

Public Preferences for Admitting Migrants Displaced by Climate Change

Policy Brief

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Executive Summary

Climate change will displace millions of people around the world over the coming decades. While many of these climate-displaced persons will migrate internally, many will be displaced across international borders. This study is one of the first to ask whether the American public views climate-displaced persons as meriting admission to the United States through a humanitarian admissions stream. **Our research indicates that Americans believe that displacement by climate change makes a prospective migrant as deserving of humanitarian immigration relief as those migrants fleeing persecution**—the criterion for asylum or refugee status currently recognized in our refugee and asylum laws. **Given that no such form of relief currently exists for climate-displaced persons under U.S. refugee and asylum laws, our research identifies a gap between public preferences and existing law.**

Our findings reveal that **the American public ranks environmental displacement explicitly due to climate change as equally deserving of refugee status or asylum as persecution due to political opinion, persecution due to national origin, and persecution due to membership in a social group—three of the five currently recognized bases for asylum or refugee status in the United States.** We investigate the factors that may influence how members of the American public perceive climate-displaced persons, including individuals' opinions on and experience with climate change. Even among those skeptical of climate change, displacement due to climate change is considered as deserving of asylum in the United States as is persecution when compared to economic migrants. **Not only do Americans favor providing asylum to those displaced by climate change at the same levels as the currently accepted criteria, but climate skeptics also do not differ in statistically significant ways.**

When asked to assign a ranking to the reasons a person might seek asylum in the United States, respondents ranked climate-related displacement on par with persecution based on nationality, political opinion, and membership in a social group. Only persecution based on race and religion rank higher on average than displacement due to climate change. **A member of the U.S. public is more likely to perceive an individual fleeing the negative effects of climate change as deserving asylum in the United States than an individual seeking economic opportunity.** These findings suggest that barriers to including climate change-displaced migrants in U.S. humanitarian admissions streams may be lower than previously thought—a finding with live policy implications as the Biden administration considers how it will manage the migration effects of a warming planet.

Analysis

a. Background on the Migration Impacts of Climate Change

Climate change has the potential to displace millions of people over the coming decades. Some of those affected by climate change will adapt as best they can; others will find themselves in regions that have become uninhabitable “hot zones,” where reliable agricultural yields become impossible to achieve, where rising sea levels in highly populated coastal areas force populations inland, and where increasingly frequent extreme weather events destroy housing and infrastructure¹. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated that disasters in 2020 displaced 30.7 million people worldwide². A 2020 collaboration between the New York Times, ProPublica, and geographer Bryan Jones estimates that by 2070, 20% of the globe—an area home to billions of people—will become uninhabitable hot-zones due to dramatic temperature rise³. As crops fail in Central America and Mexico, millions will likely be driven from the countryside and into cities, and then northward to the United States’ Southern border⁴. One New York Times/ProPublica projection estimates that the effects of climate change may increase migration from Central America to the United States from 700,000 per annum in 2025 to 1.5 million per annum by 2050⁵. Modelling conducted for the World Bank⁶ on the migration impacts of climate change in three world regions projects the displacement of 143 million people by 2050: 86 million in sub-Saharan Africa, 40 million in South Asia, and 17 million in Central America and Mexico. This displacement is likely to lead primarily to internal migration within a country, though some climate change-displaced persons will be forced to migrate across borders.

b. Background on Immigration and Refugee Law

The current criteria for refugee or asylum status are based on the 1951 Geneva Convention, incorporated into U.S. law in the Refugee Act of 1980. The 1951 Refugee Convention (and its amended 1967 Protocol) defines a refugee as someone who is unable to return to their country of origin “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion”⁷. The United States’ Immigration and Nationality Act and Refugee Act both adopt these five criteria for admissions as a refugee or asylee, and these individuals, once admitted to the United States, can apply for legal permanent residency after one year. Migrants displaced by climate change are not eligible for protection under these programs⁸. Because the previous administration drastically limited asylum for survivors of domestic/gender-based violence—limitations that the current administration has since

¹ Kanta Mumari Rigaud, *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration*, (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2020), <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/book/10.1596/29461>.

² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), “Internal displacement in a changing climate: 2021 Global Report,” (Geneva, Switzerland 2021). <https://www.internal-displacement.org/publications/2021-global-report-on-internal-displacement>

³ Chi Xu, et al., “Future of the Human Climate Niche.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 21(2020): 11350–55.

⁴ Abrahm Lustgarten, “The Great Climate Migration Has Begun,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/23/magazine/climate-migration.html>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Kanta Mumari Rigaud, *Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration*.

⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” (Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1967), <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html>.

⁸ The United States does, however, offer limited humanitarian visas under the Temporary Protected Status class for certain victims of natural disasters as well as individuals who cannot return to their countries due to ongoing civil war or some other “extraordinary and temporary condition.” While these individuals can live and work in the United States, their status is temporary and must be regularly renewed. See Jill H. Wilson, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2020).

rescinded—some advocates have called for the inclusion of gender-based violence/persecution as an explicit criterion, potentially through an amendment of the Refugee Act.⁹

The Refugee Act remains a live question of public policy and will continue to be as climate change worsens. Now is the time to ask whether the public considers migrants forced from their homes by climate change to merit refugee status or asylum alongside those migrants forced from their home countries by persecution. **Domestic and international law on forced migration does not include environmentally induced displacement in the criteria for recognition as a refugee or for asylum, but our research indicates that these criteria do not reflect widely held beliefs among the American public.**

The United States has already begun to prepare for the migration impacts of climate change.¹⁰ In February 2021, one of newly elected President Biden’s early executive orders on immigration ordered the creation of a report to advise the White House and federal agencies on managing climate change–induced migration.¹¹ That the administration included climate change in the executive order—which, among other goals, seeks to restore the refugee resettlement system that the previous administration sought to dismantle—indicates that the Biden administration may recognize the role that the United States’ humanitarian immigration programs can play in managing increasing numbers of climate change–displaced persons. However, U.S. and international law currently do not consider displacement by climate change—or any environmental factors, for that matter—among the criteria for refugee status or asylum.

Migration due to displacement by climate change is forced migration, and the solutions to it must reflect its inherent humanitarian concerns. Consequently, accommodating climate migrants in humanitarian admissions streams is a logical course of action. Chief among these streams are refugee resettlement and asylum admissions streams, which have averaged 87,081 admissions to the United States per year from 2010–2019.¹²

Public preferences on humanitarian admissions are not often disaggregated from preferences on immigration more generally, though more recent work has begun to investigate whether there are systematic differences in attitudes toward immigration and immigrants along a humanitarian dimension. In a large sample of 15 European countries, Bansak et al.¹³ identify a humanitarian preference for admitting immigrants escaping persecution (compared to immigrants seeking economic opportunity), as well as for those with vulnerabilities including disability and past experience of torture. Sana¹⁴ finds an increase over time in the proportion of Americans who support either status quo or increased levels of refugee admissions, with what he terms a “sympathy effect,” leading respondents to be more favorable to refugees when asked to consider the specific circumstances of refugees rather than abstract questions about admissions levels. Adida et al.¹⁵ find

⁹ For example, analysis from advocates from such disparate groups as Human Rights Watch and the American Bar Association have called for the Refugee Act to be reopened.

¹⁰ United States Government Accountability Office. 2019. *CLIMATE CHANGE: Activities of Selected Agencies to Address Potential Impact on Global Migration*. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Accountability Office, 2019).

¹¹ Joseph R. Biden, “Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration.” Executive Order 14013 (February 4, 2021).

¹² Author’s own calculations from publicly available administrative data from the United States Department of Homeland Security.

¹³ K. Bansak, et al. “How Economic, Humanitarian, and Religious Concerns Shape European Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers,” *Science* 354, no. 6309 (2016): 217–22.

¹⁴ Mariano Sana, “Public Opinion on Refugee Policy in the United States, 1938– 2019: Increasing Support for Refugees and the Sympathy Effect.” *International Migration Review* 55, no. 2 (2020).

¹⁵ Claire L. Adida, et al. “Perspective Taking Can Promote Short-Term Inclusionary Behavior toward Syrian Refugees,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 38 (2018): 9521–26.

that Americans’ preferences over the qualities they prefer in admitted refugees broadly align with their preferences for qualities in admitted immigrants.

c. *Climate Change and Displacement*

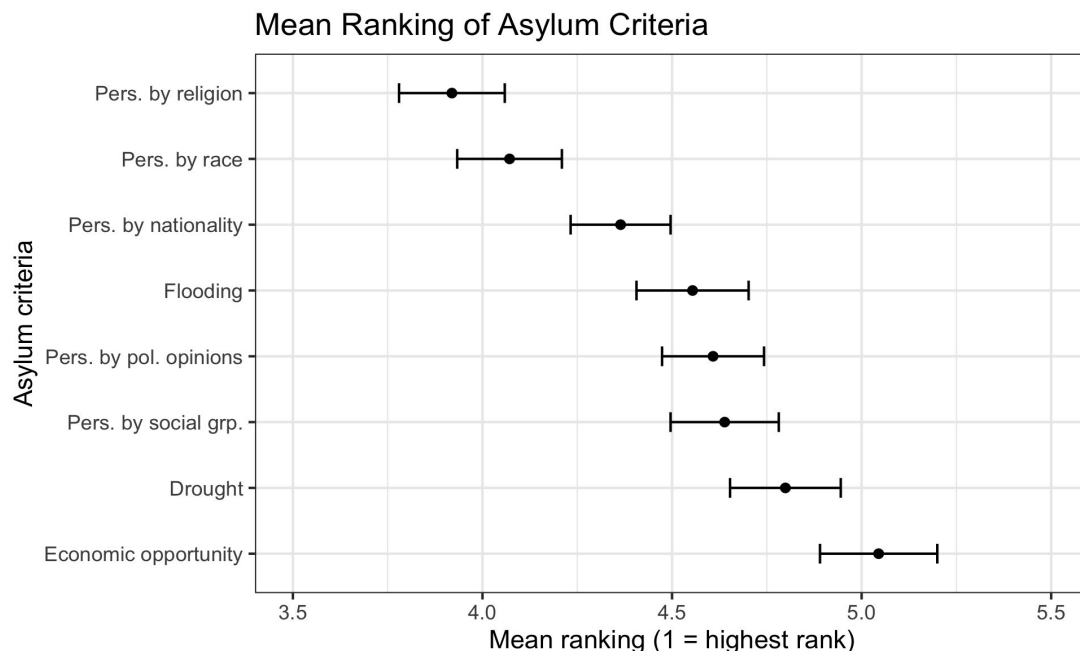
In this study, we asked Americans to assign a ranking to the reasons a person might seek asylum in the United States from most to least deserving of admission to the United States. **We find that respondents rank environmental displacement on par with persecution based on nationality, political opinion, and membership in a social group**—three types of persecution currently recognized in U.S. law as meriting asylum, and in international law as meriting refugee status.¹⁶

There is no statistically significant difference in the mean ranking of the “flooding” environmental displacement factor (mean ranking: 4.554) and persecution based on nationality (mean ranking 4.364), political opinion (mean ranking: 4.608), or membership in a social group (mean ranking: 4.639). There is also no statistically significant difference in the mean ranking of the “prolonged drought” displacement factor (mean ranking: 4.799) and persecution based on political opinion or membership in a social group.

On their own, these findings reveal a gap between the preferences of Americans over who deserves asylum in the United States and existing legal criteria for the adjudication of asylum claims. Only persecution based on race (mean ranking: 4.071) and religion (mean ranking: 3.919) rank higher, on average, than environmental displacement due to flooding. An asylum claim in which the applicant is fleeing poverty in pursuit of economic opportunity in the United States is, on average, ranked lower (mean ranking: 5.044) than the seven other factors—consistent with existing law, which does not consider poverty in the applicant’s country of origin as meriting asylum.

The mean rankings for each of these seven facts are plotted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.



¹⁶ For our full methodology and detailed supporting data, please see <https://bit.ly/2W1iVky>.

To test whether variation in public opinion on climate change results in less favorable opinion toward environmentally displaced migrants, we randomized whether migrants' environmental reasons for migrating were explicitly linked to climate change. The difference in mean ranking of these environmental factors among the group of respondents who saw only the environmental factors and those who saw environmental factors linked to climate change was not statistically significant. These findings suggest that linking migration to climate change—which may trigger a variety of reactions among the public—does not, on average, result in lower levels of public support for admitting these migrants to the United States.

Table 1: Treatment effects of explicitly linking environmental “push” factors to climate change

	Dependent variable (mean ranking of asylum criteria):	
	Flooding (1)	Drought (2)
Average treatment effect	0.133 (0.151)	-0.140 (0.149)
Observations	980	980

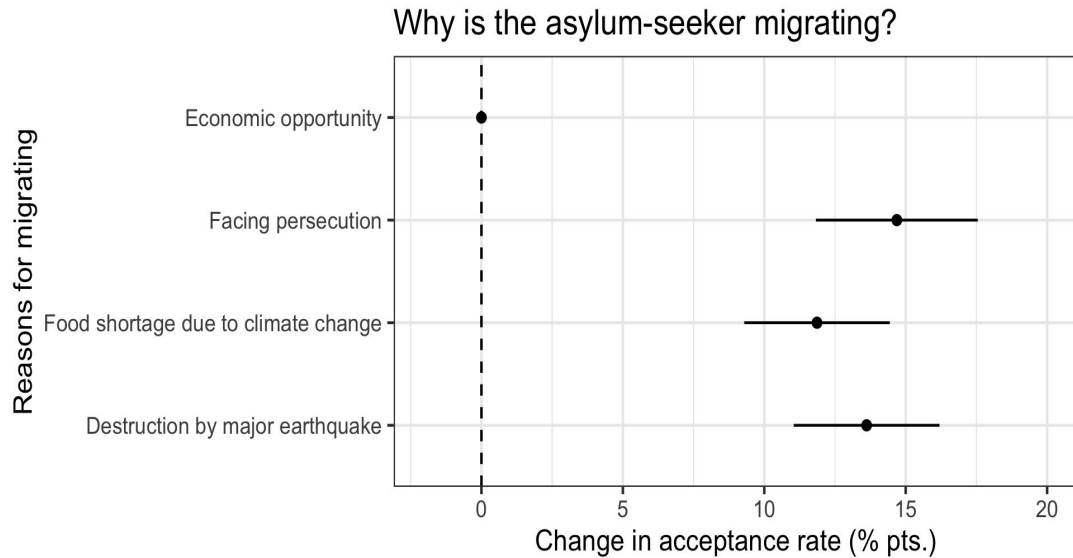
Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Both models use the difference-in-means estimator with robust standard errors.

Given the potential scale of climate migration in the coming decades, our results give us cause for optimism: **Americans consider environmental displacement to merit asylum in the United States on par with a number of existing criteria for humanitarian admissions.**

In addition, we presented respondents with profiles of potential asylum-seekers and asked them to choose which one was most deserving of admission to the United States. This research design allows us to test whether Americans favor admitting migrants fleeing persecution more than those displaced by climate change or those seeking economic opportunity. We find clear results: an asylum-seeker who is migrating because of the negative effects of climate change is over 10 percentage points more likely to be judged to merit asylum in the United States than one seeking greater economic opportunity. In fact, perception of an asylum seeker fleeing climate change is statistically indistinguishable from perception of an asylum seeker fleeing (i) persecution, or (ii) natural disaster not plausibly linked to climate change, when compared to the baseline. Full results are reported in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2.



An asylum-seeker fleeing the negative impacts of climate change, all else equal, is 11.9 percentage points more likely to be judged to merit asylum than one seeking economic opportunity. This effect size is statistically equivalent to the effects of fleeing an earthquake (13.6 percentage points) and fleeing persecution (14.7 percentage points), all relative to the baseline level.

Additionally, we found no significant evidence to show that respondents use an asylum-seeker's country of origin to discriminate against the asylum-seeker based on race or ethnicity. We broadly found no statistically significant effect of varying the asylum-seekers' countries of origin. We found no negative effect for potential asylum-seekers from Guatemala and Bangladesh, and, in fact, we found a positive effect for potential asylum-seekers from Haiti, compared to the baseline.

For the age, gender, and previous occupation attributes of the potential asylum-seekers, we replicated the findings in Bansak et al.¹⁷ Men are accepted at a lower rate than women (2.9 percentage points lower) and younger asylum-seekers are preferred to older ones, all else equal (62-year-old asylum seekers are accepted at a rate 3.8 percentage points lower than a 21-year-old asylum seeker). As in other immigration-related conjoint experiments, we found a preference for more highly skilled asylum-seekers with substantial and increasing positive effects on acceptance rates as skill levels increase.

In this conjoint experiment, prospective asylum-seekers arriving in the United States with children are evaluated by respondents as meriting asylum at a higher rate than those not arriving with children. Compared to asylum-seekers with no children, arriving with one child increases acceptance by 8.0 percentage points, as does arriving with three children.

¹⁷K. Bansak, et al. "How Economic, Humanitarian, and Religious Concerns Shape European Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers," 217–222.

Figure 3.

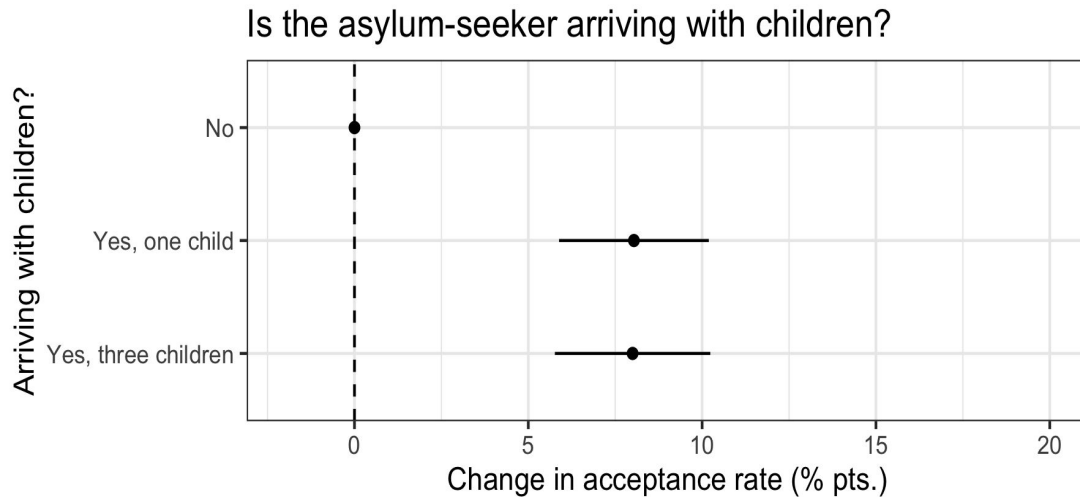


Table 2: Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) for the full conjoint sample

Attribute	Effect size	(Std. error)	p-value
Country of origin			
Cyprus	(baseline)		
Bangladesh	0.020	(0.014)	0.145
Guatemala	0.026	(0.013)	0.057
Haiti	0.041	(0.014)	0.003
Maldives	0.014	(0.014)	0.014
Age			
21 years	(baseline)		
38 years	- 0.006	(0.011)	0.557
62 years	- 0.038	(0.012)	0.001
Gender			
Female	(baseline)		
Male	- 0.029	(0.009)	0.001
Arriving with children			
No	(baseline)		
Yes, one child	0.080	(0.011)	<0.001
Yes, three children	0.080	(0.011)	<0.001
Previous occupation			
Unemployed	(baseline)		
Cleaner	0.077	(0.014)	<0.001
Farm worker	0.099	(0.014)	<0.001
Teacher	0.146	(0.014)	<0.001
Doctor	0.174	(0.015)	<0.001

Reason for migrating	(baseline)		
Economic opportunity	(baseline)		
Facing persecution	0.147	(0.015)	<0.001
Food shortage due to climate change	0.119	(0.013)	<0.001
Destruction by major earthquake	0.136	(0.013)	<0.001

Note: The sample size is 980 respondents.

Each respondent completed seven choice tasks, evaluating two proposals each for a total of 13,720 observations. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses, clustered at the level of the respondent.

i. Testing Moderating Effects: Subgroup Heterogeneity

Belief in climate change: Our research indicates that climate skeptics are less supportive of providing asylum to migrants displaced by climate change (compared to the baseline) than are those who believe in human-caused climate change. However, compared to the baseline, climate **skeptics still are as supportive of granting asylum to climate change-displaced migrants (4.9 percentage points greater than the baseline) as they are of granting asylum to those fleeing persecution (9.7 percentage points greater than the baseline)**; these effects are not statistically different from each other. These subgroup results are plotted in Figure 4.

Climate change believers are significantly more likely to favor granting asylum to migrants displaced by climate change, an increase of 17.2 percentage points compared to the baseline. This effect is equivalent to that for asylum-seekers fleeing persecution (17.8 percentage points), consistent with our findings that Americans believe environmental displacement is as deserving of asylum as the legally accepted criteria of fleeing persecution.

Those already impacted by climate change: We found no difference in effect among the subgroups who have/have not been impacted by climate change. Nonetheless, our findings reflect that even across these subgroups, climate change displacement is seen as equally deserving of asylum as fleeing persecution compared to the baseline. These effects are plotted in Figure 5.

Those threatened by climate change's future impacts: Compared to the baseline, **those who are not threatened by climate change favor asylum for climate-displaced migrants at a rate 7.9 percentage points higher than the baseline, compared to an increase of 14.8 percentage points among those who are threatened by the future impacts of climate change.** Consistent with earlier findings, both subgroups favor asylum for climate-displaced migrants at a rate that is not statistically different from that for asylum-seekers fleeing persecution, compared to the baseline. These effects are plotted in Figure 6.

Responsibility to combat climate change: Finally, **those who do not favor U.S. action on climate change still favor providing asylum to climate change-displaced migrants at a rate that is not statistically different from those fleeing persecution**; this is also true of those who do favor U.S. action. These findings continue to confirm a mismatch between preferences on asylum criteria and existing humanitarian admissions policy, even among those opposed to U.S. action on climate change. These effects are plotted in Figure 7.

Figure 4.

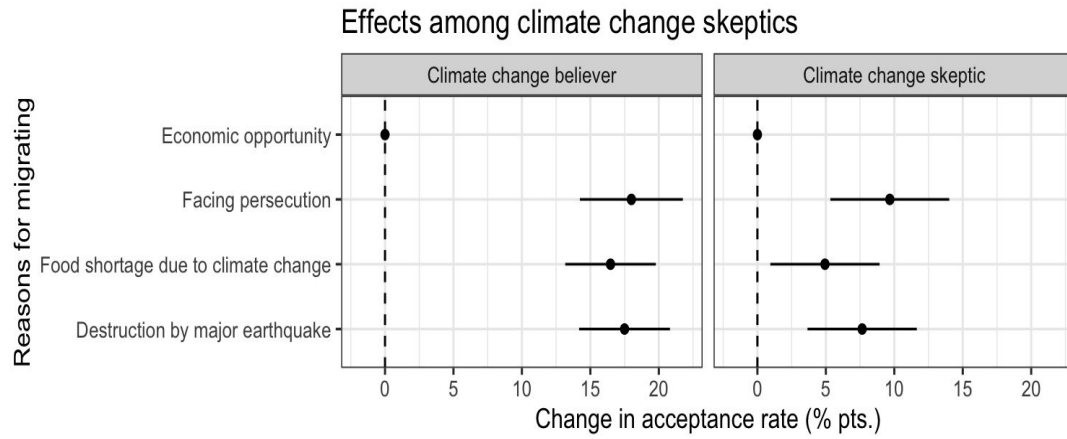


Figure 5.

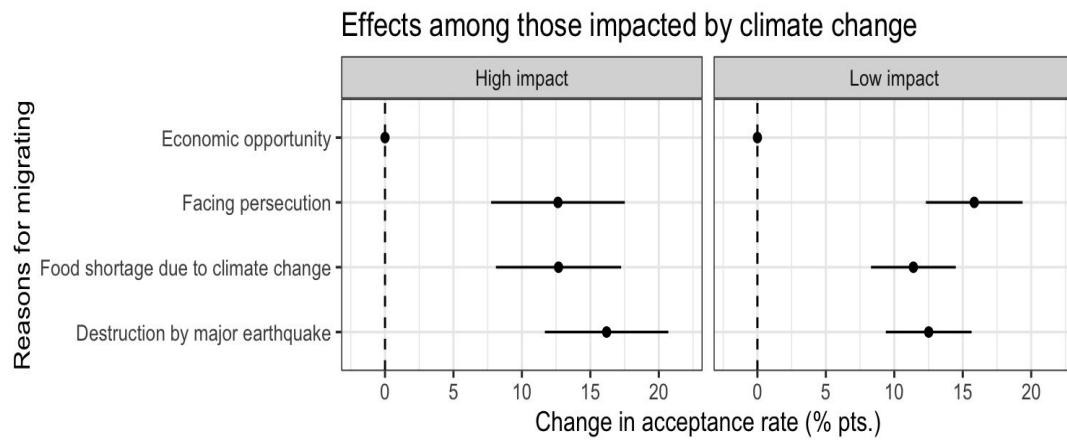


Figure 6.

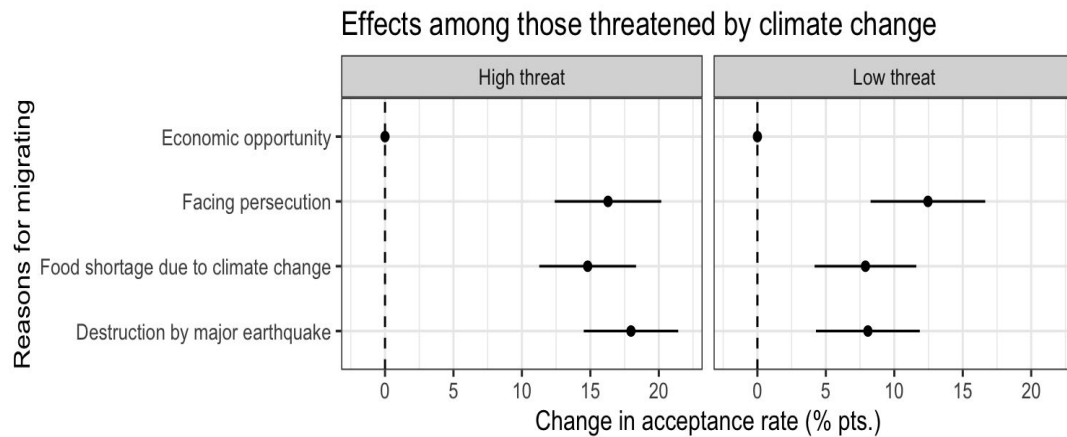
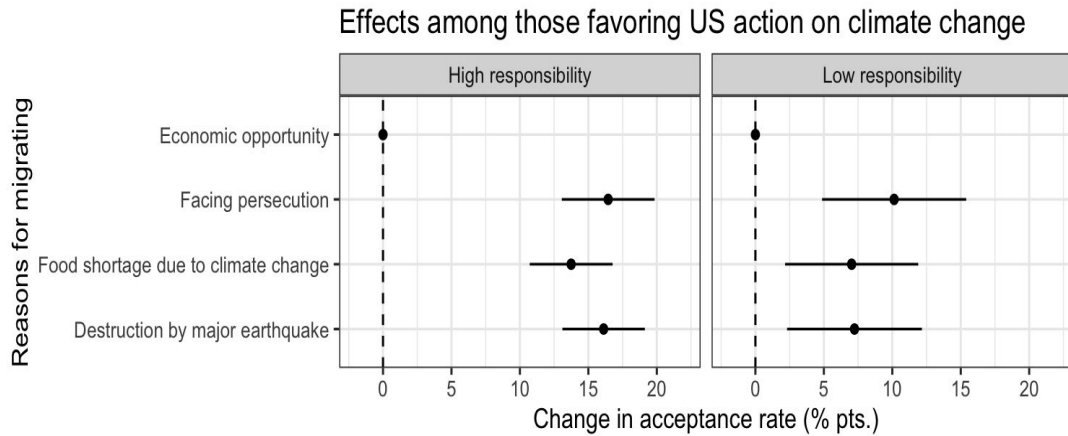


Figure 7.



Conclusion

Notwithstanding the potential increase in climate change-related migrant flows, this study is one of the first to test how these migrants are viewed in the countries that may receive them—in particular, whether citizens of receiving countries consider climate-displaced persons to be forced migrants who warrant settlement through humanitarian admissions systems. Our research reveals that Americans do indeed view migrants displaced by climate change as meriting humanitarian admission on par with certain kinds of persecution that are legally accepted as criteria for admission—more so than economic migrants, and even among those skeptical of climate change, and those who oppose action to mitigate climate change. Our study finds that current policy does not reflect widely held public preferences. The new administration now has an opportunity to align existing policies with public preferences for humanitarian admissions by offering aid to climate-displaced persons.



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