

Travel Ban, Refugees & Public Opinion

Pennsylvanians split, misinformed about the 2017 ban on refugees, with a majority opposing it.

Summary: 55% of Pennsylvanians oppose the refugee ban, citing U.S. values and traditions. Supporters focus on security concerns and a need for better screening. Overall, responses show a poor understanding of the ban and its effect on refugees.

Background

On January 27, 2017 President Trump signed an executive order related to the entrance of foreign nationals to U.S. territory. This order included two different types of restrictions: temporarily barring entrance of nationals from a set list of countries ("Travel ban"), and temporarily halting all refugee resettlement from any country ("Refugee ban"). Following reactions by the public, as well as a number of legal actions, the January 27 ban was never implemented. On March 6, 2017, a second version of the ban was signed. While initially blocked by courts, this version went into effect on June 29 until its expiration in September and October 2017. President Trump had signed a third version of the ban on September 24, which has been enforced since December 4, 2017. Legal recourses against the ban are still ongoing.

While most public discussions have focused on the list of countries whose nationals were banned entries, there has been relatively less coverage on the ban on refugees. The initial version of the ban halted refugee resettlement from any country for 120 days, and indefinitely for Syrian refugees.

The second version of the ban withdrew the indefinite halt of Syrian resettlement and kept the temporary overall halt for all refugees. The third version of the ban no longer referred to refugees, but in the meantime, President Trump had decided on a historical low quota of refugee resettlement for 2018 (at 45,000, compared to 85,000 admitted in 2016).

Travel ban vs. Refugee ban

The first two versions of the executive order included both:

A travel ban that affects all nationals from a specific list of countries	A refugee ban that affects all refugee resettlement from all countries
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What does the public think about such measures? On the one hand, President Trump was voted into office with a promise to curb immigration. On the other hand, the announcement of the ban created uproar among a segment of the population. Existing polls at the national level have provided contradictory evidence as to how much support the different versions of the ban have. The methodology, as well as the wording of the question, may explain differing

levels of support. But so do different elements of the ban, with some suggesting that the ban on refugees is more unpopular than the ban on nationals of certain countries.¹ In fall 2017, Penn State Harrisburg conducted a survey to better understand the level of support for the ban on refugees and the reasons behind it.

Findings

Support for refugees

The question asked was: "As you may know, in spring 2017, the President issued an executive order on immigration. Part of this order temporarily prohibits all refugees from being admitted to the United States. Do you support or oppose the U.S. suspending admission of all refugees?" 55.3% expressed their disapproval of the ban. Support to the ban is strongly correlated with party affiliation, with 75% of Republicans supporting the ban, and 87.5% of Democrats opposing it. The level of support for the ban increases with age, and decreases with higher levels of income and education, and is lower among minorities. This trend confirms findings from 2016.²

Concerns with refugees

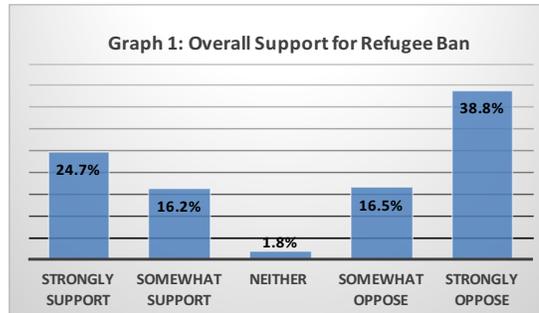
As a follow up to the question asking the level of support, respondents were asked to explain why they opposed or supported the ban. The chief concern for supporters of the ban remains the ability to screen and vet refugees properly (32.5%). This is associated with concerns over security and terrorism (25.3%). Another 21% of supporters of the ban expressed the need to care for U.S. citizens first, before caring for non-U.S. citizens.

Misconceptions

While about 8% of supporters of the ban demonstrated a clear understanding of the official rationale for the ban (the need to condition the arrival of refugees to the availability of appropriate background information from the country of origin), a significant number of responses indicated a poor understanding of the ban or U.S. refugee policies. There is a clear (and very common) confusion between refugees and other types of immigrants, with 10.5% of supporters expressing concerns about the illegal status of refugee (even though refugees are resettled through a formal process that gives them legal status). Other respondents were concerned that refugees would receive less vetting than other immigrants (even though they receive the highest level of screening) or that they would not pay tax (they do). It seems that many respondents are concerned about other issues related to immigration, and that these concerns spill over to refugees.

There also seems to have been poor communication regarding the nature of the ban, as several respondents expressed that the question asked was incorrect since

only refugees from specific countries were banned. Such statements confuse the two different aspects of the ban, and demonstrate that the administration and the media did not communicate clearly about the nature of the ban.



Criticism of the ban

As mentioned earlier, a small majority of respondents opposed the ban. 34% of them expressed that keeping the door open to refugees was a moral obligation due to the hardship felt by refugees (19.3%) and based on U.S. values (19.7%). 23% of opponents to the ban mentioned that, "We are all immigrants/refugees." Other respondents based their opposition to the ban on specific criticism of the executive order. Many thought that the ban should not be a blanket policy without distinguishing between refugees; others felt that the ban was based on prejudice against foreigners; some argued that the ban was unnecessary and not addressing the problem; still others mentioned that the ban was unconstitutional, or created out of fear, or poorly thought of and rushed.

Overall, the data demonstrate the gap between opponents and supporters of the refugee ban, with only 3% undecided, and about 5.5% who recognized value in arguments from both sides. There is therefore a need to better communicate about the existing ban, and to understand concerns on both sides to build common grounds.

¹. <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trump-immigration-travel-ban-234816>

². <https://harrisburg.psu.edu/news/poll-shows-pennsylvanians-say-yes-syrian-refugees-are-concerned-over-screening>

Methodology

Data consists of responses from 610 randomly selected adult Pennsylvania residents, who participated in the fall 2017 Penn State Poll. This was an omnibus survey administered by telephone through the Center for Survey Research at Penn State Harrisburg between August 23 and October 2, 2017. The Center employed a dual-frame design consisting of both landline and cell phone samples, with 75.5% of respondents interviewed via cell phone and 24.5% interviewed via landline. The survey cooperation rates for the landline portion and cell portion of the sample were 79.5% and 68.6%, respectively. Responses were weighted by demographic criteria to enhance representativeness. Margin of error is +/- 4.0 percentage points with 95% degree of confidence. A report of methods is available upon request.

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