

University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School

Penn Law: Legal Scholarship Repository

Faculty Scholarship at Penn Law

10-23-2020

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

Robert Shaffer
Syracuse University

Lauren E. Pinson
University of Pennsylvania

Jonathan A. Chu
University of Pennsylvania & Civic Pulse

Beth A. Simmons
University of Pennsylvania Law School

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [Immigration Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [Law and Politics Commons](#), [Law and Society Commons](#), [Public Policy Commons](#), [Social Policy Commons](#), and the [State and Local Government Law Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Shaffer, Robert; Pinson, Lauren E.; Chu, Jonathan A.; and Simmons, Beth A., "Local Elected Officials' Receptivity to Refugee Resettlement in the United States" (2020). *Faculty Scholarship at Penn Law*. 2253. https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/2253

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Penn Law: Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship at Penn Law by an authorized administrator of Penn Law: Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact PennlawIR@law.upenn.edu.

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

Robert Shaffer^a, Lauren E. Pinson^a, Jonathan A. Chu^{a,b,c}, and Beth A. Simmons^{a,b,d,e}

^aPerry World House, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 19104; ^bDepartment of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 19104; ^cCivicPulse, Mountain View, CA, 94041; ^dUniversity of Pennsylvania Law School, Philadelphia, PA, 19104; ^eWharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 19104

October 23, 2020

1 **Local leaders possess significant and growing authority over**
2 **refugee resettlement, yet we know little about their attitudes toward**
3 **refugees. In this article, we use a conjoint experiment to evaluate**
4 **how the attributes of hypothetical refugee groups influence local pol-**
5 **icymaker receptivity toward refugee resettlement. We sample from**
6 **a novel, national panel of current local elected officials, who repre-**
7 **sent a broad range of urban and rural communities across the United**
8 **States. We find that many local officials favor refugee resettlement**
9 **regardless of refugee attributes. However, officials are most recep-**
10 **tive to refugees whom they perceive as a strong economic and social**
11 **fit within their communities. Our study is the first in a growing litera-**
12 **ture on individual attitudes toward refugees to systematically exam-**
13 **ine the preferences of US local elected officials, and offers unique**
14 **insights into the views of this influential and policy-relevant group.**

1. Introduction

2 What factors lead local elected officials to support refugee
3 resettlement in their communities? Local leaders' attitudes
4 toward refugees significantly influence refugee resettlement
5 outcomes. Sympathetic local elites can facilitate the social
6 and economic transition for resettled refugees by easing access
7 to social services and economic assistance. By contrast, less
8 receptive local officials can impose hostile regulations or incite
9 resident resentment (1, 2). Since newly settled refugees often
10 rely on community assistance, these obstacles represent real
11 barriers for successful resettlement.

12 Recent executive actions have expanded US local elected of-
13 ficials' already-critical role in the refugee resettlement process.
14 In September 2019, President Donald Trump signed an execu-
15 tive order requiring the federal government to obtain consent
16 from state and local governments before settling refugees in
17 their jurisdictions. In the following months, local governments
18 in North Dakota, Minnesota, Virginia, Colorado, and beyond
19 voted on whether to consent to refugee resettlement.¹ Due to
20 legal challenges, the final status of the executive order is uncer-
21 tain. However, regardless of outcome, the order highlights the
22 importance of local policymakers throughout the resettlement
23 process. Furthermore, these developments have global impli-
24 cations due to the United States' prominent position in the
25 refugee resettlement ecosystem. Until 2018, the United States
26 accepted the most refugees of any country,² with more than
27 500 US cities accepting over 100 refugees from 2002-2018.³

This article investigates the attitudes of local elected of-
ficials 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 Admis-
sions 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 exist-
ing 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 sub-
stantial variation in preferences exists, approximately half of
our respondents supported all refugee group profiles they con-
sidered, while approximately one in ten opposed all such pro-
files (see also 3). Though local officials in Democratic-voting

Significance Statement

The recent global surge in forcibly displaced persons has pro-
duced 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 ex-
perimental 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 be-
lieve will contribute to the local economy and fit with community
values. Our results offer guidance to advocates seeking to im-
prove 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.

Corresponding author: Robert Shaffer (rbshaffer0@gmail.com)

Data deposition: The data reported in this paper have been deposited in the Harvard Dataverse (doi: 10.7910/DVN/U9IWNR).

¹Field, Andy Tsubasa. "Burleigh County OKs refugee resettlement after passionate testimony." *The Bismark Tribune* December 10, 2019; Kaul, Greta and Tom Nehil. "How every Minnesota county has voted on refugee resettlement so far." *The Minnesota Post* January 16, 2020; Tyree, Elizabeth, Valencia Jones, and Kaicey Baylor. "Appomattox Co. passes resolution refusing to become refugee sanctuary." *WSET* December 16, 2019; Aguilar, John. "Colorado communities welcome refugee resettlement." *The Denver Post* January 8, 2020.

²Radford, Jynnah and Phillip Connor. "Canada now leads the world in refugee resettlement, surpassing the U.S." *Pew Research Center* June 19, 2019.

³See the [New American Economy Research Fund's](#) data for details.

51 counties supported more refugee groups on average, their coun- 107
52 terparts in Republican-voting counties also supported over half 108
53 of the profiles they viewed. 109

54 However, this overall pattern of support conceals important 110
55 attribute-based differences in local officials' attitudes toward 111
56 refugees. Our experimental evidence shows that officials favor 112
57 refugee groups that are better-educated, possess stronger 113
58 English skills, are predominantly female, and identify as Chris- 114
59 tian. Local officials are also more likely to support refugees 115
60 who are sponsored by a business compared with refugees 116
61 without sponsorship. Descriptive data from an open-ended 117
62 follow-up question suggest that a plurality of respondents focus 118
63 on refugees' economic contributions, potentially eroding the 119
64 stated humanitarian intent of the US resettlement program. 120
65 Approximately 40% of respondents mentioned refugees' eco- 121
66 nomic contributions or local resource constraints, compared 122
67 with approximately 25% who mentioned refugees' social or 123
68 cultural fit.

69 Our study encourages researchers to pay closer attention to 124
70 the role of local governments in refugee resettlement. Though 125
71 we caution against re-orienting resettlement policy discus- 126
72 sions toward refugees' economic contributions or social fit, our 127
73 research provides guidance for both academics and refugee 128
74 resettlement stakeholders. 129

75 2. Policy Context 130

76 A refugee is "any person who is outside any country of such 131
77 person's nationality [...] and who is unable or unwilling to 132
78 return [...] or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protec- 133
79 tion of that country because of persecution or a well-founded 134
80 fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, 135
81 membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."⁴ 136
82 Refugee resettlement in the United States is a multi-stage, 137
83 multi-level process. Each year, the US government sets a cap 138
84 for refugee admissions. Based on this cap, the UN High Com- 139
85 missioner for Refugees submits cases to the US from a pool of 140
86 approved applicants. Upon referral, potential refugees undergo 141
87 an interview, security clearance, and assignment process. Suc- 142
88 cessful applicants are paired with one of nine non-governmental 143
89 resettlement agencies, which coordinate with federal agencies 144
90 on location selection and services.

91 Before 2019, US law required the Department of Health and 145
92 Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement to regularly 146
93 consult state and local governments about the sponsorship 147
94 process and geographic distribution of refugees prior to re- 148
95 settlement.⁵ Local governments have occasionally used this 149
96 consultation process to voice grievances with resettlement 150
97 decisions. For example, after the 2008 Financial Crisis, officials in 151
98 Fort Wayne, Indiana and Manchester, New Jersey requested 152
99 moratoria on refugee resettlement due to funding constraints 153
100 and lack of economic opportunity (4). But formal state or 154
101 local consent was not required for refugee resettlement.

102 More recently, local policymakers have assumed new, formal 155
103 powers over refugee resettlement decisions. In September 156
104 2019, President Trump issued an executive order directing 157
105 the Secretaries of State and Health and Human Services to 158
106 create a process for states and localities to provide written

107 consent for the initial resettlement of refugees.⁶ Starting July 108
109 of 2020, the order directed federal agencies to resettle refugees 110
110 only with the consent of *both the state and local governments*.⁷ 111
111 Refugee resettlement agencies sued to block the order,⁸ which 112
112 led to a preliminary injunction halting implementation^{9,10} and 113
113 a subsequent appeal.¹¹ Nevertheless, more than 111 localities 114
114 and 41 states gave written consent for refugee resettlement 115
115 ahead of the injunction.¹² Texas was the only state to refuse.¹³

116 Whether or not the executive order stands, the political 117
117 debate surrounding the order highlights local officials' influence 118
118 over the refugee resettlement process.¹⁴ Deliberation and 119
119 votes on refugee resettlement by local elected officials reflect 120
120 community priorities.¹⁵ When community priorities differ 121
121 from the legal criteria for refugee admission, empowering local 122
122 leaders to debate and vote on refugee resettlement could alter 123
123 refugee resettlement outcomes.

123 3. A Local Government Perspective on Refugees 124

124 **Determinants of Officials' Receptivity Toward Refugees.** In 125
125 this study we examine local elected officials' attitudes toward 126
126 refugee resettlement in their communities. We investigate 127
127 two broad sets of factors that might lead to greater recep- 128
128 tivity toward some refugee groups: economic/material and 129
129 social/cultural factors. While these considerations are not 130
130 mutually exclusive, and indeed often influence one another, 131
131 they are useful to distinguish conceptually.

132 Beginning with economic and material considerations, we 133
133 expect local elected officials to favor refugee groups that can 134
134 participate in and contribute to the local economy (see, e.g., 135
135 5–7, for related findings).¹⁶ Local officials are particularly at- 136
136 tuned to budgetary issues and economic constraints in their dis- 137
137 tricts. We expect signals of employability and self-sufficiency to 138
138 be especially attractive to resource-conscious officials. Refugee 139
139 education, business sponsorship, language skills, and status as 140
140 working-age adults are likely indicators of economic productiv- 141
141 ity, which should increase officials' receptivity toward refugee 142
142 groups with these attributes.

⁶ Trump, Donald J. "Executive Order 13888 of September 26, 2019, Enhancing State and Local Involvement in Refugee Resettlement," *Federal Register* 84(190):52355-52356.

⁷ However, the order allows the federal government to override a locality's decision in order to remain consistent with other federal laws.

⁸ Rose, Joel. "Advocates Challenge Trump Administration Plan To Let States and Towns Block Refugees." *NPR* November 21, 2019.

⁹ Jordan, Miriam. "Judge Halts Trump Policy That Allows States to Bar Refugees." *The New York Times* January 15, 2020. Monyak, Suzanne. "Md. Judge Says Trump Can't Let States Refuse Refugees." *Law360* January 15, 2020.

¹⁰ The Trump administration has since noted to the Fourth Circuit that the executive order is not a veto since it provides a "mechanism for the Secretary [of State] to resettle refugees in nonconsenting jurisdictions." Dreid, Nadia. "Gov't Tells 4th Circ. Refugee Order Gives States Input Not Veto." *Law360* March 25, 2020.

¹¹ Kunzelman, Michael. "Feds Appeal Order Blocking Trump Refugee Resettlement Limit." *The Associated Press* February 12, 2020.

¹² "Latest Developments on Refugee Resettlement Consent." *Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service*.

¹³ Monyak, Suzanne. "Texas Is First To Refuse Refugees Under Trump Order." *Law360* January 15, 2020.

¹⁴ An earlier executive order stated that "state and local jurisdictions [should] be granted a role in the process of determining the placement or settlement in their jurisdictions of aliens eligible to be admitted to the United States as refugees." Trump, Donald J. "Executive Order 13769 of January 27, 2017, Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States," *Federal Register* 82(20):8977-8982.

¹⁵ For example, during public debates on a refugee resettlement consent vote, citizens in Burleigh County, ND emphasized the need to create a welcoming community for refugees, and worried about the impact of a negative vote on integration. Field, Andy Tsubasa. "Burleigh County OKs refugee resettlement after passionate testimony." *The Bismark Tribune* December 10, 2019.

¹⁶ Alternatively, local elected officials may be more skeptical of refugees who may compete for their constituents' jobs. However, (8) report that fears of individual-labor competition have a limited influence over perceptions of potential migrants. We therefore view this possibility as unlikely.

⁴ 8 USC §1101(a)(42)(A).

⁵ 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

Demographics	Counties	Municipalities & Towns
Population	221,973	38,007
Proportion Urban	48%	72%
2016 GOP Vote Share	59%	52%
Proportion College Educated	24%	29%
# of Gov. Official Respondents	100	474

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

¹⁷Members 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).

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

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

²⁰As 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.

²¹This 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 #842736). Prior to the receipt of the data, this design was registered with EGAP (#20200417AC).

²²See 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.

²³See 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.

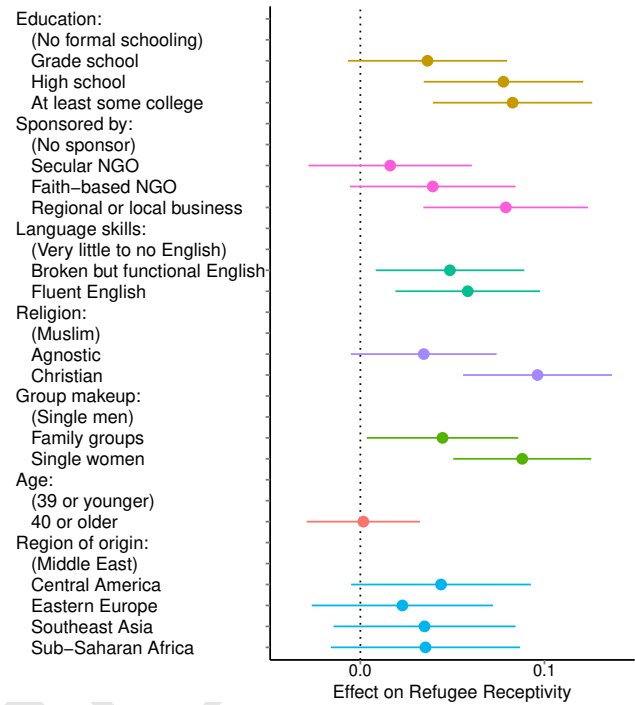
demographics.

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. Our design offers all of these options, rather than forcing a relative choice between profiles.

²⁶ See Appendix 3 for further details.

Fig. 1. Estimated effects of refugee profile attributes on local leaders' receptivity



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).

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).²⁷ Estimates are drawn from a regression model in which *Refugee Group Receptivity* is regressed on indicator variables for each level of each refugee group attribute, with baseline categories excluded and standard errors clustered by respondent.²⁸

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

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.

320 associated with employment opportunities.²⁹
321 We also find evidence that local officials are more likely
322 to support refugees they believe will integrate more easily
323 into their communities. First, respondents are 9.6 percentage
324 points more likely to support Christian refugees settling in
325 their communities compared with Muslim refugees, which is
326 the single largest effect we identify. While officials prefer
327 agnostic refugees to Muslim refugees (3.4 percentage points
328 more), this difference is not statistically significant at the .05
329 level. This finding suggests that respondents may hold in-
330 group preferences for Christian refugees rather than out-group
331 animus directed specifically at Muslim refugees, though future
332 work should investigate this possibility further.³⁰

333 Second, local officials are 4.4 and 8.8 percentage points
334 more likely to support refugee groups primarily consisting of
335 families and single women, respectively, compared with the
336 baseline group of single men. This difference likely results from
337 a perception that single men are more likely to participate
338 in socially disruptive behavior (see also 9). The support for
339 family groups over single men suggests that respondents are
340 focused on the societal fit of the group's composition rather
341 than the potential fiscal burden of families alone.³¹

342 Local elected officials are also 5.8 and 4.8 percentage points
343 more likely to support refugee groups with fluent or broken
344 but functional English skills, compared with a baseline of very
345 little to no English. Since officials likely associate refugees'
346 English proficiency both with refugees' sociocultural fit and
347 their ability to participate in the local economy, we cannot
348 definitively associate this finding with a particular mecha-
349 nism. However, officials clearly prefer English speakers to
350 non-English-speakers, even when refugees' English skills are
351 imperfect.

352 Local officials do not appear to possess a significant pref-
353 erence with respect to refugee age or regional origin. The
354 null result with respect to age may be due to the age cutoff
355 we use in our study. Since adults above or below age 40 can
356 plausibly be within prime economic productivity years, if re-
357 spondents prioritize refugee economic contributions they may
358 be roughly indifferent between these two categories (see, e.g.
359 6). By contrast, our null result on regional origin may be due
360 to respondent political knowledge. Holding all other attributes
361 constant, local officials may not have sufficient information
362 about specified regional groupings to express a preference.³²

363 **Open-Ended Responses.** We concluded our survey with an
364 open-ended question, in which we asked local elected officials to
365 identify the most important issues to consider when assessing
366 how a group of refugees might settle into their community.
367 Out of the 574 respondents who answered at least one conjoint
368 question, some 439 (76%) offered at least some response to
369 this question. Since open-ended responses are necessarily

370 unstructured, any analysis of their contents is exploratory
371 by nature. However, examining open-ended responses can
372 reinforce the findings we describe in the previous sections and
373 reveal the logic that underlies them.

374 To summarize our open-ended data, we nonexclusively
375 coded each response based on two sets of categories. The
376 first set consisted of our seven conjoint attributes. The sec-
377 ond set consisted of four abstract categories: Economy, So-
378 cial/Cultural, Immigration Process, and Public Order. These
379 categories represented the four most prominent themes we
380 identified by reading a sample of open-ended responses. All
381 responses were double-coded, with disagreements adjudicated
382 by a third coder.³³

383 The marginal histograms in Figure 2 illustrate that respon-
384 dents most frequently identify refugee language skills as a key
385 area of concern, followed by education and sponsorship status.
386 These three attributes reaffirm the set of influential attributes
387 identified in the conjoint portion of the survey. Surprisingly,
388 gender/family group makeup and religion were not frequently
389 mentioned despite their effect in the conjoint portion of the
390 survey. One possible explanation for this divergence is social
391 desirability bias. Though some respondents may be wary of
392 primarily Muslim or male refugee groups, they may be more
393 willing to express this preference in the conjoint portion of the
394 survey than in an open-ended response (24).

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

410 Open-ended responses also allow us to explore context
411 for our experimental findings. As the heatmap in Figure
412 2 shows, mentions of education and sponsorship were most
413 highly correlated with our "Economy" category, which suggests
414 that some respondents evaluated these categories primarily
415 through their association with refugees' perceived economic
416 contributions. By contrast, language skill mentions were not
417 strongly correlated with any of our abstract categories. This
418 finding suggests that language plays a more complex role,
419 which spans respondents' perceptions of refugee contributions
420 to the local economy, the social/cultural milieu, and public
421 order.

422 **Subgroup Analyses.** We also examine whether local officials'
423 refugee receptivity preferences differ by their counties' parti-
424 sanship, their own levels of interaction with non-Americans,
425 and their localities' populations.^{34,35} First, we compare offi-
426 cials by whether their jurisdiction is located in a county that
427 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.

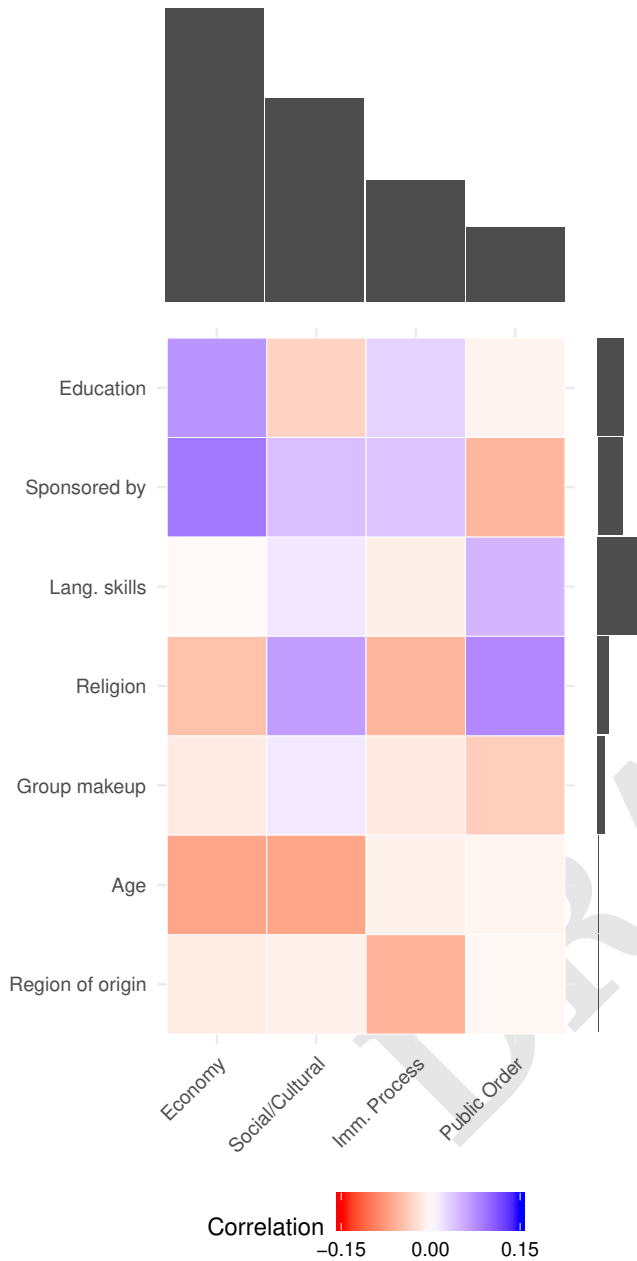
³²As shown in Appendix 3, as a robustness check, we pooled all non-Middle East regions to compare whether there is a systematic bias against refugee groups from the Middle East. The difference between the Middle East and non-Middle East categories is not statistically significant at the .05 level. However, 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.

Fig. 2. Frequency and correlation of descriptive categories in open-ended responses



Counts of each attribute are shown in marginal histograms. Cell hues denote correlation between attribute pairs ($n = 574$). See Appendix 4 for visualizations of attribute counts and co-occurrences.

We observe significant differences—ranging from 7.9 to 22.8 percentage points—between the two groups of respondents on every attribute level, with officials in Republican-voting areas exhibiting a lower level of support across all attributes.³⁶ Officials in Republican-voting counties also expressed stronger preferences toward refugee group religion and education. These respondents were more than 13 percentage points more likely to support Christian refugees compared to Muslim refugees

³⁶See (26) for parallel evidence of local officials’ individual-level polarized preferences on refugee resettlement.

and refugees with education at a high school level or above compared to those with no formal education. By comparison, officials in Democratic-voting counties did not significantly discriminate based on refugees’ religious or educational backgrounds.

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 on at least some attributes, including 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,³⁷ and explicit financial support to local

³⁷Notably, less than half of all arriving refugees in the United States speak any English (28).

495 communities likely represent high-impact public engagement
496 strategies for refugee resettlement stakeholders seeking to
497 bolster refugee acceptance. When federal or state funding for
498 these programs is not available, refugee resettlement agencies
499 may find less expensive interventions more sustainable, such
500 as placing refugees to optimize employment opportunities (29)
501 or highlighting how refugees make a positive net fiscal impact
502 across levels of government.³⁸

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

520 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.** We thank Sarah Bush, Amanda Cellini,
521 Dan Hopkins, Yosaku Horiuchi, Michael Hotard, Erik Lin-Greenberg,
522 Lama Mourad, Marianne Potvin, Stephanie Schwartz, Maraam
523 Dwidar, the participants of the Perry World House and Browne
524 Center seminars, and two reviewers for their helpful comments. This
525 report does not represent the views of CivicPulse. This project
526 was funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York's award to
527 Beth Simmons (grant number G-F-18-56213 (575502)) and does
528 not represent the views of the foundation. All mistakes remain our
529 own.

530 1. M Jones-Correa, All immigration is local: Receiving communities and their role in successful
531 immigrant integration. *Washington, DC: Cent. for Am. Prog.* (2011).
532 2. K Ebert, DG Okamoto, Social citizenship, integration and collective action: Immigrant civic
533 engagement in the United States. *Soc. Forces* **91**, 1267–1292 (2013).
534 3. AF Williamson, *Welcoming New Americans?: Local Governments and Immigrant Incorporation.*
535 (University of Chicago Press), (2018).
536 4. A Brown, T Scribner, Unfulfilled promises, future possibilities: The refugee resettlement sys-
537 tem in the United States. *J. on Migr. Hum. Secur.* **2**, 101–120 (2014).
538 5. J Hainmueller, DJ Hopkins, The hidden American immigration consensus: a conjoint analysis
539 of attitudes toward immigrants. *Am. J. Polit. Sci.* **59**, 529–548 (2015).
540 6. K Bansak, J Hainmueller, D Hangartner, How economic, humanitarian, and religious con-
541 cerns shape European attitudes toward asylum seekers. *Science* **354**, 217–222 (2016).
542 7. CL Adida, A Lo, MR Platas, Americans preferred Syrian refugees who are female, English-
543 speaking, and Christian on the eve of Donald Trump's election. *PLOS ONE* **14**, e0222504
544 (2019).
545 8. J Citrin, DP Green, C Muste, C Wong, Public opinion toward immigration reform: The role of
546 economic motivations. *The J. Polit.* **59**, 858–881 (1997).
547 9. DG Ward, Public attitudes toward young immigrant men. *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.* **113**, 264–269
548 (2019).
549 10. DD Choi, M Poertner, N Sambanis, Parochialism, social norms, and discrimination against
550 immigrants. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci.* **116**, 16274–16279 (2019).
551 11. B Altemeyer, Dogmatic behavior among students: Testing a new measure of dogmatism. *The*
552 *J. Soc. Psychol.* **142**, 713–721 (2002).
553 12. RC Carpenter, "Women, children and other vulnerable groups": gender, strategic frames and
554 the protection of civilians as a transnational issue. *Int. Stud. Q.* **49**, 295–334 (2005).
555 13. K Clayton, J Ferwerda, Y Horiuchi, Exposure to immigration and admission preferences: Evi-
556 dence from France. *Polit. Behav.*, 1–26 (2019).
557 14. L Mourad, *Open Borders, Local Closures: Decentralization and the Politics of Local Re-*
558 *sponses to the Syrian Refugee Influx in Lebanon*, Doctoral Dissertation. (University of
559 Toronto), (2019).
560 15. P Mohanty, R Shaffer, Messy data, robust inference? navigating obstacles to inference with
561 bigkrls. *Polit. Analysis* **27**, 127–144 (2019).
562 16. BA Lee, G Sharp, Ethnoracial diversity across the rural-urban continuum. *The ANNALS Am.*
563 *Acad. Polit. Soc. Sci.* **672**, 26–46 (2017).

17. J Trounstine, Representation and accountability in cities. *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* **13**, 407–423 564
(2010). 565
18. Z Hajnal, J Trounstine, Identifying and understanding perceived inequities in local politics. 566
Polit. Res. Q. **67**, 56–70 (2014). 567
19. Z Hajnal, J Trounstine, What underlies urban politics? race, class, ideology, partisanship, and 568
the urban vote. *Urban Aff. Rev.* **50**, 63–99 (2014). 569
20. ZL Hajnal, JL Trounstine, Inequality in local politics. *The Polit. Racial & Cl. Inequalities Am.* 570
(2016). 571
21. G Propfeter, An exploration of revenue structure characteristics in rural municipalities. *State* 572
Local Gov. Rev. **51**, 46–56 (2019). 573
22. J Hainmueller, DJ Hopkins, T Yamamoto, Causal inference in conjoint analysis: understand- 574
ing multidimensional choices via stated preference experiments. *Polit. Analysis* **22**, 1–30 575
(2014). 576
23. J Chu, C Lee, Race, religion, and American support for humanitarian intervention. *Work. Pap.* 577
(2020). 578
24. Y Horiuchi, ZD Markovich, T Yamamoto, Does conjoint analysis mitigate social desirability 579
bias? *MIT Polit. Sci. Dep. Res. Pap. No. 2018-05* (2020). 580
25. TJ Leeper, SB Hobolt, J Tilley, Measuring subgroup preferences in conjoint experiments. *Polit.* 581
Analysis **28**, 207–221 (2020). 582
26. N Lee, M Landgrave, K Bansak, Polarization in subnational government: Evidence from sur- 583
veys of township, municipal, county, and state policymakers. *Work. Pap.* (2020). 584
27. J Ferwerda, D Flynn, Y Horiuchi, Explaining opposition to refugee resettlement: The role of 585
NIMBYism and perceived threats. *Sci. advances* **3**, e1700812 (2017). 586
28. R Capps, et al., The integration outcomes of U.S. refugees: Successes and challenges. *Migr.* 587
Policy Inst. Rep. (2015). 588
29. K Bansak, et al., Improving refugee integration through data-driven algorithmic assignment. 589
Science **359**, 325–329 (2018). 590

³⁸ US Department of Health and Human Services [draft report](#). July 29, 2017.