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Rational Fear: The Effects of Terrorist Activity and Immigration on Attitudes toward Security in the European Union

Matthew Easton and Connor Kreutz

Introduction: Immigration, Attacks, and Perceptions of Security in the EU

As soon as refugees fleeing ISIS and a Syrian civil war started streaming into Europe, citizens began to consider the potential ramifications of accepting so many wayward people from countries responsible for producing some of the world's most deadly terrorists. Europeans most fearful of threats from terrorists and immigrants with other criminal intentions began rallying around nationalist movements that campaigned for stricter immigration laws in order to maintain the security of the European Union (Pazzanese 2017). Nationalist candidates worked to garner support for stricter immigration policy by warning voters of the threats immigrants could pose to European safety and stability (Einbender 2018). Politicians often accomplished this by asserting that terrorists pretended to be refugees in order to covertly enter countries they intend to target (Pazzanese 2017). Such rhetoric was highly successful in building connections between immigrants and terrorists in the minds of concerned citizens and helped elect nationalist parties into the parliaments of many Western European nations.

This paper aims to explore the origins of these sentiments. Following an increase in terrorist attacks, do attitudes toward security change? Using public opinion data collected from ten countries in the EU, data on global terrorist activity from the Global Terrorism Database, and immigration statistics from Eurostat's national reporting, we seek to determine if increased immigration and terrorist attacks drive public fear of refugee immigrants or if other forces are to blame for inciting fear among European citizens.

Existing Theories on Influences to Public Opinion

Citizens of nations that experience an influx of immigrants from foreign countries tend to report two types of concerns or fears. Some fear immigrants will threaten

the existing economic system by seeking out scarce labor opportunities, thus increasing competition for high-demand jobs (Mayda 2004). Specifically, in Europe, expertly skilled and highly educated Europeans are more likely to support weaker immigration laws, because they believe they are more qualified than the average immigrant and need not fear being replaced (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007).

The second type of fear reported in response to a refugee influx is fear for national and local security. Interestingly, previous literature has established that fear of this type is more often connected to the nature of each individual citizen, not external circumstances. For example, the more self-transcendent an individual seems to be, the more likely he or she is to support liberal immigration policies. The opposite is also true; the more self-concerned an individual reports to be, the more likely they are to oppose immigration (Davidov and Meuleman 2012). Individuals who are more selfless are more likely to support immigration, even when it may pose security risks. Does this mean, however, that citizens of countries with strict immigration laws are selfish people? Not completely. Research on immigration phobia and security in Europe and Russia suggests that, regardless of a citizen's ideology, when probed about issues of immigration in situations of uncertainty—such as during unemployment or in the wake of an election—their support for immigration decreases (Alexseev 2006). These types of changing and uncertain environments create situations where citizens are more impressionable or susceptible to new ideas.

Reports of terrorist attacks, both domestic and foreign, can be similarly fear-inducing for citizens of countries who may fear local aggressions or additional attacks abroad. For example, previous research indicates that terrorist attacks carried out in foreign regions such as Mumbai, India, succeeded in increasing general fear of terrorist attacks among Western Europeans (Finseraas and Listhaug 2013). It is important to note, however, that these attacks did not affect support or opposition of immigration policy (Finseraas and Listhaug 2013). Domestic terrorist attacks seem to be even more effective in instilling fear in a population than attacks abroad and do not need any sort of accompanying factor to increase their salience (Worrall 1999). Regardless of the location of the terrorist attack, there seems to be a sort of terror-induced psychosis that permeates a society after an attack (Renard 2016). This psychosis entails expanded news coverage about terrorism, increased fear for security in public, and enlarged fear of people who resemble the perpetrators of the attack.

In many cases, perception of immigration and terrorism seem to effect each other. People who embody different traits from the local population are often used as scapegoats in the wake of a terrorist attack (Spencer 2008). Often, people who are different are also depicted as people who are dangerous. Application of this theory can be seen in the U.S. perception of terrorist migration from Canada and Mexico. While there have been no known attacks in the U.S. from terrorists that migrated through Mexico, there have been multiple attacks in the U.S. from Canadian-born terrorists. However, when asked about areas of most concern, U.S. citizens report a far greater

fear of terrorist migration from or through Mexico than from Canada (Liken and Brooke 2007). Further research between immigration and terrorism exposes a dispersion effect. This effect is evident in data suggesting that, while immigration does contribute to the diffusion of terrorism, it does not lead to an increase in terrorism. It instead appears to spread out terrorist attacks among more countries (Bove and Boehmelt 2016).

Further research suggests that matters of immigration and terrorism become more salient when framed by a political or social ideology that is particularly focused on foreigners. For example, citizens seem to report stronger opposition to immigration when terrorist attacks occur but only when citizens see news articles and reports framing these attacks in a fearful way (Gadarian 2010). Research on sentiments in the UK after terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, Madrid, and London suggests the politicization of terrorism increases perceptions of terrorism as a threat to society (Mythen and Walklate 2006). This suggests that ideology acts as a catalyst for fear of terrorists and immigrants. An individual's political ideology seems to have a noticeable effect on how individuals react to immigration when triggered by some sort of fear-inducing terrorist attack (Brooks et al. 2016). Center and far-right political groups often politicize immigration to mobilize support for their causes by appealing to the fears of their constituents (Boswell and Hough 2008). This appeal to fear takes many forms but can be seen most commonly in the party's suggested policy, advertising, and rallies.

A New Theory on the Effects of Immigration and Terrorism on Public Opinion

Existing research, while thorough about how ideology, terrorist incidents, and immigration all create fearful public opinion, leaves gaps where such findings are arguably most salient—when these events occur simultaneously. Additionally, there seems to be geographic gaps in the existing literature. Western Europe has recently experienced greater immigration rates than nearly any other region, accompanied by influxes in terrorist activity and a rise in nationalist parties, making it an ideal region to study. Our analysis seeks to explore how increased immigration and terrorist incidents, as well as political ideology, all play a role in increasing fear of immigration among Western Europeans.

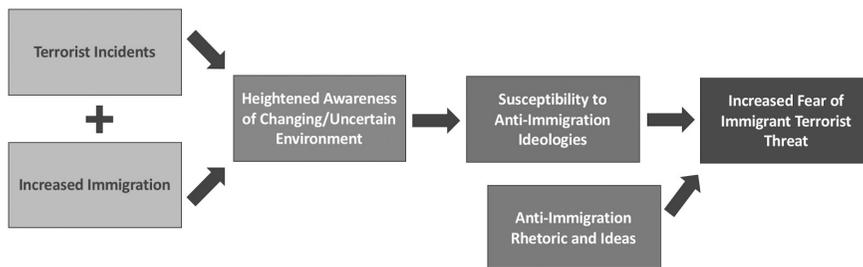
Given existing theory on the effects that immigration alone has on public opinion, we theorize that an influx of immigrants and refugees into the EU from non-EU countries alone is not enough to incite fear that these immigrants will pose a security threat. While such shocks to a nation may cause citizens to worry for their jobs, immigrants alone are not threatening enough to make Europeans fear an increase of terrorist incidents or crime (Mayda 2004).

Similarly, we can build on previous theoretical frameworks dictating that knowledge of terrorist attacks alone do not guarantee fear of immigrants among Europeans, even if those attacks take place in the citizens' native countries (Finseraas and Listhaug 2013). While Europeans are highly skeptical of opening their

borders, they do not automatically link increased terrorist incidents with the notion that incoming immigrants could threaten national security.

Previous literature does, however, clearly establish that immigration and terrorist incidents do seem to influence public opinion when the political ideology of each individual being surveyed is taken into account. Center and far-right political groups mobilize support for their policies by propagating anti-immigration rhetoric intended to increase fear of immigrant-caused attacks that their protectionist policies aim to prevent.

We theorize that increases in terrorist incidents and increased levels of immigration create a changing or uncertain environment for many Western Europeans. In such an environment, anti-immigration ideologies from political groups that believe immigration is a threat to their society are more relevant. When citizens are exposed to these ideologies in an atmosphere of increased immigration and terrorist activity, they develop greater fear and increased belief that immigration will decrease national security and increase terrorist threats.



Causal Mechanism

Based on the aforementioned theories, we suggest the following hypotheses:

1. Increases in immigration into the EU from non-EU countries alone will not increase public fear of terrorist attacks by immigrants.
2. Likewise, increased occurrence of terrorist attacks within a country will not increase public fear in that country of terrorist attacks by immigrants.
3. However, an increase in terrorist incidents and immigration, when accompanied by conservative ideological preferences, will result in greater public fear of immigration as a threat to national security.

Data and Methodology: Managing a Multilevel Data Set

In order to best test for fluctuations in public opinion across the EU, we used data from the 2016 Spring Global Attitudes and Trends Questionnaire collected by Pew Research. This dataset includes respondents from nearly twenty countries across the world and asked public opinion questions on topics ranging from the economy to cultural norms to public policy. Although the data is almost three years old, Pew Research only releases opinion survey results after two years of collection; as such, this dataset was

the most recent information Pew had to offer. With terrorism increasing in Europe since the early 2000s, we felt that—despite this time discrepancy—we would still find salient and valuable results. While there are many interesting features about this data, the most important factor for choosing this particular data is the consistency of survey content. Pew Research asked the same questions to all respondents, regardless of nationality, making cross-national comparisons much more simple and reliable. While there is significant data on public opinion for nearly every country in the world, it is difficult to find questions that are directly comparable. As such, this dataset proved more than sufficient to analyze public opinion both in the EU as a whole, as well as within each member state.

The Pew Research data contained information on twelve of the twenty-eight EU members. Although there was not full representation of all states, we felt this was sufficient enough to measure the variance within the international organization. Furthermore, it was by far the largest cross-national dataset with directly comparable outcome measures. As this data was collected before the Brexit movement in mid-2016, we decided to keep the UK in the analysis.

Focus Countries for Analysis

Pew Research Data, 2016



Outcome Measures

To best answer our question, we looked at three separate survey questions:

1. Will Refugees Increase the Likelihood of Terrorism?
2. Is ISIS a Major Threat in Your Country?
3. Are Refugees a Major Threat in Your Country?

We chose the first question as our main outcome variable, because it asked opinions on the relationship between immigration and terrorism. Although not all immigrants are refugees (and, in some spheres, are considered completely different categories), we still felt it accurately displayed the public's feelings on immigration. The European immigration crisis that began in 2013 was driven largely by refugees from

the Middle East, and refugees are therefore an acceptable measure for our research question. We chose the next two questions, “Is ISIS a Major Threat?” and “Are Refugees a Major Threat?” as outcome variables, because they can measure public opinion on terrorism and refugees (immigration) separately. If we found correlation in the first question, we could test the same analysis on the other outcomes to see if it was opinions on terrorism or refugees alone that caused the correlation.

Finally, to craft data that fully represented our hypotheses, we added the 2016 population of each country, the total number of non-EU immigrants in each country from 2013 to 2016, and the total number of terrorist incidents in each country from 2013 to 2016. The first two variables were gathered from Eurostat, with the latter coming from the Global Terrorism Database. We then took the cumulative number of immigrants and divided it by the total population to create an immigration rate for each nation. In so doing, we had the data needed to fully address how both variables impact EU public opinion on immigration and terrorism.

To analyze our data, we took a multilevel model approach. Our data was organized in a hierarchical fashion, with individual survey responses nested within larger country-variant variables including population and terrorist incidents. As such, a regular OLS regression was both insufficient and inaccurate in representing the analysis of our data. Instead, we used a mixed-model approach, which not only controls for fixed-effects between states but also allows for analysis of cross-level variables within the data. By using a multilevel mixed-model regression for hierarchical data frames, we could confidently run our statistical analysis on the 2016 Pew Research data.

Results: It's All About the Politics

To begin our analysis, we first tested the relationship between immigration and terrorist incidents. As Table 1 (below) shows, we found a positive relationship between these variables; as immigration increases, so does the amount of terrorist activity. However, the correlation coefficient between the two was only 0.1235, indicating that this relationship is weak at best. It is likely that there is correlation but not causation present in the relationship.

Understanding the present correlation between immigration and incidents, we then conducted a regression analysis on the relationship of these two variables with our main outcome measure, public opinion on refugees increasing terrorism, along with our additional outcomes of attitudes about the threat of ISIS and refugees. As seen in Figure 1, the more immigration a country experiences, the less likely it is to experience negative public opinion. However, this impact was substantively small and only statistically significant in opinions on the threat of terrorism. According to Model 1 in Table 1, a one percentage point increase in immigration rate only decreases attitudes that terrorism is likely by 0.117 units—as it is a seven-point scale, this shift is unlikely to make any true impact on opinion. Indeed, considering the largest immigration rate is less than 4 percent, even a one percentage point increase in immigration is unrealistic, which in turn signals that any change in opinion is unlikely. The decrease

in opinion on ISIS (Model 2) is even smaller: A one percentage point increase in immigration rate leads to a statistically insignificant 0.000784 unit decrease in negative opinion. This is most likely due to the universal lack of public support for ISIS; the group is responsible for hundreds of civilian deaths across the EU; therefore, it is not surprising to see a consistently high fear of ISIS across all countries. We do find interesting results between the relationship of immigration and attitudes that refugees are a threat, as seen in Model 3 of Table 1. For a one percentage point increase in immigration rate, we can expect a 0.291 decrease in negative opinion on refugees, significant at the 99 percent level. This result correlates with previous research, as it is no surprise that countries with higher immigration (and in turn higher refugee influxes) also have higher interaction with refugees, causing more of the population to view them as less threatening.

Table 1.
Regression Analysis Results

VARIABLES	(1) Will Refugees Increase Terrorism?	(2) Is ISIS a Major Threat?	(3) Are Refugees a Major Threat?
Immigration Rate	-0.119 (0.7648)	-0.000784 (0.0340)	-0.291*** (0.0574)
Incidents per 100	-0.0184 (0.0478)	-0.000220 (0.0212)	0.0311 (0.0359)
Deaths per 100	-0.165* (0.0845)	0.0559 (0.0376)	-0.0947 (0.0634)
Ideology	0.134*** (0.00768)	0.0295*** (0.00385)	0.116*** (0.00591)
Male	0.120*** (0.0198)	-0.0688*** (0.00993)	0.0116 (0.0153)
Age	0.00281*** (0.000632)	0.00270*** (0.000316)	0.00181*** (0.000485)
Family Size	0.000672 (0.00845)	0.00335 (0.00423)	-6.98e-05 (0.00651)
Constant	0.800*** (0.152)	1.545*** (0.0689)	1.272*** (0.115)
Observations	8,706	8,852	8,817
Number of groups	10	10	10

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Terrorist incidents had a much weaker effect on changing public opinion (Figure 2). Regardless of the number of incidents, belief that ISIS is a major threat remained consistently high; the regression showed virtually no increase or decrease whatsoever. Similarly, attitudes about refugees increasing terrorism hardly fluctuated. An increase of incidents per 100 only decreased negative opinion by an insignificant

0.0184 units on the 1 to 7 scale. Incidents had nearly the same impact on feelings toward refugees, increasing negative attitudes by only 0.0311 units, showing neither substantive nor statistical significance. In short, incidents proved to have very little effect on public opinion whatsoever.

Figure 1.
Effect of Immigration on Public Opinion
Various European Union Countries, 2016

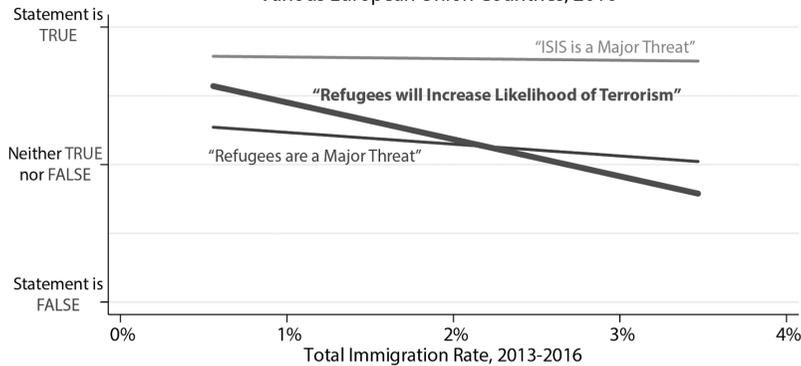
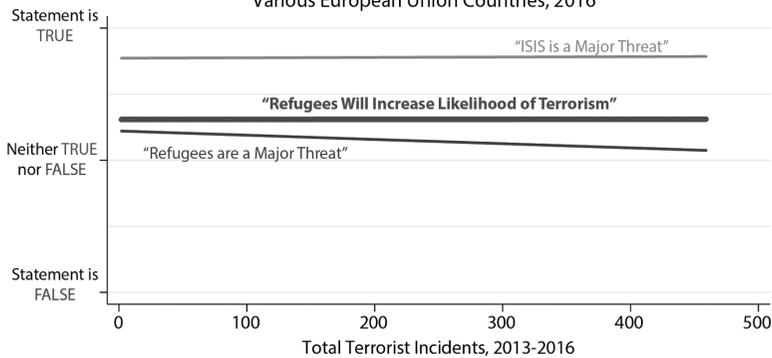


Figure 2.
Effect of Terrorist Incidents on Public Opinion
Various European Union Countries, 2016



Our initial results above proved consistent with our aforementioned theory. Supporting our proposed hypotheses, neither immigration nor incidents alone were a reliable predictor in public opinion on refugees and terrorism. Clearly, these two variables by themselves are poor indicators of public opinion on terroristic threat in EU countries. Furthermore, in each of the three models we ran, we observe a consistently significant variable: ideology. For each outcome variable, an increase toward conservative ideology increases public fear of immigration and terrorism. Upon seeing this result, we doubled down on our analysis of the possibility of political explanations for variance in EU civilian public opinion. Could conservative ideology be the explanatory factor

behind these European attitudes? To better explore our theory on the impacts of political ideology on opinions about terrorism, we ran six more mixed-model regressions to analyze if ideology, when interacted with immigration and incidents, has a higher impact on public opinion. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

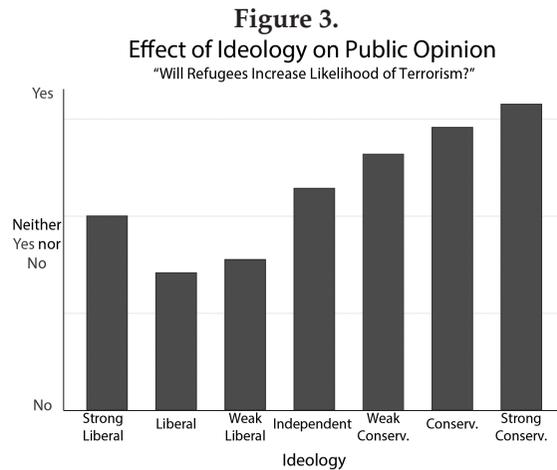
VARIABLES	(4) Will Refugees Increase Terrorism?	(5) Will Refugees Increase Terrorism?	(6) Is ISIS a Major Threat?	(7) Is ISIS a Major Threat?	(8) Are Refugees a Major Threat?	(9) Are Refugees a Major Threat?
Immigration Rate	-0.212** (0.0834)	-0.120 (0.0770)	-0.0409 (0.0376)	-0.00133 (0.0337)	-0.393*** (0.0626)	-0.292*** (0.0577)
Ideology	0.0930*** (0.0159)	0.125*** (0.00933)	0.0119 (0.00799)	0.0228*** (0.00468)	0.0715*** (0.0122)	0.106*** (0.00718)
Immigration Rate*Ideology	0.0283*** (0.00966)		0.0122** (0.00487)		0.0311*** (0.00745)	
Incidents per 100	-0.0188 (0.0482)	-0.0469 (0.0509)	-0.000393 (0.0213)	-0.0213 (0.0227)	0.0307 (0.0360)	-0.00228 (0.0383)
Deaths per 100	-0.167* (0.0852)	-0.165* (0.0851)	0.0551 (0.0376)	0.0555 (0.0373)	-0.0969 (0.0637)	-0.0954 (0.0638)
Male	0.120*** (0.0198)	0.121*** (0.0198)	-0.0689*** (0.00992)	-0.0686*** (0.00992)	0.0114 (0.0152)	0.0118 (0.0153)
Age	0.00276*** (0.000632)	0.00276*** (0.000633)	0.00268*** (0.000316)	0.00266*** (0.000316)	0.00176*** (0.000485)	0.00176*** (0.000486)
Family Size	0.000577 (0.00845)	0.000914 (0.00845)	0.00329 (0.00423)	0.00353 (0.00423)	-0.000201 (0.00651)	0.000213 (0.00651)
Incidents*Ideology		0.00892* (0.00523)		0.00656** (0.00262)		0.0104*** (0.00403)
Constant	0.939*** (0.161)	0.833*** (0.155)	1.605*** (0.0730)	1.569*** (0.0690)	1.424*** (0.121)	1.310*** (0.116)
Observations	8,706	8,706	8,852	8,852	8,817	8,817
Number of groups	10	10	10	10	10	10

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Ideology and Refugees’ Increase of Terrorism

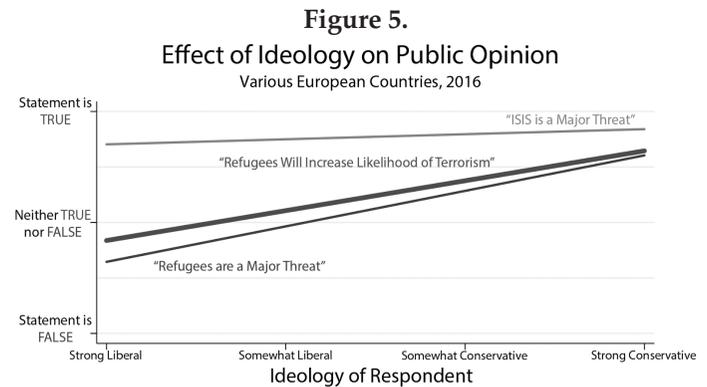
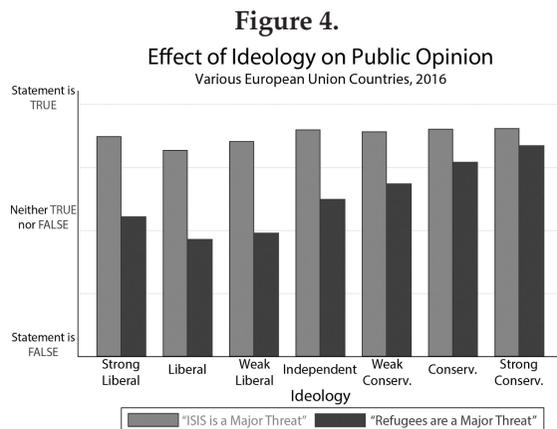
Our main findings purport that not only does ideology raise negative public opinion on terrorism but that an increase of ideology and immigration combined increases negative public opinion at a statistically significant level. Indeed, the effect of increased immigration depends on the ideology of each participant. For liberals, increased immigration does not raise public fear, whereas among conservatives, it does. For each increase of immigration rate interacted with increasing conservatism, we anticipate with 99 percent confidence a 0.0283 unit increase (on a scale of 1 to 7) in the belief that refugees will increase the likelihood of terrorism. Although small, it is significant, indicating a strong influence from conservative thought. In addition, this interaction causes the immigration rate on its own to decrease negative public opinion at the 95 percent level. Additionally, the interaction between ideology and incidents proves to significantly increase negative attitudes toward the likelihood of refugees bringing terrorism at the 90 percent level. For every one-unit shift in ideology paired with a 100-incident increase, we predict a 0.0089 increase in negative perceptions. Although not substantive, this result shows that a large enough terrorist attack could indeed begin to sway opinion based on individual ideology. Conservative ideologies are indeed related to EU members’ fear of refugees bringing terrorism, particularly in cases of high terrorist activity. In all, more conservative individuals are

more likely to believe refugees will bring terrorism with them, particularly as immigration and incidents in their countries increase (see Figure 3).



Ideology and Threat of ISIS and Refugees

The interactions between ideology, immigration, and incidents (respectively) continue to hold statistical significance among our two sub-outcome measures as well. For the variable on fearing the threat of ISIS, both immigration and incidents combined with increasing ideology expand this negative public opinion at the 95 percent confidence level. Ideology interacted with immigration and incidents has an even greater impact on negative public opinion, indicating a statistical significance of 99 percent. Again, these interactions hint at differences, though they are not substantive. Figure 4 highlights the distinctions between these two outcome measures as ideology becomes more conservative. Again, conservative ideology increases negative public opinion of ISIS and refugees, especially when combined with high immigration rates and large amounts of terrorist activity.



Ideology as an Indicator

Clearly, ideology has a strong correlation with all three of our public opinion measures, particularly when combined with high levels of immigration and large amounts of terrorist incidents. Naturally, more liberal citizens are favorable toward immigration and refugees. Conservative constituencies, in comparison, tend to be less open toward immigration and the influence of refugees, perhaps due to concerns over security. Our initial theory on the impact of immigration and incidents is confirmed under our statistical testing, as political beliefs begin to shine a light on how these factors still play a part in shaping opinions of EU citizenry. Without a doubt, politics influence public opinion in much stronger ways than we initially considered. Regardless of current trends, such as rate of immigration and total number of terrorist incidents, ideology is by far the greatest predictor of individual feelings on how immigration impacts terrorism.

Implications and Conclusion

Supporting our hypotheses, immigration rates and terrorist incidents do not, on their own, explain or predict public opinion on refugees and terrorism. However, when interacted with political ideology, both of these variables become statistically significant. These results make logical sense: Extremely political issues like terrorism and immigration are undoubtedly interpreted differently depending on personal political beliefs.

These findings have relevant applications. Policy-makers pushing a pro-immigration agenda should not focus their efforts on addressing nationwide levels of immigration in EU countries but rather target more conservative communities within each state. Improving the opinions of conservative citizens about immigration's overall impact on terrorism (or lack thereof) will be the most effective way to improve overall public opinion. While it is true that some nations, such as the UK and Sweden, have overall higher public opinion than others like Hungary and Poland, it is also true that all of these countries have liberal and conservative citizenry. With a greater understanding of public opinion on immigration and terrorism,

counter-terrorism efforts and immigration policy can be better shaped to create a better environment for all European nations.

As such, there is still much to be explored. Significant terrorist events in the EU have passed since 2016, such as the radical Islamist that drove into a crowd of pedestrians at Westminster Bridge in London or the massive bomb that killed twenty-two people at the 2017 Ariana Grande concert in Manchester (Macquire 2017). Additionally, nationalist movements like Brexit have transpired since the last public opinion survey. As our results indicate a definite relationship with political ideology, it would be both interesting and important to our topic to see how movements like that in the UK influence public attitudes on the liberal issue of immigration. The best data for this research would be the 2017 or 2018 Pew Research Spring Global Attitudes Survey, but as Pew won't release this information for two years after collection, other avenues of data should be explored.

Overall, we conclude that public opinion appears to be founded less on hard data, such as immigration rates and number of incidents, and rather built upon preconceived political ideologies. As more right-winged movements are currently sweeping the developed world, our issue is increasingly salient. Better understanding of how ideology impacts public perceptions help inform better solutions to decrease the problems surrounding immigration, refugees, and modern-day terrorism.

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