

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

Two recent policy changes have contributed to a rapid rise in lesbian and gay (LG) immigrants in the United States. In 2011, President Obama moved to make queer refugees a “population of concern”, boosting the number of successful claims. 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. Since then, numbers of same-sex couples including immigrants increased 140 percent (from 44 thousand to 107 thousand), compared to the 22 percent increase (from 7.8 million to 9.5 million) for their heterosexual counterparts.

Little is known about how Americans view this growing group. 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 of 1,650 respondents, 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 of sexual minority migrants.

Background

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. This work supports “norms-based,” “sociotropic” explanations. One such norm in development is that the U.S. is welcoming of lesbian and gay individuals – at least in international imagery. Many right-wing parties across Western democracies, too, promote gay-friendly foreign images and national identities. 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). 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. Although economic potential is not a legal consideration when awarding refugee status, respondents find hypothetical refugees with economic potential to be more deserving. 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. 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 some studies 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. As repression against LG communities increases in countries like Russia, 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. And few studies have assessed cultural similarity theory beyond religion and language. 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.

Methods

We use a conjoint survey experiment to isolate components of deservingness. A conjoint design allows reliable estimation of causal effects of multiple attributes on hypothetical choices. It also allows estimation of interaction effects and heterogeneous effects based on respondent attributes. We fielded the survey in the summer of 2023 to 1,650 U.S. citizen respondents using Prolific Academic, an online survey panel tool. The survey asked 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.

For the immigrant profiles, we varied 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.

Preliminary Results

Initial analyses show that Americans are 1.2 percent more likely to choose LG migrants for admission than straight ones, but this result is not statistically significant. Across education categories, respondents see straight immigrants as more deserving than LG ones. But respondents with at least a bachelor's degree see LG immigrants as more deserving than respondents with a high school or less education. However, respondents with some college see LG immigrants as the most deserving overall, complicating our theory. Democrats see LG immigrants as more deserving than straight ones, while republicans see LG ones as far less deserving. But among Democrats, LGs have a higher marginal mean. Results for religion show that Christians see LG immigrants as less deserving than atheists and the non-religious, but no less than other religious groups. If we consider sexuality, sexual minorities see LG immigrants as more deserving than straight ones.

Preliminary analyses of the cultural similarity question show that profiles who are seen as more culturally similar are far more likely to be chosen. However LG profiles are seen as less culturally similar. For respondents who see LG profiles as more culturally similar than straight ones, they are more likely to choose the LG profiles.