

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

Abstract

In the wake of significant increases in lesbian and gay (LG) immigration, do Americans view LG migrants as more deserving of entry to the U.S. than their straight counterparts? Using a conjoint survey experiment with 1,650 respondents, we investigate how potential immigrants’ sexual-minority status affects Americans’ perceptions of their deservingness for admission and their cultural similarity to the U.S. Results show that, overall, Americans do not perceive LG immigrants as more deserving than straight ones, and LG immigrants are perceived as less culturally similar. But survey results reveal heterogeneity: LG immigrants fleeing persecution are seen as more deserving of admission, and Democrats, atheists, and LG respondents consider LG migrants more deserving than straight ones. This paper helps disentangle Americans’ preferences for migrants’ presumed cultural similarity from economic potential and humanitarian merit as well as elucidate public opinion of an under-studied but politically salient group.

Introduction

Do Americans view lesbian and gay (LG) migrants as more deserving to enter the U.S. than their straight counterparts? Recent changes in U.S. federal policy have contributed to significant increases in LG migrants ([Vogler 2016](#); [Hoffmann and Velasco 2024](#)). From 2008 to 2019, different-sex couples containing immigrants increased by 22 percent (from 7.8 million to 9.5 million), while those of corresponding same-sex couples grew by 140 percent (from 44 thousand to 107 thousand) ([Hoffmann and Velasco 2023](#)). Despite this growth, how Americans view this emergent population is unknown. To date, there has been no empirical evaluation of Americans’ perceptions of LG migrants. Aside from evaluating this case for its own sake, LG migrants are important to investigate because they lie at the intersection of two ongoing processes in American society. First, Americans are increasingly polarized on immigration, particularly along the sociotropic and cultural aspects of migration ([Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014](#); [Johnston, Newman, and Velez 2020](#)). Second, there is increasing bipartisan support for some aspects of LG rights, such as marriage equality ([Gallup 2023](#)). Moreover, positions on LG rights in international contexts often span partisan divides, conveying national and cultural supremacy vis-a-vis countries in the Global South ([Alessi et al. 2020](#); [Danisi et al. 2021](#); [Turnbull-Dugarte and López Ortega 2023](#); [Puar 2007](#); [Martel 2018](#)).

Against this backdrop, this project investigates the perceived deservingness of sexual minorities to enter the U.S. We ask three research questions. First, how do U.S. citizens evaluate sexuality when making determinations of immigrant deservingness for admission, relative to other aspects? Second, are gay and lesbian immigrants perceived as more culturally similar to the U.S. compared to their heterosexual counterparts, and how does this relate to assessments of deservingness? Finally, how do Americans’ perceptions of sexual minority immigrants vary – such as by their own political affiliation, religious identification, or sexuality?

To answer these, we administer a conjoint survey experiment that asks respondents to choose between two hypothetical immigrants for admission to the U.S., and they are also asked to indicate which profile they see as more culturally similar to the U.S. This is one of the first survey experiments to both examine immigrant sexuality explicitly and to directly test a cultural similarity hypothesis for immigrant deservingness.

Results demonstrate a positive yet nonsignificant effect of sexual-minority status on perceived deservingness. When disaggregated by respondent characteristics that may be more sympathetic to both LG rights and migration – such as Democrats and non-religious – positive effects reach our preferred significance threshold. Yet, despite prior literature suggesting that sexual-minority status may signal cultural similarity, these migrants are viewed as significantly *less* culturally similar compared to their heterosexual counterparts, even among groups that think they are more deserving of entry. This study contributes to literature on immigrant deservingness, political culture, and the emerging field of queer migration.

Background

Policy related to LG migrants has seen major changes in recent years. In 2011, President Barack Obama moved to make queer refugees a “population of concern” (Vogler 2016), boosting the number of successful asylum claims (Shaw et al. 2021). In 2013, the end of the Defense of Marriage Act allowed U.S. citizens and permanent residents to sponsor the visa of a same-sex partner for the first time (Edwards 2013). Likely due to these changes, numbers of same-sex couples containing immigrants increased 140 percent between 2008 and 2019 (Hoffmann and Velasco 2024). While most scholarship on LG immigrants focuses on asylum-seekers and others 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 2023). These observations motivate our central question: To what extent do Americans consider sexual orientation a salient factor in evaluating the deservingness of potential migrants?

We hypothesize that *cultural similarity* will be the primary mechanism through which Americans determine LG immigrant deservingness. Other work finds that “norms-based” and “sociotropic” explanations often account for how U.S. citizens perceive immigrant deservingness (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). For example, Westerners are biased against Muslims and speakers of foreign languages, while Christians and speakers of the host country language are viewed more favorably (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Donnalaja 2022; Aviña et al. 2024). These trends raise an important question: To what extent is a new norm developing that characterizes the U.S. as welcoming of LG individuals – at least

internationally (Novitskaya 2023; Snow and Cull 2020)? Many right-wing parties across Western democracies, including the United States, promote gay-friendly positions abroad (Magni and Reynolds 2023; Moreau 2018; NBC 2019; Janoff 2022). Often, this is done to justify opposition to supposedly homophobic Black, Brown, and Muslim immigrants or to motivate interventions through foreign aid conditionalities (i.e., homonationalism) (Puar 2007; Kwon, Scarborough, and Taylor 2022). This promotion is enabled by the fact that U.S. public opinion is increasingly supportive of LG rights. In 2022, for example, U.S. support for marriage equality reached 71%, and 93% of Americans agreed that gays and lesbians should have equal employment rights (Gallup 2023). These attitudes are related to both increasing U.S. LGBTQ+ identification (7.6% in 2023) and increasing contact with such individuals (Gallup 2024).

Yet there are reasons to be suspect of such national narratives. Recent adoptions of anti-LGBTQ+ policy and hardened anti-immigrant sentiments in the U.S. may mean that LG immigrants are particularly vulnerable to perceptions of cultural distance and undeservingness (Jones 2024). Americans’ preferences for admission may be based on an “ideal American” rooted in family values – such as heterosexual reproduction and commitment to Christian values – that may stand in contrast to LG migrants (Lehr 1999; Behrman and Weitzman 2024). (See also Turnbull-Dugarte 2024 on LG surrogacy support.) Another possibility is that Americans are simply indifferent to sexuality when considering potential immigrants.

Besides cultural similarity, previous work raises two other possible theories for how Americans might evaluate deservingness for admission. Theories of *economic potential* have the greatest empirical support. Highly educated migrants working in prestigious, high-earning professions are seen as particularly 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, this population is often perceived as being wealthy (DeFilippis 2016), which could translate to perceptions of greater economic potential for LG immigrants.

Additionally, work on refugees has highlighted 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) find that refugees are 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 nor more broadly. Many of these aspects of countries and individuals are correlated, and few studies have assessed cultural similarity theory beyond religion and language. 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.

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 features 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). 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.

After conducting a pilot study (details in the Online Appendix §H), we fielded the main survey on June 20, 2023, to 1,650 U.S. citizen respondents using Prolific.¹ The Online Appendix §B contains details of the ethical principles we adhered to during data collection. 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. Each respondent completed this task four times. We vary seven features of immigrant profiles: gender, country GDP, skill, language, religion, sexuality, and reason for migration (see Table 1 for details). In all, this creates 192 potential profiles for respondents to evaluate. We re-weight the data to better match the U.S. population as a whole, using the July-August 2022 American Trends Panel (Pew 2022); see the Online Appendix §C for details. Due to missing data for age, we drop 29 respondents from analysis, resulting in final sample of 1,621.

One example profile reads: “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 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.”

Respondents are asked two questions: (1) “Based on their descriptions, which of these two immigrants **would you personally prefer to see admitted** to the United States?”, and (2) “Based on their descriptions, which of these two immigrants do you think **has greater shared values with the United States?**” After answering these questions for four sets of profiles, respondents are asked about a variety of personal attributes. The full survey instrument is available in the Supplemental Material, with a brief overview in §A of the Online Appendix.

In addition to estimating average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for the features of interest (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014), we estimate two other quantities. We examine the interaction (Egami and Imai 2019) between profile sexuality and reason for

¹This study was pre-registered on OSF, and we did not deviate from our planned analyses except where specified: https://osf.io/26wfm/?view_only=922595b5c55f40b98b77fb922c7f115d

Table 1: Immigrants profiles are created by randomly drawing one value from each of these seven features

| Feature | 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 |

Table 2: Pre-registered hypotheses

| Hypothesis | Prediction |
|---|---|
| H1a (main effect: positive) | Lesbian/gay identity will have a positive AMCE, relative to straight identity. |
| H1b (main effect: negative) | Lesbian/gay identity will have a negative AMCE, relative to straight identity. |
| H2 (mediation) | Respondents who are more likely to choose lesbian/gay profiles for admission will choose them as having more shared values with the U.S., on average. Controlling for this measure of cultural similarity will attenuate the AMCE for lesbian/gay identity. |
| H3 (interaction) | For lesbian/gay profiles, persecution will have a higher marginal mean than work as a reason for migration. |
| Heterogeneous effects for marginal means for lesbian/gay identity | |
| H4a (education) | Respondents with a bachelor's degree will have a higher marginal mean than other education levels |
| H4b (political ideology) | Democrats will have a higher marginal mean than Republicans |
| H4c (religion) | Christians will have a lower marginal mean than other groups |
| H4d (sexuality) | Lesbian/gay/bisexual respondents will have a higher marginal mean than straight respondents |
| H4e (overpopulation) | Respondents who worry about immigration contributing to overpopulation will have higher marginal means |
| H4f (lesbian/gay contacts) | Respondents who have lesbian/gay friends and family will have higher marginal means |

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, education, religion, sexual orientation, whether someone has LG friends or family, and whether someone is concerned about overpopulation. We expect that support for LG migrants will be highest among Democrats, the highly educated, sexual minorities, those concerned about overpopulation², and people who have close LG contacts (Lewis 2011; DellaPosta 2018).

We calculate average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for the main effects and marginal means for interactions and heterogeneous effects. A positive AMCE for lesbian/gay identity implies that presentation of a lesbian/gay profile increases respondents' favorability toward admitting that immigrant, relative to a straight profile. A higher marginal mean for lesbian/gay identity implies greater likelihood of choosing lesbian/gay immigrants for admission. We present our pre-registered hypotheses in Table 2.³

Results

Results for H1a and H1b are shown in Figure 1, which presents AMCEs for all features. (Full tables of all results are in the Online Appendix §G.) For LG profiles, we see a trivial AMCE effect size of -0.012, and it is nonsignificant. Neither H1a nor H1b is supported; overall, LG profiles are not more or less likely to be selection for admission to the U.S.

H2 hypothesized mediation, i.e. that controlling for shared values would attenuate the effect of LG profiles on being chosen for admission. Although we expected that LG profiles would be seen as more culturally similar, Figure 1 shows that this is not the case: LG profiles were *less* likely to be designated as having shared values with the U.S.⁴ Although the main effect for LG profiles was nonsignificant, Figure 2 directly assesses the mediation hypothesis, presenting AMCEs for sexuality stratified by whether the profile was designated as being more culturally similar to the U.S. Interestingly, among profiles that were designated as not having shared values with the U.S., LG profiles were significantly less likely to be chosen for admission. Among profiles chosen as quite culturally similar, LG profiles have a positive point estimate for admission (though the AMCE is nonsignificant).

Figure 3 presents interaction effects relevant to H3, which predicted that LG profiles with persecution as a reason for migration would be more likely to be chosen than those with economic reasons.⁵ The Figure supports this hypothesis: LG profiles that migrated to seek employment have a marginal mean of 0.381, while those fleeing persecution have a value of 0.592. This difference of 0.211 is larger than the corresponding difference for straight profiles (0.191), but not quite significantly so.

Figure 4 presents marginal means relevant for H4, revealing a number of significant heterogeneous effects. H4a predicted that respondents with at least a bachelor's degree

²Anti-immigration activists often cite overpopulation as a major reason to limit immigration (Reimers 1999).

³Hypothesis H1b was not pre-registered, but it was added following a reviewer's suggestion.

⁴In the Online Appendix §E, we examine how cultural similarity determinations vary by respondent characteristics. All subgroups except the non-religious see LG profiles as less culturally similar.

⁵In the Online Appendix §F, we present interactions with sexuality for all features.

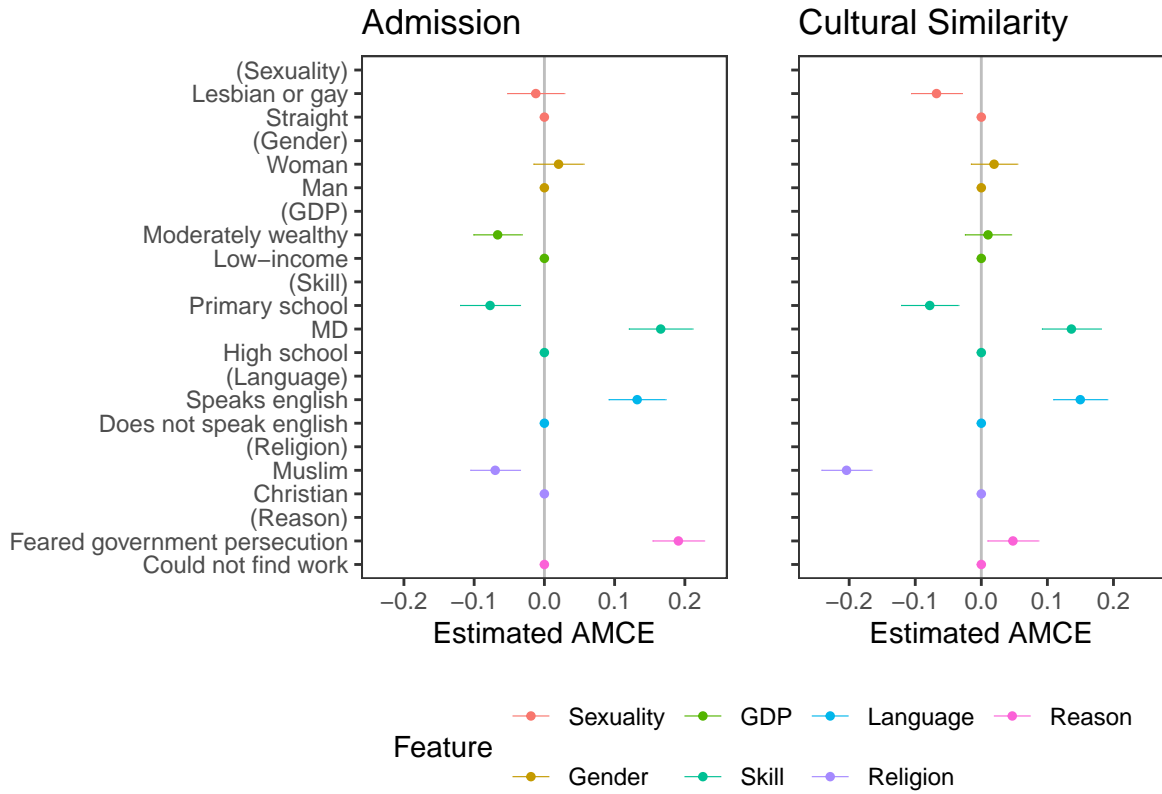


Figure 1: Estimated AMCEs for admission and cultural similarity for all features. Standard errors are clustered within respondent.

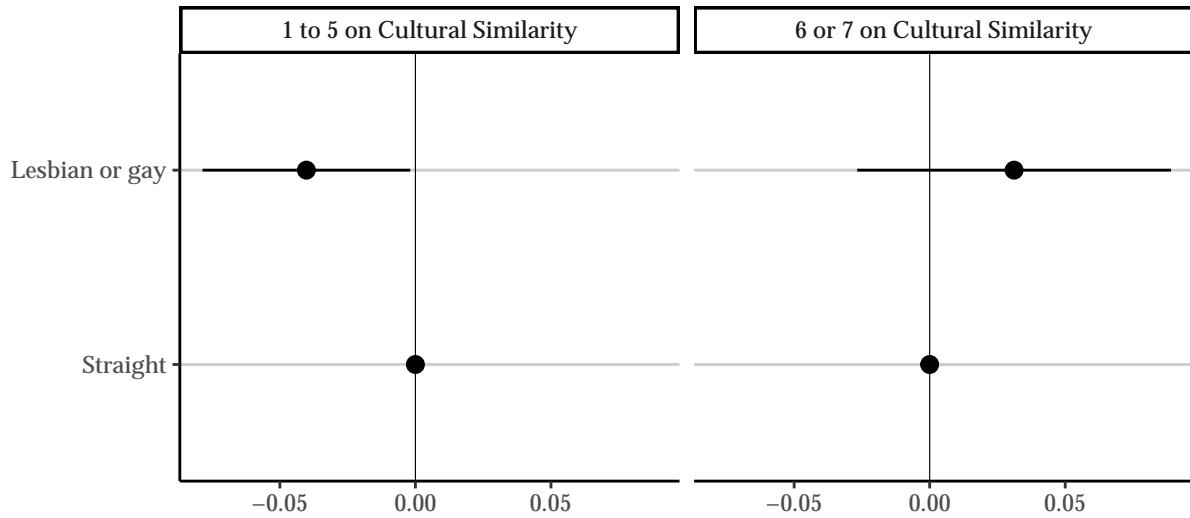


Figure 2: AMCEs for admission for sexuality, stratified by whether the profile received a 6 or 7 out of 7 on cultural similarity ratings

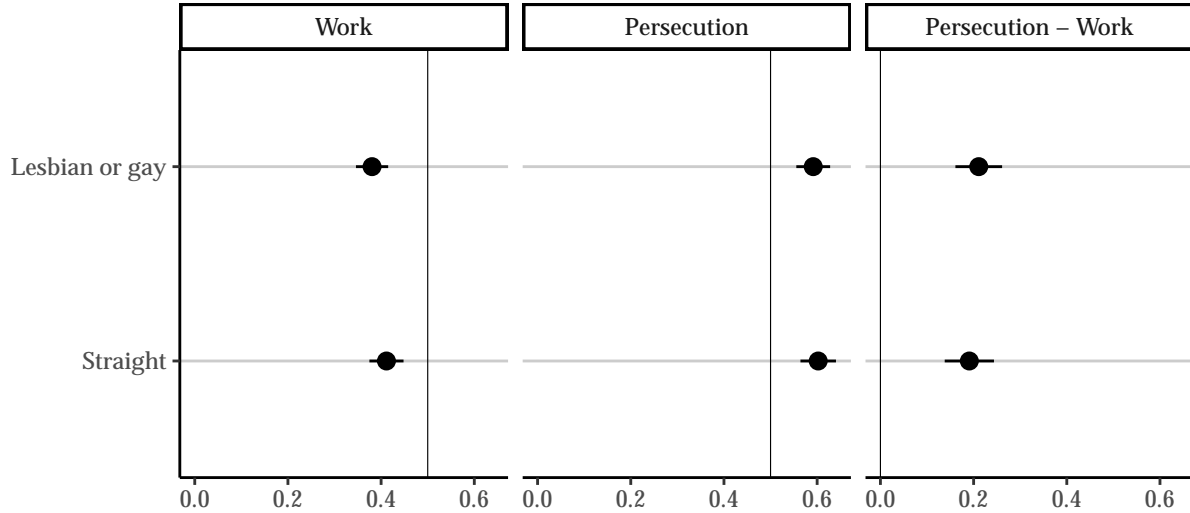


Figure 3: Marginal means of the interaction between sexuality and the reason for migration.

would see LG migrants as more than other educational groups. While respondents with a high school degree or less are less likely to admit LG migrants than those with a college degree, this difference is small and nonsignificant, and both groups are less likely to admit LG migrants than straight ones. Respondents with some college, on the other hand, see LG immigrants as somewhat more deserving. Regarding political ideology, Democrats see LG immigrants as more deserving than straight ones, while Republicans see LG ones as far less deserving, in line with H4b. Results for religion support H4c: Christians see LG immigrants as less deserving than atheists and the non-religious, who are significantly more likely to admit LG migrants than straight ones. As for sexuality, sexual minorities see LG immigrants as more deserving than straight ones, in line with H4d.

Due to the perception that LG migrants are unlikely to have children, will Americans concerned about overpopulation prefer LG migrants to straight ones (H4e)? Marginal means show the opposite effect: Respondents who worry about overpopulation are much less likely to choose LG profiles than people who do not. This is likely because overpopulation concerns are closely associated with conservative political ideologies. Finally, H4f suggested that respondents with LG family and friends would be more likely to choose LG profiles for admission, and Figure 4 supports this.

Discussion and Conclusion

This conjoint survey experiment constitutes one of the first attempts to understand the rapidly growing population of lesbian and gay (LG) migrants in the wake of shifting policies and attitudes. We theorized that Americans would evaluate sexual minorities as more deserving than their straight counterparts due to perceived cultural similarity with the U.S. This prediction failed to hold: On average, U.S. citizens give no preference to LG migrants, and in fact they view them as *less* culturally similar to the U.S. than straight immigrants. Despite the U.S. promoting pro-LG positions in international affairs, this orientation does not translate to public preference for LG migrants.

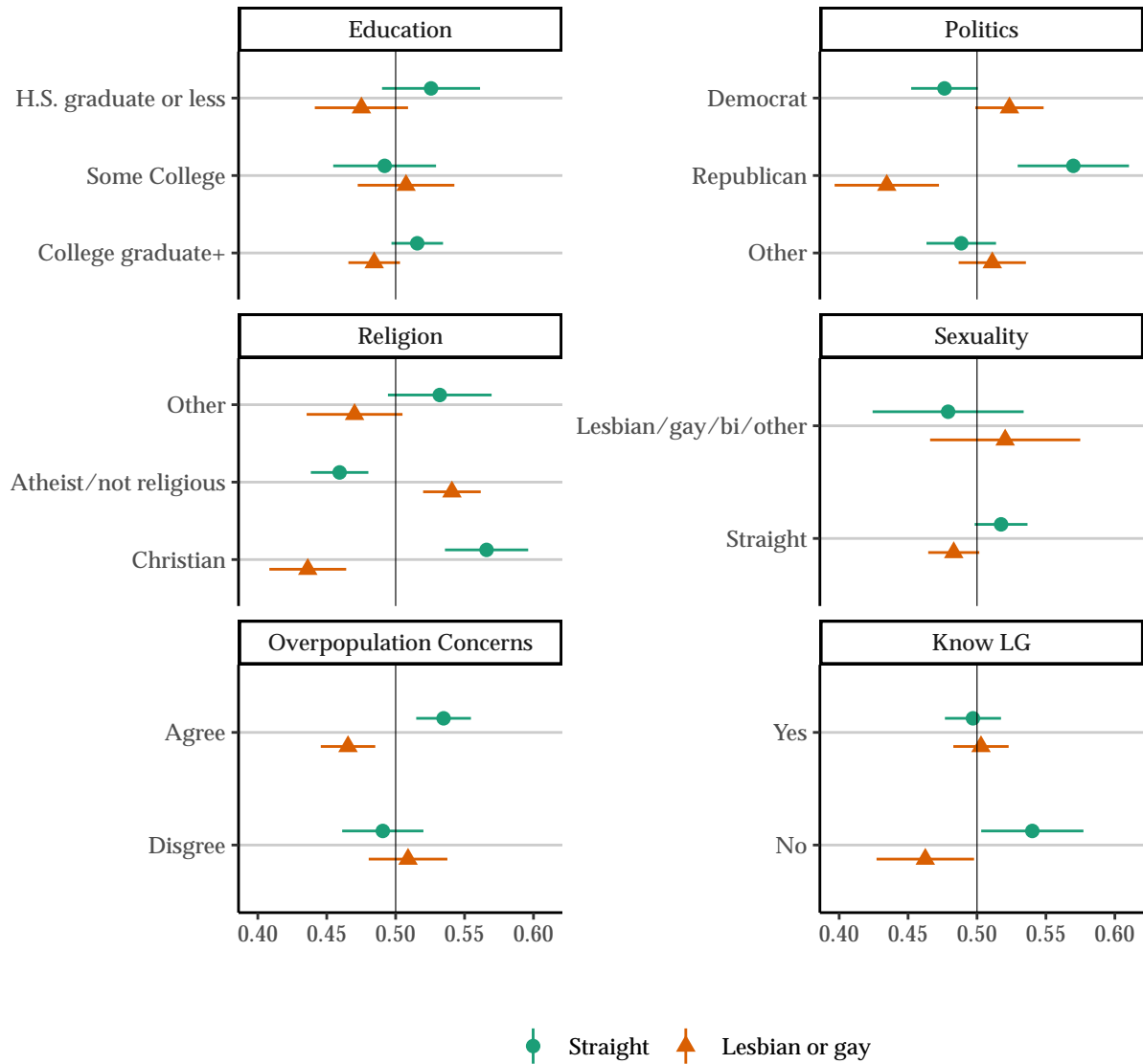


Figure 4: Marginal means for heterogeneous effects of choosing for admission, by respondent characteristics. Standard errors are clustered within respondent.

There are three important sources of heterogeneity beneath these main effects, however. First, certain groups do see LG migrants as more deserving, including Democrats, atheists, LG people, or those who know LG people. Hence views of LG migrants may not cut across traditional attitudes toward migration or LGBTQ issues but reflect partisan polarization (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Hout and Maggio 2021). Second, one instance in which there is overall perceived deservingness of LG migrants is when they are coming to U.S. for humanitarian reasons as opposed to economic – supporting prior research suggests citizens support granting entry to humanitarian migrants (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Hedegaard 2022). And, third, while Americans view LG migrants as less culturally similar, *when they do* find them more similar, there is some evidence that they prefer them over straight migrants.

There are important limitations to this study that should be addressed through future research. Although we adjust our sample with population weights, future studies should use a nationally representative sample. Additionally, while our primary hypothesis is not supported, this study finds several sources of heterogeneity. If cultural similarity is not the primary driver of U.S. attitudes toward LG migrants, what is? Initial findings suggest perceived humanitarian need – especially amid rising global backlash to LG people – or overall partisan polarization may be more promising routes to explore. Nevertheless, this study offers an important first step toward understanding how Americans view the deservingness of LG migrants within an experimental framework. More research is needed to fully explore the contours of this dramatically growing population.

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