

# Open Hearts and Closed Minds: Decoding European Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers

## A Tale of Two Refugees

### Most likely to win public approval (85%):

- Teacher
- Victim of torture
- Christian
- Speaks host country language
- Female

### Most likely rejected (25% approval):

- Farmer
- No language skill
- Muslim
- Major inconsistency in asylum testimony
- Retirement Age

## About Us

The Immigration Policy Lab is dedicated to the design and rigorous evaluation of immigration and integration policy in host countries throughout the world. By guiding and informing the people who set public policy, as well as those who directly serve immigrant communities, our research can inspire solutions, improve immigrants' lives, and strengthen their host societies.

As war, persecution, and poverty send unprecedented numbers of asylum-seekers into Europe, public backlash has sent shockwaves through EU political life. Borders closed, far-right parties claimed parliamentary seats, and alarm sounded: would xenophobia fundamentally reshape the continent?

Yet public opinion toward refugees is more complex than the blaring headlines would suggest. Humanitarian principles contend with concern for one's own country, and some groups may be shunned while others are welcomed with open arms. What kinds of asylum-seekers are Europeans willing to accept? Without answers, policymakers have struggled to respond in ways that not only honor international commitments but also inspire domestic support. They urgently need a map of the public mind if they are to build the political will to accept and integrate refugees. In a wide-reaching study of 18,000 Europeans in 15 countries (*Science*, October 2016), we pursued the insights they need to navigate the crisis.

We discovered a striking consensus as to which asylum seekers are preferred. Whether young or old, rich or poor, on the left or right, far removed from the crisis or at ground zero, Europeans tend to reward certain characteristics while penalizing others. Economic considerations, humanitarian concerns, and anti-Muslim sentiment are foremost in their minds.

Our respondents evaluated profiles of hypothetical asylum seekers and decided whether to admit or reject each one. The profiles randomly varied along nine attributes: age, gender, religion, language, previous occupation, consistency of asylum testimony, special vulnerabilities, country of origin, and reason for migrating.

Among those most likely to win acceptance were asylum seekers with professional skills and proficiency in the host country's language—those who are expected to benefit rather than burden the local economy. At the same time, respondents were highly sensitive to applicants' personal experiences of persecution, war, and tragedy. Those with consistent asylum testimonies, and those considered especially vulnerable, were privileged far above applicants seeking economic opportunities. Undercutting this desire to help those most in need, however, is a consistent bias against Muslim asylum-seekers, who were 11 percentage points less likely to be accepted than otherwise similar Christians. Notably, this bias was twice as large among respondents on the right as on the left of the political spectrum.

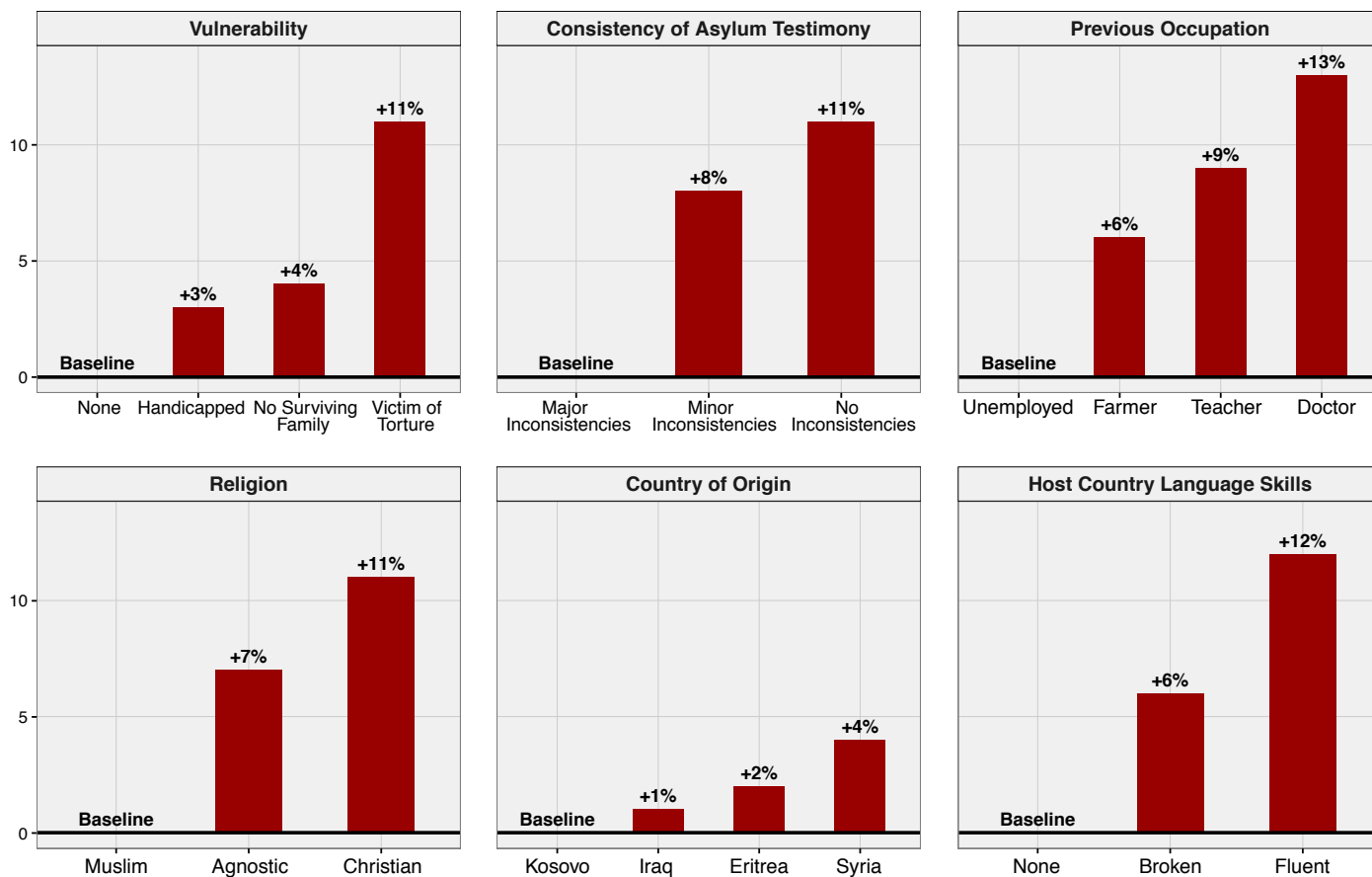
European policymakers, then, must respond to public opinion that is complex, contradictory, and often in conflict with the requirements of international law, which holds that asylum claims not be judged by factors like religion and employability. And the human face of the current crisis doesn't match the public's preference for highly skilled, fluent, and non-Muslim asylum seekers. Yet the Europeans' sincere concerns, both for the refugees' plight and for the well-being of their own societies, point to a way forward. To ease social tensions and create greater acceptance of asylum seekers from all walks of life, policymakers should speak clearly to their deservingness, vulnerability, and ability to contribute to their new homes. The more Europeans come to see refugees as valued members of their communities, the more these newcomers can successfully integrate and unlock their potential.



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Kirk Bansak, Jens Hainmueller, Dominik Hangartner (2016): How Economic, humanitarian, and religious concerns shape European attitudes toward asylum seekers, *Science* Vol. 354, Issue 6309, pp. 217-222.  
DOI: 10.1126/science.aag2147

### Percentage Point Increase in Probability of Accepting Asylum Seeker



Countries surveyed: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom