

Refugee Settlement and Decision-Making Venue: Does Public Concern Instigate Preferences for Local Referendums? Experiences from Norwegian Cities

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MS received February 2020; revised MS received October 2020

Refugee settlement in local communities is often controversial and raises questions of legitimate regulation of access and sustainable integration. This study takes the citizens' perspective and asks who should determine refugee settlement—the people in a local referendum, political representatives in the local council, or elites in central government—as well as enquiring how immigration scepticism affects preferences for the decision-making venue. The issue speaks to the wealth of literature focusing on 'the local dimension' of immigration. The data are from opinion surveys in four Norwegian cities that have experienced extensive refugee settlement during the past few decades. Contrary to expectations, it appears that despite widespread concern about the consequences of newcomers, most trust the decisions made by their local representatives in the city council and prefer the state to enforce refugee settlement at the local level. As expected, those with negative images of refugees, those with a low level of education, and those with rightist party sympathies tend to support a referendum. More surprisingly, a high level of concern for 'the others' substantially reduces the general positive effects of social background and political orientation: the worried among the well-educated and left-wingers join forces with the right-wingers and politically alienated in supporting referendums as a channel for influencing the settlement issue. This article suggests that the refugee settlement issue is too controversial to be solved by direct democracy and is also a potential channel for those fearing 'the others' across social strata.

Keywords: refugee settlement, local referendum, public opinion, decision-making venue

Introduction

Asylum-seeking not only activates demands for stricter control of a state's border, but also brings to the political agenda the way in which access to local communities is regulated for those granted residence permits and status as refugees. After

9/11, the US experienced a devolution of restrictive control, providing a new public space for local political entrepreneurs to mobilize support based on fear of ‘the others’, which led to a more contentious environment (Varsanyi 2010; García *et al.* 2011). Also, in other countries, a variety of local-policy responses to immigrants spurred considerable attention to ‘the local dimension’ of integration policies, emphasizing the accommodation of immigrants particularly in European cities (Poppelaars and Scholten 2008; Bak Jørgensen 2012; Filomeno 2017; Zapata-Barrero *et al.* 2017). These contributions mainly investigate state governance and local elites’ control policies. An enduring challenge for European welfare states is linking state aims of effective refugee settlement and integration with a decision process that is acceptable for those who face the local consequences. In this article, my focus will be on the populations’ opinions in four cities, examining whether or not inhabitants really want direct influence on receiving refugees into their local community and who it is that supports this option.

Central–local tension has been visible in the allocation of refugees to municipalities for several decades in Norway (Steen 2010; Brochmann and Hagelund 2012; Hernes 2017). Receiving refugees into a local community is administratively complex, multi-faceted, and emotionally loaded. It includes humanitarian responsibilities, re-allocation of resources, and taking into consideration public fear of the consequences for culture, security, and welfare costs. The purpose of this article is to investigate the local inhabitants’ opinions on what is legitimate decision-making on this contentious issue.

In Norway, the state requests the local government to settle a certain number of refugees and the elected representatives in the municipal council then decide how many to accept. In general, many local governments are positive, looking beyond symbolic politics mostly because major state subsidies induce moderation and consensus among local elites (Steen 2016; Steen and Røed 2018; Askim and Steen 2020). On the other hand, fear of the newcomers among the local population may lead to desire for direct influence on the settlement decision. A basic democratic dilemma is that local referendums, while inspiring participation and direct popular control, may also stimulate antagonism and political conflicts in the community that are easier to manage in more closed decision venues.

This article *first* discusses relevant literature regarding how local referendums may spur conflicts, raising queries of inclusion of minorities and political participation as well as how perceptions of threats shape attitudes to immigrants. *Second*, it questions whether, on the back of increasing refugee settlements and a harsher public discourse in Norway, there is a surge in the public preferences for more direct popular control of settlement through a referendum, or if people trust the political representatives in city councils, or, alternatively, if they believe the central government should decide. *Third*, it examines whether scepticism to the newcomers stimulates preferences for local referendums, and how personal background and local context affect attitudes. The *fourth* question asks: who are those supporting a referendum? Is it only the right-wing, ‘politically alienated’ as previous studies show, or does the settlement issue also instigate support among the well-educated and left-wingers? A main hypothesis is that fear suppresses liberal

effects of education and left-wing sympathies. The data show that only one-fifth of the inhabitants support the referendum option. However, referendums are not only preferred by the ‘politically alienated’. As this study illustrates, concern about consequences of refugee settlement is also shaping the attitudes of well-educated persons and those voting for left-leaning parties, leading them to engage in direct democracy. The data are from two opinion-survey rounds before and one survey after the 2015 European refugee crisis, carried out in one small, two medium-sized, and one large city that have received considerable numbers of refugees in recent decades.

Decision-Making Venue and Minority Inclusion

Refugee settlement has challenged the principle that people in liberal states are free to choose where to live. The tension between the individual’s right to choose their place of living and the state’s legitimate concern about ‘good integration’ has prompted three different solutions in Scandinavia. The Swedish model encourages the individual refugee’s right to choose; in Denmark, the central state instructs local governments; and in Norway, the municipalities decide (Valenta and Bunar 2010; Liden and Nylehn 2014; Hernes *et al.* 2019).

Decision processes can be democratic and open, or bureaucratic and closed. The potential for political controversies does, however, vary, with regards to the location of these decisions—‘the venue’. A decision-making venue is ‘the institutional location where authoritative decisions are made’ (Guiraudon 2001: 45). Settlement decisions taken through a local referendum, by the local representative assembly, or through a state-bureaucratic process, will ‘open’ or ‘close’ the process and frame the issue as a political issue or an administrative task. The choice of decision-making venue thus has consequences for the level of conflict and for policy outcomes (Guiraudon 1998), with major consequences for fair allocation in society and particularly for minority rights. Referendums systematically disadvantage minorities (Lewis 2011; Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013, 2015).

Many countries make use of local referendums where there is a need for popular support for specific local issues—particularly, for example, Switzerland (Schiller 2011). In Norway, a comparatively long tradition of local referendums is associated with the issue of which of the two main Norwegian languages is to predominate in schools, as well as with the issue of bans on alcohol. These issues are ones on which the electorate very often has a clear opinion (Bjørklund 2004). Right-wing political parties have sometimes proposed a local consultative referendum on refugee settlement or other issues related to immigration despite never having previously been an issue of any local referendum. One rare example is from neighbouring Sweden where a local referendum in the municipality of Sjöbo in 1988 rejected receiving about 30 refugees by a 65 per cent majority. The Sjöbo case illustrates the political potential of right-wing parties to mobilize the inhabitants through anti-immigration sentiments among the electorate (Borevi and Myrberg 2010: 10–11) where, despite concern about resident protests, the central government finally intervened and annulled the local decision (Bjørklund 2017). The

legal status of the referendum varies greatly between countries. This ranges from consultative to binding and involves a tangle of rules on how a referendum is to be initiated, where the legal majority threshold should be set, and how to interpret the result. In Norway, local referendums are, from a legal perspective, consultative; in other words, they are advice given by the people to local council politicians. In practice, high turnout and a clear majority often make compliance with this advice mandatory for politicians (Bjørklund 2017).

In Norway, nearly two-thirds of the population agree that ‘important issues should be submitted to local referendums’ (Bjørklund 2009: 125). Opinion surveys in other countries also show that a majority is in favour of local referendums in general (Dalton *et al.* 2001; Bjørklund 2009). In a more recent study, 72 per cent of the Norwegian population was in favour of having a local referendum on specific issues such as deciding whether to merge with a neighbouring municipality, while 22 per cent supported a decision by local council and 7 per cent preferred the decision to be made by national parliament (Rose *et al.* 2017: 292).

Local referendums on immigration-related issues that spur public debates along more existential lines, like ‘fear of the others’, may increase decision-making costs, and often lead to discrimination of minorities and exclusion of immigrants (Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013), while local representative democracy and, in particular, central regulation, tend to encapsulate, depoliticize, and protect minority rights. Consensus-seeking elites have therefore discarded direct democracy as an option on such issues since local referendums avoid filtering and tempering processes, and can easily become a mechanism used by the majority to disregard the needs of minorities (Lewis 2011). Direct democracy means the expansion of the scope of conflict with serious consequences for policy outcomes and distribution of welfare in society (Schattschneider 1960). This classic insight of ‘socialization of conflict’ into specific decision arenas resonates in Guiraudon’s (1998) comparison of immigration policy-making in France, Germany, and the US. She argues that the expansion of immigrant rights ensues from political strategies that promote closed decision-making venues ‘away from the public eye’. Delegation of immigrant-related decisions to the local level is likely to ‘be more conducive to restrictive outcomes and make uniform application of liberal norms harder to enforce and supervise’ (Guiraudon 2001: 47). Citizens’ direct involvement in the decision-making process may make settlement for refugees more difficult to implement, if not impossible. The extensive use of national and local referendums, as has been found in Switzerland, politicized the debates and restricted the rights of foreign residents (Ruedin and D’Amato 2015), including access to citizenship and particularly for those from Muslim countries (Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013). For this reason, in Switzerland, issues related to immigration have more recently not been decided by local referendum.

Referendum—A Political Channel for Whom?

Dalton (1984) argues in the ‘new politics’ thesis that the highly educated with their modern and liberal, left-oriented values have the potential for political activity

through other means than the traditional party system. This group's share of the electorate is growing and promoting their interests via referendums as a supplement to established channels. Bjørklund (2009) alternatively maintains that those with abundant resources—such as education, employment, wealth and social mobility—and an interest in politics are not those who are most in favour of referendums. There is, in fact, an association between higher education and the rejection of referendums. Referendums stand out as being a channel of influence that is preferred by the 'politically alienated' who normally has a low electoral turnout. This type of political activity is not a paradox when viewed from the perspective of an outsider with fewer alternatives to exert influence. People support direct democracy because of political marginalization, anti-establishment attitudes, rightist attitudes, and populism. A referendum is, for these discontented 'outsiders', an alternative to traditional elite-dominated channels. One may therefore expect that those with resources will trust established political authorities and be sceptical to direct democracy. However, one contrasting observation is that 'single-issue participation is a common dominator between referendums and New Politics' (Bjørklund 2009: 122). Therefore, I would argue that the referendum option will also attract the liberal-oriented and well-educated when refugee settlement stands out as a major concern and becomes an important single issue for political mobilization among this group.

Immigrants as a Concern

The public generally associates immigration with wariness of the negative consequences of immigration upon security and welfare (Lahav and Marie 2012; Lahav 2014; McLaren 2014). Well-established findings confirm that the negative sentiments associated with immigrants and immigration are closely related to the perception of a threat. Group conflict theory argues that negative attitudes are driven by the fear of adverse outcomes of immigration, such as economic deprivation, competition for jobs, reduced social welfare benefits, and perceptions of crime (Stephan *et al.* 2005; Sides and Citrin 2007). In particular, 'crime-related anxiety clearly intensifies concerns over immigration' (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2012: 491). The 'migration threat' is multidimensional and Lahav and Marie (2012) argue that *cultural threats* may polarize public and elite opinion because of different prior basic values. Threats such as *crime* are, however, unifying across traditional political divides, due to the common concern about physical safety. Concerns about crime, safety, and security lead to the preference of a more exclusionary immigration policy than where immigrants are viewed as being an economic burden or of cultural concern (Lahav 2014; Turper 2017).

An abounding array of literature shows that personal concern and negative sentiments towards immigrants vary with social strata (Gaasholt and Togeby 1995; Quillian 1995; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Hellevik and Hellevik 2017). Low level of education, right-wing ideology, and fear of material and cultural losses activate anti-immigration sentiments, while higher education and liberal values reduce material and cultural anxieties and stimulate positive attitudes

to immigrants. Higher education is, across Europe, a primary cause of lesser anti-immigration sentiments. [Hainmueller and Hiscox \(2007\)](#), however, ask whether educational differences may also be a symptom of a cultural divide that demarcates deeper conceptions of identity and belonging. [Hellwig and Sinno \(2017\)](#) argue that the public frames the seriousness of consequences in different ways, depending on the immigrant group—Muslims, for example, are more often associated with cultural and security threats. Most refugees settled in Norwegian municipalities come from Muslim countries and are quite visible in everyday life.

Data and Method

In this study, the four cities were selected because of differences in population size and similar experiences with refugee settlement. They have, after 2001, faced a comprehensive influx of refugees, which has burdened local governments with major challenges, including providing housing, jobs, adequate public services, nursery schools, and education. Receiving refugees often got major media attention and regularly spurred local and national debates and party activism ([Steen 2010](#)).

Three questionnaire survey rounds were carried out in 2011, 2014, and 2016 by the polling company Kantar-TNS Gallup. Representative population samples were interviewed by telephone in the capital city of Oslo (666,000), two medium-sized cities of Sandefjord (62,000) and Larvik (44,000) and the small city of Vadsø (6,000) (population sizes as at 2013). The statistical model comprises data compiled for the four cities at three points in time: $N = 4,547$. For each year, respondents in the age group 15–85 years were picked randomly from the populations in the four cities. Some respondents may have been interviewed more than once, especially in the smallest cities. However, 2–3 years had elapsed between the interviews thus reducing the possibility of repetition among these respondents.

The dependent variable has three categories—preference for referendum, city council, or central government. Multinomial logistic regression was therefore the statistical method used. This type of analysis compares the reference category (preference for referendum) with each of the other categories (city council and central government). The coefficients are odds. This means that numbers below 1 indicate negative effects and numbers above 1 indicate positive effects (for descriptive statistics and a description of the variables, see Appendices 1 and 2).

The independent variables are organized in three groups: scepticism to refugees, personal characteristics of the respondents, and municipal context. Scepticism to refugees is measured by the respondents' opinions on statements about consequences for culture, crime, municipal costs, and job competition. The statements constitute a 'fear index' that expresses people's concern about settlement in the regression analysis and measures the same underlying concept of perceived threats and worries about costs. The index is described in Appendix 2.

Who Should Decide?

Referendums on specific local issues have historically been common, with the majority of voters being in general positive to local referendums. Is this positive attitude to referendums equally high when the issue is refugee settlement? This type of issue can be decided through local referendum, as in some Swiss cantons. It can also be decided by the local council, which is the established procedure in Norway, or by central government, which is the Danish model.

As shown in [Table 1](#) the referendum option has, on average, the lowest support (19 per cent). The central government has a higher score (25 per cent), while a settlement decision taken by political representatives on the city council gets support from a much higher 53 per cent of the population. Delegating the decision to elected representatives has, obviously, much legitimacy.

The proportion that supports a *local referendum* is remarkably similar in all three cities and stable over time. This is surprising considering the increasingly harsh immigration discourse in this period. The differences between the cities are more distinct for *local council*. In the small city of Vadsø, more than 60 per cent of the inhabitants prefer the city council to make the settlement decision. The percentage for the capital city of Oslo is only about 36 per cent, while the figures for the middle-sized cities of Sandefjord and Larvik are between these two. Oslo stands out with around 40 per cent support for *the central government* option, whereas only 12–15 per cent of the citizens of Vadsø support central decision-making. The state preference for the two middle-sized cities is between these two figures. In summary, city size is not an important factor in preference for a local referendum, but has a considerable impact on support for the city council and central state. The inhabitants of the small- and middle-sized cities mainly trust their local elected representatives to make the settlement decision. The inhabitants of Oslo, however, tend to trust central government.

The referendum-share is remarkably stable in all the cities in the period. Support for the city council, however, decreases noticeably in Sandefjord and Larvik, while confidence in the state increases in particular in the two middle-sized cities. These two cities have experienced a particularly antagonistic party politics in the city council on the settlement issue. The population may therefore trust an even more closed venue to ensure less controversy.

Interestingly, the idea that there is more support for a referendum in smaller-towns is not supported. This shows the popular trust enjoyed by the representatives on these city councils. People in the capital city are less positive to local government and entrust the state to make the decision, probably because the relative importance of the issue is lower in large cities. Here, the settlement issue gains less political attention and is seldom animated in local discourses. This pattern echoes the theory of ‘venue shopping’ ([Baumgartner and Jones 1991](#); [Guiraudon 2000](#)), one explanation of which is that elites allocate policy issues to venues based on the potential for participation and conflict. When minority rights are at stake, and there is an uncomfortable choice between universal solidarity values and community-related concerns, the generally high public support

Table 1

Preference for Decision-Making Venue, 2011, 2014, 2016. Percent.

	Oslo			Sandefjord			Larvik			Vadsø			Average 2011-2016 (total N = 4547)
	2011 (N = 410)	2014 (N = 414)	2016 (N = 400)	2011 (N = 401)	2014 (N = 413)	2016 (N = 400)	2011 (N = 398)	2014 (N = 411)	2016 (N = 400)	2011 (N = 301)	2014 (N = 299)	2016 (N = 300)	
The decision on settlement should be taken by													
... the inhabitants in a local referendum*	61	61	91	19	20	21	20	20	21	17	23	18	19
... the political representatives in the city council*	37	36	36	61	55	52	59	50	51	69	61	67	53
... central government*	39	41	43	18	23	24	20	28	26	12	15	13	25
NA/DK	4	4	5	2	2	3	2	1	3	1	1	2	3

Question: 'Who, in your opinion, should decide whether refugees should be settled in your municipality? Would you say: ...' NA/DK: no answer/do not know.

to the city council and also to the central government may be explained by a ‘self-binding’ strategy. By closing the process for direct participation and leaving the decision to elite-dominated venues and established procedures, the citizen may avoid psychological cross-pressure and hinder possible antagonistic local conflicts connected with a referendum.

Explaining Preferences for Decision-Making Venue

As expected, few with higher education support a referendum. A larger proportion of those with degrees in higher education support central government when compared to those with lower levels of education. A majority, however, support the city council option irrespective of their education level. This underscores the level of trust that the inhabitants have in local political representatives to decide the settlement issue. Table 2 includes three groups of independent variables related to perceived threat, individual characteristics, and context. A main question is to what extent concerns or perceived threats have an effect when controlled for individual features and contextual variables.

Concerns: the perceived threat thesis (analysis a). The first group of variables shows how support for a decision procedure depends on the subjective framing of the issue, framing being in terms of consequences on personal well-being and relations with refugees. The ‘fear index’ and contacts with refugees as neighbours relate to the perceived consequences of settlement on respondents’ daily lives. Overall, about half of the respondents score high on the ‘fear index’. For the whole period, an average of between 47 and 56 per cent ‘fully’ or ‘partly’ agree with negative statements on local results of settlement. One would expect that the greater the perceived negative future consequences are, the more sympathy there would be for local control, particularly by referendum, and the less sympathy there would be for local council and little support for state regulation. Furthermore, the more positive to refugees as neighbours, the less preference there is for a referendum.

Personal background and orientations: the ‘political alienation’ and ‘new politics’ thesis (analysis b). The second group of variables includes individual characteristics such as gender, age, education, political ideology, connection to the city, and attitude to receiving refugees. Lack of personal resources, such as low education, may result in political alienation, opposition to the established political system, and a desire for direct control through a referendum (Bjørklund 2009). According to the ‘personal resources’ argument, elderly men with low education, a rightist party sympathy, and immigrant-sceptical attitudes tend to be isolated and ‘alienated’ from conventional channels of influence. These citizens want a direct vote through a referendum and are less attracted to the local council and definitely not attracted to state regulation.

Dalton (1984), furthermore, argues in the ‘new politics’ thesis that a referendum may be a supplementary political channel for those with abundant resources, such as education. The well-educated, according to this argument, will support a local referendum on special issues, to advance their interests in a channel that

Table 2

Effects of Fear, Background, and Context, on Preference for Decision Venue

Dependent variable: attitude towards decision venue

	City council <u>a</u>	Central government <u>b</u>	City council <u>b</u>	Central government <u>c</u>	City council <u>c</u>	Central government <u>c</u>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Fear index	0.46*** (0.07)	0.34*** (0.08)	0.49*** (0.10)	0.43*** (0.10)	0.51*** (0.10)	0.44*** (0.10)
Neighbour	1.22*** (0.07)	2.18*** (0.08)	1.13 (0.09)	1.71*** (0.10)	1.15* (0.09)	1.76*** (0.10)
Gender			0.74** (0.12)	1.04 (0.12)	0.74** (0.12)	1.04 (0.13)
Age			1.03*** (0.004)	1.01** (0.004)	1.05*** (0.004)	1.01*** (0.004)
Education			1.04 (0.03)	1.16*** (0.04)	1.22*** (0.04)	1.26*** (0.04)
Political preference			0.93 (0.13)	0.51*** (0.13)	0.87 (0.13)	0.50*** (0.14)
Local affiliation			1.00 (0.12)	1.09 (0.13)	0.99 (0.12)	1.06 (0.13)
Attitude to refugee settlement			0.43*** (0.15)	0.33*** (0.18)	0.39*** (0.15)	0.32*** (0.18)
City = Larvik					1.10 (0.29)	0.64 (0.33)

(Continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Dependent variable: attitude towards decision venue						
	City council a	Central government b	City council c	Central government	City council	Central government
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
City = Sandefjord					1.63 (0.30)	0.80 (0.34)
City = Vadsø					1.61** (0.21)	0.69 (0.25)
Year = 2014					0.78 (0.16)	1.13 (0.17)
Year = 2016					0.37*** (0.19)	0.59*** (0.20)
Constant	5.31*** (0.22)	1.86** (0.24)	2.58*** (0.34)	1.84 (0.37)	2.36** (0.36)	1.61 (0.40)
Akaike inf. crit.	7,289.74	7,289.74	5,023.40	5,023.40	4,958.34	4,958.34

Multinomial logistic regression. Analysis a (models 1 and 2): $N = 3,868$. Analysis b (models 3 and 4): $N = 2,772$. Analysis c (models 5 and 6): $N = 2,772$.

* $p < 0.1$.

** $p < 0.05$.

*** $p < 0.01$.

circumvents traditional party politics. I argue, in the next section, that if anxiety about local consequences of refugee settlement becomes prominent among persons with resources, then this may reduce the liberal effects of education and party vote. If this is true, then fear will stimulate ‘the privileged’ to join forces with ‘the alienated’, thereby forming a common wish for more local control through a referendum.

The context thesis (analysis c). The size of a city and period of refugee entry may affect attitudes to how control should be exerted. The argument is that high numbers of refugee arrivals affect smaller cities in a more visible way. Variations in city size make it possible to answer whether population size matters to preferences in the decision-making venue among citizens. One may argue that the smaller the population, the more is at stake, and influencing political decisions in a direct way becomes paramount. This echoes the basic question in [Denters et al. \(2010\)](#) of how large the local governments should be in order to be both democratically effective and have the capacity to meet major common issues. [Anckar \(2004\)](#) argues that because of the nearness of small-sized polities people experience the same problems and support a referendum. Alternatively, because transparency in small communities opens the way for direct dealings between inhabitants and local leaders, direct democracy procedures appear superfluous for political influence.

Furthermore, one would expect, after the particularly high influxes of asylum seekers prior to 2016 that the citizens of smaller cities would want local control through a referendum. Vadsø is geographically close to the Russian border and located at the end of ‘the arctic refugee-route’. The city experienced exceptional pressure on the local asylum-center in the autumn of 2015 with state requests to settle a large number of refugees the year after. One would therefore expect that pressure for a referendum was stronger here than in medium-sized and large cities.

The three models each have two variants, i.e. how preference for a referendum compares with preference for city council and for state settlement decisions. In multinomial logistic regression, the reference category (referendum) is compared with each of the other categories (city council and central government). Analysis a (*models 1 and 2*) looks at the effects of public wariness and has a refugee as a neighbour. Analyses b and c (*models 3 and 4, 5, and 6*) introduce additional individual and contextual characteristics as control variables. The following comments mainly relate to the full *models 5 and 6*.

Perceived Consequences

As expected, perceived threats result in a preference for a referendum. This means that increasing one unit on the *index* reduces the odds for preferring a city council over a referendum by 0.51, the reduction being even greater for preferring central government over a referendum (0.44), when controlling for the other variables. That is, the odds of choosing a referendum over city council and central government are significantly higher for those with a high score on the fear index. *The neighbour variable* shows that a positive attitude to having refugees as close

neighbours increases the possibility of choosing the city council and particularly central government, over a referendum.

Personal Characteristics and Orientations

For *gender*, the odds of women preferring the city council over a referendum are reduced by 0.74 in relation to men. There is no significant difference between men's and women's preference for central government over a referendum. *Age* has a positive but only minor influence on the chances of preferring city council and central government over a referendum. *Higher education* substantially increases the chances of preferring the city council and particularly the central government option. *Political preference* also tends to influence choice of decision-making venue. Voting for right-oriented parties rather than left-oriented clearly reduces the chances of preferring central government over a referendum (for a description of the two blocs, see Appendix 2). There is, however, no significant difference between the two for preferring city council over a referendum. This indicates that many voters trust local representative democracy, irrespective of party vote. *Local affiliation* (born in or moved to the city) has no significant effect on the preference of decision-making venue. As expected, a negative *attitude to receiving refugees* into the community relates very clearly to choosing the referendum option.

Context

Does *population size* affect attitude to decision-making venue? There is no significant difference between Oslo as the reference category and Sandefjord and Larvik. The inhabitants of the smallest city of Vadsø rather unexpectedly, however, prefer the city council over a referendum. Although non-western immigrants are highly visible in daily life in Vadsø, the inhabitants do not want to 'take the issue to the streets' probably because of more direct access to the local elites, an alternative effect of smallness suggested by [Anckar \(2004\)](#). The effect of *period* on referendum is, however, clear. Substantially fewer respondents preferred city council over a referendum in 2016, when there was great pressure on local resources due to many asylum seekers, as compared to the years before. This indicates that the atmosphere of national crisis following the 'refugee flow' made people's attitudes more positive to direct popular control.

Wariness and the Liberal Mind

One interesting question is how fear of 'others' interferes with socialization through the education system and political preferences. One may argue that when those with high levels of education and those with left-oriented political views perceive refugees as being a great threat, then they will become particularly concerned about receiving more refugees and attracted by exerting additional direct influence through political mobilization and a referendum. As shown in

other studies, immigrant-sceptical attitudes and preferences for a referendum are particularly strong among ‘the alienated outsiders’, distinguishing them from those with political resources. [Figure 1](#) shows the choice of decision-making venue among leftist and rightist sympathizers, distributed along different scores on the fear index.

Both left and rightists have a tendency to support a referendum when the level of threat is increasing. The highest score (3) induces 50 per cent of the rightists and as many as 43 per cent of the leftists to support a referendum. The relative importance of city council and central government diminishes substantially among those who are very worried, and the relative difference between ideological stances becomes smaller among those supporting a referendum. The effect of concern is even more manifest upon education level, as shown in [Figure 2](#).

The proportion preferring a referendum gradually rises from a low of 6 per cent (score 0 on the index) to 16 per cent (score 2) for the highly educated with low fear, with this soaring to 51 per cent ($N = 111$) for the highly educated with very high levels of fear (score 3). This is almost identical to the score for those with a low level of education (53 per cent, $N = 197$), which is surprising considering the many studies showing that higher education results in liberal attitudes to immigration ([Quillian 1995](#); [Sides and Citrin 2007](#); [Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013](#)). The ‘alienation thesis’ is of greater relevance among those perceiving no or moderate threat, scores 0, 1, and 2. Extreme threat eliminates almost all the effect of education and demonstrates that persons with resources, if very worried about refugee settlement, will take the issue ‘to the streets’. It seems that, under the condition of psychological unease and worry, one half of the well-educated are willing to use decision procedures with the potential to restrict the access of refugees to the local community.

Discussion and Conclusion

Decision-making procedures regarding local immigration have a clear impact on the efficiency of national integration policy ([Zapata-Barrero and Barker 2014](#)). Local governments in decentralized unitary welfare states and federal states are, however, doing much more than acting as implementation agencies of state immigration policies—the specific local context is driving integration in various directions, both liberal ([Poppelaars and Scholten 2008](#); [Scholten 2014](#)) and restrictive ([Varsanyi 2010](#); [García *et al.* 2011](#)). Here, the focus is on a specific aspect of ‘the local dimension’ of immigration: popular support for local decision-making procedures on refugee settlement.

The article first discussed actual experiences with a referendum for minority issues. [Hainmueller and Hangartner’s \(2015\)](#) investigation of the Swiss experience compared decisions made by citizens in local referendums and politicians in the municipal councils, finding a 60 per cent difference in the outcomes of immigrants’ naturalization applications. In addition to polarization of the issue, enabling citizens to conceal voting in referendums obviously leads to ethnic discrimination and has a dramatic impact on entry policies. Similarly, [Lewis \(2011\)](#) reports from



Figure 1.
Fear, Party Preference, and Decision-Making Venue.

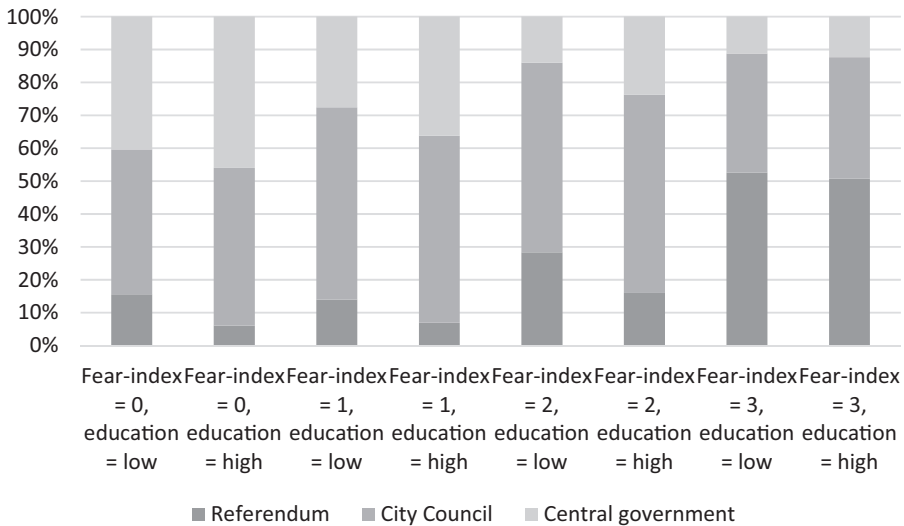


Figure 2.
Fear, Education and Decision-Making Venue.

US federal states that for minority issues in general—e.g. same sex marriage, modest English language requirements, and affirmative action bans—direct democracy has an impact on passing local anti-minority policies. These authors explain the more positive decisions taken by political representatives as the result of

politicians being accountable and therefore constrained to justifying negative decisions, unlike a secret referendum ballot.

Second, the article asked to what extent the Norwegian populace supports local referendums. The population surveys in the four cities investigated here suggest, in contrast to the widespread principal support for local referendums in the US and Europe reported in [Lupia and Matsusaka \(2004\)](#) and among the Norwegian electorate ([Bjørklund 2009](#)), that only a stable one-fifth of the populace supports a referendum for a specific case such as settling refugees in their community. Around half of the populace supports the city council and about one-fourth supports the state as the appropriate venue. In the capital city of Oslo, however, the inhabitants favour the state option over the city council. In the smaller cities, the majority supports the city council. The unexpected low support for the populist option and robust support for elected representatives and central regulation may indicate that many see refugee settlement as a divisive issue and that the decision is not suitable to be taken in secret ballot.

The low support for direct immigration control stands out as even more puzzling, in relation to widespread suspicion in the four cities about security, economic, and cultural consequences. One explanation, following the classical argument of [Schattschneider \(1960\)](#) and [Guiraudon \(2001\)](#), is that elites strategically channel decision-making to particular venues for political purposes (mobilizing support or shielding from politicization). The city council therefore functions as a suitable venue for local compromise between political and administrative elites, but also one for allowing party demarcation within a routine local government procedure ([Steen 2016](#)). The widespread agreement among national and local elites regarding this procedure—one that combines local autonomy with filtering mechanisms to temper controversy and ensure minority rights—probably makes this procedure legitimate. This spills over into public sympathies for local representative democracy and to some extent for state regulation. The attitudes indicate that people may have an interest in ‘self-binding’ by delegating decisions of this contentious issue to more closed, elite-dominated venues, thereby avoiding uncomfortable cross-pressure between humanitarian needs and concerns about consequences for the local community. Furthermore, the established, indirect decision procedure makes politicians accountable and restricted by their party and media coverage from expressing negative opinions on refugees in open debates. In this way, it sustains ‘responsible’ local political debates.

Third, this study asked how scepticism to newcomers, personal resources, party vote, and local context influence attitudes to referendums. Worries about settlement are widespread across all segments of the populace. Framing the settlement issue in terms of anxiety substantiates preferences for a referendum and makes people sceptical of the city council and of central government in particular as suitable decision-making venues. As an abundant array of literature shows, perceived threat is obviously important in shaping attitudes to immigration. It is, however, less apparent how such subjective concerns alter attitudes regarding how to make settlement-decisions, for persons with different political orientations and personal resources. As expected, less-educated right-wingers tend to support the

referendum alternative, which is in accordance with the ‘political alienation thesis’ (Dalton *et al.* 2001; Bjørklund 2009). The ‘new politics’ argument maintains that support for direct democracy is prominent also among the better educated—the ‘apartisans’ in Dalton’s (1984) terminology. However, the thesis does not find support here and confirms conclusions in other surveys that the higher the level of education, the less sympathy there is for direct democracy (Bjørklund 2009: 131). The results from the study of the four cities does in fact indicate that in general the skilled and left-oriented not only discard the referendum option, but that they are above-all sympathetic to enabling central government to enforce the settlement of refugees upon the local community. Interestingly, the effect of community ‘smallness’ (Anckar 2004) is clear on the local council option, not referendums, which is supporting Anckar’s thesis that easy access to the local elites may make referendums less important.

Fourth, this study asked to what extent ‘fear of the others’ increases sympathy among the liberal, well-educated and left-wingers for taking the settlement issue ‘to the streets’. The education system’s capability to fully transform restrictive attitudes may, however, as the survey shows, be questioned. Hainmueller and Hiscox (2007) suggest discussing education as a ‘rational cause’ or as a ‘cultural symptom’. Educational differences in attitudes may be a symptom of a deeper cultural divide related to different conceptions of identity and belonging, rather than being one that arises from reasoned learning. The debate on which of the two mechanisms underlies the effects of education seems to agree on a possible selection effect related to ‘deep culture’ and early socialization of values (Lancee and Sarrasin 2015; Hellevik and Hellevik 2017). The analysis here confirms the view that education and party vote are important in favouring ‘immigrant friendly’ decision-making venues. On the other hand, data show that higher education and left-party sympathy are not necessarily a bulwark against supporting procedures with immigrant discrimination effects. Particularly among the better educated, a high score on the fear index has a substantial effect on preferring the referendum option. It seems that perceiving immigrants as threatening may activate deep emotional beliefs about identity and security, which cancel out effects of socialized liberal values stemming from the education system and party affiliation. Consequently, perceiving refugees as having major negative effects upon the local community and feelings of safety seem to instigate a *special issue mobilization* particularly among the resourceful through direct political action. The overall relatively low and stable proportion who want a referendum, on the other hand, indicates that, although the tendency for such mobilization exists among upper strata persons, it has little potential to gain momentum in the short run. The widespread popular trust in local elites and central government to make the decisions in the four cities investigated here suggests that most people, despite considerable concern, do not want to be directly involved in the contentious refugee settlement issue.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Maiken Røed who contributed to the statistical analysis; to Tor Bjørklund, Jo Saglie, and participants in the panel ‘New Challenges in Social Policy’ ECPR General Conference, Hamburg, 2018, for useful comments on earlier versions; and to one anonymous reviewer in *JRS* for valuable feedback. A grant from the Department of Political Science made possible the opinion surveys.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Descriptive Statistics

Statistic	<i>N</i>	Mean	St. dev.	Min	Max
Attitude towards decision-making venue	4,431	2.07	0.68	1	3
Concern for culture	4,453	1.29	1.12	0	3
Welfare costs	4,336	1.73	1.05	0	3
Job competition	4,441	1.34	1.08	0	3
Concern for crime	4,350	1.44	1.07	0	3
Fear index	4,052	1.45	0.81	0.00	3.00
Neighbour	4,392	2.08	0.78	0	3
Gender	4,547	1.50	0.50	1	2
Age	4,547	50.03	17.06	15	99
Education	4,506	2.37	1.77	0	6
Political preference	3,349	1.51	0.50	1	2
Local affiliation	4,547	0.51	0.50	0	1
Attitude to refugee settlement	4,177	0.25	0.44	0	1

Appendix 2: Variable Descriptions

The fear index: The index is additive and ranges from 0 to 3, consisting of four statements with answering categories ‘fully agree’, ‘partly agree’, ‘partly disagree’, ‘fully disagree’. The statements: ‘Refugee settlement in my municipality’ ...

... ‘may be a threat to our culture and local traditions’;

... ‘is causing more crime’;

... ‘results in higher costs which will be at the expense of other municipal tasks’;

... ‘means tougher competition for jobs’.

The quality of the index is good. Eigenvalue: 1.73. Factor-loadings: cultural threat = 0.76; crime = 0.72; municipal costs = 0.63; competition for jobs = 0.48. Cronbach’s alpha = 0.74.

Neighbour: attitude towards having immigrant with refugee background as closest neighbour.

Gender: whether the respondent is male (reference category) or female.

Age: the age of the respondent.

Education: the respondent's highest level of completed education, ranging from primary school to university (master's degree or higher, five years or more).

Political preference: whether the respondent would vote for a leftist party (Arbeiderpartiet, Sosialistisk Venstreparti, Rødt, Miljøpartiet de grønne) (reference category) or a rightist party (Høyre, Fremskrittspartiet, Senterpartiet, Venstre, Kristelig Folkeparti), if there were a local election tomorrow.

Local affiliation: whether the respondent was born and raised in the municipality (but might have lived outside of the municipality for five years or more) (reference category) or was born and raised outside the municipality.

Attitude to refugee settlement: the respondent's answer to the question 'if the state requests your municipality to settle refugees this year, should the municipality then. . .' The variable is coded as 'say yes' (0, reference category) or 'say no' (1).

City: in which city the respondent lives, Oslo being the reference category.

Year: year of interviewing the respondents, 2011 being the reference category.

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