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Working Paper Series

#2025-026

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Tobias Hillenbrand

Published 5 November 2025

DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.53330/PZPD3802

Maastricht Economic and social Research institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT)
email: info@merit.unu.edu | website: http://www.merit.unu.edu

Boschstraat 24, 6211 AX Maastricht, The Netherlands
Tel: (31) (43) 388 44 00

UNU-MERIT Working Papers
ISSN 1871-9872

Maastricht Economic and social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology
UNU-MERIT

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Reforms welcome?
Evidence on the nature of asylum backlash and orderly admissions as a remedy

Tobias Hillenbrand[a,b,*]

[a]*United Nations University-MERIT, Boschstraat 24, 6211 AX Maastricht, The Netherlands*
[b]*School of Business and Economics, Maastricht University, Tongersestraat 53, 6211 LM Maastricht, The Netherlands*

Abstract

The correlation between rising asylum immigration and the electoral success of far-right anti-immigration parties has sparked concerns about a potential "Democratic Dilemma" – namely, a trade-off between a country's openness to immigrants and the preservation of democratic institutional quality. Against this backdrop, I investigate the nature of the backlash to asylum immigration and analyze the potential of an "Orderly Admission Reform" to restore public acceptance for refugee protection. The data comes from an original large-scale online survey experiment conducted in Germany, Europe's largest refugee-receiving country, where public sentiment changes have been particularly pronounced. My results reveal a "Principle-Practice" gap: while most Germans remain committed to refugee protection in principle, they express dissatisfaction with how the asylum system functions in practice. Qualitative analysis suggests that although there are concerns about the overall size of the refugee population, respondents take greater issue with the association between asylum immigration and irregular immigration. A reform proposal that aims to close irregular pathways for asylum seekers while simultaneously scaling up orderly admissions of recognized refugees enjoys broad public support. Support levels can be further boosted by embedding the proposal description in a prime that highlights aspects of improved control and management. Findings from a conjoint experiment further indicate that respondents favor policies aimed at shifting from irregular toward orderly immigration pathways, rather than endorsing the most restrictive policy options. Support for the reform proposal is remarkably consistent across diverse societal groups – including some that are typically highly polarized on immigration issues.

JEL classifications: A13, D63, F22, J15

Keywords: Migration attitudes, democratic dilemma, irregular migration, safe third country agreements, legal pathways

* Email address: hillenbrand@merit.unu.edu

Introduction

Far-right, anti-immigration parties have gained ground in many European countries following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the surge in asylum applications in the aftermath of the global pandemic. This has sparked a debate among scholars about a possible "Democratic Dilemma" facing policymakers. This dilemma is perhaps best formulated by Kapelner (2024, p. 2): "If anti-immigrant backlash gives rise to democracy-threatening political forces, could this not justify adopting a more restrictive immigration policy to halt its advance?" Researchers have offered nuanced answers to this question, yet both Kapelner (2024) and Pevnick (2024) contend that, under specific circumstances, the attempt to safeguard democratic institutions may contribute to a justification for immigration restrictions. Against this backdrop, Kustov (2024) hints at mixed evidence for the existence of such a dilemma, arguing that while many forms of immigration are widely accepted nowadays, backlash is most likely to result from "unauthorized and mismanaged unskilled and forced immigration" (p. 4). In the European context, this arguably resembles the irregular immigration of asylum seekers most closely.[2] Indeed, when differentiating between different forms of immigration, public opinion data reveals quite negative attitudes toward refugee immigration, whereas views toward the immigration of skilled workers have remained largely positive (infratest dimap, 2023b; Mason-Sucher, 2025; Vorländer et al., 2025).

Germany, the continent's largest refugee host country and once known for its "Welcome Culture", has been swept up in this backlash trend, with immigration being the top policy issue motivating voters to support the far-right AfD party (infratest dimap, 2023a). However, dissatisfaction with the country's refugee policies extends well beyond far-right voters. A September 2024 poll found that 77 percent of Germans – including majorities across all major parties – agreed that Germany needed a fundamentally different refugee policy to reduce the number of new arrivals (infratest dimap, 2024). Data from Landmann et al. (2019) further reveals that the fear of refugee immigration leading to a rise of the far-right and in xenophobia is very prevalent in the German society. The same concern is expressed by leading politicians, as exemplified by the pointed statement by Jens Spahn, parliamentary group leader of the ruling CDU party: "Either the democratic center puts an end to irregular migration, or irregular migration puts an end to the democratic center" (as quoted in Windisch, 2024). Beyond rhetoric, both the current centrist government and the previous, more left-leaning coalition have adopted markedly more restrictive refugee policies.[3] The government has, however, not indicated any desire to crack down on labor immigration, implying that it has recognized that public backlash does not extend to all forms of immigration. The question remains why refugee immigration has generated such pronounced public resistance. In light of Kustov's (2024) above argument, it is worth asking whether Germans have fundamentally turned their backs on refugee protection, whether they chiefly object to rising numbers of relatively low-skilled and culturally distant forced migrants, or whether their opposition is directed primarily at the unauthorized and mismanaged aspects of asylum migration.

[2] While the border crossings of asylum seekers mostly occur without authorization and therefore constitute a form of irregular *migration*, this does not mean that asylum seekers are generally irregular *migrants*. By contrast, they have the right to remain in the country where they have applied for asylum at least until their application has been decided.

[3] For example, the rather progressive so-called "traffic light" coalition, which governed the country from 2021 to 2025, passed two prominent bills aimed at tightening asylum laws (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024a, 2024b). The succeeding government of Christian and Social Democrats has resorted to rejecting (groups of) asylum seekers at the national border – despite widespread legal concerns about the policy's compatibility with European law (Hasselbach, 2025).

Interestingly, data suggests that Germans, when confronted with individual profiles of asylum seekers, show quite permissive attitudes. In a recent vignette experiment, German respondents (rather or fully) approved of 86.9 percent of hypothetical asylum claims (The Expert Council on Integration and Migration, 2024). Further, there is evidence that Germans, when having to choose between two migrant profiles, assess those that include humanitarian rather than economic reasons for moving more favorably, even when the economic migrant arrives with a job offer already secured (Czymara & Schmidt-Catran, 2017).[4] Conversely though, when asking at the macro level how much labor or refugee immigration people desire, the picture is the exact opposite as hinted at above (infratest dimap, 2023b; Mason-Sucher, 2025; Vorländer et al., 2025).

There is more than one way to make sense of this apparent discrepancy.[5] One explanation is that studies using migrant profiles control for several migrant characteristics, another that the macro level questions are linked with *quantity* preferences whereas the comparison of profiles represents a competition for one *single* slot. I would argue that the close association between humanitarian and irregular immigration offers an additional explanation. The fact that most asylum seekers cross borders irregularly to seek protection in European countries – also given a lack of legal alternatives – may be far more salient in people's minds when they think about refugee immigration at a larger scale than when they compare individual migrant profiles that differ in the motives for moving. The literature provides clear evidence of the public's distaste for irregular immigration, which persists even when a wide range of migrant characteristics are controlled for (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2016). Evidence also suggests that disapproval of irregular immigration extends to people who are generally relatively open toward immigration (Blinder et al., 2011). Moreover, it can be questioned whether respondents think of "actual refugees" when stating their preferences about refugee immigration, given that 61 percent of Germans agreed with a statement suggesting that most asylum seekers are actually bogus refugees looking for economic opportunities rather than protection (IPSOS, 2024).

Beyond the skepticism that is directly linked with irregular immigration, the status quo of refugee protection in Europe, in which migrants are usually required to first enter the desired country of asylum (mostly irregularly), has also been criticized for humanitarian reasons (e.g. the de facto exclusion of the most vulnerable displaced populations given their lack of resources to travel or for incentivizing highly perilous journeys to Europe) as well as from a national interest perspective (e.g., a lack of control over who arrives and stays, difficulties to manage large fluctuations in the numbers of arrivals or disproportionate crime rates). The arguably most detailed account of these and other criticisms is provided by Koopmans (2023), though similar concerns have also been raised – at least in part – by other scholars (Ferracioli, 2014; Fratzke et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, the question arises whether the observed surge in public opposition to admitting asylum seekers reflects primarily growing skepticism toward the institution of refugee protection in principle, concerns about the rapid growth of the refugee population, or disapproval of how the right to refugee protection is practically implemented – including humanitarian and national interest implications. In other words, does restoring public acceptance require drastic reductions in the number of incoming asylum seekers and refugees, or could it also be achieved by shifting toward a refugee protection system that places greater emphasis on orderly and legal admissions?

Some prominent migration scholars, such as Knaus (2022, 2024) or Koopmans (2023) have argued in favor of what I call an "Orderly Admission Reform" (OAR), which aims at disentangling humanitarian

[4] The same pattern was found in the United States (Steele et al., 2023).
[5] A nuanced discussion on this question is offered in a blog post by Kustov (2025b).

from irregular immigration, and is therefore highly useful in light of my research interest. This proposal follows a two-pronged strategy: On the one hand, it aims at minimizing irregular immigration by means of safe third country (STC) agreements which allow for the transfer of irregularly arrived asylum seekers to partner countries outside the EU. Migrants would then apply for asylum in this third country and – if approved – receive protection there. At the same time, the proposal advocates for a large-scale expansion of orderly pathways for refugee immigration, primarily through refugee resettlement.[6]

This research aims to investigate both the nature of opposition to the current system of refugee protection in Germany and public attitudes toward the proposed OAR. The study employs a pre-registered, large-scale online survey experiment with more than 2,200 participants. First, I assess support among Germans for refugee protection in principle and for the existing practice of the current asylum system, before exploring reasons for (dis)satisfaction with the status quo using qualitative data. The subsequent introduction of the OAR proposal is embedded in a priming experiment, in which the elements of the proposal are explained with an emphasis on the implications for the legality and orderliness of admissions. In addition to the (1) base condition, which provides no further information, two additional conditions present information on the proposal's potential implications from either a (2) humanitarian or a (3) national-interest perspective. Finally, a conjoint experiment examines public preferences regarding the specific design of the reform, focusing on: (a) combinations of STC agreements and resettlement expansions; (b) criteria for selecting resettlement refugees; (c) conditions under which transferring migrants to non-EU partner countries is deemed acceptable; and (d) access to welfare services in Germany.

My results show that while dissatisfaction with the current asylum system is widespread, there is still a large majority of Germans in favor of refugee protection *in principle*. Further, although a substantial number of respondents are troubled by the steep increase in the country's refugee population, concerns relating to the irregularity of asylum immigration, such as a perceived lack of control and the sense of being exploited, are even more widespread. The reform proposal is met by much more support than opposition and views toward the reform are remarkably uniform across various segments of the population including segments that are typically characterized by polarized opinions on immigration-related topics.

The priming experiment yields modest but statistically significant effects: highlighting the national-interest implications of the OAR slightly increases support for the reform, whereas emphasizing its humanitarian virtues made it slightly less popular. Finally, the conjoint results underline that a combination of STC agreements and upscaled refugee resettlement is preferred over the alternatives including the most restrictive policy option of only implementing STC agreements. Further, Germans want the selection process of resettlement refugees to include security-related criteria alongside humanitarian considerations. They strongly oppose policy packages that involve transferring migrants to partner countries with poor human rights records yet are strikingly supportive of expanding legal immigration pathways from rights-respecting partner countries in exchange for their cooperation. Finally, while Germans are not willing to grant full welfare access to all asylum seekers and refugees in the country, they do not desire restrictions for those who entered through orderly pathways.

In recent years, several political initiatives have included elements of the reform proposal. For example, the UK government under Rishi Sunak devised an STC scheme with Rwanda, but legal setbacks

[6] This is a simplified version of the reform proposal. For example, Koopmans (2023) also calls for a humanitarian visa initiative and exceptions from transfers to third countries in specific cases. Further, the proposal is not designed for scenarios in which European countries are the countries of first asylum.

prevented its implementation before the Sunak government lost the 2024 elections. However, there appears to be no inherent contradiction between STC agreements and the Geneva Refugee Convention, since the convention explicitly grants a right to seek protection but does not grant a specific right to choose one's country of residence (Thym, 2024; UNHCR, 2013). The political relevance of this policy tool is further underscored by the European Commission's recently announced intention to facilitate the application of STC deals (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2025). In addition, the new basic program of Chancellor Merz's CDU party includes commitments both to STC agreements and to expanding refugee resettlement (CDU, 2024). Political momentum for such measures therefore appears to be growing.

Despite its increasing popularity among politicians and governments, the policy of STC agreements has sparked highly controversial debates among experts (European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), 2017; Osso, 2023). The primary concerns, which relate to the comprehensive set of legal criteria that third countries have to comply with, not only de jure but de facto (e.g., non-refoulement principle, access to a fair asylum procedure, more general human rights situation), feasibility aspects (e.g., convincing suitable third countries to agree) and ethical considerations (e.g., global responsibility sharing in the context of admitting and providing for refugees), have been summarized in a recent report of the German government (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, 2025). These concerns have informed the design of this study, in particular of the conjoint experiment. For example, I test the extent to which respondents are sensitive to the human rights situation in potential partner countries, respondents' readiness to offer facilitated legal immigration from partner countries (feasibility aspect) and measure support for only introducing STC agreements without expanding resettlement programs (global responsibility sharing).

This research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it adds to the nascent "Democratic Dilemma" by more precisely identifying the exact source of public backlash to immigration. It challenges the dominant view that (larger scale) immigration of asylum seekers and refugees is per se in tension with public preferences. My analysis, on the other hand, suggests that the irregular component linked with asylum immigration is key in understanding the widespread public resistance, which opens up possibilities for refugee immigration using orderly and legal pathways that enjoy greater public support. This builds on a more general point made by, for example, Hatton (2021) and Helbling et al. (2025), who criticize the dominant role that preferences for immigration *quantities* have played in the migration attitudes literature more broadly. A narrow focus on such quantity measures appears inadequate, as prior research has shown that quantity preferences can be contingent on factors such as the degree of selectivity (Helbling et al., 2024) or perceptions of fairness with respect to refugee allocation (Bansak et al., 2017). This study underlines that also the mode of admission can shape the degree to which immigration is viewed as acceptable.

Furthermore, I contribute to the emerging literature that focuses on preferences for migration *policies* rather than for immigration or migrants/refugees. Related studies have found, contrary to common assumptions, that most people hold mixed and ambivalent rather than extreme, one-sided views (Jeannet et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2024), and that there may be considerable scope for compromise and consensus around policy mixes combining both restrictive and permissive elements (Helbling et al., 2024, 2025; Letki et al., 2024). My findings corroborate the insight that the challenge in the immigration debate has less to do with irreconcilable policy preferences among substantial population segments. Instead, the kind of polarization that complicates constructive discourse is primarily one of affective polarization – the emotionally charged nature of the topic (Vorländer et al., 2025).

Literature review and theoretical expectations

As discussed above, there are clear indications that the German public has grown increasingly dissatisfied with the current state of immigration. However, it remains unclear ex ante what specific changes would be best suited to restore public acceptance. At the most superficial level, it looks like Germans desire an overall more restrictive stance on immigration – however once a differentiation between different forms of immigration is introduced, the data reveals quite permissive preferences toward the immigration of skilled workers – as opposed to refugees (infratest dimap, 2023b; Mason-Sucher, 2025; Vorländer et al., 2025). For refugee immigration, a compelling case could be made from available evidence that, at least for the time being, the majority of Germans prefers a policy approach aimed at minimizing the numbers. Case in point is the above-mentioned poll with 77 percent of the population demanding fundamental policy changes to reduce asylum immigration (infratest dimap, 2024). This is corroborated by other polling data finding that more Germans agree than disagree with a statement endorsing the closure of borders to refugees entirely at least temporarily (IPSOS, 2024). Moreover, data from the Bertelsmann Stiftung underscores concerns about perceived capacity limits (Wieland, 2024): Large majorities of Germans express apprehension about the impact of immigration on key public services, including the welfare system, education, and housing, and 60 percent reject taking in more refugees as Germany is seen as close to a breaking point. This aligns with a longstanding tradition in the field of immigration attitudes, which posits that immigration – particularly when involving low-skilled and culturally dissimilar groups, as is often the case with asylum seekers[7] in the EU – is perceived by natives as a source of economic and cultural threat (Stephan et al., 2009). Accordingly, reducing inflow volumes may help mitigate such threat perceptions.

A very recent theory of parochial altruism posits that immigration tends to garner public support if it is *demonstrably beneficial* for the migrant-receiving nation (Kustov 2025a). The author argues that such benefits are more readily achieved through selective and well-managed labor migration than through immigration for humanitarian reasons.[8] Supporting this view, a recent study found that economic benefit arguments were not effective in improving public attitudes toward refugees (Abdelaaty et al., 2025). Taken together, these theories and the presented evidence suggest that minimizing the immigration of asylum seekers and refugees likely represents the most promising strategy for addressing the widespread public dissatisfaction in Germany. This could be accompanied by an increase in selective labor immigration to address economic needs.

On the other hand, the literature has produced a number of studies which emphasize the relevance of humanitarian considerations alongside national interest concerns (Abdelaaty et al., 2025; Bansak et al., 2016; Hillenbrand et al., 2025; Newman et al., 2015; Yitmen & Verkuyten, 2018). This humanitarianism channel is particularly important in the context of refugee migration (Fraser & Murakami, 2022). Jeannet et al. (2021) incorporate the competing motives people perceive in the

[7] The focus on asylum immigration excludes Ukrainian refugees. This decision rests on two key considerations. First, the OAR proposal is intended for situations in which European countries are *not* the first countries of asylum (Koopmans, 2023); as Ukrainian refugees typically flee directly to neighboring EU states, they fall outside its scope. Second, public opinion data indicate that attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees are more favorable than toward other migrant groups arriving through the asylum channel, suggesting that Ukrainians are not central to the current immigration backlash (Bansak et al., 2023; Dražanová & Geddes, 2023).

[8] The author does not, however, argue against the admission of refugees. Rather, he recommends designing immigration policies that are overall so demonstrably beneficial to the national interest, that the public will also tolerate (a limited amount of) refugee immigration. This reasoning, however, implies that refugee immigration is unlikely to be popular in its own right and that overall immigration must generate sufficient intuitive national benefits for the public to approve of immigration *despite* the included humanitarian component.

context of refugee migration in a framework of two logics which they label *national interest logic*, centered around subjective costs and benefits for host societies, and *humanitarian assistance logic*, stressing a moral imperative to provide protection to victims of persecution or war. Rather than cleaving the public into two separate camps, the authors show that most individuals hold both logics simultaneously, producing ambivalent attitudes toward refugee protection. Consequently, European publics tend to prefer policies that combine protection for displaced people with control measures intended to safeguard perceived national interests, such as limits and conditionality.

According to this reading of the literature, the public's main concern is that control over who arrives and in what numbers is undermined when asylum seekers cross the border without authorization or lack valid identity documents. This sense of a loss of control is reflected in the widespread view that the asylum system is largely exploited by bogus asylum seekers (IPSOS, 2024), a sentiment that is likely to be reinforced by the relatively large number of rejected asylum seekers who remain in the country (Mediendienst Integration, n.d.). Recent data suggests that Germans give the greatest policy priority to gaining more control over immigration, rather than reducing (or increasing) the size of immigration flows (Mason-Sucher, 2025). This aligns with the so-called immigration-controllability mechanism (Solodoch, 2021), which contends that attitudes depend not only on volumes or group attributes but crucially on whether immigration is perceived as under control – primarily by restoring public confidence that governments can manage migration effectively. Survey evidence shows that Europeans express markedly more favorable views toward refugee immigration in the context of orderly admission processes (see below). This line of reasoning suggests that Germans may see the OAR proposal as an appealing way to reconcile the two competing logics.

In terms of the concrete policy tools that the reform proposal consists of, i.e. (expanded) refugee resettlement combined with the implementation of STC agreements, evidence on public preferences is scarce. Yet, there is some evidence that the literature can provide: The study by Jeannet et al. (2021) suggests that including low levels of resettlement into a policy mix is at least not penalized relative to not doing any resettlement. However, including 'high resettlement' was associated with a statistically significant, yet moderate, decrease in acceptance. In terms of transferring asylum seekers to other countries, the authors included a "return to harm" attribute, which would constitute a clear violation of the non-refoulement principle. The respondents from eight European countries, including Germany, disapproved of such a policy. Additional insights are provided by the study by Vrânceanu et al. (2023) investigating attitudes toward key components of the so-called EU-Turkey statement. It corroborates that Germans accept limited levels of resettlement and reject pushbacks.

While these policy preferences are insightful, it is also important to highlight the differences between these studies and the OAR proposal and how the policies are introduced to respondents. While basic definitions of refugee resettlement were provided in the above publications, the implications of resettlement for the legality and orderliness of immigration, let alone national interest or humanitarian implications, were not made salient. Further, resettlement was not presented as part of a comprehensive reform, in which refugee resettlement would largely *replace* asylum immigration. Instead, the policies relating to resettlement and returns of migrants were presented as *separate* components. Moreover, the return policies presented in the mentioned studies represent violations of the prohibition of refoulement and are therefore in contradiction with international refugee law (Jeannet et al., 2021; Vrânceanu et al., 2023). STC agreements, on the other hand, are in principle compatible with international law, although their legality hinges on a comprehensive set of legal requirements.

Beyond the academic literature, a recent opinion survey from Germany suggests that there may be strong support for introducing asylum procedures in countries outside the European Union (infratest dimap, 2025). In terms of legal alternatives, data from the UK shows that more voters support than oppose humanitarian resettlement programs as well as the creation of more legal routes for asylum seekers (Katwala et al., 2024) and that support for refugees can be boosted if refugees were arriving through community sponsorship programs – another existing legal pathway (More in Common, 2024). These data points hint at a relatively high popularity of the two policy tools among European publics, at least when tested separately.

Research Design

Data collection and sample composition

I conducted a pre-registered online survey experiment with 2,211 respondents between December 4th and December 17th, 2024 in Germany. The data collection was carried out in collaboration with the survey company TGM which recruited respondents via their extensive online panel for Germany. Almost all respondents were aged between 18 and 66 years of age[9] and resided in Germany at the time of data collection. Quotas were set to assure that the sample is representative of the German population in terms of gender, age and distribution across states.

Survey questionnaire

Survey respondents completed an online questionnaire that was divided into several sections. First, I collected sociodemographic information, in particular information regarding respondents' gender, age, state of residence, education, employment status, (subjective) income, migration background and party preference. Subsequently, respondents were asked about their views on Germany granting international protection in principle, as well as their opinions on how Germany's asylum system functions in practice. This approach relates to the distinction between diffuse and specific support for a polity that is common in the field of political science. Introduced by Easton (1975), diffuse support for a political system has been tied to a fundamental confidence in and perceived legitimacy for a political regime even at times of eroding specific support, for example in the form of dissatisfactions with office holders and the concrete policies produced. In a similar fashion, a form of diffuse support for refugee protection may be based on the principled belief that providing shelter for persecuted or displaced persons in one's country is justified or even morally imperative. Conversely, people's specific support for refugee protection would capture (dis)satisfaction with the specific implementation and the (perceived) outcomes of an existing refugee protection regime. For example, people may disapprove of the size of inflows via a country's asylum system or the organization of admission processes. Specifically, respondents were asked the following two questions[10]:

> *If, for a moment, you set aside your concerns about the design of the German asylum system and the problems associated with that, do you, in principle, believe it is right for Germany to offer protection to people fleeing from war or persecution?*

[9] Only one respondent reported an age of 87.

[10] Responses were measured on 5-point scales ranging from 1 ("absolutely right" / "very satisfied") to 5 ("absolutely wrong" / "very dissatisfied").

And how satisfied are you with the practice of the German asylum system, that is, with the way it actually works?

Participants were then asked to explain their stated level of (dis)satisfaction with the asylum system in response to an open-ended question. Their responses were coded into 16 thematic categories. The two most important ones for this research are the categories "Excessive Numbers" and "Irregularity/Lack of Control", which align with the competing theoretical expectations introduced above. The former includes references to (concerningly) high numbers of asylum seekers, refugees or migrants more broadly, and perceived capacity limits. The second category encompasses statements of disapproval pertaining to illegal/irregular/undocumented/unauthorized immigration, insufficient border control, and perceptions that the asylum system is being exploited or benefits the wrong persons. An overview of all categories is provided in the Appendix (section D).

This was followed by a brief introduction of the concepts "asylum seekers," "refugees," and "protection-seeking persons" (*Schutzsuchende* in German)[11], before the OAR proposal was presented. The exact way in which the proposal was introduced depended on respondents' (random) assignment to one of three priming conditions: the *Orderliness* condition, the *National Interest* condition and the *Humanitarian Assistance* condition. The rationale for including these conditions is that the OAR is likely to have implications for features of the current asylum system that may partially fuel the public backlash (such as the demographic composition of asylum seekers), which are however not self-evident when laying out the key policy components of the proposal. For this reason, this intervention should be regarded as an exercise in information priming rather than mere issue framing, in which certain known aspects are rendered particularly salient.

The *Orderliness* condition served as the baseline, mainly describing the reform components while emphasizing how an implementation would shift refugee protection from a system largely based on irregular immigration to one grounded in more orderly and legal forms of immigration. Specifically, it was highlighted that – under reform implementation – Germany would agree to admit individuals already recognized as refugees abroad, who would immigrate through orderly and legal asylum channels. Refugee resettlement programs are mentioned as an existing instrument that operates in this way, albeit on a small scale. The call by reform proponents for a significant expansion of these programs is presented alongside the proposed implementation of STC agreements, under which asylum seekers crossing the border irregularly would be transferred to non-EU partner countries to apply for asylum and, if eligible, receive protection there.

Implications in line with the *National Interest* and *Humanitarian Assistance* logics are highlighted in short complementary paragraphs that are added in the other two priming conditions: In particular, respondents in the *National Interest* condition received a paragraph with a focus on the better immigration control and facilitated management associated with orderly immigration flows. Given the widespread concern around an exploitation of the asylum system by so-called "bogus asylum seekers" (IPSOS, 2024), it is also highlighted that the OAR proposal would help to reserve access to humanitarian admissions for people with already verified claims for protection. Finally, it is pointed out that the proportion of young men among refugees would likely be smaller under such a reform. In contrast to other definitions of national interest (Abdelaaty et al., 2025; Kustov, 2025a), this prime addresses prevalent concerns related to perceptions of control, exploitation and demographics, without

[11] This term encompasses both groups asylum seekers as well as refugees. This broader meaning is needed for the design of the conjoint experiment (see below).

claiming that adopting the reform would turn refugee immigration into an overall boon for national interests, such as the domestic economy.

By contrast, the *Humanitarian Assistance* condition emphasizes that the reform would provide better access to protection for those lacking the resources to travel longer distances, that it would make passages for refugees safer and be associated with a stronger representation of demographic groups considered especially vulnerable such as children, women, elderly and sick persons. The content of the three conditions is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Design of Priming Experiment

Orderliness Condition (Baseline Text)	National Interest Condition	Humanitarian Assistance Condition
➢ Introduction of reform's core idea and policy instruments ➢ Emphasis on shift from irregular to orderly and legal immigration	*Baseline text* + ➢ Better immigration control & management ➢ Reserving access for migrants with verified protection claims ➢ Fewer admissions for "threatening demographics"	*Baseline text* + ➢ Better access for those most resource-deprived ➢ Safe passage ➢ More admissions for "vulnerable demographics"

The pages containing the definitions and primes were displayed for a minimum duration before respondents could proceed, to ensure they were not skipped immediately. Furthermore, an attention check question was placed after the baseline text to test whether respondents had understood the proposal's objective to close irregular while expanding orderly pathways for migrants who seek protection – rather than decreasing or increasing overall numbers. Approximately two thirds of respondents passed this question – a relatively small share, likely due to the proposal's greater complexity and length compared to other concepts used in online surveys. As shown in Table 2 (Appendix), the only statistically significant differences between the full sample and the subsample that passed the attention check is the proportion of respondents holding a university degree and reporting difficulties to cope with their income. In the subsequent results section, the main text reports reform-related outcome variables based on the subsample of respondents who demonstrated an understanding of the core idea of the proposal, while results for the full sample – which are largely comparable – are provided in the Appendix.

In the next step, I tested respondents' views toward the OAR proposal. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they supported or rejected the proposal and also the extent to which a hypothetical implementation of the reform would increase or decrease their acceptance for refugee protection in Germany. For both questions, I used 5-point scales to measure responses.

Conjoint experiment

The final part consisted of a conjoint experiment which served to get a more fine-grained understanding of respondents' views toward specific aspects of the reform design. Conjoint experiments are well suited to this aim, as they allow me to simultaneously assess preferences across multiple attributes of the OAR

proposal. Specifically, respondents were asked to make seven comparisons[12] of two policy packages each, which varied across four policy dimensions (attributes). Each dimension consisted of three or four policy features (levels), which were randomly combined with one another. The main outcome variable is based on people's choice of one policy package relative to the alternative. The choice variable therefore takes on the values 1 (selected) and 0 (not selected). To check for robustness, I also ran the analysis with respondents' rating of each policy package on a 1 to 7 scale as an alternative outcome variable as is standard practice.

In the main text, I estimate causal effects by calculating the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) of the policy features, following established practice in related studies (Jeannet et al., 2021; Vrânceanu et al., 2023). These effects are obtained from a linear regression of the choice outcome on the policy features, with standard errors clustered at the respondent level. The AMCE can be interpreted as the average change in the probability that a policy package is selected when a specific policy feature is present, relative to a reference level, averaging over the distribution of all other features in the design (Hainmueller et al., 2014). As a robustness check, I also calculate marginal means, which represent the mean probability that a policy package is selected conditional on the presence of a particular policy feature, again averaging over the joint distribution of all other features.

The first policy dimension ("admission policies") entailed the different combinations of the key policy tools of the reform, i.e. safe third country agreements (yes/no) and an expansion of resettlement (yes/no). In the second dimension ("selection criteria") the policy features differ with respect to the criteria to be applied when selecting resettlement refugees. The aim is to assess the extent to which respondents wish safety and economic considerations to be incorporated into the selection process, complementing the humanitarian criteria that lie at its core.

The third dimension ("partner country cooperation") was centered around the requirements that countries to which asylum seekers are sent should meet. This applies not only to partner countries of STC agreements but also to the context of readmitting rejected asylum seekers.[13] Distinctions were made between policy packages where (1) no requirements exist for non-EU partner countries, (2) migrants are only transferred to countries without human rights violations, and (3) the human rights requirement is paired with efforts to strengthen legal pathways from the non-EU country to Germany.

Finally, the fourth policy dimension ("welfare access") looked at implications of the reform proposal for solidarity with asylum seekers and refugees already inside the country. As a proxy for solidarity, I used access to welfare services and distinguished between the options that (1) access is limited for all persons seeking protection (*Schutzsuchende*)[14], (2) limited only for those who arrived irregularly but not for those who entered through orderly pathways, and (3) that full welfare access is provided for all.

The conjoint experiment was designed in a way that all policy features of each policy dimension could be combined with all features of all other dimensions without logical inconsistencies. Therefore, no restrictions had to be imposed to exclude atypical packages. An overview of the policy dimensions and

[12] For this number of comparison, survey satisficing should not represent a threat to participants' response quality (Bansak et al., 2018).

[13] This is important to ensure compatibility with all features of the "admission policies" dimension. Survey participants were made aware of both contexts of cooperation with non-EU countries (STC agreements *and* readmissions).

[14] I deliberately used the term "Schutzsuchende", which was also defined for participants as it captures both asylum seekers and refugees. The relevant distinction here is not the legality of their status but the mode of arrival.

characteristics is provided in Table 3.[15] In addition, Figure 1 reproduces the way the policy packages were presented to respondents in English. An English translation of the entire questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

Table 3: Conjoint Experiment – Policy Dimensions and Policy Features

Dimensions	**Characteristics**
Admission Policies	1) Direct transfer of asylum seekers who entered irregularly to a third country. No expansion of resettlement. *(Restrictive)* 2) Direct transfer of asylum seekers who entered irregularly to a third country. Resettlement is expanded. *(Orderly)* 3) Asylum seekers who entered irregularly can apply for asylum in Germany. No expansion of resettlement. *(Status quo)* 4) Asylum seekers who entered irregularly can apply for asylum in Germany. Resettlement is expanded. *(Liberal)*
Selection Criteria	1) Humanitarian aspects, security aspects, and economic capacity are considered. *(Economic, security, humanitarian)* 2) Humanitarian aspects and security risks are considered. *(Security, humanitarian)* 3) Only humanitarian aspects are considered. *(Humanitarian only)*
Partner Country Cooperation	1) No requirements for non-EU countries. *(No conditions)* 2) Transfer only to non-EU countries that respect human rights. *(Human rights)* 3) Transfer only to non-EU countries that respect human rights. Strengthening of legal immigration pathways from the non-EU country (e.g., work visas). *(Human rights & legal)*
Welfare Access	1) Limited access to social benefits for all persons seeking protection. *(Limited overall)* 2) Limited access for persons seeking protection who entered irregularly. Those who entered legally have full access. *(Conditional on admission)* 3) Full access to social benefits for all persons seeking protection. *(Full overall)*

[15] In parentheses at the end of each policy feature, I add a brief label for the specific feature which is used when reporting the conjoint results in Figure 6 and in the appendix.

Figure 1: Sample Conjoint Task (English translation)[16]

1/7: If you were to choose a policy mix for Germany, which of the two options would you prefer?

	Option A	Option B
Selection Criteria for Resettlement Refugees	Humanitarian aspects and security risks are considered.	Only humanitarian aspects are considered.
Access to Welfare Services	Limited access to social benefits for all persons seeking protection.	Limited access for persons seeking protection who entered irregularly. Those who entered legally have full access.
Access to Protection	Direct transfer of asylum seekers who entered irregularly to a third country. Resettlement is expanded.	Asylum seekers who entered irregularly can apply for asylum in Germany. No expansion of resettlement.
Cooperation with non-EU countries for the transfer of asylum seekers	No requirements for non-EU countries.	Transfer only to non-EU countries that respect human rights.
	Option A	Option B

Results

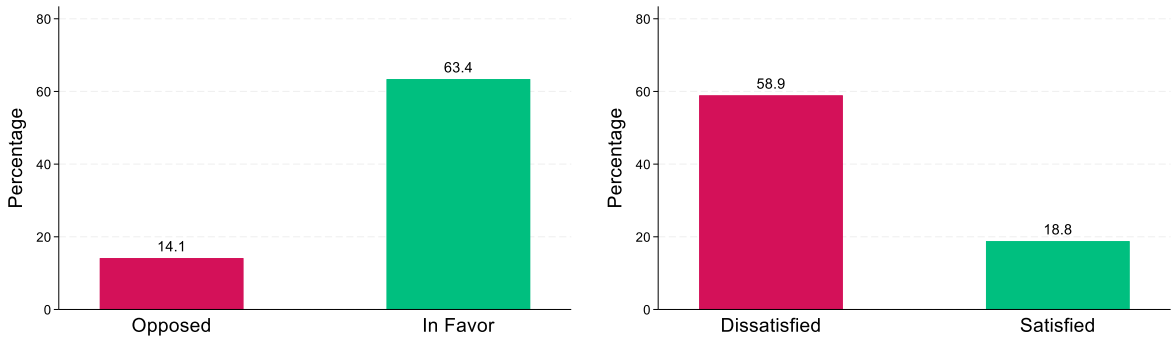
The results section is divided into a first part with a focus on the nature of the backlash against asylum immigration and a second part that is concerned with attitudes toward the OAR proposal as a potential remedy.

Results on the nature of the asylum backlash

The first step is to assess whether the recent backlash reflects a principled departure from the institution of refugee protection or dissatisfaction with its translation into practice. Figure 2 reveals a remarkable *principle-practice gap*, relating to the large difference between Germans' support for refugee protection in principle and the amount of (dis)satisfaction with the realities of the existing asylum system. Despite the significant decline in support for refugee admissions discussed above, I find that only a small minority is strictly (5 percent) or rather (9 percent) opposed to refugee protection in principle. This is dwarfed by a clear majority that is rather (36 percent) or strongly (27 percent) in favor of the principles of this institution (Figure 2, left panel).[17] This roughly aligns with IPSOS poll data according to which 74 percent of Germans agree with the statement that "People should be able to take refuge in other countries, including in my country, to escape from war or persecution" (IPSOS, 2024), whereas 20 percent disagreed. The results for respondents' specific support levels are almost a mirror image though: While only 4 (14) percent said they were very (rather) satisfied with the functioning of the current asylum system, 59 percent expressed their dissatisfaction (Figure 2, right panel).[18]

[16] Note that the names of the policy dimensions are slightly different in this table. The objective was to make the labels as intuitive as possible for respondents.
[17] The remaining percentage, totaling 100 percent, represents respondents who were neither in favor, nor opposed. This holds also for the following percentage distributions.
[18] This group was evenly divided between respondents who were very and those who were rather dissatisfied.

Figure 2: Diffuse and specific support for refugee protection



Notes: Proportion of respondents expressing support for or opposition to refugee protection in principle (left), and proportion expressing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the practice of the current asylum system (right). Percentages not summing to 100 percent reflect respondents who are neither in favor nor opposed, and those who are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, respectively.

More detailed insights into what drives (dis)satisfaction with the status quo are provided by a qualitative analysis based on an open-ended question simply asking respondents to express their reasons for (dis)satisfaction. From the overall sample of 2,211 respondents, 1,692 responses gave sufficiently clear and substantive reasons for why someone was (dis)satisfied with the status quo. My analysis shows that while concerns about the admission numbers being too high ("Excessive Numbers" category) are widespread (302 responses), expressions of dissatisfaction with how refugee protection is implemented in the country are substantially more frequent still. The majority (523) of these fall into the category of "Irregularity/Lack of Control". The quote, "[t]he people genuinely in need of protection are being neglected, there is too much migration for economic reasons" (no. 1108), illustrates the distrust toward the asylum system and that the lack of control over who is admitted fuels the perception that the wrong persons are the main beneficiaries. This recalls the results from the abovementioned IPSOS (2024) poll, according to which 61 percent of Germans thought of most asylum seekers as bogus refugees. Other respondents stated "I think it's right that refugees come. But it should be done in a more orderly way" (1253) or "In principle, something like this should exist. But in the end, anyone can come and stay" (1689). These are examples of how dissatisfaction with the reality of the status quo, i.e. a lack of specific support, may coexist alongside diffuse support for the institution of refugee protection per se.

Another key concern regarding implementation is the widespread perception of severely impaired functionality under the existing regime (252 responses under "Dysfunctionality"). For instance, complaints such as "Complete chaos" (no. 576) or "Too much bureaucracy and fuss" (no. 1616) were raised frequently. A further source of opposition to the status quo is reflected in various perceived threats to the national interest, ranging from a fear of crime and insecurity to economic and cultural concerns, overburdened municipalities, health and education infrastructures as well as tight housing markets (523 responses under "Threat perceptions"). A substantial number also demanded a harsher approach, for example with respect to deporting delinquent immigrants (154 responses).

On the other hand, a person's dissatisfaction with the status quo may also be rooted in perceptions of the current system being too restrictive and lacking adequate support for migrants seeking protection. In this spirit, a number of respondents bemoaned, for example, an "inhumane execution" (no. 430) of asylum policies or insufficient resources to foster integration. Others complained about legal obstacles preventing asylum seekers from finding work. However, this group was relatively small in comparison to those discussed above (98 responses under "Too restrictive").

Taken together, my results suggest that today's disapproval of asylum immigration does not reflect a fundamental departure from the institution of refugee protection. However, the reality of the existing asylum system is under immense public pressure, owing to a combination of high asylum numbers, perceived by many as overburdening, irregular border crossings, associated with fears of losing control and a broader sense of dysfunctionality. This results in a strong perception that asylum immigration is a threat to the interests of the local population.

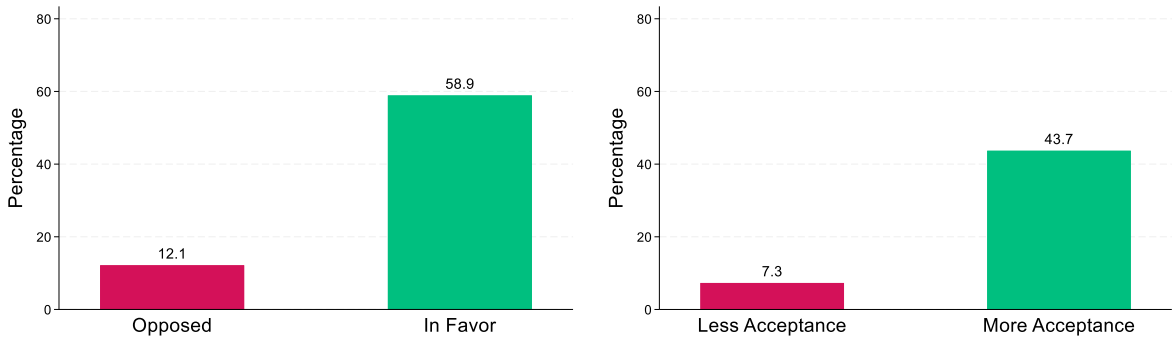
Attitudes toward the Orderly Admission Reform proposal: Descriptive results

This raises the question of whether reforming the admission process by simultaneously introducing STC agreements and largely expanding refugee resettlement – rather than minimizing influxes of refugees – may have the potential to restore acceptance for the intake of refugees. To answer this question, I first measure the popularity of the reform proposal by asking the degree to which respondents would support such a reform. It turns out that proponents of the proposal largely outnumber its critics. As Figure 3 (left panel) illustrates, opposition is limited to 12 percent of my sample, whereas 59 percent express support.[19]

Beyond examining views toward the OAR proposal itself, respondents were also asked whether a hypothetical implementation of the reform would impact the respondents' level of acceptance for refugee protection in Germany. Compared to the previous questions, a larger share of respondents – almost half – said this would not have any impact. Among the remaining respondents though, the vast majority indicated that reform implementation would rather (33 percent) or substantially (11 percent) increase their acceptance. Only a small minority of 7 percent said it would lead to a decline in their acceptance (Figure 3, right panel).[20]

[19] To provide more nuanced insights: 4 percent were strongly opposed and 8 percent were rather opposed to the reform proposal. On the other hand, 41 percent were rather and 18 percent strongly in favor.
[20] Figure 4 (Appendix) shows the results for the entire sample, which deviate only marginally from the results in the group of respondents who passed the attention check.

Figure 3: Overall support for proposal (left) and changes in acceptance for refugee protection (right)



Notes: Proportion of respondents expressing support for or opposition to the OAR proposal (left), and proportion indicating that its implementation would either increase or decrease their acceptance of refugee protection (right). Percentages not summing to 100 percent reflect respondents who are neither in favor nor opposed, and those who state that implementation would not affect their acceptance level, respectively.

Beyond overall attitudes, I also examine the degree to which the proposal may be divisive. Previous research has documented significant differences in immigration attitudes across demographic groups, including education, age, income, employment status, migration background, and residence in either East or West Germany (Dražanová et al., 2024; Wieland, 2024). Interestingly, these typical divides are absent in views toward the reform proposal. A series of t-tests reveals that no significant differences in support for the proposal exist across all of the listed dividing lines, and none of these variables emerges as statistically significant in a regression analysis (Table 4, Appendix).[21] I also find largely homogenous support across various party preferences. As shown in Figure 5 (Appendix), average support does not differ significantly among supporters of four of the six major parties, spanning from center-right (CDU) to far-left (Die Linke). The proposal is particularly popular among supporters of the liberal FDP party. While AfD (far-right) supporters give a more negative average assessment than supporters of other parties, the mean evaluation remains significantly above the middle category even in this group. This finding also echoes insights from Helbling et al. (2024, 2025), which suggest that a relatively broad consensus on immigration issues may be possible when permissive and restrictive measures are combined in an appealing way. One reason may be that refugee protection schemes are more readily accepted – particularly by individuals with lower political trust – when they include clear conditions and limits, as in the case of the OAR proposal (Jeannet et al., 2023).

The only group that markedly deviates from the rest consists of respondents with principled opposition to refugee protection. This limited subset expresses indifference vis-à-vis the reform proposal. However, individuals who oppose refugee protection so fundamentally are arguably not the primary "target audience" of such a reform in the first place. If anything, a specific target group would be comprised of those people who are, in principle, open to refugee protection but disillusioned with the status quo – which is also the most frequent combination in my sample. Among this group, views toward the OAR proposal are particularly favorable with 71 percent evaluating it positively (compared to 59 percent overall), and 53 percent stating it would improve their acceptance for refugee protection (compared to 44 percent overall).

[21] For this and the below regressions relating to the priming experiment, I include binary variables for being female, residing in East Germany, holding a university degree, being unemployed, having difficulties to cope with one's income and having a migration background as well as a continuous variable for respondents' age measured in years. The variable migration background is coded as one if the respondent or at least one of their parents was born abroad.

Attitudes toward the Orderly Admission Reform proposal: Priming experiment

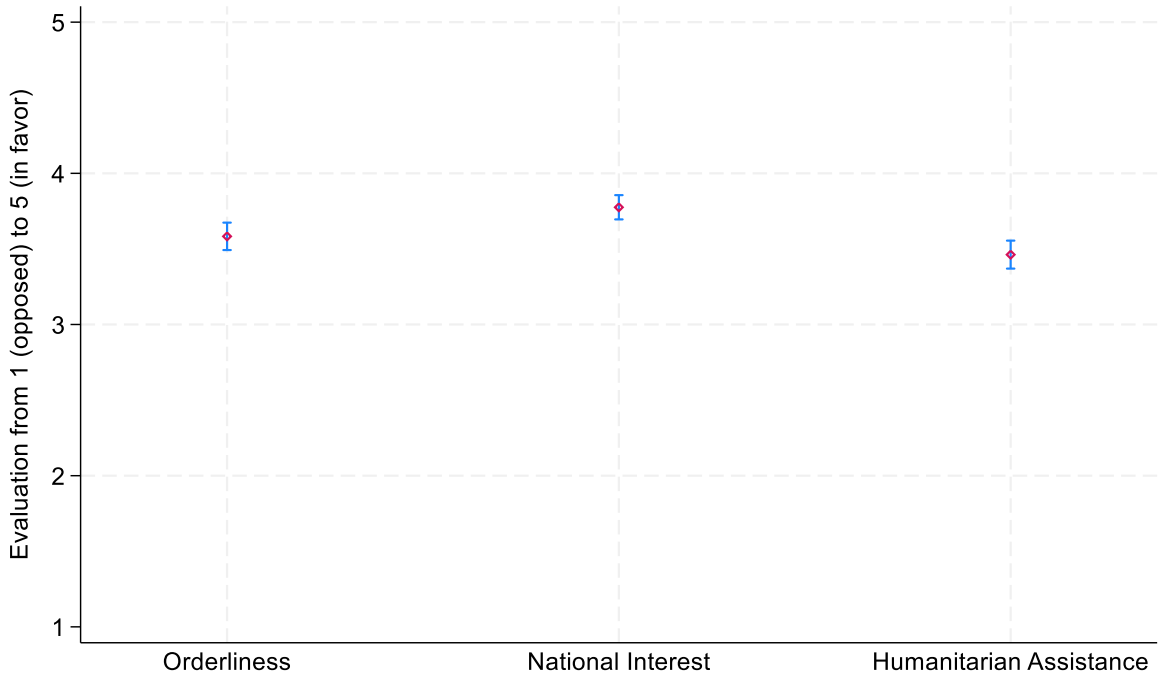
As mentioned above, the presentation of the reform proposal was not uniform across all respondents. This serves to shed some light on whether attitudes are driven primarily by the switch from irregular to more orderly immigration pathways in and of itself (baseline condition) or if highlighting non-obvious implications additionally influence the way that the proposal is perceived.

A balance test confirms that randomization of participants across the three priming conditions was successful (Table 5, Appendix). Figure 6 shows that while the mean values across all three groups are well within the positive range of the scale and roughly in the same ballpark (between 3.46 and 3.78), there are significant differences across priming conditions. The data suggests that pointing out how the reform proposal may protect national interests provides a modest boost for public opinion. At first glance, this appears to contradict a recent finding by Abdelaaty et al. (2025) while corroborating the argument by Kustov (2025a), that immigration is popular when it is "demonstrably beneficial" to national interests. However, as pointed out above, the national interest prime in this study addresses concerns around perceived control, exploitation and demographics without claiming overall economic benefits from more orderly refugee immigration.

Somewhat surprising is that adding information about (desirable) humanitarian implications to the baseline information in the *Orderliness* condition appears to be associated with a small but significant penalty. This finding is in tension with a body of research suggesting that humanitarian considerations significantly shape public attitudes toward refugees and refugee policies in positive ways (Abdelaaty et al., 2025; Bansak et al., 2016; Fraser & Murakami, 2022; Hillenbrand et al., 2025; Jeannet et al., 2021). To interpret this result, insights from psychology – particularly the literature on the so-called "dilution effect" (Nisbett et al., 1981) – may be useful. This effect describes the tendency for people to find an argument most persuasive when it relies on a few strong points rather than a larger set of arguments mixing strong and weaker ones. Logically, one might expect that adding more supportive arguments would enhance the overall case, even if those additions are less compelling than the initial ones. However, the dilution effect suggests that individuals often judge the quality of an argument by *averaging* the persuasiveness of all included points, rather than *summing* them based on their individual strength. As a result, adding supportive but weaker arguments can *reduce* the perceived overall strength of the argument (Nisbett et al., 1981). In the context of the priming experiment, it is therefore possible that while the humanitarian benefits of the reform are seen as desirable, they are perceived as less important than the aspects emphasized in the *Orderliness* condition. This could explain the slightly less favorable overall assessment of the reform proposal in the *Humanitarian Assistance* condition.

Given that the impact of a message depends on the extent it aligns with the values of recipients (Dennison, 2020), the dilution effect should be particularly pronounced among those respondents who place very little emphasis on humanitarian values. Using the absence of diffuse support for refugee protection as a proxy for a weak humanitarian orientation, Table 6, Column 2 (Appendix) documents that the negative effect of the humanitarian priming is indeed driven by this group of respondents, lending empirical support to a dilution effect.

Figure 6: Support for reform across priming conditions



Notes: Average support for the OAR proposal across the three priming conditions. Dots indicate point estimates with 95 percent confidence intervals.

The results illustrated in Figure 6 also hold when regressing support for the reform on the priming conditions as well as sociodemographic control variables (see Table 6, Column 1, Appendix).

Conjoint experiment

My analysis is complemented by a conjoint experiment to tease out people's preferences for specific components of the reform proposal. Specifically, preferences for the policy dimensions *Admission Policies, Selection Criteria, Partner Country Cooperation* and *Welfare Access* are included. The estimated Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE) are summarized in Figure 7. For each policy dimension, the most restrictive attribute is placed at the top, whereas the most liberal one is at the bottom.

The Admission Policies dimension tests which combination of the reform components is preferred. So far, respondents have assessed a situation in which the two reform components could not be separated from one another. This raises the possibility that the high level of popularity was driven primarily by one component (possibly the STC agreements), while the other may have been viewed far less favorably.[22] My data shows that policy packages which allow irregularly arrived asylum seekers to remain in Germany (i.e., policy features *Status Quo* and *Liberal*), are indeed significantly less popular than policy regimes under which these persons are transferred to an STC (i.e., *Restrictive* and *Orderly*). However, the most restrictive policy option which includes STC agreements without expanding refugee resettlement is *not* the most popular one. Instead, Germans remain willing to offer international protection at a significant scale, provided that refugees are admitted through orderly pathways, such as

[22]Therefore, the proposal may have been popular *despite* and not *because* of the proposed expansion of humanitarian resettlement.

refugee resettlement. At first glance, this finding appears to conflict with the IPSOS (2024) result that a plurality of Germans prefer to (temporarily) suspend refugee admissions altogether. However, Mason-Sucher (2025) demonstrates that when respondents are offered not only the binary choice between reducing or expanding immigration – a comparison that elicits much stronger support for reductions – but also the option of improving immigration control, a clear preference emerges for enhanced regulation over blunt numerical cuts. Similarly, it has been observed that many Germans are ready to accept higher immigration numbers if this is accompanied by enhanced entrance control (Helbling et al., 2024). My results are consistent with these findings and thus provide empirical support for Solodoch's (2021) immigration-controllability mechanism: Germans do not necessarily favor minimizing refugee inflows but rather prioritize better control over those who arrive.

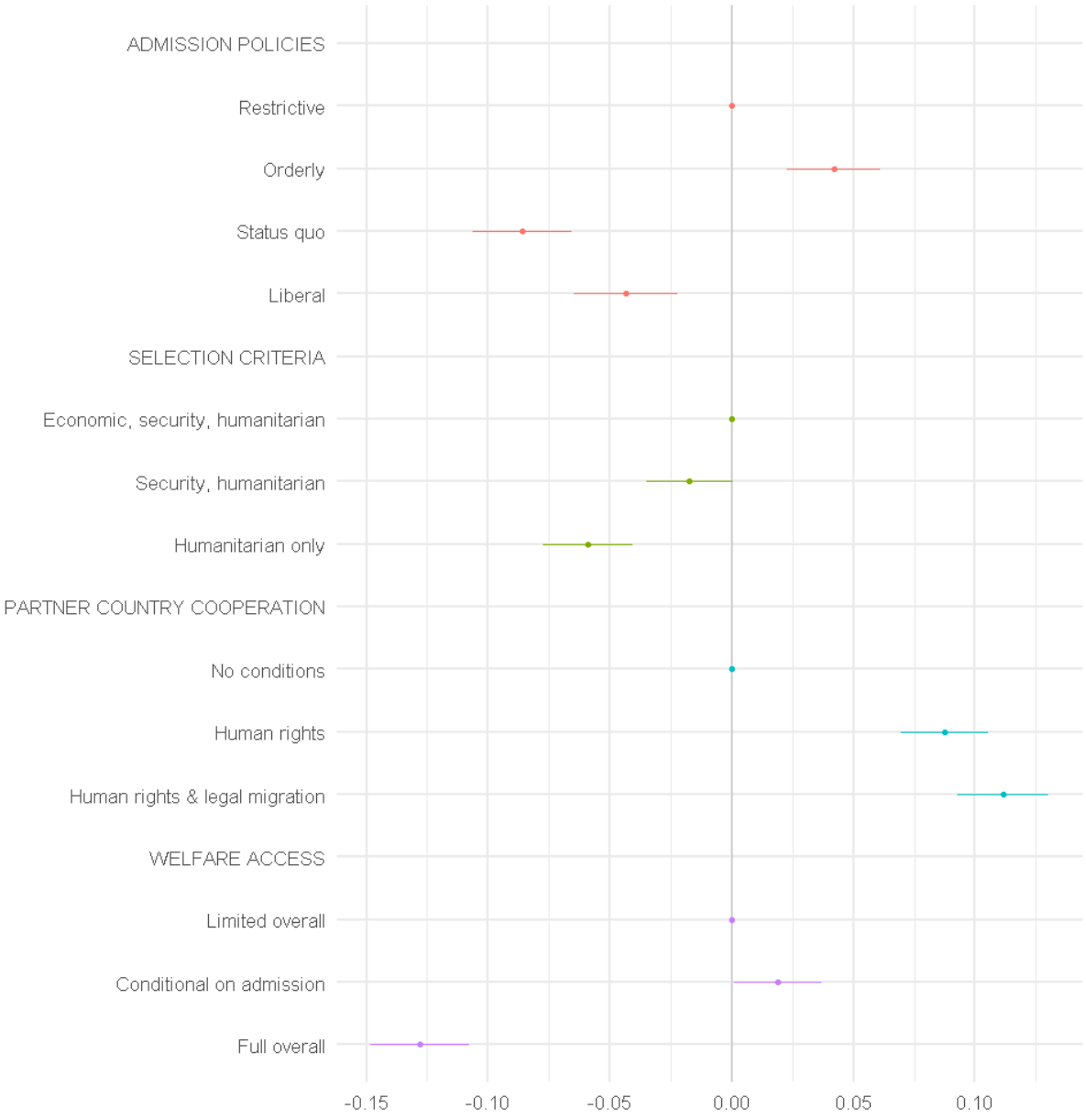
Next, I turn to preferences relating to the design of the two reform components. Regarding the criteria that people would like to play a role in the selection of resettlement refugees, I find that an exclusive focus on humanitarian criteria is associated with a significant penalty, implying a demand from the public to also integrate national interest-related aspects. Specifically, Germans clearly want security aspects to matter as well. The data is less clear-cut with respect to whether or not the economic potential of refugees should play a role in addition. In my main specification, there is (just barely) no statistically significant preference for including economic considerations compared to the scenario where only humanitarian and security aspects are assessed. Less ambiguous are the results when using the rating instead of the choice outcome (Figures 13, appendix), where virtually no difference between the two policy options exists. This aligns with research showing that safety concerns are strongly correlated with a person's willingness to accept the admission of refugees – more so than economic fears (von Hermanni & Neumann, 2019).

With respect to the design of agreements with non-EU partner countries[23], I find strong opposition to transferring asylum migrants to partner countries where human rights are violated. This recalls the finding by Jeannet et al. (2021) that European publics oppose policies that return asylum seekers to places where they may be harmed. Interestingly, when it comes to agreements with human rights respecting partner countries, Germans show a remarkable openness to strengthening legal pathways for immigration from that country in return. This is highly relevant to the feasibility of such agreements, as expansions of legal migration opportunities may serve as strong incentives for non-EU countries to participate (Knaus, 2024).

The final policy dimension examines possible implications of the reform for the degree of solidarity after admission – proxied by access to welfare services. I find a strong reluctance to provide full access to welfare services to all refugees and asylum seekers in the country. However, rather than restricting welfare access to all, Germans most prefer a policy that distinguishes between those who arrived legally and those who didn't, with full welfare access for those that arrived through legal pathways. This finding may be linked to elements of van Oorschot (2000) deservingness framework, such as the particularly great humanitarian needs of resettled refugees. Further, Ferracioli (2014) suspected that unauthorized border crossings may be perceived as violations of a fairness principle which may have negative implications for the reciprocity criterion of the deservingness framework. It therefore seems possible that a shift toward more orderly refugee immigration affects solidarity positively.

[23] Again, this refers to STC agreements but also to agreements aiming at a facilitated readmission of rejected asylum seekers to ensure compatibility with all policy features of the admission policies" dimension.

Figure 7: Effects of policy features on the probability of selecting a policy package



Notes: The figure depicts average marginal component effects (AMCE). Dots indicate point estimates with 95 percent confidence intervals. Dots on the zero line without confidence intervals represent the reference categories. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

Heterogeneity

Similar to the findings on the overall assessment of the OAR proposal, preferences elicited through the conjoint experiment are also fairly uniform. Figure 8 (Appendix) shows that I observe similar preference patterns across the three priming conditions. The same is true across most socio-demographically defined groups. However, once again supporters of the far-right AfD party form somewhat of an exception (Figure 9, Appendix): They express more restrictive preferences in terms of admission policies and welfare access and have less inhibitions to transfer migrants to partner countries with

human rights violations.[24] Nonetheless, even within this group, the policy option that combines safe third country agreements with scaled-up resettlement is *not* penalized compared to the most restrictive option (only STC agreements).

Overall, these results highlight that – despite the apparent backlash to refugee immigration as documented in many studies and opinion polls – Germans apparently do *not* prefer a policy mix characterized by maximal restrictions. Instead, there seems to be a strong desire to minimize irregular immigration but attitudes toward an orderly and legal alternative for refugee admissions are remarkably positive.

Diagnostic and robustness checks

The conjoint results are confirmed through a variety of robustness checks. First, when all observations are included, rather than only those of respondents that passed the attention check, the results differ only marginally as Figure 10 (Appendix) shows. This is also true when the Marginal Means (MM) are computed rather than the AMCE (Figure 11, Appendix). Finally, in addition to choosing between two policy packages in the seven choice tasks, respondents also rated the profiles on a scale from 1 to 7. Figure 12 (Appendix) shows the AMCE estimates when using the rating instead of the choice data. Mainly, this approach deviates from the main analysis by producing weaker evidence for a preference to include economic criteria in the refugee selection process and for the preference of a conditional welfare access policy over a policy restricting welfare access for all.

To ensure the validity of the conjoint results, I follow Hainmueller et al. (2014), in conducting a number of diagnostic checks. Specifically, I followed the authors' guidelines to test for carryover and profile order effects and tested whether randomization was successful. There are no concerning indications.[25] Further, the potential issue of attribute order effects was addressed by (successfully) randomizing the order of attributes (i.e. policy dimensions) across respondents.[26] More detailed information on these diagnostic checks can be found in the Appendix.

Discussion and conclusions

Amid rising public resistance to the immigration of asylum seekers and refugees, European governments appear to be competing over who reduces asylum numbers the fastest. This trend is particularly evident in countries where far-right parties have entered national governments, but it can also be observed among more centrist governments which are concerned about the public backlash against asylum immigration and seek to prevent radical-right politicians from gaining access to the centers of power.

Against this backdrop, the present research helps to better understand what exactly the public lashes back against – at least in the German context: Mounting opposition to asylum immigration should not be interpreted as a fundamental turn away from the institution of refugee protection in general. Further, while Germans do show concerns about the recent surge in refugee numbers, my data suggests that they are even more troubled by the *irregularity* aspect of asylum immigration. This helps explain why the investigated OAR proposal to channel refugee immigration into orderly and legal pathways is met by widespread approval – and may even bridge deep societal divides on this issue. The proposal receives

[24] Curiously though, AfD supporters appear indifferent regarding the three policy features relating to the selection process for refugees to be resettled.
[25] More details on the results of those tests are provided in Appendix C.
[26] For a given respondent, the order of attributes was kept constant as is common practice.

some additional popularity when highlighting how it may enhance immigration control and management and reduce the proportion of young men among refugees. More nuance is provided by the conjoint experiment, reinforcing the insight that Germans desire a replacement of irregular by orderly and legal immigration pathways – but not a system of maximal restrictions.

In relation to the competing theoretical expectations, my results suggest that Germans do indeed seek ways to reconcile national interest and humanitarian considerations when forming their opinion on refugee policies as proposed by Jeannet et al. (2021). The OAR proposal is apparently viewed by many as a promising strategy in this context. Consistent with Kustov (2025a), the data confirms that selectivity is crucial for fostering public acceptance of immigration. Yet an important difference is that, whereas Kustov argues that selective policies should be oriented toward advancing national interests in order to make immigration broadly acceptable – and thereby create space for some humanitarian admissions – my results convey a slightly different message. They indicate that humanitarian immigration can be popular in its own right, provided it is coupled with greater orderliness and control.

There is a chance that social desirability could bias responses in a more permissive direction. While such a bias cannot be ruled out entirely, online surveys without direct interactions between respondents and interviewers are generally assumed to mitigate this problem (Cattaneo & Grieco, 2021). In addition, conjoint experiments are particularly effective at eliciting preferences and overcoming social desirability bias, as they present respondents with multiple justifications for their choices (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Of greater concern is the hypothetical nature of the reform proposal-related survey questions. It is possible that discrepancies exist between how the proposal sounds on paper and how it would "feel" for people in practice. For example, a recent report in a German political magazine revealed serious shortcomings in Germany's admission program for Afghans, including inadequate security vetting and the use of forged passports (Lehberger, 2025). While incidents like this may undermine public trust even in orderly forms of refugee admissions, such flaws appear to be fixable.

In terms of generalizability, this research is based on data from Germany and it is possible that a proposal to make refugee flows more orderly resonates particularly well with "rule-loving Germans". Yet, prior research on preferences for refugee policies found that there seems to be much more agreement than disagreement across European publics (Jeannet et al., 2021; Letki et al., 2024; Vrânceanu et al., 2023). Finally, while the study investigates public attitudes toward a specific reform proposal, it does not assess the proposal itself, including legal and practical challenges linked to it. While other reform proposals also seek to strengthen the role of orderly pathways vis-à-vis territorial asylum, some favor more moderate approaches. These include alternative strategies to discourage irregular entry, for instance by limiting access to certain legal statuses or benefit entitlements for those who bypass regular channels (Fratzke et al., 2024) or softer versions of safe third country agreements, where asylum seekers are not granted entry during the procedure but may be admitted following a positive decision (Rietig, 2024). Given my research interest in examining attitudes toward refugee immigration when it is as clearly as possible decoupled from irregular migration, the more radical model, in which both the asylum procedure and the provision of protection are shifted abroad, aligns most closely with my epistemic focus.

For policymakers committed to preserving the institution of refugee protection while at the same time concerned about the continued rise of far-right parties, this study provides new insights into the prevailing dilemma. Specifically, my data suggest that the source of backlash is likely confined to an even narrower segment of immigration than previously assumed – namely, asylum immigration as a distinct, albeit currently dominant, form of refugee immigration in Europe. Accordingly, the dilemma

lies between protecting democratic institutions on the one hand and keeping national borders open to migrants asking for asylum – rather than allowing for refugee immigration per se – on the other.

Therefore, efforts to increasingly disentangle refugee immigration from irregular immigration may offer a pathway out of the dilemma while at the same time helping to mitigate social divisions around this highly contentious issue. The most immediate policy implication of this research is that the German government's decision to suspend orderly voluntary admission programs appears misguided and will probably be of little effect in regaining the trust of the electorate. Finally, the study invites a reinterpretation of the element of immigration control: while traditionally associated with tightening migration regimes and closing borders, (perceived) control over who arrives and in what numbers may actually enable greater openness by making host societies more comfortable with immigration. Exploring this "enabling potential" of control further, as well as its limits, offers a promising avenue for future research.

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Appendix

A) Tables

Table 2: Comparison of full sample with subsample that passed attention check

Variable names	Full Sample	Subsample	P-values (t-tests)
Female	0.469	0.498	0.188
Age	42.8	43.4	0.332
East Germany	0.171	0.164	0.711
University Degree	0.180	0.248	0.000
Unemployed	0.057	0.051	0.587
Income Struggles	0.369	0.322	0.027
Migration Background	0.232	0.219	0.477

Notes: This table reports mean values of socioeconomic variables for the full sample and for the subsample that passed the attention check; the rightmost column shows p-values from two-sample two-sided t-tests comparing the means.

Table 4: Effects of sociodemographic variables on support for reform proposal

	Support for Reform
Female	0.057
	[0.054]
Age	0.003
	[0.002]
East Germany	-0.067
	[0.074]
University Degree	-0.011
	[0.064]
Unemployed	0.065
	[0.125]
Income Struggles	-0.088
	[0.060]
Migration Background	-0.042
	[0.069]
cons	3.521***
	[0.104]
Observations	1,378
R-squared	0.004

Notes: OLS regression estimates of support for the OAR proposal on respondents' sociodemographic characteristics. Standard errors in brackets. * p < .1, ** p < .05, *** p < .01

Table 5: Balance test

	Orderliness	National	Humanitarian
Female	0.003	-0.030	0.027
	[0.026]	[0.026]	[0.026]
Age	0.001	0.000	-0.001
	[0.001]	[0.001]	[0.001]
East Germany	0.058*	-0.024	-0.034
	[0.035]	[0.035]	[0.035]
University Degree	0.019	-0.035	0.015
	[0.030]	[0.030]	[0.030]
Unemployed	0.031	-0.022	-0.009
	[0.059]	[0.059]	[0.059]
Income Struggles	-0.001	0.015	-0.014
	[0.028]	[0.028]	[0.028]
Migration Background	0.039	-0.003	-0.037
	[0.033]	[0.033]	[0.033]
_cons	0.251***	0.355***	0.395***
	[0.049]	[0.049]	[0.049]
Obs.	1,378	1,378	1,378
R-squared	0.004	0.004	0.003

Notes: OLS regression estimates of the three priming conditions (Orderliness, National Interest, Humanitarian Assistance) on sociodemographic characteristics. Standard errors in brackets. * $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Table 6: Effects of priming conditions on reform support

	Support for Reform	Support for Reform
National Interest	0.206***	0.191***
	[0.066]	[0.064]
Humanitarian Assistance	-0.132**	-0.068
	[0.065]	[0.067]
Hum Assist*No Diffuse Support	-	-0.672***
		[0.172]
Female	0.047	0.019
	[0.054]	[0.053]
Age	0.003	0.004*
	[0.002]	[0.002]
East Germany	-0.063	-0.063
	[0.074]	[0.072]
University Degree	-0.019	-0.032
	[0.063]	[0.061]
Migration Background	-0.035	-0.046
	[0.069]	[0.067]
Unemployed	0.063	0.012
	[0.124]	[0.121]
Subjective Income	-0.083	-0.070
	[0.060]	[0.058]
No Diffuse Support	-	-0.435***
		[0.098]
_cons	3.486***	3.534***
	[0.112]	[0.110]
Obs.	1,378	1,378
R-squared	0.024	0.078

Notes: OLS regression estimates of support for the OAR proposal on priming conditions and respondents' sociodemographic characteristics. Standard errors in brackets. * p < .1, ** p < .05, *** p < .01

B) Figures

Figure 4: Support for proposal (left) and changes in acceptance for refugee protection (right) – full sample

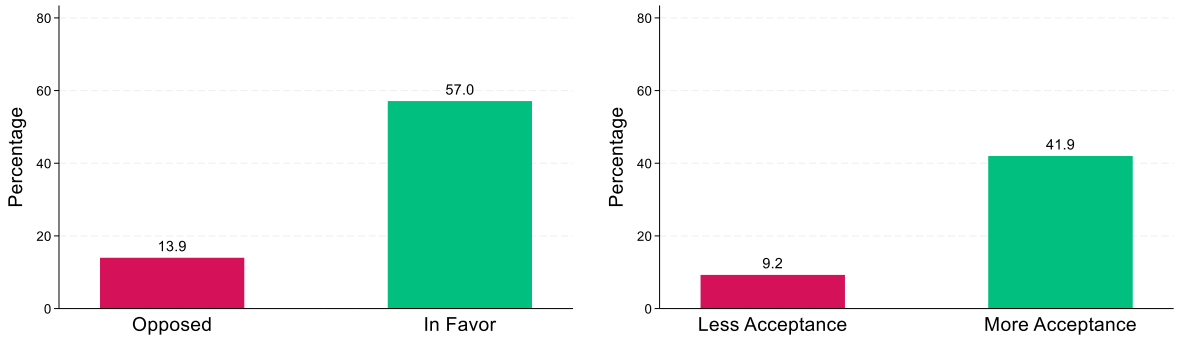


Figure 5: Support for reform proposal across party lines

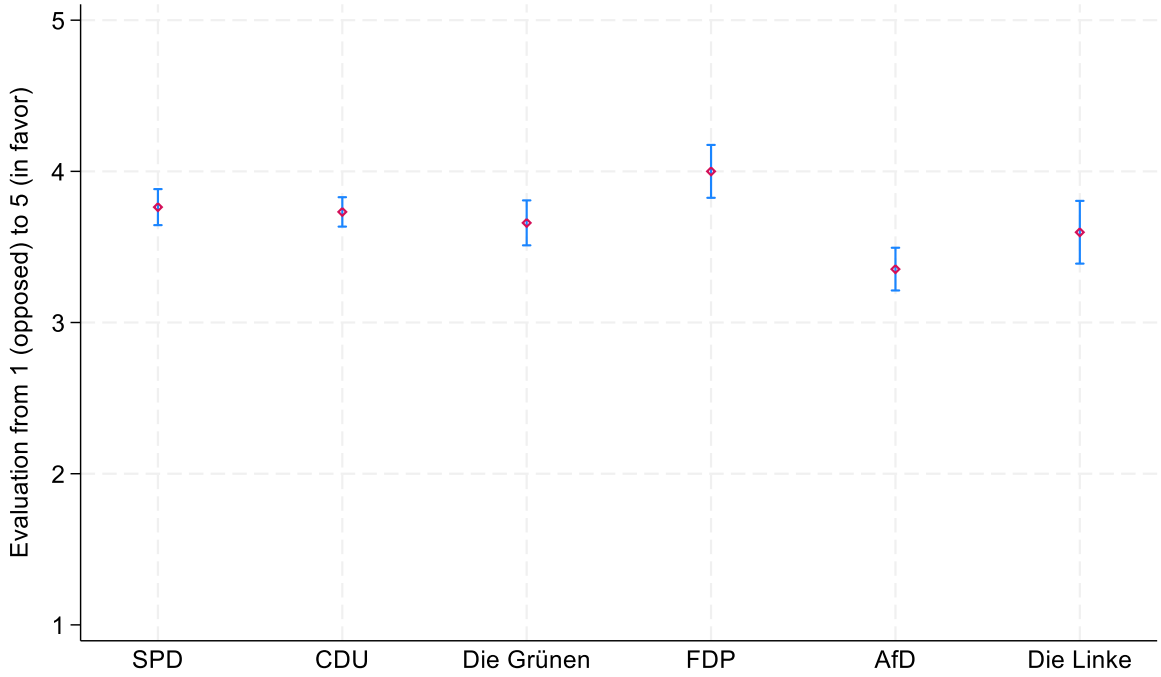


Figure 8: AMCE estimates – by priming condition

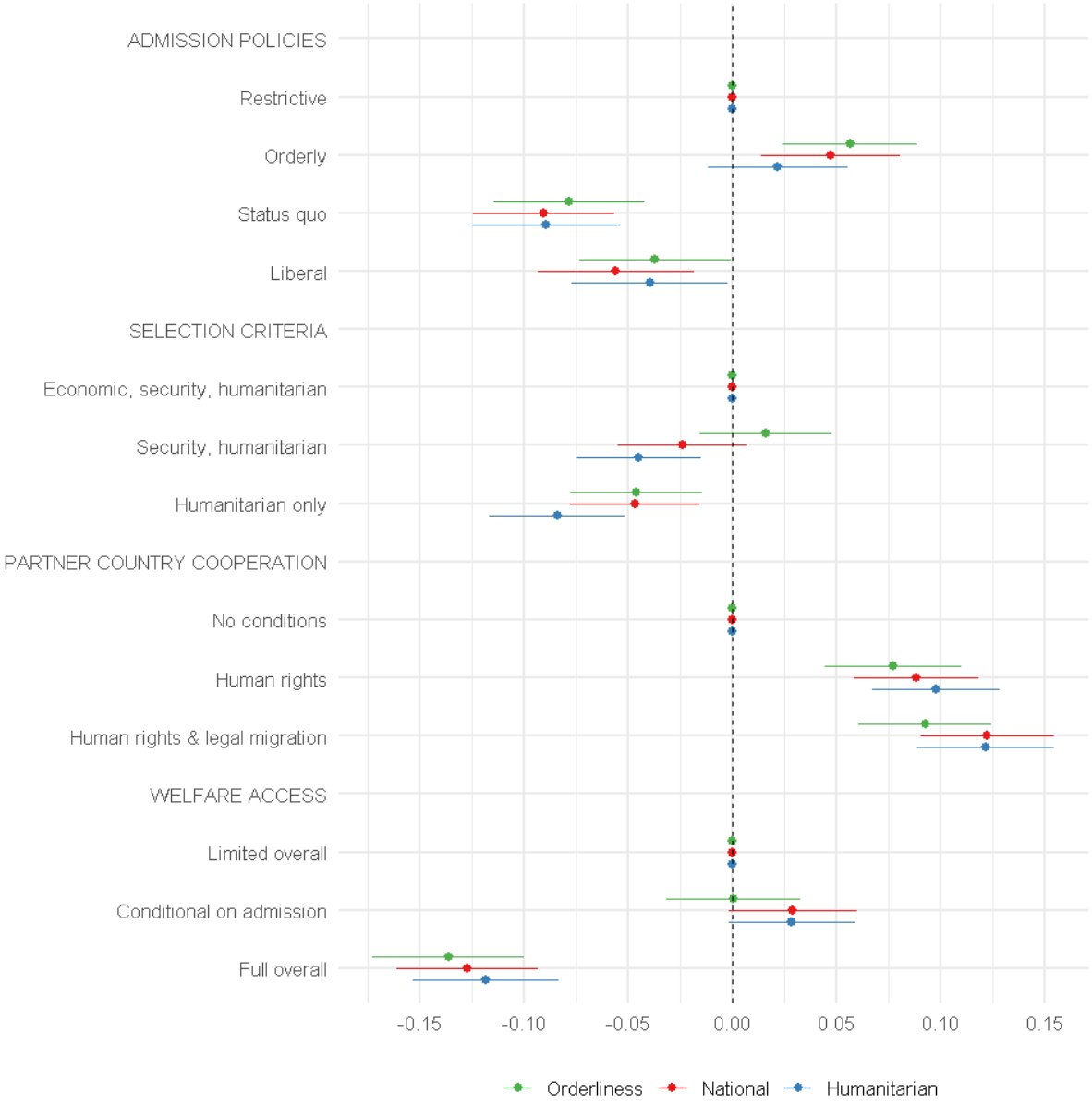


Figure 9: AMCE estimates – AfD supporters

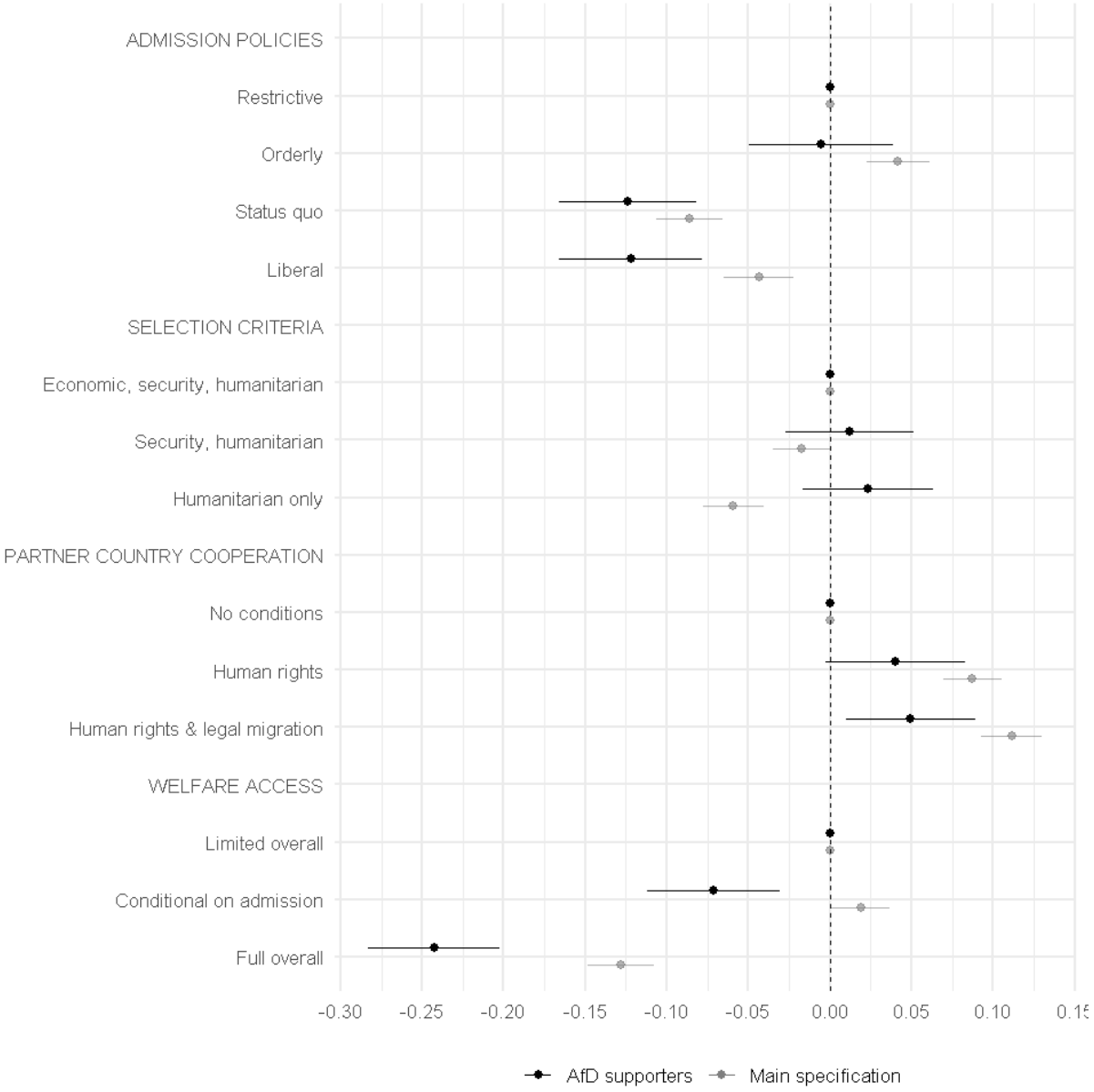


Figure 10: AMCE estimates – full sample

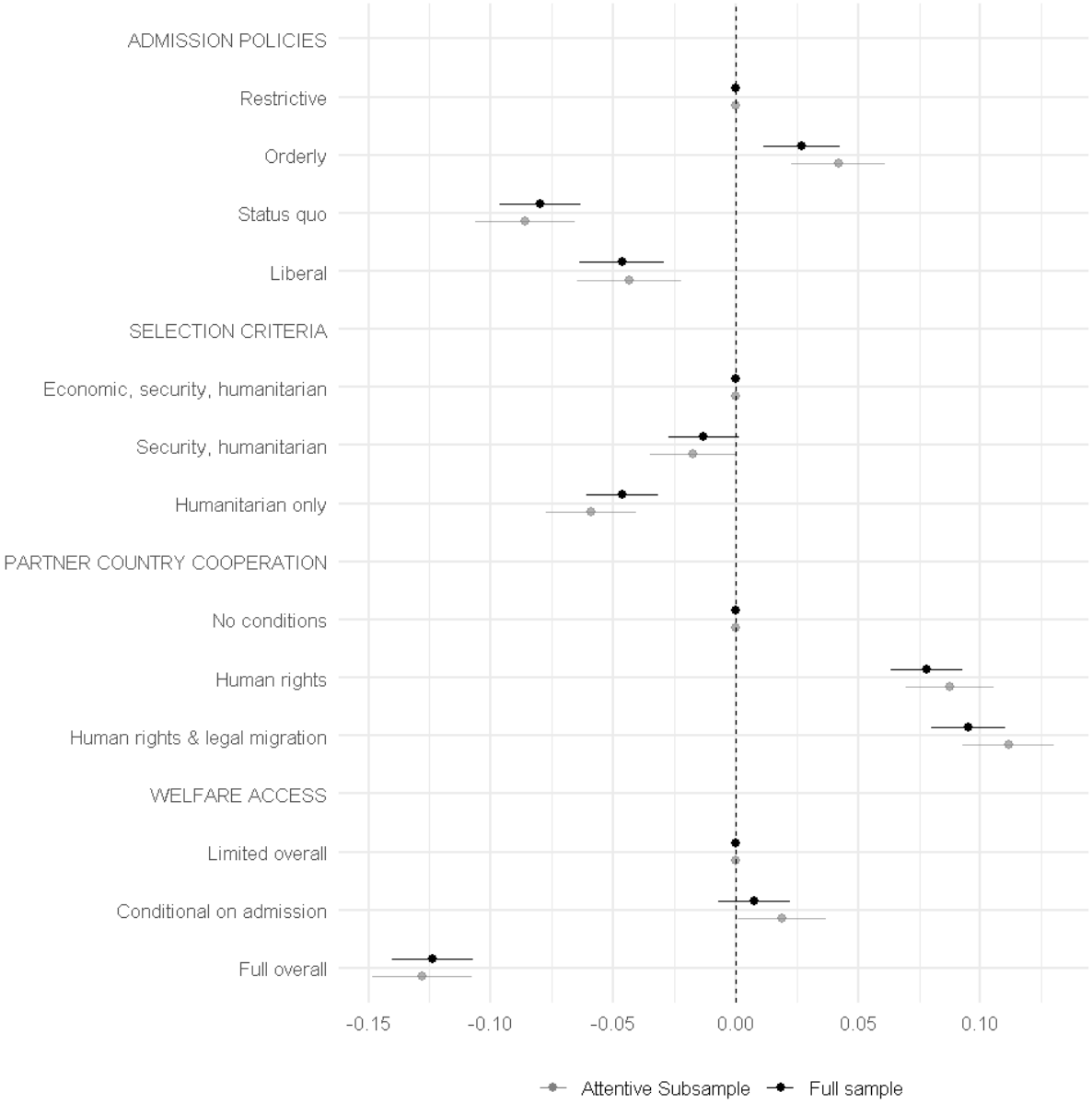


Figure 11: Marginal means estimates

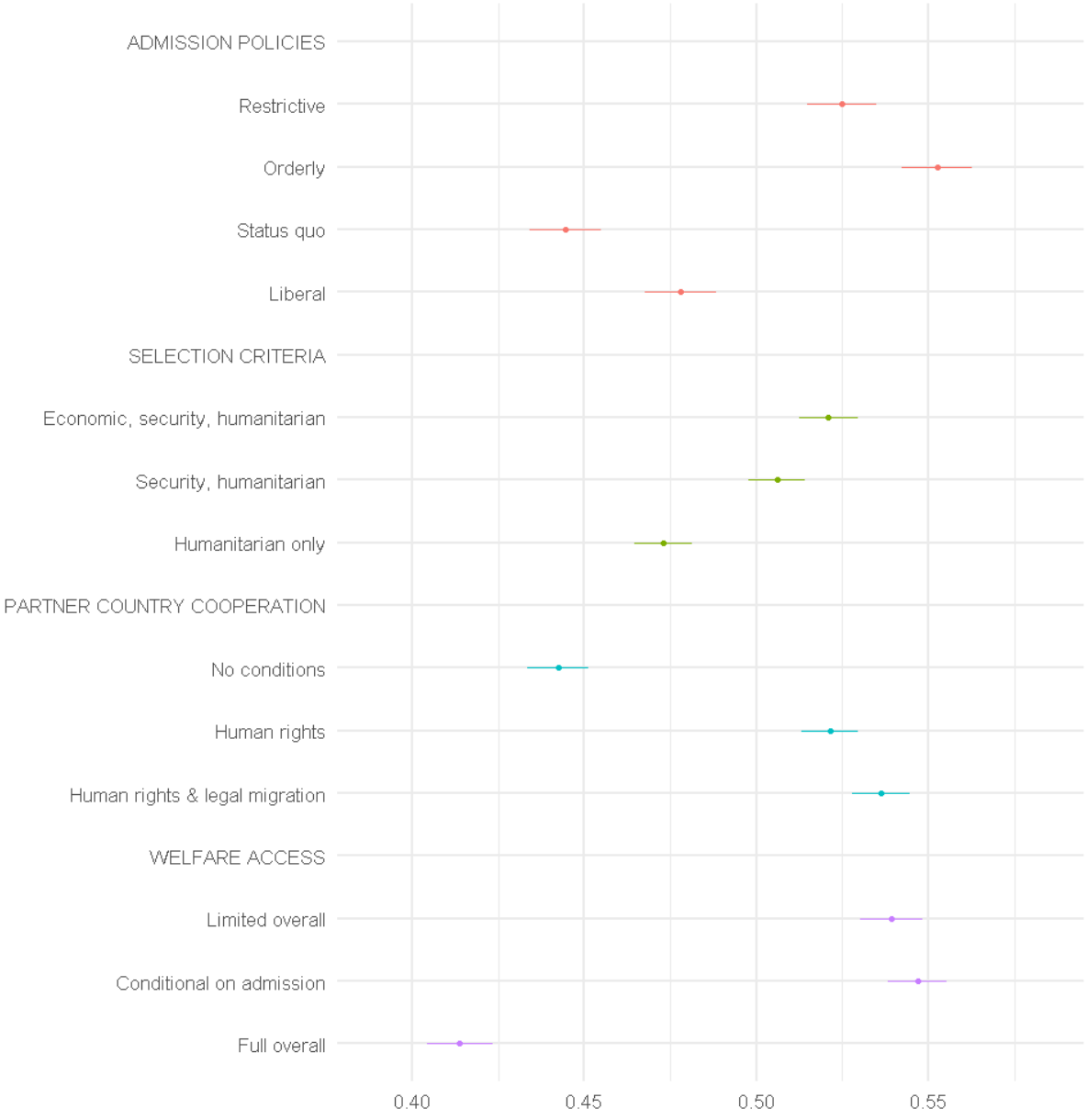
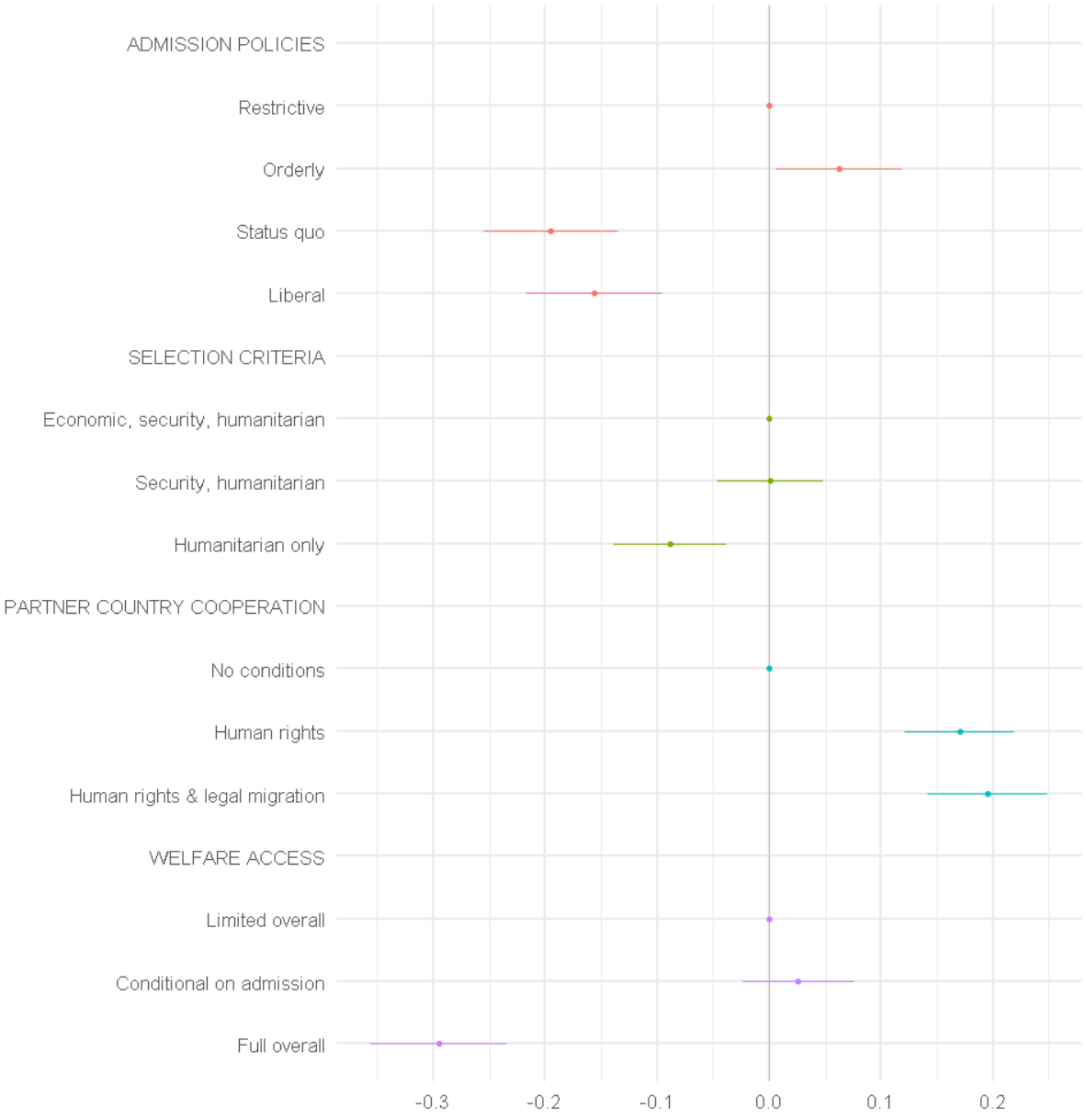


Figure 12: AMCE estimates – rating outcome



C) Diagnostic checks

First, testing for the joint significance of the interaction terms between the policy features and the seven task rounds yields a p-value of 0.42, implying the absence of carryover effects. Second, I test for possible profile order effects, i.e. the order in which the two policy mixes per task are presented. The relevant p-value is 0.77, again indicating no systematic bias. Third, regressing respondent characteristics (gender, age, residence in East or West Germany, university education, unemployment status, subjective income, and migration background) on the policy features shows no significant joint associations, confirming successful randomization. Finally, to check for attribute order effects, I regress the choice outcomes on the policy features, their presentation order, and their interactions. The F-tests for the joint significance of these interactions are non-significant (all $p > 0.05$), suggesting that attribute order does not affect the results.

D) Coding Categories

1) Call for more restrictions

2) Concerns about integration

3) Criticism of government

4) Demographics

5) Diffuse support

6) Dysfunctionality of asylum system

7) Expression of empathy / humanitarianism

8) Specific support

9) Humanitarian shortcomings

10) Irregularity / Lack of control

11) National benefits

12) Allegations of racism

13) Threat perceptions

14) Excessive numbers

15) Overly restrictive

16) Lack of fairness

E) Questionnaire

In the following the English translation of the online questionnaire is printed. The survey in the original German can be made available upon request. I report the answer options in italic below. They are separated by semicolons.

Q1.1 Online Informed Consent

Welcome! You are being asked to take part in a survey. This survey is conducted by researchers at Maastricht University and the European University Institute. All the information you will receive in this survey is verified.
There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in knowing your personal views about yourself and the world. The survey is comprised of society-related questions that also touch on the role of government and politics.

Participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this survey. If you begin the survey, you may leave the study at any time, although in this case you forfeit payment. We anticipate no costs apart from the time you spend completing the survey (10-15 minutes). You may also withdraw your consent even after completing the survey by contacting Prof. Dr. Melissa Siegel.

Your study-related information will be kept confidential. This study has been approved by the Ethics Review Committee Inner City faculties (ERCIC) of Maastricht University. The survey includes questions relating to your migration background, political opinions and religious beliefs. Data collection is confidential, and the data will be stored for 10 years. Data analysis and reporting will be fully anonymous. Your data will be kept separate from your TGM ID.

Upon completion of the study, you will receive a compensation for your time. This occurs according to the regulations of TGM.

If you have questions or remarks concerning this survey, please do contact melissa.siegel@maastrichtuniversity.nl. At the end of the survey, you will have the opportunity to provide feedback on your experience.

I hereby give permission to use my data for scientific purposes.

I had enough time to decide whether I want to participate in the study.

I know that participation is voluntary, and I know that I can decide at any time to leave the experiment and withdraw my consent. I do not have to provide any justification for such a decision. In this case, I forfeit any financial compensation.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions by contacting Melissa Siegel, one of the researchers involved in this study, at the following email address:

melissa.siegel@maastrichtuniversity.nl. My questions have been answered sufficiently.

I know that the data will be saved anonymously and will consequently only be made public anonymously.

I consent to participate

- Yes
- No

Q2.1: Are you:

Male; female; Non-binary/third gender; Prefer not to say

Q2.2 What is your age in years?

Q2.3 In which state do you live?

Baden-Württemberg; Bayern, Brandenburg; Bremen; Hamburg; Hessen; Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; Niedersachsen; Nordrhein-Westfalen; Rheinland-Pfalz; Saarland; Sachsen; Sachsen-Anhalt; Schleswig-Holstein, Thüringen; abroad

Q3.1 What is your highest educational degree? If you are currently still in education, select the highest degree you have already earned.

No formal education; Completion of primary school; Completion of Hauptschule or Realschule; Fachabitur or Abitur; Completed vocational training; Bachelor's degree; Master's degree or German Diplom; Doctoral degree; Other

Q3.2 How would you describe your current employment status?

Employed (full-time or part-time); Self-employed/freelance; unemployed, jobseeker; unemployed, no jobseeker; Retired; Unable to work; In full-time education; Other

Q3.3 Which of the following statements best describes your household's income situation?

I live comfortably with my current income; I can cope with my current income; It is difficult to cope with the current income; It is very difficult to manage on the current income; Prefer not to say

Q3.4 Were you or your father or mother born abroad?

Yes, I was born abroad; Yes, my father/mother was born abroad; No; Prefer not to say

Q4.1 Which party would you vote for if there were a federal election next Sunday?

SPD; CDU/CSU; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; FDP; AfD; Die Linke; Other; I would not vote.

Q5.1 If, for a moment, you set aside your concerns about the design of the German asylum system and the problems associated with that, do you, in principle, believe it is right for Germany to offer protection to people fleeing from war or persecution?

Totally right; Rather right; neither right nor wrong; rather wrong; totally wrong

Q5.2 And how satisfied are you with the practice of the German asylum system, that is, with the way it actually works?

Very satisfied; rather satisfied; neither satisfied, nor dissatisfied; rather dissatisfied; very dissatisfied

Q5.3 For which reasons are you rather satisfied or dissatisfied with the German asylum system?

Text entry

Q6.1 Now we want to clarify the meaning of some important terms. Therefore**, please read the following explanations carefully.**
An **asylum seeker** is someone who enters another country, such as Germany, to apply for protection, but whose application has not yet been decided. Asylum seekers in Germany have mostly immigrated irregularly, i.e., unlawfully. Nevertheless, they are entitled to apply for asylum in Germany after their entry.
If an asylum application is approved and the need for protection of the asylum seeker is established, the person is referred to as a **refugee**.
The term **persons seeking protection** ('Schutzsuchende') includes both groups, asylum seekers and refugees.

Q6.2 **Please read the following information carefully. You will be asked questions about it afterwards.**
Some migration experts are calling for a reform of refugee policy. They propose that the examination of whether a valid reason for flight exists should take place abroad – and no longer after (irregular) entry inside the country. Following the examination, safe host countries (e.g., Germany) would agree to take in people from abroad whose refugee status has already been reviewed and recognized. Entry would be **orderly and legal**.
This principle already applies today to so-called **resettlement programs**. In these programs, selected resettlement refugees from crisis regions are brought to safe countries in an orderly manner. Compared to the total number of refugees in Germany, resettlement refugees make up only a very small part. Proponents of reform advocate for a **significant expansion of this legal admission procedure**, from 6,500 to, for example, 125,000 people per year.
To simultaneously **reduce irregular migration to a minimum**, there is consideration of expanding cooperation with non-EU countries. One aim of this cooperation is to simplify the transfer of asylum seekers from Germany to these countries. So far, this only concerns rejected asylum seekers. Additionally, reform proponents advocate for **safe third country agreements**, which would allow asylum seekers who entered irregularly to be sent directly to a third country

deemed safe. There, rather than in Germany, they could apply for asylum and, if recognized, also receive protection.

Q6.3 What fundamental change is the proposed reform aiming at?

It aims at overall reducing the immigration of persons seeking protection; It aims at expanding legal immigration possibilities for persons seeking protection and, at the same time, reducing the non-legal possibilities; It aims at overall expanding the immigration of persons seeking protection.

Q7.1 (National Interest condition only)
Reform proponents highlight the contribution to **better control and management** of immigration, particularly regarding the number and identity of those seeking protection. **People without a valid reason for protection would no longer be able to immigrate through the asylum system**, which would also address the challenges of returning rejected asylum seekers. Additionally, the **proportion of young men among refugees would decrease**.

Q7.2 (Humanitarian Assistance condition only)
Reform proponents point out that resettlement refugees are selected based on **humanitarian criteria**, meaning that the most vulnerable refugees, who lack the means for long journeys, could also find refuge in Germany. **Safe transport** to Germany would be guaranteed, without the need to risk one's health or even life on a dangerous journey. Additionally, the **proportion of children, women, elderly, and sick people among refugees would increase**.

Q8.1 How would you evaluate the laid-out reform proposal (expansion of resettlement programs and implementation of safe third country agreements)?

I strongly support it; I rather support it; I neither support nor oppose it; I rather oppose it; I strongly oppose it

Q8.2 Please tell us in a few sentences why you rather support or oppose the proposal (or neither).

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Q8.3 Assuming the reform proposal was implemented: Would that change your view regarding the admission of persons seeking protection in Germany?

My acceptance would significantly increase; My acceptance would rather increase; My acceptance would neither increase nor decrease; My acceptance would rather decrease; My acceptance would significantly decline

Q9.1 For this purpose, we will present you with two different variants each time, showing what a policy mix could look like. These variants differ in some, but not necessarily in all aspects.
We ask you to select your preferred variant in each of the seven comparisons and to evaluate the variants. Please take your time to carefully weigh the variants. For this reason, it will not be possible for you to move directly from one comparison to the next.

Conjoint questions:

> If you had to choose a policy mix for Germany, which of the two options would you prefer?
>
> And how would you rate the two options?
>
> *1(very negative); 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7 (very positive)*

Q10.1 Would you say that Germany is made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?

0 (worse place);1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8 ;9; 10 (better place)

Q11.1 You are now reaching the end of the survey and have the opportunity to provide feedback on the survey.
Please note that we do not accept hateful and hurtful messages and will, if necessary, contact TGM.
Thank you very much.

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