Original Research Article

Factors Shaping U.S. Public Attitudes Toward Refugees: Political Orientation, Historical Acceptance, and Perceived Threats

Edward Lee

Bergen County Academies, 200 Hackensack Ave. Hackensack, NJ 07601, United States

ABSTRACT

This study examines the factors that influence public attitudes in the United States toward refugees, focusing on political orientation, past acceptance, and perceived threats. Understanding these dynamics is essential because public opinion shapes not only immigration and resettlement policy but also the social context in which refugees are received. Data were collected through questionnaires from 106 U.S. residents, measuring demographic traits, political ideology, local histories of refugee acceptance, perceived threats (economic, cultural, security, and infrastructure), and attitudinal support for refugees. Multiple regression analyses (R^2 = 0.593) revealed that security-related concerns (b = -0.53, p < 0.001) and public service strain (b = -0.33, p < 0.01) were the significant negative predictors of refugee support, while historical acceptance (b = 0.44, p < 0.001) predicted more positive attitudes. Political conservatism also significantly predicted negative attitudes. These results indicate that safety and infrastructure concerns outweigh economic or cultural fears and that communities with past refugee resettlement display greater local support. The findings offer both scholarly and policy relevance, providing a foundation for targeted strategies that address key public concerns while strengthening community-based acceptance of refugees.

Keywords: refugees; public attitudes; perceived threat; political ideology; United States; security concerns; historical acceptance; immigration policy

INTRODUCTION

From 2020 through mid-2024, the global number of forcibly displaced persons rose from 82.4 million to 122.6 million, driven by conflict, persecution, and environmental crises (1). This unprecedented scale of displacement places urgent demands on host countries to balance humanitarian responsibilities with domestic policy challenges and social concerns. In the United States, public opinion toward refugees plays a pivotal role in shaping immigration policy and integration initiatives, and the broader social climate in which refugees are received. Although attitudes toward refugees have been extensively studied in European contexts, a significant gap remains in understanding how a complex interplay of demographic, political, economic, and security factors shapes American public sentiment toward refugees.

This study addresses that gap by quantitatively examining which perceived threats most strongly predict attitudes toward refugees in the United States and how local histories of acceptance may moderate these effects. The analysis employs the perceived threat framework, which distinguishes between realistic

threats such as economic strain, security risks, and pressure on public services, and symbolic threats, such as fears of cultural change or identity loss (2). This framework also connects the findings to existing research on refugee acceptance, enabling comparisons across contexts while recognizing the distinctive features of the U.S. case.

The study's findings have direct relevance to national policy. The United States has maintained a consistent federal ceiling of 125,000 refugee admissions, authorized under consecutive Presidential Determinations for Fiscal Years 2022 through 2024 (3). This target, reaffirmed through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), reflects ongoing efforts to rebuild resettlement infrastructure after historic lows in Fiscal Year 2021, when the ceiling was set at 15,000 (4). At the implementation level, state-administered partnerships play a key role in allocating resources and coordinating community integration (5). By clarifying which perceived threats most influence public sentiment, this study contributes to designing evidence-based strategies that can strengthen public support for equitable refugee settlement in the United States.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Macro and Micro Level Drivers of Refugee Attitudes

Public attitudes toward refugees are shaped by a complex mix of personal and societal factors that are simultaneously influenced by political beliefs, economic concerns, and perceived threats. A robust body of cross-national research, predominantly European, demonstrates that attitudes toward refugees differ from those toward immigrants and are often shaped by a distinct interplay of macro- and micro-level drivers (6). For example, ethnic diversity, religious composition, and experiences with terrorism strongly influence refugee perceptions at the societal level, whereas perceived economic pressures, such as job competition and access to services, play a more central role in shaping public attitudes about immigrants (7).

Building on this distinction, Abdelaaty and Steele (6) emphasize that both individual factors and contextual influences jointly determine public sentiment toward refugees, underscoring the importance of national policy environments in shaping these views. Verkuyten (8) similarly proposes that demographic characteristics such as age, education, and socioeconomic status interact with macro-level forces like economic stability and cultural norms, producing distinctive national patterns of opinion. Together, these studies suggest that attitudes toward refugees emerge from the intersection of personal experiences, structural conditions, and broader sociopolitical narratives, rather than from individual traits alone.

Political Polarization and Ideological Predictors in the U.S.

In the United States, political polarization strongly shapes attitudes toward refugees, with clear partisan divisions consistently documented in national survey data. Pew Research Center surveys (9, 10) and the 2024 Chicago Council Survey (11) indicate that Democrats tend to view accepting refugees as a national responsibility, while Republicans increasingly regard refugee inflows as a potential threat. This polarization extends beyond party affiliation to reflect broader ideological and psychological dynamics. Cowling et al. (12) found through a meta-analysis that political conservatism, strong national identity, and lower education levels are consistently associated with more negative attitudes toward refugees, while liberal orientations often emphasize humanitarian responsibility.

Media narratives further reinforce these ideological divides. Humanitarian framing encourages empathy and support, while security-focused coverage amplifies fear and resistance (13, 14). At the same time, positive intergroup contact and exposure to inclusive narratives have been shown to reduce prejudice and build trust (15). A global Ipsos survey (16) reported that although 73% of respondents believe those fleeing war or persecution should be able to seek refuge elsewhere, many still express doubts about integration and harbor concerns about cultural or security challenges. These findings suggest that ideological orientation interacts with perceived threat, with conservatives more likely to interpret refugee inflows as risks to national cohesion and liberals more likely to frame them as moral imperatives (17).

The Perceived Threat Framework

One of the most widely used approaches for explaining public attitudes toward refugees and immigrants is the perceived threat framework. This perspective distinguishes between realistic threats such as competition over jobs, strain on public services, or risks to safety and symbolic threats such as fears of cultural change or identity loss (2). Landmann and colleagues further propose a multidimensional model, identifying six forms of threat: symbolic, realistic,

safety, cohesion, prejudice, and altruistic. Research consistently shows that higher perceptions of threat across these domains are associated with more negative attitudes toward refugees (12, 14).

This framework integrates the macro- and micro-level perspectives discussed above by linking personal beliefs and societal narratives through the perception of threat. Abdelaaty and Steele (6) note that while economic and cultural anxieties often dominate in European settings, threat salience is context-dependent. Ipsos (16) finds that economic anxieties about job competition and public services remain widespread, while cultural and security concerns also reinforce resistance to resettlement. In many European contexts, economic competition and cultural anxieties emerge as especially salient drivers of opposition (7, 18). However, less is known about whether these same threat dimensions operate with equal influence in the United States, where public debates more frequently emphasize safety and infrastructure concerns. By applying the perceived threat framework to the U.S. context, this study aims to clarify which threat types—economic, cultural, safety, or infrastructure-related—are most salient in shaping American public opinion and to test whether these patterns diverge from those found in prior international research.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Participants

The study was conducted in 2024 using an online survey administered via Qualtrics and targeting a diverse sample of U.S. residents. Participants were recruited primarily from university communities in the Northeast and Midwest, with additional recruitment through convenience sampling to enhance geographic and demographic diversity. Recruitment materials were distributed through student organizations and community bulletin boards. To further increase diversity, the survey link was also shared through personal networks using a snowball sampling approach that encouraged participants to invite others.

Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 18 years of age, proficient in English, and willing to provide informed consent. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent electronically. Before beginning the survey, participants were presented with an electronic informed consent form detailing the study's

purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and data confidentiality. Participants indicated their consent by selecting *"I agree to participate"* and proceeding to the questionnaire. Those who selected *"I do not agree"* were automatically redirected to an exit screen and could not access the survey. No personally identifying information was collected, ensuring that all responses remained anonymous. All survey items were presented in a fixed order, with no randomization of question sequence.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey participants (N = 106)

Demographic	N (%)
Gender	
Female	55 (51.9%)
Male	51 (48.1%)
Age Group	
18–24	39 (36.8%)
25–34	18 (17.0%)
35–44	23 (21.7%)
45–54	18 (17.0%)
55–64	8 (7.5%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	41 (38.7%)
Black/African American	17 (16.0%)
Hispanic/Latino	20 (18.9%)
Asian	23 (21.7%)
Other	5 (4.7%)
Education	
High school graduate	4 (3.8%)
Some college	33 (31.1%)
College graduate	51 (48.1%)
Postgraduate	18 (17.0%)
Employment Status	
Full-time	48 (45.3%)
Part-time	19 (17.9%)
Self-employed	7 (6.6%)
Unemployed	8 (7.5%)
Retired	1 (0.9%)
Student	23 (21.7%)

Continued Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey participants (N = 106)

Demographic	N (%)
Household Income	
< $25,000	2 (1.9%)
$25,000–$49,999	12 (11.3%)
$50,000–$74,999	5 (4.7%)
$75,000–$99,999	19 (17.9%)
$100,000–$149,999	13 (12.3%)
$150,000–$199,999	24 (22.6%)
≥ $200,000	31 (29.2%)
Region	
Northeast	42 (39.6%)
Midwest	50 (47.2%)
South	6 (5.7%)
West	8 (7.5%)

A total of 106 individuals participated in the study. The sample was slightly female-majority (51.9% female, 48.1% male). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 64 years, with the largest proportion being young adults aged 18–24 (36.8%). The remaining participants were distributed across older age groups: 25–34 years (17.0%), 35–44 years (21.7%), 45–54 years (17.0%), and 55–64 years (7.5%). In terms of racial and ethnic composition, 38.7% identified as White, 21.7% as Asian, 18.9% as Hispanic or Latino, 16.0% as African American, and 4.7% as Other. Educational attainment was generally high: 48.1% held an undergraduate degree, 17.0% a postgraduate degree, 31.1% had some college education, and 3.8% had completed high school only.

Employment status varied within the sample: 45.3% were employed full-time, 17.9% part-time, 21.7% were students, 6.6% self-employed, 7.6% unemployed, and 0.9% retired. Household income distribution was skewed toward higher brackets: 29.2% reported an annual household income of $200,000 or more, with an additional 22.6% earned $150,000–$199,999. Another 12.3% earned $100,000–$149,999, 17.9% earned $75,000–$99,999, 4.7% earned $50,000–$74,999, 11.3% earned $25,000–$49,999, and 1.9% earned less than $25,000. Participants primarily resided in the Midwest (47.2%) and Northeast (39.6%), with smaller proportions from the West (7.5%) and South

(5.7%). Table 1 presents a summary of the sample's demographic characteristics.

Measures
Political Orientation and Historical Acceptance

Participants self-reported their political orientation on a 5-point scale (*1 = Very liberal, 5 = Very conservative*) in response to the item, *"Which of these best describes your political views?"* They also rated the degree of historical acceptance of refugees within their local community, which served as an indicator of regional experience with refugee integration. This was measured using the question, *"Would you say your area has a high or low history of accepting refugees?"* rated on a 5-point scale from *1 = Very low* to *5 = Very high*.

Perceived Threats

Perceived threats related to refugees were measured using four item domains: economic strain (e.g., job competition, resource allocation), cultural integration difficulties (e.g., potential cultural clashes), safety/security risks (e.g., crime or terrorism), and strain on public services (e.g., healthcare, education). Items were adapted from the European Social Survey Round 12 Immigration Module (19). Example items included: "*To what extent do you believe that refugees pose an economic threat to USA?*" (Economic Threat); "How concerned are you that the presence of refugees might jeopardize the safety and security of your country?" (Safety); "Are you concerned about the potential strain on public services (like healthcare and education) due to refugees arriving in USA?" (Public Service); And "To what extent do you worry that the influx of refugees will negatively impact the cultural values of the USA?" (Cultural Value). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = Not at all" to "5 = Extremely". These four items demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.88) and were averaged to create a composite Perceived Threat Scale.

In addition, a "select all that apply" checklist asked respondents to indicate specific concerns they associate with refugee migration from among the same four domains. These responses were recoded into binary variables (1 = Selected, 0 = Not selected) for inclusion as independent predictors in the second regression model (Model 2). The checklist item read: "*What are your primary concerns about accepting refugees into the country?*" with options for economic strain, cultural integration difficulties, security risks, and overcrowding.

Attitudes Toward Refugee Integration

Attitudes toward refugees were measured using a four-item scale adapted from established survey instruments developed by the Pew Research Center (10) and Gallup (20). Participants were asked to indicate their (a) support for admitting civilian refugees fleeing conflict or persecution into the United States, (b) willingness to accept refugees in their own local community, (c) support for government-provided refugee aid, and (d) likelihood of personally engaging in pro-refugee actions such as volunteering, advocacy, or donations. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (low support or willingness) to 5 (strong support or high willingness). The items demonstrated acceptable internal reliability (Cronbach's α = 0.75) and were averaged to create a composite Attitudes Scale, with higher scores reflecting more favorable views toward refugee policies and integration. For example, one item asked, *"How likely are you to personally engage in activities that support refugees (e.g., donations, volunteer work)?"*

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Stata, Version 17 (21). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, minimums, and maximums) were calculated for all study variables to provide an overview of the sample characteristics and distributions. Two multiple regression models were employed to assess the predictors of attitudes toward refugees. Model 1 included demographic characteristics, political orientation, community historical acceptance, and the composite Perceived Threat Scale. Model 2 retained all control variables from Model 1 but replaced the composite threat score with the four individual threat domains: economic strain, cultural integration difficulties, safety/security risks, and strain on public services/ overcrowding, to evaluate their distinct effects.

This two-model approach allowed for examination of both the overall impact of perceived threat and the relative contributions of each specific threat type. For both models, the following covariates were included as controls: age, gender, race/ethnicity, education level, employment status, household income, and U.S. region of residence. Statistical significance was assessed at the .05 level, with marginal significance noted at .10. All analyses employed listwise deletion to handle missing responses, resulting in a consistent analytic sample of 106 cases across both models. Diagnostic checks confirmed that regression assumptions were met, including acceptable levels of multicollinearity.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

This study investigated attitudes toward refugees in the United States using an online survey, examining various factors that influence public perceptions and policy preferences. Descriptive statistics for the key study variables are presented in Table 2. These include political orientation, perceived threats associated with refugees, and levels of support for refugee-related policies and aid efforts.

On a political orientation scale ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 5 (*very conservative*), the mean score was 2.40 (SD = 1.22), indicating that, on average, participants leaned modestly toward the liberal side of the spectrum. This distribution suggests that while some ideological diversity was present, the sample overall tended to hold views aligned more closely with progressive or left-leaning political stances. Perceptions of historical refugee acceptance within respondents' communities were moderately positive, with a mean score of 3.13 (SD = 0.67) on a 1–5 scale. This finding suggests that, on average, participants perceived their local areas as having a fair degree of openness toward refugees in the past.

As shown in Table 2, overall perceived threats from refugees was relatively low to moderate (M = 2.34, SD = 0.69, range = 1-3.75). Among the four threat dimensions, economic concerns were lowest (M = 1.98, SD = 0.65), followed by cultural value concerns (M = 2.18, SD = 0.86). Safety (M = 2.62, SD = 0.93) and public service concerns (M = 2.59, SD = 0.89) were the highest-rated threats, suggesting that participants were more concerned about security risks and strain on public infrastructure than about economic or cultural issues.

The composite attitudes toward refugees scale ranged from 1.25 to 5, with a mean of 3.48 (SD = 0.64), reflecting moderate to generally favorable views. Support for refugee intake policy was highest (M = 3.93, SD = 0.64), followed by support for government refugee aid (M = 3.55, SD = 0.81) and willingness to accept refugees in local communities (M = 3.50, SD = 0.96). Willingness to personally engage in support activities, such as donating or volunteering, had the lowest mean score (M = 2.91, SD = 0.95), indicating a gap between policy support and personal action.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Main
Study Variables (N = 106)

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Political Orientation	1	5	2.4	1.22
Historical Acceptance	2	5	3.13	0.67
Threat Scale	1	3.75	2.34	0.69
Economic Threat	1	4	1.98	0.65
Cultural Value	1	5	2.18	0.86
Safety	1	5	2.62	0.93
Public Service	1	5	2.59	0.89
Attitudes Scale	1.25	5	3.48	0.64
Support for refugee intake policy	1	5	3.93	0.64
Willingness to accept refugees	1	5	3.50	0.96
Support for government refugee aid	1	5	3.55	0.81
Personal engagement in support activity	1	5	2.91	0.95

Note: Values represent mean scores on 5-point Likert-type scales (*1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree*). "Threat Scale" is a composite variable calculated as the mean of four items (economic, cultural, safety, and public service threats). "Individual Threat Items" refer to separate measures of perceived threats (economic strain, cultural integration differences, security risk, and overcrowding) included in Model 2. All variables are coded such that higher scores indicate greater agreement with the statement or stronger perceived threat.

Regression Analyses

Two multiple regression models were constructed to examine predictors of attitudes toward refugees (Table 3). Model 1 included demographic characteristics, political orientation, historical local acceptance, and a composite measure of perceived threat. Model 2 replaced the composite threat score with four specific threat types: economic strain, cultural integration difficulties, security risks, and concerns about overcrowding and infrastructure. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated acceptable variance inflation factors (model 1: VIF range: 1.30–2.81, mean VIF = 2.05; model 2: VIF range: 1.33-3.08, mean VIF = 2.24), suggesting no problematic multicollinearity (22). Model 1 explained 63.7% of the variance in refugee attitudes

($R^2 = 0.637$, $F (15, 90) = 10.54$, $p < 0.001$), while Model 2 accounted for 59.3% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.593$, $F (19, 86) = 7.05$, $p < 0.001$). Both models were statistically significant, demonstrating strong explanatory power for predicting public attitudes toward refugees.

In Model 1, political orientation was a significant negative predictor (b = -0.158, SE = 0.05, p < 0.01). Substantively, this means that a one-point increase in political orientation (on a 1-5 scale) was associated with a 0.16-point decrease on the five-point attitudes scale, indicating that more conservative respondents reported slightly less favorable views toward refugees (β = -0.30). Historical acceptance of refugees (b = 0.196, SE = 0.10, p < .05) was positively associated with attitudes, such that each one-point increase on the four-point local acceptance scale corresponded to a 0.20-point increase in support for refugees. Perceived threat showed the strongest effect (b = -0.492, SE = 0.08, p < .001): each one-point increase in perceived threat (on a 1-5 scale) predicted a half-point decrease in attitudes, which is a substantial shift given the outcome's range (1.25–5). This corresponded to a large standardized effect (β = -0.53), underscoring the importance of threat perceptions. Respondents from the Midwest expressed marginally less support compared to the Northeast (b = -0.244, SE = 0.13, p < .10). Other demographic variables (age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment, income, region) were not statistically significant.

In Model 2, the effects of specific threat domains were examined. As shown in Table 3, security risks (b = -0.533, SE = 0.15, p < .001) had the strongest influence: a one-point increase on the five-point security concern scale predicted a 0.53-point decrease in refugee attitudes, which is a large shift given that the outcome ranged from 1.25 to 5. Indeed, the standardized coefficient for security concerns was the largest among all predictors in model 2 (β = -0.45). Overcrowding and infrastructure concerns (b = -0.334, SE = 0.12, p < .01) also showed a meaningful effect, with each one-point increase predicting a 0.33-point decrease in support. Political orientation remained significant (b = -0.204, SE = 0.06, p < .01), indicating that each step toward conservatism on the 1–5 scale was associated with a 0.20-point decrease in attitudes. Historical acceptance became an even stronger predictor than in Model 1 (b = 0.435, SE = 0.11, p < .001), such that each one-point increase on the five-point local acceptance scale corresponded to nearly a half-point increase in support for refugees (β = 0.45). By contrast, economic strain (b = 0.304) and cultural integration concerns (b = 0.196)

were not statistically significant. As in Model 1, none of the demographic variables showed significant effects.

Across both models, political conservatism and perceived threats (particularly those related to security and overcrowding) consistently predicted less favorable attitudes toward refugees. In contrast, historical local acceptance emerged as a robust positive predictor of supportive attitudes. Other demographic characteristics did not exert significant independent effects once political orientation and threat perceptions were accounted for. Notably, the disaggregated threat model revealed that security and infrastructure-related threats are more salient in shaping attitudes in the U.S. context than economic or cultural concerns.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Attitudes Toward Refugees (N = 106)

	(1)				(2)			
	b	se	95% CI	β	b	se	95% CI	β
Age	-0.032	(0.05)	[-0.128,0.064]	-0.067	-0.104 †	(0.05)	[-0.209,0.001]	-0.216
Female	0.094	(0.14)	[-0.176,0.365]	0.074	0.130	(0.15)	[-0.167,0.427]	0.102
African American	-0.072	(0.13)	[-0.333,0.189]	-0.041	0.004	(0.14)	[-0.282,0.291]	0.003
Hispanic	0.064	(0.14)	[-0.207,0.335]	0.039	-0.007	(0.15)	[-0.308,0.294]	-0.004
Asian	-0.154	(0.16)	[-0.470,0.161]	-0.101	0.165	(0.17)	[-0.167,0.497]	0.108
Other Race	-0.050	(0.22)	[-0.484,0.384]	-0.017	-0.189	(0.24)	[-0.662,0.283]	-0.063
Education Level	0.069	(0.07)	[-0.070,0.209]	0.083	0.123	(0.08)	[-0.043,0.289]	0.147
Unemployment	0.005	(0.13)	[-0.261,0.272]	0.004	0.146	(0.14)	[-0.132,0.424]	0.105
Low Income (less than $50K)	0.050	(0.15)	[-0.256,0.355]	0.026	0.214	(0.18)	[-0.138,0.566]	0.113
Political Orientation	-0.158**	(0.05)	[-0.267, -0.050]	-0.302	-0.204**	(0.06)	[-0.329, -0.079]	-0.389
South	-0.253	(0.21)	[-0.676,0.171]	-0.091	-0.259	(0.24)	[-0.728,0.210]	-0.093
West	-0.106	(0.19)	[-0.485,0.273]	-0.044	-0.358	(0.22)	[-0.788,0.072]	-0.148
Midwest	-0.244 †	(0.13)	[-0.495,0.007]	-0.191	-0.258 †	(0.14)	[-0.545,0.030]	-0.201
Historic Acceptance	0.196*	(0.10)	[0.006,0.387]	0.203	0.435***	(0.11)	[0.224,0.646]	0.451
Perceived Threat	-0.492***	(0.08)	[-0.661, -0.324]	-0.528				
Economic Strain					0.304	(0.20)	[-0.083,0.692]	0.179
Cultural Integration Difficulties					0.196	(0.13)	[-0.062,0.453]	0.153
Security Risks					-0.533***	(0.15)	[-0.830, -0.237]	-0.416
Public Service					-0.334**	(0.12)	[-0.572, -0.096]	-0.258
_cons	4.359***	(0.50)	[3.368,5.349]		2.725***	(0.49)	[1.752,3.698]	
R²	0.637				0.593			
Adj. R²	0.577				0.509			
N	106				106			
F-stat	10.537				7.050			

Note: † p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
Reference categories: Male (for *FEMALE*), White (for racial indicators), and Northeast (for regional dummies). Unstandardized coefficients (b) are reported with standard errors in parentheses and 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Standardized coefficients (β) are shown for comparison. All variance inflation factors (VIFs) < 3.1 (mean = 2.05–2.24), indicating no evidence of problematic multicollinearity.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how demographic characteristics, historical acceptance, political orientation, and perceived threats shape American attitudes toward refugees. Consistent with prior research, political ideology and perceived threats emerged as the strongest predictors of public sentiment, with safety and overcrowding concerns especially influential in the U.S. context. Respondents with more conservative orientations consistently expressed lower support for refugee resettlement and aid across both regression models, a pattern that aligns with prior research. For example, Cowling et al. (12) found through a meta-analysis that political conservatism and strong national identity are consistently associated with more negative refugee attitudes, while Esses et al. (14) highlight how ideological orientations shape both threat perceptions and policy preferences in the context of the global refugee crisis.

Demographic variables such as age, education, and socioeconomic status played a comparatively minor role. This supports Verkuyten's (8) argument that individual traits alone rarely drive attitudes toward migrants; their effects depend on broader policy environments and cultural narratives. For example, education may foster more positive attitudes in pro-multicultural contexts but has weaker effects where migration is framed as a threat. Our results align with this pattern by demonstrating that once political orientation and threat perceptions were included, demographic effects lost statistical significance. A similar dynamic appears in Europe, where Häkkilä et al. (23) reported that demographic predictors are consistently overshadowed by political orientation and normative perceptions such as deservingness. Together, these findings highlight that in both U.S. and European contexts, structural and ideological factors outweigh demographics in shaping refugee and immigration attitudes.

By distinguishing between economic, cultural, safety, and infrastructure-related threats, this study builds on the multidimensional framework proposed by Landmann, Gaschler, and Rohmann (2). Security risks and overcrowding concerns were the most powerful negative predictors of refugee attitudes, while economic and cultural concerns were not statistically significant once other threats were controlled. This provides a clear theoretical contribution: the results refine the perceived threat framework by demonstrating that in the U.S. context at least among this sample, safety and capacity concerns outweigh economic or symbolic threats. Whereas European research often identifies economic competition and cultural anxieties as central drivers of opposition (7), our findings suggest that the framework operates differently not only across national contexts but also among subgroups within the same country. Accordingly, perceived threat theory must therefore be applied with sensitivity to which specific threat dimensions are most salient in a given setting. This differs from many European studies, where economic anxieties often dominate, possibly due to the higher socioeconomic status of this U.S. sample or differences in how American media and political discourse frame refugee issues. The results also diverge from von Hermann and Neumann (7) and some global surveys, suggesting that American opposition is driven more by safety and service-capacity perceptions than by fears of cultural change or direct economic competition. While these results suggest refinements of the perceived threat framework, they may partly reflect the characteristics of our sample, which was skewed toward highly educated and higher-income participants, and thus less likely to view refugees as direct economic competitors.

Historical acceptance of refugees was a consistent positive predictor of supportive attitudes. Communities perceived as having welcomed refugees in the past showed higher present-day acceptance, supporting findings by Abdelaaty and Steele (6). Regional differences were also evident, with respondents in the Midwest expressing lower support than those in the Northeast. These findings mirror Pew Research Center data from 2022 (10) and suggest that interventions should be regionally tailored and leverage positive local integration histories.

A notable gap was observed between support for refugee-friendly policies and actual personal engagement in activities such as volunteering or donating. This reflects findings from a 2023 global survey (16) and may stem from practical barriers, limited opportunities, or discomfort with direct contact with refugees. Prior research suggests that such gaps can be narrowed through structured opportunities for positive intergroup contact (e.g., community integration programs) (15) and by shaping media narratives that highlight successful integration (14). These approaches offer potential pathways for addressing both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of refugee support.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Because

recruitment relied on convenience and snowball sampling, the sample is not nationally representative and was skewed toward younger, more educated, and higher-income participants. These characteristics should be considered when interpreting the findings and assessing their generalizability. The use of self-reported data also raises the possibility of social desirability bias, which may be more pronounced among highly educated or politically liberal respondents. In addition, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, making it unclear whether perceived threats shape political ideology or vice versa. Finally, the single-item measures used for each threat domain may not capture the full complexity of these constructs. Future research should employ probability-based sampling, longitudinal or experimental designs, and multi-item validated threat scales to address these limitations and further clarify how different threat types interact with political identity over time.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the factors shaping U.S. public attitudes toward refugees, focusing on political orientation, historical acceptance, and perceived threats. Using survey data from 106 U.S. residents, the results indicated that political conservatism and specific perceived threats, particularly concerns about security and strained infrastructure, were strong negative predictors of supportive attitudes. In contrast, perceptions of positive historical acceptance within one's community were consistently associated with more favorable views. Economic and cultural concerns were less influential once other threat types were considered, suggesting that in the U.S. context, safety and capacity issues carry more weight.

These findings refine the perceived threat framework by showing that practical, safety-related concerns outweigh economic or symbolic threats in shaping American refugee attitudes. They also underscore the importance of positive local histories in fostering a welcoming climate. Future research should explore how regional contexts shape refugee attitudes and whether communication strategies that directly address safety and infrastructure concerns can effectively reduce opposition. Overall, this study contributes to understanding how the perceived threat framework operates in the U.S. context and highlights the need to examine which specific threat dimensions are most salient across different populations.

Implications

This study reaffirms that political orientation and perceived threats, especially those related to safety and public capacity, are central factors shaping U.S. attitudes toward refugees. Economic and cultural concerns were relatively less influential in this context. The consistent positive effect of historical acceptance further suggests that highlighting local integration successes may help shift public opinion, especially in regions that are less receptive. Regional variation, therefore, underscores the need for geographically tailored outreach efforts rather than a uniform national strategy.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings indicate that perceived threat framework should be applied with sensitivity to national context, since the threats most salient in the U.S. differ from those emphasized in much of the European literature. Future research should examine whether targeted communication strategies, region-specific initiatives, or the promotion of positive community narratives are effective in addressing the safety and capacity concerns identified here, rather than relying primarily on economic benefit arguments.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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