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# Why do states admit refugees? A comparative analysis of resettlement policies in OECD countries

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# Why do states admit refugees? A comparative analysis of resettlement policies in OECD  countries

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**Abstract**

*Many refugee-receiving countries have restricted their asylum policies and stepped up their border control policies to prevent asylum seekers from reaching their territories. At the same time, the resettlement of refugees has gained popularity. Many states have introduced resettlement schemes or have increased the number of refugees they resettle. Why do states voluntarily admit refugees by expanding resettlement? This article develops a comprehensive theoretical account of countries' resettlement choices and identifies the determinants of their openness to refugee resettlement through an empirical analysis of 33 OECD countries between 1980 and 2019. We find that the supply-side factor of wealth best predicts whether a country engages in refugee resettlement. The number of effective resettlement admissions tends to fluctuate with the demand-side factor of humanitarian need. Nevertheless, the expansion of resettlement policies does not result in a subsequent expansion of humanitarian protection. Instead, states combine resettlement policies with restrictive border control policies which allows them to preserve their humanitarian credentials while curtailing refugees' overall access to asylum. These findings provide important insights into the policy-making of refugee resettlement and the strategic considerations the asylum governance of liberal democracies.*

**Keywords:** asylum policy, resettlement, refugees, border control, UNHCR

**Word Count:** 9080

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# Introduction

Every year, millions of people around the world are forced to flee their countries of origin and seek refuge in a safe country (IOM, 2019). Refugee resettlement, which sees individuals in need of protection transferred to and granted permanent residence in a safe third country (Piper et al., 2013), is an established solution to this persistent humanitarian crisis. Recently, OECD countries have become increasingly active in refugee resettlement, with more countries introducing resettlement programs and a growing number of refugees gaining admission through this channel (Perrin, 2013). This growth has taken place despite states' attempts to prevent asylum seekers' arrival and despite fading political sympathies for refugees (Schultz et al., 2021). Indeed, countries have continuously tightened border controls and expanded remote control policies to deter asylum seekers (de Haas et al., 2015; Fitz Gerald, 2019; Lavenex, 2018; Lutz et al., 2020; Thielemann and Hobolth, 2016). In light of these circumstances, the increasing popularity of refugee admission by resettlement appears puzzling. Although resettlement has been a constant feature of international humanitarian action, we lack a systematic understanding of the factors that explain such policies in liberal democracies.

Liberal democracies have committed to the right to seek asylum but generally seek to keep refugee intakes at a minimum. Although OECD countries host only a small share of all refugees, they have further increased border controls and expanded their remote control policies. With these policies they seek to prevent asylum seekers' arrival to their territories and to avoid the feared economic burdens and political costs associated with refugee admission. Right-wing politicians embrace harsh policies against refugees for electoral gains. Most prominently, former US president Donald Trump slashed refugee intakes despite growing humanitarian need (Fee and Arar, 2019).

Based on all this, it is logical to expect that most countries have little interest in voluntarily contributing to international refugee resettlement. Unlike claims for territorial asylum, resettlement is at the complete discretion of the admitting state and is therefore a supererogatory act (Thomson, 2017, 1). Resettlement intakes do not diminish the legal obligation towards asylum seekers laid down in international law. Moreover, admitting resettlement refugees is unlikely to significantly reduce the irregular arrival of people seeking protection. Nevertheless, while states are strongly committed to restricting the access of refugees they are obliged to admit, they are willing to welcome refugees on a voluntary basis. Given these patterns, this article asks: Why do OECD countries admit refugees via resettlement?

To shed light on the policy-making of refugee resettlement, we build on two main strands of literature that have so far developed mostly in isolation from one another. Existing research on resettlement has been the almost exclusive domain of international relations scholars (see Abdelaaty, 2021; Bessa, 2009; Hashimoto, 2018). It has focused on states' motivations for using resettlement, such as their national self-interest, value-based altruism, or international reputation, and has failed to adopt a comparative perspective accounting for

the domestic politics involved in countries' resettlement choices. Some insightful exceptions include Beirens and Fratzke' (2017) study, which discusses the role of domestic policy interests in explaining resettlement policies, and Reklev and Jumbert' (2018) article, which explores domestic discourses on resettlement choices.

We go beyond the existing literature and systematise the drivers behind countries' resettlement choices and test them empirically. For that purpose, we borrow from the comparative politics literature on asylum and migration policies (e.g., Bernhard and Kaufmann, 2018; Thielemann and Hobolth, 2016). This literature acknowledges the role domestic factors play in shaping asylum policies, but has so far failed to closely examine resettlement policies. Linking these two strands of the literature on migration allows us to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the drivers behind resettlement choices.

We distinguish between explanatory factors associated with receiving countries (supply-side factors) and factors linked to humanitarian needs for refugee resettlement (demand-side factors). Specifically, we consider countries' admission capacity, their levels of socio-political acceptance of refugees, and humanitarian need as potential determinants of states' openness to resettlement. Furthermore, we also examine a perspective that accounts for the role of resettlement in contemporary asylum governance and contends that resettlement is used as a strategic instrument that allows states to uphold humanitarian credentials while increasingly restricting access to asylum. In this perspective, resettlement serves as a legitimacy-preserving substitution for an otherwise increasingly restrictive policy meant to prevent the arrival of asylum seekers.

To test these theoretical arguments, we compile a panel data set of resettlement choices adopted by 33 OECD countries between 1980 and 2019. We trace the development of resettlement policies across countries and over time based on (de jure) resettlement policy openness and (de facto) resettlement admissions. A series of panel regression models then identifies the driving factors behind countries' resettlement policies. Our results demonstrate that while states' admission capacities help explain whether countries become involved in refugee resettlement, partisan politics and humanitarian needs only hold limited explanatory power. The effective number of resettled refugees is best predicted by global humanitarian need. Most strikingly, our analysis confirms the pattern that states follow a largely similar policy evolution toward combining stricter border control policies with more liberal resettlement policies.

This study makes three main contributions to the literature on asylum governance. First, we discuss theoretical perspectives from domestic and international politics that can be useful to explain countries' resettlement choices based on supply- and demand-side factors. Second, we systematise the theoretical argument that liberal democracies strategically combine liberal resettlement policies with restrictive border controls. Third, we conduct a quantitative comparative analysis based on original data that makes it possible to systematically assess resettlement policies. Our findings have important implications for our understanding

of policy-making on refugee resettlement and strategic policy considerations in asylum governance.

## Explaining resettlement policies

Resettlement offers a permanent humanitarian solution to refugees by providing them an organised transfer to a safe third country. The degree to which this instrument has been used varies significantly over time and across countries. Resettlement expanded in the decades following the Second World War only to plunge into crisis in the 1990s (Chimni, 2004; Garnier, 2014). Resettlement has experienced a revival since then: more countries have included resettlement among their asylum policies, more states have introduced resettlement programs, and a growing number of refugees have been admitted through resettlement schemes. Nevertheless, during the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015, some European countries cut back on their resettlement efforts and the Trump administration in the United States drastically lowered the US refugee quota. The following section discusses different explanations for the variation in states' openness to resettling refugees. We combine theories borrowed from international relations with the comparative literature on asylum policies to identify admission capacity, socio-political acceptance and humanitarian need as determinants of states' resettlement policies. We then develop the argument that resettlement policies go hand in hand with restrictions on territorial asylum and should thus be understood in the context of broader asylum governance.

*Admission capacity*

One factor that may explain the variation in states' resettlement policies builds on countries' different capacities to provide humanitarian protection.[2] Refugees' processing and accommodation through resettlement is costly and requires considerable public investment (see Hansen, 2018, 137). Moreover, a country's level of economic development and its economic situation determine the extent to which it is able to successfully integrate refugees into its society, provide them with economic opportunities, and improve their life prospects. Hence, the more resources a country can draw on, the higher its capacity to admit resettlement refugees is. Furthermore, the theory of collective action suggests that larger countries tend to make greater contributions to international public goods than smaller countries (Olson, 1965). Nevertheless, the empirical evidence that population size affects humanitarian protection is mixed: while more populous countries contribute more to pro-active peace-keeping (Shimizu and Sandler, 2002), they fail to do so with reactive burden-sharing as far as asylum recognition rates are concerned (Thielemann and Dewan, 2006). We consider the 'exploitation of the large by the small' a more likely scenario for resettlement than for asylum recognition since only the former is a discretionary act where states can act fully strategically.

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[2] We focus on countries' economies and largely neglect social, cultural, and demographic factors that may affect states' capacities to admit refugees in order to ensure that our definition of 'capacity' neither becomes vague, nor overlaps theoretically or in terms of measurement with other explanations we consider (e.g., sociopolitical acceptance).

Both the normative literature on international responsibility-sharing and asylum governance practice make references to countries' admission capacities. Scholars have identified states' relative capacities to admit refugees and integrate them into their societies and labour markets as the main normative criteria for the allocation of protection responsibilities among states (Czaika, 2005; Dowd and McAdam, 2017; Lutz et al., 2021). Examples from the practice of resettlement suggest that the capacity criterion influences states' policy choices. The large-scale resettlement programs after the Second World War were partially motivated by the idea of bringing foreign workers in to address domestic labour needs (Suhrke, 1998, 404). Admission capacity was also employed as an allocation criterion in the 2015 EU resettlement scheme, which calculated member states' obligation to contribute to relocation based on their population size, wealth, and unemployment rate (Grech, 2017).[3] These considerations suggest that admission capacity could not only provide the resources necessary for resettlement, but could also be central to the norm of international burden-sharing.

In light of this discussion, we expect countries' openness to resettlement to depend on their admission capacities. Hence, larger, wealthier states with low levels of unemployment should be more likely to admit resettlement refugees.

**Hypothesis 1** *The higher a country's capacity to admit refugees, the more liberal its admission of resettlement refugees will be.*

*Socio-political acceptance*

A second explanatory approach considers the socio-political acceptance in the receiving country and the role domestic political preferences play in shaping states' resettlement choices. The surge of refugee arrivals in the 1990s increasingly politicised questions about immigration and asylum in many countries. After the Cold War, the popular discourse has viewed refugees as a burden and has revolved around the idea of "bogus refugees" exploiting (too) liberal asylum systems (Lavenex, 2001). Political opposition to refugees has been increasingly nourished by radical-right populist parties that have gained substantial electoral strength in many democratic countries. Despite waning political sympathies for refugees, a clear and persistent left-right divide in political parties' asylum positions sees the left as more welcoming than the right (Akkerman, 2015; Bernhard and Kaufmann, 2018; Schultz et al., 2021). Left-wing parties' ideological core—universalist values of social solidarity—naturally leans toward a more permissive stand on refugee admission. Indeed, proponents of egalitarian humanitarianism view the resettlement of refugees by rich democracies as a moral duty (Gibney, 2004). In contrast, the political right typically values cultural conservatism and often promotes nativist policies. This divide in parties' positions on asylum should be reflected in official policies. A prominent example in support of this argument is the restriction on resettlement during Trump's right-wing

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[3] The relocation key also includes previous refugee intakes. While this could be read in terms of admission capacity, it is deployed in the opposite sense inasmuch as countries' previous refugee intakes are deducted from their current obligations.

administration. Furthermore, existing research shows that asylum recognition rates are significantly lower during right-wing governments than during centrist or left-wing administrations (Winn, 2021). Given the partisan nature of asylum policy preferences, we expect resettlement choices to be influenced by the socio-political acceptance of refugees in a country and by the way in which preferences are mobilised and represented in domestic politics. In light of these considerations, we hypothesise that government ideology and anti-immigration mobilisation affect countries' resettlement choices.

**Hypothesis 2** *The stronger right-wing parties in a country, the more restrictive its admission of resettlement refugees will be.*

*Humanitarian demand*

A third explanation for states' openness to resettlement refugees is based on the international demand for humanitarian protection. During the Cold War, refugee admission was politically valuable to Western democracies because the image of people fleeing the Soviet Union allowed the West to demonstrate liberalism's superiority over communism (Loescher, 1989).[4] Logically, this foreign policy motivation has since disappeared and been replaced by humanitarian considerations (Bessa, 2009; Troeller, 2002). Moreover, humanitarian crises with high numbers of people seeking protection in third countries threaten to undermine international stability and security (Suhrke, 1998). The larger the number of people in need of protection, the stronger the pressure on the international community for coordinated action becomes and the more pronounced the reputational risks of inaction are (Flowers, 2008). In particular, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is an intergovernmental organisation that has important authority on refugee issues and can increase the pressure on its member states by formulating protection demands (Garnier, 2014).

These considerations suggests that higher humanitarian need increases the political pressure and the reputational incentives for states to accept resettlement refugees. Therefore, states are generally expected to be more likely to engage in resettlement when the number of refugees seeking protection is high. These expectations result in the following demand-side hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3** *The higher the demand for humanitarian protection, the more liberal the admission of resettlement refugees will be.*

*Humanitarian alibi*

Fourth, we introduce an additional hypothesis which argues that resettlement policies are a strategic policy instrument that should be understood in the broader policy context of states seeking to minimise their refugee

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[4] While refugees fleeing from the East to the West held considerable propaganda utility for Western democracies, their numbers remained more limited during the Cold War, with major peaks only occurring during the 1990s and more recently.

intakes. The argument builds on existing scholarship which suggests that liberal democracies commit to accepting refugees in order to preserve their legitimacy as liberal-democratic polities (e.g., Guiraudon and Joppke, 2001; Hampshire, 2013). Resettlement allows states to demonstrate a "symbolic commitment to reciprocity"—a willingness to support each other in providing humanitarian protection—both to first countries of asylum and to the international community more generally (Betts and Collier, 2017, 136). Furthermore, states may have reasons to prefer resettlement to ordinary asylum procedures. This is because "resettlement is an orderly, managed, controlled, and possibly cheaper migration scheme" that bears fewer political risks than the admission of asylum-seekers (Hashimoto, 2018, 182).

Resettlement can serve as a strategic policy instrument primarily in situations when states enact restrictive entry and border control policies to keep refugees from reaching their territories (van Selm, 2004).[5] In such situations, governments may use resettlement to solve the liberal paradox resulting from the conflicting imperatives of liberal constitutionalism and political pressure (cf Hampshire, 2013). According to the liberal paradox, many liberal democracies face intense pressure to enact restrictive immigration controls from their constituents, while the legitimacy of liberal institutions requires that they contribute to international humanitarian protection and uphold the right to seek asylum. Governments can ignore neither the restrictive pressure from voters, nor the constraints from liberal institutions without incurring the risk of their democratic legitimacy being undermined. The strategic use of resettlement might therefore offer governments an instrument to address this tension despite their limited room for manoeuvre. States can limit their humanitarian admissions through more restrictive border control policies and continue to comply with their commitment to protecting refugees through resettlement.

Recent policy developments are in line with our argument of strategic policy combination. In the so-called 'EU-Turkey deal', the European Union offered to resettle refugees in exchange for a more restrictive control of irregular entries at its external borders. Indeed, the commissioner Avramopoulos stated that the desire to select genuine refugees and reduce irregular migration motivated the EU's strategic use of resettlement.[6] Another illustrative example is Australia, which not only has one of the largest resettlement programs in the world, but is also among the countries with the harshest policies towards the irregular arrival of asylum seekers. The Australian government justifies its policy of 'stopping the boats', i.e., holding asylum seekers back at sea, with the argument that irregularly arriving asylum seekers are illegitimate 'queue-jumpers', unlike the 'genuine refugees' that reach the country via resettlement (McAdam, 2013).[7] This strategy of delegitimising asylum seekers through resettlement allows the government to justify restricted access for refugees at the border as a means to deter 'economic migrants' (Betts, 2015).

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[5] The strategic use of resettlement refers to the use of resettlement for purposes other than refugee (van Selm, 2004).

[6] European Commission (2016) "Enhancing Legal Channels: Commission Proposes to Create Common EU Resettlement Framework." Press release, Brussels, 13 July 2016. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-2434_en.htm.

[7] The claim of 'queue-jumping' is a metaphor in the public discourse but does not adequately describe the reality of refugees as most of them do not have access to protection in a safe third country and therefore are not waiting in a queue.

Building on these country-specific experiences, we theorise a more general evolution of liberal democracies' asylum policy-making and embed them into the comparative politics literature. To summarise, we argue that the instrument of refugee resettlement allows countries to reconcile their objective to keeping refugee intakes at a minimum with the liberal principle of granting humanitarian protection. The expansion of resettlement could therefore be understood as a 'humanitarian alibi' that serves not to significantly increase humanitarian protection but to justify countries' otherwise restricted access to asylum (van Selm, 2004, 40). Based on this reasoning, we formulate the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4** *The liberal admission of resettlement refugees is combined with a restrictive access for asylum seekers.*

## Data and method

We test our hypotheses through a comparative analysis of resettlement policies in 33 OECD countries between 1980 and 2019.[8] This case selection covers all countries that provide a significant number of resettlement slots.[9] According to the statistics from the UNHCR, OECD countries were responsible for almost 99% of all resettlement intakes between 1980 and 2016. While most OECD countries are advanced Western economies, there is significant variation in countries' income levels and geographic locations, which results in a broad sample.

*Measuring resettlement policies*

We operationalise the dependent variable—countries' openness to resettlement refugees—through an index of each country's resettlement policy and the number of refugees who are resettled in its territory. Both measures represent resettlement choices made by political authorities. While the formal resettlement policy represents de jure openness, the number of resettled refugees serves as a measure of de facto openness.

The index of the openness of resettlement policies is based on the 'Immigration Policies in Comparison' (IMPIC) data set that contains detailed indices of OECD countries' immigration policies (Helbling et al., 2017). The data set considers 'resettlement agreements' as one dimension of policies on asylum and refugees. The dimension consists of two elements: (a) whether a country has put in place an ad hoc program for the admission of resettlement refugees, and (b) whether it has defined a quota for the admission of refugees via

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[8] The following countries are included: Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Slovakia, South Korea, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States. Eastern European countries were only included after their first free elections took place. These are only the OECD member states of the year 2010 and leaves out countries that joined the organisation later.

[9] Some non-OECD countries in the Global South (primarily in South America and Africa) started to be involved in refugee resettlement after 2000. However, these few cases remain of minor significance in comparison with the overall number of resettlement places.

resettlement. A quota program is more liberal than an ad hoc program because it establishes a guaranteed annual number of resettlement places. In contrast, ad hoc programs only provide the government with the means to admit specific groups of refugees at its discretion. Therefore, that policy is less institutionalised. The combination of a resettlement quota program and an ad hoc program is the most liberal resettlement policy in the index. In order to capture the most recent changes in countries' resettlement policies, we have expanded the index for the period 2011–2019. Following the strategy that underlies the IMPIC indicator, our coding is based on the UNHCR's country chapters[10] as well as official government websites and the wider academic literature. These policy elements are aggregated into an index with the following categories: (0) no resettlement, (1/3) ad hoc resettlement, (2/3) resettlement with quota, (1) both ad hoc and quota resettlement.[11][10] Hence, higher values on the index represent greater openness towards resettlement refugees. The 0–1 range facilitates the interpretation of our model estimates. Additionally, we build a dummy variable that takes the value '1' if a country has an institutionalised resettlement program (quota) in any given year, and the value '0' if the country does not have such a program. We use this alternative operationalisation as a robustness check.

The policy index is complemented by a second dependent variable that measures the number of refugees a country resettles in any given year. We use the resettlement statistics provided by the UNHCR. The data is based on government statistics and includes resettlement with and without UNHCR assistance. The UNHCR data registers both refugees' receiving country and their country of origin and spans from 1959 to 2016. For the purposes of our analysis, we aggregate the total number of resettlement refugees for each receiving country. We then divide the number of refugees by the receiving countries' population size to obtain a variable measuring the number of resettlement intakes per 1,000 inhabitants.

This two-fold measurement of resettlement policies has several advantages. While the policy index captures countries' legal frameworks, the number of resettled refugees measures the extent to which countries actually use their resettlement instruments to admit refugees. Distinguishing between the two is important due to countries' diversity in resettlement regimes: some countries resettle refugees without any formal resettlement policy, while others do have a legal framework in place but do not implement any resettlement. Therefore, taking into account both the formal policies and the number of refugees who are granted resettlement allows for a more comprehensive analysis of countries' resettlement choices.

To assess the idea of resettlement as a humanitarian alibi which assumes a strategic combination with policies restricting the access to asylum, we build an index that measures the openness of resettlement policies relative to the restrictiveness of border control policies. In addition to our resettlement policy index, we rely on a

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[10] https://www.unhcr.org/protection/resettlement/4a2ccf4c6/unhcr-resettlement-handbook-country-chapters.html.

[11] The IMPIC indicator also includes the category 'no asylum'. Since we are only interested in resettlement policies, we re-code these observations as 'no resettlement'.

second IMPIC policy index that measures the restrictiveness of external border control policy. This index captures how difficult it is for asylum seekers to access OECD countries' territories where they can lodge an asylum request, based on sub-items such as illegal residence, carriers' sanction, aliens register, information sharing/international cooperation, biometric information, and forged/expired documents. We subtract the openness in the area of border control from the policy openness in the area of resettlement. The index takes its highest values when a country has a liberal resettlement policy combined with a restrictive border control policy. Its lowest values correspond to the opposite combination of no resettlement but also few control efforts to prevent asylum seekers' arrival.

*Empirical analysis*

The unit of analysis of the compiled data set is the country-year and the data are structured as cross-sectional time series. We first present descriptive evidence of OECD countries' resettlement choices and their evolution over time. Building on this evidence, we then analyse the determinants of countries' resettlement choices to test our four hypotheses. For that purpose, we use a series of independent variables that operationalise the explanatory factors described above (for detailed operationalisation, see Table A1 in the Appendix). A country's admission capacity is measured by its GDP per capita and its unemployment rate (lagged by one year).[12] For socio-political acceptance, we measure 1) a country's government ideology on the left-right scale based on the political orientation of the largest government party (left, center, right) (Cruz et al., 2021) and 2) the electoral strength of radical-right populist parties based on their share in the last national elections.[13] The external demand for humanitarian protection is approximated by the global number of refugees in the previous year.[14] Finally, we include the number of asylum seekers that a country received as a control variable because resettlement has been identified in the literature as an alternative to claims for territorial asylum (Hashimoto, 2018). We use also here the values of the previous year (one-year lag) to account for an adequate temporal order. The descriptive statistics of all variables can be found in Table A2 in the Appendix.

Given the hierarchical nature of our data set, we estimate linear panel regression models with country-fixed effects and panel-corrected standard errors. We use this model specification for our two main outcome variables: the openness of countries' resettlement policies and resettlement admissions. Alternatively, we estimate a logistic model using a dummy (resettlement quota: yes/no) dependent variable. Furthermore, countries vary greatly in the number of refugees they choose to resettle, with a few countries admitting most of the resettlement refugees (US, Canada, Australia). While our analysis generally includes a total of 33

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[12] Data on countries' unemployment rates and GDP per capita comes from the International Monetary Fund. Per-capita GDP is log-transformed for the purpose of the analysis due to the variable's strongly skewed distribution.

[13] Our classification of radical-right populist parties is based on Mudde (2007).

[14] Official refugee figures provided by the UNHCR are based on the total number of refugees under the UNHCR mandate. These figures do not include internally displaced persons.

OECD countries, we run models based on a subsample of European countries that constitute a more homogeneous sample in order to assess policy determinants without the traditional countries of resettlement as outlier cases.[15]

In a next step, we explore the hypothesis of a humanitarian alibi. We first provide a descriptive comparison of border control and resettlement policies and then test whether and when resettlement policies result in higher refugee intakes. Finally, we identify the factors that explain the combination of these two policies in the field of asylum. To do so, we estimate linear models using our index of countries' asylum policy mix as the dependent variable and two explanatory factors that serve as proxies for the growing pressures of the liberal paradox: the electoral strength of radical-right populist parties and the number of asylum requests a country receives.

## Results

*Resettlement policies in OECD countries*

Which countries are most open to refugee resettlement and how have resettlement policies evolved over time? We address these questions with a descriptive analysis of OECD countries' resettlement choices. Figure 1displays countries' openness to resettlement and distinguishes between formal policy openness and effective admissions. The 'classic immigration countries', i.e., the United States, Canada and Australia, and the Scandinavian countries were characterised by relatively liberal resettlement policies over the period between 1980 and 2019. In contrast, the Eastern European and other non-Western countries in the sample were more reluctant to resettle refugees. Yet, most countries position themselves somewhere between not granting resettlement and adopting the most liberal resettlement policy. The between-country divergence is even more pronounced when we look at effective refugee admissions: Only the Anglo-Saxon countries and Scandinavia have significant resettlement intakes, whereas about the half of the countries in our sample have hardly engaged in any resettlement. Overall, our data shows that there is significant variation in OECD countries' resettlement choices.

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[15] Furthermore, the EU encourages the resettlement of refugees, identified as such by the UNHCR, with a voluntary program and financial resources. There have been several collective pledges from member states (e.g., during the war in Iraq in 2008/2009 and the conflict in Syria since 2011).

Figure 1: Comparison of resettlement policies and number of resettled refugees across countries



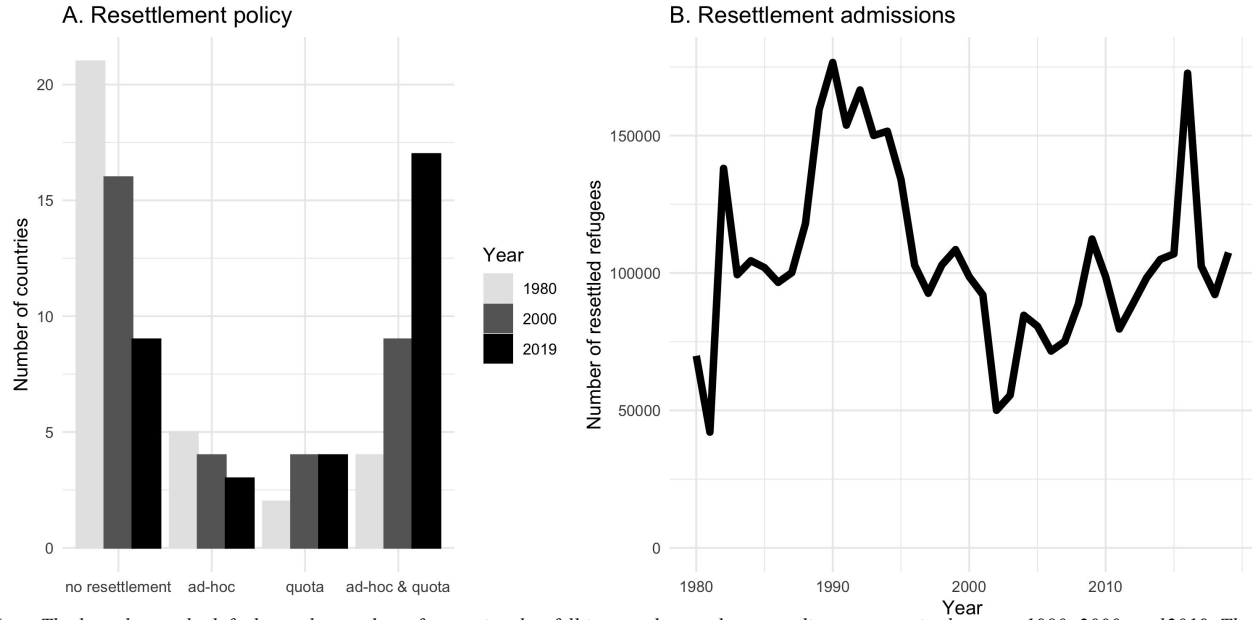**A. Resettlement policy**

**B. Resettlement admissions**
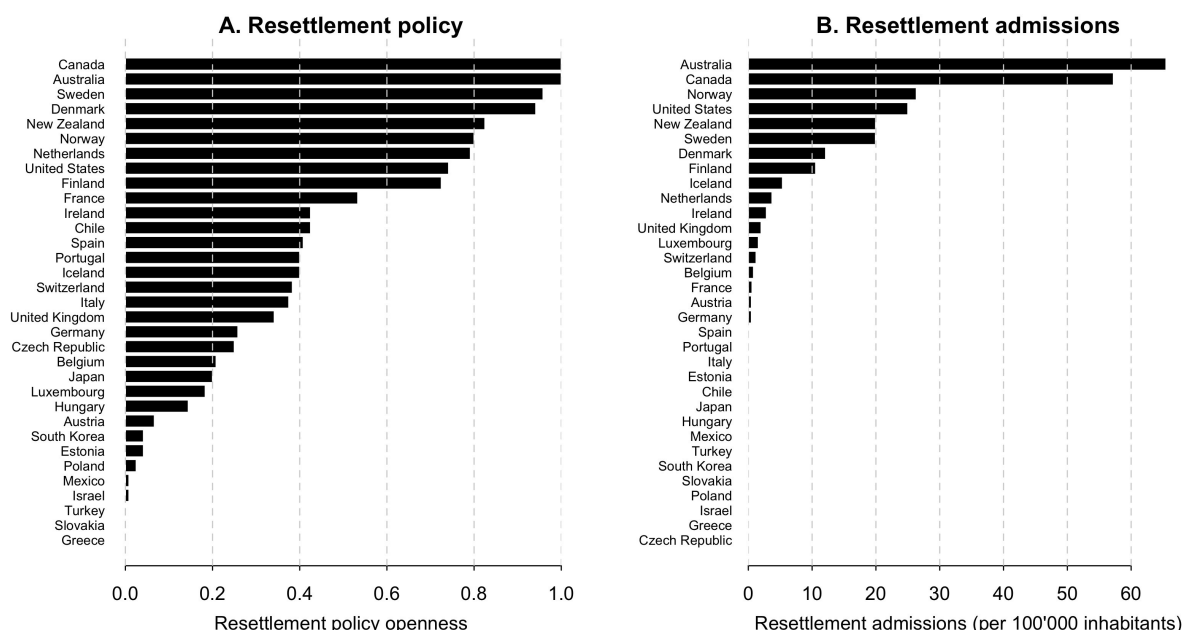
*Note: The bar plot on the left displays countries' resettlement policy openness as the average of each country's index values between 1980 and 2019. The bar plot on the right displays each country's number of resettlement admissions (adjusted for population size) as an average over the period between 1980 and 2019.*

We next turn to the variation in OECD countries' resettlement policies over time (see Figure 2). These policies have become more liberal since 1980, with more countries adopting an institutionalised resettlement quota. While in 1980, only 6 out of the 33 OECD countries (18%) had a resettlement quota program, this number had increased to 13 (39%) by 2000 and to 21 (64%) by 2019. The number of countries in the most liberal category more than tripled in the period under observation. This rise was accompanied by a substantial increase in the absolute number of resettled refugees between 1980 and 2015. However, we also observe large variations from one year to the next. Resettlement numbers increased sharply during the 1980s and peaked in the early 1990s when a record number of refugees, particularly from Russia and the Western Balkan, sought protection.[16] In the second half of the 1990s, the number of refugees who were resettled dropped significantly to a new low and refugee resettlement was in crisis. Since then, we have again observed an increase in resettlement activities with a peak in 2016 as a result of the European refugee crisis. Nevertheless, most recently, domestic opposition against further immigration has organised a backlash against resettlement. Austria and Denmark are cases in point, having suspended resettlement altogether, and, most dramatically, the United States—the main provider of resettlement places—significantly down-sized its program under the Trump administration (Fee and Arar, 2019). These developments suggests that despite the observed expansion of resettlement policies, the policy practice is subject to significant fluctuations stemming from refugee emergencies and partisan dynamics.

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[16] Note that refugee resettlement also used to be a common tool in the period following the Second World War. However, refugee statistics from these early times are less reliable (Fransen and de Haas, 2019). Our analysis only focuses on the period after 1980 to ensure data comparability.

Figure 2: The evolution of resettlement over time



A. Resettlement policy

B. Resettlement admissions

*Note: The bar plot on the left shows the number of countries that fell into each resettlement policy category in the years 1980, 2000, and 2019. The line chart on the right displays the total number of refugees resettled in OECD countries between 1960 and 2019.*

*Determinants of resettlement choices*

This section presents the results of our analysis of the determinants of countries' openness to refugee resettlement. We test the competing theoretical accounts of countries' resettlement choices by estimating panel regression models (see Table 1). The openness of resettlement policy (Models 1 and 2) and the number of resettled refugees (Models 3 and 4) are our main dependent variables. We estimate separate models for the sample of all 33 OECD countries and the sub-sample of the 23 European countries.

As far as policy openness is concerned, our models reveal mixed evidence for the effect of state capacity (Hypothesis 1). Economic growth has a consistent positive and significant effect: a higher per-capita GDP is associated with more liberal resettlement policies. In contrast, the effect of population size varies across samples. Only for the sub-sample of European countries, does a larger population predict a significantly higher policy openness. The coefficients of unemployment are not in the expected negative direction. However, its effect is small and does only reach statistical significance in the sample with all OECD countries. Hence, the evidence does not strongly support the hypothesis that resettlement policies are driven by the business cycle or by the adopting country's size. We now turn to the role of domestic politics (Hypothesis 2). The model estimates are in line with our theoretical expectations in that resettlement policies are less open under right-wing governments than under centrist administrations (which is used as a reference category). While right-wing governments' negative effect is consistent across the two country-samples, it is

only statistically significant in the overall sample of OECD countries. By contrast, the coefficient for the dummy 'left-wing governments' varies depending on the sample and is in neither of the models statistically significant. Based on these findings we must conclude that while right-wing governments tend to be slightly more restrictive on resettlement, partisan differences are small and the estimated effects are not robust across different country samples. The limited role of government ideology is confirmed when we compare resettlement policies across different ideological categories of party government (see Figure A2 in the Appendix). Moreover, the effect of radical-right parties' electoral strength comes close to zero and its direction is not consistent across the two models. Therefore, we cannot confirm Hypothesis 2 that partisan politics is an important determinant of countries' resettlement choices. Finally, regarding the effect of humanitarian need, we find that the global number of refugees is negatively associated with policy openness. The effect does however not reach the level of statistical significance, suggesting that states do not primarily liberalise resettlement in response to increases in the number of people seeking protection (Hypothesis 3).

We use the same model specifications to estimate our independent variables' effect on the number of resettled refugees (see Models 3 and 4). As formal policy openness does not necessarily correspond to greater refugee intakes, we may expect different drivers behind the two policy dimensions. We find no clear evidence that either state capacity or socio-political acceptance affect resettlement intakes. While we find support for the hypothesis that countries expand the number of resettled refugees as GDP per capita increases in our sample of European countries, the models that include all OECD countries indicate the opposite effect. Similarly, the effect of population size also varies greatly across samples and unemployment has a small positive effect, just like in previous models 1 and 2. The coefficients of government ideology suggest that both left-wing and right-wing cabinets tend to admit more resettlement refugees than centrist governments.

Table 1: Model estimates of resettlement policy openness and number of resettlement admissions

| | *Dependent variable:* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Policy openness | | Resettlement admissions | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| | OECD | Europe | OECD | Europe |
| Population size | -0.002 | 0.035*** | -0.168*** | 0.046 |
| | (0.001) | (0.007) | (0.048) | (0.170) |
| GDP per capita | 0.207*** | 0.200*** | -0.128 | 1.336** |
| | (0.014) | (0.019) | (0.552) | (0.444) |
| Unemployment | 0.006* | 0.004 | 0.181 | 0.165* |
| | (0.003) | (0.003) | (0.109) | (0.074) |
| Left-wing cabinet | -0.030 | 0.024 | 0.949 | 1.780 |
| | (0.032) | (0.042) | (1.262) | (0.995) |
| Right-wing cabinet | -0.037* | -0.027 | 0.956 | 0.440 |
| | (0.018) | (0.022) | (0.692) | (0.523) |
| Radical-right vote share | 0.002 | -0.001 | -0.003 | -0.032 |
| | (0.001) | (0.002) | (0.058) | (0.041) |
| Refugees worldwide | -0.003 | -0.004 | 0.484*** | 0.498*** |
| | (0.003) | (0.003) | (0.101) | (0.077) |

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| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Asylum requests | 21.539** | 21.959** | 473.238 | 376.813* |
| | (6.667) | (7.162) | (262.133) | (169.702) |
| Constant | -1.060*** | -2.245*** | 59.995*** | -20.816*** |
| | (0.146) | (0.172) | (5.746) | (4.079) |
| Observations | 1,081 | 750 | 1,081 | 750 |
| R2 | 0.726 | 0.671 | 0.769 | 0.642 |

*Note: The estimates are based on linear panel regression models with country fixed effects and panel-corrected standard errors. The two dummies for government ideology take centrist cabinets as their reference category. The level of significance is indicated as follows: $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.*

However, none of these effects is statistically significant. Likewise, we find no substantive effect for the electoral strength of radical-right parties. Since these effects are generally small and vary across our two samples, we conclude that there is no robust evidence that admission capacity and socio-political acceptance affect the number of resettlement intakes. Finally, we find more support for the assumption that humanitarian need is associated with the number of resettled refugees in that the number of refugees predicts higher levels of resettlement admissions. In other words, OECD countries admit more resettlement refugees when more people are in need of humanitarian protection. This pattern is also confirmed on an aggregate level where we find a strong correlation (r=0.61) between the number of refugees worldwide and the number or refugees who are resettled by OECD countries. Our control variable measuring the number of asylum requests filed in a country is positively associated with policy openness and also statistically significant in three out of the four models. This suggests that resettlement is not used as an alternative to asylum flows but rather that the two humanitarian channels tend to fluctuate in parallel.

We conduct a series of robustness checks to test the stability of these findings and gain a better interpretation of the results. We first use an alternative measure of resettlement policy: a dummy that captures whether an institutionalised resettlement policy exists (1) or does not exist (0). The results of the logistic models are largely similar to those of the base models (although they expectedly have lower levels of statistical significance) and confirm the overall patterns (see Table A3 in the Appendix). Second, our models are likely to under-estimate the effect of the structural factors of population size and per-capita GDP because these factors vary mainly across countries, rather than within countries. We thus estimate additional models based on this between-country variation (for model output, see Table A4 in the Appendix). Although these models have a small number of observations and low overall explanatory power, we find that a country's per-capita GDP has a significant effect and that the latter is stronger for policy openness than it is for resettlement admissions. This confirms our results about the impact state capacity has on states' resettlement choices. Likewise, the link between a country's wealth and the openness of its resettlement policies is also confirmed when looking at the bivariate association and suggests that OECD countries only start to engage in resettlement once they reach a certain level of economic development (see Figure A3 in the Appendix).

Overall, our findings lend support to some of our theoretical expectations and vary between de jure and de facto policies. Formal policy openness is best explained by countries' wealth, a supply-side factor that

captures state capacity. In contrast, resettlement admissions vary mainly depending on humanitarian need and, therefore, seem more likely to follow the demand-side of resettlement. We find however no robust evidence in favour of the assumption that partisan politics consistently shapes resettlement policies.

*Resettlement as humanitarian alibi?*

This section deploys empirical evidence to explore the strategic use of resettlement as humanitarian alibi. We have argued that the liberalisation of resettlement policies goes hand in hand with more restrictive control policies designed to prevent the arrival of asylum seekers. Our data lend support to this argument (see Figure 3a). OECD countries have liberalised resettlement policies, while increasingly hindering refugees' access to asylum by tightening their external border controls. Indeed, while these two policy areas have developed in opposite directions, the similarities in their trajectories are striking. Although the policy categories we work with are relatively coarse, the average correlation between the two policy dimensions among OECD countries is strong (r = −0.5). To identify possible outliers from this pattern, we calculate this correlation work with are relatively coarse, the average correlation between the two policy dimensions among OECD coefficient for each country. Traditional resettlement countries have maintained liberal resettlement policies over the entire period under investigation, so we are mainly interested in the policy combinations adopted by the newer resettlement countries.[17] The pattern of a negative correlation between resettlement and control policies holds in all OECD countries and suggests a prevalent policy dynamic despite the existing between-country variation (see Table A6 in the Appendix).

Furthermore, the data shows that only few refugees benefit from resettlement to a country of protection. The current number of resettlement admissions is too small to provide a sustainable solution to the problem of humanitarian protection. Indeed, although refugee resettlement has been a constant feature of international humanitarian action since the Second World War, the supply of resettlement spots that states offer continues to fall short of demand. The annual proportion of refugees resettled in OECD countries relative to the total refugee population worldwide has mostly oscillated between 0.5 and 1 per cent over the past four decades (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). Moreover, Figure 3b displays the share of resettlement intakes as a percentage of overall humanitarian migration (which includes asylum seekers and resettlement refugees). The figure shows that in 1980, resettlement made up for an average of around 40% of countries' humanitarian arrivals. Since then, the share has continuously decreased and stabilised at just under 10% in the years after 2000. These figures suggest that the relative importance of resettlement in humanitarian migration to OECD countries has decreased rather than increased, despite increasing numbers of refugees that are resettled over this period.

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[17] The countries whose policy index retained a constant value over time were dropped from the correlation analysis.

Figure 3: The evolution of asylum policies over time
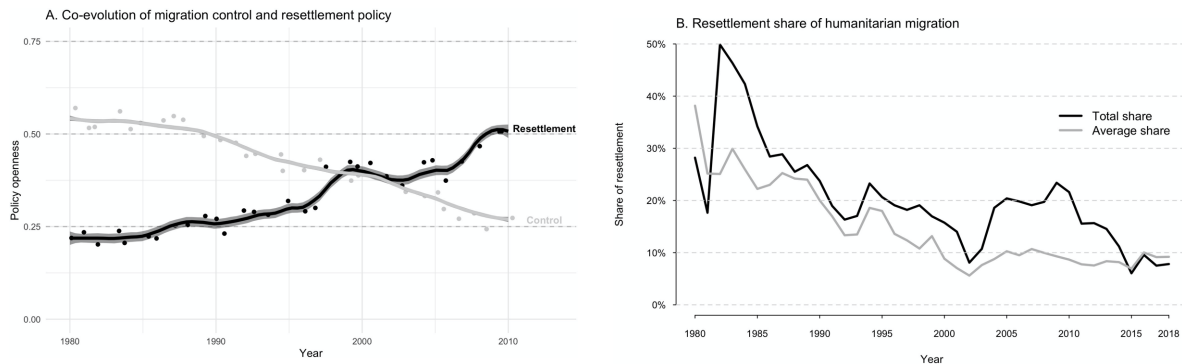


*Note: The line plot on the left shows the evolution of policy openness in terms of external control and resettlement policies across all 33 OECD countries. The lines represent LOESS estimates (locally weighted smoothing). The line plot on the right shows the total and the average shares of resettlement of all humanitarian migration to OECD countries over time.*

Given the fact that resettlement only constitutes a small proportion of the total humanitarian migration, states cannot hope that expanding resettlement would significantly reduce the number of irregular immigrants arriving to them. In line with the hypothesis of a humanitarian alibi, resettlement's trajectory over time suggests that its main purpose may have little to do with significantly enhancing humanitarian protection.

To further substantiate the idea of a more strategic use, we present evidence of the relationship between countries' resettlement policies and the number of refugees they resettle (see Figure 4a). If states use resettlement policy for strategic and symbolic purposes, we would expect that the liberalisation of such policies does not (always) result in a significant increase in resettlement admissions. We present within-country (across time) and between-country comparisons. Our results reveal that policy openness is associated with higher resettlement intakes, albeit to a rather limited degree. The only substantial effect is found for the most liberal regime combining quota and ad hoc admission in the between-country perspective. This result is driven by the classic resettlement countries, which have seen limited policy change over the period of our analysis. In contrast, if countries only have an ad hoc or a quota regime, the model does not predict higher refugee intakes. The within-country model reveals that if a country introduces a more liberal resettlement policy, this does not lead to a substantial increase in refugee intakes. Even when the most liberal regime is compared to no resettlement policy, the model only predicts an increase of two to three refugees per 100,000 inhabitants.

Finally, we look at how resettlement policies are associated with resettlement's share of total humanitarian arrivals (see Figure 4b). Countries that have more liberal resettlement policies also have a higher resettlement share among their humanitarian arrivals (between-country model). In contrast, if countries introduce a more liberal resettlement policy, it is associated with a lower share of resettlement (within-country model). In line with the results displayed in Figure 3b, we learn that the expansion of resettlement has not increased the relative importance of the resettlement channel.

Figure 4: Estimated resettlement admission by policy regime
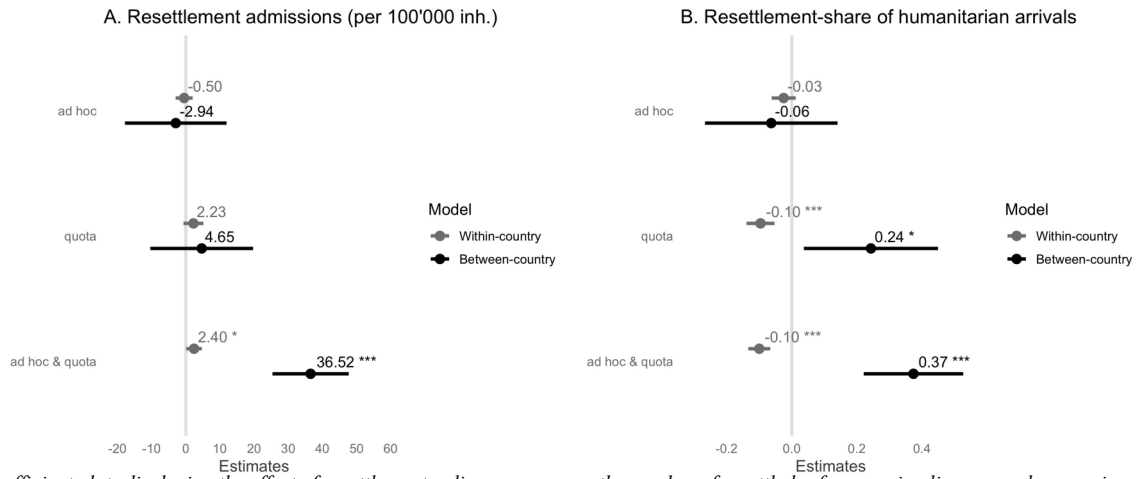


*Note: Coefficient plots displaying the effect of resettlement policy openness on the number of resettled refugees using linear panel regression models with panel-corrected standard errors (separately for within/between country variation). Confidence intervals (95%) shown. The level of significance is indicated as follows: \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Full sample of 33 OECD countries.*

We now evaluate our hypothesis of a strategic use of resettlement as a humanitarian alibi by estimating additional panel regression models. Our dependent variable is the composite index of liberal resettlement relative to restrictive controls. Do states use this policy mix in order to escape the liberal paradox of asylum policy and respond to a growing political pressure to restrict undesired immigration? We use two variables to measure the domestic pressures to restrict asylum seekers' access to a country: the vote share of radical-right populist parties as a proxy for anti-immigration mobilisation and the number of asylum requests as a proxy for the pressure of the humanitarian problem. In line with the assumptions of the liberal paradox, we find that the pressure arising from the electoral strength of radical-right populist parties and from a high number of asylum requests predicts a shift of the asylum policy mix in the expected direction (see Figure 5; for the complete model output, see Table A5 in the Appendix). While our previous results find that radical-right success holds limited explanatory power inasmuch as countries' resettlement choices are concerned, these findings demonstrate that the overall dynamics of the asylum policy mix are closely associated with anti-immigration mobilisation.

Figure 5: Predicted values of asylum policy mix
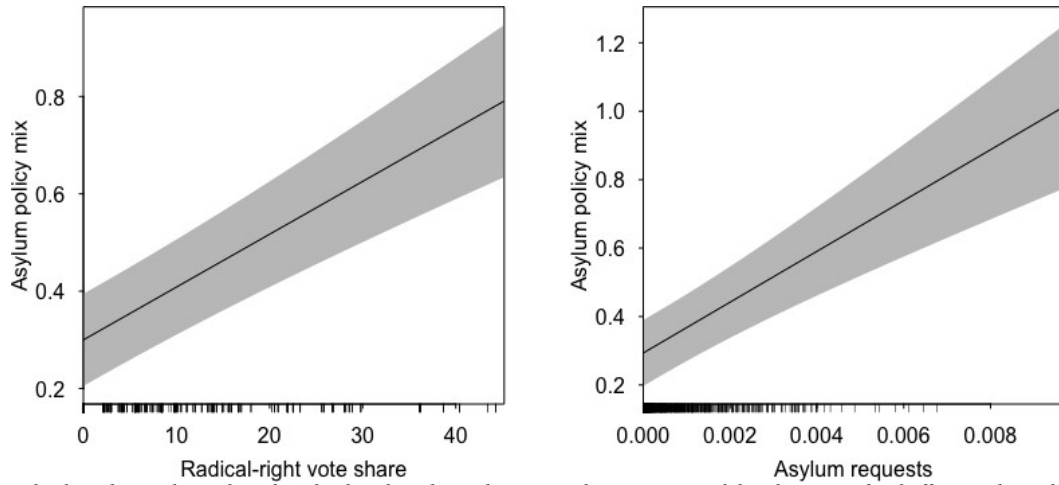


*Note: The figure displays the conditional predicted values based on a linear panel regression model with country fixed effects and panel-corrected standard errors. 95% confidence intervals displayed. The dependent variable is the asylum policy mix of liberal resettlement and restrictive asylum access. Full sample of 33 OECD countries.*

## Conclusion

Motivated by the fact that many liberal democracies have introduced or expanded programs of refugee resettlement despite their efforts to deter asylum seekers, this article has addressed the question of why states *voluntarily seek to admit* refugees. Our analysis sheds light on the evolution of resettlement policies in OECD countries and shows how supply- and demand-side factors explain the variation in countries' openness to resettlement.

Our empirical analysis produces two main findings. First, de-facto and de-jure openness to refugee resettlement follow different political dynamics. Formal resettlement *policies* are best explained by the supply-side factor wealth. The wealthier a country, the more likely its involvement in refugee resettlement becomes. However, we do not find evidence that left-wing governments significantly differ from right-wing governments in their resettlement choices. Likewise, the liberalisation of resettlement policies is neither explained by global humanitarian needs, nor does it subsequently lead to greater refugee intakes overall. This is in contrast to the *number* of refugees that countries resettle, which is best predicted by humanitarian needs: When global refugee numbers were on the rise, OECD countries increased their resettlement intakes.

The finding that resettlement intakes follow global humanitarian needs but formal policies do not hint at the strategic purpose of introducing resettlement policies other than refugee protection. We identify a particular type of asylum policy mix that has gradually evolved over time and consistently appears across OECD countries: The systematic combination of liberalised resettlement policies with efforts to prevent the arrival of asylum seekers via restrictive border controls. This is in line with our theoretical expectations of a strategic use of resettlement:

Expanding resettlement allows states to restrict access to asylum without undermining their public commitment to the protection of people in need. Our results imply that resettlement is a strategic instrument of a larger asylum policy agenda which focuses on minimizing countries' refugee admissions and limiting the undesired consequences that result from their commitment to the protection of refugees. We show that apart from the traditional resettlement countries, resettlement policies did not substantially increase the number of people receiving protection. In this sense, our findings lend support to the observation of an "organized hypocrisy", that is, the concurrent reinforcement of humanitarian claims and restrictionist policies (Lavenex, 2018). This pattern shows that resettlement choices are jointly shaped by domestic and international politics. Governments have to balance resettlement as a foreign policy tool with attention to domestic politics.

Other findings from the recent literature on the topic indicate that the strategic use of resettlement might hold political promise for governments for governments that seek to escape the liberal paradox of asylum policy with its competing political pressures. Public opinion research suggests that while citizens generally support humanitarian protection and small resettlement numbers, most people want to see limits and control in the admission process (Jeannet et al., 2019). Moreover, the use of resettlement as a rhetorical strategy to delegitimise the arrival of asylum seekers resonates with some segments of the population (McKay et al., 2012). The establishment of limited resettlement admission may therefore allow governments to signal their migration control capabilities to their constituents, while retaining their commitment to the right to asylum. While the quantitative comparative approach brings important advantages to the study of asylum policies, it also comes with some limitations. First, our measurement index cannot reflect resettlement policies in all their complexity as it leaves aspects of refugee selection or integration out. Our findings are thus limited to states' decisions of whether or not to admit resettlement refugees. Second, our analysis does not take into account country idiosyncrasies such as those social and cultural characteristics that might make countries more or less open to refugee admission. Third, the quantifiable policy choices only allow us to indirectly infer governments' particular motivations. To what an extent the strategic use as a humanitarian alibi indeed motivates specific policy choices requires further assessment through qualitative case studies. Our study has systematised theoretical explanations of resettlement choices and revealed the policy dynamics that are generalisable across OECD countries.

Our findings have broader implications for our understanding of asylum policy-making. We find evidence in favour of the hypothesis that states combine non-access policies for asylum-seekers with open resettlement channels. Thereby, the results of our comparative analysis suggest that resettlement should be understood in the context of countries' overall immigration and asylum policies. The liberalisation of resettlement can be interpreted as the continuation of the 'containment pact' after the Second World War where Western democracies committed to allow a few selected political refugees, while the greater share of the burden remained on countries in the Global South (Piguet, 2020). This containment pact has begun to weaken over the past decades and Western countries have experienced an increasing number of asylum seekers. Meanwhile, states have started to combine

restriction on asylum access with resettlement offers for a selected few. Ultimately, states' strategic use of resettlement may undermine the latter's initial purpose as a policy instrument designed to provide durable humanitarian protection to the world's refugees.

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