# Inform the People or Fix the Problem?
# Which lessons should we draw from the Refugee Crisis?

Laurenz R. K. Günther
laurenz.guenther@uni-bonn.de

April 26, 2021

## Abstract

In this project I want to examine whether subjects respond differently to the presence of asylum seekers (AS) when this presence showcases flaws in the asylum system. Because the asylum system was specifically designed to only host those fleeing war or persecution, I design an information intervention in Germany in which subjects either receive information about the number of AS still in Germany who fled war or persecution, information about the corresponding number of those that came for other reasons, or no information.

# 1 Motivation

Since the onset of the century, the number of populist parties in Europe has almost doubled, together with the number of countries with populist participation in government (Eiermann, Mounk, and Gultchin (2017)). How can we explain this trend and how (if at all) should scientists and policy-makers respond?

In this paper I try to shed some light on these questions in the context of the Refugee Crisis in Europe. The Refugee-Crisis has been at the center of the rhetoric of European populists and a large body of literature shows a tight connection between immigration by asylum seekers and populist voting (Guriev and Papaioannou (2020)).

I designed an information intervention to answer three research questions: 1) do people hold biased beliefs about asylum seekers (AS)? 2) does information provision about the number of AS in their country change peoples attitudes on AS-immigration and populist parties? 3) do people respond differently to the presence of AS when this presence showcases flaws in the asylum system? I make a key distinction between two types of asylum seekers. I label those who actually flee war and/or persecution Humanitarian Asylum Seekers (HAS) and those that don't Other Asylum Seekers (OAS).

# 2 Sample Selection

The experiment will be conducted in Germany in partnership with the survey company Pureprofile. Participants will be recruited from April to May 2021. Only German citizens who are over the age of 18, indicated their consent to participate, passed an attention-check and a captcha will be allowed to proceed. I will implement quotas on gender, age, income and education to make the sample broadly representative of the German population.

# 3 Experimental Design

The experiment consists of three conditions. In all conditions subjects first complete validity checks (like solving a Captcha) and answer some demographic questions. Then beliefs about the total numbers of HAS and OAS are elicited. Thereafter, participants in treatment THAS are told the true number of HAS still in Germany and subjects in treatment TOAS are informed about the number of OAS residing in Germany. Participants in the control condition are not informed about any of these numbers.

Afterwards, posterior beliefs and outcomes are elicited. I include (incentivized) outcome measures for populist voting and immigration attitudes. Importantly, I include several outcome variables to examine potential channels.

I also implemented several other items to maximize the validity of the intervention. Figure 1 provides an overview over the full experimental design. Blocks on the right-hand-side correspond to sets of survey items with a specific purpose. These purposes are indicated by the blocks on the left-hand-side. The blocks of the first row are included in

the control condition. Both treatment conditions include all blocks of the second row. All blocks in the last three rows are included in all three conditions.

In general, the experiment was designed cautiously to prevent biases like experimenter demand effects, cross learning or lack of attention. For instance, as can be seen in figure 1, I follow Alesina, Stantcheva, and Teso (2018) and place attention checks just before the most important parts of the study. I also include several validity checks to assess data quality and elicit beliefs about other variables to make sure effects are not driven by cross-learning (Haaland and Wohlfart (2020)).

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Baseline Balance and Representativeness

I will test for baseline balance for the following variables:

- Gender

- Age

- Education

- Income

- Self-placement on political left-right-scale

- Belief about BAMF-behavior

- Belief about number HAS in Germany

- Belief about number OAS in Germany

- Certainty about belief about number HAS in Germany

- Certainty about belief about number OAS in Germany

- Religious affiliation

- Immigrant-Dummy

- Immigration-Background-Dummy

I will regress each of these variables on both treatment indicators to see if there are imbalances. I will also conduct a joint F-test, to see if the coefficients are jointly different from zero. Means or Medians (depending on the variable) of all demographic characteristics will also be presented in a table together with data for the actual population-level values.

## 4.2 Descriptive Analysis

I want to compare beliefs about the numbers of AS, HAS and OAS respectively to the actual numbers. Simple t-tests will be used to test for differences. Moreover, I want to examine whether subjects know the share of HAS in their region. To this end I will regress the share of HAS a subject perceives to be in his county on the actual share of HAS in the county.

## 4.3 Manipulation Check

I want to test whether subjects in the treatment conditions update their beliefs in response to the information. Hence, I ask them again about the numbers of HAS and OAS respectively after the treatment manipulation. I expect their answers to be more accurate afterwards.

## 4.4 Effect of De-Biasing

To assess what happens to attitudes if people are de-biased wrt. the numbers of HAS and OAS respectively I will estimate the following model by OLS:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \cdot THAS_i + \beta_2 \cdot TOAS_i + \gamma \cdot X_i + \varepsilon_i \tag{1}$$

Here, $THAS_i$ and $TOAS_i$ are treatment indicators, $X_i$ includes individual-specific values for demographic control variables and $\varepsilon_i$ is an individual-specific error term. $Y_i$ is an outcome variable. I will analyze four of them:

- Voting intention

- Preferred Party Program (far left immigration program versus far right immigration program)

- Stated Immigration Attitudes

- Incentivized Immigration Attitudes (Donation Decision)

## 4.5 Effect of Immigration

To assess what happens to attitudes if people learn about higher numbers of HAS and OAS respectively I will estimate the following model by OLS:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \cdot THAS_i \cdot BiasHAS_i + \beta_2 \cdot TOAS_i \cdot BiasOAS_i + \beta_3 \cdot THAS_i +$$
$$\beta_4 \cdot TOAS_i + \beta_5 \cdot BiasHAS_i + \beta_6 \cdot BiasOAS_i + \gamma_k \cdot X_i + \varepsilon_i \tag{2}$$

where $BiasK = \frac{Info_K - Prior_K}{Info_K}$, $K \in \{HAS, OAS\}$. I expect that $\beta_2 > 0$ and that $\beta_2 > \beta_1$. I will examine the same outcome variables as before.

### 4.6 Channels

I want to go beyond estimating these main effects by explaining why subjects change their attitudes in response to information. To this end I will consider 4 different possible channels.

### 4.6.1 Updating

To assess whether updating on AS-characteristics can explain attitude change I will do two things. First, I will estimate equation 1 and equation 2 by OLS but additionally control for the following variables:

- Belief about willingness of AS to integrate

- Belief about economic effects of AS-immigration

- Belief about the number of murders committed by AS

- Belief about whether many lives were saved during the refugee crisis

Additionally, I will estimate regressions similar to equation 2 but with these four belief-variables as the dependent variable each at a time.

### 4.6.2 Reciprocity and Moral

To test whether reciprocity and moral considerations are a main driver for immigration attitudes I will employ three variables. First, I will estimate specifications by OLS that resemble equation 2 and equation 1 respectively with the difference that an additional variable is interacted with $THAS_i \cdot BiasHAS_i$, $T_{OAS} \cdot BiasOAS_i$, $THAS_i$ and $OHAS_i$ respectively. This variable is measured on a Likert-scale and refers to the following question: *How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Many asylum seekers come to Europe although they know that they are not eligible for asylum.* Additionally I will estimate regressions similar to equation 2 but with this variable as the dependent variable.

Second, I will estimate the two models by OLS but additionally control for a variable which is measured on a Likert-scale and refers to the following question: *How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? It is unfair toward the native population to apply for asylum if one does not flee war or persecution.* Additionally I will estimate the two models with this variable as the dependent variable.

Lastly, I will repeat the same procedure with a third variable in which subjects are asked whether they agree that applying for asylum is immoral if one does not flee war or persecution.

### 4.6.3 Law Enforcement

To assess whether worries about law-enforcement can explain attitude change I will do two things. First, I will estimate equation 2 by OLS but additionally control for a variable

which refers to the following question: *How much do you agree with the statement that asylum laws are often enforced*? I will also estimate regressions similar to equation 2 but with this variable as the dependent variable.

Second, I will examine whether subjects think that a lack of law enforcement is problematic, because it stimulated crime elsewhere in the society. Subjects are asked to agree or disagree with a corresponding statement.

If these variable turns out to play an important role, it is crucial to find out whether subjects want the law to be enforced through more deportations of OAS or through lowering the standards for becoming a HAS. To find out, I will look at descriptive statistics for two variables that relate to questions in which subjects are asked about these two alternatives.

### 4.6.4 Second Order Reasoning

It is also conceivable that subjects fear hostile responses of other natives as a response to OAS immigration and therefore opt against it. To test this I will estimate models resembling models 1 and 2. The difference is that I additionally control for one of the two following variables:

- Perceptions of other peoples relative preferences for HAS over OAS

- Assessment on whether OAS exploit HAS by applying for asylum

Again, I will also put these two variables on the left-hand-side of the equations in another exercise. Moreover, I will do this whole analysis separately for subjects who place themselves on the left of the political spectrum and those who place themselves on the right.

### 4.7 Heterogeneity

I will also test whether there are important heterogeneous treatment effects. To this end I will estimate specifications of the following form by OLS:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \cdot THAS_i \cdot I_i + \beta_2 \cdot TOAS_i \cdot I_i + \beta_3 \cdot THAS_i +$$
$$\beta_4 \cdot TOAS_i + \beta_5 \cdot I_i + \gamma_k \cdot X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \cdot THAS_i \cdot BiasHAS_i \cdot I_i + \beta_2 \cdot TOAS_i \cdot BiasOAS_i \cdot I_i + \beta_3 \cdot THAS_i +$$
$$\beta_4 \cdot TOAS_i + \beta_5 \cdot BiasHAS_i + \beta_6 \cdot BiasOAS_i + \gamma_k \cdot X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where $I_i$ is the moderator-variable. The second specification will also include all lower-order interactions which are omitted here for readability. I will use several variables as moderators. Among them are:

- Self-placement on the political left-right spectrum

- Religious affiliation

- Immigrant indicator (Born in country?)

- Immigration background (Parents born in country?)

- Age

- Gender

- Income-group

- Political self-placement

- Education

## 4.8 Robustness Exercises and alternative explanations

To ensure high data quality and valid results I will run several robustness exercises.

### 4.8.1 Cross-Learning

I implemented two tests for cross-learning in the experiment. One measure is elicited once for participants while the other one is elicited twice for each participant and therefore allows for a within-subject-test for cross-learning.

In the first item subjects are asked how biased the decision making of the BAMF (German Migration Agency) is in their view and in which direction. Cross-learning would imply that there exist a treatment-differences wrt. this variable. To test this, I estimate the following regression equation by OLS:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \cdot THAS_i + \beta_2 \cdot TOAS_i + \gamma \cdot X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where, $Y_i$ is the item just described. I expect that $\beta_1$ and $\beta_2$ are insignificant at conventional levels.

To test whether individuals updated on BAMF-behavior in response to the information intervention I will make use of two questions (one asked just before, the other one asked just after the intervention) in which subjects are asked about the decision making process of the BAMF. Again, I will test for treatment differences with the procedure just described. Again, I expect treatment differences to be insignificant. As an additional robustness check I will exclude subjects who gave different answers at the two items and repeat all regressions described above with the sub-sample.

### 4.8.2 Trust in Information

Another concern might be that subjects don't trust the information provided to them. Hence, I elicit to what extend subjects trust information about the number of HAS and OAS respectively on a Likert-Scale. Moreover, I include an item in which subjects are asked whether they believe the survey was biased or not. The first item is elicited on a 6-point Likert-Scale. The second item is elicited on a 7-point Likert-Scale.

As a robustness check, I will exclude subjects who report that they rather not trust the information, don't trust the information or don't trust the information at all. In yet another robustness exercise I will exclude subjects from the analysis who choose one of the 4 most extreme possible answers of the second item. These are subjects who find the survey either biased or very biased in either direction (left or right).

### 4.8.3 Additional Robustness Checks

I will run two additional robustness checks. First, I will exclude outliers with respect to completion time. I will also selectively exclude those that state (in an attention check item) that they have not paid full attention to the previous question.

Moreover, if subjects demographics will turn out to be very different from their population equivalents, I will weigh observations to make the sample more nationally representative.

# References

Alesina, A., Stantcheva, S., & Teso, E. (2018). Intergenerational Mobility and Preferences for Redistribution. *American Economic Review*, *108*(2), 521–554. doi: 10.1257/aer.20162015

Eiermann, M., Mounk, Y., & Gultchin, L. (2017). European Populism: Trends, Threats and Future Prospects. *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, 1–33.

Guriev, S., & Papaioannou, E. (2020). *The Political Economy of Populism.*

Haaland, I., & Wohlfart, J. (2020). *Designing Information Provision Experiments* .

# A Figures

Figure 1: Structure of the Experiment
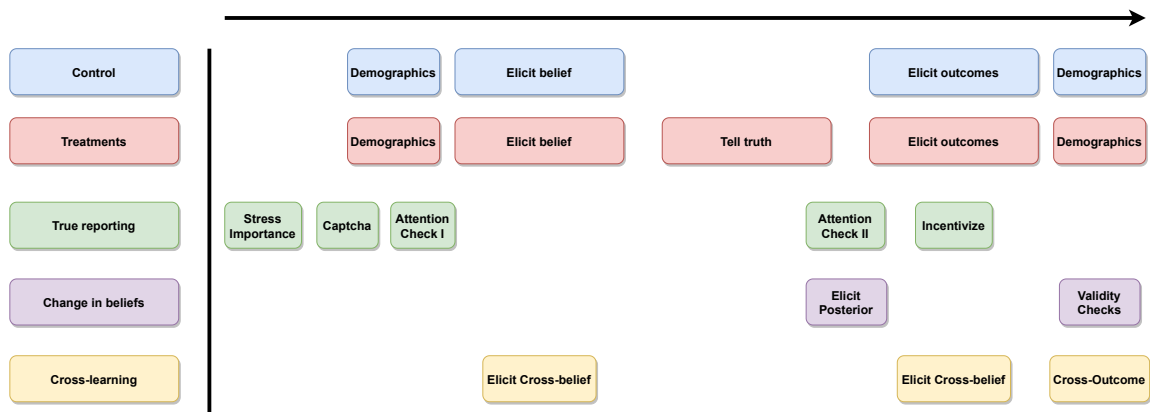


**Note:** This figure shows building blocks of the Experiment. The first two rows show blocks that are included in the control group and the two treatment groups respectively. Blocks that are further to the left start earlier in the experiment. The last three rows relate to challenges which the experimental design faces. Blocks in these rows are designed to tackle these challenges.