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Political Psychology

Perceived threat, compassion, and public evaluations toward refugees

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Abstract

Scholarly research on emotions tackles various domains, among which opposition to immigration ranks as socially and politically critical. While earlier literature captures distinct aspects of this domain, certain emotions are less studied than others, primarily compassion. By focusing on the unique role of compassion in comparison with anger and anxiety, we tackle how and under which conditions compassion changes social distancing and political preferences regarding refugees. Drawing on representative data collected in Turkey—the country with the highest number of Syrian refugees—we test whether feelings of compassion toward refugees can hold back the escalation in opposition to immigration as a result of heightened threat. Our results show that compassion functions as the key to lowering the negative effects of perceived threat in shaping refugees' social and political integration.

KEYWORDS

anger, anxiety, compassion, immigration, perceived threat, refugees, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

The number of refugees and displaced people worldwide has surged to its highest levels since World War II due to ongoing conflicts, persecution, and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2021). This increasing mobility has escalated debates on accepting displaced persons into countries, grievances over immigration, and integration prospects. Consequently, public opposition to immigration and anti-immigrant sentiments attract more widespread attention in scholarly investigations and practical politics than ever. As a recent instance, the Syrian conflict has caused one of the worst humanitarian crises. After anti-regime protests turned into a civil war, millions of Syrians had to flee from their home country, especially to Turkey and European countries, and became the largest forcibly displaced population worldwide.

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According to current figures, Turkey hosts the most people under temporary protection, with 3.7 million Syrians (UNHCR, 2022). The combination of the protracted Syria crisis, a large refugee population, and challenging economic conditions, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has put considerable pressure on the country's immigration and migrant integration policies and ultimately increased anti-immigration sentiments among its citizens. Given its social and political importance, it has become necessary to investigate the motives underlying public opposition to immigration and identify the factors that might prevent anti-immigration sentiments.

This surge in refugee numbers, particularly from Syria, not only strains the host countries' resources but also raises critical questions about the social and psychological factors that influence public opinion on immigration. During large-scale immigration inflows, citizens may perceive competition for scarce resources, changes to their cultural landscape, and potential disruptions to their way of life. It is well established that these threat perceptions fuel anti-immigration attitudes and policy preferences (e.g., Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). Per earlier research, negative emotions are often found to encourage opposition to immigration, although particular emotions like anger and anxiety can have different effects in shaping political attitudes and judgments (Erisen et al., 2020; Marcus et al., 2019; Utych et al., 2022; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). What we know from earlier research about emotions in attitude formation toward immigration captures perceived threat as an essential component (Brader et al., 2008) and extends the reach of the literature to various outcome measures (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015).

As an emotion that is inherently other-oriented and accompanied by the desire to help and alleviate others' suffering, compassion has the potential to significantly alter host nations' attitudes toward immigrants (Muradova & Arceneaux, 2022; Sinclair et al., 2016). Though the political psychology literature often emphasizes a limited range of emotions, predominantly focusing on anger and anxiety (Gadarian & Brader, 2023; Redlawsk & Mattes, 2022), there is a growing recognition of the need to examine a broader spectrum of emotions. Compassion, in particular, warrants further exploration to understand its unique role in shaping public opinion and political attitudes on pressing issues such as immigration.

Research has illustrated the remedial effects of compassion in areas such as conflict resolution (Sznycer et al., 2017), group relations (Newman et al., 2015; Sirin et al., 2016), and polarization (Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017). Yet, there remains a gap in our understanding of its role in moderating perceived threats toward refugees and immigrants. What happens when members of a host nation see newcomers threatening their well-being and prerogatives while simultaneously feeling compassion toward them? Consider the vivid images of the Syrian child Alyan, back in 2015, who was washed up drowned on a beach while trying to flee to Europe. The image evoked major reactions across the globe and influenced the European debate regarding refugees. Most importantly, the image aroused a more compassionate understanding of the conditions that Syrian refugees had to face during their risky journey toward Europe. Our research investigates the specific role of compassion and its influence on the relationship between perceived threat and political attitudes, thus uncovering the affective mechanism of compassion that potentially regulates preexisting threat perceptions. To that end, the focus of this study is twofold: First, we explain how discrete emotions of compassion, anger, and anxiety shape different aspects of public opposition to immigrants. Second, we evaluate the extent to which compassion toward immigrants can mitigate the escalation in opposition to immigration as reflected in public evaluations and policy preferences.

This question is of particular importance to enhance scholarly and societal awareness about the true scope of threat perceptions and emotions toward immigrants. Opposition to immigration is not merely a disguised bias but an intricate manifestation of the interplay among various beliefs, apprehensions, and opinions pertaining to the far-reaching effects of immigration (Palmer, 1996). Therefore, we distinguish between attitudes in more intimate personal social domains and general policy opinions. This study decomposes the multifaceted nature

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of opposition to immigration and immigrants while providing a fine-grained analysis of how public responses develop in the face of mass forced immigration.

Focusing on the distinct roles of compassion, anxiety, and anger, this study first contributes to the public opinion literature on immigration. We also add to the research on the link between emotion and political behavior by investigating the interplay of compassion and threat perceptions in shaping policy preferences on immigration and refugees. Drawing on data from a survey conducted through face-to-face interviews based on a representative probability sample of the population in Turkey, we present evidence regarding the primary role that compassion plays in immigration-related attitudes and policy evaluations in contrast to anxiety and anger. With this, our work offers a piece of evidence for a prominent position for compassion in the study of emotions in political psychology.

PERCEIVED THREAT AND IMMIGRATION

In exploring the reasons behind host community members' negative attitudes toward newcomers and their support for restrictive and exclusionary immigration policies, the literature consistently points to the pivotal role of perceived threat from immigration. Such perceptions are instrumental in shaping public opinion and influencing policies on immigration and integration (Callens & Meuleman, 2017; Davidov et al., 2020; Erisen & Kentmen-Cin, 2017). The established literature on group threat theory (Blumer, 1958) suggests that opposition to immigration originates in threat perceptions due to competition over scarce resources and fear of losing prerogatives. These perceived threats, whether at a personal or collective level, prompt a defensive stance against immigration, driven by concerns over possible negative outcomes such as diminished political influence, cultural disintegration, economic hardship, or increased crime rates (Hangartner et al., 2019).

Previous observational studies have established that economic, social, and cultural threat perceptions play a significant role in shaping anti-immigrant attitudes and support for restrictive immigration policies (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007); likewise, experimental research also shows that threat perceptions are a crucial driving force behind opposition to immigration (Brader et al., 2008; Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2010; Iyengar et al., 2013; Turper et al., 2015). Safety threat perceptions are also strongly connected with opposition to immigration in that public concerns about the criminal activities of immigrants influence negative immigration attitudes and preferences for more restrictive immigration policies (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017; McLaren & Johnson, 2007). Given that perceptions of sociocultural, economic, and safety threats often coexist and are interrelated, research typically addresses these dimensions collectively to provide a comprehensive understanding of their impact.

Furthermore, the relationship between threat perceptions and immigration attitudes is intricately linked with emotional responses. Individuals are usually guided by their gut reactions and habits of mind rather than drawing greater effort for recalling, learning, and sifting through details to arrive at judgments (Brader et al., 2008; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023). Emotions, serving as immediate and primal responses, significantly influence sociopolitical judgments by modifying how threat perceptions are experienced and processed. In explaining the heterogeneity in individual reactions to threats, Sirin et al. (2016) posit that empathy felt toward outgroup members diminishes intergroup perceived threat and boosts support for pro-immigration policies by curbing ingroup interest seeking. That is, intergroup empathy appears as a potent driver that can alter reactions to various threats in politics, including those perceived from immigration.

Emotions are powerful resources that play a substantial role in shaping political judgments and attitudes. Specifically, compassion emerges as a critical factor influencing attitudes toward social welfare policies (Huddy et al., 2001), whereas anger has been shown to foster support for

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punitive measures against outgroups (Huddy et al., 2007; Suhay & Erisen, 2018) and bolster backing for far-right ideologies (Erisen & Vasilopoulou, 2022; Filsinger et al., 2023). Conversely, anxiety is known to intensify opposition to immigration (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Given that immigration intersects with a myriad of policy areas—including economic considerations, welfare system access, sociocultural integration, and demographic shifts—it has the potential to evoke a spectrum of emotional responses in the public. In the following section, we first unpack the role of compassion within emotion theory and then explain how discrete emotions of compassion, anger, and anxiety could influence public opinion on refugees in the context of Turkey.

UNDERSTANDING COMPASSION'S IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION TOWARD IMMIGRATION

Compassion—warmth, tenderness, and a care-giving social emotion—emerges from witnessing another's suffering and stimulates a desire to help and alleviate that agony (Batson, 2011; Goetz et al., 2010; Huddy et al., 2001). According to Nussbaum, compassion is a crucial component of interpersonal knowledge. It acts as "a central bridge between the individual and the community; it is conceived of as our species' way of hooking the interests of others to our own personal goods" (Nussbaum, 1996, p. 28).

Compassion is an intrinsically other-oriented emotion, which is one of its distinctive characteristics. Other-oriented emotions are experienced with a focus on another person, where the individual feeling the emotion is doing so on behalf of and for the sake of the other person (Malbois, 2023). In other words, these emotions involve a genuine concern or care for someone else's well-being, and the emotional experience is centered around the feelings or circumstances of that other individual. Compassion originates in reaction to appraisals of suffering (Goetz et al., 2010), characterized by its primary focus on the person who is undergoing suffering or facing challenges. Therefore, at its core, there is a genuine and caring concern directed toward this individual.

Not all emotions have *the other* as their focus (Malbois, 2023). Enthusiasm, for example, is a positive emotion operationalized through pride and hope and is a self-oriented emotion involving a strong sense of excitement, interest, or eagerness about an activity or idea (Erisen et al., 2020). Hence, the person feeling enthusiastic about herself is the focus of the emotion. Although emotions may not be mutually exclusive (Gadarian & Brader, 2023), compassion substantially distinguishes itself from self-oriented emotions. Moreover, although it is often regarded as a positive emotion, contrary to several positive emotions (e.g., joy, amusement, enthusiasm), people rate the experience of compassion low on pleasantness (Tong, 2015).

Another distinctive characteristic of compassion is having a future-directed tendency to act to mitigate others' suffering (Nussbaum, 2016). While the feelings of concern, warmth, and care for the suffering of others characterize compassion, it is also accompanied by the motivation to improve others' well-being (Breyer, 2020). Evolutionary psychologists explain compassion as a distinct affective state evolved to achieve altruistic and cooperative functions, which operate analogously in various animal species (Hublin, 2009; Preston, 2013). It is suggested to be (a) an essential affective component of the caregiving system intended to enhance the well-being of vulnerable offspring, (b) a desirable attribute in mate selection processes, and (c) a crucial criterion to build cooperative relations with non-kin.

Research often uses the concept of empathy loosely, sometimes referring to the capacity to take the perspective of the other and at other times to a discrete emotional experience (DeSteno, 2015). Although compassion significantly differs from empathy in its approach and proactive motivations, some consider compassion an overlapping notion and a subcomponent within the broader concept of empathy (Batson, 2011; Decety & Cowell, 2014). From

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this approach, empathy is suggested as a multidimensional concept including affective (i.e., empathic concern) and cognitive (i.e., perspective taking) components and defined as a capacity or predisposition that motivates individuals to take others' vantage points and vicariously experience their perspectives and feelings (Muradova & Arceneaux, 2022; Sirin et al., 2021).

Existing research documents that empathy reduces prejudice toward a variety of outgroups, including immigrants (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Simonovits et al., 2018; Sirin et al., 2016), stimulates cooperation between individuals and improves intergroup relations (Batson et al., 2002; Dovidio et al., 2010), and decreases support for restrictive immigration policies (Newman et al., 2015). When individuals experience empathy for someone they disagree with on political matters and take others' perspectives, they become more likely to engage in reflective political reasoning—integrating contrasting perspectives on an issue (Muradova, 2021), which reduces political polarization (Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2017). Nevertheless, the research underscores that this process does not directly translate into positive attitude change (Muradova & Arceneaux, 2022). On the other side, there is also evidence that empathy can reduce pro-social behaviors. Experiences of empathy are often subjected to regulation, which can be either upward or downward. Recent findings, for instance, reveal that higher levels of individualism curb the pro-social tendency of empathetic capacity, resulting in less support for welfare assistance toward those in need (Feldman et al., 2020). Empathy can pose potential burdens for empathic distress and burnout that are likely to hinder empathizers' pro-social motivations (Bloom, 2017). Lebowitz and Dovidio (2015) document that when people regulate empathy by suppressing feelings of compassion, they become less likely to engage in altruistic behavior and are more likely to prefer social distancing. Hence, empathy may result in empathic distress instead of compassion since it is a general capacity to resonate with others' emotional states, regardless of their positive or negative valence (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Contrary to compassion, empathic distress, as a self-oriented response, leads people to react with aversion coupled with a desire to withdraw from the suffering to protect the empathizer herself from an excessive burden.

Building on the differences between compassion and empathy, a growing body of research underscores that compassion on its own is a unique emotion distinct from but sometimes interconnected with empathy (DeSteno, 2015; Goetz et al., 2010). Lim and DeSteno's (2016) study demonstrates that compassion determines whether people develop pro-social attitudes and that empathy alone does not translate into caring attitudes for someone suffering in the absence of compassion. Empathy is the capacity to resonate with the other's feelings; therefore, the experience shared with the other would be pleasant or not, especially when distinguishing between oneself and others becomes blurred (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Hence, experiences of empathy are feelings with the other, regardless of positive or negative valence. The self versus other distinction is clear in compassion that engages people in pro-social behaviors (Stevens & Taber, 2021). Contrary to empathy, compassion "is feeling for and not feeling with the other" (Singer & Klimecki, 2014, p. 875). Evidence from social neuroscience research also demonstrates that empathy and compassion are distinct from each other (Decety & Cacioppo, 2012; Stevens & Taber, 2021). Likewise, a series of factor analyses reveals that empathy and compassion consistently load onto different factors (Mayukha et al., 2020). While compassion predicts pro-social action, empathy is documented to either be associated with a decrease in the likelihood of pro-social action or not have a significant effect (Jordan et al., 2016).

Building on this evidence, we conceptualize compassion as a unique social emotion focused on the welfare of others, coupled with a forward-looking motivation to alleviate their suffering. This conceptualization prompts us to examine compassion's distinct role in forming attitudes toward immigrants, contrasting it with the emotions more commonly explored in political psychology: anger and anxiety. Scholarly investigations demonstrate that anger and anxiety are both strong emotional drivers of anti-immigrant attitudes (Gadarian & Brader, 2023) and intolerance toward immigrants (Erisen & Kentmen-Cin, 2017; Skitka et al., 2004). Although

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anger and anxiety may have distinct effects on political attitudes, both anxiety (Koc & Anderson, 2018) and anger (Wirtz et al., 2016) felt toward newcomers augment social distance toward immigrants and refugees (Erisen, 2018). Contrarily, compassion is a well-established emotion, boosting pro-social attitudes (Bloom, 2017; Delton et al., 2018). Experimental research reveals that compassion is strongly connected with lower levels of prejudice toward a variety of outgroups, including immigrants (Sinclair et al., 2016). Higher levels of compassion toward newcomers who suffer from poor conditions are also demonstrated to elevate positive public attitudes toward them (Landmann et al., 2019). In a similar vein, we predict that both anger and anxiety trigger preferences for social distancing from Syrian refugees, whereas compassion has the opposite effect.

In light of escalating public opposition to immigration, fueled by perceived threats and negative emotions toward displaced populations, we focus on social acceptance and support or opposition to various government-led initiatives and proposals concerning refugees. Acknowledging the malleability and potential shifts in support of or opposition to political proposals and government-led initiatives reflects changes in emotional responses and perceived threats. By exploring these varying predictors of pro- and anti-refugee proposals, the present study sets the stage for hypotheses that explore how emotions and perceived threats differently influence public opinion on refugees in a context marked by considerable humanitarian and integration challenges, particularly those encountered in the case of Turkey.

HYPOTHESES

Preferences on social distancing

Stemming from the dynamics of emotions in shaping public attitudes toward refugees, we first delve into the specific emotional responses of compassion, anger, and anxiety to forecast their influence on social distancing behaviors. Given the backdrop of Turkey's significant refugee influx and the ensuing societal and political challenges, understanding the emotional underpinnings of public responses to Syrian refugees is an important task. Hence, in exploring the varying relationship between emotional responses and social distancing practices, we begin by testing the divergent effects of compassion, anger, and anxiety on the social integration of Syrian refugees. This leads us to articulate our first set of hypotheses, focusing on the directional influences of these distinct emotions on individuals' propensity to engage in social distancing from Syrian refugees:

> **Hypothesis 1a.** Those feeling higher levels of compassion toward Syrian refugees are less likely to adopt social distancing.

> **Hypothesis 1b.** Those feeling higher levels of anger toward Syrian refugees are more likely to adopt social distancing attitudes.

> **Hypothesis 1c.** Those feeling higher levels of anxiety toward Syrian refugees are more likely to adopt social distancing attitudes.

Support for restrictive and inclusive proposals

Expanding our investigation into the realm of political evaluations, we next examine how the emotional responses identified—particularly compassion—influence public support for restrictive versus inclusive immigration proposals. This exploration is grounded in the

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understanding that emotional reactions can extend beyond personal interactions with refugees to shape broader political opinions and stances on immigration policies (e.g., Freitag & Hofstetter, 2022; Vasilopoulos et al., 2018). Drawing on evidence from evolutionary psychology research, scholars posit that contemporary political questions, such as redistribution, welfare, collective action, immigration, and intergroup processes, include fundamental social and political dilemmas (Alford & Hibbing, 2004). Building on this framework, studies have demonstrated that compassion is one of the core mechanisms shaping public opinion regarding political issues (Petersen et al., 2012).

On the other hand, immigrants may not necessarily evoke compassion among host community members or easily encourage them to show compassion toward migrants to support pro-immigration proposals. Compassion often emanates when neediness is perceived to be beyond the control of the referent person (Betancourt, 1990). Accordingly, experimental studies show that individuals are more compassionate toward immigrants portrayed as political refugees who had no choice but to migrate than those who chose to migrate (Verkuyten et al., 2018). In turn, those feeling compassion toward the former group are more likely to endorse pro-immigration policies, assistance to migrants, and cultural rights than the latter group. Accordingly, we propose the following set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a. Individuals feeling greater compassion toward Syrian refugees are less likely to adopt anti-refugee proposals.

Hypothesis 2b. Individuals feeling greater compassion toward Syrian refugees are more likely to adopt pro-refugee proposals.

In contrast to compassion, as strong predictors of anti-refugee evaluations, anger and anxiety can be distinguished from each other in several respects. Given the course of events regarding refugee flows to Turkey, we predict that anger and anxiety motivate people differently in shaping their policy opinions. Whereas anxiety is connected to the pressure of high-level uncertainty stemming from a perceived lack of individual control, anger is related to certainty and a sense of individual control (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Marcus et al., 2019; Utych et al., 2022). Under the conditions of uncertainty, when the responsibility for the adverse situation is unidentifiable, anxiety is expected to affect political attitudes (Erisen et al., 2020; Vasilopoulos et al., 2018).

Anxiety is a product of the surveillance system that scans the environment for possible dangers and adjusts behavior accordingly (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Marcus et al., 2000). In the face of novelty and uncertainty, anxiety motivates individuals to eliminate or at least distance themselves from uncertainty. Thus, anxiety arouses risk and uncertainty aversion. We consider that anti-refugee political proposals to repatriate them or restrict their opportunities for earning a living are a strategy to remove the uncertainties caused by the refugee influx (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023). Accordingly, anxious people, who are expected to adopt risk avoidance, can express higher support for anti-refugee proposals. We therefore expect anxiety to be a strong motivator for public support for anti-refugee proposals.

Hypothesis 3. Individuals feeling anxiety toward Syrian refugees are more likely to adopt restrictive, anti-refugee proposals.

In contrast, anger rather than anxiety may promote public opposition to pro-refugee proposals, which aim to empower refugees and grant rights, including welfare benefits, access to the labor market, or citizenship opportunities. Host society members often feel a proprietary claim to certain resources, privileges, and benefits, which they think only in-group members deserve. Therefore, they believe only they should have these opportunities

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(Utych et al., 2022). When host society members perceive that newcomers are encroaching on their group exclusiveness and proprietary claims, anger and resentment are expected to be triggered (Smith et al., 2012; Suhay & Erisen, 2018). This is because anger originates in morality and rule violations. When individuals perceive that something they value has been wronged or harmed by external actors, anger is activated as an approach emotion coming from the disposition system (Erisen, 2021; MacKuen et al., 2010). It motivates a defense response against those perceived as threatening and challenging their internalized core norms and beliefs. More importantly, it elevates a defense response against those perceived as threatening and challenging their internalized core norms and beliefs (Marcus et al., 2019). We therefore expect opposition to policy proposals bestowing inclusive rights on refugees to be boosted by anger rather than anxiety.

> **Hypothesis 4.** Individuals who are angry with Syrian refugees are less likely to support inclusive, pro-refugee proposals.

Support for government-led policies

The effects of discrete emotions on shaping immigration-related policy preferences can also be different. Whereas previous dependent measures are more relevant to individual attitudes and evaluations, preferences on government policies could involve distinct factors. Exploring emotions' impact on government-led immigration policies reveals the complex interplay between personal feelings and public policy preferences. This analysis highlights how these emotional reactions could guide collective support for or opposition to national policy directions. Considering this context, given that Syrian refugees are forced migrants who had to flee their home country because of a civil war, we predict that those experiencing higher levels of compassion toward Syrians are more inclined to support welcoming migration policies. However, we consider that anxiety could provoke host society members to adopt anti-immigration policy preferences to reduce perceived risks and threats from further refugee inflow. In the face of the novelty and uncertainty of the large-scale refugee inflow, anxiety can become a powerful driver—as opposed to anger—behind public opposition toward further refugee entry and the readmission agreement with the European Union. Taken together, we propose the following set of hypotheses, differentiating the potential effects:

> **Hypothesis 5a.** Those who feel compassion toward Syrian refugees are more likely to endorse the EU–Turkey readmission deal and further incoming refugee flows from Syria.

> **Hypothesis 5b.** In contrast to those who feel anger toward Syrian refugees, those who are anxious are more likely to oppose the EU–Turkey readmission deal and further incoming refugee flows from Syria.

The interplay of compassion with perceived threat

Intergroup relations have long been seen in a competitive setting, as majority-group members often see outgroup members as threatening their economic interests, socially valuable statuses, or society's established value system (Blumer, 1958). Such perceived costs and threats from immigrants can influence the regulation of compassion in shaping public opinion over immigration. What happens when compassion toward immigrants and threat perceptions from immigration conflict? To the best of our knowledge, the literature has not explained this potential

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interplay between compassion and threat perceptions, although there are possible hints (Sirin et al., 2016; Thravalou et al., 2021).

Compassion toward different group members, for example, remains strongly significant in explaining positive attitudes toward immigrants and support for pro-immigrant proposals, even after accounting for the influence of threat perceptions (Sirin et al., 2016). Besides, while both factors have a significant impact, compassion has a more substantial influence than threat perceptions on attitudes pertaining to humanitarian assistance for asylum seekers and their permanent settlement in the country (Thravalou et al., 2021). Studies also show that inducing compassionate values for immigrants by conveying messages regarding the hardships immigrants face in their home countries increases support for policies allowing more immigration. Furthermore, this effect holds even in the presence of messages activating economic and cultural threats from immigrants (Newman et al., 2015). Building on these findings, we predict that compassion, especially toward forced immigrants, who have little choice but to leave their home country, can restrain the impact of threat perceptions in shaping social attitudes and political judgments. To test this, we propose an interaction effect through our last hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 6.** The effect of threat perceptions about immigration becomes weaker, especially for those with high levels of compassion toward Syrian refugees, by promoting less social distancing, more pro-immigrant proposals, fewer anti-immigrant proposals, and greater support for pro-refugee policies.

TURKISH CASE

At the onset of the refugee flow from Syria, the government in Turkey adopted an open-door policy to let Syrians enter the country under the status of "temporary protection." That is, they were seen as temporary guests and welcomed with a high level of social acceptance (Erdogan, 2014). However, as the number of Syrian refugees increased, peaking at 2.5 million by the beginning of 2016, these welcoming attitudes eventually faded. Meanwhile, thousands of Syrians aspired to reach European territory by crossing the Aegean and the Mediterranean Sea, making the crisis a critical threat to European countries. Accordingly, the readmission agreement between Turkey and the European Union was enacted in March 2016 to tackle growing irregular migration. In the agreement, Turkey committed to readmitting Syrian refugees arriving on Greek islands from its coasts. The resulting dramatic increase in the Syrian population in Turkey for longer than anticipated raised public negativity toward Syrian refugees in several respects (Erisen, 2018), even affecting vote choice (Fisunoglu & Sert, 2019). Increasingly, a substantial part of the host community started considering Syrians as socio-culturally different and competitors for low-wage jobs, particularly in the informal economy (Getmansky et al., 2019). As a result, there has been growing public opposition to Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Consequently, it is essential to emphasize that Syrian refugees were the subject of forced migration, primarily motivated by the urgent need for safety and protection from domestic conflict. These conditions represent a major difference from immigrants who move to other countries for economic purposes in search of better employment opportunities and living conditions. In that regard, we account for the potential difference between immigrants and refugees and the role of compassion toward a group that faced forced migration. Given these considerations, what we learn and infer from the Turkish case could equally apply to similar situations in different contexts, such as the Syrians dispersed across European countries and the refugees from wars that occurred in Ukraine, Palestine, and Myanmar, or across the African continent.

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DATA

Stratified random probability sampling was used to draw a cross-sectional sample of 1224 participants representing the Turkish population. The distribution of the sample across geographical areas and provinces was based on the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics classification to cover the whole country, including urban and rural settlements. The interviews included an oversample from four municipalities (Adana, Mersin, Şanlıurfa, and Mardin) in the southern and southeastern parts of Turkey, where Syrian refugees are settled in larger numbers. All interviews were conducted face-to-face May 5–18, 2017, at a contextually relevant point in time about the Syrian refugee influx in the country. The average interview length was approximately 24 minutes. According to the standards of the American Association of Public Opinion Research, the response rate was 19%, the cooperation rate was 36%, and the refusal rate was 34%.

Measures

Emotions

In line with the recommendations in the literature (Marcus, 2022; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021), we measured emotions using a 10-item battery, asking participants to what extent they feel compassion, affection, warmth, approval, embracement, anger, hate, hostility, fear, and anxiety toward Syrian refugees. Participants responded using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*). Each emotion domain was loaded onto a single factor (see Table S1 for confirmatory factor analysis results). This allowed us to produce separate measures of compassion (compassion, affection, warmth, approval, and embracement; $\alpha = .84$), anxiety (anxiety and fear; $\alpha = .79$), and anger (anger, hate, and hostility; $\alpha = .82$) as single constructs. In line with our theoretical discussion, our measurement approach enabled us to distinguish between the particular emotions evoked by Syrian refugees.

Perceived threat

Perceived threat from Syrian refugees was measured using a five-item battery that asked about the likelihood of immigrants having a negative impact on the way of life in society, on the economy, and on life in general, as well as posing a security threat and posing a danger to society. Participants responded using a scale ranging from 1 (*very low*) to 4 (*very high*). The responses were combined into a single measure ($\alpha = .88$) whereby higher scores indicate greater levels of perceived threat from the refugees ($M = 2.98$, $SD = .80$).

Social distance

Social distance was measured using the seven-item Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1967), which includes questions asking respondents whether they would accept Syrian refugees into close kinship through marriage, into their social circle as close friends, into their neighborhoods as neighbors, into their workplace as colleagues, into the country as citizens, as guests, and to be removed from the country (reverse). Participants responded using a 5-point scale (1 = *absolutely accept*, 5 = *absolutely not accept*). The responses were combined into a single

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measure of social distance ($\alpha = .83$) whereby higher scores indicate greater social distance toward Syrian refugees ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .93$).

Political proposals

As one of the primary outcome measures, we capture attitudes toward political proposals regarding refugees. Anti-refugee proposals included encouragement for repatriation, prohibition of begging, and increased risk of epidemic disease, whereas pro-refugee proposals entailed access to welfare programs on an equal basis with citizens, the right to work, and acquiring citizenship in return for investment. Participants responded using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Anti-refugee proposals were combined into one variable ($\alpha = .41$), and the pro-refugee proposals ($\alpha = .71$) were combined into another variable (see Table S2 for confirmatory factor analysis results differentiating the proposals). Host community members showed more support for anti-refugee proposals ($M = 4.08$, $SD = .78$) than for pro-refugee proposals ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.07$).

Policy preferences

Different from evaluations for the proposals, we account for government-led policies to capture public opinion regarding the politics dealing with the issue. To that end, we used two items that were also contextually relevant to the timing of the study: First, support for the EU–Turkey readmission agreement was measured through an item ranging from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 5 (*strongly support*; $M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.41$). Second, attitudes toward the refugee admission policy were an item of support for incoming refugee flow, ranging from 1 (*strong opposition to incoming refugee flow*) to 7 (*strong support for incoming refugee flow*; $M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.33$).

Degree of contact

Previous research indicates that contact with outgroups plays a significant role in reducing prejudices (Hangartner et al., 2019). We therefore accounted for the effect of contact with Syrian refugees in our models. We measured contact using a seven-item battery asking respondents whether they encountered Syrian refugees in their residential building, their workplace, their neighborhood, their children's school, a street, a shopping mall, and a mosque (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). These items were aggregated into a single measure ($M = .58$, $SD = .26$) from 0 (*lower contact*) to 1 (*higher contact*).

Control measures

We also controlled for a number of demographic variables, including age, gender, education level, income level, and being a member of an ethnic minority group. We also measured vote choice by asking which party the participants voted for in the last general election in 2015. They could choose from a list of the four major political parties—Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), and Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP)—or an open-ended option for other political parties.

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TABLE 1 Bivariate correlations.

	Compassion	Anger	Anxiety	Perceived threat
Compassion	1.0000			
Anger	.0659	1.0000		
	.0214			
Anxiety	−.1557	.3363	1.0000	
	.0000	.0000		
Perceived threat	−.3959	.1963	.3660	1.0000
	.0000	.0000	.0000	

RESULTS

Descriptive results

Before engaging with multivariate analysis, we briefly provide the associations among the main variables of interest, including emotional reactions and perceived threat. First, we see that the host community members in Turkey feel significantly more anxious ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.99$) than angry ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.62$; t-value = 15.39, $p < .001$) and significantly more anxiety than compassion ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.30$; t-value = 20.19, $p < .001$) toward Syrian refugees. Also, as shown in Table 1, whereas compassion is negatively correlated with anxiety ($\beta = -.16$; $p < .001$), it is weakly but positively correlated with anger ($\beta = .07$; $p < .05$). This finding suggests that our theoretical approach confirms the distinct routes for the three emotion domains under study. Also, as expected, anger and anxiety are positively correlated ($\beta = .33$; $p < .001$). Considering perceived threat as the potential third variable in our analyses, we confirm our theoretical expectations that it correlates negatively with compassion but positively with anger and anxiety.[1]

Effects of compassion, anger, and anxiety

Social distancing

We begin our analysis by examining the effects of compassion, anger, and anxiety on our variables of interest. Based on our theoretical framework, experiencing compassion toward Syrian refugees should motivate host community members to adopt less social distance and support more welcoming and affirmative policy proposals. In line with Hypothesis 1a, participants feeling higher compassion toward Syrian refugees were significantly less likely to adopt social distance ($\beta = -.36$, $p < .001$) (see Figure 1; Table S3 reports the full results). Thus, consistent with prior studies, compassion significantly decreased avoidant attitudes toward outgroup members within societal contexts. Next, supporting our subsequent theoretical predictions (Hypotheses 1b and 1c), respondents who were angry with Syrian refugees or anxious due to them were significantly more likely to adopt social distance toward Syrian refugees ($\beta_{anger} = .15$, $p < .001$; $\beta_{anxiety} = .08$, $p < .001$).

In all our models, perceived threat remained a robust predictor ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) of behavior toward refugees in social environments. That is, from a personal to a sociotropic degree of threat, the more that the participants felt threatened by Syrian refugees, the less they were willing to accept them into their societal domains. Regardless of the context of these social exchanges, whether in the neighborhood, as a friend in the community, or as a family member

[1]See Figure S1 for the correlation plot of all items used in the operationalization of emotion domains and perceived threat.

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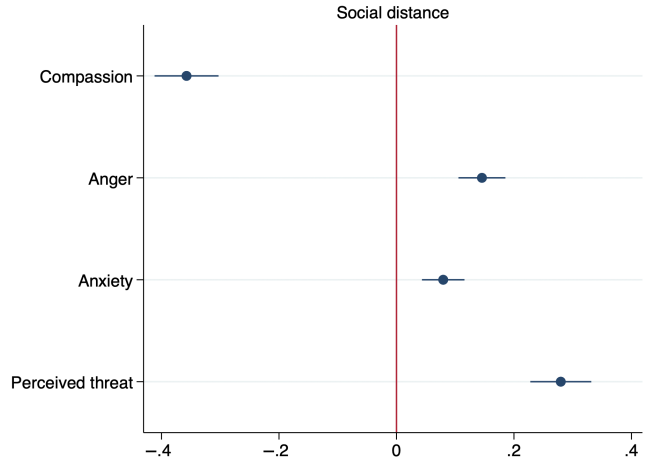


FIGURE 1 Effects of compassion, anger, and anxiety on social distance.

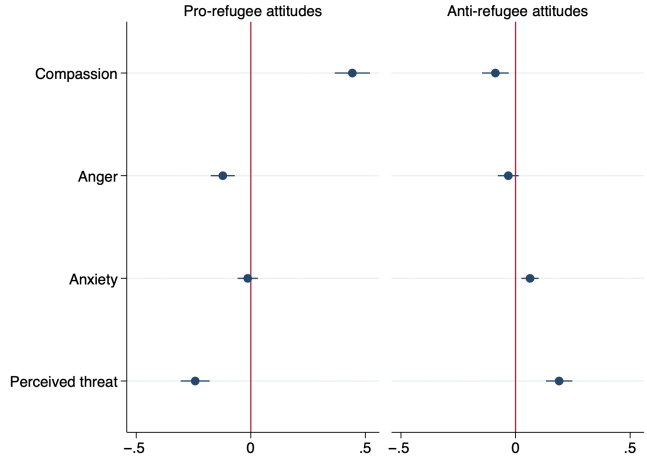


FIGURE 2 Effects of compassion, anger, and anxiety on pro- and anti-refugee attitudes.

through marriage, the participants remained reserved toward the refugees due to their perceived threat. With the support of our first set of hypotheses, we next test these results across specific political proposals and policy preferences.

Evaluations on political proposals

We next examine the impact of emotions on anti- and pro-refugee proposals, starting with compassion. The results reveal that compassion is a significant component of the emotional mechanism behind evaluations of refugee-related proposals. Compatible with Hypotheses 2a and 2b, the findings reported in Figure 2 (see Tables S4 and S5 for full results) establish that compassion makes individuals significantly more likely to support pro-refugee proposals (β = .44, $p < .001$) and more likely to oppose anti-refugee proposals after controlling for several relevant variables (β = –.09, $p < .01$). Equally important, compassion is more powerful in bolstering pro-refugee proposals as opposed to its—still significant but weaker—effect in lowering the rejection of anti-refugee proposals. Compassion appears to evoke feelings of care

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and empathy for refugees, even after controlling for ideology and partisanship. Corroborating with previous research (e.g., Feldman et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2015), feelings of care and compassion consistently reduce the potential effects of anti-refugee factors. Thus, compassion appears as a key to successfully resolving various societal concerns regarding the integration and acceptance of refugees into the host society.

Furthermore, we predicted that higher levels of anxiety make individuals more likely to support restrictive, anti-refugee proposals and oppose welcoming refugee policies. In line with Hypothesis 3, anxiety, but not anger, was a significant driver of support for anti-refugee proposals. The same robust, distinct effects of anger and anxiety remained after we introduced the control variables into the models.

Our findings also demonstrate that there is a major difference in the effects of anger and anxiety on public attitudes toward welcoming and pro-refugee proposals. In line with Hypothesis 4, in contrast to those who felt anxious, those who felt angry with Syrian refugees were significantly more likely to oppose policy proposals enabling refugees to be empowered through access to the labor market, welfare benefits, and citizenship opportunities ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$). Our initial analysis, which was conducted without the control variables, suggested that anxious respondents were also more likely to oppose pro-refugee proposals. However, after the control variables were added to the model, the association of anger with opposition to pro-refugee proposals remained the same, whereas the effect of anxiety disappeared.

Considering the difference in the effects of anger and anxiety, these findings highlight an important aspect of emotion research. In line with earlier studies into the differences between anger and anxiety (e.g., Erisen et al., 2020; Filsinger et al., 2023; Utych et al., 2022; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019), pro-refugee proposals that promote better options for refugees, such as welfare programs, the right to work, and citizenship for those making a financial investment, are associated with anger rather than anxiety. In contrast, anti-refugee proposals that raise social, economic, and health concerns relate to anxiety rather than anger. Also, in line with emotion-driven influences, threat perception consistently increases attitudes and evaluations that promote social distancing from refugees, favor greater opposition to pro-refugee proposals, and increase support for anti-refugee proposals. Against these negative effects, compassion emerges not just as an emotional response but as a transformative force that shapes attitudes and evaluations, guiding public opinion toward a more inclusive and supportive stance on refugees. This role of compassion underscores its significance beyond mere personal feelings, marking it as a critical factor in fostering societal acceptance and attitudinal change toward the well-being of refugees. Yet, we still need to test the consistency of these findings against public opinion about governmental policies.

Preferences for governmental policies

Following the results showing the influence of emotions and perceived threat on support or opposition toward political proposals for dealing with Syrian refugees in Turkey, we further extend our tests, in line with Hypothesis 5, by evaluating how emotional reactions influence public preferences about governmental policies. Aside from the evaluations for handling Syrian refugees in the country, the government also negotiated an agreement with the EU to control the refugee influx toward Europe. Both of these policies imposed duties on the Turkish government in return for financial assistance and a visa agreement for Turkish citizens visiting the EU. The Turkish public raised concerns about the potential consequences, which led to limited support for these policies. In content, the government negotiated these policies and differed from public opinion and evaluations toward the refugees in various ways, providing us with the opportunity to test another aspect of public opposition to immigration.

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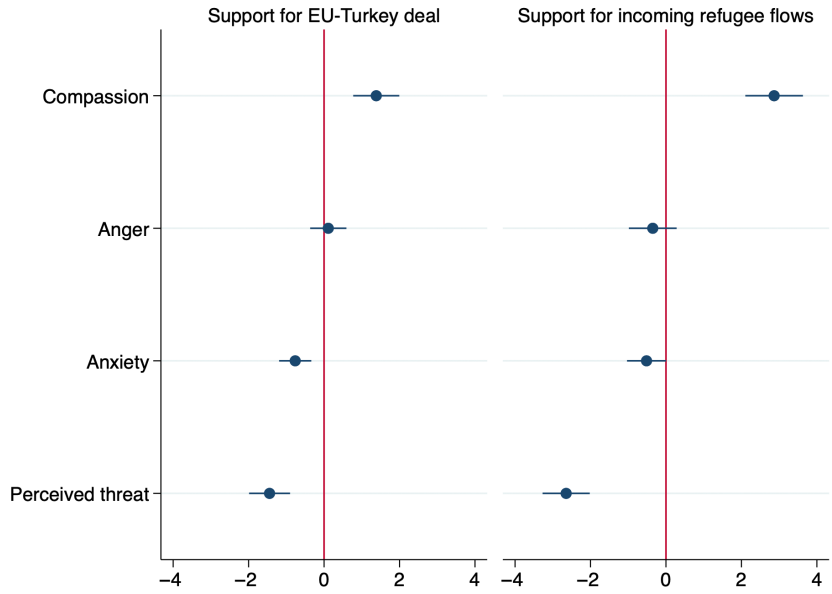


FIGURE 3 Impact of emotional responses on governmental policies.

In line with our earlier findings, we also expected a positive effect of compassion on these policies (Hypothesis 5a). Given that Syrian refugees are forced migrants because they had to flee their home country's civil war, we predicted that those experiencing compassion toward the refugees would be more inclined to support welcoming migration policies. Indeed, as shown in Figure 3, compassion consistently increased the propensity to support these governmental policies.

In contrast to these effects, we predicted that higher anxiety makes individuals more likely to oppose the EU–Turkey readmission agreement and policies that could increase refugee flows from Syria. Regarding the acceptance of further refugees through government-level agreements, there was a major difference in the effects of anger and anxiety. Supporting Hypothesis 5b, while anger had no effect, anxiety dominated and made participants more likely to oppose the readmission agreement (Table S6 reports the full models). The distinct effects of anxiety regarding these policies rest on the potential unknowns and uncertain consequences. Because the government implemented these policies without consulting the public, the risks are novel to them. In line with previous research (e.g., Erisen et al., 2020; Filsinger et al., 2023; Huddy et al., 2007; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019) showing that people's behavior becomes risk-averse under conditions of anxiety and uncertainty, the participants rejected further engagement with the readmission agreement on official EU grounds. In these results, compassion still serves as a key and robust driver in mobilizing public support for inclusive policies, effectively bridging the gap between government initiatives and community acceptance. However, our analysis so far concerns the distinct effects of emotions and perceived threats on attitudinal and policy-based evaluations. While the control measures do not change any of these robust effects for perceived threat, the next main task is to test for interactions between threat and emotions, particularly compassion.

The interplay between compassion and perceived threat

Our final hypothesis concerns the critical role of perceived threats from immigrants in explaining opposition to immigration and anti-refugee proposals, particularly by analyzing its

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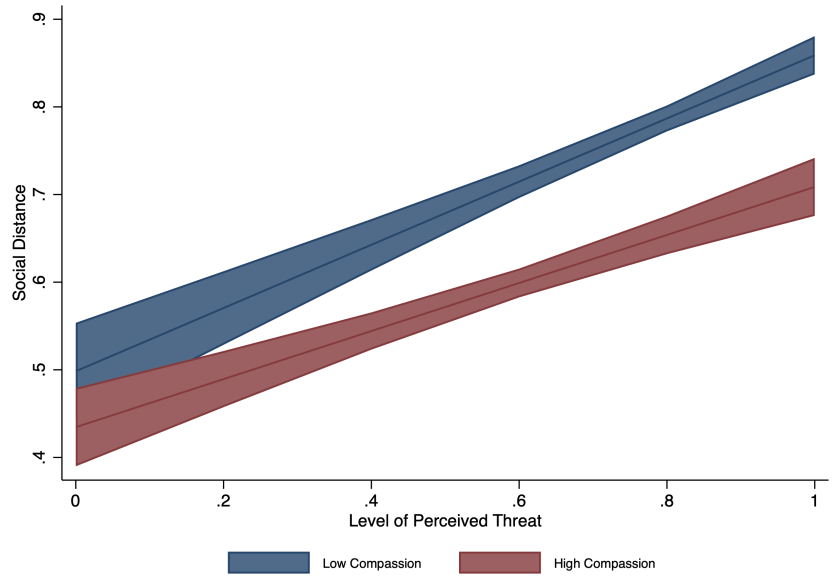


FIGURE 4 Compassion lowers the negative perceived threat effects on social distance.

interplay with compassion. As Figure 4 presents (Table S3's last two columns report the full results), even on the higher levels of perceived threat from refugees, compassion significantly affected social distancing toward Syrian refugees. That is, among respondents who perceive refugees as highly threatening, those who also feel compassion toward Syrian refugees were significantly less likely than less compassionate individuals to adopt high social distancing.

Similarly, the marginal effects shown in the left plot in Figure 5 (Tables S4 and S5 report the full results) demonstrate that compassionate individuals were significantly more likely than less compassionate individuals to support pro-refugee proposals even as the level of perceived threat increased. When perceived threat was lowest, respondents with higher compassion did not significantly differ from those feeling lower compassion in their support for inclusive, pro-refugee proposals.

Confirming our theoretical expectations (Hypothesis 6), the effect of perceived threat significantly changes when moving from lower to higher levels of compassion toward Syrian refugees. That is, the effect of perceived threat on evaluations regarding pro-refugee proposals changes as a function of the extent to which people feel compassion toward refugees. These findings thus provide novel evidence regarding the interplay between threat perceptions and compassion as an emotion. We also support previous results in the literature (e.g., Newman et al., 2015) establishing that the perceived threat from immigration is most effective in boosting opposition to immigration among those lowest in compassion while reducing opposition to immigration among those highest in compassion.

As seen in the right plot in Figure 5, compassion had a minimal effect on the interaction between threat perceptions and support for anti-refugee proposals. The plotted marginal effects show that respondents with higher compassion only significantly differed from their counterparts with lower compassion in supporting anti-refugee proposals when perceived threat was at its highest value. When threat perceptions were at lower or moderate levels, compassion had no significant effect on support for exclusionary, anti-refugee proposals.

Figure 6 plots the probability of displaying strong opposition to and strong support for the EU–Turkey readmission deal (Table S6 and Figure S2 report the full results). It shows that compassion had the most effect when the perceived threat was higher. As threat perceptions escalate, in the absence of high compassion toward Syrian refugees, the probability of strong

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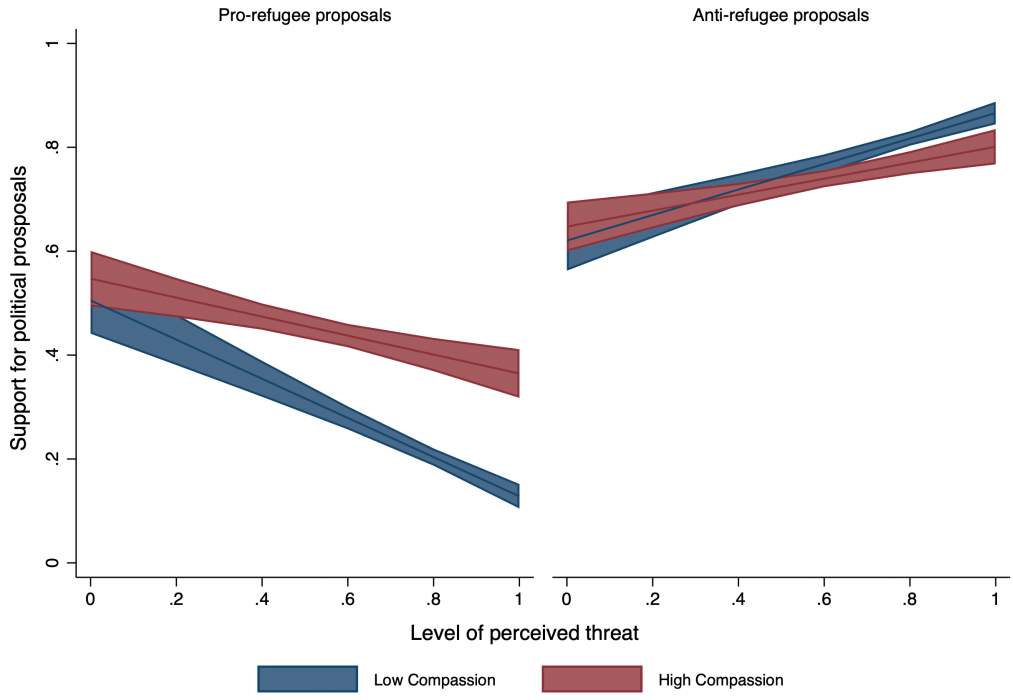


FIGURE 5 Interaction of compassion and perceived threat on the level of support for political proposals.

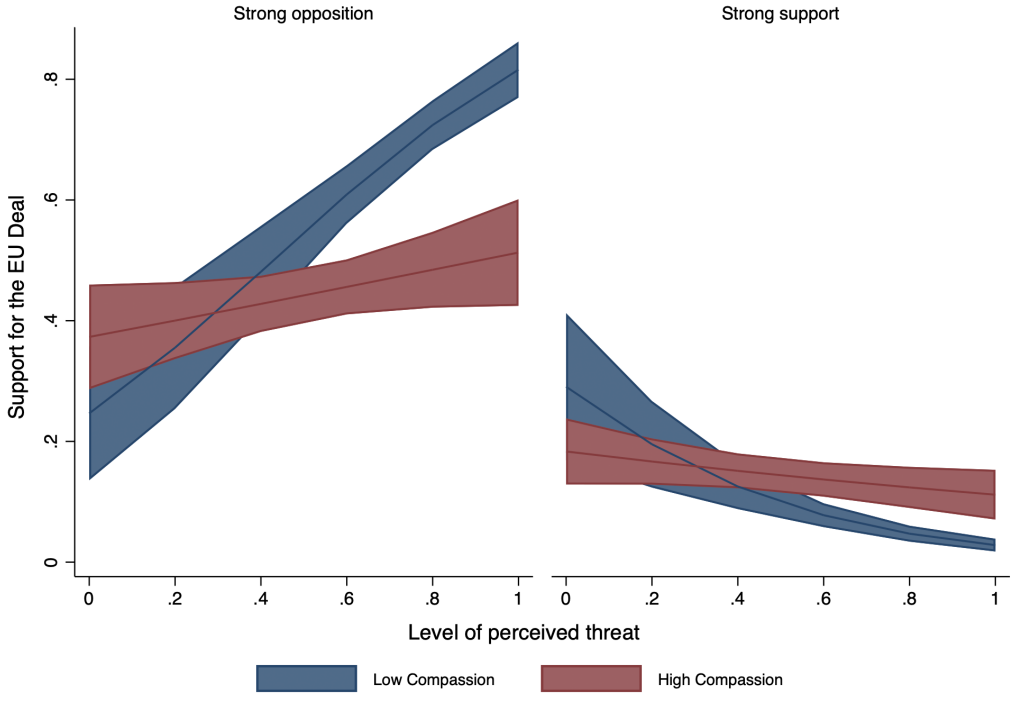


FIGURE 6 Interaction of compassion and perceived threat on support for the EU–Turkey readmission agreement.

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opposition to the EU–Turkey readmission agreement increases. More specifically, among those with low compassion, the probability of strong opposition to the EU–Turkey deal rises from .24 to .82 as the level of perceived threat from refugees increases from its minimum to maximum value. Among respondents feeling greater compassion, however, the probability of being strongly opposed to the EU–Turkey agreement increases from .36 to .52 as the level of perceived threat moves from its minimum to maximum value.

In addition, as the perceived threat from refugees magnifies, the probability of giving strong support for this policy decreases among those feeling less compassion toward Syrian refugees, whereas it remains almost the same for those with higher compassion across differing levels of threat perception. As the level of perceived threat moves from its minimum to maximum value, for example, the probability of strongly supporting the EU–Turkey deal falls from .30 to .03 when respondents feel low compassion, whereas it decreases from .19 to .11 when compassion is higher. These findings underline that the substantial impact of threat perceptions on opposition to the EU–Turkey readmission deal is weakened when compassion toward refugees is greater.

Next, we analyze the interplay between compassion and perceived threat in shaping popular support for the refugee admission policy that allows refugee flows from Syria into Turkey. Figure 7 (Table S7 and Figure S3 report the full results) plots the probability of strongly opposing this policy and supporting maintaining the number of Syrian refugees as it is.[2] As the level of perceived threat from refugees increases, the probability of being strongly opposed to this policy is significantly affected by the respondent's level of compassion. More specifically, the impact of rising threat perceptions on the probability of strongly opposing this policy is more intense when compassion is lower toward refugees. As threat perception moves from its lowest to highest scores, the probability of strongly opposing the policy rises from .28 to .96 among those with low compassion, whereas it increases from .28 to .75 when compassion is high.

There was also a marginal difference between those believing that refugee numbers should be kept the same. The plots demonstrate that even if threat perceptions from refugees increased, respondents who felt compassion were significantly more likely than those feeling less compassion to agree with keeping refugee numbers the same. When perceived threat changes from its minimum to its maximum value, the probability of giving support for keeping the refugee numbers the same decreases from .41 to .01 for those with low compassion while falling from .40 to .11 for those feeling higher compassion.

We also found robust, consistent effects regarding the interplay of perceived threat and compassion across our dependent measures. Unlike the effects of anxiety or anger, compassion is the key to unraveling public understanding in the host nation toward Syrian refugees. While perceived threat remains a powerful predictor of opposition, feelings of care and compassion reduce its effects. Anger and anxiety, while functioning in distinct ways to threat perception, do not interact with it regarding social distancing, political attitudes, and policy preferences.

One reason compassion restrains the influence of perceived threat might be related to the strong motivation aroused by caregiving, or warm and tender feelings motivating one to help and comfort *the other*. It promotes pro-social actions for those who had to leave their country due to war conditions and now need significant support to survive. In this context, even for people who perceive immigration as highly threatening to collective interests, the effects of these judgments seem to be curbed by compassion, resulting in positivity toward refugees and pro-immigration policies.

[2]To see the distribution of perceived threat across the conditional interaction effects, please refer to Figures S4–S6.

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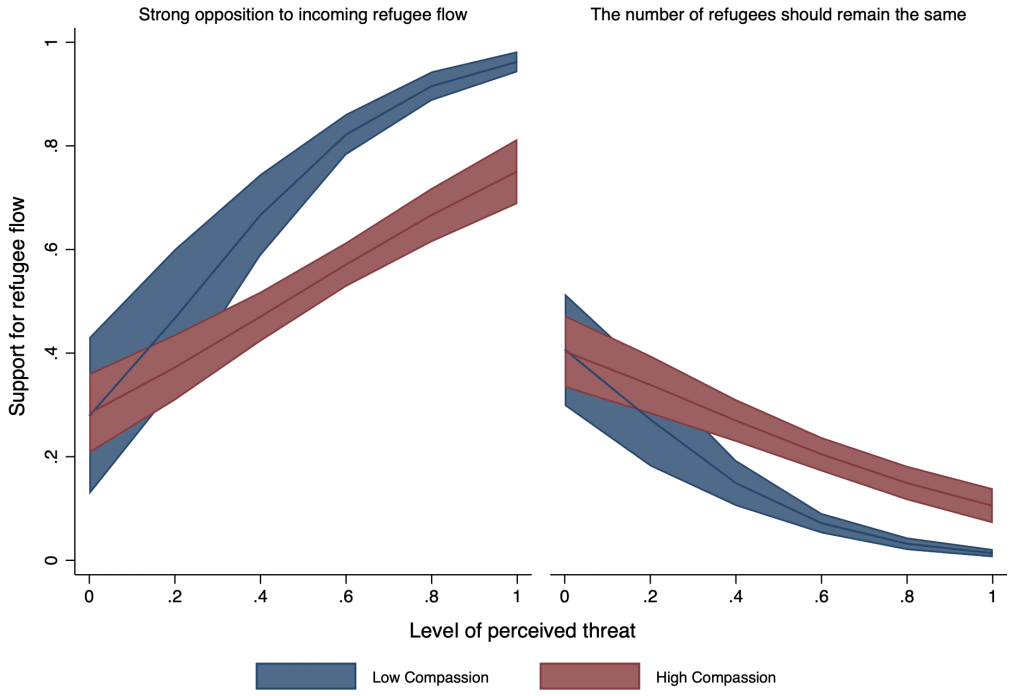


FIGURE 7 Interaction of compassion and perceived threat on support for refugee flow.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Social scientists across the fields spend significant time and funders spend major resources to address the challenges of the integration and acceptance of refugees and immigrants into society (see e.g., Claassen & McLaren, 2022; Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2011; Esses et al.,2017). Although the challenge is a major one for governments and societies, the study of immigrants in the host nation requires tailored approaches. Given that, opposition to immigration is not merely a disguised bias but also an intricate manifestation of the interplay among various beliefs, apprehensions, and opinions pertaining to the far-reaching effects of immigration. Our take in this study relies on the role of emotions—compassion in particular—when it comes to understanding and lowering threat perceptions from immigrants and refugees. Previous literature on emotions suggests how anger and anxiety promote distinct levels of threat. As both are categorized as negative emotions, the possibility of reduced threat has not become a topic of discussion. To that end, we provide analyses for the role of compassion in mitigating the effects of heightened perceived threat from Syrian refugees in Turkey.

By focusing on the unique role of compassion in comparison with anger and anxiety, we tackle how and under which conditions compassion may change preferences regarding immigration. Our results suggest several important inferences about the consistent positive effect of compassion on lowering social distancing and strengthening support for political proposals and governmental policies that promote integration. Consistent across both political proposals and policy preferences, higher compassion toward refugees mitigates the role of perceived threat and fosters support for pro-immigration political choices. More importantly, compassion holds ground when interacting with threat perception. In contrast to the potential and expected range of anger and anxiety, compassion functions as the major source of lowering the negative effects of perceived threat in shaping opposition to immigration. Our findings are

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robust in predicting the reduction of negative public evaluations through compassion across several domains.

Going beyond the existing research that predominantly investigates what explains opposition to immigration, our findings provide valuable insights into not only how opposition to immigration can diminish among host community members but also how to down-regulate the impacts of perceived threat underpinning the popular opposition. In the face of growing immigrant and refugee populations across different parts of the globe, the alleviation of immigration-related threat perceptions, anti-immigrant preferences, and negative attitudes toward immigrants in social or political domains becomes a pivotal issue for social cohesion and integration. As the current evidence reveals the potent role of compassion in curbing threat perceptions and opposition to immigration, we consider that compassion might also be a significant concept for immigrant and refugee integration studies.

Our research also emphasizes the empirical and theoretical importance of recognizing compassion as a distinct emotion in understanding public opinion. While empathy receives considerable attention in political psychology studies, conflicting findings exist regarding its impact on pro-social attitudes. In contrast, our study highlights the robust influence of compassion, offering a valuable framework for future research. Distinguishing between compassion and empathy, further research would enrich our understanding of their differing roles in shaping public evaluations.

Equally relevant is the rising number of refugees across the globe who are faced with forced migration, from millions of Syrians dispersed beyond Turkey across several European countries to the Ukrainians having moved to other European countries to the Palestinians or thousands of Africans in Sudan and the Central African Republic becoming refugees as a result of conflict. What we offer through this work may apply to similar situations and travel to other contexts.

Finally, we acknowledge the potential limitations of this work built on observational data alone. So, as we make only correlational inferences, the implications stand relevant in offering how and when compassion could play a role in the study of public evaluations toward refugees. To address this limitation, future research could employ experimental designs to vary different notions of compassion and provide causal tests of how these feelings could regulate opposing views toward refugees. Moreover, given the complexity of emotions, it would be valuable to examine how the effects of compassion—as an *other*-oriented emotion—differ from self-oriented positive emotions in shaping public attitudes and opinions. As such, our insights into the affective mechanism behind public evaluations would be enriched.

We believe that these findings are equally relevant for policymakers as well. In a time of polarized politics and growing far-right, anti-immigrant-driven political traction in Turkey, across Europe, and elsewhere around the globe, finding a potential route for integration is an important task. From the lens of emotion research, we propose that compassion could be the key to unraveling public understanding toward refugees. Capturing the manifold effects of compassion in connection with immigrant and refugee integration into host societies will potentially offer political and societal contributions and strengthen the standing of democracy overall.

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