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# Reverence for Rejection: Religiosity and Refugees in the United States

NICK BOOTH

## Research Question and Significance

Religiosity is a variable used to test how religious an individual is, measuring their actual practice of the religion, not just their identification (Cornwall, Marie, Albrecht, Cunningham, & Pitcher, 1986). One study, *The Faith Community's Role in Refugee Resettlement in the United States*, connects a large portion of the United States' refugee resettlement efforts to faith-based organizations (Eby, Iverson, Smyers, & Kekic, 2011). Is the U.S. obligated to take in refugees? This is an important question to ask, since large scale migrations of people, like the Syrian refugee crisis, has caused a need for an increased role in resettlement of refugees by the U.S. Moreover, faith-based organizations are a necessary factor not only in the acceptance, but also the resettlement of foreign refugees (Ives, Sinha, & Cnaan, 2010). Therefore, data on acceptance of refugees, compared with religiosity, will examine whether the practice of religion informs a

person's view about the role the U.S. plays in refugee resettlement.

Refugee policy has also become a political issue this election cycle. According to a recent NBC News/ Penn poll, a majority of Americans disapprove of increasing the number of Syrian refugees the U.S. takes in, with 8 in 10 Republicans disapproving (Kopicki, Allison, Lapinski, & Hartig, 2016). The overwhelming Republican disapproval is interesting, since there is a "correlation between religious attendance and Republican Party identification" (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 374). This seems to be at odds with the role that faith-based organizations play in the acceptance and resettlement of refugees in American. Thus, it would be beneficial to see if religiosity is a variable that changes feelings towards accepting refugees, or if there is another factor influencing the attitude towards refugees.

This study will seek to contribute to the discussion about how people form opinions on refugee policy, as well as adding more data to the subject. As was mentioned above, public opinion is against accepting refugees, but it is not clear where the signals for this position are coming from. While Republicans are overwhelmingly against accepting more refugees, this direction goes against the evidence that suggests they score higher on religiosity than Democrats. I want to look closely at the variable of religiosity, and if it is not the first indicator of refugee opinion then party identification could be more influential. What this study could do is shed light on which variable is more influential on how respondents are forming this opinion. More clarity here would help to better understand the true nature of public opinion on this issue and how the government should act

towards it. Moreover, the public opinion data collected will add to research available for this topic. While the sample size will not be representative, there is still value in comparing the relationships in this test to the ones seen on the national level.

## **Literature Review and Theory**

### **Public Opinion**

To understand how respondents act in public opinion surveys, the Michigan school of thought should be considered. Philip Converse's theory of unsophisticates was developed here, in which political opinions will have "little aggregative patterning of belief combinations in populations of unsophisticated people" (Niemi & Weisberg, 1993, p. 54). This is because they are "innocent of 'ideology'" that informs these opinions (Niemi & Weisberg, 1993, p. 56). If this is true, then there are people who participate in public opinion polling who do not hold informed views on the issues they are commenting on, which leads to unreliable patterns of responses from those groups. While this is a problem for research, since polls will be made up of these individuals, there are other ways to find links within the outcomes of polling data. As Converse notes, since ideology directly informs opinion, finding out where these frames of mind come from should be a crucial part of public opinion research.

### **Top-Down Versus Bottom-Up**

How an attitude is formed is the foundation of public opinion research, since it is the cause to any recorded outcome. There are two theories that drive this debate, elite opinion theory and activated mass opinion. The former is defined by John Zaller (1992). As Zaller explains, "when elites uphold a clear picture of what

should be done, the public tends to see events from that point of view...when elites divide, members of the public tend to follow" (p. 8). This means that the most influential variable on the formation of an opinion is influence from elites. Therefore, if people's already held beliefs are unstable, then they can be swayed by the messages sent down from the top by elites. Zaller further explains this using the RAS model, which lays out the process for how people respond to questions on public opinion surveys. The process is that people take opinions from elites, use the parts that keep their internal ideas consistent, and then take the newest information they have learned, and follow the approach explained above to answer the question. Through this recall, polls can quantify public opinion; however, it is always started from elite influence. This idea has not gone unchallenged: Taeku Lee has argued for a bottom-up approach, through active mass opinion. Lee sees this as a more "maximalist" approach, which is able to account for more variables of influence than Zaller's model (Lee, 2002). Moreover, Lee says that "beliefs...that are at once salient in the mind...impel one to political action." He argues that this can best be seen in the Civil Rights Movement, since, "grassroots social movements pose a fundamental challenge to top-down theories" (Lee, 2002, p. 31). As is the case in many grassroots movements, the public was able to generate an opinion without the help of traditional elites. Therefore, a substantial tension remains between the two theories on attitude formation, and the debate over who starts the creation of opinions. When analyzing the following research, I will try to discern which of the two theories is influencing the opinions of the participants.

## **The United States' Attitude towards Refugees**

The United States resists accepting refugees. Rebecca Hamlin conducted an analysis of 444 news articles, as well as 52 in-depth interviews, to develop a theory about why the U.S. has moved its policy towards the deterrence of asylum seekers (Hamlin, 2012). With this research, Hamlin found that in the mid-1990s there was a bipartisan shift toward keeping refugees out of the U.S. (Hamlin, 2012). There has been a “rise of anti-refugee sentiment in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential elections” that has been polarized along party lines (Nagel, 2016, p. 2). This can be seen in American public opinion, since, as the above mentioned NBC News/Penn poll found, a majority of Americans are against accepting more refugees, and the partisan split that Nagel identified is also present in the results (Kopicki et al., 2016). Therefore, recent studies have shown that in the U.S. there is both an overall aversion to accepting refugees and the development of refugee policy into a party issue. Since Bridgewater State University students will probably skew towards identifying as Democrats, I would expect the majority will be accepting of refugees, unlike the national polls.

## **Faith-based Organizations and Refugees**

While the research shows the overall trend in the U.S. is to reject new refugees, for the refugees who do make it to the U.S., faith-based organizations play a primary role in their acceptance and resettlement. These groups are responsible for resettling about 70 percent of the refugees that come to the U.S. (Eby et al., 2011). They play a prevalent role in connecting displaced people to their new communities, which means there is an interaction between members of faith-based organization and refugees (Ives et al., 2010). Moreover, they are not just

helping people associated with their own religions, as, “some of the largest national refugee assistance organizations, such as Catholic Charities and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, provide services to a broad array of refugee groups” (Nawyn, 2006, p. 6). This could be because religion is more of a “motivation and rationale” for wanting to do this work, while the actual processes of the service act like any secular non-governmental organization would provide (Nawyn, 2006). Either way, scholars agree that faith-based organizations play one of the most influential roles during the refugee process, making religiosity an interesting independent variable to test for when trying to gauge an individual’s view on refugees. Based on what is found here, I would expect to see increased acceptance of refugees from the Bridgewater State University students who score higher in religiosity.

## **Party Identification and Religiosity**

Party identification is always an important factor to consider when studying U.S. politics. As Converse argued, ideology is needed for an individual to give a consistent response to opinion polls, and parties are highly influential in supplying the basis for that ideology. In the U.S., Republicans score higher in religiosity than Democrats (Putnam and Campbell, 2010) (Malka et al., 2012). Moreover, the more politically engaged an individual is, the stronger the relationship between the two variables, religiosity and conservatism (Malka et al., 2012). These findings make party identification and ideology two more interesting independent variables to test in this study. If religiosity creates better feelings towards refugees, and Republicans score higher in religiosity, then Republicans should be more accepting of refugees, especially when compared to the results of the

NBC News/ Penn poll. I would expect the Bridgewater State University students who score high in religiosity to be more accepting of refugees

## **Hypotheses**

Based on the existing literature, I have developed hypotheses that will be informed by my public opinion survey. My first hypothesis is: people who score higher in religiosity are more likely to be accepting of refugees. The reason for this is that faith-based organizations play an important role in the acceptance and resettlement of refugees in the United States. Since people with high religiosity scores are more likely to come into contact with refugees and their stories, they would be more sympathetic to the idea of helping them seek refuge. Therefore, the feelings of compassion created by being aware of and working with refugees would make religiosity a significant variable in deciding if someone is going to be favorable to the acceptance of refugees.

My second hypothesis is: people who identify as Republicans and conservatives will be less accepting of refugees. This is because of the partisan divide that exists on the issue of accepting refugees. According to Converse, ideology is needed to answer polling question consistently, and if Zaller is right, then ideology is informed by party elites. Thus, I would expect to see Republicans and conservatives following elite opinion and to be against accepting refugees in the United States.

## **Methods and Data**

The method used for this study was a public opinion survey of 194 Bridgewater State University students. The survey was conducted from October 15, 2016 to November 27, 2016. The data for this research came

from the answers to four questions pulled from the above-mentioned survey. To get data on people's willingness to accept refugees into the United States, I asked the question, "Does the U.S. have an obligation to accept refugees?" The reason I asked this question was because I wanted to get directly to the individual's feelings on refugees. By asking this question using narrow terms, like "obligation," I was able to get responses that would clearly show which way the dependent variable, acceptance of refugees, was changing. To get a participant's score on religiosity, I asked the question, "Not counting weddings or other events, how often do you attend religious services?" This question is pulled from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), and is used to identify a participant's religiosity score. People who attend services at the highest rate will be considered "highly religious," with each answer after it being a lower degree of religiosity, as well as an answer for no religious participation. The question must be asked in this way to avoid social desirability bias. If a respondent was asked, "Are you religious?" they might answer "yes" if they think that is the way they are supposed to respond. By asking the question in this manner, a more accurate score of religiosity was taken from the participants. This gave me the independent variables I needed to test my first hypothesis. To establish a participant's party identification, I asked two questions, "Thinking about yourself, would you say you are a ...?" as well as, "Thinking about your political views, would you say you are a ...?" Party identification and ideology were both important independent variables for me to extract from the survey, which I used to test my second hypothesis. Overall, the answers to these questions allowed me to create three cross-tab analyses for the question I proposed. The statistical

significance found in these cross-tabs were used to inform my hypotheses.

### Analysis

Overall, 58 percent of Bridgewater State University students were accepting of refugees. This result was not surprising, since 38 percent of BSU students considered identified as Democrats, while only 9 percent identified as Republicans. The difference in party identification here, compared to the party breakdown of the national poll, means that a different result was likely.

This cross-tab analysis shows how the independent variable, religiosity, affected the dependent variable, acceptance of refugees, and was used to test my first hypothesis, people who score higher in religiosity are more likely to be accepting of refugees. Among Bridgewater State University students, a higher score in religiosity caused a more favorable position toward the acceptance of refugees. For people who were either very religious or religious, 72 percent thought the United States should be obligated to take in refugees. The p-value was  $P < .05$ , making it a statistically significant relationship. I would reject the null hypothesis in this test, since this p-value presents an acceptable risk. This is because assuming that the null hypothesis were true, I would expect to see the observed relationship or more in 5% of studies due to random sampling error (Frost, 2014).

However, even with these results more analysis is needed. There was also an acceptance of refugees among non-religious students, as 62 percent felt that the U.S. should be obligated to accept them. This fits the overall difference from BSU students compared to the overall

population, since the former was in favor of accepting refugees at 58 percent, while the latter disapproved of accepting refugees at 56 percent (Kopicki et al., 2016). The results of the data confirmed my first hypothesis, as the participants' score of religiosity went up, their willingness to accept refugees into the U.S. also went up. Based on these results, it seems as though there is a quality of religious participation that would make an individual more accepting of refugees. Therefore, by studying certain aspects of religious organization and how individuals participate in them, a better understanding of how people form opinions about refugees could be discovered, since religiosity is a variable that changes those opinions.

This crosstab analysis shows how the independent variable, party identification, affected the dependent variable, acceptance of refugees, and will be used to test my second hypothesis, people who identify as Republicans and conservatives will be less accepting of refugees. Among Bridgewater State University students, 79 percent of Republicans were against accepting refugees into the United States. The p-value was  $P < .01$ , which means that there was a statistically significant connection between these two variables. These results confirmed my second hypothesis, since people who identified as Republican were less accepting of refugees. Moreover, I would reject the null hypothesis in this test, since this p-value presents an acceptable risk. This is because assuming that the null hypothesis were true, I would expect to see the observed relationship or more in 1% of studies due to random sampling error (Frost, 2014).

Here, Zaller's elite opinion theory seems to be taking

**Table 1.** Cross-Tab Analysis of Religiosity

	Very Religious	Religious	Somewhat Religious	Not Religious	Total
Yes	14 82%	9 60%	19 44%	55 62.5%	97 60%
No	3 18%	6 40%	24 56%	33 37.5%	66 40%
Total	17 100%	15 100%	43 100%	87 100%	163 100%

<i>Chi Square</i>	8.20
<i>Degrees of Freedom</i>	3.00
<i>p-value</i>	0.04

**Table 2.** Cross-Tab Analysis of Party Identification

	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Other	Not Sure	Total
<b>Yes</b>	51 82%	33 53%	3 21%	4 36%	7 47%	98 60%
<b>No</b>	11 18%	29 47%	11 79%	7 64%	8 53%	66 40%
<b>Total</b>	62 100%	62 100%	14 100%	11 100%	15 100%	164 100%

<i>Chi Square</i>	26.28
<i>Degrees of Freedom</i>	4

**Table 3.** Cross-Tab Analysis of Ideology

	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Yes</b>	5 33%	16 41%	62 79%	1 25%	14 50%	98 60%
<b>No</b>	10 67%	23 59%	16 21%	3 75%	14 50%	66 40%
<b>Total</b>	15 100%	39 100%	78 100%	4 100%	28 100%	164 100%

<b>Chi Square</b>	<b>25.79</b>
<b>Degrees of Freedom</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>p-value</b>	<b>0.00</b>

effect, as party identification was a clear indicator of an individual’s feelings toward refugees. Not only were Republicans unified on the issue, an 82 percent of Democrats said they believed the U.S. has an obligation to accept refugees. The breakdown here was also closer to the one seen in the aforementioned national polling data. Clearly, the issue of refugee policy has become a partisan one.

This crosstab analysis shows how the independent variable, ideology, affected the dependent variable, acceptance of refugees, and will also be used to test my second hypothesis, people who identify as Republicans and conservatives will be less accepting of refugees. Among Bridgewater State University students, 67 percent of conservatives were against accepting refugees

into the United States. The p-value was  $P < .01$ , meaning there was a statistically significant connection between the two variables. These results confirmed my second hypothesis, since people who identified as conservative were less accepting of refugees. Furthermore, I would reject the null hypothesis in this test, since this p-value presents an acceptable risk. This is because assuming that the null hypothesis were true, I would expect to see the observed relationship or more in 1% of studies due to random sampling error (Frost, 2014).

As Converse argued, ideology can be used to inform answers to public opinion surveys. However, ideology does not always align with party identification, so a closer look is needed to see if there is any difference between the two variables. In this case, since people are

not as knowledgeable about foreign policy it is likely that ideology is informed by party elites. Thus, ideology is probably closer to being tied to party identification on this issue. Also, as ideology on refugee policy is likely to come from parties, this result is supported by Zaller's elite opinion theory. Again, this result shows that there is a partisan split on the issue of refugees in the U.S.

### Conclusion

I asked the question, "Is the U.S. obligated to take in refugees?" to try to see if there was a connection between this opinion and an individual's score of religiously. The results show that this connection exists, opening up the possibility that an aspect of participating in religious organizations is able to lock in an individual's opinion on refugees. Moreover, this research also highlighted that there is a clear partisan divide on the issue of refugee policy.

This research question provides many areas that should be explored in the future. If I were to do it again, I would like to have asked a question about the participant's attitude towards government welfare that is provided for refugees. An exploration like this, that is more policy based, could do a better job of explaining Americans' feelings toward the acceptance of refugees. Asking whether the threat of a foreign terrorist attack on U.S. soil was a concern for participants could have also provided more insight into which citizens are accepting of foreign refugees. Therefore, future research should address both the policy and threat aspects of the U.S.'s willingness to accept refugees.

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## About the Author

Nick Booth is a senior majoring in Political Science. His research project was completed in the fall of 2016 under the mentorship of Dr. Melinda Tarsi (Political Science).