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## Public Opinion in the United States and Hungary: How Trump and Orbán have Manufactured the Debate over Refugees

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### Abstract

This research paper is inspired by the author's recent experience interning with US Together – Cleveland, a non-profit refugee resettlement agency that provides services before, during, and immediately after refugees' arrival. It will utilize a humanitarian approach to the topic of public opinion and perception of refugees in the United States. In order to put these findings in the context of world refugee responses, Hungary will be considered as a comparative case study. This will include an exploration into the historical role and perception of refugees in both countries, as well as the recent policy changes by the Trump and Orbán administrations respectively. This is a critical topic in today's globalized world with ongoing refugee crises in various world regions which seemingly drive increasingly negative attitudes towards refugees arriving in both countries. The purpose of this paper is to retrace closely the Trump and Orbán administrations' policies in order to determine whether the harsh criticism leveled at refugees espoused by these leaders is a reflection of widely held feelings previously present in the population that elected them, or rather, if their populist and xenophobic demagoguery have impacted the people's perceptions of immigrants and refugees. This paper will explore the historical, economic, and social factors that relate to public opinion of refugees. This paper finds that it is most likely that Trump and Orbán are reflections of their electorates. While they themselves might hold these views, they were elected on xenophobic platforms because enough people agree with their platforms.

### Introduction

Every day 37,000 people are forced to leave their homes due to persecution and conflict (UNHCR "Figures at a Glance", 2019). Over the past century, the world has seen a large number of refugees fleeing from countless conflicts. Countries have had drastically different responses to these crises, particularly with regard to the number of refugees they have agreed to resettle within their borders. In a comparison of the U.S. and Europe, the spectrum of host countries who have welcomed refugees in the second decade of the new millennium ranges from Germany, a country that has taken a great many refugees, all the way down to Poland and

Hungary, who have taken few to none. In today's world, there appears to be quite a bit of negative rhetoric concerning people's perceptions of refugees. Although this paper will primarily discuss refugees, perceptions of immigrants are often tied in with that of refugees, so they too will be touched on. The distinction between refugees and immigrants for the purposes of this paper hinges on the official status recognized by the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention. An interesting aspect to consider in conjunction with immigration is the recent rise of far-right leaders in many Western countries. This paper will focus on two case studies in particular: Donald Trump in the United States and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Both leaders have expressed vitriol for refugees and immigrants through their words and policies. One central question of this paper will be to what extent these leaders have influenced public opinion of refugees and immigrants, and to what extent those views were already held prior to their election and led to their respective rise to power.

In order to answer these questions, it is important and useful to consider this issue through a historical lens. This paper will explore the history of refugees and immigration in both countries in order to discern whether public opinion has gotten more or less supportive of immigration and the acceptance of refugees. It will also look at the evolution of immigration policies by both administrations, at what sort of rhetoric they have espoused and how that has been received by voters. Ultimately, this paper will show that though Trump and Orbán's policies are repressive and have amplified implicit racism and xenophobia, refugees and immigrants have never been overwhelmingly supported. Despite this, both countries have an obligation to accept refugees, not just because they signed international agreements and conventions, but also out of a moral obligation to fellow people.

### **Essential Concepts**

It is necessary to clear up misconceptions on the differences between immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, as each distinction carries with it different rights and expectations. The boundaries between each classification can be fuzzy, leading to confusion. Immigrants choose to leave their country of origin and move to another, though they have the right to return should they choose (“Migrants, Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Immigrants”). Refugees have been granted international recognition and status under the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This gives them the right to be resettled in another country based on a legitimate fear of persecution or violence in their home country (“Migrants, Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Immigrants”). Asylum seekers, by contrast, have fled their countries due to violence and apply for safety in whatever country they can reach, but whose claims for refugee status are still under review (“What’s the Difference Between a Refugee and an Asylum Seeker?”). Not every asylum seeker will obtain refugee status, but all refugees start out as asylum seekers who have fled their countries of origin (“What’s the Difference Between a Refugee and an Asylum Seeker?”).

## **History**

If public opinion of refugees and immigrants (legal or undocumented) are connected, it is worth considering both the United States and Hungary’s history with immigration. The U.S. has historically been a nation of immigrants, and those immigrants, whether German, Irish or Chinese, were subjected to a number of exclusionary acts and blatant discrimination (Desilver). This is not unusual in America’s history. By contrast, the rejection of “the other” in Hungary seems to go against their national history. Hungarians themselves were forced to flee as refugees after a short-lived uprising against Soviet rule in 1956 (Gardos). After a Soviet crackdown, thousands fled to Austria, where they were welcomed. In the spirit of the UN Refugee

Convention of 1951, states, including the United States. came together to resettle those refugees (though the decision was decidedly not popular) (Desilver, Gardos). People's memories might be notoriously short-lived, but the nearness of this crisis to today would indicate that there are still people within the country who remember this time, and what other countries did to welcome Hungarian refugees who fled the Soviet-controlled regime. It could even be said that Hungary has an obligation to accept refugees or that perhaps the people of Hungary might feel collectively the need to give back by showing today's refugees the same kindness. However, the opposite has proven to be true, and Hungary now has some of the strictest refugee policies in the world. It ranks as low as in the bottom three in Gallup's Migrant Acceptance Index, coming out ahead of only Montenegro and Macedonia, two other former East Bloc entities (Esipova). While this index does not include refugees per se, the link between perceptions of immigrants and perceptions of refugees is clear and can help show the drastic extent of Hungary's policies.

### **Case Study: Trump and the United States**

Public approval for refugee resettlement in the U.S. has never been particularly high (Desilver). A study by the Pew Research Center that consolidated public opinion polls from different eras of U.S. history since WW2 shows that with the exception of ethnic Albanians fleeing from Kosovo in 1999, the approval rating for accepting refugees never rose above 35% in the U.S. (Desilver). This is not counting today's numbers, which will be discussed next, but it begs the question where these views come from. Clearly, refugees were never popular among the U.S.-American electorate. Nonetheless, how is it that refugees have become politicized around the world? This question speaks very specifically to people's fears and perceptions of refugees.

Recent U.S. public opinion has shown a decrease in support for refugees since Donald Trump entered office (Gomez). Support has dropped from 56% in 2017 to 51% in 2018

(Gomez). Levels of support for refugees are based primarily along party lines. Democrats and Democrat-leaning Independents show 74% approval of the U.S. accepting refugees (Krogstad). This is opposed to just 26% of Republican and Republican-leaning Independents (Krogstad). According to Pew Research polls, the drop in overall support has come from a large decrease on the Republican and Republican-leaning side (Gomez). These drops in public opinion come as Trump's administration has continued to lower the U.S.'s refugee ceiling year after year. He has made it a point to present refugee resettlement as a national security issue, emphasizing the danger of radicalized terrorists sneaking in amongst the refugee population (Gomez). The administration has yet to show any data supporting the reality of this concern, but the rhetoric speaks to the people's fears. For many, the president is a respected authority figure, and if he constantly warns about the dangers of today's refugees, people will start to believe it and internalize it.

When considering Donald Trump's rhetoric, the denouncement of undocumented immigrants has been even more prevalent than that of refugees. Well known are Trump's policies concerning asylum seekers on the U.S.-Mexico border. His family separation policy has been widely criticized as discriminatory, and he has attempted to end protections for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA recipients), or "dreamers" (Isaacs). Trump is widely known for his comments about immigrants during his campaign for the presidency. They show an absolutist attitude toward undocumented immigrants in particular, equating those who commit crimes with those who do not. This warps public perception toward all immigrants, regardless of status. His most publicized quote involved immigrants from Mexico (June 2015): "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're sending people that have a lot of

problems, and they're bringing those problems with them. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists” (Mark).

In September of 2019, Trump announced his intention to lower the United States’ refugee ceiling, the maximum number of refugees that would be allowed resettlement in the U.S. in the upcoming fiscal year (Allyn). Fiscal Year 2019 saw a refugee ceiling of 30,000; Trump would cut that nearly in half, lowering it to 18,000 this upcoming fiscal year (Allyn). Furthermore, new policies would allow states and cities to opt out of accepting refugees. This is a dangerous allowance to make. Not only would it play into the partisan views of elected politicians, but it might also inspire those with racist sentiments to further lobby their officials in that direction. It should not be controversial to aid people who are fleeing from unimaginable brutality and persecution, regardless of the country they are fleeing from. These new cuts come at a time when almost 26 million people are registered refugees, and many millions more have been internally displaced within their countries or are seeking asylum (UNHCR “Figures at a Glance”, 2019). This decrease represents the lowest number of refugees accepted by the United States since the inception of its modern refugee program in 1980, and an 80% decrease from the refugee ceiling from the last year of President Obama’s administration, which was capped at 110,000 (Allyn). It is obvious then, that Trump is implementing policies that align with his remarks on the campaign trail.

One of the questions this paper seeks to answer is to what extent Trump and Viktor Orbán in Hungary manufacture negative dialogue of refugees in their countries. In Trump’s case, looking at his electorate might help to discern how and why he uses xenophobic rhetoric as a tactic. It may be that he is outwardly professing beliefs that a large percentage of the population share, and that his supporters are those who have felt unseen by other presidential candidates.

During Trump's campaign for the presidency in 2015, a poll of his Republican voter base was conducted. It divided those who generally lean Republican into those in favor of deportation of undocumented immigrants, those in favor of rejecting any refugees from the Syrian conflict, and those who feel otherwise. For the most part, those who favor rejecting refugees also favor deporting undocumented immigrants (Tankersley). It is these issues that set Trump supporters apart from other Republicans, and which allowed Trump to pull ahead of his Republican peers in that party's primary process. Three-fourths of Trump's primary support came from these voters who supported both deportation and refusal of refugees, in contrast to only 16% from other Republicans who did not share those views (Tankersley). This seems to imply that Trump is able to bring in supporters who may not support all of his policies, but who are passionate enough about some that they are willing to vote for him.

An examination of interviews with Trump supporters of various backgrounds shows a general perception that he tackles the issues no one is willing to mention. One such supporter explained why they would be voting for him: "He says things that other Americans are afraid to say but they feel in their heart" (Trump Nation). The anti-immigration and anti-refugee feelings that Trump espouses through his policies may well be referenced here and were already present and helped in his election. This tactic of stoking anti-immigration sentiments is dangerous, showing the international community that the United States cannot be relied upon as a safe haven for those fleeing persecution, despite its status as a superpower.

There is a perception in the United States that accepting and resettling refugees is a huge drain on the economy. In the case of immigrants to the U.S., there is more concern about them working jobs that otherwise could have been given to natural-born citizens. However, the reality is that immigrants are usually working jobs that no one else would want. There are many migrant



workers toiling in agricultural fields with little to no benefits, harvesting the fruits and vegetables that we consume. In 2017, the Trump administration rejected a report from the Department of Health and Human Services because it went against their assumption that refugees are a financial burden to the country (Newland & Capps). The Migration Policy Institute found that in fact, “refugees brought in \$63 billion more revenue to federal, state, and local governments than they cost over the 2005-14 period surveyed” (Newland & Capps). For refugees, though their first year is mostly funded by public benefits, there is research to prove that the longer a refugee stays in the country, the fewer benefits they need to receive (Newland & Capps). Additionally, refugee men have become more likely to work and have a job than native-born men, and for refugee women it is about equal to native-born citizens (“Immigrants as Economic Contributors”). Indeed, many studies outline how refugees are benefits to their communities. It is worth noting that the Midwest has historically been one of the leading regions in refugee resettlement in the United States and has reaped the benefits of including refugees (“Immigrants as Economic Contributors”). If the economic benefit of refugees is well-recorded, the question should be why the president insists otherwise. It has long been suspected that the Trump administration uses social media and provocative announcements to draw attention away from actions that may be less popular.

### **Case Study: Orbán and Hungary**

Pew research into multiple European countries in the wake of the 2015 migrant/refugee crisis helps create an accurate representation of their people’s perceptions of refugees and immigrants. In Hungary, 76% of respondents admitted to the belief that refugees are more likely to increase terrorism in their countries (Poushter). 69% feared that refugees from Syria and Iraq posed a major threat (Poushter). The idea of European fear of a perceived other is also a

possibility, especially considering that the same research asks Europeans whether they believe that growing diversity makes their countries a better place. In the countries surveyed, belief that growing diversity makes the country better never rose above 35% (Poushter). In Hungary, 41% believe diversity actively makes the country a worse place to live. As a point of comparison, 58% of Americans believe in the benefits of growing diversity in their country (Poushter).

The Syrian civil war and similar conflicts in North Africa have seen increased numbers of both refugees and those seeking asylum in European countries such as Hungary. Viktor Orbán's rejection of any and all people falling within these two categories amounts to Hungary ignoring its obligations under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, including the concept of non-refoulement (Article 33). Orbán has expressed his position, particularly in his comments concerning Muslim migrants and refugees fleeing into Europe. One quote, given to a German newspaper, serves to sum up his views: "We don't see these people as Muslim refugees. We see them as Muslim invaders" (Barry).

Because Hungary has a history involving their own refugees during the Cold War, one might think individuals there would be sympathetic, if not empathetic, to the plight of those fleeing violence and persecution in the Middle East and North Africa. It is also the case, though, that the government has a lot of power in manufacturing public opinion. Orbán and his administration have gone to extreme measures to turn people against the idea of taking in refugees (Gall). It is commonplace for members of his party to use anti-migrant/anti-refugee language, and the same has been printed and circulated on billboards and on radio and T.V. (Gall). Refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers have been referred to as "intruders" and "potential terrorists" who would never be able to integrate into Hungarian society (Gall). Orbán himself has gone so far as to refer to immigration as a "poison" (Gall). In a report on Hungary's

treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, Human Rights Watch notes the government's goal: "The government doesn't just make life miserable for asylum seekers and refugees. It wants the Hungarians to hate them too" (Gall). New waves of migration into Hungary would take a shift in mindset to accept, especially if those refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants are from a non-Christian background. The irony here is that Hungary faces a huge labor shortage as a result of a brain-drain over the last decade and a half. Other countries have welcomed refugees and immigrants into their borders to fill similar needs, but Orbán's hostility makes this unlikely for Hungary.

The makeup of far-right voters in Europe is quite similar country-by-country, including Hungary. Lacking first-person interviews with Orbán supporters, a few factors from the media are helpful to discern what makes Orbán appealing. According to an article by Neil Fligstein, "European Integration, Nationalism and European Identity," supporters of anti-immigrant policy are generally less educated and from a lower socio-economic class (Fligstein et al 114). They are more likely to buy into ethnic nationalism, the exclusionary type of nationalism that asserts that one can only be a citizen by virtue of having been born into that country (Fligstein et al 112). These voters are also more likely to hold anti-EU sentiments (Flistein et al 114).

In Hungary, Orbán and his Fidesz party emphasize the "Christian-national idea" as a foundation for changes within the country, drawing on the majority Christian makeup of the country as a basis for policy decisions (Fekete 43). However, this ends up masking the administration's essentially nativist and xenophobic policies, which are presented as a maintenance of traditional values (Fekete 43). If Christian sentiments were at the forefront of policy, one might assume that heartfelt Christian charitable feelings would inspire the country to take in refugees, even if it was only Christian refugees. However, the fact that this is not the case

shows the deep hypocrisy of Orbán's declaration. It suggests the "Christian-national idea" is truly a front to hide the discriminating policies toward not only Syrian migrants at the border, but also North African migrants and the Roma people within the country. Orbán has overseen a militarization of its borders with Serbia and Croatia, and images of refugees being teargassed and kept in metal pens at those borders have garnered international attention (Fekete 39). Orbán is playing a dangerous game with the European Union, which could withdraw EU funds from his country. A number of attempts by the EU to curtail Orbán have been vetoed by Poland, Hungary's ally in the EU and a country that has seen a rise in similar far-right nationalism and shares the same concerns about refugees and immigrants ("Europe and Nationalism").

International agencies offered Hungary monetary aid for receiving refugees in the country, but Orbán refused, as accepting such aid would amount to Hungary recognizing its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention (Fekete 41). This would also mean creating a registration system and allowing asylees to make their asylum claims in Hungary. Additionally, the policy of non-refoulement prohibits refugees or asylum seekers from being sent back to countries where they would be in danger (Human Rights First). It is obvious then, therefore, that Orbán's concept of a Christian ideal is a country where only Hungarian Christians are welcome. The Roma, despite having settled in Hungary for many centuries, face similar persecution (Fekete 40). Far-right protesters have been known to attack Roma communities, chanting slurs and maintaining rhetoric that cements this group as an other (Cernusakova). Orbán has refused to condemn comments from members of his party that have equated the Roma people with animals. Additionally, he has done little to prevent continued hate crimes (Cernusakova). Hate crimes have long been lumped in with regular crimes, and for this reason, activists have found it

necessary to bypass the Hungarian justice system and appeal directly to the European Court of Human Rights (Cernusakova).

The rise of far-right parties has been documented in many countries across Europe. Many use immigration as a main selling point. Viktor Orbán emphasizes the Christian identity of Hungary, explaining that allowing Muslim refugees would turn Europe into a place “with a mixed population and no sense of identity” (“Europe and Nationalism”). Under his leadership, Hungary has seen decreased freedom of the press, an elimination of checks and balances, and a redefinition of the election system, so that he has an advantage in his reelection campaign (Kelemen). This idea of identity is clearly important to how Europeans, not just Hungarians, vote. Neil Fligstein’s article, “European Integration, Nationalism and European Identity,” digs deeper into the relationship between nationalism and identity. Nationalism is divided into two types: civic and ethnic. A civic view of nationalism is that anyone can become a citizen if they promise to uphold the laws of the state, even if they were born elsewhere. On the other hand, ethnic nationalism is more exclusionary, defining national identity solely on having been born into that culture (Fligstein et al 112). This dual concept is helpful in discussing the rise of far-right parties in European countries, including Hungary, because it directly ties concerns about immigrants and refugees to a fears of the loss of a homogenous national identity.

This view of national identity is not about who is in, but who is out (Fligstein et al 113). People generally lean towards one version of nationalism and national identity over another. It is generally people who are less-educated and come from a lower socio-economic class who tend towards ethnic nationalism, and it is these voters, who in turn, tend more towards the far-right (Fligstein et al 114). There is obviously a concern there that refugees and immigrants will warp Hungarian national identity and resistance to that underlies the election of openly anti-immigrant

candidates, who may be seen as more likely to enact aggressive policies in that area. This seems to indicate that since enough people feel this way, then Orbán was able to be elected. His government has taken these limited ethnic nationalism and attendant xenophobia and run with it, making efforts to convert the rest of the population to those views and inflating a problem he presents as something only he can fix, thereby cementing his rule.

It is worth considering what it is about both Trump and Orbán that appeals to a wide enough electorate that allows them to enjoy continued support. Their voter bases tend to include people who feel unseen by mainstream politicians, indicating that they see the views they already held reflected in those candidates. Rising nativism and nationalism in the U.S. and Hungary have brought those concerns about refugees and immigrants to the forefront (Lucassen & Lubbers 548). They have created a forum for those inherent racist and xenophobic viewpoints to flourish and presented themselves as the savior who will fix the problem and defend the people.

In her book, *Blaming Immigrants: Nationalism and the Economics of Global Movement*, Neeraj Kaushal comments that the anti-immigrant sentiments Mexicans experience in some southern U.S. states today are not unlike those that impacted the waves of Irish, Italian, German, Jewish, and Chinese immigrants many years earlier. She notes that “In the long run, the key to pacifying discontents lies in how well the current flows of immigrants integrate with host country cultures and how they contribute to host societies” (Kaushal 23). As these immigrants of yesteryear began contributing toward America’s future, negative views towards them dissipated. One can hope then, that this will eventually be the same with the refugees and immigrants of today. For her part, Kaushal believes this is possible for Syrian refugees in European countries, but that it may take years for their economic impact to be felt (Kaushal 23). This might be true for countries like Germany, where many refugees have been taken in, but for Hungary, which

has shut its borders to refugees, it may not be the case. If refugees are not allowed in the country, Hungarians will continue to mistrust them as a faceless “other.”

## **Conclusion**

The research has shown that despite perceptions that today’s discussions surrounding refugees and immigrants are worse than they have ever been, there is evidence that the public opinion has rarely been high for refugee resettlement. Though it may seem like a spike in negative rhetoric correlates with the election of Trump in the United States and Orbán in Hungary, it is clear that these views were entrenched long before either one was elected. In Hungary’s case, there is a fear of the dissolution of Hungarian identity and national culture with the settling of refugees and migrants, a fear that, interestingly enough, is not prevalent in the United States. Both countries share concerns about terrorism and immigrants being a drain on the economy. Despite these misguided fears, states do have an obligation to house refugees under the 1951 convention, and as conflicts due to political disputes or environmental problems continue to lead to more and more refugees and asylees, wealthy and influential states need to bear more of that obligation. A start to this would be to increase existing refugee ceilings in the United States and to institute mechanisms within the EU that would either punish members who try to shirk their responsibility or create incentives for taking more. The plight of refugees and asylum seekers is a major human rights issue, and the racist and xenophobic views of world leaders should not undermine it.

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