

How Sexuality Affects Evaluations of Immigrant Deservingness and Cultural Similarity: A Conjoint Survey Experiment

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Abstract

Do Americans view lesbian and gay (LG) migrants as more deserving to enter the country than their straight counterparts? Recent changes in federal policy have contributed to significant increases in LG migrants coming to the U.S., yet little is known about how Americans view them. While Americans are increasingly polarized on their views toward migration, support for gay and lesbian migrants may be cross-cutting. Using a conjoint survey experiment, this project investigates how immigrants' sexual minority status affects Americans' perceptions of their deservingness for admission and how this may be related to evaluations of cultural similarity. Analyses consider interactions between reason for migration, skill, and sexuality as well as heterogeneous effects based on respondent profiles. Preliminary results show that Americans are more likely to choose LG migrants for admission than straight ones; LG immigrants fleeing persecution are seen as especially deserving of admission; and Republicans, Christians, and straight respondents see LG migrants as less deserving. This paper helps disentangle Americans' preferences for migrants' presumed cultural similarity from economic potential and humanitarian merit as well as elucidate public opinion of this under-studied group.

Introduction

Do Americans view lesbian and gay (LG) migrants as more deserving to enter the country than their straight counterparts? This question has yet to be evaluated, but is important to address for two reasons. First, recent changes in federal policy have contributed to significant increases in LG migrants coming to the U.S. (Vogler 2016). According to American Community Survey data, numbers of different-sex couples including immigrants increased by 22 percent from 2013 to 2019 (from 7.8 million to 9.5 million), while those of corresponding same-sex couples grew from 44 thousand to 107 thousand in the same period, an increase of 140 percent (Hoffmann and Velasco 2021). Despite this growth, how Americans view these types of migrants is unknown. Second, while Americans are increasingly polarized on their views toward migration, support for gay and lesbian migrants may be cross-cutting. There are now strong majorities and bipartisan support for

related issues like marriage equality. In foreign policy, even the Trump Administration discursively promoted pro-gay programs – enhancing the image of the U.S. as a tolerant society amid rising ethnonationalism and xenophobia.

Therefore, this project investigates whether sexual minorities are evaluated as more deserving due to perceived cultural similarity to the U.S. We administer a conjoint survey experiment that asks respondents to choose between two hypothetical immigrants for admission to the U.S. Respondents are also asked to choose which profile they see as more culturally similar to the U.S. This is one of the first survey experiments to examine immigrant sexuality explicitly and to directly test a cultural similarity hypothesis for immigrant deservingness.

Preliminary results show that Americans are more likely to choose LG migrants for admission than straight ones. LG immigrants fleeing persecution are seen as especially deserving of admission. Subgroup analyses show that Republicans, Christians, and straight respondents see LG migrants as less deserving. This paper contributes to sociology of international migration, sexuality, and politics; helps disentangle Americans' preferences for migrants' presumed cultural similarity from economic potential and humanitarian merit; and elucidates public opinion of this under-studied group.

Research Questions

1. How do U.S. citizens evaluate sexuality when making determinations of immigrant deservingness for admission? How does sexuality compare to reason for migration or skill level of the immigrant?
2. In deservingness considerations, how is perceived cultural similarity related to immigrant sexuality?
3. How do Americans' perceptions of sexual minority immigrants vary by their own political affiliation, religion, or sexuality?

Background

Two recent policy changes have contributed to a rapid rise in lesbian and gay immigrants in the United States. In 2011, President Obama moved to make queer refugees a “population of concern” (Vogler 2016), boosting the number of successful claims (Shaw et al. 2021). Then, in 2013, the Defense of Marriage act ended, allowing U.S. citizens to sponsor the visa of a same-sex partner for the first time (Edwards 2013). Since then, numbers of same-sex couples including immigrants increased 140 percent – dramatically greater compared to the 22 percent increase for their heterosexual counterparts (Hoffmann and Velasco 2021). While most scholarship on LG immigrants focuses on cases of asylum-seekers fleeing repression (Murray 2014; Sam and Finley 2015; Akin 2017; Dhoest 2019; Giametta 2020; Saleh 2020), recent work suggests that the typical LG immigrant may be privileged and coming from progressive contexts (Hoffmann and Velasco 2021, 2022). These observations raise our key research questions: To what extent do Americans leverage sexual orientation as a salient factor to determine the deservingness of potential LG immigrants? Does economic potential or humanitarian merit condition these effects?

Previous experimental work assesses how native-born respondents evaluate the “deservingness” of migrants to gain legal entry to their country. This work broadly supports three theories of deservingness: *cultural similarity*, *economic potential*, and *humanitarian merit*.

We hypothesize that *cultural similarity* will be the primary mechanism through which Americans determine LG immigrant deservingness. The limited, relevant research that exists finds Americans to be biased against Muslims and non-English speakers while Christians and English speakers are viewed as more deserving (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Donnalaja 2022). This work supports “norms-based,” “sociotropic” explanations (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). One such norm in development is that the U.S. is welcoming of lesbian and gay individuals – at least in international imagery (Snow and Cull 2020). Many right-wing parties across Western democracies, too, promote gay-friendly foreign images and national identities (Magni and Reynolds 2023). Often, this is done to justify opposition to supposedly homophobic Black, Brown, and Muslim immigrants or to justify foreign interventions like foreign aid conditionalities (e.g., homonationalism) (Puar 2007; Kwon, Scarborough, and Taylor 2022). Thus, just like language or religion signals cultural closeness, so too will an openly gay or lesbian sexual identity.

But theories of *economic potential* have greatest empirical support. Numerous studies find that highly educated migrants working in prestigious, high-earning professions are seen as most deserving of entry (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Helbling and Kriesi 2014; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Donnalaja 2022). Although economic potential is not a legal consideration when awarding refugee status, respondents find hypothetical refugees with economic potential to be more deserving (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Lawlor and Paquet 2021). And while LG Americans experience greater rates of poverty and have lower incomes compared to straight Americans, there is popular perception of this population being wealthy (DeFilippis 2016). This perception may transfer over toward the deservingness of LG migrants if Americans perceive this population as similarly being wealthy or, at least, as having greater economic potential.

Additionally, work on refugees has pointed to the importance of *humanitarian merit* in matters of deservingness. While Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner (2016) find greater support in Europe for immigrants with greater economic potential, they also find that respondents favor immigrants coming for “humanitarian” rather than “economic” reasons. In the Danish context, Hedegaard (2022) finds that respondents are less likely to support climate migrants than typical refugees, but these two groups are both considered more deserving than economic migrants. As repression against LG communities increases in countries like Russia (Velasco 2023), this may prime Americans to be more sympathetic toward LG migrants on humanitarian grounds.

It is therefore important to disentangle cultural theories of immigrant deservingness from economic or humanitarian explanations. Doing so has yet to be convincingly executed – neither for LG immigrants, specifically, nor all immigrants, generally. Part of the issue is that many of these aspects of countries and individuals are correlated. Immigrants originating in wealthier countries tend to be considered to have both more economic potential and cultural similarity. Humanitarian migrants usually originate in less wealthy countries that are regarded as having less cultural similarity or economic potential. Few studies have assessed cultural similarity theory beyond religion and language.

Methods

We use a conjoint survey experiment to isolate these components of deservingness (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). A conjoint design allows reliable estimation of causal effects of multiple attributes on hypothetical choices (Bansak et al. 2021). It also allows estimation of interaction effects (Egami and Imai 2019) and heterogeneous effects based on respondent attributes (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020).

Despite the recent rise of LG immigrants in the U.S., sexuality has been under-explored in studies of immigrant deservingness.¹ We use sexual minority status as a measure of cultural similarity that overcomes these issues. Sexual minorities are present throughout the world, avoiding issues of country-level correlates. The present era is characterized by rapidly changing policies and attitudes regarding sexual minorities, as well as substantial global heterogeneity. A large majority of Americans now support same-sex marriage and other rights for same-sex couples (Ofosu et al. 2019). The proposed study will be one of the first survey experiments to consider immigrant sexuality explicitly.

To assess the degree to which sexuality matters as a sign of cultural similarity, we randomize two other attributes of cultural similarity: language and religion. To examine the cultural similarity theory explicitly, we also ask respondents to choose which profile they see as more culturally similar to the U.S. Furthermore, while we theorize that the deservingness of this type of immigrant may cut across typical divisions, we anticipate some heterogeneous effects across respondents. Namely, we hypothesize that respondents with greater cultural affinity with and support for LG communities will view LG migrants as more deserving. We measure the following signals of respondents' cultural closeness: educational attainment, sexual/gender minority status, political party affiliation, and religiosity.

Research Design

The conjoint survey design asks respondents to read two vignettes describing hypothetical immigrants and choose the one they prefer to gain entry to the United States (Lawlor and Paquet 2021; Fraser and Murakami 2022). Each respondent completes this task four times.

For the immigrant profiles, we vary four attributes. Two are controls: *gender* has two levels (man and woman) and *country GDP* has two levels (moderately wealthy and poor). The other attributes test our hypotheses. *Skill* has three levels (has an MD and works as a cardiologist; has a high school degree and works as a restaurant manager; and has a primary school education and works as a cleaner). *Language* has two levels (speaks English and does not speak English), *religion* has two levels (Christian and Muslim), and *sexuality* has two levels (gay/lesbian and straight). Finally, *reason for migration* has two levels (could not find work due to high unemployment; feared government persecution). In all, this creates 192 potential profiles for respondents to evaluate.

One example profile might read: "Immigrant 1 wishes to be admitted as an immigrant to the United States. She comes from a moderately wealthy country, has a primary school education, and

¹Lawlor and Paquet (2021) include persecution due to sexual orientation (along with religion) as a "humanitarian deservingness cues" for hypothetical asylum seeker profiles, but not for refugee profiles, and they do not disaggregate these two cues. Hedegaard (2022) list "sexuality" as a possible form of persecution for hypothetical refugee profiles, along with race, religion, nationality, or political orientation.

works as a cleaner. She does not speak English, is Christian, and identifies as lesbian. She had to leave her country because she could not find work due to high unemployment.”

After choosing which profile they wish to see admitted to the U.S., respondents choose which profile they believe has greater shared values with the U.S. Further details about the survey instrument are in the Appendix.

In addition to estimating average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for the attributes of interest (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014), we estimate two other quantities. We look at the interaction effect (Egami and Imai 2019) between profile sexuality and reason for migration; we expect that sexual minorities fleeing persecution will be seen as more deserving than those looking for work, and this difference may be greater for sexual minorities than straight immigrants. We also test for the presence of heterogeneous effects for subsamples of respondents (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020), including by political party affiliation, educational level, sexual/gender identity, and religiosity.

We have applied to Time-sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS). If our application is success, they will send our survey to a representative sample of adults in the United States using NORC’s AmeriSpeak Panel. If TESS does not choose our proposal, we will use university research funds to conduct our survey.

Each respondent is shown the survey instrument four times, for a total of eight questions plus four sets of vignettes. We anticipate a sample size of 1,710 evaluating 13,680 sets of profiles, which our DeclareDesign (Blair, Coppock, and Humphreys 2023) power analysis suggests is sufficient to detect our effect of interest at a sufficient level of 85 percent (see appendix).

Preliminary Results

We conducted a pilot study of 100 respondents using Prolific Academic, showing each respondent two sets of profiles (see Appendix for details and figures). For LG profiles, we see an AMCE effect size of 0.032 in the expected direction (Figure 1); respondents are 3.2 percent more likely to choose a gay or lesbian immigrant for admission to the U.S. Furthermore, there is evidence of an interaction between sexuality and reason for departure: LG profiles fleeing persecution are more likely to be chosen than straight ones fleeing persecution (Figure 2). Subgroup analyses show that Republicans, Christians, and straight respondents see LG migrants as less deserving (Figure 3). All of these effects are in line with our theory; our larger, representative final survey of 1,710 respondents will allow the estimation of more precise effects on a representative sample.

Contribution

This study contributes to literature on immigrant deservingness and sexual minorities. Despite the rapid rise of LG immigrants in the U.S., we know little about how the American public views this population. Furthermore, previous studies of immigrant deservingness have rarely considered or clearly evaluated how cultural similarity might shape respondents’ choices. This research will clarify this area for scholars of immigration and sexual minorities, inform policymakers of public opinion, and provide activists for immigrant and queer rights with tools to shape their advocacy work.

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Appendix

Survey Instrument

Include panel question on LGBT identity. Each respondent will be shown four sets of profiles. For each set, they will be asked the following two questions:

Please carefully read the following two descriptions of potential immigrants to the United States. Then indicate which one you personally would prefer to see admitted to the United States.

Immigrant [1/2] wishes to be admitted as an immigrant to the U.S. [He/she] comes from a [GDP] country, [Skill]. [He/she] [Language], is [Religion], and identifies as [Sexuality]. [He/she] had to leave [his/her] country because [he/she] [reason].

Randomize:

Attribute	Vignette text
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• man• woman
Country GDP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• moderately wealthy• low-income
Skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• has an MD and works as a cardiologist• has a high school degree and works as a restaurant manager• has a primary school education and works as a cleaner
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• speaks English• does not speak English
Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Christian• Muslim
Sexuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• gay/lesbian• straight (that is, not gay/lesbian)
Reason for migration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• feared government persecution• could not find work due to high unemployment

Example:

Immigrant 1	Immigrant 2
Immigrant 1 is a woman from a moderately wealthy country. She has a primary school education and works as a teacher. She speaks English, is Muslim, and identifies as lesbian. She had to leave her country because she could not find work due to high unemployment.	Immigrant 2 is a man from a low-income country. He has an MD and works as a cardiologist. He does not speak English, is Christian, and identifies as straight (that is, not gay). He had to leave his country because he feared government persecution.

1. *Based on their descriptions, which of these two immigrants would you personally prefer to see admitted to the United States?*
 - Immigrant 1 should be admitted
 - Immigrant 2 should be admitted
2. *Based on their descriptions, which of these two immigrants do you think has greater shared values with the United States?*
 - Immigrant 1 has greater shared values with the U.S.
 - Immigrant 2 has greater shared values with the U.S.

Pilot Study Results

We conducted a pilot study of 100 U.S. citizens using Prolific Academic, showing each respondent two sets of profiles as described in the survey instrument above. We also asked respondents key questions that are included in the TESS standard data delivery (political ideology and religion) and AmeriSpeak Core Adult Profile (sexuality).

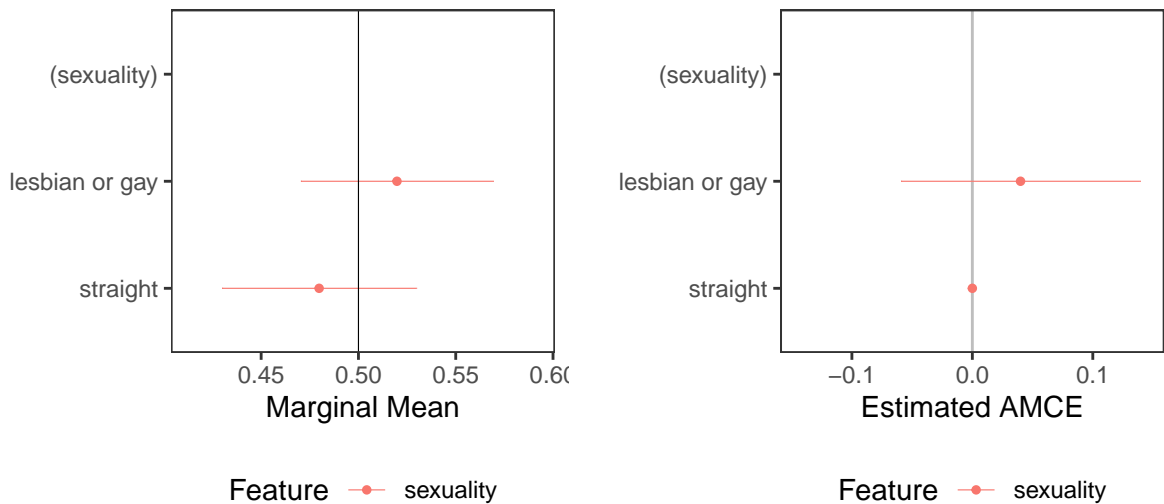


Figure 1: Estimated marginal means and AMCEs for Prolific Academic pilot study of 100 respondents each shown 2 sets of profiles. Standard errors are clustered within respondent.

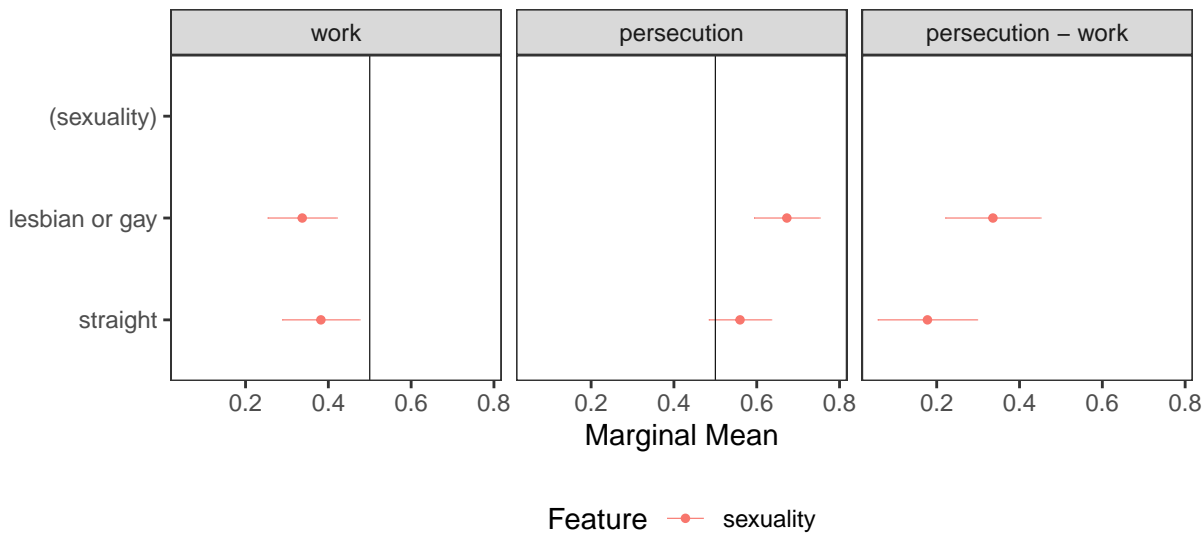


Figure 2: Marginal means of the interaction between sexuality and the reason for migration

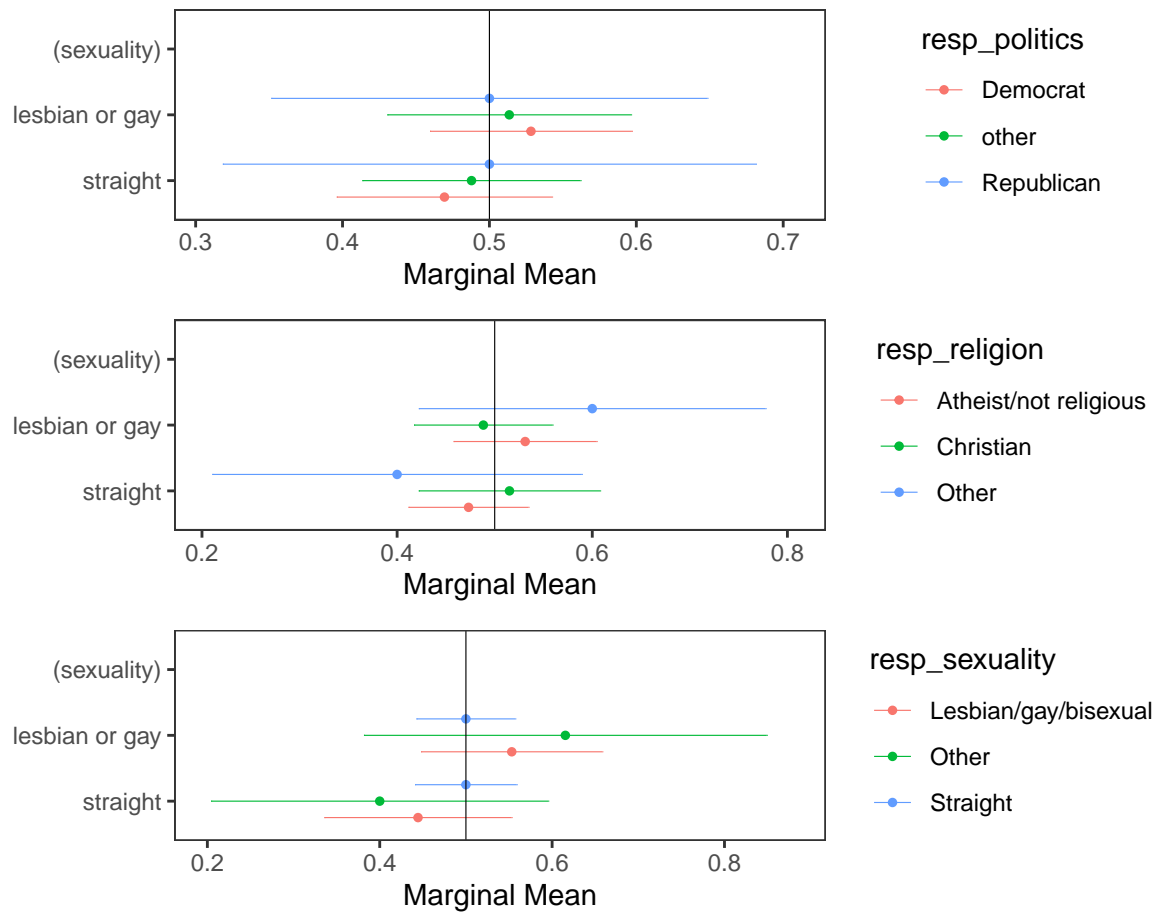


Figure 3: Marginal means for subgroups

Power analysis

Table 1: DeclareDesign power analysis of the lesbian/gay attribute in a conjoint design, based on 500 simulations of 1,710 respondents being shown 4 sets of profiles. We assume that all effect sizes estimated in our pilot study are the true effect sizes.

term	mean_estimate	sd_estimate	power	se(power)	n_sims
(Intercept)	0.304	0.011	1.000	0.000	500
educationcollege	0.259	0.010	1.000	0.000	500
educationHS	0.117	0.010	1.000	0.000	500
English	0.012	0.008	0.308	0.020	500
lesbian or gay	0.025	0.008	0.858	0.015	500
moderately_wealthy	-0.041	0.008	0.998	0.002	500
Muslim	0.035	0.009	0.978	0.006	500
persecution	0.180	0.008	1.000	0.000	500
woman	-0.069	0.008	1.000	0.000	500