

TESS Proposal: Skill, Sexuality, and Immigrant Deservingness

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Overview: 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 toward significant increases in LG migrants coming to the U.S. (Hoffmann and Velasco 2021; Vogler 2016). Despite this growth, how Americans view these types of migrant is unknown. Second, while Americans are increasingly polarized on their views toward migration, support for gay and lesbian migrants may be cross-cutting. Strong majorities now support related issues like marriage equality and even the Trump Administration discursively promoted pro-gay elements in U.S. foreign policy – enhancing the image of the U.S. as a tolerant society even during rising ethnonationalism and xenophobia. Therefore, this project proposes to investigate whether sexual minorities are evaluated as more deserving due to perceived cultural similarity to the U.S. This will help disentangle Americans’ preferences for migrants’ presumed cultural similarity from economic potential and humanitarian merit as well as delineate public opinion of this under-studied group.

Background: Two recent policy changes have contributed to a rapid rise of lesbian and gay immigrants in the United States. In 2011, President Obama moved to make queer refugees a “population of concern” for the U.S. (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, numbers of same-sex couples including immigrants increased 140 percent – a dramatic increase compared to the 22 percent 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 has attempted to assess how native-born respondents assess 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 argue *cultural similarity* will be the primary mechanism through which Americans determine LG immigrant deservingness. The limited relevant research that exists research finds biases 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). And 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). Even Western right-wing parties often promote gay-friendly foreign images – if only to justify opposition to supposedly homophobic Black and Brown immigrants or to justify such foreign interventions as 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).

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.

It is therefore important to disentangle cultural theories of immigrant deservingness from economic or humanitarian explanations. Doing so has yet to be convincingly executed. 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. And besides religion, few studies have assessed cultural similarity theory.

We propose using a conjoint survey experiment to isolate these components of deservingness. Despite the recent rise of LG immigrants in the U.S., sexuality has been under-explored in studies of immigrant deservingness.¹ We will 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.

Research Design: We will use a conjoint survey experiment, which allows isolation of these components (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Respondents will 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).

For the immigrant profiles, we will vary four attributes. Two are controls: gender has two levels (man and woman) and country GDP has three levels (wealthy, middle-income, and poor). The other two 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 in custodial). Finally, reason for migration has five levels (identifies as gay, left because homosexuality is criminalized; identifies as gay, left because spoken out against authoritarian government; identifies as gay, could not find work; identifies as straight, spoken out

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.

against authoritarian government; identifies as straight, could not find work). In all, this creates $2 \times 3 \times 3 \times 5 = 90$ potential profiles for respondents to evaluate.

We will present respondents with two vignettes, and they will indicate which one they see as more deserving of being admitted to the United States. One example profile might read: “Immigrant 1 wishes to be admitted as an immigrant to the U.S. She comes from a wealthy country, has a high school degree and works as a restaurant manager. She identifies as gay. She had to leave her country because she has spoken out against the authoritarian government and feared for her life.”

After choosing which profile they wish to see admitted to the U.S., respondents will give a rating between 1 and 7 of each profile’s deservingness, a rating of perceived sharing of American values, and have space to justify their decisions with open-ended text. Respondents will all be U.S. citizens, and they will be asked whether they identify as a sexual or gender minority. 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 will test for the presence of heterogeneous effects for subsamples of respondents ([Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020](#)), including by political ideology, educational level, and sexual/gender identity.

Pretest Results: Our pilot study...

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 these immigrants. Furthermore, previous studies of immigrant deservingness have rarely considered 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

1. Please carefully read the following two descriptions of potential immigrants to the U.S. 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] [reason].

- Gender
 - man
 - woman
- Country GDP
 - wealthy
 - middle-income
 - poor
- Skill
 - 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 in custodial
- Reason
 - identifies as gay. [He/she] had to leave [his/her] country because homosexuality is criminalized and [he/she] feared for [his/her] life.
 - identifies as gay. [He/she] had to leave [his/her] country because [he/she] has spoken out against the authoritarian government and feared for [his/her] life.
 - identifies as gay. [He/she] had to leave [his/her] country because [he/she] could not find work.
 - identifies as straight. [He/she] had to leave [his/her] country because he has spoken out against the authoritarian government and feared for [his/her] life.
 - identifies as straight. [He/she] had to leave [his/her] country because [he/she] could not find work.

2. On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 signifies that the U.S. should absolutely not admit immigrant 1 and 7 signifies that the U.S. should definitely admit this immigrant, how would you rate immigrant 1?

3. Using the same scale, how would you rate immigrant 2?

4. Please write a justification for why you made the choice and ratings you did.

5. *On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 signifies having no shared values and 7 signifies a great deal of shared values, to what degree do you think immigrant 1 has shared values with the U.S.?*
6. *Using the same scale, how would you rate immigrant 2?*
7. *Please write a justification for why you made the choice and ratings you did.*
8. *Was anything unclear in these instructions, or did you have any problems completing this task?*
9. *Do you identify as a sexual or gender minority (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer)?*
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. unsure

Power analysis