CCIS Center for Comparative Immigration Studies

The American Syrian Refugee Consensus*

Claire L. Adida, UC San Diego
Adeline Lo, Princeton University
Melina Platas Izama, New York University Abu Dhabi

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Abstract

What types of refugees do Americans prefer for admission into the United States? Scholars have explored the immigrant characteristics that appeal to Americans and the characteristics that Europeans prioritize in asylum-seekers, but we currently do not know which refugee characteristics Americans prefer, and whether or not these preferences form a consensus. We conduct a conjoint experiment on a representative sample of 1800 US adults, manipulating refugee attributes in pairs of Syrian refugee profiles, and ask respondents to rate each refugee's appeal. Our focus on Syrian refugees allows us to speak to the current refugee crisis while also identifying religious discrimination, holding constant the refugee's national origin. We find that Americans prefer Syrian refugees who are female, high-skilled, English-speaking, and Christian, suggesting they prioritize refugee integration into the U.S. labor and cultural markets. We find that the preference for female refugees is not driven by the desire to exclude Muslim male refugees. Finally, we find that preferences over refugee attributes are consistent across political party affiliation, age, gender, race, religion, and education of respondents, forming what we call an American Syrian refugee consensus.

*We registered a pre-analysis plan prior to data collection. Also prior to data collection, we obtained approval as exempt by each author's Institutional Review Board.

1 Introduction

What types of refugees do Americans prefer to admit into the United States? We know that Americans prefer high-skilled English-speaking immigrants (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015), and that Europeans prioritize asylum seekers with higher employability and greater humanitarian need (Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner, 2016). We also know that anti-Muslim bias pervades public preferences for both immigrants and refugees (Adida, Laitin and Valfort, 2016; Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner, 2016; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015). In light of record-high forced displacement globally and the recent politicization of the refugee admissions process in the United States, it is worth asking what kinds of refugees the American public prefers.

Drawing on a nationally representative sample of 1,800 American citizens, and on more than 5,000 conjoints which we administered in the two weeks leading up to the 2016 presidential election, we identify Americans' preferred refugee profile. Our empirical strategy focuses on American preferences for different types of Syrian refugees for both substantive and methodological reasons. As of mid-2017, nearly one-third of all registered refugees were Syrian – close to 6 million – making the Syrian case a substantively important one (UNHCR, 2018). At the same time, Syria is home to both Muslims and Christians, allowing us to identify anti-Muslim bias, holding constant national origin.

Our findings indicate that the American public prefers Syrian refugees who are female, high-skilled, English speakers, and Christian. The most consistent and substantive determinant is religion: Muslim profiles rate on average 0.5 points lower than do Christian profiles, a substantive difference for a scale that runs from 1 (the respondent believes the United States should absolutely not admit the refugee) to 7 (the respondent believes the United States should definitely admit the refugee). Further, these preferences reflect a consensus rarely found across the American landscape's typical social divides: Americans agree on the ideal Syrian refugee regardless of partisanship, race, gender, religion, generation and education level. Indeed, while we find that the anti-Muslim bias is significantly lower for Democrats

(e.g., (Newman, 2018)), for non-whites, and for non-Christians, it is also the case that all respondents are more likely to exclude Muslim than Christian Syrian refugees. These results echo findings from Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) and Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner (2016), who found a large public consensus on preferred immigrants in the US and on preferred refugees in Europe (respectively);[1] similarly, our study reports on an American Syrian refugee consensus.

2 Research design

We test which factors drive American preferences toward Syrian refugees with a conjoint experiment conducted in October-November 2016. Relying on YouGov, we procured a nationally-representative sample of 1,800 American adult citizens, and fielded 5,400 conjoints, with a total of 10,800 refugee profiles.[2] Table A1 in the appendix provides summary statistics for our sample.

Conjoint analysis is a common methodological approach in marketing, but it was first introduced to political science by Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) to isolate the causal effect of various immigrant attributes on immigration attitudes. In our context, we presented survey respondents with three pairs of randomized refugee profiles – presented sequentially – and asked them, after each pair, to imagine that they are an official deciding which refugee to allow into the country for resettlement.[3] Respondents were then asked to rate each refugee

[1]Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) find no partisan difference in preferences for immigrants in the US, though they do not measure immigrant religion explicitly. Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner (2016) find a significant difference in preferences for asylum-seekers among Europeans, with right-leaning respondents much more anti-Muslim than left-leaning respondents.

[2]The study was part of a larger survey experiment on 5,400 American adults citizens. We rely here on a random sub-sample. A detailed description of YouGov's sampling strategy is available upon request.

[3]Although ordinary American citizens are never in the position to evaluate refugees in the real world, as they might in Switzerland through referenda on immigrant naturalization decisions (Hainmueller and

on a scale from 1 (the US should absolutely not admit the refugee) to 7 (the US should definitely admit the refugee). The dimensions describing the refugees are listed below, and their values were randomly assigned as follows (See Figure A1 for a screenshot):

- Country: Syria (constant)
- Gender: Male/Female
- Religion: Christian/Muslim
- Previous occupation: Farmer/Teacher/Doctor
- English fluency: Fluent/Broken/Interpreter
- Age: 20/40/60

The nature of the conjoint experiment involves the randomization of each attribute, such that the probability that each attribute appears in a given profile is orthogonal to that of all other attributes. Our estimand of interest is the average marginal component effect (AMCE) (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). This is the average difference in refugee rating when comparing two attribute values and averaging over all possible combinations of the other profile attributes. The statistical model used is a regression of the rating outcome on indicator variables for levels of each attribute.[4] Additionally, because each respondent views three pairs of profiles, we cluster the standard errors at the respondent level. We estimate and present unweighted results, but in robustness checks we verify that these hold when we weight.

Hangartner, 2015), this type of thought exercise is similar to that conducted by Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto (2014) and Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) asking American respondents to evaluate immigrant profiles. It is analytically useful for the purpose of isolating refugee characteristics that are appealing to the American public. It is also relevant to the extent that political elites respond to public opinion (e.g., Butler and Nickerson (2011)).

[4]Our results hold when we rely on the forced choice outcome rather than the refugee rating.

3 Results

What types of refugees do Americans prioritize? Our conjoint analysis reveals two key findings. First, American respondents prefer high-skilled female Christian Syrian refugees who speak fluent English. And second, this preference cuts across many respondent-types, revealing an American refugee consensus.

Figure 1 illustrates our main result: our respondents prefer middle-aged, high-skilled, female Christian Syrian refugees who speak fluent English. The effects are substantively strongest for language-fluency and religion, a result that echoes the cultural-threat literature on immigrant exclusion. Additionally, we find no significant heterogenous treatment effect by respondent skill-level, as proxied by education (see Figure A3). In other words, all respondents prefer high-skilled refugees, consistent with findings in the literature on immigrant exclusion that individual economic competition does not drive exclusion. To be sure, this test is imperfect: we proxy the respondent's skill level with a measure of educational attainment, rather than with a direct measure of skill. Scholars have previously argued that imperfect proxies for skill might yield misleading claims (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Malhotra, Margalit and Mo, 2013). As an alternative test, we check to see whether refugee preferences are significantly different for respondents who are not in the labor force. We find that they are not.

The large and significant negative effect for Muslim profiles is important, albeit unsurprising given the anti-Muslim discrimination previously documented in the immigrant exclusion literature (e.g., Adida, Laitin and Valfort (2016); Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner (2016); Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015)). At the same time, we are the first to document this anti-Muslim bias toward refugees among a representative sample of American adults. Additionally, we see a large and significant positive effect for female profiles. Taken together, these results raise a question: is anti-Muslim discrimination driven by the desire to exclude Muslim male refugees specifically? Further analysis indicates that respondent preferences for female profiles are not driven by a desire to exclude Muslim male profiles, specifically:

the interaction effect between the gender and religion of the profile, while in the expected direction (it is negative for Muslim male profiles), is not statistically significant (see Figure A8). We further investigate whether any respondent-type is more likely to specifically exclude Muslim male profiles and find consistently null results. In sum, our respondents prefer female over male profiles, and this is driven neither by the desire to specifically exclude Muslim male profiles (Figures A9a and A9b), nor by certain respondent-types who may be more sensitive to security concerns.[5] These results are preliminary, but question the claim that Americans perceive a security threat from Syrian refugees.

Our second main result highlights a consensus across a diverse set of respondents. Figures A2 through A7 in the appendix show that the preferred refugee profile cuts across most of America's major social divides, be they gender, educational, racial, generational, partisan, or religious. Particularly robust is the generalized preference for high-skilled, English-speaking, Christian profiles. Notably, the anti-Muslim bias remains the largest and most systematically significant finding across almost all respondent cleavages. And while it is significantly smaller for Democrats ($p = 0.00$), non-Whites ($p = 0.03$), and non-Christians ($p = 0.00$), it exists nonetheless.[6] In sum, our analysis points to an American Syrian refugee consensus.

[5]Public opinion polls suggest Republican voters are more concerned with national security issues than are Democratic or Independent voters (e.g., `https://www.vox.com/2018/5/3/17314664/2018-midterm-polls-policy-priority-voters`.

[6]We replicate this analysis by characterizing differences in preferences between subgroups as suggested in Leeper et al. (2018), which offers subgroup analysis with results robust to reference category choice. Our results are unchanged and displayed in Figures A10 through A13. In each of those figures, the final graphs show whether or not differences between subgroup preferences for any particular conjoint dimension are statistically significant (coefficient and error bars do not cross 0).

4 Discussion

The literature on immigrant exclusion is theoretically and empirically rich, indicating that immigrant exclusion is driven primarily by sociotropic cultural threats, with less evidence for individual economic threat (e.g., Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014, 2015), though see Dancygier (2010); Malhotra, Margalit and Mo (2013)). We lack a similarly clear understanding of what drives public attitudes toward refugees. Yet there are reasons to believe that public opinion toward refugees might be qualitatively different than that toward immigrants. Indeed, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services agency defines a refugee as someone who, among other criteria, is of special humanitarian concern to the United States, and demonstrates that they were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (`https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/refugees`). There are therefore two ways in which the public might perceive refugees as different from immigrants. First, the public may view refugees as involuntary and vulnerable migrants who face persecution in the country of origin. Indeed, humanitarian concerns are an important factor driving European attitudes toward asylum-seekers (Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner, 2016). Second, if the public perceives the refugee admissions process as qualitatively different from immigration, namely believing that refugees pose a security risk either because they come from a conflict zone or because the public misunderstands the refugee screening process as more lenient, then security concerns may drive preferences in refugee profiles. This very argument motivated the President's executive order banning entry into the United States of aliens from certain Muslim-majority countries.

This paper is the first to investigate the American public's preference toward Syrian refugees, explicitly testing and capturing religious discrimination in refugee preferences in the US. Our results are remarkably similar to those on immigrant exclusion, confirming that Americans prefer high-skilled, English-speaking and Christian refugees, those most likely to contribute to the economy and pose no cultural threat to the host society. But our results

also call for more investigation into whether or not separate concerns motivate the American public. Our respondents' large and significant preference for female refugees over male refugees – a preference not motivated by the desire to exclude Muslim male refugees specifically, suggests that vulnerability concerns might also matter in shaping American preferences for Syrian refugees, while security concerns may be less apparent.[7] Future research should further this line of inquiry by explicitly testing the extent to which and the reasons why the American public might differentiate between refugees and immigrants.

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[7]We note that adding a conjoint dimension about security threat is difficult for both research design and ethical reasons.

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Figures

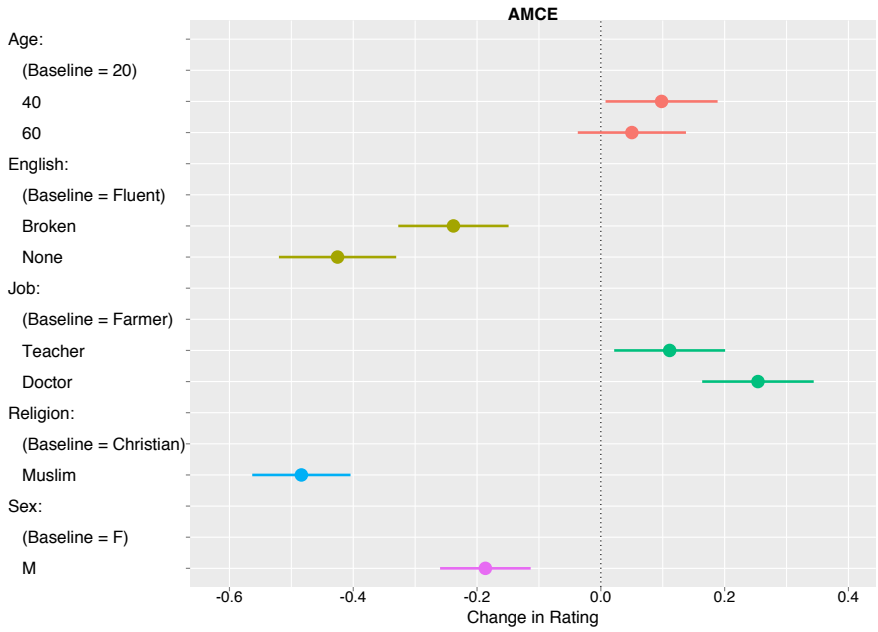


Figure 1: Average marginal components effect plot.

Appendix

Table A1: Summary Statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Age	48.29389	16.68969	18	95
Dem	.3483333	.4765747	0	1
Rep	.2427778	.428881	0	1
Ind	.3383333	.4732741	0	1
US born	.9438889	.2302001	0	1
Female	.5455556	.4980587	0	1
Protestant	.3427778	.4747698	0	1
Catholic	.2011111	.4009423	0	1
Muslim	.0077778	.0878725	0	1
Jewish	.0211111	.1437947	0	1
Ethnocentrism	2.076667	.3898518	1	3
First generation immigrant	.1411111	.3482329	0	1
Second generation immigrant	.1994444	.3996938	0	1
High school	.3861111	.4869919	0	1
College	.5272222	.4993971	0	1
Post-graduate	.0866667	.2814242	0	1
White	.7894444	.4078165	0	1
Black	.0855556	.2797844	0	1
Hispanic	.0688889	.2533355	0	1
Mixed	.0205556	.1419303	0	1
N	1800			

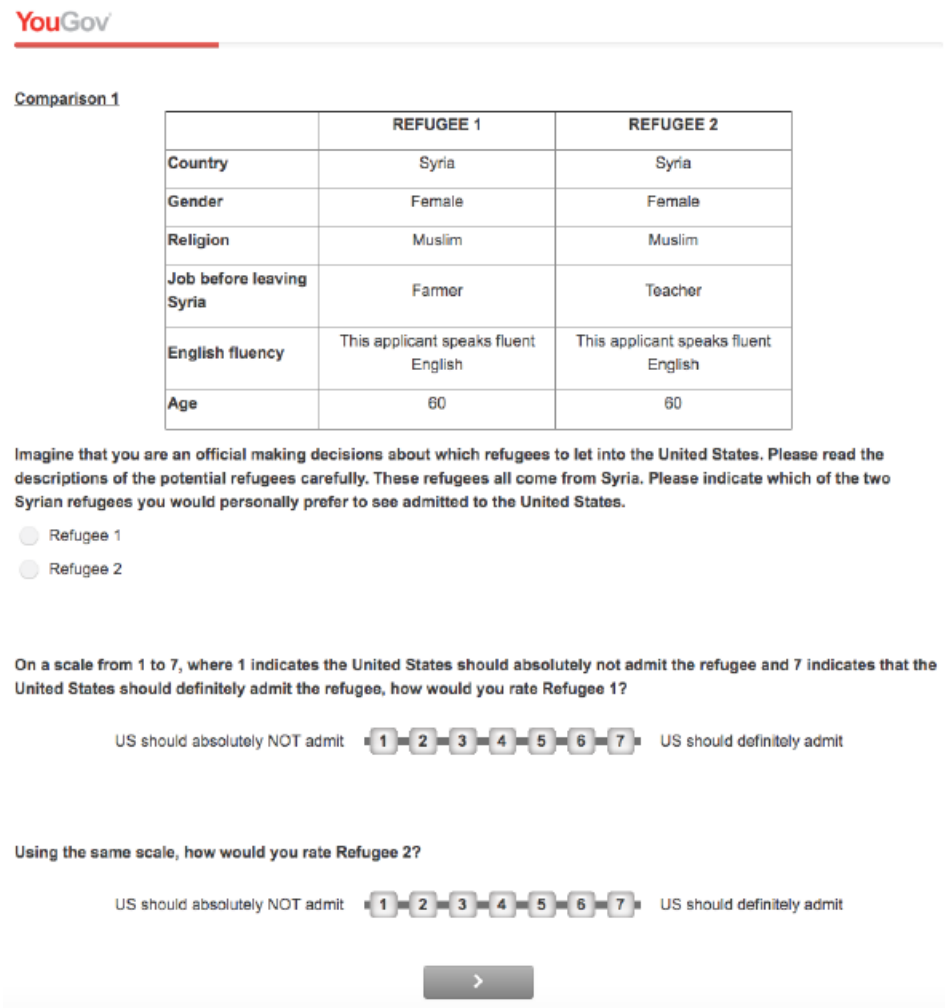
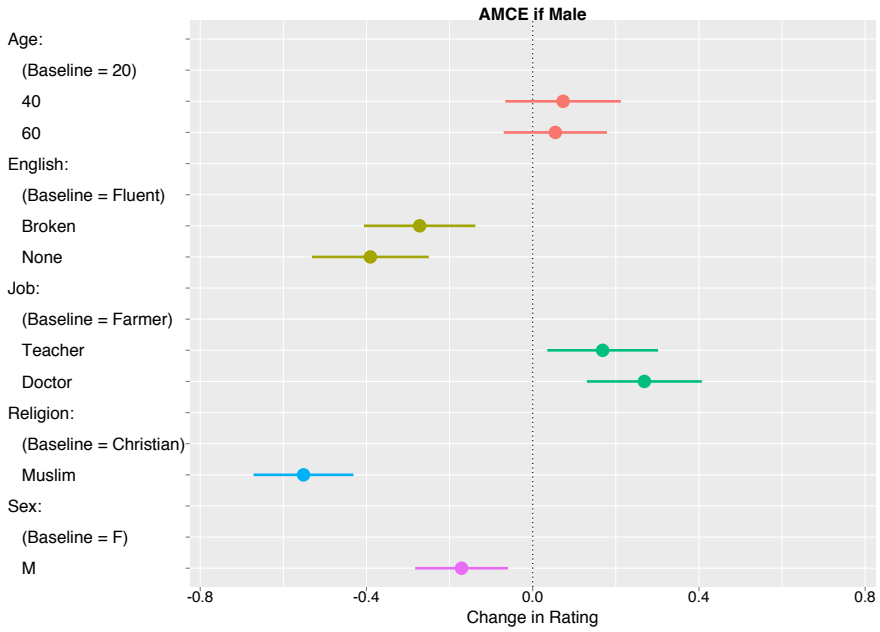
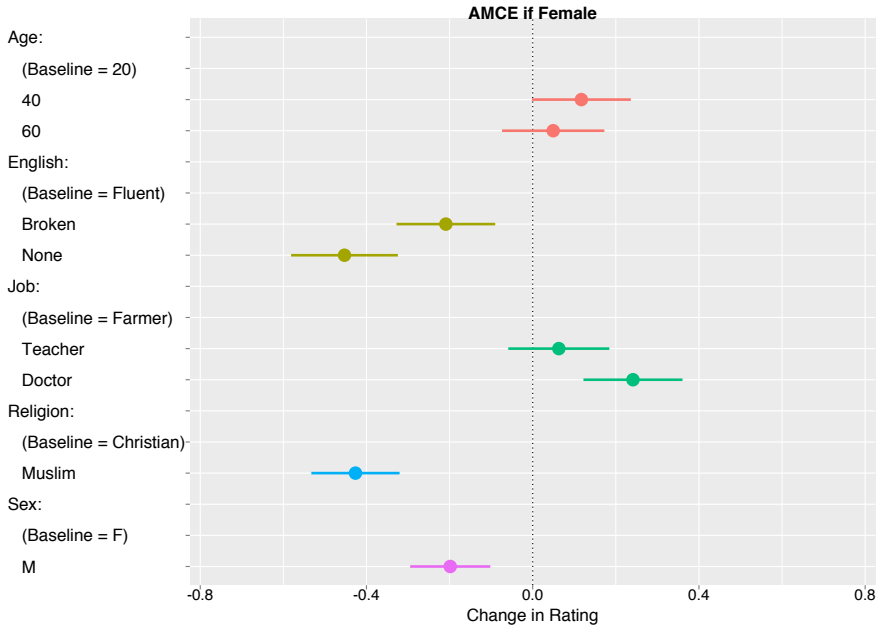


Figure A1: Screenshot of the conjoint experiment.



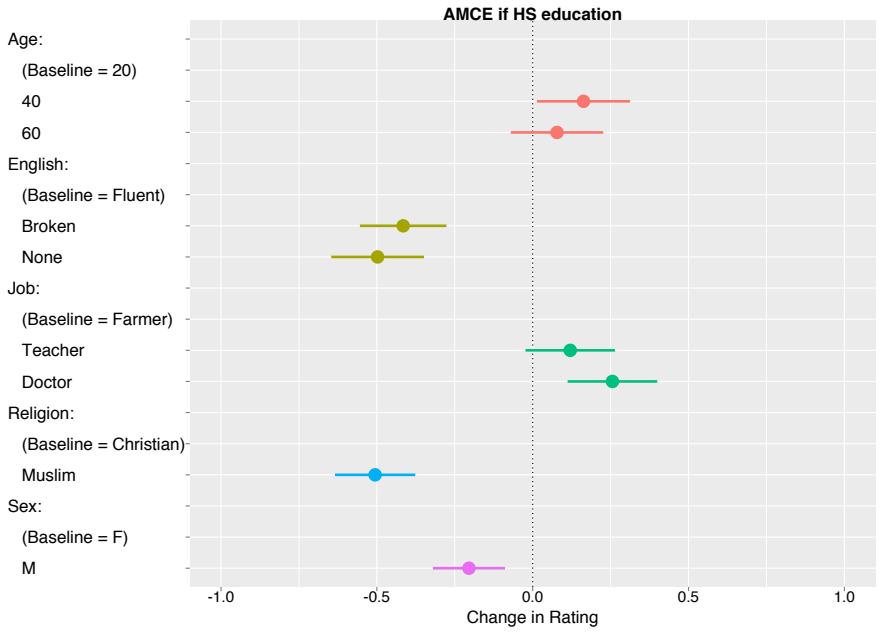
(a) Average marginal components effect for Male respondents

Figure A2: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent gender



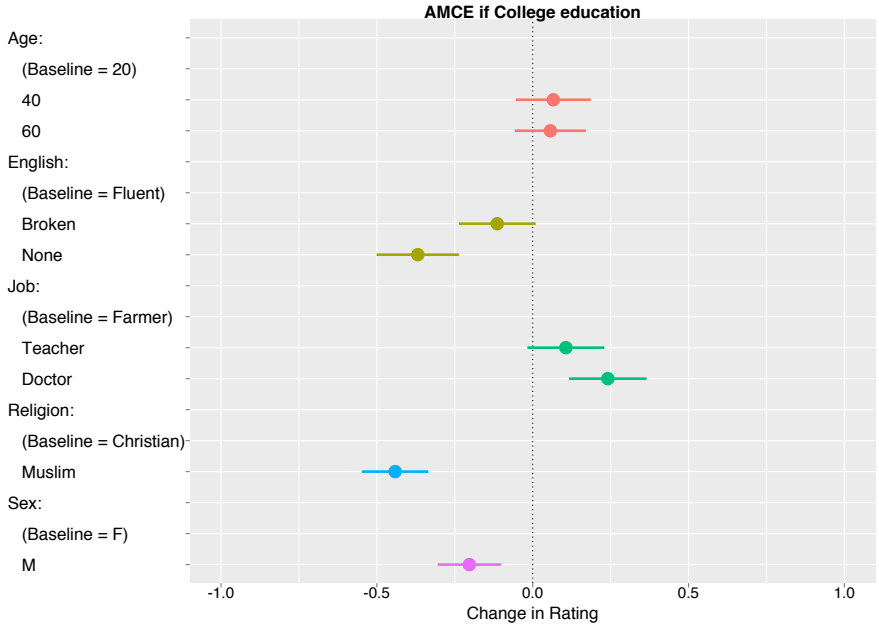
(b) Average marginal components effect for Female respondents

Figure A2: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent gender (cont.)



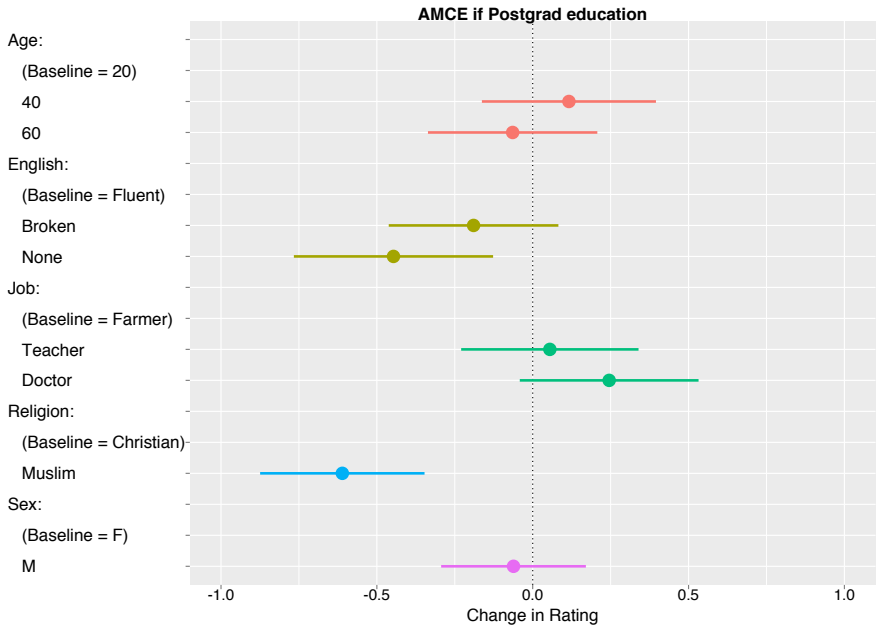
(a) Average marginal components effect for HS respondents

Figure A3: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent education



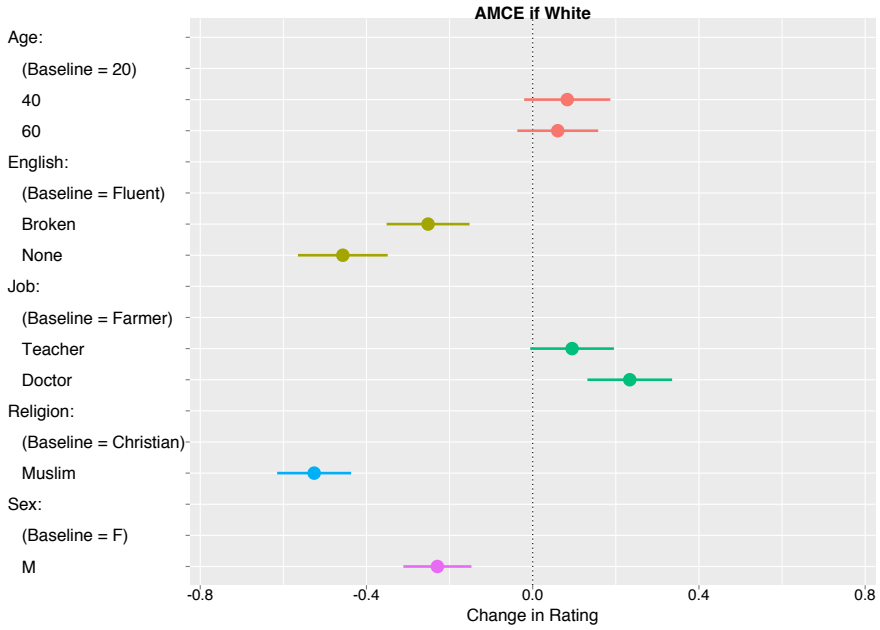
(b) Average marginal components effect for College respondents

Figure A3: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent education (cont.)



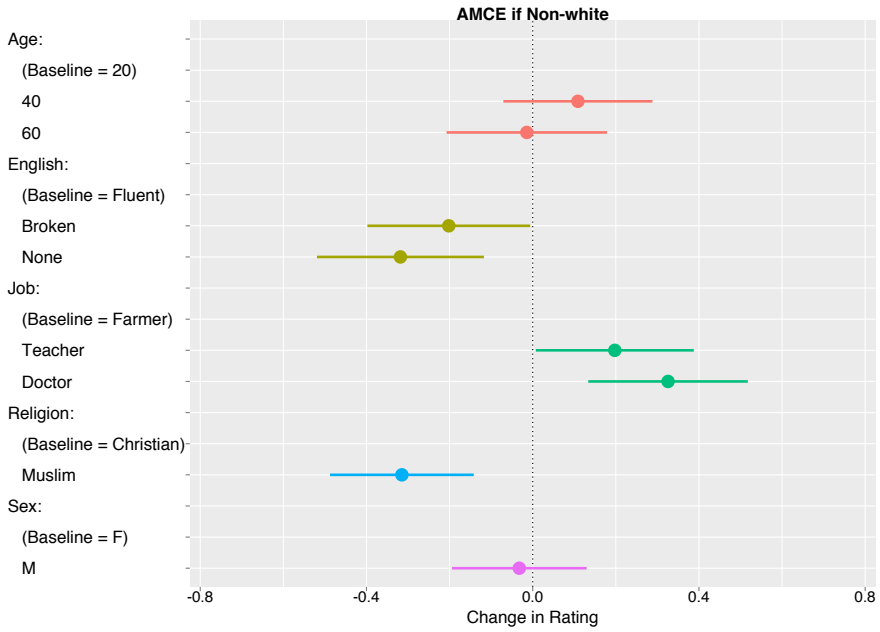
(c) Average marginal components effect for Postgrad respondents

Figure A3: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent education (cont.)



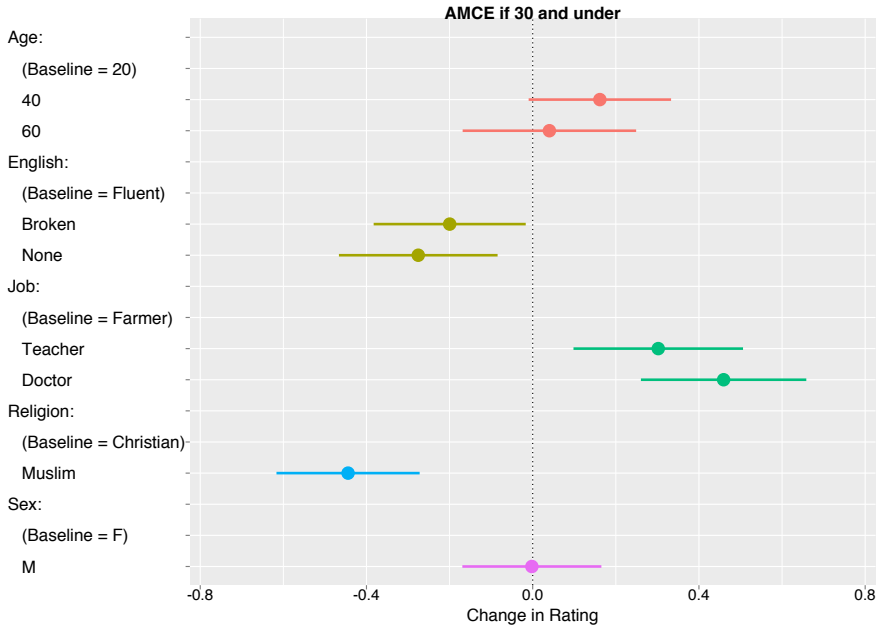
(a) Average marginal components effect for White respondents

Figure A4: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent race



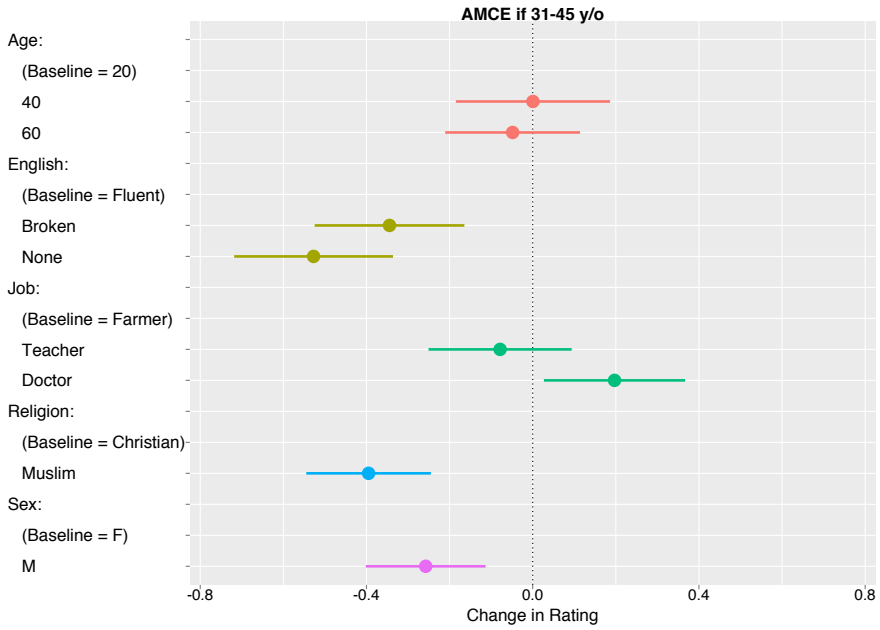
(b) Average marginal components effect for Non-White respondents

Figure A4: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent race (cont.)



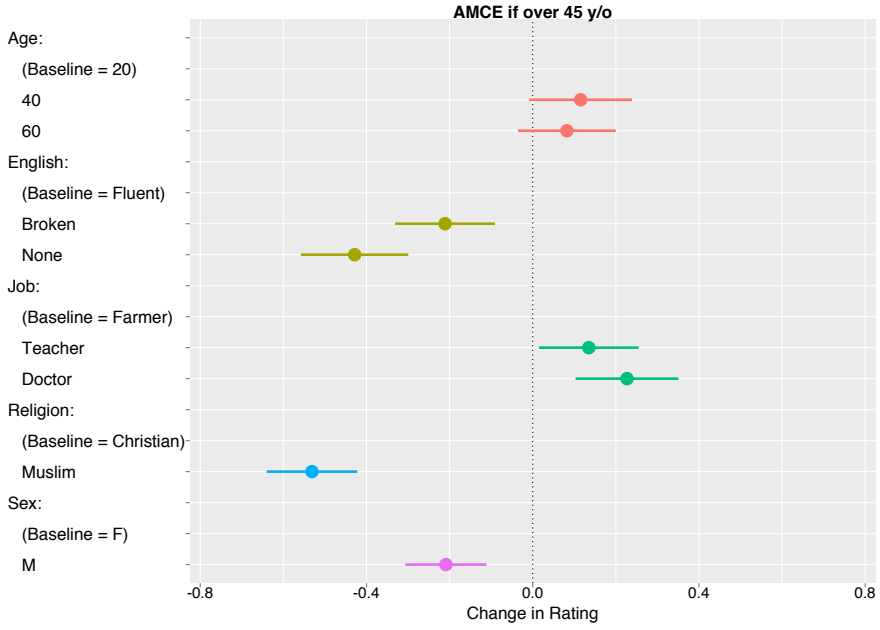
(a) Average marginal components effect for respondents age 30 or younger

Figure A5: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent age



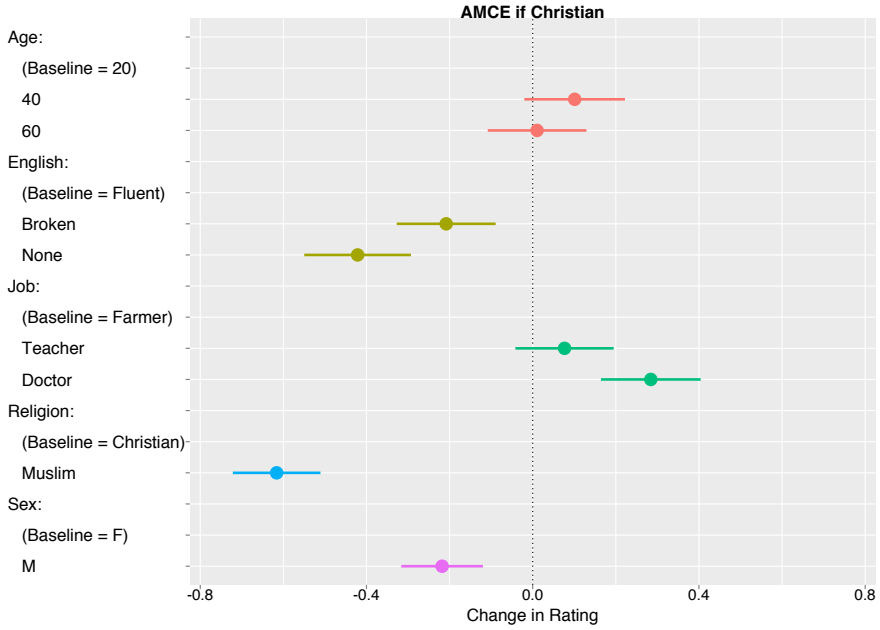
(b) Average marginal components effect for respondents age 31-45

Figure A5: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent age (cont.)



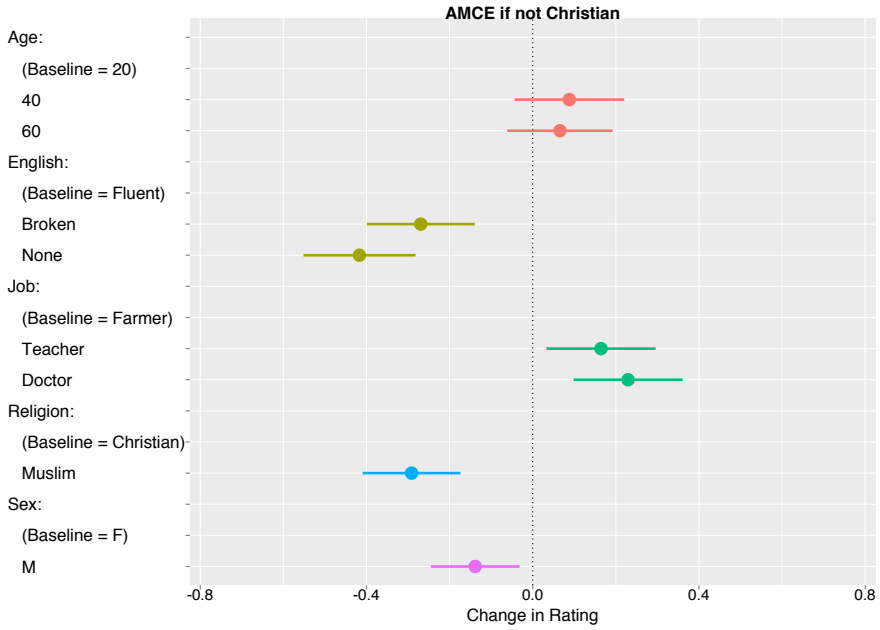
(c) Average marginal components effect for respondents above 45 years of age

Figure A5: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent age (cont.)



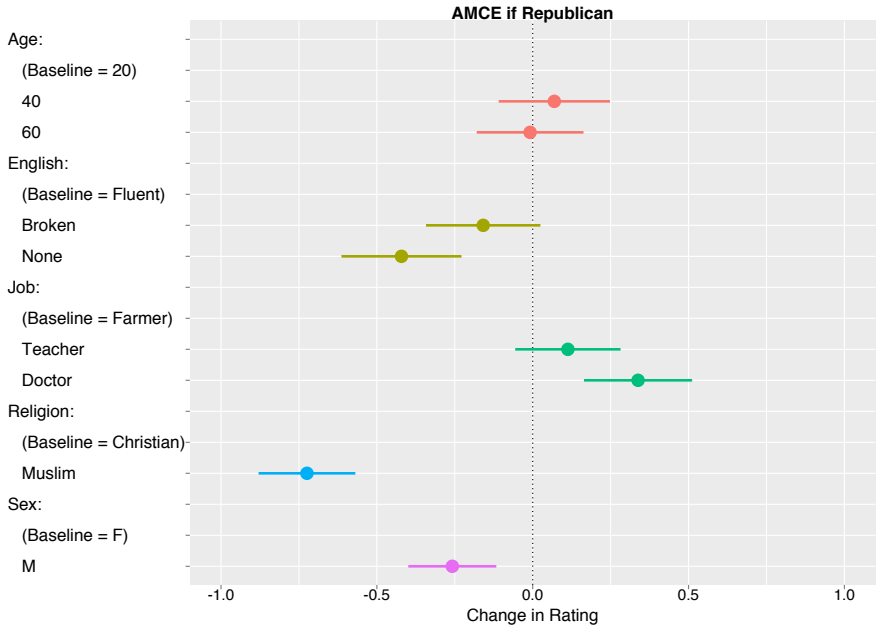
(a) Average marginal components effect for Christian respondents

Figure A6: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent religion



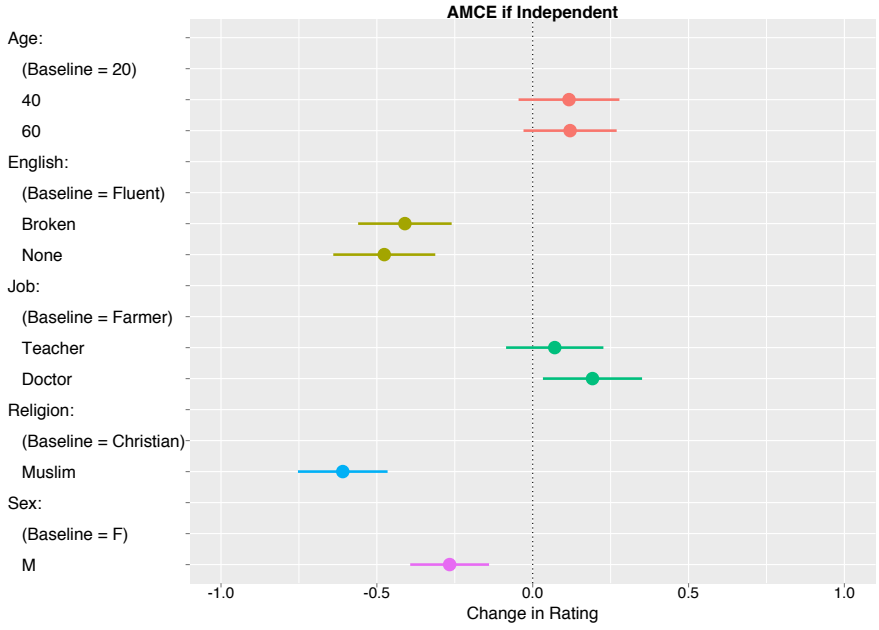
(b) Average marginal components effect for Non-Christian respondents

Figure A6: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent religion (cont.)



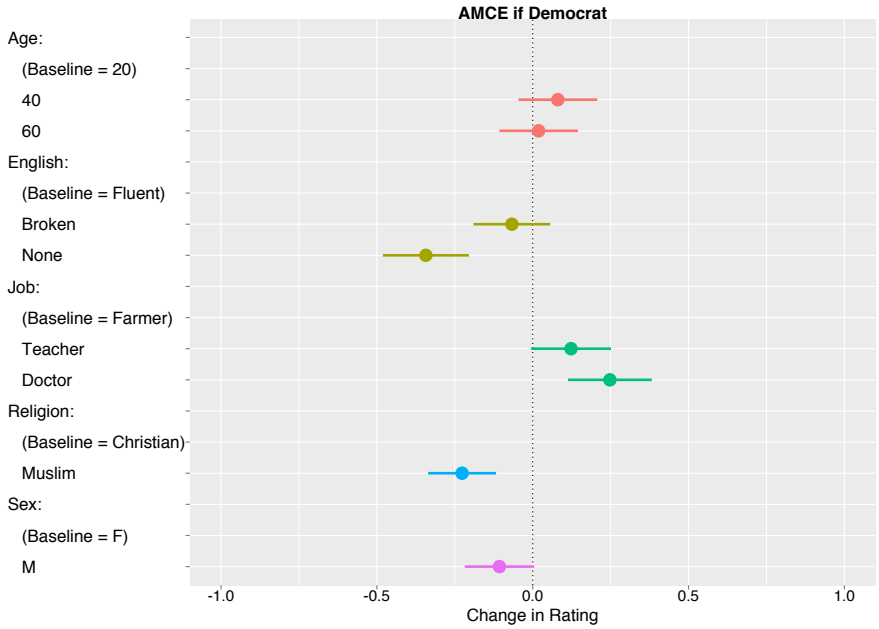
(a) Average marginal components effect for Republican respondents

Figure A7: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent political party



(b) Average marginal components effect for Independent respondents

Figure A7: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent political party (cont.)



(c) Average marginal components effect for Democrat respondents

Figure A7: Average marginal components effect plot by respondent political party (cont.)

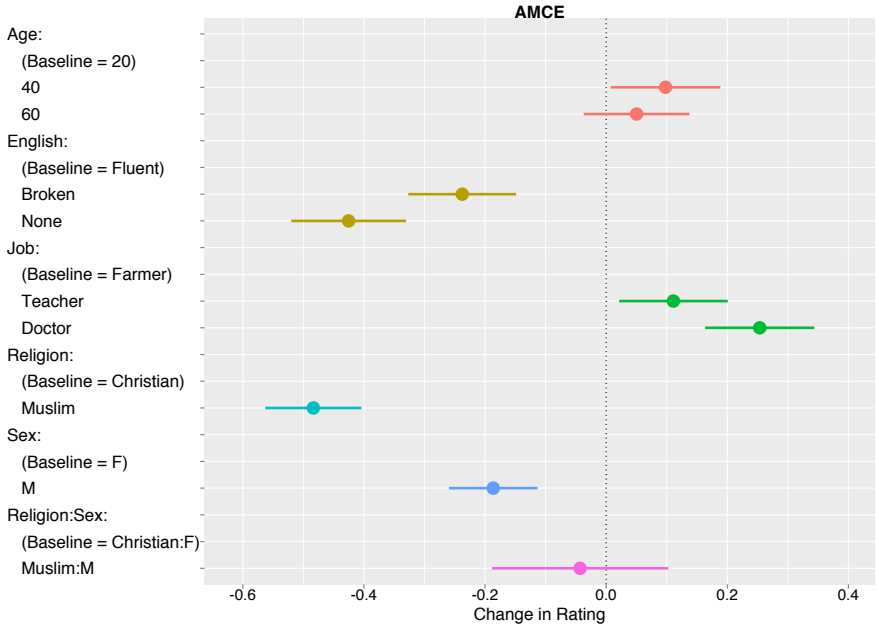
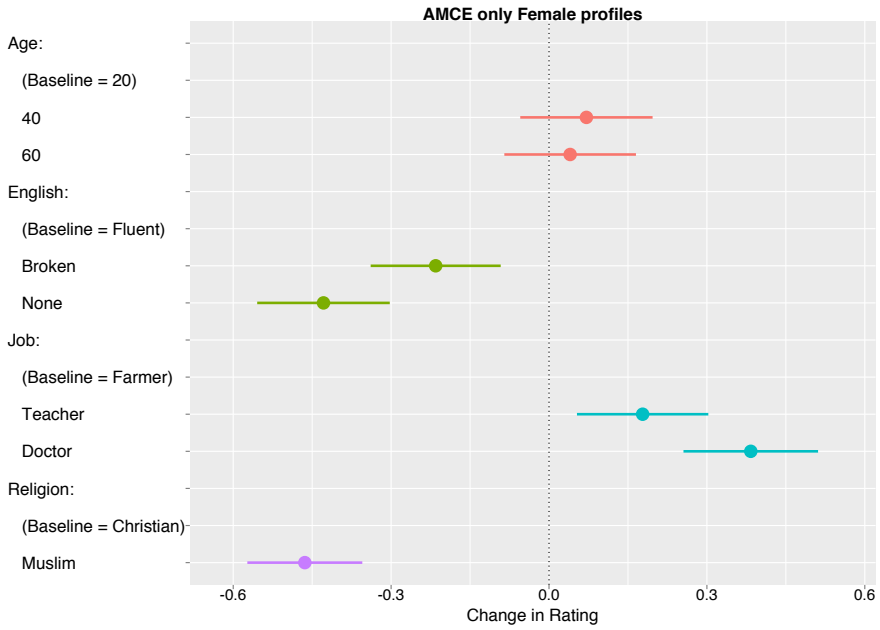
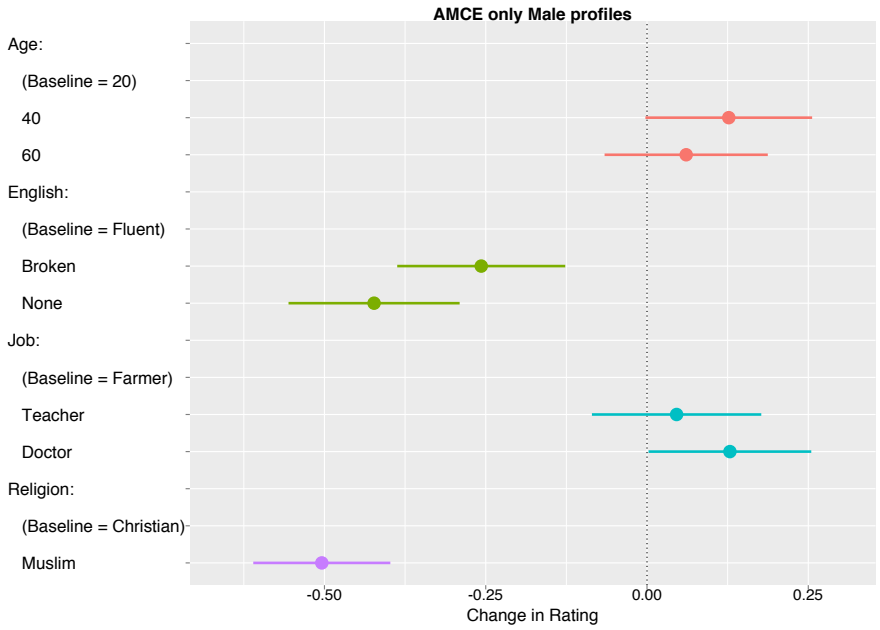


Figure A8: Average marginal components effect with interaction between refugee religion and refugee gender



(a) Average marginal components effect for female profiles only

Figure A9: Average marginal components effect plot by refugee gender



(b) Average marginal components effect for male profiles only

Figure A9: Average marginal components effect plot by refugee gender (cont.)

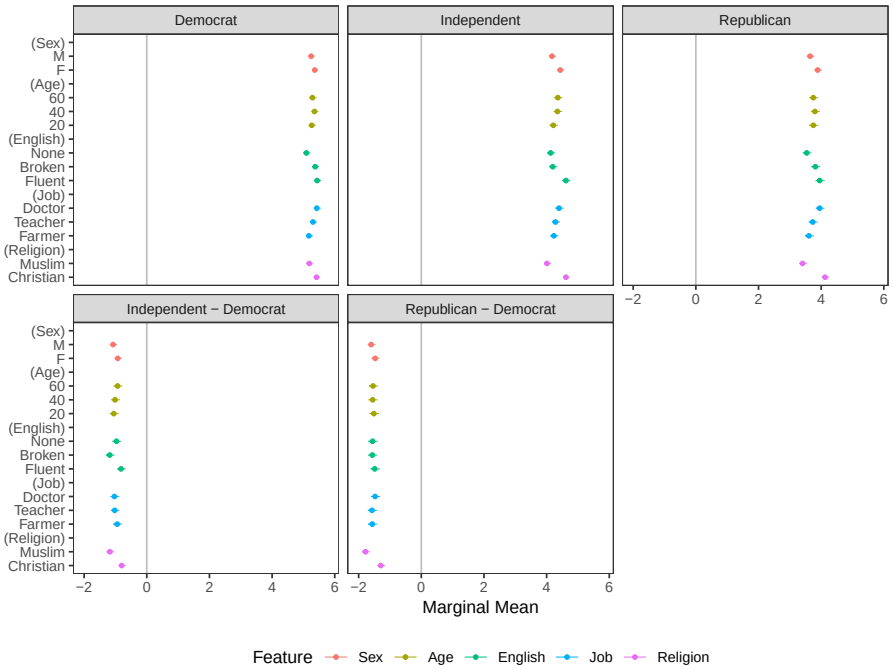


Figure A10: Leeper et al. 2018 subgroup analysis by respondent party ID

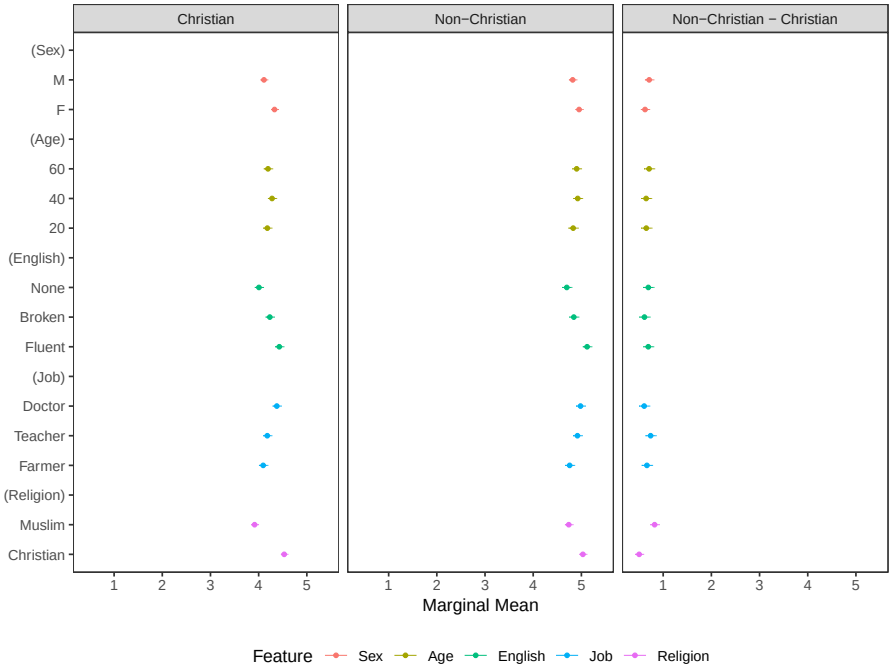


Figure A11: Leeper et al. 2018 subgroup analysis by respondent religion

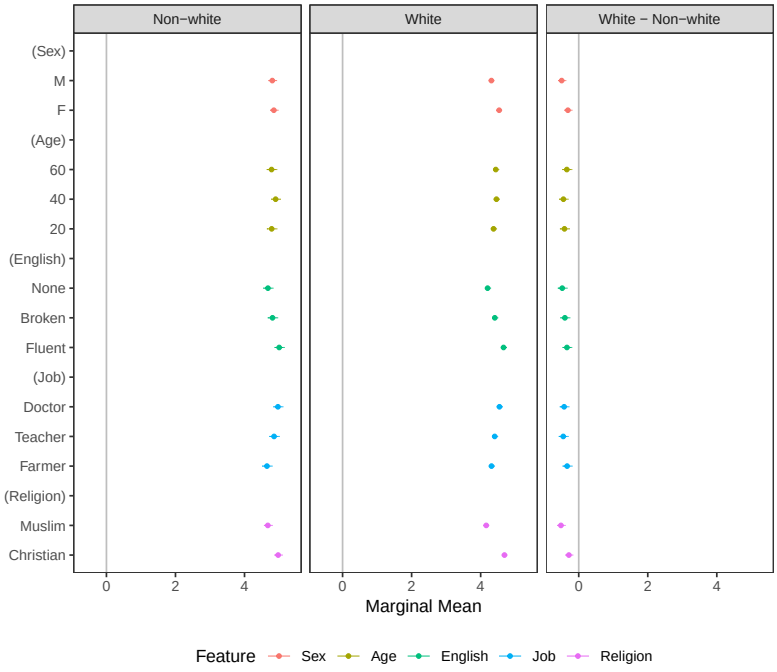


Figure A12: Leeper et al. 2018 subgroup analysis by respondent race

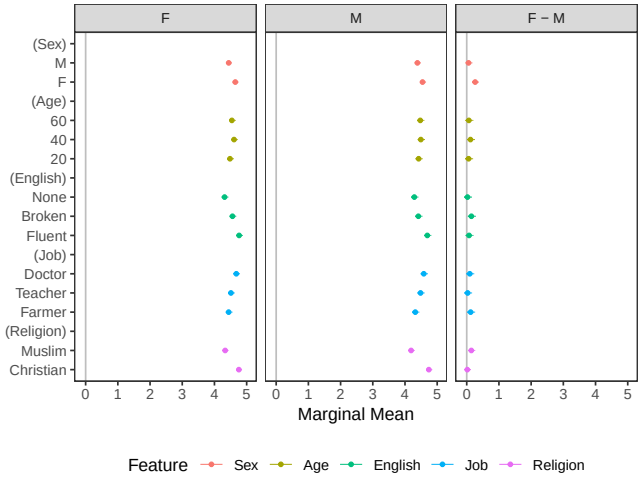


Figure A13: Leeper et al. 2018 subgroup analysis by respondent gener