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Who Supports Syrians?

The Relative Importance of Religion, Partisanship, and Partisan News

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Abstract

Who supports allowing Syrian refugees into the U.S.? As a candidate Donald Trump clearly opposed doing so. In contrast, religious leaders across the broad spectrum of religious traditions in the U.S. have drawn on sacred texts to call their people to action in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Many explicitly ask the U.S. government to resettle Syrian refugees in the U.S. Thus, many Republicans may have experienced cross-cutting pressures. Analyses of three surveys from 2015 and 2016 find that party identification, ideology, support for Trump, partisan news consumption, religious service attendance, age, and education predict support for bringing Syrian refugees to the U.S. Overall, the partisan and ideological variables were far more predictive of attitudes than were religious variables. These results raise important questions about refugee politics and contexts in which religious forces conflict with partisan and ideological forces.

Key words: refugees, refugee crisis, religion and politics, partisan media

Word count (main text, footnotes, references, tables, and figures): 3,644

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As a candidate, Donald Trump's views on Syrian refugees left little to the imagination. In the final debate he called Syrian refugees "definitely, in many cases, ISIS-aligned...the great Trojan horse."¹ Religious leaders in the U.S. struck a different tone. While religious groups vigorously debate each other on all kinds of issues (e.g., abortion, capital punishment, climate change, immigration, Israel/Palestine, rules for bathrooms and wedding cakes), on the Syrian refugee crisis, leaders across religious traditions invoked sacred texts to stake out similar positions. Statements from Catholic, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Methodist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Mormon, Jewish, and Muslim groups all provided explicitly religious arguments for supporting refugees. Many specifically argued for bringing more Syrian refugees into the U.S. (see web appendix for details).

Even evangelical groups and their leaders, often among the most politically conservative voices in American politics, joined the chorus, potentially cross-pressuring evangelical Republicans. The National Association of Evangelicals asked Congress to "expand expedited resettlement in the U.S. of vulnerable Syrian refugees."² The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest evangelical denomination and a conservative bulwark, issued a resolution in 2016 supporting refugee resettlement in the U.S.³ To be sure, some evangelical leaders opposed resettling Syrian refugees in the U.S. Most notably, Franklin Graham, CEO of the evangelical relief organization Samaritan's Purse and the son of the revered evangelist, Billy Graham, supported Trump's executive order temporarily suspending the refugee resettlement program. Still, evangelical leaders overwhelmingly broke with Graham, as more than 500 evangelical pastors and leaders signed an open letter to "call on President Trump and Vice President Pence to support refugees" published in the *Washington Post* (Weber 2017). As Emma Green (2017) put it, "from religious leaders' perspectives, backlash against Trump's immigration policy may be

the most ecumenical issue in America right now.”

For many issues, partisan and religious forces align. For example, evangelicals can encounter conservative religious cues on a host of issues (e.g., abortion, religious liberty, LGBT rights) that match the conservative messages from Republican sources. However, on the question of letting Syrian refugees into the U.S., religious elites’ generally pro-refugee messages ran counter to many conservative and Republican voices, especially Donald Trump’s. In this case, what is the relative importance of explicitly political forces like party identification and ideology *vis-à-vis* religious forces? Exploring this question provides a first step toward understanding who supports bringing Syrian refugees to the U.S. We know relatively little about the underpinnings of attitudes toward Syrian refugees in the U.S. Given the scale of the refugee crisis, its impact on global politics, and the political significance of Trump’s executive orders limiting refugee resettlement in the first months of his administration, refugee politics deserve scholarly attention.

Religious and Partisan Forces

Religion directly and indirectly shapes public opinion on a variety of social, economic, and foreign policy issues (see Guth 2013; Jelen 2009; Wilson 2009) often by highlighting values, information, and cues relating to those issues. Values, information, and cues can be transmitted and reinforced via statements from clergy or other leaders during services or in religious media outlets. However, while clergy can shape the laity in some ways, direct influence is often limited (Djupe and Calfano 2013; Djupe and Gilbert 2009). Cues from interactions with co-religionists at worship services and in less formal gatherings associated with the local house of worship can often be more influential (Djupe and Calfano 2013; Djupe and Gilbert 2009).

Of course, political forces like party identification, ideology, and affect toward political leaders powerfully influence views on a variety of issues as well (e.g., Abramowitz 2010). Thus, I expect those identifying as Republican, conservative, and/or Trump supporters to be less likely to approve of bringing refugees into the U.S. Given the almost universally pro-refugee messages from religious leaders across traditions, I expect few differences in attitudes toward refugees across religious traditions.⁴ In addition, I expect that, all else equal, people who regularly attend worship services will be more favorable toward allowing refugees into the country. Regular attenders are presumably the most likely to encounter pro-refugee messages because they may hear such messages during services. Attendance may also proxy engagement with their tradition's leaders and members outside services (e.g., via religious media and informal meetings with co-religionists). Regular attenders may also hold more strongly to values that encourage sympathy for refugees, the same values that may be animating leaders' pro-refugee statements. Given that leaders from a variety of traditions voiced pro-refugee messages, I expect regular attenders to be more favorable toward refugees regardless of religious tradition.

Despite broad consensus among religious leaders, mass opinion broke down along religious lines. Table 1 shows support for allowing Syrian refugees into the U.S. across three surveys. A Pew Research Center poll from September, 2015, just after Obama committed to allowing 10,000 Syrian refugees into the country, asked respondents whether they approved of allowing more Syrian refugees into the country (see web appendix for details on measures). The table shows the percentage who approved, using Pew's religious tradition measures. The survey finds big religious differences, with approval ranging from 70% of Jewish respondents to 31% of white evangelical Protestants. Despite religious leaders' calls for supporting the Syrian refugees,

those unaffiliated with any religion were more supportive than those among many of the U.S.'s major religious traditions.

The table also presents findings from two American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys, the pilot study conducted in January of 2016 and the Time Series pre-election study fielded September through the day before the election. The surveys asked how much respondents favor or oppose (or neither) “allowing Syrian refugees to come to the United States,” creating a 7-point scale with strongest opposition at the scale’s low end. Means for religious traditions (constructed to match the Pew study as closely as possible) varied considerably. White evangelical Protestants were the least supportive of allowing Syrian refugees into the country, with a mean about .75 points lower than the overall mean, while the religiously unaffiliated were among the most supportive, with a mean about half a point higher than average.

These differences mostly disappear when controlling for political variables. Using the Pew survey, I estimated a probit model of approval of allowing more Syrian refugees into the U.S. as a function of religious (religious tradition and attendance at a local house of worship), political (party identification, ideology, support for Donald Trump), and demographic variables (college education, age, income, and race/ethnicity). The religious traditions, education, race/ethnicity, and age variables are indicator variables that are mutually exclusive and exhaustive within the relevant category. Party identification and ideology are coded such that higher scores are Republicans and conservatives. Support for Trump equals 1 if the respondent listed Trump as their first or second choice for the Republican nomination and 0 otherwise.

The ANES models take the 7-point scale described above as the dependent variable and use the same independent variables with the exception of support for Trump—these models

include respondents' feeling thermometer rating of Trump rather than respondents' preference for the Republican nomination. I estimated the model using OLS for ease of interpretation but ordered probit models generate similar results.⁵ I recoded all independent variables to a 0-1 scale.

The results support expectations. In all three surveys, Republicans, conservatives, and Trump supporters were significantly less supportive of resettlement. Consistent with other surveys, those with college degrees and younger people were more supportive.⁶ Compared to a pure independent, moderate, with mean support for Trump in the ANES pre-election survey, the model estimates a strong Republican, strong conservative giving Trump an 85 rating (90th percentile) would be 2.4 points lower on the 7-point scale.

As expected, holding party identification, ideology, Trump support, education, and age constant, relatively few differences remain across religious traditions. In the Pew survey, Mormons and the religiously unaffiliated were significantly more likely to approve than others. In the ANES pre-election survey, Mormons, Catholics who were not white or Hispanic, and respondents affiliated with smaller religious traditions in the U.S. were significantly more favorable toward refugees than average (the same was true for adherents of smaller religions in the pilot study). No other religious tradition's parameter estimate was statistically significant at even the .10 level. That is, conservative evangelical Republicans appear no different from other conservative Republicans on this issue. Conservative Republican White Catholics likewise appear indistinct from other conservative Republicans. And so on. The LDS community stands out from other traditions in two of the three surveys, a point I return to below.

Yet religion still plays the anticipated role, as those who regularly attend religious services tend to be more supportive of refugees. However, the magnitude of religion's predictive

impact is much smaller than that of the political variables. Compared to non-attenders, those who attend more than once a week were 11 percentage points more likely to support allowing Syrian refugees into the U.S. in the Pew survey and about .45 points more supportive on the ANES 7-point scale. This .45 point difference pales in comparison to the 2.4 point difference associated with partisan differences noted above. I examined whether the attendance estimate differed across religious traditions via interactions between attendance and religious tradition. I found that it did not (see web appendix).

Partisan News

The ANES pre-election survey allows a closer look at two sources of partisan cues: Fox News and MSNBC. According to data from GDELT's Television Explorer database, from September 1, 2015 to November 8, 2016, Fox News mentioned "refugee" or "refugees" on average 16 times a day, while MSNBC mentioned the terms 12 times a day.⁷ Viewers of either source would have presumably encountered discussion of refugees various times during the campaign. Although a full content analysis of coverage is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems safe to assume that Fox News coverage was generally opposed to allowing Syrian refugees in the U.S. and that MSNBC was more favorable. Fox News mentioned refugees within four sentences of "terrorism," "terrorist," or "threat" 1,352 times during the same period, compared to 874 times for MSNBC. In contrast, refugees were mentioned in proximity to "humanitarian," "victim," or "victims" 1,375 times on MSNBC and only 979 times on Fox News.

ANES pre-election respondents who said they heard about the presidential campaign on television were given a list of television shows and asked to indicate which shows they watch at

least once a month. I created an indicator variable for respondents who watched Hannity, The O'Reilly Factor, or The Kelly File, each of which aired on Fox News. I created another indicator variable for respondents who watched All in With Chris Hayes, Hardball with Chris Matthews, or The Rachel Maddow Show, each from MSNBC.

Remarkably, even after controlling for party identification, ideology, support for Trump, religious attendance, age, and education, consumption of Fox News and MSNBC differentiated respondents' views of refugee resettlement (see Table 2, Column 4). *Ceterus paribus*, Fox News viewers were about a quarter point less favorable toward allowing refugees into the U.S. and MSNBC viewers were about a quarter point more favorable. Although we cannot draw causal inferences from these data, the results are consistent with a causal impact since the model controls for so many factors that might affect media choice and other studies have demonstrated partisan media's causal impact (e.g., Levendusky 2013).

To see the difference between MSNBC viewers and non-viewers, compare means on the 1-7 scale among white Democratic identifiers across the largest religious traditions. Although limiting the analysis to white Democrats and then parsing by MSNBC viewership and religious tradition is slicing the data fairly thin, some remarkable differences are evident. Figure 1, which shows mean responses along with 95% confidence intervals, shows that MSNBC viewers were distinctively favorable toward Syrian refugees, controlling for race and party identification. Among white evangelical Democrats, MSNBC viewers were about a point more favorable toward refugees than non-viewers, but there are so few respondents in these categories that confidence intervals overlap considerably. Religiously unaffiliated white Democrats who watched MSNBC were .8 points more supportive than non-viewers of resettling Syrian refugees in the U.S., though confidence intervals just overlap. More starkly, MSNBC viewers among

white mainline Democrats were 1.7 points more favorable toward Syrian refugees than non-viewers, while white Catholic Democrats who watched MSNBC were just over 1 point more favorable than non-viewers in this group.

We see the reverse pattern for Fox News viewers and white Republicans (see Figure 2). In particular, among white evangelical Republicans, Fox viewers had an average of 1.7, a full 1.5 points below the overall mean and .8 points below their fellow white Republican evangelicals who didn't watch Fox News. If church attendance and watching Fox News are competing sources of information and cues, Fox News is winning.

Other differences in Figure 2 are less dramatic, but still significant. Among white Republican mainline Protestants and Catholics, Fox News viewers scored about .6 points lower than their non-watching counterparts. For religiously unaffiliated white Republicans, the difference was a statistically insignificant .4 points. In short, even among white Republicans, Fox News viewers stand out for their opposition to allowing Syrian refugees into the U.S.

Conclusion

Democrats, liberals, Trump skeptics, MSNBC viewers, college graduates, the young, Mormons, and regular church attenders were all more favorable than their counterparts toward bringing Syrian refugees to the U.S. That said, party identification and ideology are much more predictive of attitudes toward refugees than is attending religious services. These analyses take a first step toward understanding refugee politics in the U.S. This initial step raises important questions. First, exactly what messages about refugees affect public opinion? To what extent is opposition to resettlement driven by anti-Muslim sentiment, fear of terrorism, economic worries, and/or concern about weakening American culture? I have assumed much about the content,

exposure to, and acceptance of religious and political messages, making assumptions that are, I think, reasonable and probably correct, but almost certainly over-generalized. Although suggestive, the analyses above cannot establish causal links. Future research should provide more precise measures of message content and employ experimental methods to gauge reactions to those messages.

Why might partisan and ideological effects outweigh religious forces on attitudes toward refugee resettlement? One simple reason may be that partisan messages are so clear, strong, and frequent, compared to religious messages that for some (maybe many) Republicans religious and partisan cues may not have been in much conflict. Individuals may be wholly unaware of religious leaders' statements, which may not be widely reported in news media or at the local level. Moreover, at least among Protestants, few pastors discussed the issue at all during worship services. In a 2016 survey of Protestant pastors, only 32% of evangelical pastors and 41% of mainline pastors said they had *ever* "specifically addressed the Syrian refugee crisis from the pulpit" (LifeWay Research 2016). Furthermore, local pastors may not share their leaders' views on refugee issues. In the same survey, 63% of Baptist pastors said the U.S. "can balance national security and compassion in its response to global refugees," meaning a significant minority may have sided more with Franklin Graham than the Southern Baptist Convention leadership. Even if people know about leaders' pro-refugee statements, presumably they aren't being reminded of them frequently. In contrast, Fox News discussed refugees and the refugee crisis several times a week during the 2016 campaign. Finally, Fox News may have minimized the conflict between religious and partisan cues by highlighting Franklin Graham's views. Fox News mentioned the evangelical leader wary of resettling refugees at least once on 38 separate days during the period of study, compared to just 4 days on MSNBC.

As noted above, the LDS community was distinctively supportive of refugees. Mormons' uniqueness is consistent with many of the suggestions in the previous paragraph. Compared to other religious traditions, the LDS tradition has a clearer leadership hierarchy with clear channels of communication and members of the LDS community tend to pay closer attention to leadership messages and shape their attitudes accordingly (e.g., Campbell, Green, and Monson 2014).

Future research should continue to explore attitudes toward refugees and the conditions under which religious forces could unify the public on issues and when they further polarize the public. On many issues, religious cues reinforce partisan and ideological cues, potentially polarizing the public. The similar responses of many religious leaders to the Syrian refugee crisis religion *could* bridge a major partisan divide. So far, they haven't.

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Table 1: Support for Allowing Refugees in the U.S. by Religious Tradition

	Pew		ANES Pilot		ANES Pre-election	
	% approve	N	Mean on 1-7 scale	N	Mean on 1-7 scale	N
All	51	1502	3.24	1199	3.23	4234
LDS	58	28	2.70	15	3.94	49
White Evangelical Protestant	31	282	2.51	199	2.47	745
White Mainline Protestant	42	211	2.89	138	3.01	680
Black Protestant	58	98	3.60	80	3.45	276
Additional Protestant	50	88	3.12	37	3.27	261
White Catholic	51	196	2.65	152	2.82	629
Hispanic Catholic	69	97	3.57	57	3.47	213
Additional Catholic	55	26	3.28	20	3.92	86
Jewish	70	33	3.31	30	4.51	85
Additional Traditions	49	103	3.86	72	3.73	334
Unaffiliated	60	340	3.78	397	3.74	876

Table 2: Support for Allowing Refugees in the U.S.

	(1) Pew	Marginal Effect 0 → 1	(2) ANES Pilot	(3) ANES Pre- election	(4) ANES Pre- election
LDS (Mormon)	0.49* (0.27)	.15	-0.41 (0.48)	0.71*** (0.21)	0.73*** (0.21)
White Evangelical Prot.	-0.15 (0.14)	-.05	0.10 (0.24)	0.05 (0.11)	0.05 (0.11)
White Mainline Protestant	0.09 (0.15)	.03	0.14 (0.22)	-0.02 (0.09)	-0.02 (0.09)
Black Protestant	0.00+ (0.26)	.00	-0.18 (0.47)	-0.29 (0.24)	-0.30 (0.24)
Additional Protestant	-0.12 (0.22)	-.04	0.08 (0.41)	0.02 (0.14)	0.00+ (0.14)
White Catholic	0.16 (0.14)	.05	-0.18 (0.26)	-0.14 (0.10)	-0.14 (0.10)
Hispanic Catholic	0.09 (0.27)	.03	-0.17 (0.53)	-0.20 (0.22)	-0.18 (0.22)
Additional Catholic	0.07 (0.32)	.02	0.42 (0.61)	0.42* (0.24)	0.41* (0.24)
Other Religious Tradition	0.12 (0.17)	.04	0.85** (0.36)	0.31** (0.12)	0.31** (0.12)
Unaffiliated	0.24* (0.13)	.08	0.36 (0.22)	0.13 (0.10)	0.14 (0.10)
Attendance	0.36** (0.18)	.11	0.42* (0.25)	0.45*** (0.11)	0.46*** (0.11)
Party ID	-0.84*** (0.14)	-.29	-1.12*** (0.29)	-0.30** (0.12)	-0.24* (0.13)
Ideology	-0.64*** (0.21)	-.22	-1.54*** (0.32)	-2.29*** (0.18)	-2.18*** (0.18)
Support for Trump	-0.31** (0.15)	-.10	-1.85*** (0.23)	-2.26*** (0.14)	-2.20*** (0.14)
College Graduate	0.44*** (0.10)	.15	0.50*** (0.14)	0.54*** (0.07)	0.53*** (0.07)
White	0.00+ (0.20)	.00	0.43 (0.40)	0.04 (0.16)	0.05 (0.16)
African American	-0.13 (0.28)	-.04	0.13 (0.57)	-0.17 (0.25)	-0.15 (0.25)
Hispanic	0.48* (0.26)	.16	0.81 (0.51)	0.05 (0.21)	0.07 (0.21)
Income	0.27 (0.17)	.09	-0.06 (0.35)	0.22* (0.12)	0.23* (0.13)
Age 18-29	0.57*** (0.14)	.19	0.75*** (0.21)	0.51*** (0.08)	0.52*** (0.08)
Age 30-49	0.24**	.08	0.33*	-0.14*	-0.13

	(0.11)	(0.18)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Age 65+	0.14	-0.024	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.13)	(0.18)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Fox News Viewer				-0.26***
				(0.07)
MSNBC Viewer				0.26***
				(0.10)
Constant	0.08	4.25***	4.87***	4.78***
	(0.24)	(0.39)	(0.16)	(0.16)
Observations	1,255	942	3,949	3,949

Standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Marginal Effect refers to the average change in probability of approving when varying the value of the given variable from minimum to maximum (0 to 1), as calculated by STATA's margins routine.

Figure 1: MSNBC and Views toward Refugee Resettlement Among White Democrats

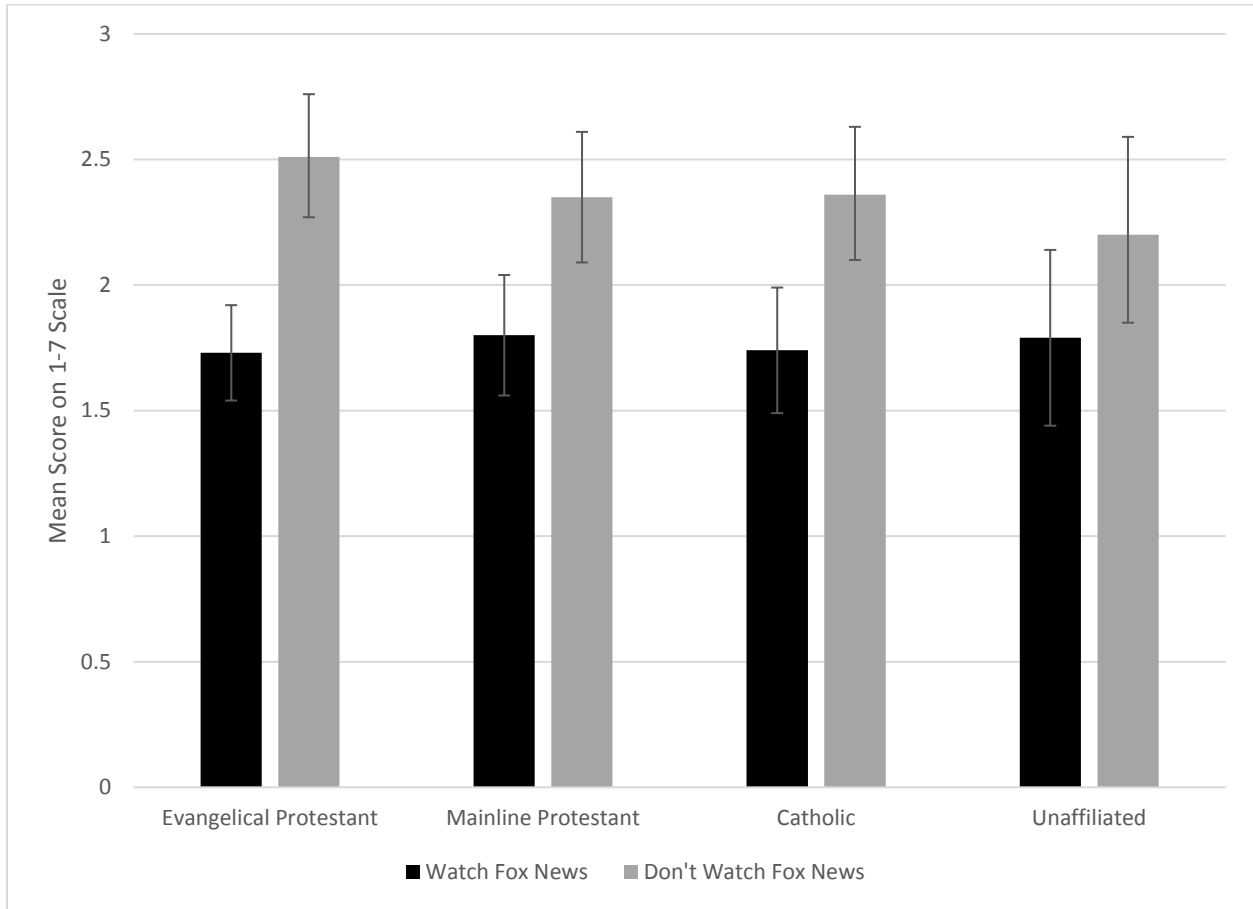
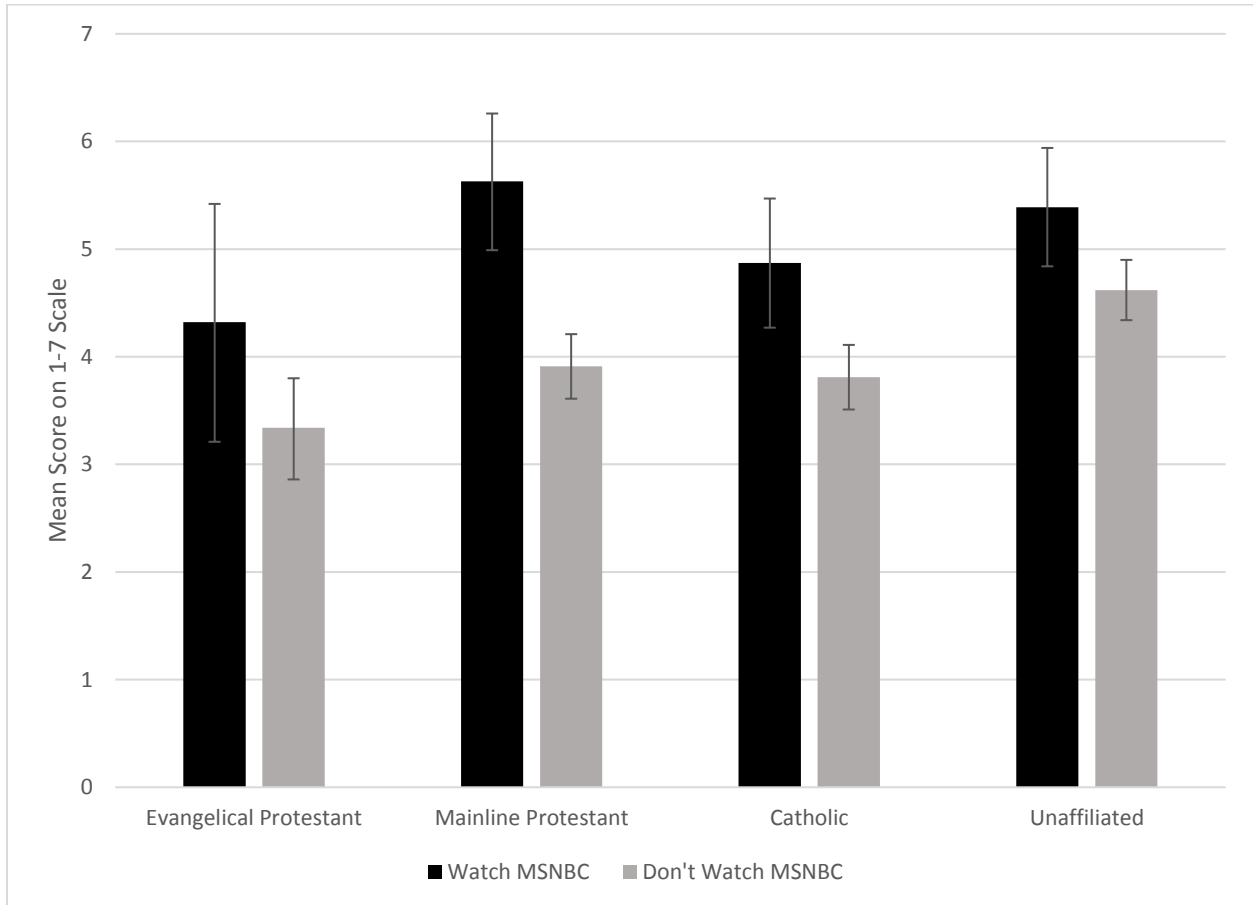


Figure 2: Fox News and Views toward Refugee Resettlement Among White Republicans



¹ See https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/19/the-final-trump-clinton-debate-transcript-annotated/?utm_term=.e76b2919f10f

² See <https://www.nae.net/statement-on-syrian-refugee-crisis/>.

³ See <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/2273/on-refugee-ministry>.

⁴ I use Kellstedt and Green’s (1993, 55) denomination-based conceptualization of religious traditions as “alliances of specific denominations representing major cultural divisions.”

⁵ Rather than arbitrarily choosing a religious tradition to exclude, I estimated the model via restricted OLS with the constraint that the coefficients for religious traditions sum to 1. This approach generates parameter estimates interpreted as the deviation of the group’s mean from the sample mean (Greene and Seaks 1991).

⁶ See, e.g., <http://www.people-press.org/2017/02/16/2-views-of-trumps-executive-order-on-travel-restrictions/>.

⁷ All media content figures stem from analysis by the GDELT Project using data from the Internet Archive Television News Archive.