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Linus Hormuth

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Linus Hormuth
linus.hormuth@ipz.uzh.ch
University of Zurich

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URPP Equality of Opportunity, University of Zurich, Schoenberggasse 1, 8001 Zurich, Switzerland
info@equality.uzh.ch, www.urpp-equality.uzh.ch

From Acceptance to Policy: Policymakers' Attitudes toward Climate Migrants*

Linus Hormuth[†]

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Abstract: Why do favorable attitudes toward climate migrants not result in concrete policy commitments? I show that a translation gap between comparative evaluations of climate migrants and support for specific institutional measures prevents policymakers from acting on this issue. Drawing on an original survey of legislative staffers in German state parliaments ($N = 407$), I combine a conjoint experiment with direct measures of policy support. In the conjoint, staffers evaluate climate migrants comparatively favorably across the ideological spectrum but this consensus dissipates when asked about a concrete residency policy for climate migrants. Support for a residency policy is strongly structured by ideology and prior migration attitudes, and positive evaluations in the conjoint experiment translate only modestly into policy support. These findings suggest that even among political elites, normative evaluations of climate-affected groups are filtered through ideological constraints, thereby contributing to boarder debates about elite responsiveness to climate change.

Keywords: climate change, migration, policymakers, legislative staff

*The study was pre-registered on OSF (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/VSX37, see Appendix D).

[†]Department of Political Science, University of Zurich, linus.hormuth@ipz.uzh.ch.

Introduction

As climate change intensifies [1], it leads to the displacement of a growing number of people worldwide [2, 3], reshaping migration patterns toward Europe among other destinations. Yet despite growing public and political attention to climate migration, no policy framework has emerged to clarify the status of climate migrants even though existing migration policies directly impact their vulnerability [4].[1] This highlights a critical puzzle: Why might policymakers fail to translate favorable normative evaluations of climate migrants into concrete policy commitments?

An increasing number of studies investigates citizens' attitudes toward climate migrants in the U.S., Germany, Denmark, Austria and Australia, providing evidence of relative openness toward this group [5, 7–10]. These findings hint at a general pattern in industrialized countries, where climate migrants are viewed more favorably and perceived as more deserving than economic migrants but less so than political migrants. Yet, despite this comparatively positive public reception, climate migration has not been met with a uniform or sustained policy response. I argue that this disconnect reflects a translation problem from general acceptance of affected groups to supporting policy commitments which I expect to be particularly pronounced among policy makers, who operate under elevated institutional and ideological constraints. To examine this translation issue, this paper studies how legislative staff, who are key intermediaries in the policy making process [11–13], evaluate climate migrants and how such evaluations carry over, or fail to carry over, into concrete policy commitments.

I therefore conducted a pre-registered survey with legislative staff working for parliamentary groups and legislators in all 16 German state parliaments ($N = 407$) with the goal to map their perceptions of climate migrants and to better understand under what circumstances they would support a policy that addresses climate migration. The survey design that I employ is particularly suited to capture two distinct judgment domains. First, a forced-choice conjoint experiment measures respondents' comparative evaluation of political, climate and economic migrants while controlling for occupation, gender and origin,

[1] I rely on the same definition of climate migrants that has previously been used by Arias & Blair [5], namely people "who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad" [6].

revealing relative acceptance under comparison. Second, a vignette assesses respondents' willingness to support a policy addressing climate migration, a judgment that is likely subject to stronger institutional and ideological constraints. By combining both measures within the same respondents, the design allows to directly examine how potential favorable migrant evaluations translate into policy support.

The relevance of my study sample is highlighted by the fact that most staffers that took part in the survey hold important positions either as office managers or policy advisors and that a large majority states that they work on issues related to migration. The results from the conjoint experiment show that staffers are in fact more accepting of climate migrants than of economic migrants and most accepting of political migrants. Turning to the ideological dimension of these evaluations, I show that this general preference order persists when comparing left- and right-leaning staffers. With a second survey experiment, I demonstrate that framing climate migrants as involuntary slightly increases support for a policy proposal that would grant climate migrants residency, but that this cue is bounded by respondents' ideological position. I further demonstrate that positive evaluations of climate migrants in comparison to economic migrants in the conjoint experiment are modestly related to the endorsement of the policy commitment, but that such endorsement is most strongly shaped by ideology and general migration attitudes.

Beyond documenting preferences of policymakers toward climate migrants, the findings contribute to broader debates on elite responsiveness to climate change [14–17] by reflecting a more general pattern of elite decision-making under ideological and institutional constraint. When judgments are detached from concrete policy consequences, elites rely more heavily on moral and deservingness considerations when evaluating climate-affected groups. In contrast, binding policy choices seem to activate considerations related to ideology and anticipated political costs.

Theoretical Framework

Investigating the attitudes of legislative staffers toward climate migrants in potential receiver countries is of particular policy relevance, not least because climate migration so

far has remained largely unaddressed by policymakers in countries of the Global North.[2] In formulating my hypotheses, I build directly on previous research on citizens attitudes toward climate migrants and argue that legislative staffers perceive climate migrants as more deserving than economic migrants under minimal institutional constraints. I further argue that, in theory, such deservingness perceptions can extend beyond general attitudes and thereby shape support for concrete policy commitments.

Legislative staff and policymaking

Legislative staff, who work either for parliamentary groups or directly for legislators, provide a suitable population of policymakers to study how comparative evaluations of climate migrants might translate into policy. They occupy an intermediate position in the policymaking process as they are institutionally and politically constrained, yet less exposed to electoral accountability than the legislators they serve. This intermediate position makes their need for striking a balance between their own normative evaluations and constraints set by institutional and ideological requirements particularly apparent.

Importantly, previous research shows how legislative staff are not merely passive administrators. Influential tasks such as the drafting of motions or speeches and the provision of policy advice provide leeway for discretion and the personal preferences of staffers to be pivotal [19, 20] and allow them to engage in "policy shaping" to a limited yet considerable degree [11]. In the U.S. context, Montgomery & Nyhan [12] show that the exchange of staff between legislators predicts similarity in voting patterns, while Otjes & Brandsma [13] demonstrate for the Netherlands that staff availability is related to legislators' parliamentary activity. Legislative staff is therefore closely embedded within the legislative process which highlights how their attitudes toward rising policy challenges carry political relevance. At the same time, staffers make up a distinct group of professionals that can be characterized as high status, that strongly identifies with their party, and that is professionally socialized into the norms and constraints of a particular ideological environment [21, 22]. Moens [22] shows that Dutch political staffers are broadly congruent with party members in their attitudes on key political issues, suggesting that the ideological imprint of the party context runs deep. This means that when staffers evaluate

[2] With the exception of Australia that has recently reached a bilateral agreement with Tuvalu, granting 280 citizens from Tuvalu permanent residency in Australia in order to address the "existential threat posed by climate change" [18].

policy proposals, they are likely to do so not only on the basis of their personal normative judgments but also with awareness of the political costs and ideological constraints that define their professional environment.

Attitudes of legislative staff toward climate migrants

A broad body of literature investigates citizens' individual attitudes toward migrants [e.g. 23–26]. When considering reasons for migration, these studies indicate that citizens generally view migrants leaving their home country for political reasons, such as war or persecution, as more deserving than those migrating for economic reasons. Other studies further show how perceived involuntariness, i.e., whether or not migrants have no other choice but to leave their home country, influence the acceptance of migrants [27–29]. In general, citizens tend to view politically displaced migrants as less responsible for their circumstances, which in turn elicits more sympathetic emotional and attitudinal responses and leads to higher levels of public acceptance compared to economic migrants [cf. 30].

Concerning climate migration, an increasing number of studies investigates citizens' attitudes toward climate migrants in comparison to political and economic migrants in different settings and under various conditions. One important strand of this literature looks at host attitudes toward climate migrants in countries of the Global South [31, 32]. Concerning countries of the Global North, Helbling [8] is the first to report that German citizens are substantively more accepting of environmental migrants than of economic migrants.

A growing body of research corroborates this initial finding across a range of national contexts, drawing on citizen samples from Germany and the U.S. [5], Denmark [7], Austria [9] and Australia [10]. Using mostly conjoint experiments similar to the ones used in other studies on attitudes toward migrants [24, 25], they consistently show that citizens are more accepting of climate migrants in comparison to economic migrants but less so in comparison to political migrants. However, a recent conjoint experiment conducted with U.S. citizens challenges this pattern, finding no greater acceptance of climate migrants compared to economic migrants [33].

While some differences in findings across studies may reflect variation in experimental design and framing,[3] taken together the evidence points to a broadly shared, yet slightly contested, average preference order of citizens in industrialized democracies: political migrants are preferred over climate migrants while both are preferred over economic migrants. This ordering is consistent with arguments emphasizing perceived involuntariness as a key driver of deservingness judgments [5]. As climate-related events are generally beyond individual control, climate migrants might be seen to some degree as involuntary migrants. However, since those affected oftentimes retain some scope for adaptation in their home country, climate migrants occupy an intermediate position between political and economic migrants. Overall, ascribed responsibility appears to structure attitudinal responses toward climate migrants by shaping normatively grounded deservingness judgments [cf. 30].

So far, limited evidence suggests that such preference structures might be not solely confined to mass publics: Martínez i Coma & Birch [10] report, based on interviews with Australian legislators, that the preferences of elected officials generally align with those of citizens. Building on the substantial literature on citizen attitudes toward climate migrants, as well as on the emerging evidence on the perspectives of political elites, I argue that under minimal institutional constraints, legislative staff likewise rely on deservingness judgments when distinguishing between migrant categories. I therefore test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *Climate migrants are seen more favorably than economic migrants but less favorably than political migrants by legislative staff.*

A broader body of research shows that both voters [34–36] and political parties [37, 38] on the political right tend to hold more restrictive views on immigration compared to the political left. These ideological differences might also extend to comparative evaluations of climate migrants. In particular, right-leaning staff might apply narrower deservingness criteria when assessing migrant categories. Because climate migrants might be perceived as only partially involuntary, they may be viewed less favorably by right-leaning staffers

[3] Differences for example exist in how climate or economic migrants are described in the textual treatments. Helbling [8] frames climate migrants as having no other choice but to migrate, in the survey vignette. Hedegaard [7] simply refers to "climate changes", while Arias & Blair [5] refer to different specific climatic events and Adman *et al.* [33] to a natural disaster or poverty caused by climate change. Further differences exist in how the baseline level of economic migrants is framed.

than by left-leaning staffers, even under minimal institutional constraints. I therefore additionally test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *Right-leaning legislative staff is less open toward climate migrants than left-leaning legislative staff.*[4]

Finally, deservingness judgments might shape not only attitudes toward migrant groups, but also inform support for more concrete, and politically costly policy commitments. To examine whether such judgments extend beyond abstract evaluations, I leverage variation in the perceived agency of climate migrants. Importantly, the degree of involuntariness associated with climate migration differs across types of climate-related events that affect migrants' countries of origin. For instance, individuals affected by certain events like droughts may have access to alternative adaptation strategies, whereas those facing events like sea-level rises often have fewer options [3, 39, 40]. Accordingly, I derive the third testable hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: *Legislative staff is more open toward a policy proposal that allows involuntary climate migrants to move to Germany than toward a proposal that allows voluntary climate migrants to move to Germany.*

Results

In presenting the findings from the survey, I first examine staffers' relative evaluations of climate migrants in comparison to economic and political migrants within the conjoint and then assess their willingness to support a concrete policy commitment.

Staffers' relative acceptance of climate migrants

The main findings from the conjoint experiment are presented in Figure 1 that reports estimated Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) for the four attributes included in the conjoint, i.e., reason for migration, occupation, gender and origin. I first look at the focal attribute of interest, i.e., reason for migration. Changing a migrant's reason for migration from severe recession to severe drought increases the probability of selection by 19 percentage points, changing it to severe war increases the probability by 40 percentage

[4]Note that this hypothesis is phrased slightly differently from the preregistered version, though the underlying theoretical expectation remains unchanged.

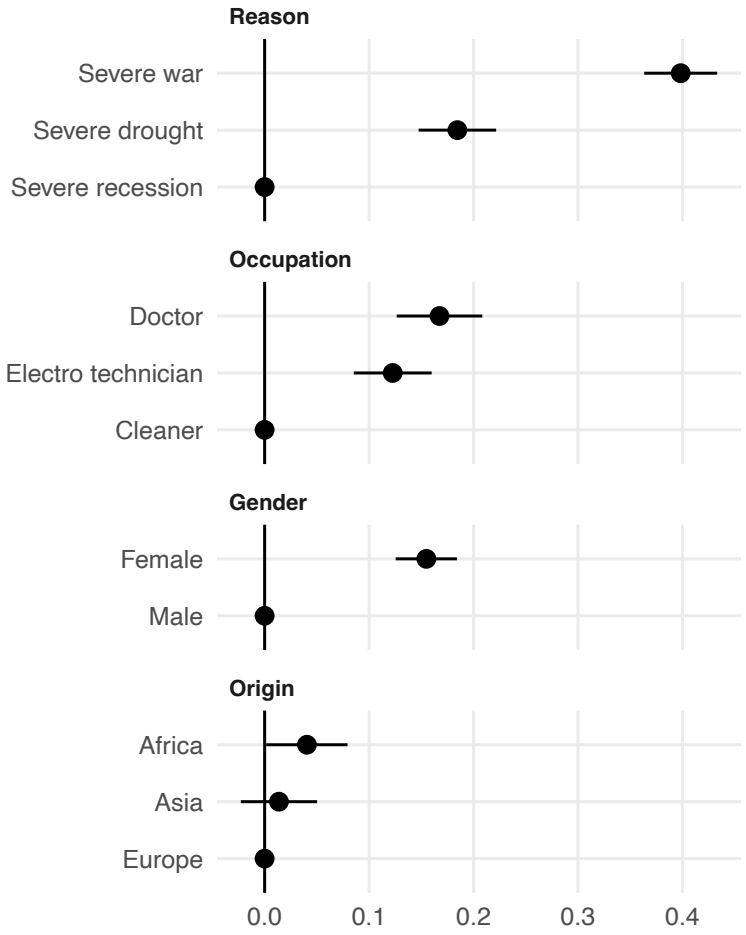

Figure 1: Average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for the conjoint experiment ($N_{respondents} = 407; N_{choices} = 4070$). Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals from respondent-clustered and robust standard errors. Numerical results are reported in Table C.1 in Appendix C.

points. Both effects are highly statistically significant and very substantial in size. The difference between severe drought and severe war is also sizable (21 percentage points) and statistically significant. Reported Marginal Means (MMs) [41] in Table C.7 in Appendix C show that these results do not depend on the chosen baseline level.

Turning to the choice probabilities related to the other attributes, the estimated AMCEs for occupation and gender are consistent with the results of previous research on citizens' attitudes [24, 25]. Profiles with potentially higher status occupations are more likely to be chosen than profiles where cleaner is the stated occupation (17 percentage points for doctor and 12 percentage points for electro technician). Female migrants are 16 percentage points more likely to be chosen than male profiles. Lastly, a migrant's origin

in itself seems to have the smallest effect on respondents' choice in the overall sample. However, when looking at interactions between origin and reason for migration, severe drought has a substantially larger effect for migrants from Africa or Asia compared to those from Europe (see Table C.6 in Appendix C). Additionally, the estimated effects from these three attributes also help to contextualize the size of the treatment effects of the reasons for migration. The effect of a severe drought in comparison to a severe recession on choice probabilities is as big as the effect of a migrant being a doctor in comparison to being a cleaner. At the same time, the effect of severe war in comparison to a severe recession is more than twice the size of that. This shows that, in this particular setup, the stated reason for migration seemed to have been the most important attribute on which respondents based their decisions.[5] Overall, these initial findings from the conjoint analysis are supportive of **Hypothesis 1** and indicate that legislative staff are more accepting of climate migrants than of economic migrants and most accepting of political migrants. In addition, I report on two important robustness tests in Appendix C. First, by applying weights that adjust for the population-level ideological distribution in all German state parliaments, I show that the results are generalizable to the overall population of staffers in German state parliaments. Second, I demonstrate that the main results remain robust when using bias-corrected estimates that account for measurement error in conjoint experiments [42].

As a manipulation check, directly following the conjoint tasks, respondents were also asked how much in need they perceived migrants to be under each of the three reasons for migration used in the conjoint experiment. As shown in Figure C.4 in Appendix C, perceived neediness closely tracks the preference ordering reported above indicating that the textual treatments successfully conveyed distinct migration scenarios and show that respondents have, on average, distinct sets of beliefs with regards to the personal situations of the three different types of migrants.

Next, I test **Hypothesis 2** and examine the ideological dimension of legislative staffers' acceptance of different types of migrants.[6] I therefore report MMs [41] for left- and

[5]This pattern cannot be explained by ordering effects, since attribute order was randomized across respondents.

[6]I note that I also preregistered subgroup analyses based on respondents' beliefs about whether climate change will lead to more migration to Germany. As shown in Section , however, most respondents do hold this belief, which would mean that dividing the sample accordingly would lead to a very uneven split.

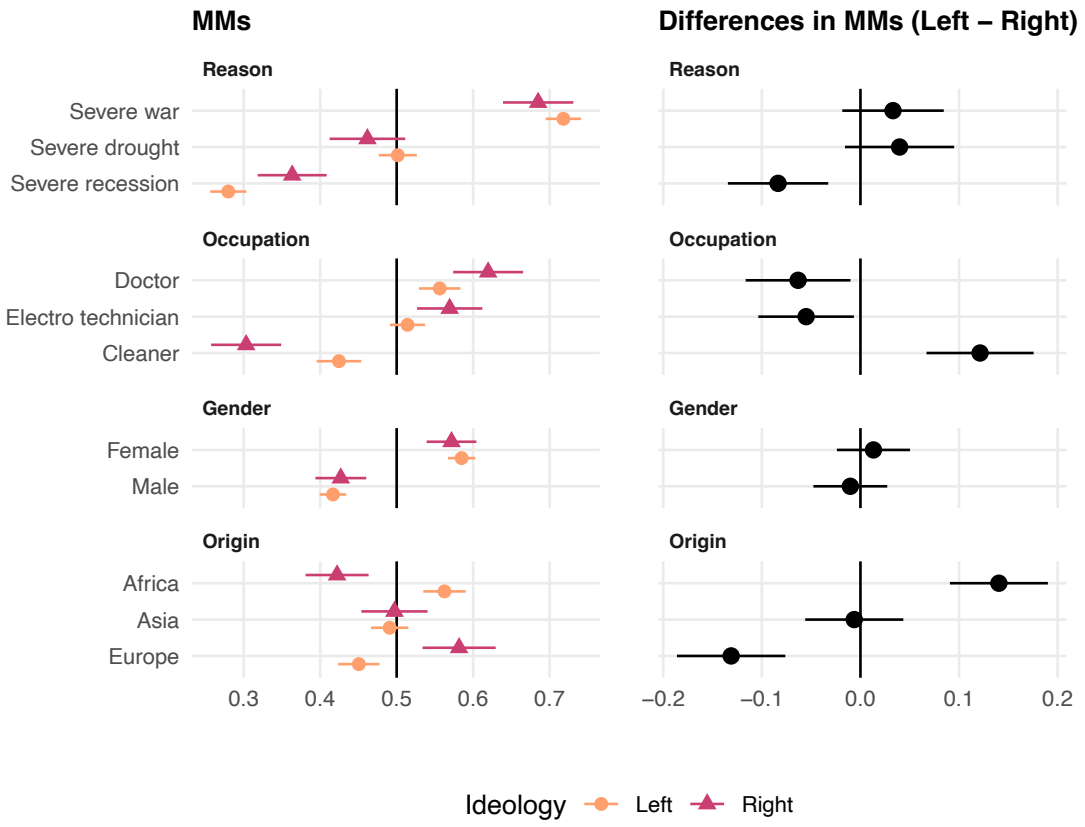

Figure 2: MMs for left- ($N_{respondents} = 302; N_{choices} = 3020$) and right-leaning ($N_{respondents} = 105; N_{choices} = 1050$) legislative staff and differences in MMs between both groups. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals from respondent-clustered and robust standard errors.

right-leaning staffers, along with differences between them, in Figure 2.[7] Notably, the relative ranking of reasons for migration remains unaffected by respondents' ideology, as shown by the general order of choice probabilities of all three reasons. Moreover, although the choice probabilities for migrants leaving their home country because of a severe drought are slightly higher for left-leaning staffers (50 percent) than for right-leaning staffers (46 percent), this difference is not statistically significant. The same pattern holds for migrants fleeing a severe war. By contrast, right-leaning staffers were more likely to choose a migrant profile citing a severe recession as the reason for migration (36 percent) than left-leaning staffers (28 percent), with the difference being statistically significant. Looking at the other attributes, particularly occupation and origin, reveals further heterogeneity between left- and right- leaning staffers. Right-leaning staffers seem

[7]Self-identified ideology was measured with an eleven point Likert scale where 0 indicated left and 10 right. Staffers are counted as left if they selected values from 0 to 4 and as right otherwise.

to discriminate more against cleaners than left-leaning staffers, also in comparison to the other two potentially higher-status occupations. Additionally, left-leaning staffers are more accepting of migrants from Africa and less accepting of migrants from Europe while right-leaning staffers show the opposite pattern, being less accepting of migrants from Africa and more accepting of migrants from Europe. Overall, these results do not support **Hypothesis 2** and do not indicate that left-leaning staffers are more accepting of climate migrants than their right-leaning counterparts. In this forced-choice conjoint setting, as it is commonly used in studies measuring attitudes toward migrants, left- and right-staffers evaluate climate migrants in fairly similar ways. Importantly, while ideology does not meaningfully differentiate how staffers evaluate climate migrants comparatively under minimal institutional constraints, it becomes the dominant predictor once a concrete policy commitment is introduced, as the next section shows.

Lastly, I test whether the main findings from the conjoint analysis remain unaffected when looking at those legislative staffers in the sample who are most relevant to parliamentary processes or the specific policy field. The relative ranking of reasons for migration and the related order of choice probabilities in fact does not change when looking at staffers with influential positions, i.e., office managers and policy advisors, (see Figure C.8 in Appendix C) or at staff that works on issues related to migration (see Figure C.9 in Appendix C).

Staffers' willingness to support a policy proposal

The previous section demonstrates that staffers are open to climate migrants, at least relative to economic migrants. I now examine the extent to which this acceptance translates into a concrete institutional commitment, as reflected in staffers' support for a policy proposal granting climate migrants residency in Germany. Notably, whereas respondents make relative choices between hypothetical migrant profiles in the conjoint experiment, they are now asked to evaluate a general institutional pathway, which may activate a distinct set of considerations. Specifically, I estimate the treatment effect of describing climate migrants as involuntary in comparison to voluntary and compare this effect to other correlates of policy support. Finally, to more directly link the stated preferences from the conjoint experiment to policy support, I construct an index capturing respon-

dents' relative openness toward climate migrants compared to economic migrants, as stated in the conjoint tasks.[8]

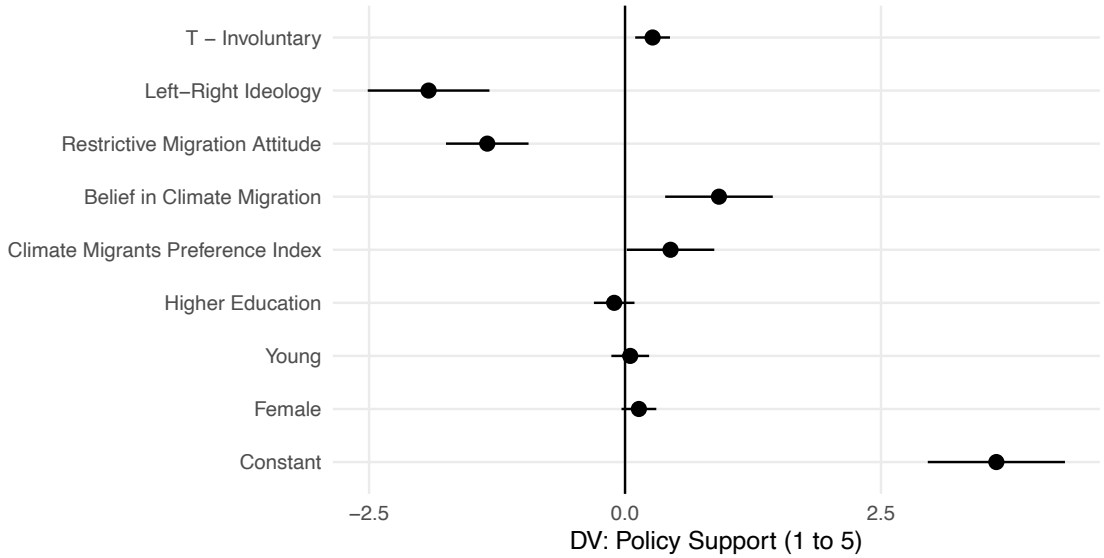

Figure 3: Estimated treatment effect of involuntariness and correlates of policy support ($N = 388$). The dependent variable is agreement to the policy proposal measured on a five point Likert scale (1 = not at all agree, 5 = very much agree). Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals from robust standard errors. Numerical results are reported in Table C.3, model 3.

Figure 3 reports the results from the main regression of the agreement to the policy proposal on the binary treatment indicator (*T1 – Involuntary*), additional control variables and the climate migration openness index.[9] While the treatment variable and the socio-demographic indicators (Higher Education, Young, Female) are binary variables, other predictors are rescaled to range from 0 to 1 to facilitate comparability of coefficient magnitudes. In this full regression model, framing climate migrants as involuntary in the vignette experiment has an average positive effect on support for the policy proposal. The *Involuntary* treatment increases support on average by 0.27 points on a five point scale ($p = 0.002$). However, comparing the magnitude of this effect to the associations

[8]In order to construct this index, I compute a respondent's overall selection rate for profiles citing *severs drought* as the reason for migration motives and the corresponding rate for profiles citing *severe recession* as the reason. The difference between those two, rescaled to range from 0 to 1, serves as a respondent-level measure of relative openness toward climate migrants. This index can be computed for 388 out of the 407 respondents.

[9]Note that a slight imbalance occurred in the allocation of the treatment assignment and particularly left-leaning staffers have been more likely to receive *T – Involuntary* and right leaning staffer more likely to receive *C – Voluntary* (see also Table C.2 in Appendix C). For this reason I only show the full regression model with control variables here. Results from different model specifications are shown in the Table C.3.

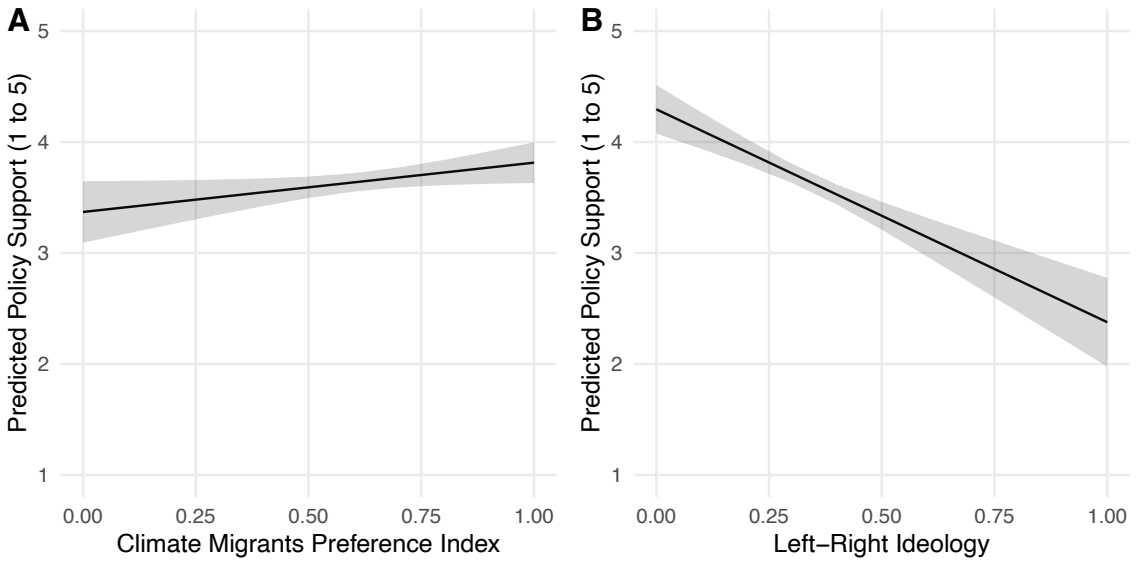

Figure 4: Predicted policy support by (A) stated preferences for climate migrants in the conjoint experiment and (B) left-right ideology. Support for the policy proposal is measured on a five point Likert scale (1 = not at all agree, 5 = very much agree). Shaded gray areas indicate 95% confidence intervals from robust standard errors. Values are based on the regression model reported in Figure 3 where all other covariates are set to their mean values.

between the dependent variable and other observables reveals that the treatment effect is comparatively small. Instead, support for the policy proposal is driven to a much greater extent by staffers' ideological position, their overall position on immigration, i.e., whether they see increasing migration to Germany as a problem, as well as their beliefs about whether climate change will lead to higher levels of migration to Germany. Notably, acceptance of climate migrants relative to economic migrants in the conjoint tasks is positively related to policy support, as indicated by the positive and statistically significant estimate of the index ($p = 0.042$). However, when compared to left–right ideology, the substantive magnitude of this relationship is limited. As shown in Figure 4, predicted policy support increases only modestly with stated preferences for climate migrants, whereas left-right ideology is a much stronger predictor. Moving from left to right on the full scale corresponds to a pronounced shift from supporting to opposing the policy proposal. Lastly, including survey weights does not substantively change these results (cf. Table C.3, model 4).

Overall, these findings provide only limited support for **Hypothesis 3**. Although I identify a statistically significant treatment effect of the involuntariness cue, its magnitude

is comparatively small. Moreover, while acceptance in the conjoint experiment translates to some extent into more concrete commitments, the support for the policy proposal is to large parts structured along ideological lines and more general migration attitudes.

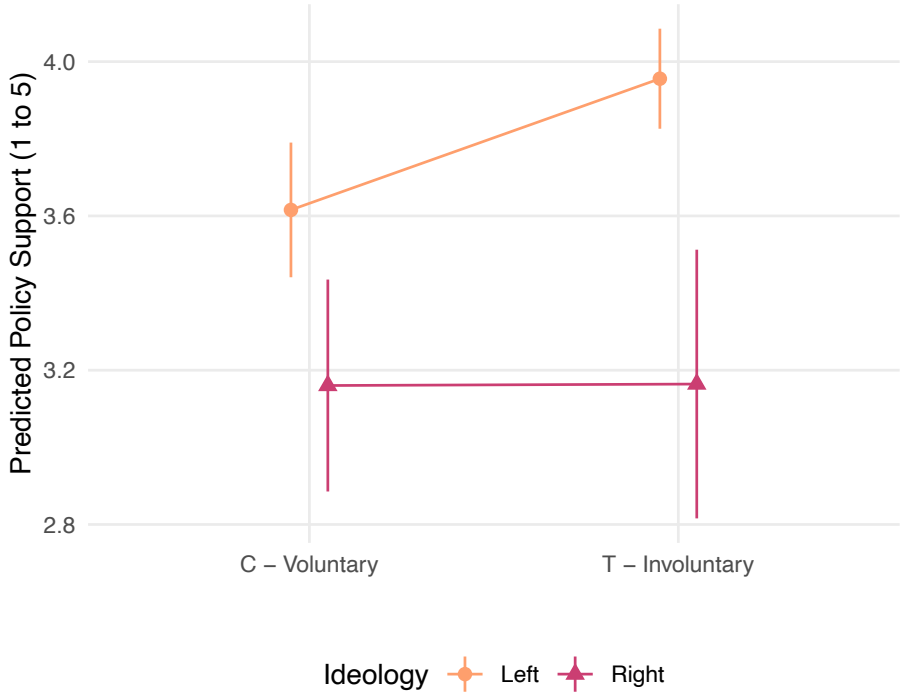

Figure 5: Predicted policy support by treatment condition and ideology ($N = 388$). Support for the policy proposal is measured on a five point Likert scale (1 = not at all agree, 5 = very much agree). Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals from robust standard errors. Values are based on a regression model interacting the treatment variable with a binarized ideology measure (cf. Table C.3, model 5) where all other covariates are set to their mean values.

Lastly, I investigate the effect heterogeneity of the involuntariness cue along ideological lines. Figure 5 therefore reports predicted levels of support by treatment condition and ideological orientation based on a regression model interacting the treatment variable with a binarized ideology measure. Overall, framing climate migrants as involuntary increases support among left-leaning staffers, whereas support among right-leaning staffers remains unchanged. Consistent with this pattern, marginal-effects estimates based on the same regression model indicate a positive treatment effect among left-leaning respondents and no detectable effect among right-leaning respondents (cf. Table C.4), although the interaction term itself is imprecisely estimated ($p = 0.141$; cf. Table C.3, model 5), likely due to small sample size. Once survey weights are applied to account for the undersam-

pling of right-leaning staffers, the interaction term turns statistically significant at the 10 percent level ($p = 0.056$; cf. Table C.3, model 6), indicating that the treatment effect is significantly stronger among left-leaning respondents in the target population. Overall, the involuntariness cue appears to activate deservingness considerations only among left-leaning staffers. This heterogeneity indicates that the frame does not function as a general persuasion tool but rather as a conditional cue whose effectiveness is bounded by respondents' ideological predispositions.

Discussion

In this article, I investigate how policymakers respond to climate migrants. Drawing on deservingness theory, I examine legislative staffers' acceptance of climate migrants across two distinct judgment domains. A conjoint experiment measures staffers comparative acceptance of climate migrants under minimal institutional constraints. Introducing a concrete policy proposal in the second step then raises the political stakes by adding a binding institutional commitment. Together, these two steps provide an answer on the question posed at the outset of this article: why do favorable attitudes toward climate migrants not translate into policy? Importantly, the two experiments should not be seen as competing measures of the same underlying attitude and their findings therefore not as contradictory. Rather, they tap two distinct stages of political judgment and thereby provide complementary insights into how policymakers' normative assessment of climate migrants shape their support for related policies. Better understanding this process is critical, since the political and policy responses to climate migration directly shape how vulnerable climate migrants are to their surrounding circumstances [4, 43].

The findings reveal that comparative evaluations and policy support operate on two different levels with distinct empirical patterns, and that legislative staffers treat them differently. When staffers evaluate climate migrants in the conjoint scenarios, they favor climate migrants over economic migrants. These structured deservingness considerations hold across ideological lines and are in line with findings from previous studies on citizen samples [5, 7, 8, 32]. However, once that judgment is translated into an institutionally binding commitment, as done by the policy vignette, a different logic takes over. While preferences expressed in the conjoint experiment only modestly translate into policy sup-

port, left-right ideology and prior migration attitudes become the dominant predictors. These findings are in line with research emphasizing the role of partisanship for climate policy support and behavior among citizens [44]. While the present study cannot directly compare legislative staffers with citizens, the effect of ideology on policy support could plausibly be stronger among this group than among citizens. While ideological identification has been shown to be particularly strong among political staff [45], a different study finds that ideological polarization on climate change is markedly stronger among politicians than among citizens [46]. Moreover, the involuntariness cue introduced in the policy vignette, which taps on deservingness considerations, only modestly moves staffers support, and this effect is contingent upon their ideological predisposition as evidenced by the heterogeneous treatment effect. This contrast suggests that while staffers recognize the deservingness of climate migrants in principle, translating these judgments into support for concrete policies is constrained by broader political considerations. Importantly, this does not imply that policymakers' normative judgments are irrelevant. Rather, such judgments are filtered through ideological constraints and anticipated political costs, which however may limit their impact on policy support.

The distinction between the two different judgment domains also helps to better understand the heterogeneous treatment effect of the involuntariness cue in the policy vignette. The finding that it only increased policy support among left-leaning staffers suggests that deservingness is not a simple persuasion tool. As the findings from the conjoint experiment show that left- and right-leaning staffers employ broadly similar deservingness criteria under minimal institutional constraint, the involuntariness treatment in the policy vignette should have increased support across ideological groups if it simply provided new information on deservingness. The fact that this was not the case suggests that the cue was filtered through rather than added on top of respondents prior ideological commitments. While left leaning staffers that might have already been predisposed in favor of the proposal treated the involuntariness cue as confirmatory, right leaning staffers that might have already been predisposed against the proposal did not update their support. This finding is consistent with accounts of motivated reasoning, which emphasize the role of partisanship and prior attitudes in shaping how individuals process policy relevant information [47, 48], a pattern also previously documented among political elites [49]. Motivated partisan cognition in general plays an important role in the formation of cli-

mate attitudes [50, 51] and partisan identity has also been shown to be able to override effects of issue framing in other climate related policy domains [52].

The reported findings also carry implications for the politics of climate change more broadly. They indicate that policy inaction with regards to the support of climate-affected groups may persist not because elites disagree about who is affected or deserving, but because the translation from moral recognition to institutional commitment is regulated by ideological constraints that operate largely independently of normative judgment. This insight contributes to broader debates on the responsiveness of political elites to policy challenges posed by climate change [14, 15, 17]. Moreover, future research should examine more closely how policymakers process the needs and demands of other climate-affected groups, and whether deservingness carries a different weight for domestic, non-migrant constituencies. Because immigrants tend to score lowest on deservingness perceptions among groups generally [53, 54], deservingness might matter more for other climate-affected populations, such as those disproportionally harmed by climate events like heatwaves or wildfires.

Lastly, the findings have also practical implications for those seeking support for climate migration policy. If deservingness appeals mainly reinforce support among left-leaning policymakers, who might be already sympathetic, rather than persuading those who might be opposed, then strategies relying solely on moral claims might be limited in their success to broaden coalitions among policymakers and political elites more broadly. Besides appealing to deservingness considerations one should also consider addressing perceived political and electoral costs, in order to close the translation gap reported here.

Methods

To test my hypotheses, I conducted an original survey with legislative staff from all 16 German state parliaments that included two embedded survey experiments ($N = 407$).[10] The first experiment employed a conjoint design to measure respondents' comparative evaluations of climate migrants relative to economic and political migrants under minimal institutional constraint. The second experiment used a between-respondent vignette

[10] A detailed description of the recruitment strategy is provided in Appendix A.1. The survey was opened a total of 513 times, with 407 respondents completing the questions related to the two survey experiments. These observations were then included in the final dataset.

design in order to identify the effect of an involuntariness cue on the support for a policy proposal granting climate migrants residency. Besides directly testing how deservingness judgments shape migrant categorizations and policy commitments among legislative staffers, this setup provides a unique opportunity for assessing how the relative acceptance of climate migrants translates into concrete policy support within the same respondents.

Case selection

Regarding the selection of legislative staffers in German state parliaments as target population, several important considerations are warranted. As Germany ranks globally among the top destination countries for international migration [55], migration poses a high salience policy issue for policymakers and legislative staff in Germany. At the same time, positions of German parties on immigration are anything but uniform and party-internal dissent on immigration policy varies likewise across parties as shown by the latest round of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey [56] (see Figure C.1 Appendix C). Moreover, the topic of climate migration is not new to the German political agendas as it has already been addressed by ministries [57], federal agencies [58] and other interest groups [59, 60]. These features make Germany a particularly relevant case for studying individual attitudes of legislative staff toward climate migrant.

I further note that I surveyed staffers at the state rather than the federal level. While major aspects of migration policy, particularly those related to asylum, fall under federal jurisdiction, German states retain meaningful autonomy in the administration and implementation of immigration policy [61]. Moreover, most federal legislation requires the approval of the states in the upper chamber of parliament (*German: Bundesrat*). Taken together, state-level legislatures are highly relevant in German migration policymaking. Consequently, legislative staff in state parliaments constitute a substantively meaningful and appropriate population for addressing the research questions of this study.

Sample description

Given that this study constitutes, to my knowledge, the first large-scale survey of legislative staff in Germany, Table 1 presents summary statistics describing the composition of the sample.

Table 1: Summary statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Female	0.53	0.50
Migration background	0.14	0.35
Younger than 35	0.36	0.48
Higher education	0.80	0.40
Works on migration	0.66	0.47
Position		
Office manager	0.22	0.42
Policy advisor	0.48	0.50
Press officer	0.06	0.23
Office assistant	0.15	0.36
Student assistant	0.03	0.16
Intern	0.02	0.14
Left-Right Ideology (1–11)	4.42	2.10
Restrictive Migration Attitude (1–5)	2.57	1.30
Climate Migration Belief (1–5)	4.35	0.95
N	407	

Note: All variables are binary indicators, except Left-Right Ideology, Restrictive Migration Attitude and Belief in Climate Migration.

The sample is relatively balanced with regards to age and gender, as about half of the respondents are women and rouhgly a third a younger than 35. Staffers in the sample are predominantly highly educated and a relatively small share reports a migration background, compared to 29.7 percent in the overall German population [62].[11] The lack of population-level data on legislative staff precludes direct conclusions about the representativeness of the sample. The pattern is nonetheless consistent with the well-documented underrepresentation of individuals with a migration background in politics [63] and the likely educational requirements for staffing roles in parliamentary groups. Further, most respondents occupy positions of substantive responsibility and potential influence, with 70 percent serving as office managers or policy advisors. 66 percent report that their work involves migration-related issues,[12] underscoring the sample's relevance for studying migration policy. A slight majority of respondents self-identify as ideologically left-leaning

[11] Migration background was measured in accordance with the definition used by the Federal Statistical Office: A person is considered having a migration background if they themselves or at least one parent do not have German citizenship at birth.

[12] The exact question read: "Do you deal with issues relating to migration in your work?" *(German: "Haben Sie in Ihrer Tätigkeit mit Themen zu tun, die Migration betreffen?")*

and consistent with this pattern respondents on average express comparatively less restrictive attitudes toward migration.[13] Lastly, a clear majority believes that climate change will lead to increased migration to Germany, showing that climate migration is in fact a relevant issue for most of the staffers that took part in the survey.[14]

Overall, participating staffers predominantly occupy influential roles, frequently engage with migration-related issues, and take the issue of climate migration seriously, thereby underscoring the substantive relevance of the sample for addressing the research questions. Given slight imbalance toward left-leaning respondents, I apply survey weights in later stages of the analysis to improve inference to the target population of legislative staff in German state parliaments.

Conjoint experimental design

To measure staffers' comparative evaluations of different migrant categories and to examine how deservingness judgments shape these evaluations, I included a conjoint experiment as a central experimental component of the survey. Notably, Arias & Blair [5], Hedegaard [7], and Adman *et al.* [33] also employ conjoint designs to estimate citizens' attitudes toward climate migrants. Adopting a similar design not only facilitates comparability with prior studies but also enables an assessment of whether established patterns in public opinion extend to political elites operating within legislative institutions.

Table 2: Conjoint design specification

Attribute of migrant	Levels
Reason for migration	Severe recession, Severe drought, Severe war
Occupation	Cleaner, Electro technician, Doctor
Gender	Male, Female
Origin	Europe, Africa, Asia

Note: All attribute levels were randomly assigned and displayed with equal probability. The order in which the attributes were presented in the conjoint table was randomized between respondents to mitigate potential ordering effects.

Within the conjoint tasks respondents were presented a total of six conjoint tables, each displaying two migrant profiles. However, only the first five tables were used for the main

[13] The question measuring migration attitudes read: "Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'Increasing migration is a problem for Germany'?"

[14] The question measuring climate migration beliefs read: "Do you believe that climate change will lead to more migration to Germany?".

analysis, resulting in 4,070 individual migrant profiles and corresponding choice observations (407 respondents × 5 tasks × 2 profiles). Following each table, respondents were asked to choose which of the two persons they would prefer to allow to move to Germany, thereby employing a so called forced choice design. Each of the four attributes and their levels used to describe migrant profiles are shown in Table 2. The main focal attribute thereby is a migrant's reason for migration that took on three levels: (1) severe recession, (2) severe drought and (3) severe war. These correspond to economic, climate, and political migrants, respectively, with each level referring to a single, external event beyond the migrant's direct control. This approach avoids implying any pull factors related to the receiving country within the textual treatments and should therefore allow for greater comparability of the three treatment levels. I also intentionally limited the number of attribute levels to three to enhance statistical power.[15] This seemed especially important, as statistical power is of particular concern when fielding survey experiments with naturally limited samples of political elites [65]. The inclusion of additional attributes served two key purposes in this particular case. First, it turned the conjoint tasks into more realistic decision scenarios. Second, it allowed to control for other confounding migrant attributes, thereby mitigating so-called masking [66], where respondents infer multiple characteristics from a single attribute. However, I deliberately limited the number of non-focal attributes about which I have no direct theoretical expectations to three as the causal effect of interest is that of the reason for migration. Importantly, all attribute levels are formulated in a way so that all possible combinations of attribute levels result in realistic migrant profiles.[16]

Policy vignette design

To test whether deservingness judgments also shape staffers' support for a specific policy commitment, and precisely whether this support is affected by beliefs of climate migrants' involuntariness, I included a second vignette experiment at the end of the survey.

This second survey experiment was designed to enhance external validity by presenting respondents with a realistic policy proposal, while isolating the effect of involuntariness

[15]Before fielding the survey I ran a priori power analyses for conjoint experiments according to Schuessler & Freitag [64] which supported this decision.

[16]More detail on the estimation strategy employed in analyzing the conjoint experiment is provided in Appendix B.

on support for a concrete institutional pathway granting climate migrants residency. In order to communicate realistic scenarios I grounded involuntariness in actual climatic events and operationalize **T – Involuntary** by stating that migrants' home country has become uninhabitable due to rising sea levels, and **C – Voluntary** by stating that migrants face economic difficulties due to droughts. While migrants are depicted as having no alternative but to leave their home country in the former scenario they might retain other options for adaptation besides migration in the latter one. Both conditions thus convey severe environmental stress while systematically varying migrants' degree of agency. The vignette first informed respondents about the current legal status quo and then asked about their support for the policy proposal, measured on a five-point Likert scale. The two versions which were equally randomized between respondents read as follows:[17]

> "Finally, we would like to ask you for your opinion on a specific policy proposal. Currently, international and national refugee law does not provide any protection for those affected by climate change. What is your opinion on the following proposal? 'People, **[T – Involuntary:] whose home country has become uninhabitable due to rising sea levels / [C – Voluntary:] who have difficulties making a living due to droughts in their home country**, should be allowed to move to Germany.'"

Data availability

Data will be made available upon publication under https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/J8JU1K.

Code availability

Code will be made available upon publication under https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/J8JU1K.

[17] More detail on the estimation strategy employed in analyzing the policy vignette is provided in Appendix B.

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Ethical statement

The study design was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Konstanz (45/2021 and 10/2021).

Competing interest

The author reports no competing interest.

Appendix for "From Acceptance to Policy: Policymakers' Attitudes toward Climate Migrants"

A Additional information on survey design **2**

A.1 Recruitment strategy 2

A.2 Measures against survey satisficing 3

A.3 Survey invitation e-mail 4

A.4 Survey questionnaire 5

B Estimation strategies **8**

B.1 Conjoint experiment 8

B.2 Policy vignette 10

C Additional analyses **11**

C.1 Robustness of conjoint findings 11

C.2 Additional analyses: Conjoint experiment 15

C.3 Additional analyses: Policy vignette 21

D Pre-registration **24**

Appendix References **29**

A Additional information on survey design

A.1 Recruitment strategy

The target population of the survey were legislative staff in all 16 German state parliaments from every parliamentary group that was represented in a given parliament at the time the survey was fielded. This included all major German parties and some parties that were only represented in a single or only a few states, such as the SSW in Schleswig-Holstein, the 'Bündnis Deutschland' in Bremen, the CSU in Bavaria or the newer party BSW that was present in the state parliaments of Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg at the time the survey was fielded .

In order to distribute the survey among legislative staff and invite them to participate, I contacted the managing directors (*German: Geschäftsführung*) of all 80 parliamentary groups between January and March 2025, requesting that they circulate the invitation e-mail among their staff (see Appendix A.3). Initial phone calls with managing directors from different groups confirmed that they were indeed the appropriate contact as they had access to the relevant internal mailing lists. In some cases, the names and contact information of managing directors were not publicly available. In these cases, I reached out via the general contact addresses of the respective parliamentary groups which, however, rendered the recruitment of staff from these groups more difficult. This was especially the case for many groups of the party AfD.

This recruitment strategy resulted in a scenario where the individual response of staffers to the survey was preceded by a group-level response, determining whether the survey was actually distributed through the relevant mailing lists and reached potential respondents. Recruiting legislative staff through managing directors, or in general taking the route via group leaders of political elites, comes with advantages as well as with some disadvantages (Kertzer & Renshon, 2022). The agreement of managing directors to participate in the survey and to distribute it among their staff could lead to 'buy-in' into the group (Dietrich et al., 2021), increase the perceived legitimacy of the survey among staffers and thereby ultimately increase participation. On an even more practical level, approval from managing directors also meant that more staffers were likely to receive the invitation than would have been possible through other recruitment channels. On the other hand,

if managing directors decided not to distribute the survey, an entire group of potential respondents was effectively excluded from the sample at once (Vis & Stolwijk, 2021). An alternative way of recruiting staffers would have been to send the survey invitation directly to their publicly available contact address. While some parliamentary groups actually list staff members and their e-mail addresses online, particularly many groups of the AfD do not. Accordingly, this strategy would have resulted in a foreseeable sample bias for which reason I deemed it impractical.

To further increase participation of individual staffers, I followed the recommendations of others (Dietrich et al., 2021; Kertzer & Renshon, 2022; Vis & Stolwijk, 2021) in implementing incentives to encourage survey participation while minimizing potential reasons that could retain someone from participating. At the end of the survey, respondents had the option to provide their e-mail address to receive a summary of the results. Additionally, those who submitted their e-mail addresses were entered into a lottery for a chance of winning one of three €30 gift cards. Both of these incentives were communicated in the invitation e-mail to the survey (see Appendix A.3). On the other hand, I guaranteed the anonymity of individual respondents as well as of individual parliamentary groups. This particularly meant that I did not ask about the party or group that a respondent worked for or the state parliament in which they worked nor did I measure party affiliation or location in any other way. While this approach limited the ability to draw inferences at the party level during analysis, guaranteeing anonymity, however, proved to be important for the participation of several groups as various phone calls with officials from parliamentary groups have shown.

A.2 Measures against survey satisficing

Even though some evidence suggests that survey satisficing might not be of particular concern in conjoint experiments even with many repeated conjoint tables (Bansak et al., 2021) it is unclear whether this also holds for elite samples. This is especially so, considering that staffers participate in the survey voluntarily and potentially do so during their working hours. In order to get ahead of potential respondent fatigue, the conjoint tables were presented in two separate blocks, such that the first three conjoint tables were followed by other questions on socio-demographics which are then again followed by the other three conjoint tables (see again the survey questionnaire in Appendix A.4).

Lastly, a recent discussion highlights the possibility of biased estimates in conjoint analysis following measurement error (Clayton et al., 2023). I therefore implemented the fix proposed by Clayton et al. (2023) where the sixth conjoint table, which is not used for the main analysis, was identical to the first one only that the two profiles switched sides. This then allows to measure so called intra-respondent reliability by looking at whether respondents in fact chose the same profile in the first and last task. If they did not, then this would suggest that at least in one case they did not decide in accordance with their own true preferences. In later stages of the analysis, I further use this approach to arrive at bias-corrected estimates that account for this type of measurement error.

A.3 Survey invitation e-mail

(Below is the English translation of the invitation e-mail originally sent out in German.)

Subject: Invitation to participate in a survey: "Attitudes toward migration in politics"

Dear parliamentary group staff members,

As part of a research project on "Attitudes toward migration in politics," we cordially invite you to participate in an online survey. You can find the questionnaire at the following link:

[link]

We are particularly interested in the personal opinions of parliamentary group staff, i.e. people who work either for parliamentary groups or directly for members of parliament. With its focus on your specific professional group, this survey is unique in Germany.

Participation in the survey is completely anonymous, takes about 5–8 minutes, and does not allow any conclusions to be drawn about you or your political group. The survey is part of a larger research project that has been reviewed and approved by *(blinded for peer-review)*.

At the end of the survey, you have the option of participating in a prize draw to win one of three Amazon vouchers worth €30 each. We can also send you a summary of our results, which will certainly be of interest to you and your parliamentary group.

Thank you very much for your support and valuable contribution to our research!

Kind regards,

(blinded for peer-review)

A.4 Survey questionnaire

(Below is the English translation of the survey originally shown to respondents in German.)

Welcome to this survey on the topic of "Attitudes toward migration in politics." This survey is specifically aimed at staff members of parliamentary group offices and the offices of members of the German Bundestag and state parliaments.

Completing the survey takes approximately 5–8 minutes. We are primarily interested in your personal opinion regarding the topic of migration. All information you provide will be processed anonymously and will not allow any conclusions to be drawn about you personally or about the parliamentary group for which you work. The survey is part of a larger research project that has been reviewed and approved by *(blinded for peer-review)*. If you have any questions, please contact the survey creator at: *(blinded for peer-review)*.

If you wish, you may leave your email address at the end of the survey to be informed about the results and to participate in a raffle to win one of three Amazon vouchers worth €30 each.

Would you like to participate in the following survey? If so, please confirm that you have read the above information and wish to participate voluntarily by checking the box below.

- I have read and understood the above information. I am aware that all data will be processed anonymously. I am participating in this study voluntarily and understand that I can withdraw from it at any time.

At the beginning of the survey, we will first ask you a few questions about yourself and your work for the parliamentary group.

Q1: Were you and both of your parents born with German citizenship?

• Yes • No • I cannot/do not wish to answer

Q2: Many people use the terms "left" and "right" to describe different political views.

Where would you place your own political views on the following scale, where 0 stands for "left" and 10 stands for "right"?

• left • 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 • 6 • 7 • 8 • 9 • right

Q3: What position do you hold in your work for your parliamentary group?

• Office manager • Policy advisor • Press officer • Office assistant • Student assistant • Intern • I cannot/do not wish to answer

Q4 - Q6: Below, we show you three randomly generated pairs of hypothetical individuals who are both trying to move to Germany. The individuals differ in terms of occupation, gender, reason for migration, and origin. For each pair, please indicate which of the two individuals, in your personal opinion, should be allowed to move to Germany.

There are no right or wrong answers. None of your responses can be linked to you personally or to the parliamentary group for which you work.

(Three conjoint tables were shown at this part of the survey. Figure A.1 shows an exemplary conjoint table.)

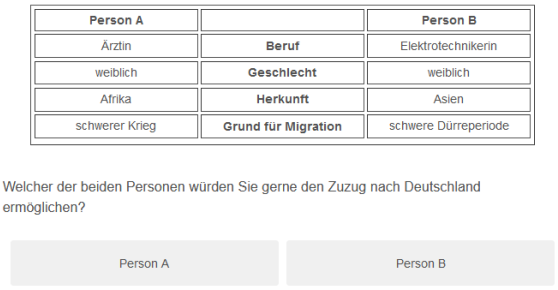

Figure A.1: Exemplary conjoint table

Which of these two persons would you like to enable to move to Germany?

• Person A • Person B

Below, we will ask you three short questions about yourself again.

Q7: How old are you?

• Younger than 18 years • 18 to 34 years • 35 to 49 years • 50 to 64 years • Older than 64 years • I cannot/do not wish to answer

Q8: What is your gender?

• Female • Male • Non-binary • I cannot/do not wish to answer

Q9: What is your highest level of education?

• No school diploma or primary school diploma • Secondary school diploma (*Hauptschule, Realschule, Gymnasium*) • Vocational training/apprenticeship • University or university of applied sciences degree • I cannot/do not wish to answer

Q10 - Q12: You will now again see three randomly generated pairs of hypothetical individuals. Please indicate which of the two individuals, in your personal opinion, should be allowed to move to Germany.

(Another three conjoint tables were shown at this part of the survey.)

Which of these two persons would you like to enable to move to Germany?

• Person A • Person B

At the end of the survey, we have four more questions for you on the topic of migration.

Q13: How much in need do you consider individuals who leave their home country for the following reasons?

(The order of reasons was randomized.)

Severe recession

• Not at all in need • Rather not in need • Neither in need nor not in need • Rather in need • Very in need

Severe drought

• Not at all in need • Rather not in need • Neither in need nor not in need • Rather in need • Very in need

Severe war

• Not at all in need • Rather not in need • Neither in need nor not in need • Rather in need • Very in need

Q14: Generally speaking, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Increasing migration poses a problem for Germany."

• Strongly disagree • Somewhat disagree • Neither agree nor disagree • Somewhat agree • Strongly agree

Q15: Do you believe that climate change will lead to more migration to Germany?

• Very unlikely • Somewhat unlikely • Neither unlikely nor likely • Somewhat likely • Very likely

Q16: Finally, we would like to ask you for your opinion on a specific policy proposal.

Currently, international and national refugee law does not provide any protection for those affected by climate change. What is your opinion on the following proposal? "People, **[T – Involuntary:] whose home country has become uninhabitable due to rising sea levels / [C – Voluntary:] who have difficulties making a living due to droughts in their home country**, should be allowed to move to Germany."

• Strongly disagree • Somewhat disagree • Neither agree nor disagree • Somewhat agree • Strongly agree

B Estimation strategies

B.1 Conjoint experiment

To estimate the average causal effects of the textual treatments used in the conjoint experiment, I report Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs). The AMCE is the average causal effect that a given attribute level has on the probability that a migrant profile is chosen, compared to a baseline level of the same attribute and averaged over all other attributes (Hainmueller et al., 2014). As such, AMCEs allow for a direct causal interpretation of the effect of a given attribute level in comparison to a baseline level. For subgroup comparisons and to test whether treatment effects are moderated by certain covariates of interest, I report marginal means which allows to account for differences in baseline levels across subgroups (Leeper et al., 2020). Again averaging over all other attributes, marginal means provide the probability that a migrant profile with a given attribute level is selected and differences of marginal means form AMCEs. In order to estimate AMCEs and marginal means, I use so called linear probability models (Angrist & Pischke, 2009) described by

$$Choice_{ipc} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Reason_{ipc} + \beta_2 Occupation_{ipc} + \beta_3 Gender_{ipc} + \beta_4 Origin_{ipc} + \epsilon_{ipt},$$

where $Choice_{ipc}$ measures whether respondent i chose the migrant profile p in conjoint task c. Using this model, the point coefficients β_1 to β_4 provide the causal effects of the causal estimates in comparison to a baseline level of each attribute, i.e. AMCEs. Respondent-clustered standard errors are included to account for the multiple selection of migrant profiles by each respondent. Both, AMCEs and marginal means, are computed using the *cregg* (**leeper˙cregg˙2020**) package in *R*.

Hainmueller et al. (2014) define three critical assumptions under which estimates of AMCEs are valid causal estimates. One of those assumptions is already justified to be made due to the particular research design that I employ while the other two can be justified by providing particular diagnostics. First, the assumption of independence of potential outcomes from migrant profiles (Hainmueller et al., 2014, p. 9) is justified by the independent and equal randomization of each attribute. In addition, I show that the randomization process generated attribute levels with equal frequencies, as shown in Figure C.5 in Appendix C. Second, the assumption of no profile-order effects (Hainmueller et al., 2014, pp. 8–9) practically states that the position of a migrant profile, whether displayed on the left- or right-hand side of the conjoint table, should not systematically influence the likelihood of it being chosen. Ex post, this assumption can be plausibilized by showing that the main causal estimates do not substantially differ when comparing whether an attribute occurred on the left- or right-hand side of the conjoint table.[1] Lastly, the assumption of stability and no carry-over effects (Hainmueller et al., 2014, p. 8) states that respondents' choices in a given task are not influenced by treatments shown in previous tasks, and that potential outcomes remain stable across repeated choice tasks. Under this assumption, observations from all five conjoint tasks can be validly pooled for analysis. Again, this assumption can be partly justified ex post by demonstrating that the main causal estimates do not substantially differ across the different conjoint tasks.[2]

To further probe the robustness of my estimates, I not only compare estimates across different subgroups but also re-estimate the main causal quantities using frequency weights that reflect the population-level distribution of political ideologies (left, centre, right) in the German state parliaments. In addition, I implement a correction for measure-

[1] Figure C.10 in Appendix C shows that marginal means do not substantially differ regardless of whether migrant profiles appeared on the left- or right-hand side of the conjoint table, especially with respect to the focal attribute, reason for migration.

[2] Figure C.11 in Appendix C shows that marginal means do not substantially differ regardless of which task the migrant profiles appeared in, especially with respect to the focal attribute, reason for migration.

ment error and potential bias of the causal estimates arising from less-than-perfect intra-respondent reliability (Clayton et al., 2023).

B.2 Policy vignette

In order to estimate treatment effects of the involuntariness treatment I use OLS regressions of the rating of the policy proposal on the treatment indicator. The linear model is described by

$$Y_i = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 Involuntray_i + X_i'\delta + \epsilon_i,$$

where Y_i is the rating of the policy proposal by respondent i, $Involuntary_i$ is a dummy that turns 1 if respondent i received **T − Involuntary** and 0 if respondent i received **C − Voluntary** and X_i' describes a vector of respondent specific covariates. Including covariates in the model serves two primary purposes. First, it allows to directly compare the size of the treatment effect to other predictors of policy support. Second, it allows to control for potential imbalances in treatment assignment. As shown in Table C.2 slight imbalances of treatment allocation did in fact occur across these covariates. Particularly, left-leaning staffers have been more likely to be included in **T − Involuntary** than in **C − Voluntary**. At the same time, I could not detect any evidence of a systematic randomization error. This does not necessarily mean that this imbalance occurred solely by chance. However, the randomization of the treatment allocation was independently implemented for every respondent several screens before the vignette was presented. Also, self-identified ideology was measured prior to the vignette so that treatment allocation cannot have affected the measurement of a respondent's ideology from left to right.

C Additional analyses

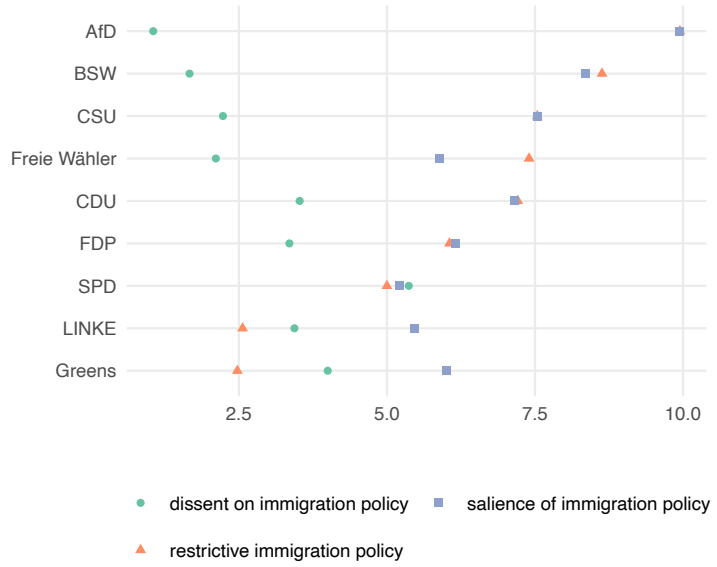

Figure C.1: Policy dimensions regarding immigration from the 2024 Chapel Hill Expert Survey for German parties

C.1 Robustness of conjoint findings

I probe the robustness of the main results of the conjoint analysis in two important ways. First, I test whether the main results generalize to the population-level ideological distribution of parties in the German state parliaments. This seems especially important as left-leaning staffers are overrepresented in the survey sample (see Section **??**). I address this imbalance by applying frequency weights that reflect the distribution of seats of left, center and right parties in all 16 German state parliaments. To construct the frequency weights, I used the most recent ideological placement data (lrgen) of German parties from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Rovny et al., 2025). The CHES records party ideology on a scale from 0 to 10, which aligns with the ideological self-placement scale used in my survey of legislative staffers. I classified both parties and respondents with scores under 4 as left, from 4 to under 7 as center, from 7 to 10 as right. Additionally, two parties represented in state parliaments are not part of the CHES: "Bündnis Deutschland" is classified as right and SSW as left. Based on these classifications, I assigned weights to individual respondent-level observations so that the ideological distribution of the sample

reflects the actual seat shares of left, center, and right parties across the 16 German state parliaments. As shown in Figure C.2 in Appendix C, the AMCEs related to the reason of migration do not substantially change when applying these weights.

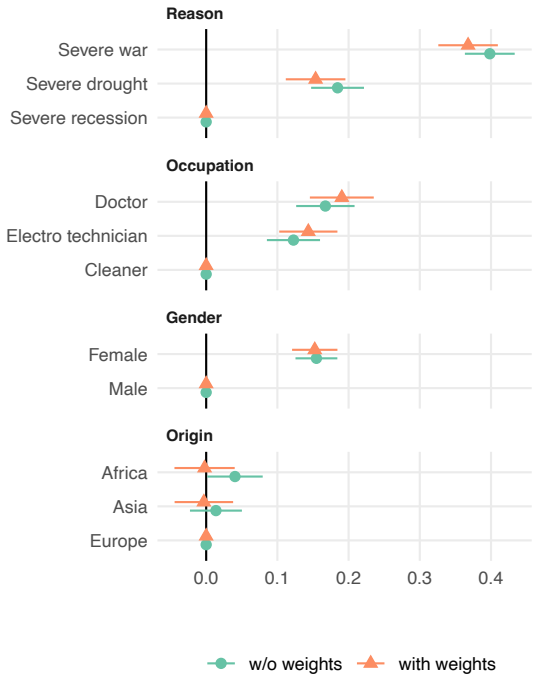

Figure C.2: Average marginal component effects without and with frequency weights accounting for the population-level ideological distribution (left, center, right) in all 16 German state parliaments. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals from respondent-clustered and robust standard errors.

Second, a recently voiced discussion revolves around the issue whether the causal estimates from conjoint analysis may be biased due to a systematic measurement error, particularly in forced-choice designs (Clayton et al., 2023) (see also Section **??**). As I implemented the fix proposed by Clayton et al. (2023) already in the design of the conjoint experiment, I am able to address these concerns by (1) measuring intra-respondent reliability within the sample and (2) reporting bias corrected estimates with the *R* package *projoint* (Horiuchi & Kaufman, 2023).[3] Intra-respondent reliability is already quite high with 86 percent of respondents having chosen the same migrant profile in the first and in the sixth conjoint table. This indicates that measurement error is limited and unlikely to induce significant bias in the main estimators of AMCEs and marginal means.

[3]As this package is still in its development phase, I was only able to successfully report uncorrected and bias-corrected marginal means.

This is further supported by the comparison of uncorrected and bias-corrected marginal means that are reported in Figure C.3 in Appendix C. For all four attributes and most importantly for the reason of migration, uncorrected and corrected estimates do not substantially differ from each other, thereby further supporting the robustness of the reported findings.

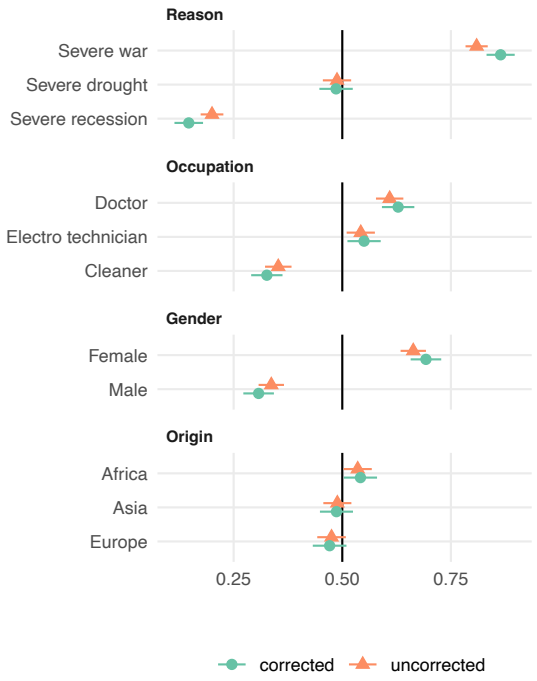

Figure C.3: Uncorrected and bias-corrected marginal means. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Estimations done using the *projoint* package in *R*.

Directly following the conjoint tasks, respondents were asked how much in need (*German: bedürftig*) they perceived individuals to be who migrate because of a severe recession, a severe drought or severe war.[4] This served two main purposes. First, it functioned as a manipulation check to test whether the textual treatments in the conjoint experiment successfully conveyed distinct migration scenarios. Second, it allowed measurement of respondents' underlying beliefs regarding the three reasons for migration that were presented in the conjoint tasks. Results are reported in Figure C.4. Notably, the average preference order regarding the reasons for migration observed in the conjoint experiment is reflected in respondents' perceptions of migrants' neediness. Those migrating because of a severe war are perceived as most in need, followed by those migrating due to a

[4]The order in which respondents were asked to rate perceived neediness for the three migration reasons was again randomized between respondents to account for ordering effects.

severe drought, while those migrating because of a severe recession are viewed as least in need. It further shows that, on average, respondents have very distinct sets of beliefs with regards to the personal situations of the three different types of migrants. Moreover, a clear majority of respondents viewed individuals migrating due to a severe drought as either somewhat or very in need indicating that they are aware of the distinct situations of climate migrants.

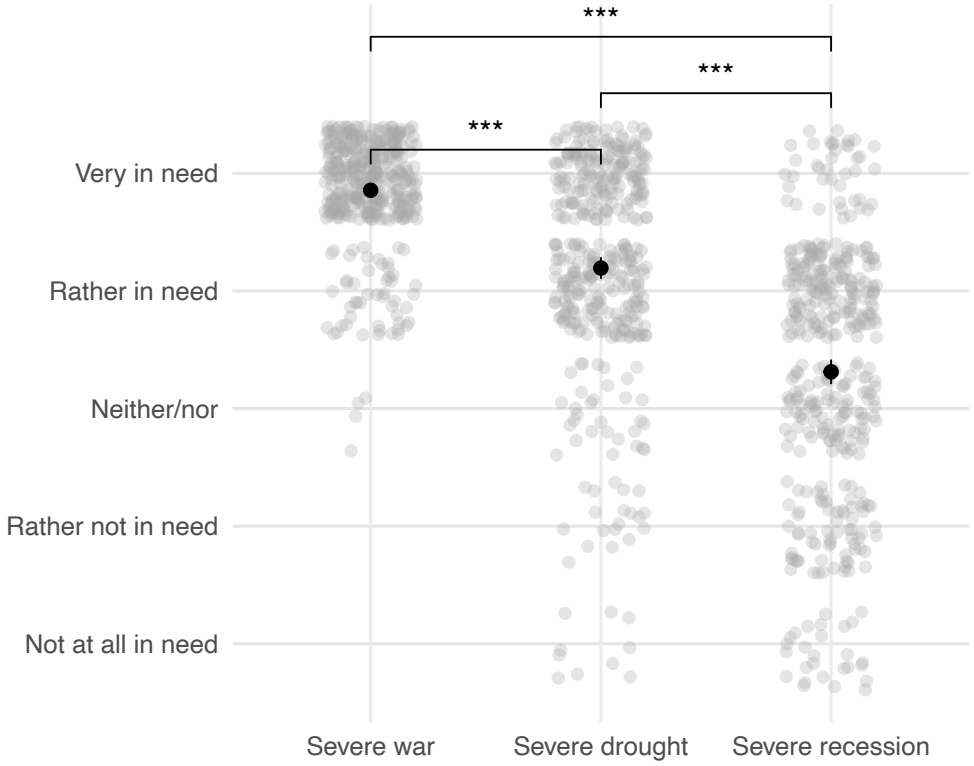

Figure C.4: Distribution of perceived neediness relating to the three reasons for migration ($N = 407$). The question read: "How much in need do you consider people who leave their home country for the following three reasons?" Discrete values range from 1 (not at all needy) to 5 (very needy). Means with 95% CIs are displayed in black. T-tests are used to test for differences in means. *** $p < 0.01$

C.2 Additional analyses: Conjoint experiment

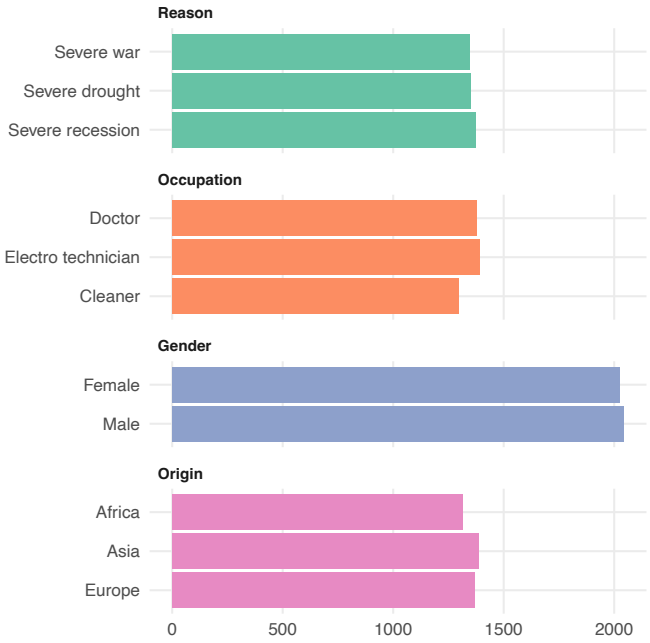

Figure C.5: Frequency of attribute levels in the generated migrant profiles

Table C.1: Average marginal component effects (with respective baseline levels)

	AMCE (w/o weights)	AMCE (with weights)
Reason for migration		
Severe war	0.398***	0.368***
	(0.018)	(0.021)
Severe drought	0.185***	0.154***
	(0.019)	(0.021)
Severe recession	–	–
	–	–
Occupation		
Doctor	0.167***	0.190***
	(0.021)	(0.023)
Electro technician	0.123***	0.143***
	(0.019)	(0.021)
Cleaner	–	–
	–	–
Gender		
Female	0.155***	0.152***
	(0.015)	(0.016)
Male	–	–
	–	–
Origin		
Africa	0.040**	−0.002
	(0.020)	(0.022)
Asia	0.014	−0.003
	(0.019)	(0.021)
Europe	–	–
	–	–
$N_{choices}$	4 070	4 070
$N_{respondents}$	407	407

Note: Respondent-clustered and robust standard errors are shown parentheses. * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

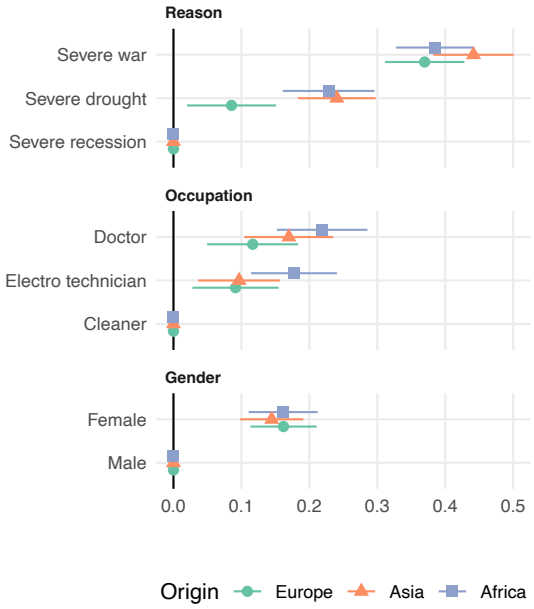

Figure C.6: Average marginal component interaction effects (AMCIEs) for the interaction of the Origin attribute with all other attributes. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals taken from respondent-clustered and robust standard errors.

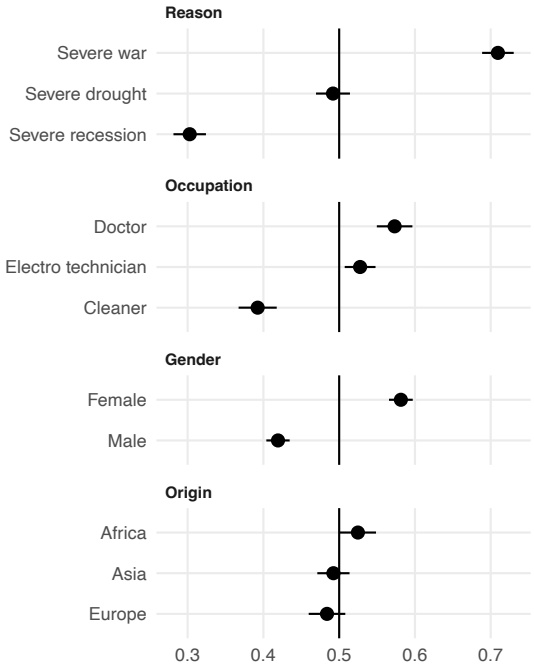

Figure C.7: Marginal means for the conjoint experiment. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals taken from respondent-clustered and robust standard errors.

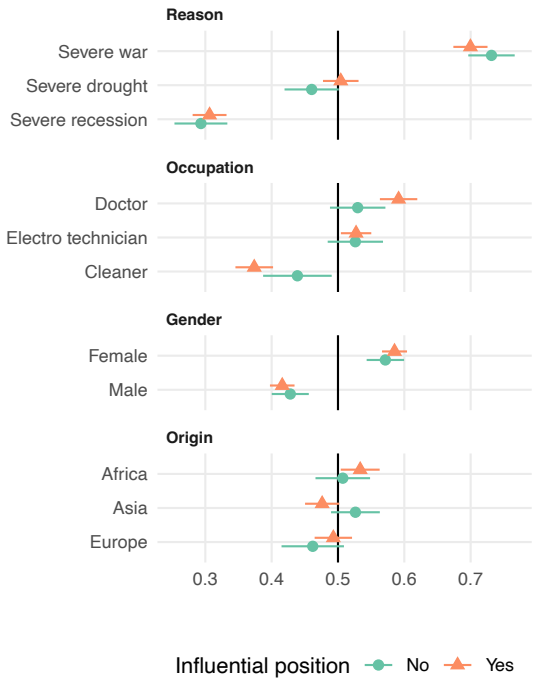

Figure C.8: Marginal means for staffers who hold influential positions, i.e. office managers and policy advisors, (N = 286) and those that do not (N = 120). Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals taken from respondent-clustered and robust standard errors.

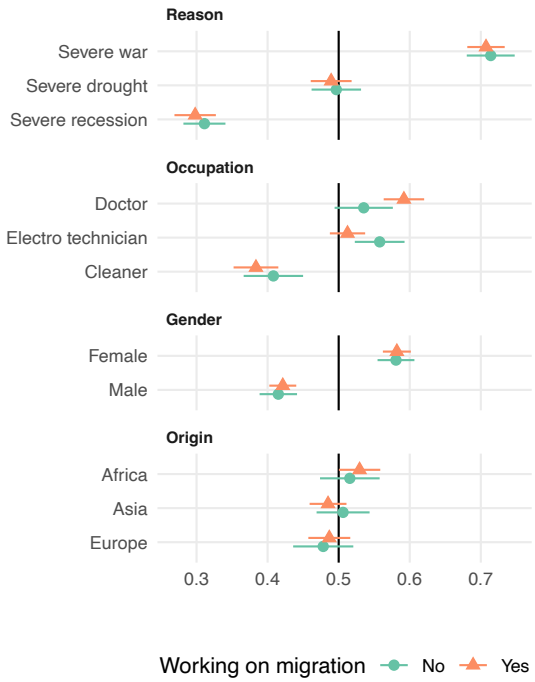

Figure C.9: Marginal means for those working on issues related to migration (N = 268) and those that do not (N = 139). Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals taken from respondent-clustered and robust standard errors.

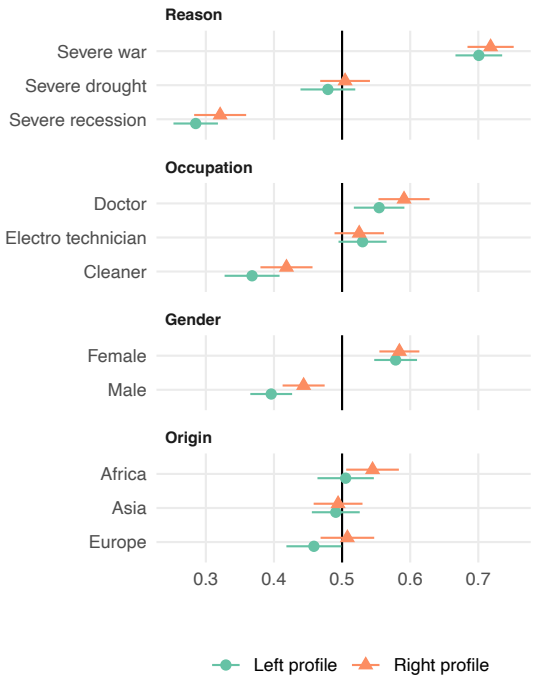

Figure C.10: Marginal means for migrants profiles shown on the left or right side of the conjoint table. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals taken from respondent-clustered and robust standard errors.

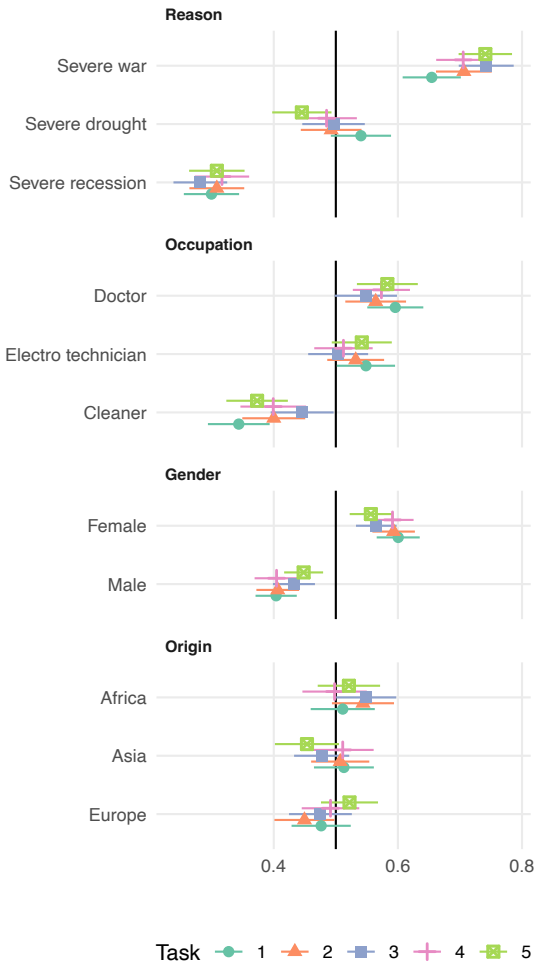

Figure C.11: Marginal means for each of the five conjoint tasks. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals taken from respondent-clustered and robust standard errors.

C.3 Additional analyses: Policy vignette

Table C.2: OLS regressions testing covariate balance across the binary treatment from the policy vignette

	Female	Younger than 35	Higher education	Left-Right Ideology	Restrictive Migration Attitude	Belief in Climate Migration
Constant	0.533***	0.308***	0.800***	0.366***	0.417***	0.796***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
T - Involuntary	−0.005	0.093**	−0.008	−0.046**	−0.049	0.080***
	(0.920)	(0.050)	(0.851)	(0.027)	(0.133)	(0.001)
Num.Obs.	407	407	407	407	407	407
R2	0.000	0.009	0.000	0.012	0.006	0.029

Note: P-values from robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. Each column regresses a variable on the treatment dummy to test for imbalanced treatment assignment. A joint F-test, conducted within a SUR model, was used to evaluate the hypothesis that all treatment coefficients are collectively equal to zero ($p = 0.014$). * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table C.3: OLS regressions estimating treatment effects for the policy vignette

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
T - Involuntary	0.489***	0.256***	0.269***	0.222**	0.004	−0.076
	(0.000)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.023)	(0.985)	(0.711)
Left-Right Ideology		−2.040***	−1.919***	−1.947***		
		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)		
Restrictive Migration		−1.363***	−1.346***	−1.390***	−1.656***	−1.796***
Attitude		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Belief in Climate		0.837***	0.918***	0.867***	0.975***	0.951***
Migration		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Climate Migrants			0.444**	0.431*	0.548**	0.565**
Preference Index			(0.042)	(0.077)	(0.017)	(0.029)
Higher Education		−0.057	−0.106	−0.094	−0.121	−0.107
		(0.566)	(0.294)	(0.400)	(0.241)	(0.349)
Younger than 35		0.061	0.051	0.036	0.095	0.094
		(0.506)	(0.589)	(0.744)	(0.322)	(0.393)
Female		0.137	0.135	0.158	0.164*	0.194*
		(0.105)	(0.118)	(0.112)	(0.060)	(0.051)
Left Ideology					0.455**	0.363**
(Binarized)					(0.013)	(0.045)
(T - Involuntary)*					0.336	0.439*
(Left Ideology (Binarized))					(0.141)	(0.056)
Constant	3.369***	3.972***	3.627***	3.703***	2.622***	2.695***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Weights	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓
Num.Obs.	407	407	388	388	388	388
R2	0.039	0.575	0.580	0.621	0.557	0.600

Note: P-values from robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table C.4: Marginal effects of treatment by ideological groupings based on model 5 in Table C.3

Ideology	Contrast	Estimate	SE	P-value
Right	(T - Involuntary) - (C - Voluntary)	0.004	0.206	0.985
Left	(T - Involuntary) - (C - Voluntary)	0.340	0.099	0.001

D Pre-registration

Date registered on OSF: January 7, 2025

The preregistration deviates from the executed study in two ways. First, Germany held a snap election in February 2025, for which reason surveying legislative staffers on the federal level was deemed impractical at the time the survey was conducted. Second, I do not directly test H3 formulated in the pre-registration given that the sample provided only very limited variation on climate migration beliefs.

Description

Studies investigating attitudes towards climate migrants of citizens in the U.S., Germany and Denmark provide evidence of relative openness towards climate migrants (Arias & Blair, 2022; Hedegaard, 2022; Helbling, 2020). This existing survey experimental evidence therefore hints at a general pattern in industrialized countries, where climate migrants are viewed more favorably than economic migrants but less favorably than political migrants. However, little is known about whether the same preference orders exist for those who call the shots. As the population of politicians and those working in politics remains understudied in that regard, I study the attitudes towards migrants and especially climate migrants of German legislative staff - i.e. administrative staff either working for parliamentary groups or directly for legislators. Turning to legislative staff as a study population seems justified as they have previously been shown to be committed to the interests of their parliamentary group (Egeberg et al., 2013) and that they have a substantial influence on the behavior and voting patterns of legislators (Montgomery & Nyhan, 2017). In order to elicit preferences of legislative staff towards climate migrants compared to other migrants as well as towards involuntary compared to voluntary climate migrants, I will field a survey with German legislative staff with two embedded experimental designs, i.e. a conjoint experiment as well as a second single-factor vignette experiment.

Study Information

Hypotheses

H1: Climate migrants are seen more favorably than economic migrants but less favorably than political migrants by legislative staff.

H2: More right-leaning legislative staff will be less open towards climate migrants than less right-leaning legislative staff.

H3: Legislative staff that believes that climate change will lead to more migration to Germany will be more open towards climate migrants than legislative staff that does not believe so.

H4: Legislative staff is more open towards a policy proposal that allows involuntary climate migrants to move to Germany than towards a proposal that allows voluntary climate migrants to move to Germany.

Design Plan

Study type

Experiment – A researcher randomly assigns treatments to study subjects, this includes field or lab experiments. This is also known as an intervention experiment and includes randomized controlled trials.

Blinding

For studies that involve human subjects, they will not know the treatment group to which they have been assigned.

Study design

For the study I will field a survey with legislative staff from German state parliaments and the federal parliament (Bundestag) with two embedded experimental designs.

I will field a discrete choice conjoint experiment. Respondents will be presented with conjoint tables that each contain the profiles of two hypothetical persons that seek to move to Germany. Respondents will then be asked for which of these two persons they

would like to allow to move to Germany. The migrants' profiles are described by four attributes, i.e. the reason for migration, gender, occupation and origin. Reason for migration can take on three possible levels: severe recession, severe droughts, severe war. Gender can take on the levels female and male. Occupation can take on the levels cleaner, electro technician and doctor. Origin can take on the levels Europe, Africa and Asia. Each respondent will be shown six conjoint tables, where the last conjoint table will be identical to the first one with the side of the two profiles switched (in order to correct for measurement error following Clayton et al. (2023)).

In the same survey, I will include a single-factor vignette experiment that asks respondents about their support for a policy proposal that would allow climate migrants to legally move to Germany. The policy proposal will randomly vary between respondents and will help involuntary or voluntary climate migrants to move to Germany.

Randomization

For the conjoint experiment, attribute levels will be equally randomized for each attribute and task, i.e. within randomization. The attribute order within the conjoint tables will be randomized between respondents.

For the single-factor vignette experiment, the treatment condition, i.e. whether the policy is meant for voluntary or involuntary climate migrants, is equally randomized between respondents, i.e. between randomization.

Sampling Plan

Existing Data

Registration prior to creation of data

Data collection procedures

The study population of interest is legislative staff in Germany, i.e. persons working for parliamentary groups or directly for legislators in German state parliaments and the federal parliament (Bundestag). I will first contact the managing director of parliamentary groups which then ideally centrally disseminate the links to the online-based survey between their staff. Alternatively I will directly collect the email addresses of legislative

staff from the websites of parliamentary groups and directly send the links to the online based survey to these collected email addresses and other potential functional email addresses of staffers.

To further incentivize participation in the survey, respondents will be informed about the results of the study and can participate in a lottery on a voluntary basis.

Sample size

I aim to include as many respondents in the sample as possible. Given a priori power analyses, I aim for a lower bound of at least 100 respondents.

Sample size rationale

Given a priori power analyses and the results of previous studies fielding similar conjoint experiments with samples of citizens I aim for a lower bound of at least 100 respondents. Resources for this project, however, are limited - both in terms of money and manpower

Variables

Manipulated variables

Manipulated variables include the attribute levels that are randomized for the conjoint experiment, and the treatment variable in the single-factor vignette experiment. These variables have been described above under "Sampling Plan".

Measured variables

The two main outcome variables are measured for the two experimental designs. For the conjoint experiment: whether a hypothetical person is chosen or not (binary indicator). For the single-factor vignette experiment: support for the policy proposal measured on a five-point Likert scale.

Sociodemographic variables: I ask respondents about their age, education and personal migration background.

Respondents 's ideology is measured by their self-placement on a ten-point Likert scale from "left" to "right".

I ask respondents about the position in which they work for their parliamentary group and whether they work on topics related to migration.

In the last part of the survey, I inquire attitudes towards migration. I ask how deserving respondents perceive migrants that migrate because of severe recession/severe droughts/severe war (measured on a five-point Likert scale). General opposition towards migration is measured by asking respondents whether they agree that increasing migration to Germany poses a problem (five-point Likert scale). Beliefs about climate migration are measured by asking respondents whether they think that climate change will lead to more migration to Germany (five-point Likert scale).

Analysis Plan

Statistical models

To estimate the average causal effects of the textual treatments used in the conjoint experiment, linear probability models will be used to estimate average marginal component effects (AMCEs) (H1). For additional subgroup analyses, marginal means will be estimated to report differences or similarities between subgroups (H2 and H3). I will further implemet a correction for measurement error and bias following Clayton et al. (2023).

Regarding the single-factor vignette experiment, regressions will be run to estimate treatment effects without and with control variables (H4).

Inference criteria

I will use the conventional $p < 0.05$ to determine whether the estimates of the treatment effects significantly differ from their expected values if the null hypothesis was correct, i.e. if there was no treatment effect. As the sample size might end up comparatively small, I will also test for $p < 0.1$. I will use two-tailed tests for each analysis.

Missing data

Respondents will be included in an analysis as long as variables necessary for the analysis are complete, even if they have missing values on the other variables.

Exploratory analysis

I will further look at subgroup differences in both experimental setups for certain covariates of interest, such as respondents' education or whether or not they work on migration topics, while remaining open to exploring other relevant subgroups.

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