Fleeing For Their Lives:

Reconsidering How Americans View Immigrants' Reasons for Migrating

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Abstract

Politicians and media outlets often emphasize a distinction between migrants fleeing their home country for reasons linked to *violence* and migrants leaving their home country to pursue *economic opportunity*. This distinction is widely believed to play a crucial role in shaping natives' immigration attitudes: natives are expected to be less welcoming towards immigrants who are perceived as seeking economic opportunity. Using two nationally representative survey experiments, I test the hypothesis that—when the threats and risks migrants face in their home country are equalized—natives will not penalize people who immigrate due to economic threat relative to people immigrating due to violence threat. After accounting for threat in the migrant's home country, I find that natives' special penalty associated with economic types of migration is erased. My results indicate that policymakers should reconsider existing immigration and refugee policies related to economic migration and poverty.

1 Introduction

At mid-2022, over 100 million individuals (or roughly 1.2% of the world's population) have been forcibly displaced from their home as a result of events "seriously disturbing public order" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022).[1] In the coming decades, the number of displaced people is expected to increase due to climate change (McLeman 2019; Rigaud 2018). Given these events, it is increasingly important to understand how and why natives react and respond to arriving immigrants who are fleeing from their country of origin. To ensure that immigration and refugee policies align with the preferences of domestic voters in liberal democracies, researchers and policymakers must gauge the contours of public support for migrants escaping different problems in their home country.

Considering these ongoing migration crises, politicians, media outlets, and international legal experts often emphasize a distinction between people fleeing their home country for reasons linked to *violence* and people leaving their home country to pursue *economic opportunity*. The former group of individuals is often labeled humanitarian migrants, refugees, or asylees, while the latter is broadly deemed migrants or economic migrants. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, for example, define "migrants" as "people who move by choice rather than to escape conflict or persecution."[2] On the other hand, "refugees," according to the 1951 Refugee Convention, are people who are "unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion." Regarding recent unauthorized crossings at the US-Mexico border, conservative political commentator Tucker Carlson reinforced this distinction by exclaiming, "To be perfectly

[1] UNHCR. 2022. "Refugee Data Finder." https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/100-million-forcibly-displaced.html

[2] UNHCR. 2019. "Migrant Definition." UNHCR Emergency Handbook https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/legal-framework/migrant-definition.

clear, these [people] are not refugees. They are not being persecuted by any government. [...] Instead these are economic migrants." (Carlson 2021).[3] Likewise, a group of Republican senators[4] recently issued an open letter to the US Attorney General denouncing the Biden Administration's immigration policies by arguing that, "[American] asylum laws have been abused and misused by illegal immigrants who are primarily economic migrants and are not otherwise eligible to immigrate to the United States" (Tillis 2021).[5] This type of argument was frequently deployed during the Trump Administration as well.[6]

The distinction between people migrating to flee violence and people migrating to seek better economic opportunities is widely believed to play a crucial role in shaping natives' immigration attitudes. When compared to people who are fleeing violence in their home country, people who migrate for economic reasons are generally expected to receive less support from natives in the receiving country. Bolstering this claim, researchers across the United States and Europe have consistently found that natives are less willing to admit immigrants who are perceived as pursuing financial opportunity (Abdelaaty and Steele 2022; Arias and Blair 2021; Bansak et al. 2016; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Rasmussen and Poushter 2019). These findings could plausibly serve as evidence to support current legal frameworks that strictly differentiate refugees from migrants (Hamlin 2021; Ramji-Nogales 2017).

In this paper, I challenge the conventional view that natives will be less supportive of people immigrating for economic reasons when compared to people immigrating due to fear of violence.

[3]Carlson, Tucker. 2021. "Tucker blasts Biden over immigration crisis: 'He did this on purpose'," "Tucker Carlson Tonight, September 21, 2021", https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/tucker-on-bidens-border-crisis-fallout-from-vaccine-passports

[4]The full list of senators includes Thom Tillis (R-NC), Mike Braun (R-IN), Kevin Cramer (R-ND), Josh Hawley (R-MO), Cynthia Lummis (R-WY), Tom Cotton (R-AR), James Inhofe (R-OK), and James Lankford (R-OK).

[5]Tillis, Thom. 2021. "Tillis Leads Letter to DOJ Seeking Answers Over Open Border Policies," Senate Press Release https://www.tillis.senate.gov/2021/7/tillis-leads-letter-to-doj-seeking-answers-over-open-border-policies

[6]Examples include: 1) Nick Miroff, "Trump's new restrictions on foreign workers, explained," Washington Post, June 23, 2020 2) Daniel Trotta, "U.S. restores aid to Central America after reaching migration deals," Reuters, October 16, 2019

Although the label "refugee" may carry implicit associations with deservingness (Adida et al. 2018; Levy and Wright 2020, 77; Wyszynski et al. 2020), most Americans lack an understanding that economic reasons for migration do not make one eligible for refugee status (Thorson and Abdelaaty 2022). Consequently, the rigid legal qualifications regarding refugee eligibility are unlikely to hold any direct influence on the public's immigration attitudes.

Instead, I argue that native residents, in part, determine their support for immigrants based on *the severity of perceived threats* that the immigrants would face if they remained in their country of origin. Fleeing violence, for example, may involve risking one's life in the home country, but pursuing better economic opportunity does not necessarily include the same consequences. Nevertheless, poverty can pose life threatening situations as well (Lister 2021; Oberman 2015; Sen 2000; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007). Moreover, country conditions are often defined by a complex intersection between political turmoil, economic development, violent conflict, and other country specific events and characteristics (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

My primary argument is that economic reasons for migration are only viewed less favorably by natives *if the risks in the immigrant's home country are not equivalent to the risks associated with violence in the home country.* When the threats and risks that migrants face in their country of origin are equalized, natives will not penalize people who leave their country for economic reasons relative to people immigrating due to fear of violence.

To assess whether Americans are more supportive of immigrants escaping violence or immigrants escaping poverty, I conducted two nationally representative preregistered between-subjects survey experiments (n=1205), where respondents read fictional news articles discussing American immigration and then answered a series of questions about immigration preferences. In the articles, I manipulated *the type of threat* that immigrants faced in their home country. In addition to a control condition where no threat was mentioned, respondents read news articles that featured people

fleeing due to severe economic threat (i.e., poverty and death by starvation) or severe violence threat (i.e., collapsed public safety and death by gun violence). To equalize the threats and consequences associated with economic and violence threats, both news articles included structural conditions feasibly beyond the immigrant's control and explicit risks that could plausibly lead to death. After reading each article, respondents answered survey questions related to their immigration attitudes.

Does learning about dire economic circumstances or violent conditions in an immigrant's home country cause Americans to express more favorable immigration attitudes? I find that Americans are more supportive of immigrants who experience *either* violence threats or economic threats in their home country when compared to immigrants not explicitly facing risks in their home country. Severe conditions due to either *violence threat* or *economic threat* in an immigrant's country of origin *equally* lead natives to express more welcoming immigration attitudes, perceptions of involuntary migration decisions, and external attributions of responsibility to immigrants' current predicaments. Substantively, economic threats and violence threats caused a 7.3 percent increase and 7.8 percent increase, respectively, in favorable immigration attitudes relative to a control condition. Each type of threat even had a substantial impact on the way natives perceived broader global immigration patterns: natives in each treatment condition believed that more people immigrate due to either violence or economic threats. As a whole, these results add further evidence that immigration frames in the media can significantly alter immigration attitudes (Branton et al. 2011; Djourelova 2023; Hopkins 2010; Knoll et al. 2011; McCabe et al. 2021; Merolla et al. 2013; Ramakrishnan et al. 2014).

Most importantly, the magnitude of effects from economic and violence threat is the same for each treatment, which suggests that natives feel similarly toward immigrants fleeing severe poverty and immigrants fleeing extreme violence. When the risks associated with staying in one's country are equalized, the special penalty associated with economic types of migration is erased. These

findings challenge the commonly held notion that natives believe that economic migrants are less deserving of protection than those fleeing violence.

There are significant policy implications from these findings. First, my findings add additional evidence *against* legal regimes that rely on a binary framework for categorizing individuals as either refugees or economic migrants (Hamlin 2021; Ramji-Nogales 2017). This type of dichotomous distinction rarely matches immigrants' lived experiences (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; McMahon and Sigona 2018) and, based on my findings, public attitudes towards immigrants also do not align with these categories—suggesting that current policies may not accurately reflect reality the public's policy preferences. Moreover, the experimental treatments also had direct effects on natives' policy attitudes as well. Natives who learned about immigrants' dangerous economic circumstances were more likely to support a decrease in the number of deportations and more likely to prioritize policies admitting immigrants into the country who are suffering from poverty in their home country. Interestingly, natives learning about violence threats did not react the same way in terms of policy attitudes, possibly due to worries about spillover effects of violence. Overall, my findings indicate that policymakers should reconsider existing refugee and immigration policies to incorporate people fleeing extreme poverty—especially since these types of policies can dramatically improve the American economy (Clemens 2022) and the lives of immigrants (Oberman 2015).

2 Re-examining Native Perceptions of Migration Motivations

Native residents prioritize immigrants with certain traits and backgrounds. Natives, for example, prefer immigrants who are employed, speak the native language, and are in the country legally (Adida et al. 2019; Alrababa'h et al. 2021; Arias and Blair 2021; Bansak et al. 2016; Hainmueller

and Hopkins 2015; Levy et al. 2016). Other research demonstrates that Americans, in particular, are more sympathetic toward immigrants facing different humanitarian concerns as well (Levy and Wright 2020; Newman et al. 2015).

In evaluating their immigration preferences, native residents also consider the underlying factors that led an immigrant to leave his or her country of origin. An important consideration in this assessment is whether the immigrant's decision to relocate was *voluntary* or *involuntary*. Previous studies contend that migrants *forced* to leave their home country will generate notions of humanitarianism, greater empathy, and feelings of deservingness from natives (Verkuyten et al. 2018).[7] Migrants who *choose* to leave their country of origin, in contrast, will not evoke the same welcoming responses. Extending this argument, numerous studies have claimed that *economic migrants* are perceived as *voluntary migrants* who are responsible for their own circumstances, whereas *migrants fleeing violence* are seen as *involuntary migrants* who are not responsible for their own situation (Abdelaaty and Steele 2022; Alrababa'h et al. 2021; Arias and Blair 2021; Verkuyten et al. 2018).

Prior research appears to support the claim that economic migration, presumably voluntary migration, does not generate the same welcoming responses as migration by individuals fleeing violence, which is often deemed involuntary migration (Abdelaaty and Steele 2022; Alrababa'h et al. 2021; Arias and Blair 2021; Bansak et al. 2016; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Rasmussen and Poushter 2019; But also see Findor et al. 2021 and Spliker et al. 2021). An 18-country analysis by Pew Research Center, for example, shows that natives across the world are more supportive of "refugees fleeing violence" than "immigrants moving into [the] country" (Rasmussen and Poushter 2019). Likewise, several studies use conjoint experiments to better understand how an immigrant's

[7]Similarly, past scholarship suggests that natives will express heightened empathy when they assign external attributions of responsibility to a migrant's current predicament (Ostfeld and Mutz 2014). Put otherwise, migrants who are viewed as not personally to blame for their difficult situation will be regarded more positively by natives.

reason for migrating is associated with support for admission among natives (Alrababa'h et al. 2021; Arias and Blair 2021; Bansak et al. 2016; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). Across these studies, migrants departing for reasons associated with violence are significantly more likely to be accepted into the receiving country than migrants coming for economic reasons. Specifically, asylum seekers who migrate because of violence and persecution are 15 percentage points more likely to be accepted than economic migrants across 15 European countries (Bansak et al. 2016) and 7.6 percentage points more likely to be accepted in the United States (Arias and Blair 2021). The magnitude of this effect is comparable to admitting doctors versus unemployed migrants or migrants who maintain zero inconsistencies in their asylum testimony to those who have major inconsistencies (Bansak et al. 2016). From these results, Bansak et al. conclude,

> "the public is opposed to admitting asylum seekers whose principal motivation is to seek better economic opportunities and who therefore might be regarded as economic migrants who do not meet the legal definition of refugee status according to the 1951 Refugee Convention" (Bansak et al. 2016, 218).

There are several reasons to question whether natives are less willing to admit immigrants who are perceived as fleeing for economic motivations. Most importantly, prior experimental studies make comparisons between migrants leaving their home country for different justifications but *fail to equalize the severity of consequences for the migrant if he or she remained in the country of origin.* For example, numerous conjoint experiments state a hypothetical immigrant's reason for migrating as, "[s]eeking *better* economic opportunities" (emphasis added; quote from Bansak et al. 2016; But see Arias and Blair 2021 and Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015).[8] Because of this phrasing, it is not clear whether survey respondents are reacting to the notion of economic migration itself or the

[8]Bansak et al. (2016) are the only study with the exact listed language. Instead, the precise language employed in the other conjoint experiments that refer to economic migration is, "Seek *better* job in U.S." (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015, emphasis added) and "Economic opportunity" (Arias and Blair 2021).

perception that migrants may not be experiencing severe economic hardship in their home country. Put otherwise, respondents' reactions to migrants seeking economic opportunities may be influenced by their perception of the conditions in the migrants' home country. If native respondents believe that migrants are leaving a relatively comfortable situation in their home country, natives may view their migration decisions as less justified compared to those who are fleeing more dangerous circumstances. Yet, both violence and poverty are linked to a host of negative life outcomes, which indicates that economic motivations for migration can also carry severe consequences (Lister 2021; Oberman 2015; Sen 2000; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007).

In order to obtain a more accurate understanding of how economic migrants are perceived by natives, it is essential to carefully design experimental procedures that account for the perceived consequences of migrants remaining in their country of origin. After accounting for threat in the migrant's home country, it is plausible that natives will not penalize people who leave their country for economic reasons relative to people immigrating due to fear of violence.[9]

3 Research Design

I designed two nationally representative preregistered between-subject survey experiments to test whether equalizing the threats and risks that migrants face in their home country erases natives' special penalty associated with economic types of migration. The experiments were conducted one year apart (December 2021 and December 2022). Both survey experiments were fielded by

[9]For instance, in their conjoint experiment, Alrababa'h et al. (2021) describe economic migration as a "[l]ack of job opportunities," which signals a more severe economic situation than that described in Arias and Blair (2021), Bansak et al. (2016), and Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015). In Alrababa'h et al. (2021), individuals who migrate because of violence are only 3 percentage points more likely to be accepted than migrants without job opportunities, which is less than one fifth the effect observed in Bansak et al. (2016). Thus, this slight wording shift significantly alters the magnitude of the effects, although it is possible that this difference is driven by the geographic sample as well. Still, the consequences associated with a lack of job opportunities are not explicitly equal to the risks associated with violence, which could explain the 3-percentage point difference.

Forthright, a data collection company who formed a demographically representative probability sample. The first study was a pretest with a demographically representative probability sample of 202 adult respondents. The second study (n=1003) received IRB approval and was pre-registered.[10]

In the survey experiment, respondents first read two fictional news stories about American immigration. One story related to deportation and another related to unauthorized border crossings. I designed each article to be brief and to resemble news stories that might appear in the real world.[11] The deportation article reports that an increasing number of immigrants arriving in the United States have been deported back to their home countries shortly after arrival. The article then gives an example of a fictional immigrant illustrating this trend and suggests that many others face similar situations. In the control condition, there is no information provided about what happens to the individual after being deported. The second article follows a similar format. The unauthorized crossing article began by briefly noting that the number of border crossings in the United States has dramatically increased in recent months. Then, the article reports a short interview with a family of ostensible immigrants and lists why the family traveled to the United States. In the control condition, the family states that they are traveling "in pursuit of a better life."

In the experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions with equal probability: control, violence threat, and economic threat. In the control condition, respondents read the news articles previously described. In either of the treatment conditions, however, I manipulated the *type of threat* that the immigrants faced in their home country. In the violence threat condition, both the deportation and unauthorized crossing articles featured situations where the migrant's home country was not safe due to gun violence. In the economic threat condition, both articles featured circumstances where the migrant's home country was not safe due to extreme

[10]The pre-analysis plan can be found here: https://osf.io/ykqcn

[11]For example, see Sarah Stillman. 2018. "When Deportation Is a Death Sentence" *The New Yorker* and Eileen Sullivan and Miriam Jordan. 2021. "Illegal Border Crossings, Driven by Pandemic and Natural Disasters, Soar to Record High" *The New York Times*

poverty. In each respective treatment condition, the individual deported back to his home country dies from either gunshot wounds or starvation. Moreover, each respective treatment condition features a family in the second article that had a son who also died from either gun violence or starvation. Both threats were framed to be equal in severity and plausibly beyond the migrants' control.

After reading the news articles, respondents answered a series of questions about their immigration preferences. Specifically, I measured respondents' immigration attitudes toward the hypothetical migrant family mentioned in the news articles, including whether the family should be admitted into the country, whether the family was responsible for their own situation, and whether the family's migration choices were involuntary. I also measured respondents' attitudes toward various immigration policy items. Each of these outcome variables was measured by a series of questions that were combined into an index, which are described in detail in **SI**.[12] To assess whether attitudinal measures translated to behavioral outcomes, I asked respondents if they would donate money to an immigration non-profit helping migrants at the border. Finally, I asked respondents about their perceptions about broader immigration patterns as well.

Manipulation checks were included at the end of the survey after measuring the dependent variables. To assess whether threat in the migrant's home country was successfully manipulated, respondents were asked why the hypothetical migrant family tried to come to the United States. In particular, respondents were asked how likely it was that the immigrant family came to the US to avoid violence or starvation. I estimated the effects of the treatment conditions on the manipulation checks using OLS regression. In comparison to the control condition, respondents in the economic threat condition were 23 percent more likely to say that the immigrant family in the article came to avoid starvation ($p < 0.001$) and 45 percent less likely to say that the family migrated

[12]Each index was scaled on a range from 1 to 5, with higher values associated with more favorable immigration attitudes, with the exception of blame attribution.

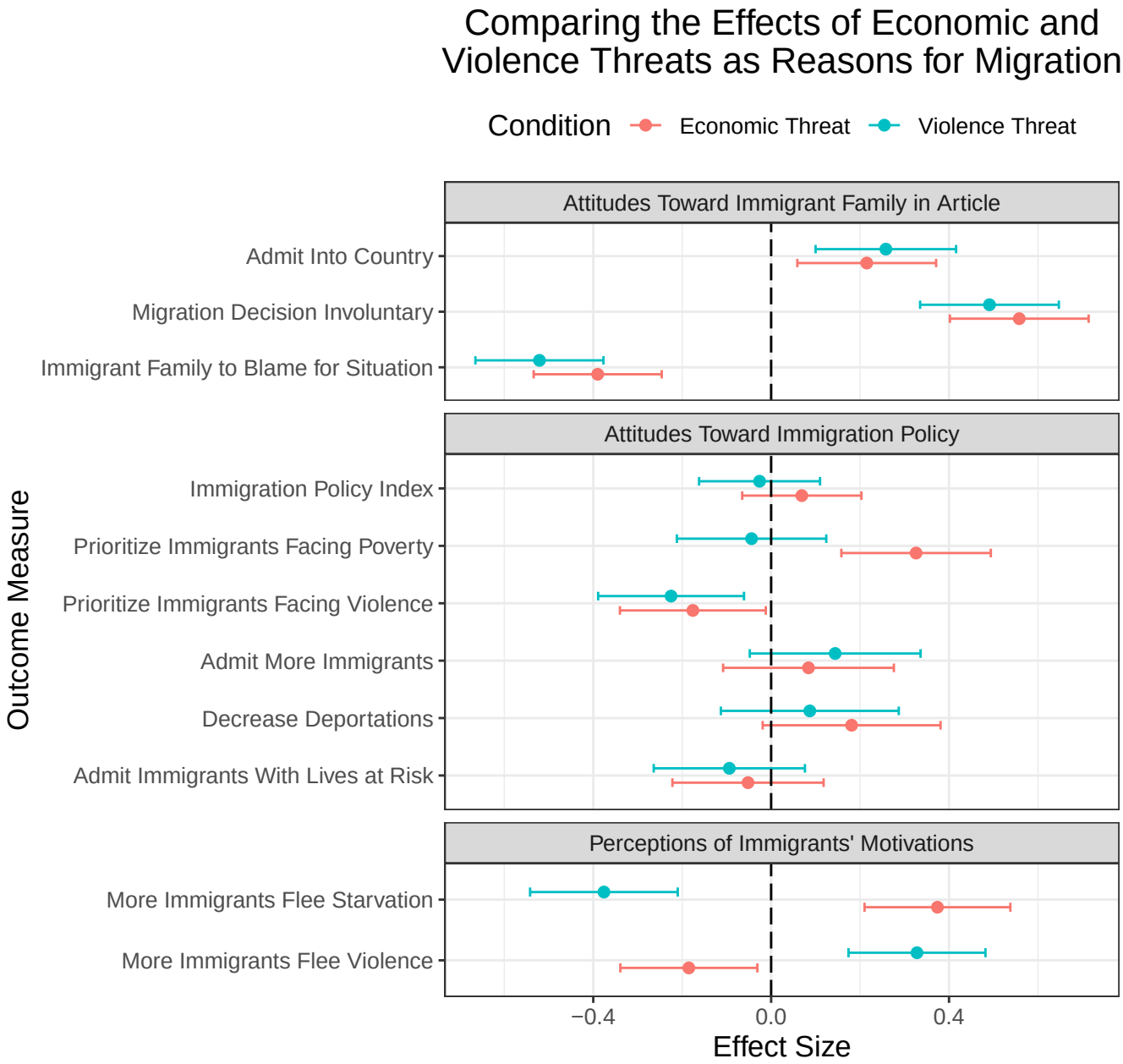
to avoid violence ($p < 0.001$). Compared to the control condition, respondents in the violence threat condition were 37.9 percent more likely to say that the family came to avoid violence ($p < 0.001$) and 27.2 percent less likely to say that the family migrated to avoid starvation ($p < 0.001$). These results provide strong evidence that type of threat was successfully manipulated.

Additional details on the research design, exact wording of the survey questions, and summary statistics of the demographic sample are included in the **SI**.

4 Results

Figure 1 displays the experimental results analyzed using OLS regression. When compared to immigrants who are not explicitly facing risks in their home country, Americans are more supportive of immigrants who experience economic threats or violence threats in their home country. Looking to the first row of **Figure 1**, regression estimates show that—relative to the control condition—economic threat improved attitudes toward the hypothetical family of immigrants by 0.215 or 7.3 percent ($d = 0.192$, $p < 0.01$) and assignment to the violence threat condition improved attitudes by 0.257 or 7.8 percent ($d = 0.269$, $p < 0.01$), adjusted for partisanship and education covariates. Results are robust to dropped partisanship and education covariates. Substantively, these effect sizes are similar in magnitude to recent, related immigration experiments that feature brief treatment stimuli (Adida et al. 2018; Kalla and Broockman 2020; Williamson et al. 2021). There are no meaningful interactions with respondent partisanship.

Similar results hold for respondents' perceptions of voluntariness (second row of **Figure 1**), attitudes toward blame attribution (third row of **Figure 1**), and perceptions of broader immigration patterns (bottom two rows of **Figure 1**). Relative to a control condition, economic threats or violence threats lead natives to express perceptions of involuntary migration decisions ($p < 0.01$),



Note: Treatment effects using multiple regression relative to the control condition, adjusted for education and partisanship covariates. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1: Experimental Results

external attributions of responsibility to immigrants' current predicaments ($p < 0.01$), and altered beliefs about broader migration patterns ($p < 0.01$).

Across each outcome variable, economic and violence threats maintain *similar effects* on natives' immigration attitudes, which suggests that both threats are comparable in terms of the severity of consequences. A planned contrast confirms that there is no meaningful difference between the effects from economic threat or violence threat ($p = 0.636$). Once the risks of staying in the home country are made equal, the unique disadvantage attributed to economic migration disappears. These results contradict the notion that natives believe that immigrants who migrate for economic reasons deserve less protection than those escaping violence.

The top row in the middle panel of **Figure 1** shows minimal effects of economic or violence threats on an index of general attitudes toward immigration policy, although the effects become significant when examining only respondents who passed the manipulation check. These null effects may be because natives use different criteria to assess individual immigrants when compared to immigrants as a broader group (Iyengar et al. 2013). Although neither treatment shifted respondents' attitudes on an index of immigration policies, economic threat did significantly shift attitudes on several specific policies. Learning dire economic conditions made respondents more likely to support a decrease in the number of deportations ($p = 0.069$) and more likely to prioritize policies admitting immigrants into the country who are suffering from poverty in their home country ($p < 0.01$). Interestingly, both treatments made respondents less likely to prioritize policies admitting immigrants into the country who are suffering from violence threats in their home country ($p < 0.01$). This effect may be due to worries about spillover effects of violence, although violence threat had no effect on any of the other policy items. Finally, the treatments also had no significant effect on the quasi-behavioral measure.

What did respondents infer in the absence of information about the immigrants discussed in

the fictional articles? Prior research highlights the policy importance of baseline assumptions and stereotypes that citizens hold toward welfare recipients in America and Denmark (Aarøe and Bang Petersen 2014). Likewise, baseline expectations about incoming immigrants may hold a similar importance in structuring American immigration policy attitudes. In a pretest control condition, 63% of respondents believed that migrants immigrating "in pursuit of a better life" were leaving their home country due to "economic opportunity." Only 20% and 25% of the same respondents said that this group of immigrants were traveling to avoid starvation and violence, respectively. This means that, at a baseline, natives assume that immigrants leave for economic opportunity, as opposed to economic or violence threat. This suggests that, if natives are provided with more details about economic deprivation in an immigrant's country, researchers and policymakers may be able to shift broader perceptions and alter public attitudes toward economic migration.

5 Conclusion

Overall, my experimental results offer notable evidence against the conventional view that natives will be less supportive of people immigrating for economic reasons when compared to people immigrating due to fear of violence. After accounting for threat in the migrant's home country, I find that natives' special penalty associated with economic types of migration is erased. These findings contribute further support that legal systems that use a binary approach to classify individuals as refugees or economic migrants are flawed (Hamlin 2021). Migration decisions are driven by a unique combination of motivations, which are often multi-causal and include some degree of economic motivations (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). My findings indicate that public attitudes do not map onto this distinction either. As displacement driven by climate change continues to blur the lines between forced and voluntary migration (Arias and Blair 2021; Cattaneo et al. 2019;

Cattaneo and Peri. 2016), it is increasingly important to study how natives perceive and respond to immigrants escaping different problems in their home country.

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