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## Personal Contact with Refugees is Key to Welcoming Them: An Analysis of Politicians' and Citizens' Attitudes Towards Refugee Integration

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*Politicians are influential both in directing policies about refugees and in framing public discourse about them. However, unlike other host country residents, politicians' attitudes towards refugees and integration are remarkably understudied. We therefore examine similarities and differences between politicians' attitudes towards refugee integration and those held by citizens. Based on the stereotype content model, we expect that political ideology informs stereotypes about refugees, which subsequently shape attitudes towards refugee integration. Based on the Contact Hypothesis, we further argue that personal contact with refugees reduces negative stereotypes about them—in particular for those endorsing a right-wing ideology. We draw on data collected via two surveys with 905 politicians and 8013 citizens in the Netherlands to show that (1) unlike those with a left-wing orientation, residents (i.e., both politicians and citizens) with a right-wing orientation hold more negative stereotypes about refugees, which in turn relate to more negative attitudes towards refugee integration; (2) personal contact with refugees is associated with less negative stereotypes among residents; and (3) politicians, compared to citizens, report less negative stereotypes and more positive attitudes towards refugee integration. The practical implication of fostering residents' contact with refugees as well as the implications for future research are discussed.*

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**KEY WORDS:** refugees, politicians, integration, stereotypes, contact theory, political orientation

While the world is “witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record” (UNHCR, 2019), the country representatives of the European Union (EU) decided to further strengthen the bloc’s borders (Prati, Moscatelli, Pratto, & Rubini, 2018). With this “tough approach on immigration” (Pancevski & Pop, 2018), EU politicians mimic political leaders elsewhere (e.g., the United States and Australia) and contribute to antipathy towards immigrants and refugees amongst their voters by framing the debate about refugee integration in ethno-nationalist tones (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; Esses, Hamilton, & Gaucher, 2017; Porter & Russell, 2018). According to the UNHCR, refugees are “people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country” (UNHCR, 2020), and earlier research has shown imperative differences in residents’ legitimacy perceptions towards “refugees” versus “labor migrants” (De Coninck, 2020). In many EU member states, residents’ attitudes towards refugee integration are associated with increased societal tensions (Stokes, Wike, & Poushter, 2016). Whereas the political left seems more inclined to welcome and integrate refugees into host societies, the political right is less supportive and often mobilizes against refugee integration, advocating for restrictive refugee policies (e.g., Badea, Tavani, Rubin, & Meyer, 2017; Davidov, Meuleman, Billiet, & Schmidt, 2008; van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Emmer, 2018).

Politicians play a key role in shaping and sustaining such polarizing attitudes given their central position in the public debate and formal influence over policymaking. By communicating about refugees and integration from their own political angle, politicians shape specific frames and cue attitudes and opinions about refugees among their followers (e.g., Bale, 2008; Converse, 1975; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019; McLaren, 2001; Zetter, 2007). For example, many right-wing politicians portray refugees as competitors for jobs or rationalize restrictive refugee policies on the basis of protection against a threat (Esses et al., 2017; Rydgren, 2003). In doing so, politicians provide frames that are likely to shape fearful and negative stereotypes of refugees among citizens, thus negatively affecting citizens’ attitudes towards refugee integration (Kotzur, Forsbach, & Wagner, 2017; Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999). Conversely, left-wing politicians often use positive frames and create more favorable views of refugees (e.g., Justin Trudeau’s liberal government in Canada) (Esses et al., 2017). However, despite their dominant position in framing and fueling public opinion, and notwithstanding a long tradition in studying opinion (in)congruence between politicians and their voters (van Ditmars & de Lange, 2019; Gaasendam, Abts, Swyngedouw, & Meuleman, 2020; May, 1973), politicians’ and citizens’ attitudinal congruence with regards to refugees and integration remains a severely understudied phenomenon. Consequently, it remains unknown whether and how politicians’ attitudes towards refugees and integration differ from those held by their supporters and under what circumstances politicians may adopt more versus less favorable views on these matters.

In this study, we address these important questions by investigating politicians’ attitudes towards refugee integration and the drivers behind these attitudes. We further compare politicians’ stereotypes and integration attitudes with those held by citizens. Based on contact theory (Allport, 1954), we expect that personal contact between residents (i.e., politicians and citizens) and refugees is associated with less negative stereotypes about refugees and more welcoming attitudes towards newcomers. Over half a century of research indicates that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice, promotes benevolent attitudes towards low-status outgroups (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and is particularly helpful in mitigating negative attitudes among people who are rather intolerant towards low-status outgroups (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011; Hodson, 2011; Kteily, Hodson, Dhont, & Ho, 2019). As such, contact theory has stimulated a great deal of policy-relevant research on how to improve intergroup relations (Paluck, Green, & Green, 2019; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). However, despite its massive contributions, contact theory literature still has important gaps, such as the lack of studies investigating adults’ ethnic or racial prejudices (for a recent study on European adults’ attitudes towards refugees, see De Coninck, Rodríguez-de-Dios, & d’Haenens, 2020). Yet, adults are particularly the target group that is of relevance for

evidence-based policy (Paluck et al., 2019). More specifically, to the best of our knowledge, no study to date has tested the Contact Hypothesis among politicians, which is surprising given their central role for intergroup relations in general and refugee integration in particular.

We test our assumptions with two large-scale survey studies (one among politicians, one among citizens) in the Netherlands, where refugee integration is a crucial and timely issue. In the last decade, anti-immigrant, populist parties at all levels of representative democracy have put migrants and refugees at the center of the political debate in the Netherlands. This also surfaced in the rankings of the Netherlands on the Migration Policy Index (MIPEX), which represents a benchmark of the integration policies and progress of countries against a normative standard. Whereas the Netherlands was traditionally considered an exemplary for integration policy, in the 2014 edition of MIPEX, the Netherlands dropped more than any other country compared to the prior edition in 2007 (MIPEX, 2014). The two surveys of the present study were fielded in 2016, a time when the EU “refugee crisis” continuously made news headlines. These issues were most salient in both the 2012 and 2017 elections, occurring before and after this study.

Taken together, our study makes several contributions. First, we conceptualize the implications of contact theory in the context of an impactful geopolitical event (i.e., the EU “refugee crisis”). Second, we use two unique and high-powered samples of citizens and politicians to test our hypotheses, thereby contributing to the scarce data on “interracial contact on people older than 25” (Paluck et al., 2019, p. 5) and addressing an important gap in the literature, that is, the lack of knowledge on politicians’ attitudes towards refugees and integration. Finally, we draw a comparison between citizens’ and politicians’ stereotypes and corresponding attitudes towards refugee integration to assess whether contact with refugees shapes politicians’ attitudes differently than those of citizens. In sum, this study provides both theory- and policy-relevant evidence that contact between residents and refugees matters for how stereotypes are constructed and, in turn, how such stereotypes affect refugee integration attitudes.

### **Political Orientation and Attitudes Towards Refugee Integration**

Political ideology is defined as a shared belief system that determines how society should ideally be organized (Jost, 2017). In most political psychology research, political ideology is narrowed down to left-right or liberal-conservative orientation (Feldman & Johnston, 2014). The consequences of political orientations for intergroup attitudes have attracted considerable attention from researchers (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). More specifically, some studies looked at right- and left-wingers’ attitudes towards refugee integration policy, showing a more pronounced preference for exclusionary policies among right wingers (e.g., Alonso & da Fonseca, 2012; Canetti, Snider, Pedersen, & Hall, 2016; Hawley, 2011). Similarly, Lucas, Rudolph, Zhdanova, Barkho, and Weidner (2014) showed that just-world beliefs (i.e., the idea that people get what they deserve), which in combination with the acceptance of inequalities is a key characteristic differentiating conservatives from liberals (Jost, 2017; Napier & Jost, 2008), are related to support for restrictive immigration policies.

One important explanation for the strong association between political orientation and attitudes towards refugee integration are cognitive frames that are used by politicians (e.g., Bale, 2008; Converse, 1975; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). The political left departs from a rather egalitarian and inclusive approach, focusing on equal rights and universal provisions of social and economic support for the poor and destitute (Bale, Green-Pedersen, Krouwel, Luther, & Sitter, 2010). In contrast, based on their societal vision of law and order, stability, and the acceptance of inequality, right-wing politicians have been more prone to focus on the dangers of immigration (Rydgren, 2008). This is particularly visible among the radical right in Europe, which has repeatedly used anti-immigrant frames by picturing refugees as (1) a threat to ethnonational identity; (2) a cause of unemployment; (3) a source of crime; and (4) abusers of Western democracies’ welfare states (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019;

Rydgren, 2003). Given the influence of politicians on their followers, these incompatible frames supplied by left- versus right-wing politicians are likely to be adopted by left- versus right-wing voters and shape their attitudes towards refugee integration.

In the following, we further theorize about the mechanism via which political orientation affects attitudes towards refugee integration policy and about a possible way to bridge the polarized viewpoints between the left and the right.

### **Stereotypes Towards Refugees and the Contact Hypothesis**

We argue that stereotypes represent the key mechanism through which political orientation translates into attitudes towards refugee integration. Stereotypes represent the foundational beliefs and expectations about individuals based on their social-group membership (van Dijk, Meyer, van Engen, & Loyd, 2016; Quadflieg & Macrae, 2011). By ascribing different qualities to members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups, stereotypes can facilitate prejudice and legitimize inequality (Glick & Fiske, 2011; Jost & Banaji, 1994). For instance, conservative residents are more likely to believe that refugees are associated with terrorism, that many refugee applications are fake, or that refugees threaten members of the host society economically and culturally (for a review, see Esses et al., 2017). Such negative stereotypes endorse negative attitudes towards refugee integration and provide justification for more restrictive integration policies (Esses et al., 2017; Hartley & Pedersen, 2015).

According to the stereotype content model (SCM) (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), stereotypes primarily assess targets on two dimensions: warmth and competence. Whereas warmth indicates how trustworthy, sincere, and helpful members of a group are perceived, competence describes if group members are perceived as capable, intelligent, and competent. Perceived as both warm and competent, groups are categorized as members or allies of the ingroup. With low levels on one or both dimensions, groups are categorized as outgroups. For example, Lee and Fiske (2006) found that most immigrant groups in the United States (such as “Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern immigrant groups”; Lee & Fiske, 2006, p. 758) are stereotyped as outgroups.

The SCM further theorizes that people’s emotional and behavioral reactions to outgroups depend on their stereotypes (Cuddy et al., 2008). For instance, Kotzur et al. (2017) found that residents tend to perceive refugees as an outgroup and that they associate rather negative feelings with them. Given that right-wing orientation is generally associated with a stronger tendency to rely on negative stereotypes towards refugees (Jost et al., 2009; Nosek et al., 2007; Whitley, 1999), we expect that right-wingers’ negative stereotypes translate into negative integration attitudes. On the contrary, we assume left-wing residents to associate less negative stereotypes with refugees and, hence, to show more positive integration attitudes.

Targeting stereotypes as the mechanism by which such polarized attitudes are formed, the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954) promises a remedy, as its core assumption is that intergroup contact reduces gross generalizations and negative stereotypes about outgroups (cf. Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). With a long research tradition and convincing meta-analytical results (e.g., Lemmer & Wagner, 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008), “the field of social psychology is understandably enthusiastic and optimistic about contact” (Hodson, 2011, p. 154) and provides policy implications that center on intergroup contact (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Indeed, several studies showed that personal contact reduces citizens’ stereotypes or negative attitudes towards refugees or immigrants (e.g., Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009, 2011; Finseraas & Kotsadam, 2017; Prati et al., 2018). For example, in a qualitative study with Australian citizens, participants described personal contact with refugees as important when forming an opinion about members of this group (McKay, Thomas, & Kneebone, 2012). Further, De Coninck et al. (2020) recently demonstrated in a large sample across Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden that direct contact is positively related to attitudes towards refugees.

Only a few of these studies, however, have looked into the interactive effect of political ideology and contact (Prati et al., 2018). One exception is a study by Dhont and Van Hiel (2011) that examined the effects of extended contact (i.e., knowing an ingroup member with close relationships to an outgroup member) on anti-immigrant prejudice with a representative Dutch sample. Notably, the authors also reported that the effect was strongest for participants with high levels of right-wing authoritarianism, supporting earlier reports that positive effects of contact for intergroup attitudes are particularly powerful “among intolerant and cognitively rigid persons” (Hodson, 2011, p. 154). One explanation for these findings is a ceiling effect: There may be less room for change among left-wingers who already hold relatively positive attitudes towards refugees. Hence, we expect contact with refugees to be particularly effective among right-wing residents and that it will, in turn, be associated with more favorable attitudes towards refugee integration.

Taken together, this study is grounded in the theoretical expectation that political ideology shapes stereotypes about refugees, which in turn relate to attitudes towards refugee integration. We further assert that this relationship is affected by intergroup contact in two ways. First, we argue that personally knowing refugees is associated with less negative stereotypes about them. Second, given that contact with members of an outgroup challenges initial prejudice and negative stereotypes, we expect that especially among right-wing residents personal contact with refugees results in more positive stereotypes about refugees and, accordingly, more positive attitudes towards refugee integration. Finally, given the crucial role of politicians in shaping citizens’ attitudes and crafting refugee integration policies, we also explore whether these relationships differ for politicians compared to citizens. Due to the general lack of theory and research on politicians’ stereotypes and integration attitudes and how these may differ from those held by citizens, we do not have any *a priori* expectations about potential differences in the hypothesized relationships between politicians and residents.

## Method

We conducted two large-scale survey studies (one among politicians, one among citizens) with online panels from a Dutch political research organization (Election Compass) affiliated with the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam. Election Compass acts in line with the strict regulations of the GDPR regarding privacy and with the ethical norms of VU Amsterdam.

The politicians’ panel was collected by first accessing all websites of representative bodies at all governmental levels (e.g., members of parliament, city councils, provinces, and water boards<sup>1</sup>) and collecting the publicly available email addresses of political representatives. Our citizens’ sample respondents were recruited from the pool of users of various iterations of an online Dutch Vote Advice Application (VAA) (Krouwel, Vitiello, & Wall, 2012). VAAs are relatively new online information tools attracting millions of users designed to make political party and candidate positions more accessible by comparing users and parties on an interactive landscape. While interacting with these tools, VAA users have the option to sign up for follow-up surveys, which is how we collected our data. We obtained reasonably large and diverse samples but acknowledge self-selection bias on a host of indicators. VAA users and opt-in respondents—and even more so political representatives—tend to be more urban, male, and politically interested individuals with higher education (Pianzola, Ladner, & Lausanne, 2011). Nevertheless, as pointed out below, both samples have more than sufficient variation on political orientation and attitudes towards refugees. The questionnaire was designed and distributed in Dutch (see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information).

<sup>1</sup>Dutch water boards, are regional governmental bodies responsible for managing waterways and water barriers (e.g., dams) as well as water levels, quality, and sewage treatment in their respective regions.

### Samples

The politicians' panel survey—fielded April 2–8, 2016—is comprised of Dutch politicians at different tiers of government. First, all local, regional, national, and EU political representatives with publicly available email addresses were requested to participate in the study. In total, 10,965 politicians received an invitation. We retained the responses from the participants who have answered at least 80% of items (excluding items linked to control variables; the qualified observations should possess at most four missing entries over all 19 items). In total, we analyzed the data provided by 905 politicians (including members of the Senate, the House of Representatives, members of provincial states, aldermen, mayors, deputy mayors, local councilors, and appointed municipal clerks). The multiple imputation (MI) routine (Schafer, 1999), one of the most robust missing-data imputation techniques (Rubin, 2004), was then applied to handle nonresponses.<sup>2</sup>

The citizens' panel survey was fielded April 1–8, 2016, and sent to 20,588 citizens. Again, we retained observations with at most four invalid responses over all 19 items and employed MI for missing-data imputation. In total 8013 respondents have been retained in the analysis. Data were gathered anonymously, and respondents participated voluntarily (opt in). In the email in which we invited them to participate, they were asked to provide explicit consent for their answers to be used for research.

We note that the Netherlands is a crucial case for such a study as the electoral system is one of the most proportional on the globe with no threshold at any tier of government. This creates a very plural-party landscape where voters can support a party that is close to their own political preferences, without having to prioritize tactical considerations over policy concerns. No less than 12 political parties from all sides of the political spectrum were included in this study, including a broad category of “local” parties.

### Measures

#### *Political Ideology*

Following other studies (Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009), we used a single item to measure the respondents' political ideology. The respondents were instructed to position themselves on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*left-wing*) to 10 (*right-wing*).<sup>3</sup>

#### *Warmth and Competence Stereotypes*

Research suggests that stereotypes mainly revolve around two universal dimensions: warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002; Wojciszke, 2005). Warmth (i.e., friendliness, trustworthiness, empathy, kindness, communality) focuses on the extent to which a target is perceived to have friendly intentions, whereas competence (i.e., intelligence, power, efficacy, skill, agency) focuses on the extent to which a target is perceived to be able to act on those intentions. To measure the perception of warmth and competence of refugees, we adapted an existing scale (Fiske et al., 2002). Respondents were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale to what extent they considered certain characteristics to appropriately describe refugees, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). Five items were

<sup>2</sup>To check the robustness of the current findings, we have reanalyzed the data with a different strategy: Instead of imputing all missing values before analyses, we employed the full information likelihood estimator (i.e., FIML) during the analysis to obtain the final estimations. With the alternative data-analysis strategy, the main findings are unaffected.

<sup>3</sup>We recoded responses as 1–11, thus defining the scale midpoint as 6.

used to assess the *warmth* dimension: friendly, warmth, trustworthy, tolerant, and sincere (Cronbach  $a_{\text{citizens}} = .94$ ,  $a_{\text{politicians}} = .94$ ). Four items were used to capture the *competence* dimension: capable, efficient, organized, and skillful (Cronbach  $a_{\text{citizens}} = .89$ ,  $a_{\text{politicians}} = .90$ ).

Warmth and competence stereotypes about specific groups are frequently negatively correlated, such that they create so-called ambivalent stereotypes where groups are perceived as favorable on one dimension but less favorable on the other (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Kervyn, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2010). We, however, argue that warmth and competence stereotypes about refugees tend to be *positively* correlated, given that some low-status groups (e.g., welfare recipients, migrant workers) elicit both dislike and disrespect (Fiske et al., 2002). Moreover, most communications and public debates about refugees do not make a distinction between refugees' warmth and competence but instead focus on them in a rather generic and one-dimensional manner. For example, right-wing politicians have been found to repeatedly highlight refugees as a "problem" (Semyonov, Raijman, & Gorodzeisky, 2006, p. 71; see also Lee & Fiske, 2006). In line with this argument, our findings indicated high correlations between average warmth and competence ratings in both groups ( $r = .76$  among politicians and  $r = .74$  among citizens).

### *Attitudes Towards Refugee Integration*

We asked respondents to indicate their attitudes towards refugee integration by asking them about the extent to which they (1) oppose refugee integration into the Dutch society; (2) see societal stakeholders (e.g., employers, citizens, volunteers) as responsible for the integration of refugees; and (3) are open to having refugees as colleagues and neighbors. Whereas the first aspect assesses blatant opposition towards the integration of refugees, the second aspect measures whether participants see societal institutions and actors of the host country as responsible for refugee integration. Finally, the third aspect assesses respondents' openness to being personally affected by the integration.

Specifically, we used a single item to measure respondents' *opposition to refugee integration*. The respondents were instructed to indicate to what extent they agree that "refugees should not be integrated into the Dutch society at all" on a 7-point Likert item ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). *Integration responsibility by societal stakeholders* was assessed by asking respondents to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*) to what extent they agreed that certain societal actors are responsible for refugees' integration. We asked for their evaluations of five important and representative societal stakeholders: employers, citizens, neighborhoods, labor unions, and volunteers (Cronbach  $a_{\text{citizens}} = .85$ ,  $a_{\text{politicians}} = .86$ ). A higher score indicates stronger endorsements on societal stakeholders to invest in refugees' integration, which in turn suggests stronger support for refugees' integration into society. Finally, two items were used to measure respondents' *openness to integrate refugees into their personal networks*. The respondents were requested to answer "to what extent would you find it unpleasant to have refugees as your [neighbors]/ [colleagues]?" on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*very unpleasant*) to 7 (*very pleasant*) (Cronbach  $a_{\text{citizens}} = .78$ ,  $a_{\text{politicians}} = .78$ ), with higher scores in responses indicating greater openness to being personally affected by the integration of refugees.

### *Personally Knowing Refugees*

A single item was used to measure the extent to which respondents personally knew refugees. We asked respondents the following question: "How many people do you know who are refugees (e.g., through work or friends)?" They responded on a 4-point Likert item, ranging from 1 (*none*) to 4 (*many*).



Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Variables in Both Samples

Variables	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
<i>Politician sample</i>												
1. Political ideology	5.98 (2.31)	—										
2. Warmth	4.30 (1.04)	-.30*	—									
3. Competence	4.10 (.97)	-.26*	.76*	—								
4. Opposition to refugee integration	1.98 (1.54)	.25*	-.28*	-.25*	—							
5. Integration responsibility of societal stakeholders	3.93 (1.34)	-.35*	.40*	.36*	-.29*	—						
6. Openness to integrate refugees into personal networks	4.76 (1.26)	-.30*	.55*	.48*	-.31*	.40*	—					
7. Personally knowing refugees	1.91 (.67)	-.21*	.26*	.21*	-.14*	.15*	.26*	—				
8. Age	57.12 (10.85)	-.04	-.03	-.07*	.04	-.05	-.01	.06*	—			
9. Education level	5.85 (1.18)	-.09*	.06	.06	-.08*	.13*	-.04	-.04	-.26*	—		
10. Income	2.76 (1.06)	.11	0	-.01	.03	.04	-.03	.01	0	.28*	—	
11. Gender	.77 (.42)	.14*	-.06	-.06	.12*	-.09*	-.08*	-.11*	.09*	-.01	.30*	—
<i>Citizen sample</i>												
1. Political ideology	5.58 (2.17)	—										
2. Warmth	4.06 (1.09)	-.31*	—									
3. Competence	3.93 (1.01)	-.27*	.74*	—								
4. Opposition to refugee integration	2.06 (1.65)	.31*	-.35*	-.29*	—							
5. Integration responsibility of societal stakeholders	3.82 (1.38)	-.34*	.45*	.39*	-.34*	—						
6. Openness to integrate refugees into personal networks	4.52 (1.34)	-.35*	.58*	.49*	-.40*	.42*	—					
7. Personally knowing refugees	1.60 (.66)	-.14*	.18*	.15*	-.10*	.16*	.21*	—				
8. Age	56.80 (16.50)	.00	-.04*	-.07*	.04*	.01	-.01	.04*	—			
9. Education level	5.69 (1.26)	-.10*	.12*	.10*	-.20*	.13*	.11*	.09*	-.15*	—		
10. Income	2.33 (1.09)	.17*	-.03*	-.03*	-.01	-.04	-.04*	.00	.06*	.29*	—	
11. Gender	.75 (.43)	.14*	-.10*	-.11*	.10*	-.11*	-.13*	-.07*	.08*	.02*	.26*	—

Note.  $N_{politicians} = 905$ ,  $N_{citizens} = 8013$ .

\* $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

### *Control Variables*

In all analyses, we included four demographic control variables: age, gender (1 = male; 0 = female), income (higher value indicates higher income level), and education level (higher value indicates higher education level). The differences between the results with and without the control variables are minimal, and our overall conclusions are not affected. Hence, we report here the results computed with control variables, and the results without control variables are reported in the online supporting information (see Appendix S4b).

### *Analytic Strategy*

First, we estimated separate models for both samples. For each sample, we took a modified multiple-steps strategy (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) to examine our hypotheses with structural equation modelling (SEM). In the first step, we tested the measurement models with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and further contrasted our hypothetical model against the alternative models. Second, based on the established measurement models, we tested the mediation models via a bootstrapping resampling approach (Hayes, 2009). Afterward, the moderator (i.e., personally knowing refugees) was added to the mediation models, and the full moderated mediation models were estimated. Last, we conducted a regression analysis to further determine whether the moderation effects differ between politicians and citizens.

## **Results**

We begin with descriptive analysis and comparison between the politician and citizen samples. We then move on to report on tests to verify the discriminant validity of all latent constructs, before, lastly, testing mediation and moderated mediation models.

### *Descriptive Analysis and Group Comparisons*

The means, standard deviations, and correlations of all variables are shown in Table 1. The distribution of categorical demographic variables across the two samples are reported in Appendix S2 (see the online supporting information).

To inspect the relationships between political ideology and various outcomes, we mapped those relationships in Figure 1. Figure 1a,b indicate that, in both samples, stereotypes about refugees become gradually more negative with political ideologies moving from left to right, with a particularly sharp decrease at the far-right end of the political ideology scale. An unexpected yet remarkable finding is that across the political spectrum from left to right, politicians tend to hold more positive stereotypes about refugees and positive attitudes towards refugee integration.

To directly contrast the responses of citizens with politicians, as well as left-wing respondents with right-wing respondents, we conducted several linear regression analyses, examining the main and interactive effects of sampling groups (i.e., politicians versus citizens) and political ideology (i.e., left wing versus right wing) on various outcomes of interest. We categorized the respondents into three groups: left-wing respondents (i.e., citizens or politicians) refer to those who score lower than 6 (scale midpoint) on the political ideology scale; right-wing respondents refer to those who score higher than 6 on the political ideology scale; politically neutral respondents score exactly 6 on the political ideology scale. In light of our research question, politically neutral respondents were temporarily excluded from this set of analyses. To minimize the loss of information during the analysis, regression with planned contrasts was used, where contrasts effectively dichotomized self-reported

political ideology. The detailed results of the following analyses are available in Appendix S5 (see the online supporting information).

We found that when asked to rate refugees on warmth and competence, left-wing residents reported higher average scores than right-wing residents (warmth:  $b = 3.11$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ; competence:  $b = 2.47$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ), while politicians reported higher average scores than citizens (warmth:  $b = .31$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .01$ ; competence:  $b = .23$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The interaction of these two factors was not significant (warmth:  $b = -.60$ ,  $SE = .39$ ,  $p < .13$ ; competence:  $b = -.48$ ,  $SE = .37$ ,  $p < .20$ ).

Furthermore, taking a closer look at graphs 1c–1e (see Figure 1), we have found that, in line with expectations, attitudes towards refugee integration showed to be more negative when citizens' and politicians identified themselves as more right wing. Specifically, Figure 1c indicates that left-wing residents (citizens and politicians) hardly oppose refugee integration: The scores remain well below 2 (out of 7), indicating alignment between left-wing residents' ideologies and their attitudes towards refugee integration. In contrast, towards the right, there is a steady increase in residents' opposition to refugee integration. Left-wing residents on average scored lower ( $b = -4.43$ ,  $SE = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ) in their oppositions to refugee integration than right-wing residents.

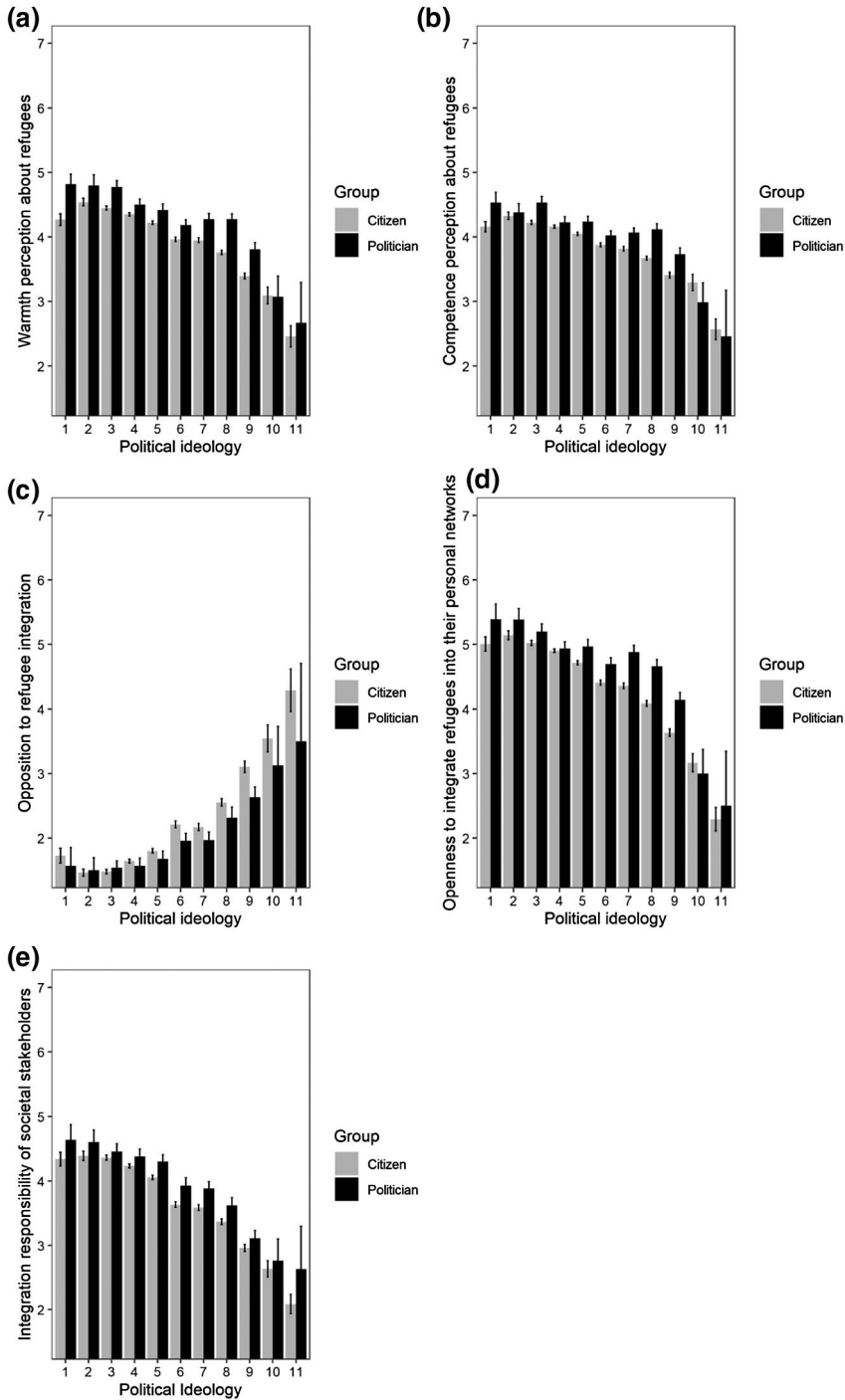
Interestingly, politicians on average scored lower in opposition compared to citizens ( $b = -.13$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .05$ ), even controlling for potential confounding variables such as education level and income. It should be noted, however, that across the political spectrum, average levels of opposition to refugee integration hardly reached higher scores than 4 (out of 7, thus indicating medium levels of opposition to refugee integration), except for citizens at the far-right end of the political ideology scale (11), who scored on average 4.29. This indicates that, while antirefugee sentiments are believed to be widespread among the center right, even among radical right-wing citizens and politicians, the opposition to refugee integration on average does not reach its potential maximum.

Figure 1d,e show similar patterns regarding the extent to which left-wing versus right-wing residents believe that the responsibility for refugee integration lies with societal institutions and actors ( $b = 4.30$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and that they are open to integrating refugees into their personal networks ( $b = 4.11$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Politicians, in comparison to citizens, scored higher on average regarding integration responsibilities ( $b = .18$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and welcoming refugees into their own networks ( $b = .32$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

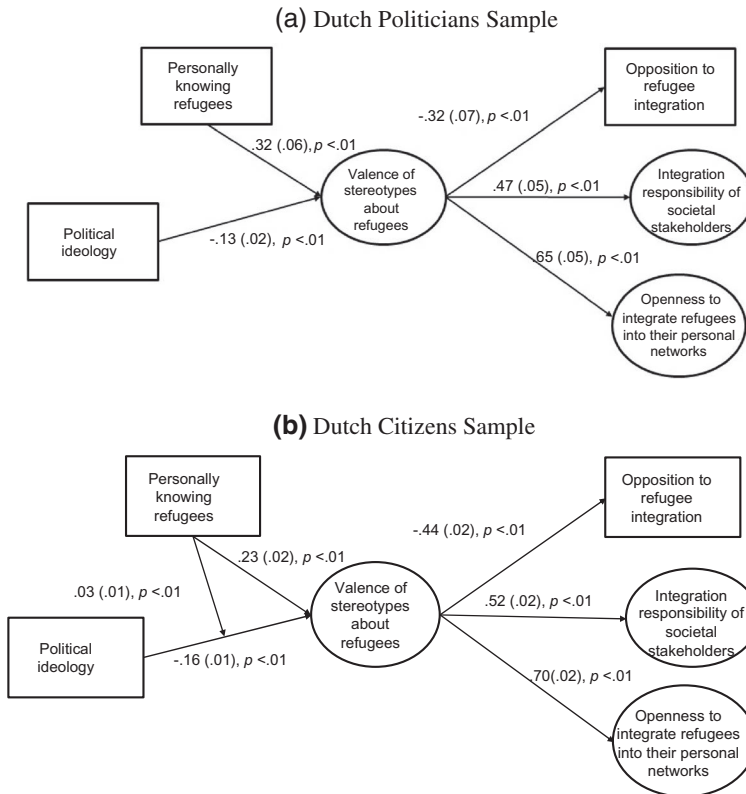
### *Tests of the Measurement Models*

We have conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to test the measurement part of the model and verify the discriminant validity of the latent constructs included in the current study (i.e., four latent constructs that are measured by more than one single item: (1) respondents' warmth perceptions towards refugees; (2) respondents' competence perceptions towards refugees; (3) respondents' perceived refugees' integration responsibility by societal stakeholders; and (4) openness to being personally affected by the integration of refugees). The results indicate an acceptable fit of the four-factor model that is expected in our research design as described above (for the politician sample,  $RMSEA = .083$  90%  $CI$  of  $RMSEA = (.077, .089)$ ,  $CFI = .95$ ,  $TLI = .94$ ; for the citizen sample,  $RMSEA = .07$ , 90%  $CI$  of  $RMSEA = (.068, .072)$ ,  $CFI = .96$ ,  $TLI = .95$ ). The full model estimation results are available in Appendix S3 (see the online supporting information).

We further compared the selected four-factor model with alternative measurement models, that is, all possible three-factor, two-factor, or one-factor alternative models that can be generated by combining two or more original factors. The results verify the superior fit of the selected four-factor model compared to all other alternatives (see Appendix S3 in online supplement).



**Figure 1.** Stereotypes about refugees and attitudes towards refugee integration. Average stereotype valence about refugees and attitudes towards refugee integration as a function of citizens' and politicians' political ideology. For all graphs, lower numbers on the X-axes indicate a more left-wing political ideology, whereas greater numbers indicate a more right-wing political ideology. The first graph (a) and second graph (b) report the warmth perceptions and the competence perceptions of respondents' stereotypes about refugees, respectively, with a higher number on the Y-axis indicating less negative stereotypes. The other three graphs indicate respondents' attitudes towards refugees. They respectively show respondents' opposition towards refugee integration (c), respondents' openness to integrate refugees into their personal network, (d), and respondents' perceived integration responsibility by societal stakeholders (e).

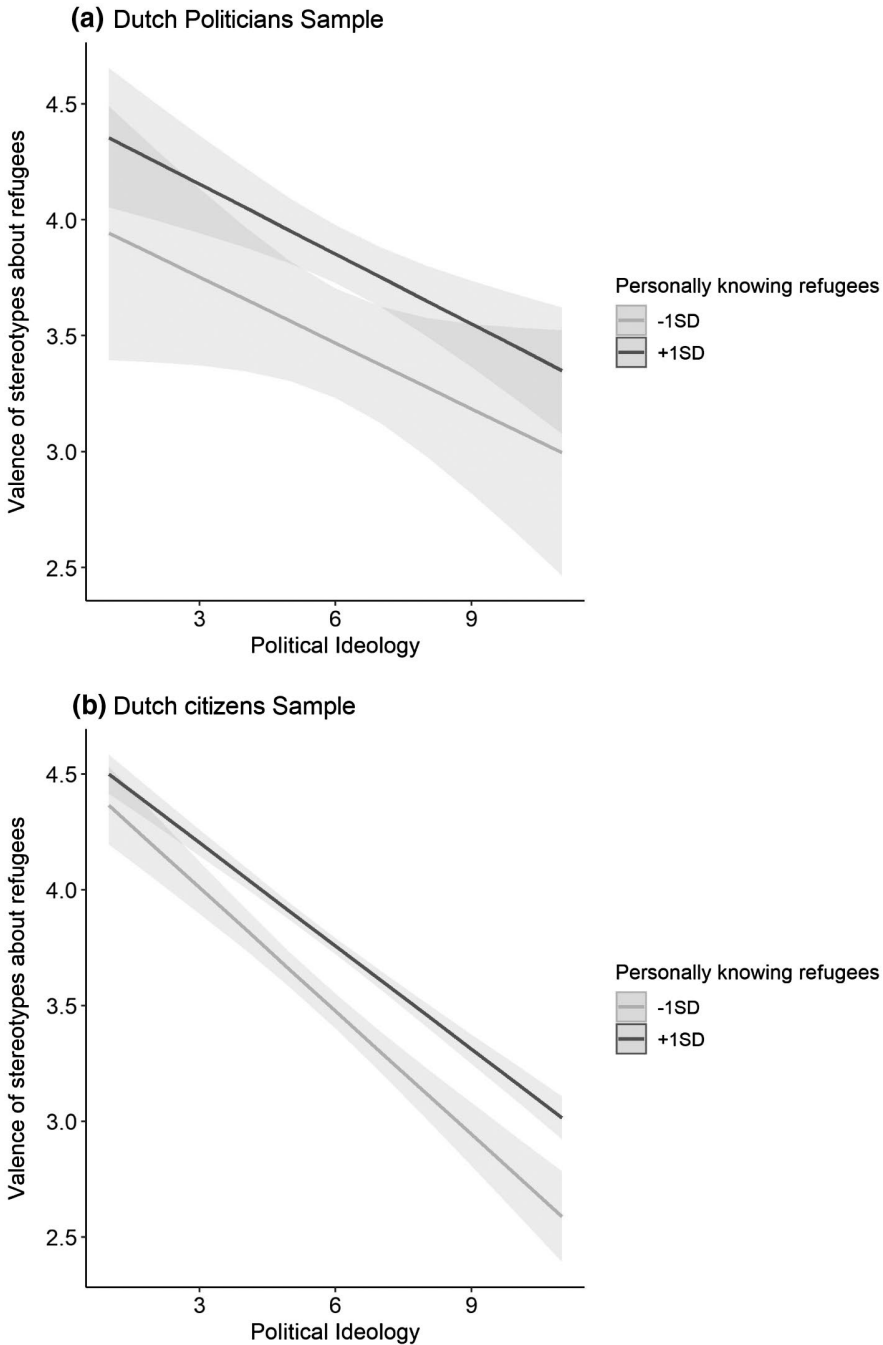


**Figure 2.** Graphical overview of the studies' findings. The variables with rectangles represent observable variables while the variables with ovals represent latent variables. The estimates as well as the standard errors (see parentheses) of the significant paths are shown in the figure. The models are estimated separately for the two samples. Only the estimations of the structural part have been presented and, due to the limitation of the space, the direct effects between the independent variable and the dependent variables are excluded (see Appendix S4a of the online supporting information for full estimation results).

### *Tests of the Mediation and Moderated Mediation Models*

In line with our expectation, in the final measurement models, we have found very high correlations between the latent factors that indicate *warmth* and *competence* perceptions in both samples (.84 in the politician sample and .82 in the citizen sample). Therefore, from both a theoretical and empirical perspective, it is reasonable to argue for the existence of a higher-order latent factor that underlies warmth and competence perceptions. In the following, we refer to this second-order latent factor as “stereotype valence.”

With the established measurement models, we first examined the mediation models by setting stereotypes towards refugees as the mediator. The mediation role of stereotype valence (as indicated statistically by the coefficient “*ab*”) is supported in both samples for all possible paths (in politician sample,  $ab_{\text{opposition}} = .05(.01), p < .01$ ,  $ab_{\text{responsibility}} = -.07(.01), p < .01$ ,  $ab_{\text{openness}} = -.10(.01), p < .01$ ; in citizen sample,  $ab_{\text{opposition}} = .07(.00), p < .01$ ,  $ab_{\text{responsibility}} = -.09(.00), p < .01$ ,  $ab_{\text{openness}} = -.12(.01), p < .01$ ), while the partial mediation models (where the direct effects of the predictor and the outcomes are explicitly estimated) are preferred over the full mediation model (in politician sample,  $\chi^2$  difference (3) = 75.75,  $p < .01$ ; in citizens sample,  $\chi^2$  difference (3) = 601.17,  $p < .01$ ).



**Figure 3.** The effects of contact with refugees. The lines indicate the extent to which contact with refugees affects respondents' stereotypes about refugees based on their political ideology, while the gray areas indicate the regions of significance. The results are shown separately for the politicians (a) and the citizens (b). Lower numbers on the X-axis indicate more left-wing political ideology, and higher numbers indicate more right-wing political ideology. Greater numbers on the Y axes indicate more positive overall stereotypes about refugees. The lighter lines represent the scores of the respondents who on average scored one standard deviation *below* the mean in terms of contact with refugees, whereas the darker lines represent the scores of the respondents who on average scored one standard deviation *above* the mean in terms of contact with refugees.

After setting up the partial mediation models, we further test the moderated mediation models with SEM. Figure 2 shows the findings of the full model for both samples (see Appendix S4a in the online supplement for detailed estimates of the models). Figure 2a indicates that among politicians a more right-wing political ideology relates to more negative stereotypes about refugees ( $\beta = -.13(.02)$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Contact with refugees does not mitigate these relationships ( $\beta = -.05(.03)$ ,  $p = .84$ ), but does have a strong main effect on stereotypes about refugees ( $\beta = .32(.06)$ ,  $p < .01$ ), such that, regardless of the politicians' ideology, personally knowing refugees relates to less negative stereotypes about them and, consequently, more positive attitudes towards refugee integration.

Figure 2b shows that citizens with more right-wing political orientations hold more negative stereotypes about refugees and associated attitudes towards their social integration ( $\beta = -.16(.01)$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and that personally knowing refugees mitigates these relationships ( $\beta = .03(.01)$ ,  $p < .01$ ), such that right-wing citizens who know more refugees tend to hold less negative stereotypes about refugees and consequently more positive attitudes towards the social integration of refugees. Meanwhile, similar to the findings in the politician sample, a positive main effect of contact with refugees is also found in the citizen sample ( $\beta = .23(.02)$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The analysis of the moderated mediation index (Hayes, 2015) further confirmed that personally knowing refugees exhibit a significant moderated mediation role among citizens ( $\text{index}_{\text{opposition}} = -.011(.004)$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\text{index}_{\text{responsibility}} = .013(.005)$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\text{index}_{\text{openness}} = .018(.007)$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but not among politicians ( $\text{index}_{\text{opposition}} = .002(.009)$ ,  $p = .85$ ;  $\text{index}_{\text{responsibility}} = -.003(.013)$ ,  $p = .84$ ,  $\text{index}_{\text{openness}} = -.003(.017)$ ,  $p = .84$ ). These results suggest that, while contact with refugees directly affects stereotypes in both samples (i.e., contact may mitigate citizens' and politicians' negative stereotypes about them), contact with refugees moderates the effects of political ideology on stereotype valence about refugees for citizens, but not for politicians.

To investigate in detail the moderation effects of personally knowing refugees, Figure 3 is plotted (following the instruction in Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006), employing the predicted factor score of the second-order latent factor stereotype valence as the dependent variable and depicting the extent to which personally knowing refugees affects the relationship between political ideology and stereotype valence about refugees. Figure 3a indicates that personal contact with refugees is associated with less negative stereotypes about refugees among politicians, regardless of their political ideology.

Figure 3b shows a slightly different pattern for citizens: Whereas contact with refugees, in general, mitigates negative stereotypes, this is particularly true among those holding a more right-wing political ideology. For left-wing citizens, contact with refugees affects their overall image of refugees comparatively less.<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion

In this study, we examined politicians' attitudes towards refugee integration, with the main aim to identify the drivers behind these attitudes and to provide a better understanding of the circumstances under which politicians may adopt more or less favorable views on refugee integration. Further, we sought to compare politicians' attitudes with those held by citizens. Our findings suggest that for politicians as well as citizens, attitudes towards refugees are shaped by their political orientation and personal contact with refugees. This supports our expectations based on the stereotype content model (SCM; Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002), such that right-wing residents perceive refugees as an outgroup that they associate with negative stereotypes. In turn, these stereotypes are

<sup>4</sup>We did not have any hypotheses about the difference between the moderation effects across the two samples of citizen and politicians, but, as an exploratory step, we also tested whether the moderation effects of personally knowing refugees was significantly different across the two samples. The results are reported in Appendix S6 of the online supporting information.

negatively associated with attitudes towards refugee integration. Differentiating these general claims by the SCM, and in line with earlier studies (Jost et al., 2009; Nosek et al., 2007; Whitley, 1999), our analysis reveals that right-wing orientation is associated with a stronger tendency to endorse negative stereotypes, while left-wing residents tend towards more positive stereotypes about refugees and hence, show more positive integration attitudes.

Furthermore, the valence of stereotypes reported by politicians (as compared to citizens) was less negative and attitudes towards refugee integration were more positive across the political spectrum and even among right wingers. This is a surprising finding, in light of other studies that show how, compared to their followers, politicians tend to represent more radical positions on central issues (van Ditmars & de Lange, 2019) and given the political debate about refugees and their integration in the 2012 and 2017 elections in the Netherlands. Possibly, the politicians' more positive view on refugees might be explained by their professional duty to engage in refugee issues, which might also expose them to more information about this group. Additionally, compared to most citizens, politicians might be more prone to be societally engaged or even urged to take responsibility for underrepresented groups. As a consequence, they might be more trained to actively avoid stereotypes (Fiske, 2004).

Another possible explanation for politicians' comparatively positive view on refugees involves their special relationship with mass media and hence, a possibly lower receptivity for negatively colored "parasocial contact" with refugees (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005).<sup>5</sup> Although at least some politicians seem to heavily rely on media to shape their attitudes (Christensen & Curiel, 2017), politicians are different than most citizens in that they also regularly appear in the media themselves. In that way, politicians might become more aware and thus more able to discount certain biases in news communications (e.g., sensationalism, excessive emphasis on negative information, etc.). As media depictions of refugees are typically negative (Boomgaarden & Vliegthart, 2009; De Coninck et al., 2020; Visintin, Voci, Pagotto, & Hewstone, 2017, p. 179), this might have colored citizens' attitudes more than those of politicians. Yet, these are speculations that require future research for which also the type of media (e.g., public versus commercial news) should be taken into account (De Coninck et al., 2020).

In conceptualizing the implications of contact theory in the context of the EU "refugee crisis," our findings show that personal contact between residents and refugees is negatively associated with residents' stereotypes about refugees. Supporting earlier research (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011; Hodson, 2011; Kteily et al., 2019), our results further show how personal contact with refugees is particularly helpful in mitigating negative attitudes among right-wing citizens (who are rather intolerant towards low-status groups) and less so among left-wing citizens, possibly indicating a ceiling effect (i.e., as left-wing residents' attitudes towards refugees are already more positive, there may be less room for even more favorable attitudes). However, whereas personal contact exerts a clear direct effect on stereotypes towards refugees, the moderation effect of contact on the relationship between political ideology and stereotypes is rather small, and we could detect it in this study only with large sample sizes (i.e., only in the citizens' sample).

Whereas the role of contact on adults' prejudices is generally underresearched (De Coninck et al., 2020; Paluck et al., 2019), to our knowledge, the present study is the first to test the Contact Hypothesis among politicians. Delivering insights on this groups' attitude towards refugees and integration is crucial because politicians do not only have a central role in framing and fueling the public opinion of receiving societies (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019), but they are also involved in decision-making about immigration policies. More generally, this study's unique and high-powered sample of residents and politicians allowed us to compare and explore differences between citizens' and politicians' stereotypes as well as their corresponding attitudes towards refugee integration, thus

<sup>5</sup>We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this particular explanation.



contributing to the growing body of literature that applies contact theory to policy-relevant target groups (Paluck et al., 2019).

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

This study has its limitations. First, it was conducted in the Netherlands, and we cannot make claims about the generalizability of our findings to other countries. Still, given that the effects of contact with low-status outgroups on reducing prejudice tend to be similar across countries (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), and in light of recent evidence that this also holds for attitudes towards refugees (De Coninck et al., 2020), we believe there is little reason to expect these findings to be different in other countries. However, we call for researchers in other countries to replicate our study and test our assumptions across contexts (e.g., with EU politicians). Another caveat of this research is the cross-sectional design. We cannot rule out the possibility of reversed causality, for example, that initial attitudes towards refugees have determined personal contact with refugees. However, our theory and statistical model align well in suggesting that political orientation and personal contact with refugees do shape residents' stereotypes and attitudes towards integration.

Further, we could not control for the optimal conditions of contact (i.e., common goals, cooperative environment, equal status between groups, and support by authorities) that earlier research has established (cf. Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Therefore, to further advance knowledge on the implications of contact theory in the context of refugee integration, future research should specify the type of contact (e.g., positive versus negative) and aim for more controlled study designs such as experiments in which the contact conditions can be accounted for.

Finally, our study focuses on attitudes towards refugees and their integration. Building on previous research (e.g., De Coninck, 2020; De Coninck & Matthijs, 2020; von Hermanni & Neumann, 2019) that points to the differences in residents' perceptions towards different groups of migrants (e.g., labor migrants versus refugees)<sup>6</sup> as well as towards subgroups of refugees (e.g., women versus men; Christians versus Muslims), researchers should consider these impactful nuances in their future studies.

### *Practical Implications*

The practical implications of this study are threefold. First, to alleviate societal tensions about refugees, our findings suggest a focus on fostering personal contact between refugees and host-country residents, including politicians. Hence, policymakers and researchers are challenged to explore ways in which this contact can be facilitated. Second, prioritizing contact between politicians and refugees seems sensible, given that for politicians, contact with refugees was associated with reduced negative stereotypes across the political spectrum and that politicians hold a great influence on citizens' attitudes (McLaren, 2001). Finally, politicians may want to keep in mind that their followers tend to hold more negative attitudes towards refugee integration than themselves. Hence, to better align their followers' views with their own and reduce societal tensions, they may want to strike a more positive chord about refugees.

### **Conclusion**

The unprecedented number of refugees is not only a humanitarian issue but is also increasingly a political tool that polarizes societies, with politicians at the center of influence and decision-making

<sup>6</sup>Notably, researchers may also be reminded that these are policy categories that often deviate substantially from the lived experiences of the people behind the labels and that the academic community might play an important role in denaturalizing the use of these labels "as a mechanism to distinguish, divide and discriminate" (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 48).

power. Our study indicates that fostering contact between refugees and residents has the potential to depoliticize the topic of refugee integration into host societies by reducing politicians' and citizens' negative stereotypes towards refugees. Policymakers who wish to mitigate negative stereotypes among their followers are well-advised to introduce and support initiatives that facilitate personal contact between refugees and residents.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Supplementary Material

Appendix S1. Questionnaire Design: Dutch Version of the Questionnaire

Appendix S2. Distribution of Categorical Demographic Variables in Both Samples

Appendix S3. Survey Validation: Test of the Measurement Model

Appendix S4a. Moderated Mediation Analyses with Control Variables

Appendix S5. Group Comparisons

Appendix S6. Comparison of the Moderation Effects in the Two Samples