

# Newsweek

## Obama Should Avoid the Public Clamor on Syrian Refugees

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The latest polls are clear: Americans want little to do with the 10,000 Syrian refugees President Obama has promised to take in, much less any part of dealing with the more than 4 million refugees fleeing Syria's civil war.

According to Gallup, 60 percent oppose the United States taking in refugees, compared with just 37 percent who approve. As clear as the figures seem, however, there are four good reasons that Obama should avoid following the majority's lead.

The first reason is that Americans are wildly ignorant about Syria, Islam and the situation in the Middle East.

A Pew survey in 2012 caused a kerfuffle when it revealed that 50 percent of Americans couldn't identify Syria when it was highlighted on a map of the Middle East.

The same survey found that just 42 percent could identify the crescent and star as the symbol for Islam from a set of four symbols, one of which was the Christian cross and another of which was the Star of David (about 34 percent chose Om, the symbol associated with Hinduism).

This ignorance would be bad enough, but at least presidents might be able to count on American opinion, if they could only figure out which half of the people to trust!

What's worse, however, is the collective ignorance that Americans have shown regarding major political issues over time. Thanks to fear, nationalism, religious and cultural biases and historical circumstances, American majorities have been wrong about a number of very important issues, often over long periods of time; slavery, the treatment of native peoples and women's rights are just a few obvious examples.

Regarding foreign affairs, the majority's track record is very spotty. The public was far too slow to recognize the threat of Hitler, far too acquiescent when Kennedy and then Johnson escalated Vietnam to pointless disaster and over-eager to take on Iraq a second time in 2003.

Regarding refugees in particular, the current hysteria has prompted reminders that very similar majorities opposed accepting Jewish children from Germany in 1939, opposed accepting Hungarian refugees fleeing Soviet control in 1958 and more recently opposed taking in refugees from Kosovo in 1999.

None of those episodes seem, in retrospect, to reflect wise counsel from the public.

The third reason the president should ignore public opinion on the refugee crisis is that American attitudes are irresponsible. Even in the best of times, American public opinion does not reflect one of the most critical requirements of policy evaluation: a consideration of trade-offs.

Since individual Americans are not responsible for making tough decisions between guns and butter, they tend to respond to poll questions in a vacuum, unhindered by the context in which policy decisions must actually be made.

When you ask Americans what they want, they want it all—military strength without economic strain, influence without upsetting the allies and victory without casualties.

In the wake of Paris, public attitudes are all the more suspect. Terrorist attacks produce fear and fear produces emotional responses, not rational ones. Of all surveys, presidents should least trust those taken in the middle of a crisis.

The fourth reason to question the will of the majority is that it is the toxic byproduct of the political echo chamber.

Whether glued to the television or to Twitter, research shows that the mass public remains dependent on the foreign policy establishment for almost all the arguments and cues necessary to form opinions about foreign policy.

Since the Paris attacks we have heard the Republican candidates trip over themselves to take ever more extreme positions on the refugee situation. Senator Ted Cruz has called it “nothing less than lunacy” to take in refugees; Ben Carson called it a “suspension of intellect” to consider accepting refugees. Donald Trump has called accepting refugees “just insane” while suggesting closing mosques and considering the creation of a database of all Muslims living in the United States.

In today’s information environment, such outrageous statements not only make news but they spread quickly through social media, pushing aside calmer and more reasoned assessments and proposals.

Unsurprisingly, then, 60 percent of the public—and 84 percent of Republicans—oppose Obama’s plan to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees despite the fact that the United States has an extensive and lengthy security review process for screening refugees and despite the fact that the U.S. experience with refugees provides no support for exaggerated perceptions of a terrorist threat. Given all this, neither President Obama, nor Congress, nor the various candidates for president should put too much stock in today’s majority opinion about Syrian refugees.

Instead, Obama should lead a patient and vigorous national debate about the benefits and costs of accepting refugees, working toward a policy that meets the long-run interests of the United States.

Over time, as the fear and panic from Paris subside, we should be mindful that today’s “wisdom of the crowd” may eventually look like yesterday’s folly.

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