

PRE-ANALYSIS PLAN

Foreign Aid, Border Enforcement, and Public Opinion on U.S. Migration Policy

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1 Research Question

This study investigates how American citizens evaluate trade-offs between foreign aid and domestic border enforcement in the context of global forced displacement. Specifically, I ask: *How do Americans weigh foreign aid to refugee-hosting countries against domestic border enforcement when the two are presented as competing budget priorities?* The project explores whether information about refugee-hosting burdens, the stated purpose of aid, and the framing of border enforcement spending influence public preferences over how the United States allocates its resources.

2 Background, Theory, and Hypotheses

U.S. policymakers frequently frame foreign aid and border enforcement as alternative tools to address migration—one addressing root causes abroad, the other aiming to restrict flows domestically. Public opinion may reflect this dichotomy. Foreign aid tends to garner support when recipients are seen as vulnerable or when aid serves clear U.S. strategic interests. However, the case for foreign aid becomes more complex in the migration context. Host countries may be seen as shouldering global burdens, but they may also be perceived as containment partners or insufficiently aligned with U.S. goals. Domestic border enforcement, by contrast, appeals to voters concerned about sovereignty, control, and national security.

I expect that public support for foreign aid will increase when the recipient country is described as hosting large numbers of refugees. In such cases, the aid is perceived not just as an act of charity but as burden-sharing with countries absorbing displaced populations who might otherwise move onward to the United States.

H₁: Respondents will be more supportive of foreign aid when the recipient country is described as hosting many refugees, compared to otherwise similar countries for which no such information is provided.

I also anticipate that the stated purpose of the aid will affect support. Aid framed as addressing

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migration—by preventing onward movement to the United States—may be more compelling to respondents than general development or humanitarian assistance, especially for individuals who view migration as a threat.

H₂: Foreign aid framed as preventing migration to the United States will receive more support than aid framed as general development or humanitarian assistance.

When forced to choose between aid and enforcement, I expect a baseline preference for border enforcement, given its directness and alignment with prevailing political rhetoric. However, this preference may be attenuated if aid is framed as both a burden-sharing gesture and a tool to reduce onward migration.

H₃: When foreign aid and border enforcement are presented as competing options, respondents will prefer border enforcement, except when aid is both targeted to refugee-hosting countries and framed as migration prevention.

Lastly, I expect variation in preferences across respondents. Those who perceive immigration as a threat or who express strong national identity may consistently prefer domestic enforcement over foreign aid, regardless of aid framing or refugee burden.

H₄: Respondents high in threat perception or nationalism will exhibit stronger preferences for border enforcement over foreign aid across all experimental conditions.

3 Research Design and Conjoint Experiment

To test these hypotheses, I will implement a paired-profile conjoint experiment embedded in an online survey. Each respondent will be presented with six tasks in which they compare two spending packages. Each package includes a foreign aid component and a domestic border enforcement component. The respondent will be asked to select which package they prefer.

The foreign aid component will be experimentally manipulated along five dimensions: whether the recipient country is hosting many refugees, the country’s level of economic need, the region of the country, the stated purpose of the aid (development, humanitarian, or migration prevention), and the amount of aid allocated.

The border enforcement component will vary in type (infrastructure, technology, or personnel), spending level, and framing (e.g., “protecting the homeland” versus “controlling illegal migration”).

Attribute levels will be fully randomized and orthogonal. This design allows for the estimation of average marginal component effects (AMCEs) and interaction effects with key covariates.

4 Moderators and Heterogeneous Effects

I will examine whether the effects of refugee burden and aid purpose are moderated by political ideology, national identity, perceived immigration threat, and prior support for foreign aid. These moderators will be measured using standard survey batteries. I also plan to explore heterogeneity by proximity to the U.S.–Mexico border, media consumption, and demographic characteristics such as race, age, and income.

5 Outcome Measures and Estimation Strategy

The primary outcome is a binary indicator for whether a spending package is chosen. Secondary outcomes include post-task 7-point Likert ratings of support for each individual aid and enforcement component.

Estimation will be conducted using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to compute AMCEs, with standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Interaction terms will be used to examine conditional effects of refugee burden and aid purpose across key moderators. The conjoint design allows estimation of both main effects and conditional preferences without requiring respondents to make direct trade-offs between attributes.

6 Power Calculations and Sample Size

Assuming a conservative baseline AMCE of 0.05 (i.e., a 5 percentage point increase in probability of choosing a package when a given attribute level is present), with six tasks per respondent and two profiles per task, a sample of 2,000 respondents yields 24,000 profile observations.

Using simulations modeled after Hainmueller et al. (2014), this sample provides over 90% power to detect AMCEs of 0.03 or greater at $\alpha = 0.05$, assuming a within-respondent standard deviation typical of choice-based conjoint data. This sample size also supports testing heterogeneous effects across common binary moderators (e.g., high vs. low threat perception) with sufficient power, allowing for subgroup analysis and the inclusion of interactions.

The sample will be recruited through a reputable online panel provider with quotas for age, gender, region, and race/ethnicity to approximate U.S. adult population demographics.

7 Ethics, Preregistration, and Data Sharing

This study will be preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) prior to data collection. The survey instrument and analysis plan will be uploaded as supplementary materials. IRB approval will be sought through my home institution. All participants will provide informed consent and will be compensated in accordance with platform norms. Upon completion, de-identified data, replication code, and pre-analysis materials will be made publicly available via OSF.