

In the fight over Republicans’ attitudes towards refugees, President Trump and Fox News are beating religion



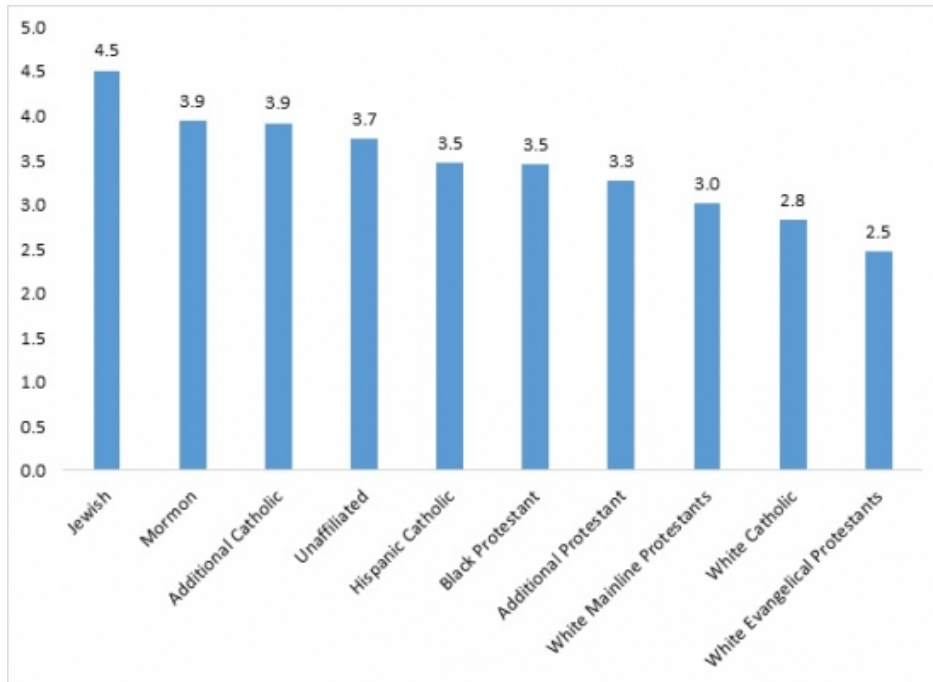
Since the days of his presidential campaign, Donald Trump has made no secret of his desire to restrict the number of refugees who come into the United States. Trump’s subsequent efforts to restrict refugees have been opposed vocally by many civil society organizations, including Evangelical groups. But, when religious leaders and the President disagree, who do Republican voters listen to? [Brian Newman](#) has analyzed the American public’s views on refugees, and has found that being both a strong conservative and a strong Trump supporter are closely linked to having negative attitudes towards refugee resettlement in the US. He explains that this may be at least partly down to the strong pro-Trump messaging from religious leaders appearing on Fox News.

No one had to wonder what candidate Donald Trump thought about Syrian refugees. In the third presidential debate, he [called Syrian refugees](#) “definitely, in many cases, ISIS-aligned...the great Trojan horse.” As president, Trump signed an [executive order](#) preventing Syrians from entering the US, a move the Supreme Court recently upheld. In contrast, leaders from virtually every part of the religious landscape in the US have invoked sacred texts to advocate for refugees. Statements from Catholic, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Methodist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Mormon, Jewish, and Muslim groups all provided explicitly religious arguments for supporting refugees, many specifically arguing for bringing more Syrian refugees into the US.

Many evangelical [leaders](#), often among the most conservative voices in US politics, joined the chorus. The Southern Baptist Convention, often a conservative bulwark, issued a 2016 [resolution](#) supporting refugee resettlement in the US, while over 500 evangelical leaders [signed](#) an open letter to “call on President Trump and Vice President Pence to support refugees” published in the *Washington Post*. Thus, evangelical leaders’ generally pro-refugee messages ran counter to many conservative and Republican voices, especially Trump’s. When religious and partisan forces collide, which wins? (Spoiler alert: Trump wins.)

To find out, I examined the 2016 American National Election Study, which asked how much respondents favored or opposed “allowing Syrian refugees to come to the United States,” creating a 7-point scale with strongest opposition at the scale’s low end. Despite the virtual consensus among religious leaders, public attitudes varied widely across religious traditions. Jewish respondents were most favorable toward resettling refugees, with an average score of 4.5. White evangelical Protestants (white Protestants who say they have been “born again”) were least supportive, with a mean score of 2.5.

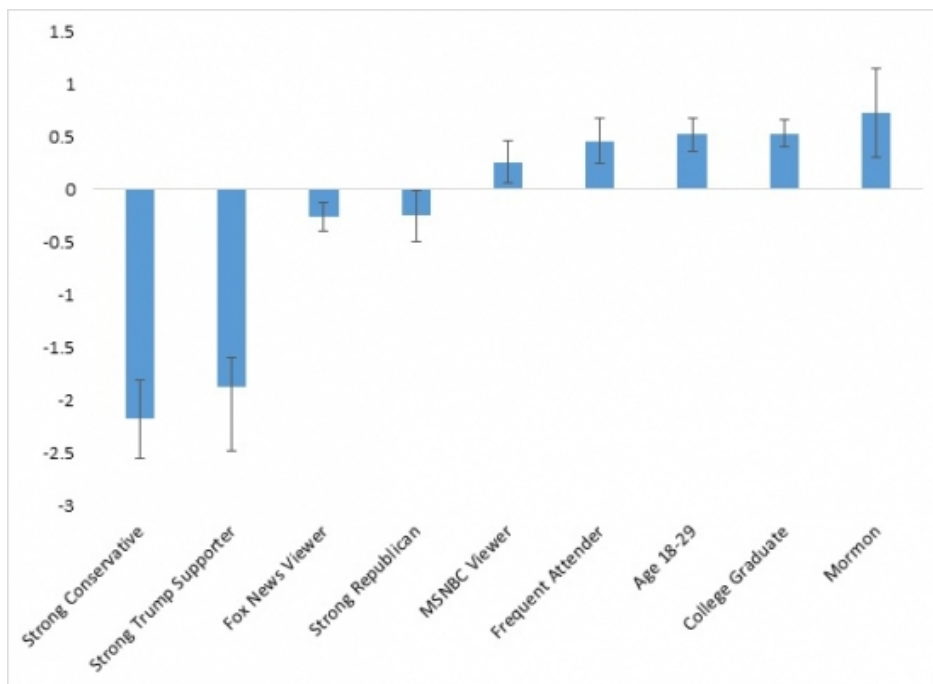
Figure 1 – Support for Bringing Syrian Refugees to the US across Religious Traditions (Mean on 1-7 Scale)



Given the pro-refugee messages from leaders across these religious traditions, we might suspect that the variation across the traditions stem from partisan differences between the groups. Regression offers a way to assess the independent predictive power of political, religious, and demographic variables. Figure 1 shows the predictive power of the variables that were significantly related to attitudes toward refugees, controlling for all the other variables (i.e., the figure shows regression coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals).

By far the two strongest predictors in the model were respondents’ political ideology and view of Trump. All else equal, strong conservatives were about 2.2 points less favorable toward bringing refugees to the US than were strong liberals. Even beyond that, respondents who rated Trump an 85 on a 0-100 scale were about 1.9 points less favorable than respondents rating Trump a 0. Over and above these powerful predictors, strong Republicans were about a quarter-point less favorable than strong Democrats.

Figure 2 – Predictors of Attitudes toward Refugee Resettlement



In addition to the power of the political variables, what stands out in Figure 2 is the lack of religious traditions. I examined each tradition as a predictor, but controlling for demographic and political variables wipes out almost all the variation across religious traditions seen in Figure 1. The only exception is that Mormons are about three-quarters of a point more favorable toward refugee resettlement than adherents of other traditions.

That does not mean, however, that religion has no effect. People who attend religious services once a week or more were about half a point more positive toward bringing refugees to the US than those who never attend religious services. Interestingly, regular attenders were more favorable toward welcoming refugees into the US regardless of their tradition. Still, the figure demonstrates that political ideology and attitudes toward Trump were about four times as predictive of attitudes toward refugee policy compared to religious service attendance.

" Among conservative Republicans who like Trump, those who watch Fox News were even more opposed to resettling Syrian refugees in the US than those who don't"

Brian Newman of Pepperdine University writes that in the fight over Republicans' attitudes towards refugees, President Trump and Fox News are beating religion.
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Impressively, over and above the demographic, political, and religious factors described above, watching partisan news independently predicts attitudes toward refugees. On average, Fox News viewers were about a quarter point less supportive of bringing refugees to the US while MSNBC viewers were about a quarter point more supportive. That is, among conservative Republicans who like Trump, those who watch Fox News were even more opposed to resettling Syrian refugees in the US than those who don't.

Why does politics seem to matter so much more than religion on this issue? The data cannot say for sure, but one likely explanation is that partisan messages tend to be clear, strong, and frequent compared to messages from religious sources. Many religious people may be wholly unaware of religious leaders' statements, which may not be widely reported in national news, religious media outlets, or even in religious services. In a 2016 [survey](#) of Protestant pastors, only 32 percent of evangelical pastors and 41 percent of mainline pastors said they had ever "specifically addressed the Syrian refugee crisis from the pulpit." Even if people know about their leaders' pro-refugee statements, they presumably are not being reminded of them frequently.

In contrast, Fox News mentioned refugees on average 16 times *per day* during the presidential campaign, often in conjunction with the threat of terrorism (according to data from the [GDELT Project](#)). In addition, Fox News may have played an important role in minimizing any potential conflict between religion and partisanship for evangelical Republicans. Its coverage focused on Franklin Graham, the son of the revered evangelist Billy Graham, who has been a fervent supporter of Trump's position on refugees. Fox News mentioned or interviewed Graham at least once on 38 separate days during the campaign. A few pro-refugee statements from religious leaders that may (or may not) garner headlines for a day or two seem no match for the repeated warnings of a well-known evangelical leader on Fox News combined with the overwhelming [power](#) of [partisanship](#) in the current US political context.

We have a lot more to learn about the politics of refugees in the US and how religion influences these politics. Typically, religion and partisanship reinforce each other, spurring polarization. Religious leaders' pro-refugee positions run counter to this trend and could unite the public on this issue. So far, they haven't.

- *This article is based on the paper, '[Who Supports Syrians? The Relative Importance of Religion, Partisanship, and Partisan News](#)', in PS: Political Science & Politics.*

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