

Pennsylvania 2016 Pre-Election Poll on Policy and Governance



PennState
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Pennsylvanians say “yes” to Syrian refugees but are concerned over screening

Summary: A majority (54%) of Pennsylvanians support accepting more Syrian refugees, but the issue is polarizing; while many Republicans strongly oppose this policy due to security concerns, Democrats strongly support it based on U.S. core values. Both sides cite concerns over screening.

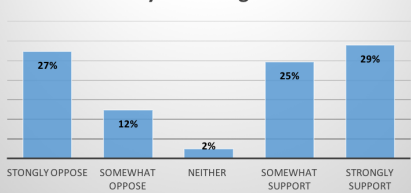
Background

In November 2015, the terrorist attacks in Paris triggered a conversation on Syrian refugees: whether or not Syrian refugees coming to the U.S. could pose a security threat. As many U.S. governors started to affirm that they would not allow Syrian refugees to be resettled in their state, Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf stood out by stating that Pennsylvania will continue working with the federal government to accept Syrian refugees. Pennsylvania had indeed resettled a number of Syrian refugees before the announcement, and continued to do so after. However, among the broader refugee population, Syrians represent a small group: in 2015, out of 2,764 refugees resettled in Pennsylvania, only 112 were from Syria (many more were resettled from Bhutan, Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire and Somalia).*

At the national level, most of the polls conducted since November 2015 indicated that a majority of the American public opposed bringing in more Syrian refugees (53 percent) over 42 percent of Americans who favored it. It is worth noting that

polls from the last 70 years have shown that the American public always tended to oppose increased intake of refugees, whatever their origins are.**

Graph 1: Overall Attitudes Toward Syrian Refugees



Findings

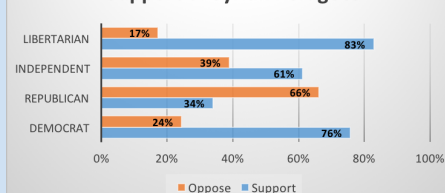
Overall support

What do Pennsylvanians think about the arrival of Syrian refugees? The results of this poll sponsored by the Penn State Harrisburg School of Public Affairs provide a different – more supportive – picture. When asked: “Do you support or oppose the United States taking in refugees from the conflict in Syria after screening them for security?,” 54 percent of respondents supported the arrival of Syrian refugees in the US (29 percent strongly supported, 25 percent somewhat supported), while 39 percent opposed it (27 percent strongly opposed, 12 percent somewhat opposed).

Polarization

The higher numbers in the “strongly (support or oppose)” categories than in the “somewhat” category indicate that this is a polarizing issue. As was also shown in previous national polls, there is a statistically significant relationship between support for Syrian refugees and political affiliation. Self-declared Republicans (45 percent) strongly opposed taking in Syrian refugees, compared to only 12 percent of Democrats. Inversely, 43 percent of self-declared Democrats strongly supported taking in Syrian refugees, compared to 10 percent of Republicans. These results are not surprising given that the two 2016 presidential candidates have taken radically different positions on the issue of Syrian refugees (“ban” or “extreme vetting” of Syrian refugees for Donald Trump; an increase in the quota from 10,000 to 65,000 Syrian refugees resettled per year for Hillary Clinton).

Graph 2: Political Affiliation by Support of Syrian Refugees



(over)

Pennsylvanians' opposition or support of refugees from Syria is also related to their confidence in the federal government's ability to deliver services: 53 percent of respondents who rated the federal government's job as "very bad" strongly oppose taking in Syrian refugees, while 47 percent of respondents who rated the government as "very good" strongly support it.

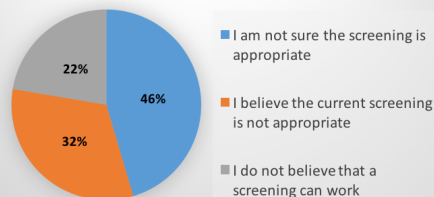
Pre-arrival screening

Pennsylvanians' concerns about the federal government were also evident in the answers to open-ended questions about why they supported or opposed Syrian refugees. The analysis of their answers indicates that a third of the respondents expressed some concerns about the security screening that refugees have to go through before entering the U.S. Supporters and opponents to Syrian refugees raised this issue. Among supporters, 86 percent expressed that they did not have sufficient information regarding whether the current screening and vetting system is appropriate. Among opponents, 51 percent thought that the current screening system was not good enough, while another 34 percent thought it would be impossible to put in place a vetting system that can guarantee that no refugee will ever endanger the lives of U.S. citizens. These figures are important, because they indicate that better information regarding the existing screening process in general, as well as the additional process required for refugees coming from Syria, could help alleviate some of the concerns.***

Among the respondents who overall oppose the arrival of Syrian refugees, the two reasons mentioned the most after

concerns with screening were: the terrorist threat that refugees pose (20 percent) and the need to first help U.S. citizens before refugees (in particular veterans and homeless people) before helping refugees (32 percent).

Graph 3: Overall Attitudes Toward Security Screening



"We are all immigrants"

On the other hand, Pennsylvanian respondents also articulated the reasons why they support the arrival of refugees. Many supporters expressed sympathy towards the dramatic plight of Syrians (35 percent). But, the most commonly advanced rationale (42 percent) is based on values, identity and history: respondents expressed that receiving refugees is what the U.S. stands for and does, and that "we are all immigrants." This particular discourse seems to resonate strongly among Pennsylvanians. Understanding these discourses, as well as the concerns held by the public, indicates that policy makers should focus on improving asylum policies and raising public awareness about the actual process.

*<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/fy-2015-refugees-by-state-and-country-of-origin-all-served-populations>

** Data computed from Quinnipiac University, MSNBC, Gallup, ABC News/Washington Post, Bloomberg Polls (Nov. 2015) and Brookings (May 2016). Long-term data from PewResearch.

***<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/24/watch-heres-what-refugee-screening-process-looks>

Methodology

Data consists of responses from 660 randomly selected adult Pennsylvania residents, who participated in the School of Public Affairs' Pennsylvania Pre-election Poll on Policy and Governance. This was an omnibus survey administered by telephone through the Center for Survey Research at Penn State Harrisburg between August 18 and October 15, 2016. The Center employed a dual-frame design consisting of both landline and cell phone samples, with 60.8% of respondents interviewed via cell phone and 39.2% interviewed via landline. The survey cooperation rates for the landline portion and cell portion of the sample were 73.4% and 60.1%, respectively. Responses were weighted by demographic criteria to enhance representativeness. Margin of error is +/- 4.0 percentage points with 95% degree of confidence.

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