official’s receptivity toward refugee group resettlement: education, sponsorship status, language skills, religion, gender/family makeup, age, and region of origin. Respondents then indicated whether they were receptive to either group, Group A only, Group B only, or neither group settling in their community. We coded the responses to this question as a binary variable—Refugee Group Receptivity—which took a value of 1 if a given refugee group profile or “either group” was chosen, and 0 for other responses. We repeated this process two additional times, yielding three total paired-conjoint tasks for each respondent.

Compared with other immigration conjoint surveys (e.g., 6, 13, 22), our design is parsimonious. We chose this design to optimize for our specific target population and policy scenario. Since local elected officials are difficult to contact and time-constrained, we were limited in both the number of responses we could collect and the number of tasks we could ask of each individual. And, since we ask respondents to consider groups of refugees rather than individuals, including some standard conjoint attributes in our experiment would have presented respondents with an implausible hypothetical. We discuss our specific choices in more detail in Appendix 2, but we chose a design that respects respondents’ time and real-world policy experience while allowing us to build on existing research.

5. Results

Conjoint Findings. Our survey reveals that elected local officials generally support a broad range of refugee profiles. Of the 534 respondents who answered all three paired-profile questions, 51% indicated that they would accept any of the six profiles that they were presented with, compared with less than 13% who were unwilling to accept any of the six profiles. The remaining 36% of respondents varied substantially, with a roughly even distribution over the remaining set of values. Given the relatively conservative individual- and district-level demographics of our sample, this finding is noteworthy, and offers a rejoinder to national-level opposition to refugee resettlement.

Figure 1 reports the effect of each attribute value on the respondent’s probability of being receptive to a refugee group—the average marginal component effect (AMCE). Estimates are drawn from a regression model in which Refugee Group Receptivity is regressed on indicator variables for each level of refugee group attribute, with baseline categories excluded and standard errors clustered by respondent.

We find strong evidence that US local government officials are more receptive to refugees with a greater potential for a positive economic impact. First, local officials are significantly more receptive to potential refugee groups with higher levels of education. Respondents are 7.7 and 8.3 percentage points more likely to support refugee groups with a high school education and at least some college, respectively, compared with refugee groups with no formal schooling. This relationship may suggest that respondents view more educated refugees as more likely contributors to the local economy. Second, local elected officials are 7.9 percentage points more likely to support refugee groups sponsored by a regional or local business compared to refugees with no sponsor, which suggests respondents are likely prioritizing economic integration for refugees. Direct sponsorship from a business group is likely

Dots mark point estimates and lines indicate cluster-robust 95% confidence intervals for the AMCE of each attribute value on the probability that respondents were receptive to a particular refugee group. The comparison category’s AMCE is the difference in the probability of receptivity between that category and the baseline category in parentheses (observations = 3324; respondents = 574).

Educational level affects local elected officials’ receptivity toward refugee resettlement: education, sponsorship status, language skills, religion, gender/family makeup, age, and region of origin. Among these attributes, we find that refugees with higher levels of education are more likely contributors to the local economy. Respondents are 7.7 and 8.3 percentage points more likely to support refugee groups with a high school education and at least some college, respectively, compared with refugee groups with no formal schooling. This relationship may suggest that respondents view more educated refugees as more likely contributors to the local economy. Second, local elected officials are 7.9 percentage points more likely to support refugee groups sponsored by a regional or local business compared to refugees with no sponsor, which suggests respondents are likely prioritizing economic integration for refugees. Direct sponsorship from a business group is likely

Notes:

24 See Appendix 2 for question wording, survey delivery, design, and randomization.
25 This design also acknowledges the set of preferences respondents are likely to possess. When asked whether they are receptive to two refugee groups, local elected officials can express opposition, support regardless of group attribute, or selective support for refugees with certain attributes.
26 Our design offers all of these options, rather than forcing a relative choice between profiles.
27 The average marginal treatment effect of each component is identifiable under a set of assumptions likely to hold in a typical conjoint experiment (22). In addition, see Appendix 3 for the AMCE results table and marginal means results.
28 All in-text results are based on unweighted models. In Appendix 1, we discuss this choice further. In Appendix 3, we present an alternative model that includes locality-level demographic weights as a robustness check.
associated with employment opportunities.29

We also find evidence that local officials are more likely

to support refugees they believe will integrate more easily

into their communities. First, respondents are 9.6 percentage

points more likely to support Christian refugees settling in

their communities compared with Muslim refugees, which is

the single largest effect we identify. While officials prefer

agnostic refugees to Muslim refugees (3.4 percentage points

more), this difference is not statistically significant at the .05

level. This finding suggests that respondents may hold in-
group preferences for Christian refugees rather than out-group

animus directed specifically at Muslim refugees, though future

work should investigate this possibility further.30

Second, local officials are 4.4 and 8.8 percentage points

more likely to support refugee groups primarily consisting of

families and single women, respectively, compared with the

baseline group of single men. This difference likely results from

a perception that single men are more likely to participate

in socially disruptive behavior (see also 9). The support for

family groups over single men suggests that respondents are

focused on the societal fit of the group’s composition rather

than the potential fiscal burden of families alone.31

Local elected officials are also 5.8 and 4.8 percentage points

more likely to support refugee groups with fluent or broken

but functional English skills, compared with a baseline of very

little to no English. Since officials likely associate refugees’

English proficiency both with refugees’ sociocultural fit and

their ability to participate in the local economy, we cannot

definitively associate this finding with a particular mecha-
nism. However, officials clearly prefer English speakers to

non-English-speakers, even when refugees’ English skills are

imperfect.

Local officials do not appear to possess a significant prefer-
ence with respect to refugee age or regional origin. The
null result with respect to age may be due to the age cutoff
we use in our study. Since adults above or below age 40 can
plausibly be within prime economic productivity years, if re-

spondents prioritize refugee economic contributions they may

be roughly indifferent between these two categories (see, e.g.
6). By contrast, our null result on regional origin may be due
to respondent political knowledge. Holding all other attributes
constant, local officials may not have sufficient information
about specified regional groupings to express a preference.32

Open-Ended Responses. We concluded our survey with an
open-ended question, in which we asked local elected officials to
identify the most important issues to consider when assessing
how a group of refugees might settle into their community.

Of the 574 respondents who answered at least one conjoint
question, some 439 (76%) offered at least some response to
this question. Since open-ended responses are necessarily

unstructured, any analysis of their contents is exploratory

by nature. However, examining open-ended responses can

reinforce the findings we describe in the previous sections and

deepen our understanding of the dynamics that inform them.

To summarize our open-ended data, we nonexclusively coded
each response based on two sets of categories. The first
set consisted of our seven conjoint attributes. The second
set consisted of four abstract categories: Economy, Social/Cultural, Immigration Process, and Public Order. These
categories represented the four most prominent themes we
identified by reading a sample of open-ended responses. All
responses were double-coded, with disagreements adjudicated
by a third coder.33

The marginal histograms in Figure 2 illustrate that respon-
dents most frequently identify refugee language skills as a key
area of concern, followed by education and sponsorship status.

These three attributes reaffirm the set of influential attributes
identified in the conjoint portion of the survey. Surprisingly,
gender/family group makeup and religion were not frequently
mentioned despite their effect in the conjoint portion of the
survey. One possible explanation for this divergence is social
desirability bias. Though some respondents may be wary of
primarily Muslim or male refugee groups, they may be more
willing to express this preference in the conjoint portion of the
survey than in an open-ended response (24).

As implied by their professional responsibilities, local offi-
cials most frequently mentioned economic concerns in their
open-ended responses (see marginal histograms in Figure 2).
Nearly half of all open-ended comments contained language
categorized as Economy, while approximately one-third were
categorized as Social/Cultural. Since these categories are
broad, the specific concerns within most of these categories
varied substantially. For example, some 60% of respondents
who raised economic concerns cited availability of jobs in
their community, while 29% mentioned suitability of housing,
transportation, or other physical infrastructure. A smaller
number of respondents also referenced language assigned to
the Immigration Process and Public Order categories, which
suggests that these categories were less central to respondents’
attitudes.

Open-ended responses also allow us to explore context for
our experimental findings. As the heatmap in Figure 2 shows,
mentions of education and sponsorship were most highly correlated with our “Economy” category, which suggests
that some respondents evaluated these categories primarily
through their association with refugees’ perceived economic
contributions. By contrast, language skill mentions were not
strongly correlated with any of our abstract categories. This
finding suggests that language plays a more complex role,
which spans respondents’ perceptions of refugee contributions
to the local economy, the social/cultural milieu, and public
order.

Subgroup Analyses. We also examine whether local officials’
refugee receptivity preferences differ by their counties’ parti-
sanship, their own levels of interaction with non-Americans,
and their localities’ populations.34,35 First, we compare offi-
cials by whether their jurisdiction is located in a county that
voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election.

29Business sponsorships are not currently part of the refugee resettlement process in the United
States. However, we included the option in our profile design since other countries, including
Canada, allow for private sponsorship.

30(23) similarly find that Americans favor humanitarian action to save Christian over Muslim victims
of war as a result of in-group preference.

31This finding may also stem from our focus on refugee groups instead of individuals. Respondents
may be particularly wary of groups consisting of largely single men, especially in cases where the
hypothetical group is larger.

32As shown in Appendix 3, as a robustness check, we posted all non-Middle East regions to compare
whether there is a systematic bias against refugee groups from the Middle East. The difference
between the Middle East and non-Middle East categories is not statistically significant at the .05
level. However, in the weighted version of the analysis presented in Appendix 3, respondents do
show a statistically significant and lower level of support for refugee groups from the Middle East.

33See Appendix 4 for definitions, examples, intercoder reliability, and per-attribute summary statistics.

34We follow (13, 25) and use marginal means to compare subgroups instead of AMCEs.

35See Appendix 3 for subgroup variables, marginal mean plots, and F-test results for each subgroup.
Second, local government officials who interact more frequently with non-US citizens are significantly more receptive to all attribute levels than officials who interact infrequently, with per-level differences ranging from 6.7 to 18.3 percentage points. This finding aligns with prior research suggesting personal interaction with immigrants moderates preferences (13). Third, officials in more populous localities express more support for most refugee group attribute levels than officials in less populous localities, though not all differences are significant.

6. Implications

Our analysis of local government officials’ receptivity toward refugees offers two primary conclusions. First, in line with the stated humanitarian focus of the US Refugee Admissions Program, we find that many local elected officials are supportive of refugee resettlement regardless of refugee group attributes. Approximately half of all local policymakers favored refugee admission for all profiles viewed, and almost all favored refugee admission for at least some types of refugee groups. This pattern is strongest among officials in Democratic-voting counties, but officials in Republican-voting counties still supported over half of all refugee group profiles they viewed. While our study focuses on the attitudes of local officials, future research should connect these results to more qualified patterns of support expressed by members of the general public (see, e.g. 27).

One possible explanation for this limited level of attribute-based discrimination is social desirability bias. However, if local officials are concerned with the social acceptability of their answers in an anonymous survey, they are also likely to modulate their positions in public-facing policy discussions. Though the answers to our survey might potentially overestimate respondents’ “sincere” support for refugee admissions, they provide a reasonable representation of respondents’ publicly expressed beliefs.

Second, we find that local policymakers are concerned with refugees’ ability to both fit with local values and participate in the local economy. This pattern is stronger among officials in Republican-voting than Democratic-voting constituencies, and particularly so for education and religious background, but is present among both groups. We cannot adjudicate decisively between respondents’ motives, on average, for preferring refugees with particular attributes. Such preferences could reflect apprehension toward refugees or concern for community capacity to provide refugees with essential resources. But, descriptive data from our open-ended follow-up question suggest that officials may be more strongly motivated by refugees’ perceived economic contributions than by refugees’ perceived community fit. This result matches our theoretical expectations regarding the relative importance of economic issues to local elected officials, though future experimental work should further investigate these mechanisms.

Local officials are crucial to refugee resettlement, and yet their attitudes have been understudied. Based on our findings, emphasizing business sponsorship programs, skill development, language training, and explicit financial support to local...
communities likely represent high-impact public engagement strategies for refugee resettlement stakeholders seeking to bolster refugee acceptance. When federal or state funding for these programs is not available, refugee resettlement agencies may find less expensive interventions more sustainable, such as placing refugees to optimize employment opportunities (29) or highlighting how refugees make a positive net fiscal impact across levels of government. 38

We emphasize that concerns about economic contribution and community fit are neither legal nor normative reasons for rejecting refugees, who are eligible for resettlement once the United States determines their claim of persecution in their home or other country is well-founded. Engagement strategies that focus on these factors should not undermine the humanitarian purposes of the US refugee resettlement program, which is designed to resettle the most vulnerable. We do not contest a robust right to apply for refugee status or seek asylum in the United States or any other country. However, our results do reveal policy-relevant information about the attitudes of an understudied and increasingly important group of refugee resettlement gatekeepers. Overall, we find that officials across the political spectrum are receptive to a broad range of refugee groups, which offers a timely rejoinder to suspicion toward refugee resettlement prevalent in national US politics.

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