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How humanitarian are Germans towards refugees?

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Abstract

This paper uses data collected in May 2023 to better understand how Germans feel towards Syrian refugees. Generally, while feelings of different types of humanitarian concern (safety, material wellbeing, health, future opportunities) were similar, threat feelings (welfare, safety, culture) were slightly higher with the notable exception of less concern about labour market competition. We find that younger people, people with a university degree, or people with a migration background feel less threatened by the immigration of refugees with the most significant differences in attitudes towards refugees based on people's social and political values. Respondents with stronger humanitarian orientations, higher trust levels and who do not place themselves on the right side of the political spectrum, show markedly higher levels of humanitarian concerns and lower threat perceptions. In addition to measuring attitudes, we also measured respondents' solidarity towards refugees. Only 29 percent and 23 percent of respondents are willing to sign a petition in favour of financial aid to refugee camps or admissions to Germany, respectively. Respondents with higher levels of social trust are much more likely to express their support for more camp assistance than less trusting respondents. Regarding refugee admissions, a stark divide emerges along political lines, with individuals on the political left showing much greater openness to admitting refugees than those on the right. We find limited support for housing refugees in Germany, especially when asking for respondents' willingness to accommodate refugees privately.

JEL Classification: A13, D63, I31, J15

Keywords: Refugees; solidarity; humanitarianism; threat perceptions

Introduction

Immigration policy is one of the most salient issues in Germany's current political debate, next to energy/climate and economic policy and is often polarizing. This has led to record polling numbers for the right-populist anti-immigration party 'Alternative für Deutschland' (AfD) as well as electoral successes for the party on local levels of government (Wahlrecht.de, n.d.; ZDF, 2023).

Some opinion polls provide insights into motivations behind voter's current party preference. Besides the overall disenchantment with the ruling government under the leadership of Olaf Scholz (infratest dimap, 2023a), the issue of immigration seems to play a crucial role. When AfD supporters were asked in the 'DeutschlandTrend' survey of June 2023 which policy areas mattered most for their party choice, immigration policies came in first with 65 percent as one of up to three key areas. This was followed by energy and environmental policy (47 percent) as well as economic policy (43 percent) (infratest dimap, 2023a). This is in line with a finding from the May edition of the survey that a clear majority in Germany regards immigration as rather disadvantageous for the country (infratest dimap, 2023b). The same edition also showed that the majority of respondents (52 percent) wanted Germany to take in less refugees (as opposed to only 8 percent in favour of expanding refugee admissions). Conversely, 41 percent agreed that more skilled immigrants should be recruited while 23 percent preferred a reduction of skilled labour immigration (infratest dimap, 2023b). This implies that refugees and asylum seekers are seen as more problematic than skilled migrants by the public.

These recent numbers from spring and summer 2023 contrast with data from larger social surveys collected before Russia started its full-scale attack on Ukraine. For example, a study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung using data of residents in Germany from November 2021, shows that 48 percent agreed that Germany could and should take in more refugees compared to 36 percent that saw Germany at a capacity limit. The authors interpreted these results as part of a trend towards more positive views on immigration since the so-called 'migration crisis' of 2015 and 2016 (Kösemen & Wieland, 2022). Similarly, in the 10th wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), respondents from Germany were asked about their opinions on immigration between September 2021 and January 2022. The data shows that immigration was seen overall as slightly more positive than negative for both the German economy and German culture. The assessment of whether immigration makes Germany a better place to live also leaned to the positive side of the scale, if only very slightly. One objective of this research is to investigate the current state of immigration attitudes more thoroughly with a focus on humanitarian migration and understand possible drivers of the suggested attitude change.

Research provides interesting insights regarding what may motivate and change people's attitudes towards immigration which forms the starting point of our survey. One longstanding strand of literature says that intergroup contact can - under certain conditions - reduce prejudice between population groups (Allport, 1954). Another well-established strand of literature, which enjoyed particularly high popularity in past years and decades, emphasizes the fears that host society members tend to associate with immigration. Such threat theories investigate, for example, widespread perceptions that an influx of foreigners may have detrimental economic, public safety or cultural effects (Stephan et al., 2009).

Humanitarian considerations, which is something like compassion with and perceived responsibility for fellow human beings in need (see, for instance, Newman et al., 2015), is a third important dimension, particularly in the context of humanitarian migration, i.e. the

movement of asylum seekers and refugees. It deviates from the concept of altruism, understood as a selfless concern for the well-being of others (Rushton et al., 1981), in its focus on other humans in particularly adverse situations and it emphasizes a sense of responsibility. The relevance of such humanitarian aspects has been confirmed in studies for Germany (Czymara, 2021), Europe (Bansak et al., 2016) and the US (Newman et al., 2015).

Here we present survey data from May 2023 on people's views of humanitarian immigration and their solidarity with refugees. We provide nuanced insights into people's immigration fears, their concerns for forcibly displaced migrants and the level and type of solidarity they are willing to express. We also highlight how various population groups differ in their attitudes and behaviours towards refugees. In this way, we shed light on the drivers of people's attitudes towards migration which contributes to a better understanding of the current public debate.

Sample and Survey

The data we present here was collected as part of a larger survey experiment between May 8th and 30th, 2023 in collaboration with the market research services provider *Bilendi*. Our sample consists of 405 participants aged between 18 and 69 and is representative of the German population with respect to gender, age, and the geographical distribution across the 16 German states ('Bundesländer').

Slightly more than one quarter of participants in our sample hold a university degree, 14 percent have a migration background.¹ Roughly half of our respondents self-describe as Catholic or Protestant, followed by a large group of people that do not identify with any religion. The share of Muslims is approximately 5 percent. By and large, the composition of our sample resembles the current structure of German society, with the exception of the group of people with migration background. Their share in the overall population amounts to roughly one fourth and is therefore substantially higher than among our survey participants (Statistisches Bundesamt, n.d.).

With respect to political ideology, people self-identify on average close to the middle on a left-right scale, ranging from 1 (left) to 5 (right), but with a slight tendency to the political left. These numbers are consistent with other studies, e.g. the 10th ESS wave mentioned above. The social trust value of 2.6 on the same scale is in line with the most recent ESS data. Somewhat earlier data reported trust levels above the middle category, which could suggest that social trust declined during the pandemic (Brand et al., 2020). In addition, we asked respondents for their humanitarian orientation, i.e. how much they generally care for the welfare of people in need.

Survey participants were also asked about their attitudes towards Syrian refugees living in Turkish refugee camps. While much of the media and research attention has shifted towards Ukrainians since February 2022, the role of non-European refugees and asylum seekers, such as Syrians, has become particularly controversial. Specifically, we collected responses for different types of threat perception, i.e. the immigration-related fears of respondents, as well as for different types of humanitarian concern. The concept of humanitarian concern differs from the above-mentioned humanitarian orientation in the following way: While a humanitarian orientation refers to someone's personality and value system and is therefore more general in nature and rather stable over time, a person's humanitarian concern is directed to specific people in a specific situation, such as a group of refugees living in refugee camps. The extent of humanitarian concern can vary substantially depending on the person or the group of persons towards which the concern is directed, as well as on the circumstances the person or

¹ Here 'migration background' means that either the participants themselves or at least one of their parents was not born in Germany.

people are confronted with. Since these concepts are not identical, we measure them separately in our study. However, we assume that humanitarian orientation is positively associated with the concern for the wellbeing of specific groups such as Syrian refugees in Turkish camps.

Taking inspiration from the HESPER scale on humanitarian need (World Health Organization & King's College London, 2011), we distinguish between a concern for the refugees' safety, their material wellbeing, their health and future opportunities. Our set of questions on threat perceptions includes the degree to which respondents fear that the arrival of the respective refugees may increase competition on the labour market, represent a burden for the welfare state, lead to a deterioration of public safety or a clash of cultures.

Beyond attitudes, we also asked respondents solidarity-related questions, for example if they agreed that housing for the refugees should be provided in their municipalities or if they would be willing to accommodate refugees for a couple of days in their own dwellings. We also measured solidarity behaviour explicitly by giving respondents the opportunity to support a petition to either advocate for more financial support from the German government to improve living conditions in the camps in Turkey or for the admission of refugees from the camps to Germany.

Results

Attitudes towards refugees

Figure 1 shows that overall participants in our sample express a medium level of concern for Syrian refugees when it comes to their safety, material wellbeing, health and future opportunities. There is little variation in these averages across the different types of concern (safety, material wellbeing, health and future opportunities). We also find very strong correlations between each pair of concern types, meaning that people who feel very concerned about one dimension, e.g. safety, are likely to express high concerns about the other dimensions too.

Regarding threat perceptions, **we find that respondents' fears that the relocation of Syrian refugees to Germany can cause additional welfare burdens, a deterioration of public safety and cultural clashes are of similar magnitude as the expressed humanitarian concerns, or slightly stronger.** However, **respondents are less concerned about job market competition** which is in line with earlier studies (Dražanová et al., 2022; Dustmann & Preston, 2007). Overall, people seem to distinguish a bit more between forms of threats than humanitarian concerns.

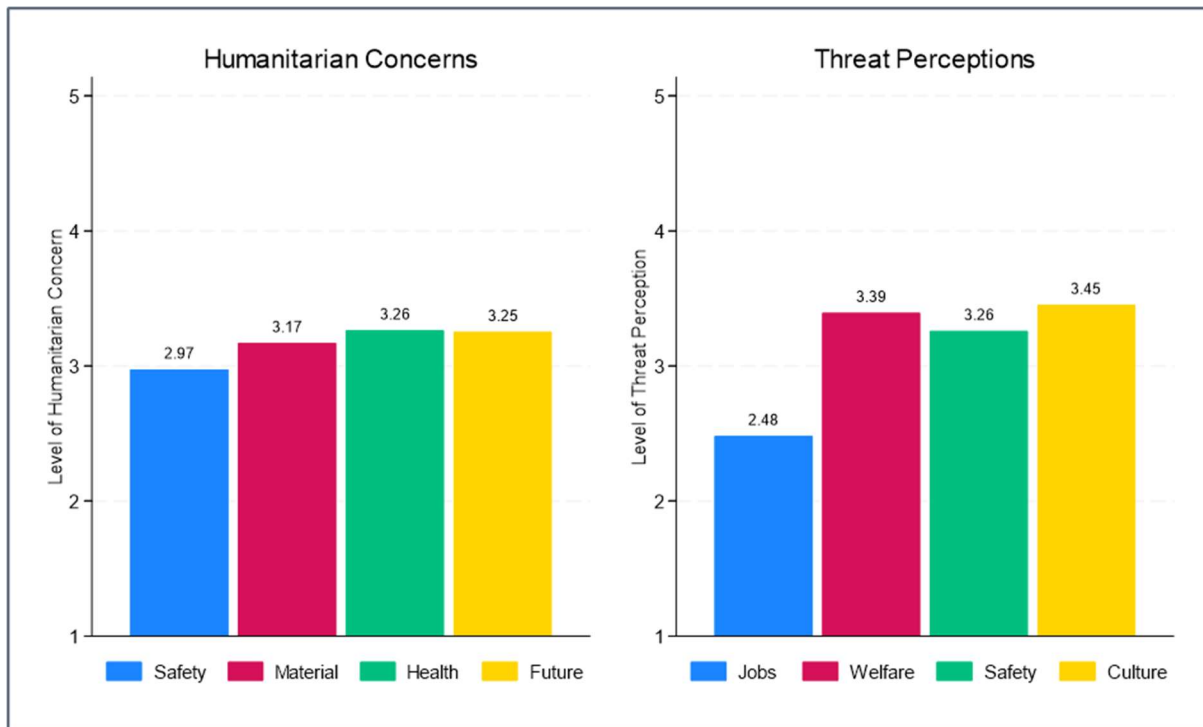


Figure 1: Attitudes towards refugees

When dividing the sample into subgroups to gain a more nuanced understanding, we find no significant differences across genders. However, differentiating based on respondents' age², educational status³, and migration background reveals significant differences in threat perceptions. **Younger people, people with a university degree, or people with a migration background feel less threatened by the immigration of refugees.** These findings are in line with previous studies (Hellmann et al., 2021; Kösemen & Wieland, 2022). We do not find notable differences for people's humanitarian concern for refugees across the subgroups.

Given the particularly strong performance of the AfD and a higher popularity for anti-immigration movements, such as PEGIDA, in the East of Germany, we also compare attitudes between respondents living in the former GDR territory with those living in 'West Germany'. In contrast to popular narratives, according to which East Germans feel more threatened by immigration, for instance, because of a relatively low share of immigrants during the socialist times (see the Contact Hypothesis above), our data does not provide any evidence for this claim. While the average values for humanitarian concerns are slightly smaller among East Germans across all four concern types, these differences are not statistically significant.

We find the most significant differences in attitudes towards refugees based on people's social and political values. Specifically, we divide the sample according to the extent of participants' humanitarian orientation (above the median or not), their trust levels (above the middle category or not) as well as their political self-placement on a left to right scale (right-leaning vs. centrist or left-leaning). **Respondents with stronger humanitarian orientations, higher trust levels and who do not place themselves on the right side of the political spectrum, show markedly higher levels of humanitarian concerns and lower threat perceptions.** The differences in attitudes are greatest when distinguishing by people's political orientation (see Figure 2).

² Respondents aged 47 or under are assigned to the younger age group, whereas people aged 48 or over are assigned to the older group.

³ Here, we simply distinguish between people with a university degree and people without.

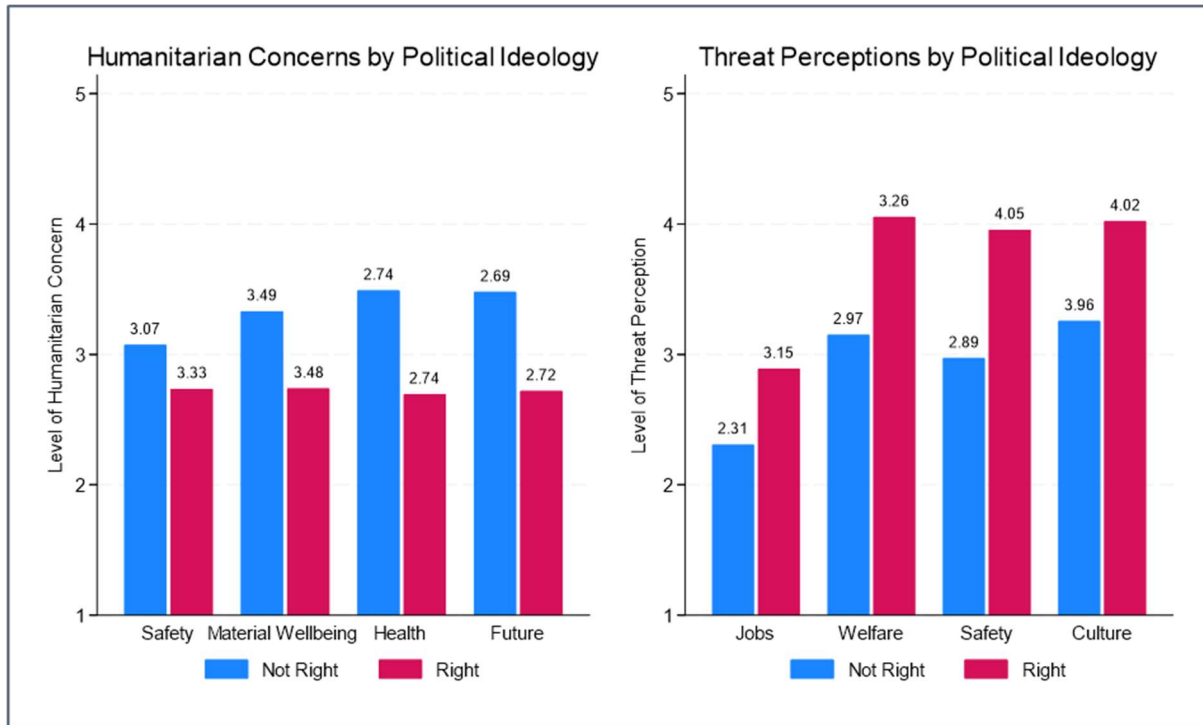


Figure 2: Attitudes by Political Ideology

Solidarity towards refugees

In addition to measuring attitudes, we also measured respondents' solidarity towards refugees. We measured solidarity by asking respondents about their preferences for housing provision for refugees in their municipality and their willingness to accommodate refugees temporarily in their home. Moreover, we gave them the opportunity to support a petition, either for more financial support to refugee camps outside of Germany through the German government, or for the admission of Syrian refugees to Germany.

Figure 3 summarizes the responses. The first thing to note is that the large majority of people are not willing to sign either petition. **Only 29 percent and 23 percent are willing to support financial aid to camps or admissions to Germany, respectively.** Besides the overall low level of support, there is a substantial gap between these two forms of solidarity. Support for providing financial aid to refugee camps outside Germany is 26 percent higher than for supporting admission of refugees to Germany.

With respect to the provision of housing, we find that agreement levels are below the middle category. This is particularly true when asking for respondents' willingness to accommodate refugees privately, which, of course, requires a lot more commitment than 'merely' accepting additional refugee housing locally.

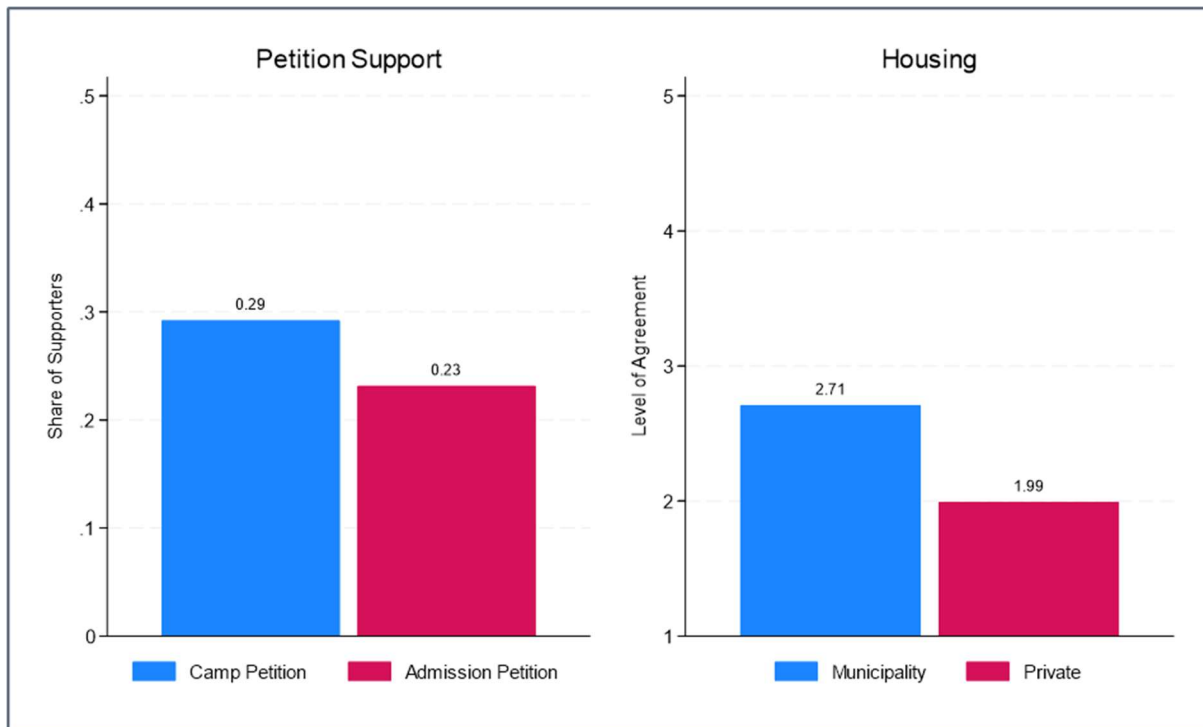


Figure 3: Attitudes towards refugees

When analysing differences across different subgroups of respondents, we find that men are considerably more willing to support either petition than women but this difference is not statistically significant.⁴ Gaps in solidarity across age and education groups are more pronounced. We find that **younger respondents and those with a university degree are significantly more likely to support the admission petition. Having a university degree is also associated with a significantly higher likelihood for signing the camp petition.** Also, younger respondents and respondents with a university degree are significantly less opposed to refugee housing in their municipalities or to accommodating refugees privately compared to older respondents and respondents without a university degree, respectively.

Respondents with a migration background are also more likely to sign either petition, but only the difference for the admission petition is significant.⁵ They are also significantly more likely to accept refugee housing in their municipality but they are not more willing to accommodate refugees in their own home.

Concerning the geographical divide, we find that the **support levels of West Germans are roughly twice as high for the petitions relative to their co-citizens in the East** (see Figure 4). However, the solidarity levels with respect to the two housing variables are indistinguishable. Considering also the relatively similar immigration attitudes in East and West, one could speculate that the smaller willingness of East Germans to sign pro-refugee petitions may at least in part be due to a stronger reluctance towards this form of political engagement. Whatever the reason, given the reduced sample size for petition questions and

⁴ Since each respondent was confronted with only one of the two petition questions, the sample size for these questions is reduced by 50 percent. This makes statistical significance less likely.

⁵ We need to emphasize though that the combination of the reduced sample size for the petition questions with the generally rather small number of people with migration background in the sample leads to only 32 and 25 people with migration background for the petition questions, respectively. Given such small numbers, interpreting these results should be done with caution.

an exclusion of residents of Berlin⁶, these (statistically insignificant) results are based on only small numbers of observations for East Germany. Therefore, they must be interpreted with caution, especially when making inferences to the underlying populations.

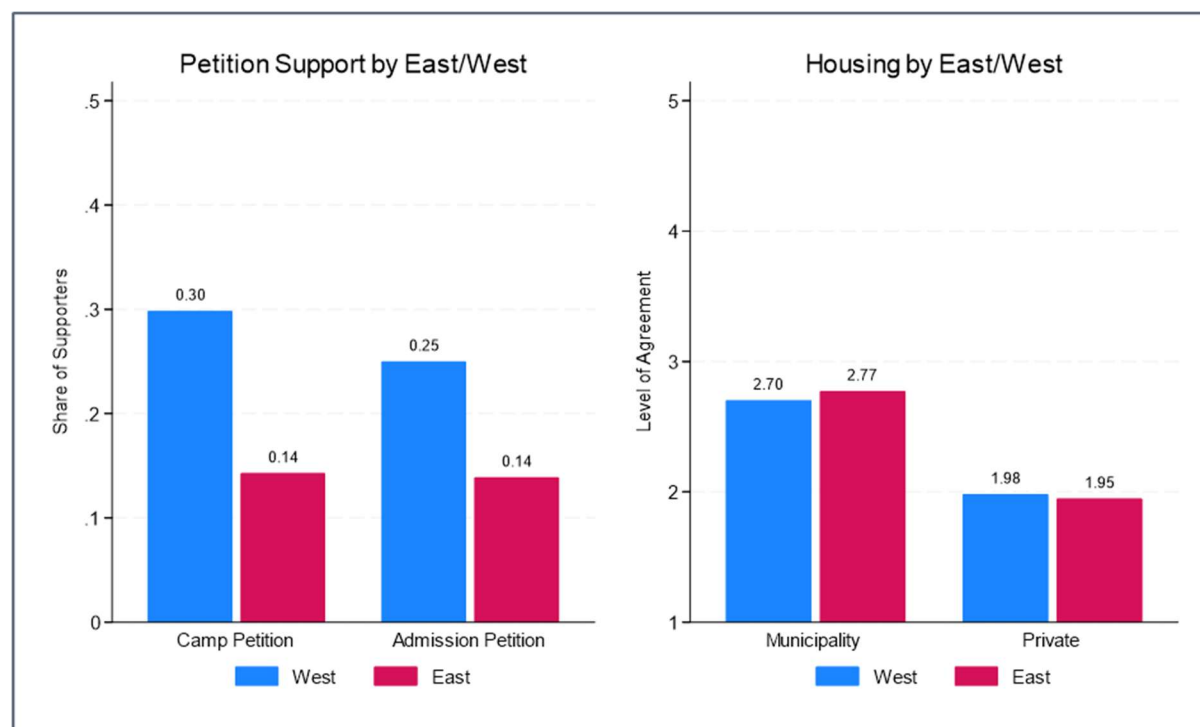


Figure 4: Solidarity by East/West

When dividing the sample along a stronger or weaker humanitarian orientation, we find insignificantly higher support levels for the petitions and a **significantly stronger acceptance of refugee housing in the municipality among more humanitarian-oriented respondents. Participants with levels of social trust above the middle category show a support rate for the camp petition of 46 percent vis-à-vis merely 25 percent among people with less trust.** The difference is smaller (and not significant) for the admission petition but points in the same direction (see Figure 5). We observe the opposite pattern when distinguishing by respondents' political orientation. Support rates for the camp petitions are now quite similar but **the share of right-leaning respondents' signing the admission petition lies only at 9 percent vis-à-vis 30 percent among their counterparts** (see Figure 5). **Less trusting and right-leaning participants also show significantly lower agreement levels for both housing variables than their respective comparison groups.**

⁶ Residents of Berlin were excluded as they could not be clearly assigned to either West or East Germany.

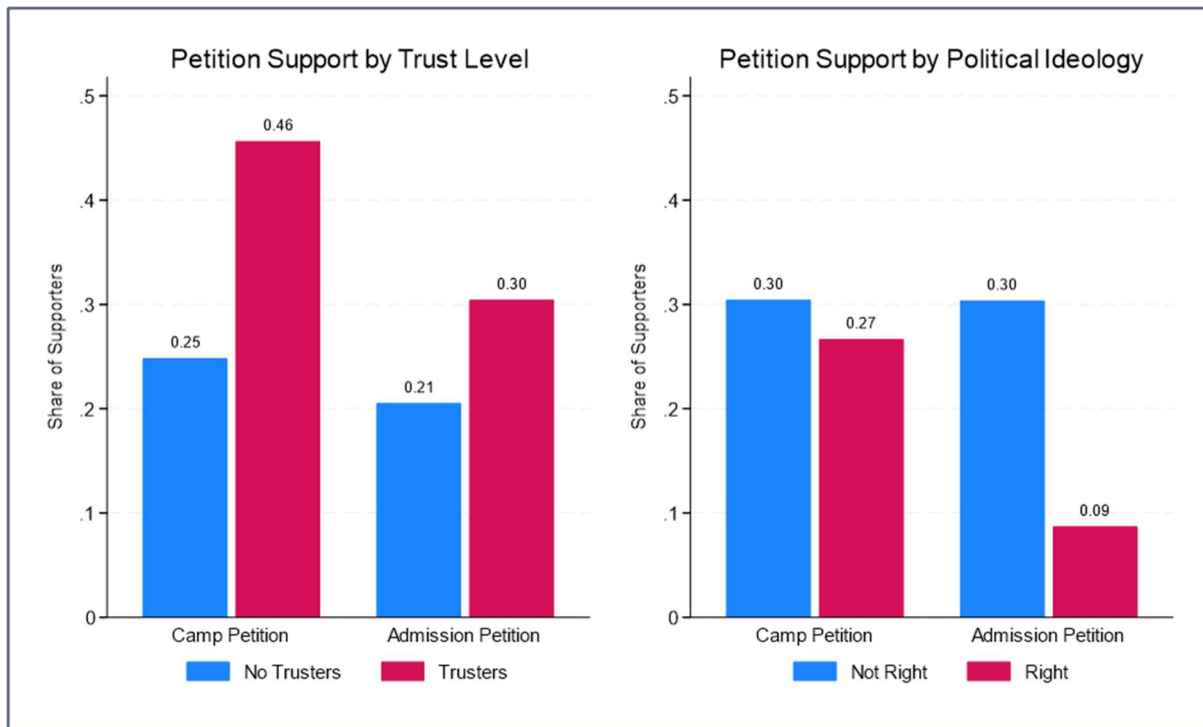


Figure 5: Petition Support by Trust Level and Political Ideology

In summary, we find that threat perceptions - with the exception of the fear of labor market competition - are on average on similar, if not slightly higher, levels as humanitarian concerns. Sociodemographic variables can reveal some significant differences in perceived threats but less so in humanitarian concerns, whereas social values and in particular political orientation seem to perform better as predictors for both kinds of attitudes towards refugees. In terms of solidarity, our data confirms the picture of a fatigued society, as painted by the DeutschlandTrend survey from June 2023 (infratest dimap, 2023a). Large majorities are not willing to support petitions to improve living conditions in refugee camps in Turkey or to relocate refugees from these camps to Germany. People's acceptance of refugee housing in their municipality or in their own dwelling is also limited. When comparing the two forms of solidarity, we observe a preference for on-site support vis-à-vis the admission of refugees. Social trust seems to be a particularly relevant predictor for supporting the camp petition, whereas political ideology is strongly associated with supporting the admission petition.

Conclusion

One interesting aspect of our results is that, as much as the topic of immigration is politically polarized, preferences for more on-site support do not differ much across people's political ideology. Rather, the polarization seems to revolve around the question of refugee admission. That said, there could be differences in why people speak out in favor of more funding for refugee camps. Some may care primarily for the wellbeing of camp residents, while others may hope that better camp conditions make refugees more willing to stay there. Our data does not allow for insights into the motivations of respondents' answers.

To properly interpret the above results, it is important to understand the context in which the data was collected. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, more than a million people moved from Ukraine to Germany in search of protection (Mediendienst Integration, n.d.). While the need to take in Ukrainian refugees in the face of the cruelty of the war has met widespread support (European Commission, 2022), an increasing number of voices started to warn against an overextension of integration capacities in Germany over time

(Die Welt, 2023). Given the (for most people) undeniable need to provide shelter to large numbers of Ukrainians, the immigration of asylum seekers from outside of Europe has become particularly controversial. Some respondents may feel that Germany, and possibly European countries more generally, should primarily concentrate their resources on the humanitarian crisis unfolding at its doorstep. The war in Ukraine and the associated atrocities are also likely to be much more present in people's minds due to the high media coverage. Moreover, Ukrainians are predominantly female, white Christians, which may also matter for the receptiveness of host populations (Ford, 2011). This is the reason why European countries were confronted with allegations of ethnicity and religion-based double standards (Deeb, 2022; Njai et al., 2022). Therefore, it may be that respondents in our study may not be generally reluctant to show solidarity with refugees but they may view integration resources as limited and regard the support of Ukrainians as the higher priority.

Besides the immigration context, it is also important to acknowledge the presence of a broader crisis narrative at the time of the data collection, including a soaring dissatisfaction with a publicly quarrelling government (infratest dimap, 2023a) and a grim economic outlook (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e. V., 2023; International Monetary Fund, 2023). Besides contributing to the relatively low levels of social trust, as hinted at above, this environment may also have intensified threat perceptions, and spread a sentiment that the pressing issues existing within Germany itself need to be tackled first before the needs of people from elsewhere can be taken care of. Therefore, our respondents may have been less willing to express solidarity during our data collection than they would have in 'normal times' (Heizmann & Huth, 2021; Laaker, 2023).

In the face of some aftereffects of the pandemic, an economic downturn, a highly unpopular government as well as increased energy prices and a large-scale influx of Ukrainians following Russia's invasion, the political climate in Germany in the spring of 2023 was tense and clearly benefited the right-populist party AfD. Asylum policies seem to have played an important role in the support for AfD and in particular the question of humanitarian immigration from outside of Europe has triggered fierce public debates.

Against this backdrop, our research provides evidence that, while empathy with non-European refugees has prevailed, people are worried what their immigration would mean for the welfare system, public safety and cultural life in Germany. Large majorities are not willing to support pro-refugee petitions, even though measures to provide on-site assistance for refugee camps abroad appear somewhat more popular than admitting refugees to Germany. Moreover, the acceptance to have refugees settle in one's immediate proximity is limited. A more differentiated look at the data reveals that people's levels of social trust as well as their political ideology are strong predictors for their attitudes and expressed solidarity towards refugees.

Future research could further explore the link between refugee attitudes and solidarity behaviour and look more closely at differences in acceptance levels depending on refugee characteristics or the way refugees are framed. Investigating how people's views of immigration change over time, and relating these changes, for instance, to the evolution of migration flows or economic developments also holds promise.

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