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

Nathan I. Hoffmann, Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles

Kristopher Velasco, Department of Sociology, Princeton University

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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 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 containing immigrants increased by 22 percent from 2008 to 2019 (from 7.8 million to 9.5 million), while those of corresponding same-sex couples grew by 140 percent in the same period (from 44 thousand to 107 thousand) (Hoffmann and Velasco 2023). Despite this growth, how Americans view these types

of migrants is unknown. Second, Americans are increasingly polarized regarding their views toward migration, especially due to differing concerns about the sociotropic and cultural impact of migration (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Johnston, Newman, and Velez 2020). But support for gay and lesbian migrants may be cross-cutting; bipartisan majorities support related issues such as marriage equality (Gallup 2023). And, as found in Europe, some right-wing parties and citizens support LG migrants in order to make symbolic statements about national and cultural supremacy vis-a-vis the Global South countries some migrants are coming from (Turnbull-Dugarte and López Ortega 2023; Puar 2007).

Therefore, this project investigates whether sexual minorities are evaluated as more deserving 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, and how does sexuality compare with more well studied topics like reason for migration and skill level of the immigrant? Second, are gay and lesbian immigrants perceived as more culturally similar to the U.S. compared to their heterosexual counterparts, and does this increase perceived deservingness? Finally, do Americans' perceptions of sexual-minority immigrants vary by their own politics, religion, sexuality, and other attributes?

To answer these questions, we administer a pre-registered, conjoint survey experiment that asks respondents to choose between repeated sets of two hypothetical immigrants for admission to the U.S. Respondents are then asked to choose 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 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 those with a bachelor's degree, Democrats, non-religious individuals, and those who know an LG person – 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 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 2023). 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 2024). 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. The limited, relevant research that exists finds that "norms-based" and "sociotropic" explanations influence how U.S. citizens perceive immigrant deservingness (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). For example, Americans are biased against Muslims and non-English speakers while Christians and English speakers are viewed as more deserving due to perceived cultural similarity and, in effect, less likely to disrupt established values (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Donnaloja 2022). One such norm in development is that the U.S. is welcoming of lesbian and gay individuals – at least in international imagery and perception by both Americans and potential immigrants (Novitskaya 2023; Snow and Cull 2020). Many right-wing parties across Western democracies, including Trump, promote gay-friendly foreign images and national identities (Magni and Reynolds 2023; Moreau 2018; NBC 2019). 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). Nevertheless, because of these efforts, an openly gay or lesbian sexual identity may signal cultural closeness similar to language or religion.

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; Donnaloja 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 to 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) 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, specifically, nor all immigrants, generally. 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), we fielded the main survey on June 20, 2023, to 1,650 U.S. citizen respondents using Prolific.[1] The Online Appendix 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 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."

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. After being shown four sets of profiles, respondents are asked whether they have any friends or family members who are lesbian or gay. The full survey instrument is available in the Supplemental Material.

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 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, education, religion, sexual orientation, whether someone has LG friends or family,

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[1]This 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 (anonymous link)

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

Feature	Vignette text
Gender	• man • woman
Country GDP	• moderately wealthy • low-income
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 as a cleaner
Language	• speaks English • does not speak English
Religion	• Christian • Muslim
Sexuality	• gay/lesbian • straight (that is, not gay/lesbian)
Reason for migration	• 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

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 overpopulation (Reimers 1999), 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.[2]

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.) 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: 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. 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.[3] 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 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

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[2]Hypothesis H1b was not hypothesized, but it was added following a reviewer's suggestion.

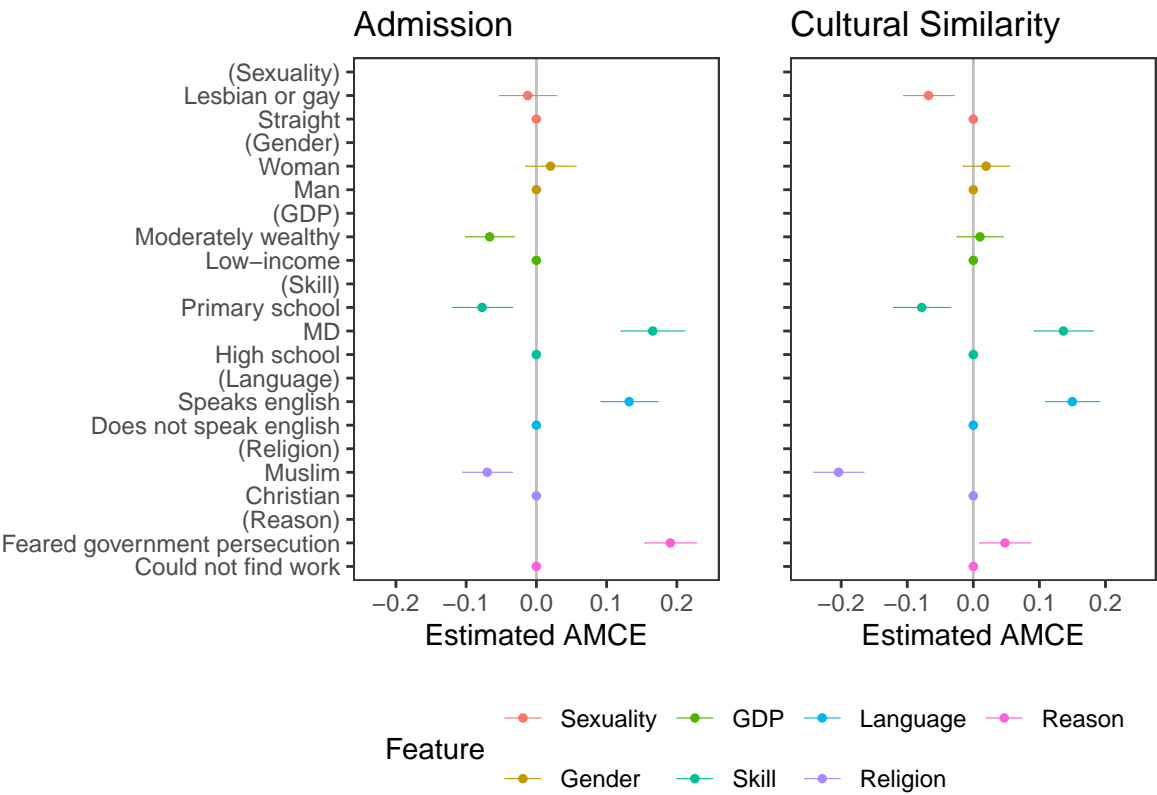[3]In the Online Appendix, we present interactions with sexuality for all features.

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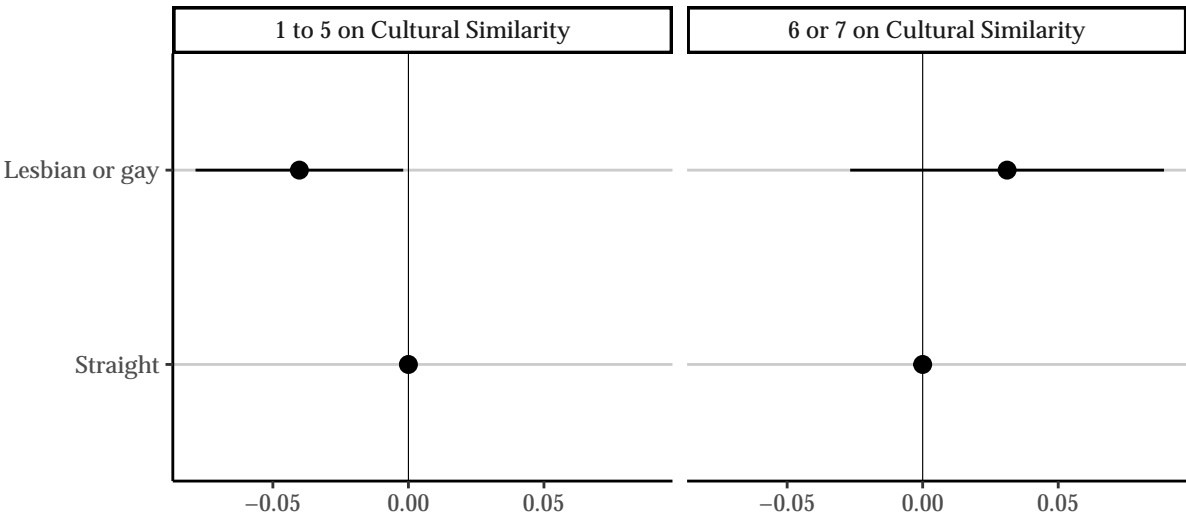

Figure 2: AMCEs for admission for sexuality, stratified by whether the profile received a 6 or 7 out of 7 on cultural similarity ratings
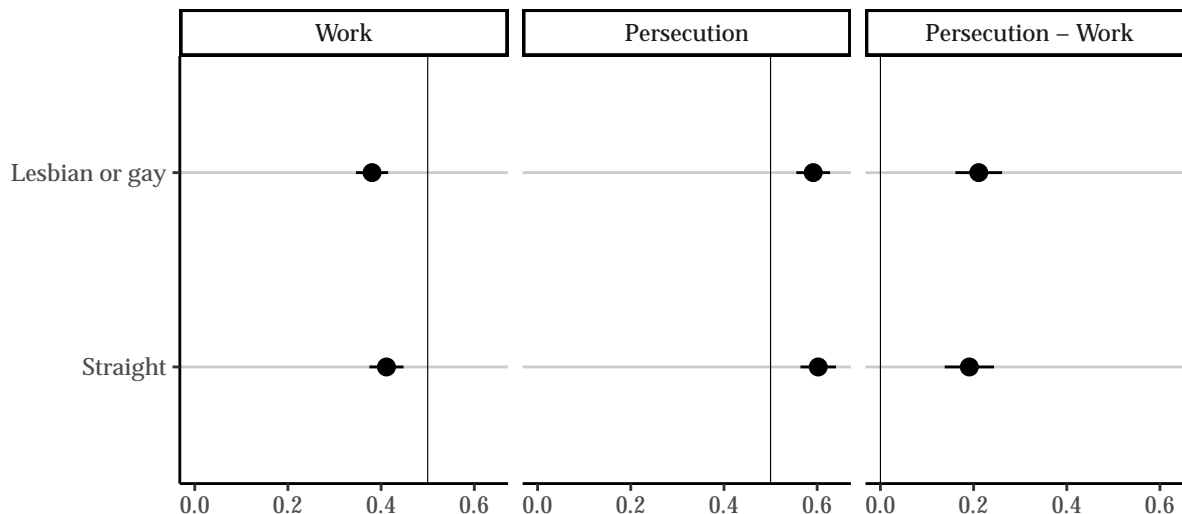
Figure 3: Marginal means of the interaction between sexuality and the reason for migration.

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.

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

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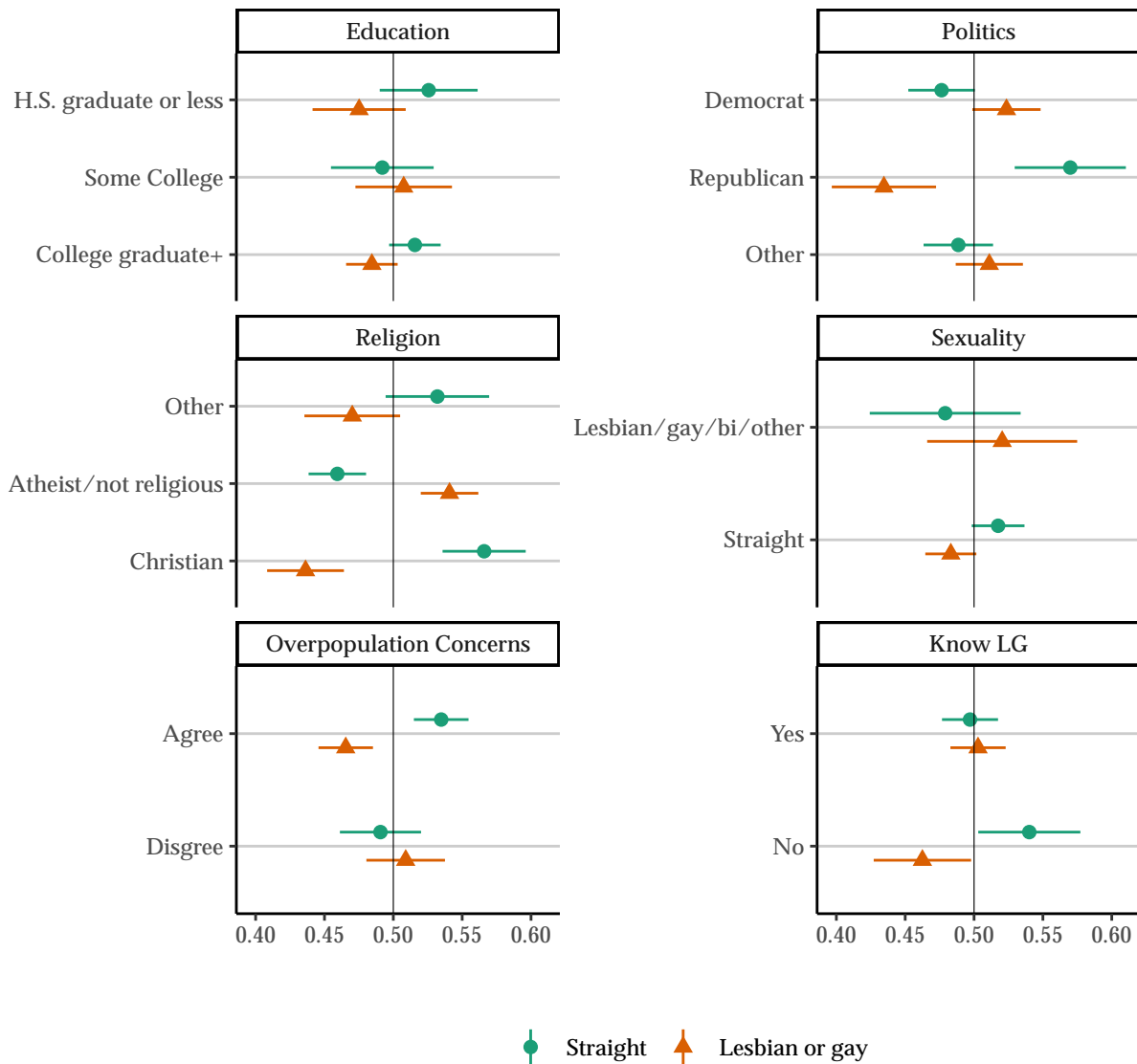
Figure 4: Marginal means for heterogeneous effects by respondent characteristics. Standard errors are clustered within respondent.

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. For example, while the Appendix presents models adjusted 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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