Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Age: Socio-Demographic and Intersectional Characteristics of Migrants

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Sexuality, Migration, and LGB Policy: A Portrait of Immigrants in Same-Sex Couples in the United States

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Abstract

Both internationally and in the United States, the policy landscape for same-sex couples is changing rapidly, and surveys report swiftly increasing numbers of immigrants in same-sex couples in the US. Yet few researchers have examined immigrants in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) couples on a large scale, especially regarding their relationship to LGB policy. Are these immigrants disadvantaged and fleeing anti-LGB contexts, or are they empowered to migrate by progressive origin-country LGB policy? Using American Community Survey data from 2008 to 2019 and original datasets indexing LGB policy changes in 122 countries and all US states, this study assesses and characterizes the scale of LGB migration to the US as well as the role of LGB policy. Compared to immigrants in different-sex couples, those in same-sex couples come from richer, more democratic countries that are less represented among immigrants in the US. They also tend to be more highly educated, work in more prestigious occupations, and have higher incomes. While previous

R code to replicate all analyses is available from the corresponding author's website: https://nathanhoffmann.com/

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work largely focuses on LGB immigrants from repressive contexts, fixed-effect models show that higher proportions of these immigrants come from LGB-friendly countries, and they are more likely to live in progressive US states. These findings highlight how sexuality as well as state policies seemingly unrelated to migration can shape migratory pathways.

Keywords
same-sex couples, LGB policy, sexuality

Introduction

In 2013, the US Supreme Court overturned the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and required the US government to recognize marriages between same-sex spouses. Among many consequences, this decision radically changed the immigration landscape: For the first time, same-sex spouses of US citizens and lawful permanent residents were eligible to file a spousal or fiancé(e) petition for an immigrant visa (Edwards 2013). Since then, the US population of immigrants in same-sex couples has grown rapidly (Redpath 2022). According to American Community Survey (ACS) data (Ruggles et al. 2021), the number of different-sex couples including immigrants increased by 13 percent from 2013 to 2019 (from 8.4 million to 9.5 million), while those of corresponding same-sex couples grew by 76 percent in the same period (from about 61,000 to 107,000). While some cursory descriptions exist (Gates 2013; Goldberg and Conron 2021), there is now a pressing need to understand the contours of this burgeoning population and the relevant forces shaping their migratory pathways.

While immigrants in same-sex couples may resemble their heterosexual conationals and respond to similar migratory forces (e.g., economic benefits and network effects), there is good reason to suspect distinction. As the Supreme Court decision indicates, this population may be particularly responsive to changes in state policy. Indeed, the Supreme Court decision occurred against a backdrop of rapidly changing laws concerning same-sex couples — and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) communities, generally — both in the US and abroad. As some countries have expanded rights and social recognition, others have imposed new forms of repression (Hadler and Symons 2018). Emerging qualitative work demonstrates that changing LGB policy landscapes are a salient factor influencing migration decisions, especially for asylees seeking refuge from more repressive contexts (Gorman-Murray 2009; Mai and King 2009; Vogler 2016; Carrillo 2018) but also for elite queer migrants (Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha 2016; Choi 2022). However, there has yet to be a large-scale, representative investigation into how changing policy environments influence the migration patterns of individuals in same-sex couples into and across the US. Through studying the migration of same-sex couples, this study allows us to gain a fuller understanding of migratory pathways by underscoring

the importance of political and "lifestyle" considerations in migration decisions (Benson and O'Reilly 2012; Fitzgerald, Leblang, and Teets 2014).

How does the US population of immigrants in same-sex couples differ from their different-sex counterparts? And how does country-of-origin and US-state LGB policy relate to their relative numbers? To address our research questions, we integrate two types of data. First, we rely on ACS data from 2008 to 2019 (Ruggles et al. 2021), which allow the identification of individuals in cohabiting same-sex couples as well as their country of origin, US state of residence, education, income, and other individual characteristics. Second, we merge these data with country- and state-level datasets on variables relevant to these migrants, most notably an original dataset indexing LGB policy changes in 122 countries and all US states from 1991 to 2019.

Our analytic strategy proceeds in two parts. First, we descriptively understand who these cohabiting LGB immigrants are. This first step is important because little is known about this growing population. Second, we focus on country-of-origin and US-state effects, modeling how the representation of immigrants in same-sex partnerships changes over time in relation to the LGB policy in both contexts. We account for the number of immigrants in different-sex couples by modeling the proportion of immigrants from a given country that are in cohabiting same-sex couples, out of all cohabiting immigrants from that country.

Our investigation offers several novel insights. First, we find that immigrants in same-sex couples differ markedly compared to conationals in different-sex relationships. Those in same-sex relationships are often more highly educated, have higher incomes, and come from countries with fewer immigrants in the US. Second, we find that origin countries with more LGB-friendly policies send higher proportions of immigrants in same-sex couples to the US. This finding is unexpected given existing queer migration scholarship, which largely focuses on asylum seekers leaving repressive contexts and seeking entry into the US and other countries in the Global North (Murray 2014; Sam and Finley 2015; Akin 2017; Dhoest 2019; Giametta 2020; Karimi 2020; Saleh 2020). Yet the DOMA decision appears to have opened an alternative pathway for sexual migration — a pathway being used at greater rates by relatively privileged migrants from progressive contexts. Our findings also indicate that immigrants in same-sex couples are more likely to reside in US states with progressive policies, especially if they come from countries with more supportive policies as well. By showing how policies seemingly unrelated to migration can shape migration decisions and actions, this article shows how identity — and the state's governance of it — can interact with broader institutional contexts to yield unexpected results.

Background: Changing Policy Landscapes and Same-Sex Immigrant Couples

The US continues to undergo significant shifts in the policies governing LGB populations at both state and federal levels. Since 2003, the US Supreme Court has ruled

sodomy laws and DOMA unconstitutional, federally recognized same-sex marriages, and curtailed employment discrimination. In response, however, several US states have implemented new policies encumbering LGB communities on top of existing discriminatory practices (Kazyak, Burke, and Strange 2018). These dynamics create a varied landscape in which state lines significantly demarcate the types of rights and legal environments LGB people experience. Now, a burgeoning area of scholarship exists to understand the causes of these transformations (Soule 2004; Lax and Phillips 2009) and their distinct consequences for the lives and well-being of LGB people (Cantú 2009; Kail, Acosta, and Wright 2015; Levy and Levy 2017; Boertien and Vignoli 2019; Carpenter 2020).

Although this changing policy landscape affects LGB populations of all types, particular subgroups are differentially impacted. Immigrants in same-sex couples represent a population especially susceptible to recent changes. This is because, prior to being able to experience recognized rights like marriage or nondiscrimination protections, immigrants in same-sex couples must first be able to enter the US. While single queer migrants could potentially enter the US through other visa pathways (e.g., employment-sponsored, family sponsored, and asylum), federal US law historically hindered same-sex couples' ability to enter the country due to the government's lack of recognition of their relationship (Human Rights Watch 2006). And while, in theory, queer asylum seekers could enter with a same-sex spouse using the "derivative asylee status," lack of spousal recognition by sending countries and invasive requirements to "prove" one's sexuality rendered this avenue effectively inaccessible (Human Rights Watch 2006; Ritholtz and Buxton 2021).

The federal environment governing immigration significantly changed after 2013. The US Supreme Court decision ruling DOMA unconstitutional opened the door for same-sex immigrant couples to enter the US through the same process long governing different-sex couples (Edwards 2013). Now, couples could enter together, or one partner already in the US could sponsor their same-sex fiancé(e) or spouse. As Figure 1 highlights, the number of immigrant-containing same-sex couples in the US grew significantly in this period — especially when compared to different-sex couples. Aside from allowing gay and lesbian families to remain unified, this national opening creates an important moment for the scholarly community to begin investigating the factors motivating this emerging population to migrate to the US.

The US is not alone in seeing rapid policy changes related to LGB couples. Recent changes in LGB rights around the world are increasing the salience of one's sexuality in the decision to leave one's home country (Murray 2016; Mole 2018). This is partly driven by the transnational flow of information and general visibility of those with diverse sexualities that accompany these policy changes (Ayoub 2016; Ayoub and Garretson 2017). Greater circulation of cultural content makes people cognizant of how they are treated in their home country due to their sexuality, for better or worse, compared to these outside contexts (Carrillo 2018; Karimi 2020; Vuckovic Juros 2022). Furthermore, international organizations contribute to this increased

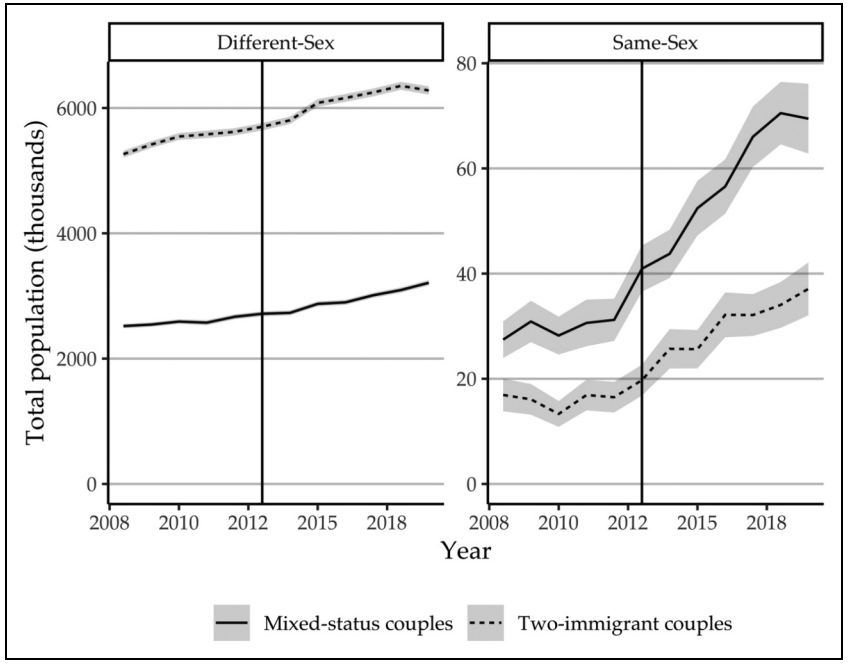

Figure 1. Estimated Totals of Different- and Same-Sex Couples Containing One ("Mixed Status") or Two Immigrants, 2008–2019, With 95% Confidence Intervals. The Vertical Line at 2013 Indicates When the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was Overturned.

salience by constructing sexuality as a legitimate basis for leaving. For example, in 2008, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees issued a new guidance note for why and how countries should consider sexual orientation and gender identity when granting asylum claims (UNHCR 2008). The note guides various authorities to consider discriminatory domestic policies when evaluating asylum claims, as such policies "can create or contribute to an oppressive atmosphere of intolerance and generate a threat of prosecution" (UNHCR 2008, 8). International organizations such as the European Union and several countries now incorporate the UN guidance, though not the US (Giametta 2020). As the DOMA decision demonstrates, too, these LGB policies are important, as they can condition initial access to a country and the quality of life once there.

Current research on the types of policy environments likely to influence the migration of those in same-sex couples is both limited in scope and mixed in outcomes. Only recently have representative samples that allow identification of LGB immigrants become available, yet these have thus far been underused. Thus, a broader portrait of LGB migrants, and how policy environments influence them, is urgently needed.

Empirical Expectations

We combine insights from three longstanding theories of migration with newer scholarship on queer migration to help inform our expectations for migrants in same-sex couples. We begin by describing these theories here in brief but then extend our discussions of each below. First, neoclassical economic theory posits that potential migrants engage in cost–benefit analyses when deciding whether and where to migrate (Sjaastad 1962; Borjas 1989). Second, the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) conceives of migration as a family-level decision; even when the individual migrant may not see a wage gain, migration can help the family by offsetting local economic uncertainty (Stark and Bloom 1985; Taylor 1999). And, third, cumulative causation theory provides additional reasons why migration may occur (Massey 1990). Once a migration stream begins, immigrant networks share information and resources to lower the cost of migration and settling in the destination country (Massey et al. 1987), and institutions arise to ease entry and settlement (Hernández-León 2013). Hence the first "pioneer" migrants are often more positively selected than later migrants, who benefit from these lower barriers to migrating (Hatton and Williamson 2005). If the migration dynamics for same-sex couples operate similarly to those for different-sex couples, then we should see similar processes at play. Yet LGB-specific policy may disrupt or attenuate these patterns.

With these theories in mind, are LGB immigrants in same-sex couples coming from generally repressive or progressive contexts? Although representative research on this population is lacking, existing evidence from qualitative studies supports both hypotheses. Much queer migration research supports the former perspective, reflected in Adur's suggestion that (2018, 321, emphasis theirs) "LGBTI immigrants relocate in pursuit of spaces that they *imagine* will be safer and more liberal." Especially since the UN 2008 guidance note and President Obama's move to make queer refugees a "population of concern" for the US in 2011 (Luibhéid 2008; Lewis and Naples 2014; Vogler 2016), numerous studies have characterized migrants in same-sex relationships as largely escaping repressive contexts (Murray 2014; Sam and Finley 2015; Akin 2017; Dhoest 2019; Giametta 2020; Saleh 2020). Although the US is less progressive and inviting compared to many other Western states, high-profile developments such as marriage equality can contribute to an imagined openness relative to many locations around the world. For example, Karimi (2020) finds that access to gay content in film and on the Internet contributes to Iranian refugees' decisions to seek sexual freedom in the West. Additional research documents how people in comparatively oppressive contexts seek out partners in more equitable locations, such as the US, who can then sponsor them through the immigration process (Kong 2010; Carrillo 2018; Corey-Boulet 2019). This pathway fits within neoclassical economic theory, as LGB individuals leaving repressive contexts often face economic difficulties and may expect great returns upon migrating to progressive destinations (Luibhéid 2008). Moreover, under NELM, LGB individuals can potentially position themselves

as a family's "insurance-policy" migrant, strategically aligning their desire for sexual freedom with their family's economic security.

Although the studies described above support a representation of immigrants in same-sex couples as largely fleeing repressive contexts, (Luibhéid 2005, xxv) cautions against overemphasizing queer migration as "a narrative of movement from repression to freedom, or a heroic journey undertaken in search of liberation" (see also Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011; Choi 2022). Even when migrants imagine they are moving to a much more progressive context, actual policy differences may be relatively minor. Carrillo (2018) explores a prominent case of this in his study of the "sexual migration" of gay Mexican men to the US. Overall, US LGB policy is somewhat more progressive than Mexico's, but Mexico's large, cosmopolitan cities are more welcoming to queer people than many parts of the US. Why, then, do these young men feel that they must cross the northern border in order to live authentic lives? Carrillo argues that their often rural birthplaces, conservative upbringings, and unsympathetic family members lead these men to believe that only by migrating to the US can they live openly. Since northward migration is a common choice for young Mexicans seeking upward mobility, family members are less likely to question this decision, and steady remittances help ward off prying questions. This observation may generalize to other contexts: LGB immigrants may believe they are moving to a much more progressive country when actual policy differences are relatively minor.

On the other hand, immigrants in same-sex couples may come from countries with greater recognition and access to sexuality-related rights and services than the US. There are three interrelated reasons for this. First, affirming policy environments are likely to enable people's capacity to make such an important, expensive move (de Haas 2021). Longstanding research on immigrant selection demonstrates that migrants typically occupy higher-status social positions than conational stay-at-homes — more formal education, higher incomes, and more prestigious occupations (Feliciano 2020). Supportive policies such as marriage equality and protections against employment discrimination may enable the capacity to migrate by providing more access to necessary social, human, and economic capital. Second, same-sex coupledom, such as marriage, is a culturally contingent artifact (Philpot et al. 2016). Consequently, the interactive dynamics between policy and culture within an immigrant's country of origin are likely to influence both their decision to "come out" and then their desire to be part of a couple (Baiocco, Argalia, and Laghi 2014; Flores and Barclay 2016; Ocobock 2020; Suen 2021). Policies supportive of LGB communities normalize and validate the disclosure of such identities and partnerships (Ocobock 2020) — influencing those with same-sex attractions to imagine and aspire for such possibilities for themselves. And, relatedly, being from a country where the state recognizes one's sexuality and validates these relationships may make survey respondents, once in the US, more comfortable disclosing their same-sex relationships. Third, these factors may combine to make those coming from countries with progressive policies more legible to migration officials

determining access to visas, as the enactment of the sexuality and relationship may align more closely with dominant expressions in the US (Edwards 2013).

Migration from progressive policy contexts also finds explanation in traditional migration theories. The cost–benefit analysis advanced by neoclassical economic theory could imply that migrants coming from progressive contexts enjoy greater resources and hence face lower migration costs. Under NELM, countries that recognize same-sex relationships may be more likely to have same-sex couples that make the migration decision together. Finally, since spousal migration for same-sex couples is a new pathway for migration, cumulative causation theory suggests that barriers to migration will be high and hence "pioneer" migrants will be positively selected on such characteristics as income and education.

Unlike our mixed expectations for origin-country policy, we are more confident that LGB immigrants will move to US states with progressive policy contexts. Gay and lesbian couples in the US were likely to leave states without marriage equality prior to national recognition (Beaudin 2017), and queer migrants often have strong cross-national networks for relaying information (Stella and Gawlewicz 2020). These factors likely result in a greater concentration of coupled LGB immigrants in states with marriage equality and other protective policies. Additionally, if migrants are coming from a country with greater legal protections, they are unlikely to want to relocate to a state where such rights are no longer recognized — rendering the political environment acutely important. Of course, this is predicated on the assumption that migrants take such distinct subnational variation into account — which they well may not. Consequently, the "pull" to individual states may operate independently from specific state laws affirming LGB people and their relationships.

Data and Methods

Identifying Same-Sex Couples in the ACS

We merge individual-level data on immigrants in the US with state- and country-level variables from a variety of datasets. The individual data come from the 2008 to 2019 ACS (Ruggles et al. 2021). Each year, the ACS surveys a 1-percent representative sample of the US population about their education, occupation, income, family structure, immigration status, country of origin, location, and a variety of other individual and household attributes. We define a same-sex couple as two individuals of the same sex in the same household who report their relationship as "spouse" or "unmarried partner." We limit the sample to individuals who immigrated at the age of 18 or older and in 1991 or later.[1] Hence this analysis considers four types of couples: (1) two-immigrant couples who came to the US together; (2)

[1] The exception is for Figure 1, where we include those who immigrated in any year, at age 18 or older.

two-immigrant couples that formed once in the US; (3) mixed-status couples where an immigrant migrated with or to be with their US-born partner; and (4) mixed-status couples that formed in the US. In Section D.2 of the Online Supplemental Appendix, we present results separately for one- and two-immigrant couples. We are unable to differentiate between couples that partnered or married abroad and those that did so in the US. We elaborate on the implications of these scope conditions in the Discussion.

The 12 years of survey data contain 6,349 same-sex couples that include at least one immigrant, for a total of 7,097 immigrants in same-sex couples with complete data. These immigrants are compared to 641,521 corresponding different-sex couples containing 903,552 individual immigrants.

We use "LGB" to refer to all individuals who may be in romantic relationships with members of the same sex, although we recognize that some individuals in same-sex relationships may not identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. We also recognize that we are not able to identify bisexual (or pansexual, multisexual, etc.) individuals cohabiting with different-sex partners. Furthermore, measuring the prevalence of same-sex couples in the US is difficult (Michaels 2013). As in most nationally representative demographic work on same-sex couples (Baumle 2013; Baumle and Dreon 2019), we are able to identify only LGB couples that cohabit; unpartnered LGB individuals and those who do not live with their partner are not included in the analysis (Baumle, Compton, and Poston 2009, 6). In addition, LGB individuals who do not feel comfortable with the partner labels of the ACS are not in the sample. Another pitfall is measurement error: misreporting may result when different-sex couples accidentally misspecify the gender of one of the partners (Gates and Steinberger 2009; Goodnature and Neto 2021). Beginning in 2008, the Census Bureau made changes to ACS gender and partnership questions in order to prevent such errors (U.S. Census Bureau 2013), so we rely on data only from 2008 onward, but difficulties remain. If even a small number of different-sex couples misreport one partner's sex, the counts of same-sex couples will be inflated. Following Gates and Steinberger (2009), we remove all respondents that had either their relationship or sex variable allocated by the Census Bureau, which results in dropping 168 immigrants in same-sex couples and 2,363 in different-sex couples, or 0.28 percent of the sample. This is the strategy used by most studies of same-sex couples in the ACS (e.g., Gates 2013; Boertien and Vignoli 2019; Christafore and Leguizamon 2019; Martell and Nash 2020; Goldberg and Conron 2021). In Section C of the Online Supplemental Appendix, we include robustness checks to test the sensitivity of our results to hypothetically high rates of misreporting.

Analytic Strategy

Many of our analyses entail descriptive statistics of ACS data. For these and the reshaping described below, we apply survey weights from the ACS.

One of our goals is to isolate the effect of the country of origin's LGB policy on the immigration of immigrants in same-sex couples. The ideal survey would follow potential immigrants over time and have information about sexual orientation, allowing us to estimate how the probability of migrating and choice of US state of residence vary by sexual orientation. This ideal dataset does not exist, but we attempt to approximate it.

We reshape the data so that each observation is the percentage of individual cohabiting immigrants in same-sex couples from country x in state y in survey year z. For example, the observation for France×New York×2015 is 2, meaning that among coupled ACS respondents who immigrated from France and resided in New York at the time of the 2015 survey, a weighted 2 percent were in same-sex couples. This transformation of the data results in 38,713 country–state–year observations.[2] This reshaping acts to control aspects of migrant settlement common to immigrants from the same country. We regress the country–state–survey year proportion on state and sending country policy scores and adjust for state and origin-country controls (listed below) using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. State-level measures are linked to the survey year, while origin-country LGB policy and controls are linked to the mean year of immigration for each country–state–year immigrant group. In our final models, we include state and country-of-origin fixed effects, and we cluster errors at the state and country levels.

Variables

While country and state fixed effects account for time-invariant characteristics, we also control for time-variant country- and state-level variables from a variety of sources. For country-of-origin variables, we include the difference in living standards — calculated as the difference in expenditure-side real gross domestic product at chained purchasing power parity ($RGDP^c$) — which comes from the Penn World Table (Feenstra, Inklaar, and Timmer 2015), and we rely on World Bank data for differences in unemployment rates (World Bank 2020). We use Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) measures of liberal democracy of the country of origin (Coppedge et al. 2021). In an attempt to proxy network effects, we create a new variable by dividing, for a given year, each country's immigrant stock by the total number of immigrants in the US. For this, we use the UN's Trends in International Migrant Stock report (United Nations 2017) for 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2017, linearly interpolating to yield an annual time series from 1990 to 2019. For state controls, we use per capita income by year from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA 2020) and state-level annual unemployment rates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS 2020). All monetary variables are adjusted to 1999 US dollars.

[2] Cells without any cohabiting immigrants from a given country are necessarily dropped from the analysis.

To examine LGB policies in the country of origin and state of destination, we use original datasets. To create the US state policy index, we compile data from the Movement Advancement Project,[3] a leading LGB organization in the US that collects data on a number of relevant policies. Our state index encompasses both progressive policies (full marriage equality, state recognition of civil unions and domestic partnerships, ban on all employment and housing discrimination based on sexual orientation, hate crime protections based on sexual orientation, legal joint adoption by same-sex couples, and a ban on conversation therapy for minors) and regressive policies (criminalization of sodomy, state constitutional bans of marriage equality, religious freedom exemptions to discriminate against same-sex couples in adoption, and state-level bans on local nondiscrimination ordinances encompassing sexual orientation). The state index ranges from −1 to 7, and the mean state policy score for our sample of immigrants is 3.2.

We measure the origin-country policy environment using a modified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Policy Index (Velasco 2018) . The index comprises 16 policies, many similar to those above, but including additional policies such as the death penalty for homosexual acts, propaganda laws limiting free speech for LGB communities, and equal ages of consent between same-sex and different-sex couples. We remove policies targeting gender identity and transgender communities from the original index. Both state and country indices are created by summing the total of progressive policies (scored +1) and regressive policies (scored −1). For the 122 countries of origin in our sample, the country index ranges from −3 to 10, and the mean score of the country of origin for our sample is 1.7. Immigrants are assigned US state index scores based on their state of residence as reported in the ACS, and they are assigned country of origin index scores based on their birthplace and year of immigration.

We also include a binary variable to indicate the change in the national policy environment in the US following the overturning of DOMA in 2013. This represents an important shift in opening up traditional pathways of immigration to same-sex couples. We include an interaction term between this post-DOMA indicator and the country-of-origin index because we theorize that the effects will be more pronounced following this event.

For individual characteristics, we rely on ACS variables for reported sex, age, education (with categories for less than high school, high school, some college, and college), year of immigration, income in thousands in the past year, and a binary unemployment indicator (for income reported to be 0 or less). Descriptive statistics for variables used in all analyses are included in Section A of the Online Supplemental Appendix.

[3] https://www.lgbtmap.org/

Results

Descriptive Trends

We first estimate the total numbers of immigrants in same- and different-sex couples, applying survey weights to obtain population-level estimates from the ACS. Recall that Figure 1 showed that, whereas the numbers of different-sex immigrant couples have steadily increased over the period of study, numbers of same-sex immigrant couples increased much more rapidly.

How do same- and different-sex immigrant couples differ in their origin-country and individual attributes? Do variables typically used in migration models differ between the groups? Figure 2 compares immigrants in same- and different-sex couples on five origin-country variables. First, microeconomic theory predicts that differences in wages and living standards across countries are one of the most important motivations for migration. Panel A of Figure 2 shows that per capita GDP is lower in the average country of origin than in the US for both groups of immigrants, but the gap is significantly more negative for immigrants in different-sex couples. This means that immigrants in same-sex couples are coming from countries with higher standards of living than those in different-sex couples. Differences in the unemployment rate (Panel B of Figure 2) indicate similar trends: Compared to the countries of origin for immigrants in different-sex couples, immigrants in same-sex couples come from countries with lower unemployment rates. These findings indicate that microeconomic considerations may be less important to the migration of LGB immigrants.

Models of migration also often use the distance between countries as a proxy for migration costs, with closer countries often having more migration between them. Panel C of Figure 2 shows that immigrants in same-sex couples tend to come from somewhat more distant countries. Panel D of Figure 2 looks at a measure of network effects: at the time of immigration, what was the proportion of total immigrants in the US from the country of origin? Compared to different-sex couples, immigrants in same-sex couples immigrated from countries that were less represented in the US population at the time of migration. This suggests that the network effects that attract migrants from the same country of origin may be less relevant to LGB immigrants, or that these migration streams are relatively new. Finally, Panel E of Figure 2 compares V-Dem democracy levels for the country of origin at the time of migration. We see that levels of liberal democracy tend to be higher for immigrants in same-sex couples, indicating that political context may factor differently into their migration decisions.

Immigrants in same-sex couples appear to come from more advantaged countries, but are they more advantaged at an individual level as well? Previous studies on LGB immigrants suggest that those coming from advantaged countries may still be fleeing individual disadvantage. Figure 3 presents results for four individual attributes. Panels A and B of Figure 3 show that immigrants in same-sex couples tend to be *more* highly educated than immigrants in different-sex

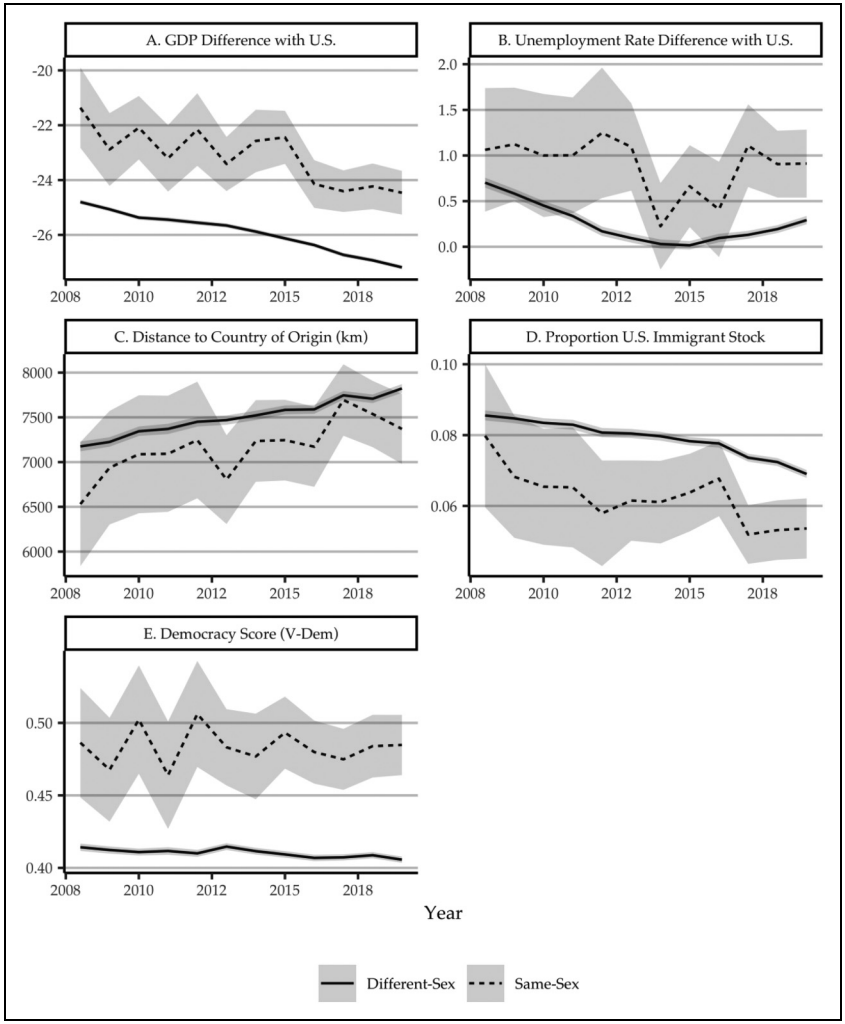

Figure 2. Origin-Country Descriptive Statistics for Immigrants in Couples 2008–2019, for Year of Migration, With Survey Weights and 95% Confidence Intervals. Currency in Thousands of 1999 dollars.

couples, with about 10 percent more having high school and four-year college degrees. Panel C of Figure 3 corroborates the macroeconomic findings at the individual level: not only do immigrants in same-sex couples come from countries with higher per capita GDP, but they individually tend to earn more than immigrants in different-sex couples. Panel D of Figure 3 demonstrates that immigrants in same-sex couples also tend to work in professions with higher occupational prestige scores. Together, these findings indicate that LGB immigrants may come

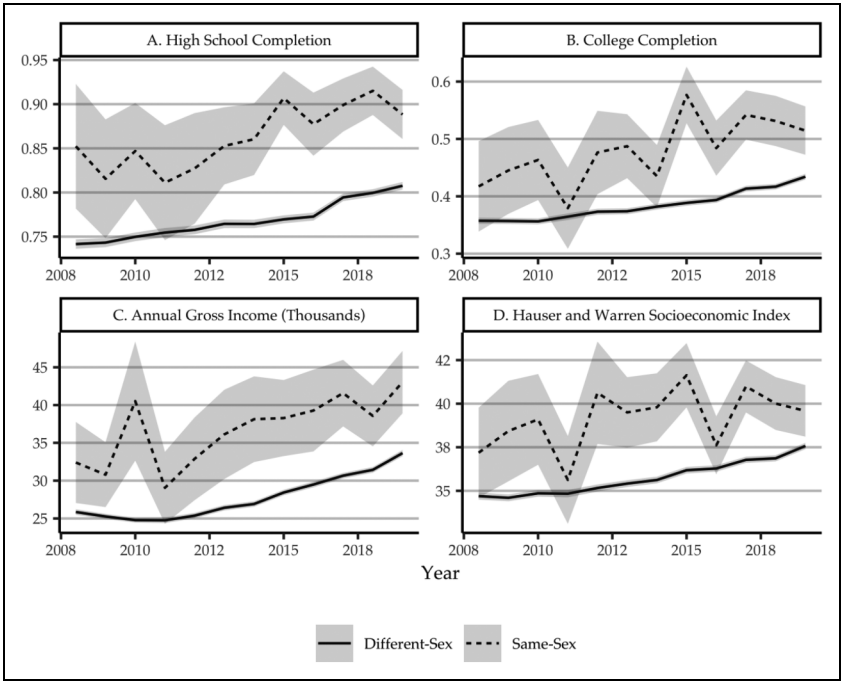

Figure 3. Individual Descriptive Statistics for Immigrants in Couples 2008–2019, With Survey Weights and 95% Confidence Intervals. Currency in Thousands of 1999 dollars.

from more privileged social origins than their heterosexual counterparts. This aligns with existing research showing that nonimmigrant married same-sex couples in the US have higher earnings than their different-sex counterparts (Fisher, Gee, and Looney 2018).

Figure 2 implies that there is between-country selection of immigrants in same-sex couples, but Figure 3 does not necessarily imply within-country selection as well. Section B of the Online Supplemental Appendix examines within-country selection explicitly, subtracting the individual attributes in Figure 3 from country-year averages in the ACS. The positive values for immigrants in same-sex couples mean that not only do immigrants in same-sex couples come from more advantaged countries, but they tend to be among the most advantaged immigrants from a given country, as well.

Although we see significant differences between same- and different-sex couples on a number of important migration variables, none shows the sudden jump in recent years reflected in Figure 1. Turning to LGB policy may better explain this surge. Figure 4 charts the average country of origin and US state LGB policy scores for the immigrants in our sample over time, comparing means for immigrants in same- and different-sex couples. The left panel of Figure 4 shows that the country

of origin index at the time of migration is generally higher for immigrants in same-sex couples, and since 2013 it has rapidly increased. Immigrants in same-sex couples tend to come from more progressive countries, and this trend increases in step with the overall population of this group. The right panel of Figure 4 indicates less of a difference in US state policies, although states where immigrants in same-sex couples live tend to score somewhat higher.

Figure 5 shows the percentage of immigrants to the US in same-sex couples from each country of origin, averaging over the 12 years of survey data, and Table 1 presents the top ten of these along with the average LGB policy score over these years. The top sending countries include interesting diversity. Although countries with more progressive policies top the list, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, and Singapore make the list with their relatively repressive contexts. Having countries in the top 10 span multiple regions and cultures provides preliminary evidence that LGB policy is not substantially affecting willingness to respond truthfully on the ACS about being in a same-sex couple. Nor does it appear as though responses to the ACS are simply a function of country-of-origin LGB policies, as policy scores vary significantly across the top 10. Figure 6 presents the percentage of immigrants in same-sex couples in US states, averaging over the survey years and possible countries of

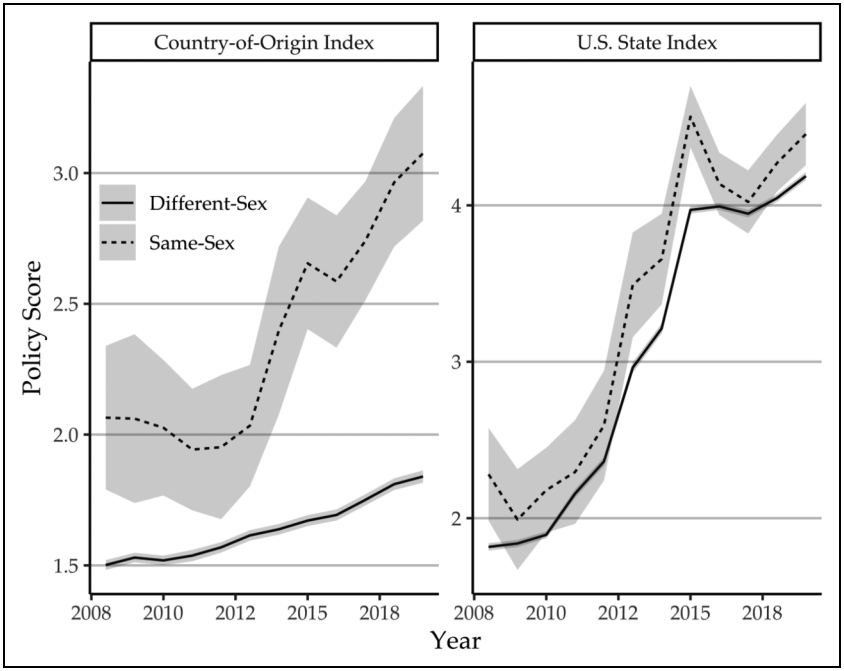

Figure 4. Mean Country of Origin and US State Policy Index Score for Immigrants in Same- and Different-Sex Couples, 2008–2019, With 95% Confidence Intervals.

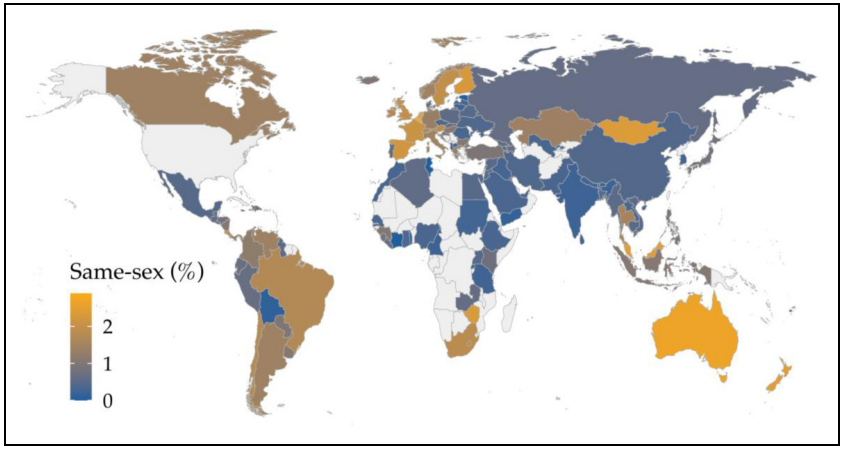

Figure 5. Percentage of Cohabiting Immigrants in the US in Same-Sex Couples by Country of Origin, Averaging Over ACS Survey Years 2008 to 2019. Countries With Missing Values are Colored Gray.

Table 1. Sending Countries Ranked by Percentage of Immigrants in Same-Sex Cohabiting Couples.

Rank	Country of Origin	Percentage Same-Sex	95% CI	Mean Country Policy Score
1	Belgium	2.89%	(1.53%, 4.24%)	5.4
2	Australia	2.65%	(2.04%, 3.26%)	4.6
3	Netherlands	2.53%	(1.65%, 3.40%)	7.2
4	Malaysia	2.48%	(1.70%, 3.27%)	−1.0
5	New Zealand	2.46%	(1.42%, 3.49%)	5.1
6	Mongolia	2.36%	(0.00%, 6.30%)	2.1
7	Zimbabwe	2.32%	(1.02%, 3.62%)	−1.1
8	Finland	2.29%	(0.82%, 3.77%)	4.4
9	Singapore	2.28%	(1.12%, 3.43%)	0.0
10	Cyprus	2.25%	(0.00%, 5.64%)	0.7

Source: American Community Survey 2008–2019. Authors' calculations.

origin, and Table 2 ranks the top 10. Although states with progressive policies occupy the top spots, Mississippi still makes the list with a less affirming policy environment.[4] Section F of the Online Supplemental Appendix contains full rankings of countries and states.

[4]Mongolia and Cyprus also figure into the top 10 countries, and Montana and North Dakota into the top 10 states, but their percentages are estimated with greater uncertainty due to small sample sizes.

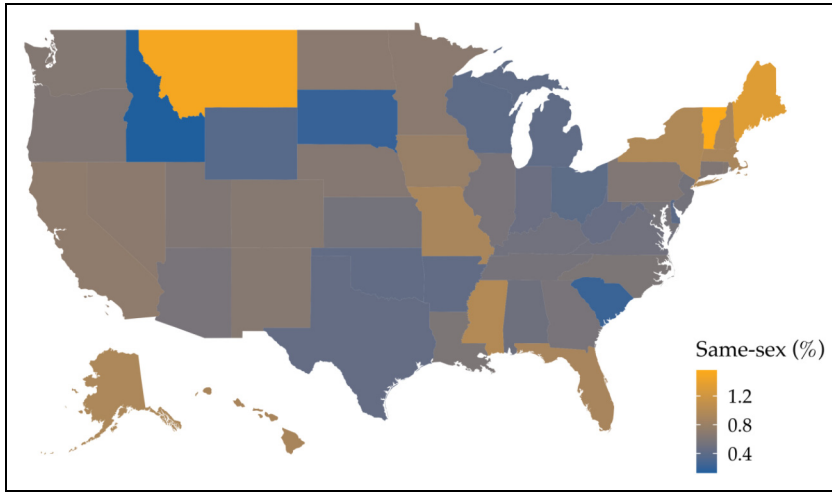

Figure 6. Percentage of Cohabiting Immigrants in Same-Sex Couples in US States, Averaging Over ACS Survey Years 2008 to 2019.

Table 2. States Ranked by Proportion of Immigrants in Same-Sex Cohabiting Couples.

Rank	State	Percentage Same-Sex	95% CI	Mean State Policy Score
1	Vermont	1.55%	(0.33%, 2.76%)	5.3
2	Montana	1.49%	(0.00%, 3.20%)	0.9
3	Maine	1.44%	(0.51%, 2.36%)	4.9
4	North Dakota	1.16%	(0.00%, 2.68%)	0.0
5	Mississippi	1.01%	(0.22%, 1.79%)	−0.5
6	Alaska	0.99%	(0.02%, 1.95%)	0.2
7	New York	0.99%	(0.89%, 1.08%)	4.9
8	Hawaii	0.98%	(0.56%, 1.40%)	4.5
9	Missouri	0.94%	(0.55%, 1.33%)	2.0
10	New Hampshire	0.94%	(0.35%, 1.53%)	4.4

Source: American Community Survey 2008–2019. Authors' calculations.

Model Results

Although the trends in Figure 4 are suggestive, other factors correlated with LGB policy may be confounding results. To address this, Table 3 presents OLS models of the US state-level proportion of immigrants in same-sex couples, from a given country of origin in a given survey year. We present only coefficients of interest here, but Section E of the Online Supplemental Appendix contains the full table of regression coefficients.

Model 1 contains only one predictor: origin-country LGB policy score, for the average year of immigration for immigrants in the country–state–year cell. We see that countries with more progressive LGB policies tend to send more immigrants to the US who end up in same-sex couples. The average percentage of immigrants in same-sex couples is only 0.9 percent, so an increase of 0.14 percent per point increase in the LGB policy score represents a substantial effect.

Model 2 turns to the role of US state policy score in a given survey year, adjusting only for this variable. We see that, on average, states with more friendly LGB policies have somewhat higher proportions of immigrants in same-sex couples, on the order of 0.11 percentage points per point of LGB policy score. Model 3 includes both country and state LGB scores; results barely change from the first two models, suggesting that LGB policy in both sending country and receiving state have somewhat independent relationships with LGB migration.

According to the descriptive analysis above, immigrants in same-sex couples tend to have higher incomes and hold more prestigious occupations than immigrants in different-sex couples, and they tend to come from wealthier countries. This implies that immigrants in same-sex couples may be attracted to progressive states for their economic rather than political benefits, so Model 4 adds state and origin-country controls and fixed effects. Intriguingly, the coefficients for state score and country score *grow* in magnitude. More progressive sending countries are

Table 3. OLS Regressions of Percentage of Immigrants in Same-Sex Couples by Country of Origin, US State of Residence, and Survey Year.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Country LGB policy score	0.144***		0.140***	0.228***	0.136†	0.212**	0.119†
	(0.026)		(0.026)	(0.068)	(0.071)	(0.068)	(0.071)
State LGB policy score		0.106***	0.101***	0.141***	0.108**	0.103*	0.068
		(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.039)	(0.041)	(0.046)	(0.048)
State score × country score					0.023***		0.023***
					(0.007)		(0.007)
Post-2013						0.220*	0.234*
						(0.098)	(0.098)
State controls and FEs?	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country controls and FEs?	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	38,713	38,713	38,713	38,713	38,713	38,713	38,713

Note: GDP = gross domestic product; FE = fixed effect. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$; †$p < .1$. Country and state two-way clustered standard errors are shown in parentheses. State controls include the unemployment rate and per capita income. Country controls include per capita GDP differential, unemployment differential, proportion same-country stock, and democracy. *Source*: American Community Survey 2008–2019. Authors' calculations.

represented by greater proportions of same-sex couples, and they tend to settle in more progressive US states.

Model 5 adds an interaction between state and country LGB scores. It is positive and significant; progressive states attract higher proportions of same-sex immigrant couples, and this effect is stronger for immigrants from more progressive countries. To aid interpretation, we use simulation to predict the representation of same-sex couples. Country and state LGB policy scores are set to the same value for the entire sample, and the outcome is simulated and averaged over the empirical distribution of the other covariates. The left panel of Figure 7 has the country of origin of LGB policy on the horizontal axis and the percentage of immigrants in same-sex couples on the vertical axis, with separate prediction lines shown for US states with the minimum or maximum LGB policy score. The right panel of Figure 7 switches the role of country and state policy. Both panels show that LGB immigrants tend to originate in more progressive countries and live in more progressive US states. But the relationship is strongest when both country and state policy scores are high; at low levels of either score, the difference in the other score has little effect on the expected percentage of immigrants in same-sex couples.

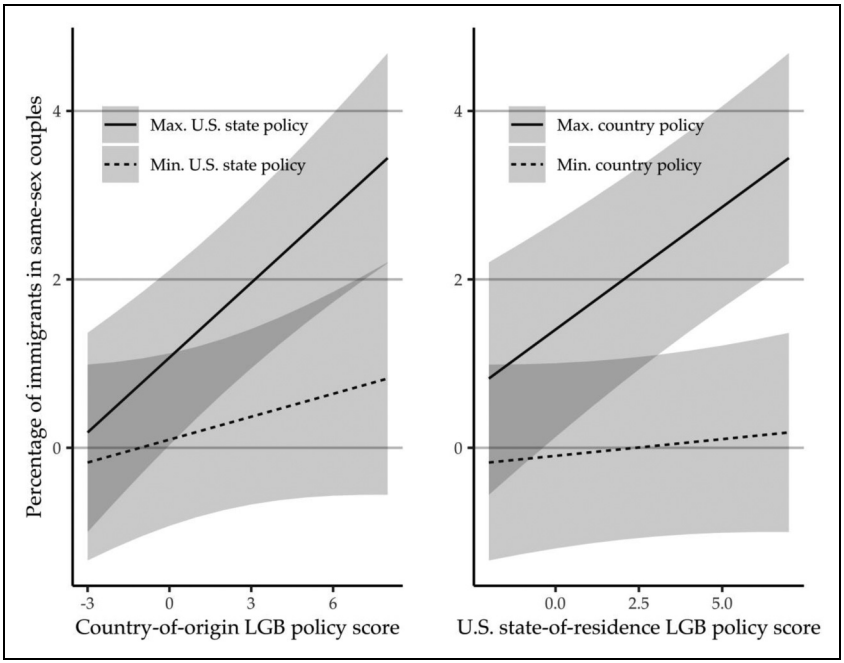

Figure 7. Predicted Percentage of Immigrants in Same-Sex Couples by Country–State, Using Model 5 From Table 3. Country and State LGB Policy Scores are set to the Same Value for the Entire Sample, and the Predicted Outcome is Averaged Over the Entire Sample. Ribbons Represent Asymptotic 95 Percent Confidence Intervals.

Finally, Model 6 of Table 3 augments Model 4 with a dichotomous variable for the post-2013 DOMA decision era, and Model 7 adds the same variable to Model 5. The significant post-2013 variable in both regressions implies that the proportions of LGB immigrants have increased across the country in the past few years.

Our results hold up to a variety of robustness checks presented in Sections C and D of the Online Supplemental Appendix. These include hypothetically high levels of sex misreporting (C); weighting by the relative size of a country's immigrant population in the US (D.1); restricting the sample to married, one-immigrant, or two-immigrant couples (D.2); excluding countries and US states with few cohabiting immigrants in our sample (D.3); and using one-year lagged measures of policy (D.4). For most robustness checks, results are substantively the same as in the main analysis. For weighted regressions that include controls and fixed effects, coefficients for origin-country and state policy scores become nonsignificant, but their interaction retains significance. This implies that results apply more at the country level than to absolute numbers of immigrants in the US. One interesting finding is that results are stronger for married and one-immigrant couples than two-immigrant couples, suggesting that marriages between US-born and immigrants are driving the results. This is likely because the spousal visa pathway is open only to partners of US citizens or lawful permanent residents (LPRs); two-immigrant couples do not necessarily contain a US citizen or LPR, while one-immigrant couples do.

Discussion and Conclusion

In 2013, there were about 61,000 same-sex couples that included immigrants in the US. By 2019, this number had nearly doubled to almost 107,000. Despite this expansive growth far outpacing overall migration rates, there has been little demographic research investigating the characteristics of these couples or the factors influencing their migratory patterns. Notwithstanding a growing number of small-scale studies focusing largely on asylum seekers, we know little about the broader population of LGB migrants: who these migrants are, why they are leaving their home countries, or where they are choosing to locate once in the US. Answering these questions is important, not only because this represents an increasing number of border crossers, but also because this process has the potential to reshape our conceptualization of who immigrants are, their motivations for moving, and how policy unrelated to migration can shape the aspirations and capabilities of potential migrants.

The rising number of immigrants in same-sex couples coincides with a dramatic change in policy environments governing LGB communities, both in the US and abroad. Thanks to the 2013 Supreme Court decision striking down DOMA, same-sex couples now have an additional legal pathway into the US (Edwards 2013; Carrillo 2018). This project leverages changing policy landscapes at both country of origin and US state of residence to understand the migratory patterns of immigrants in these couples. Engaging such a question adds to emerging

demographic research evaluating how recent policy changes are influencing the health, well-being, and lifestyles of LGB people, while also recognizing that these policy effects are moderated by social position (Kail, Acosta, and Wright 2015; Levy and Levy 2017; Boertien and Vignoli 2019; Carpenter 2020). In addition, this project contributes to an important area of migration studies that focuses on the interactions between the state and sexuality in conditioning migratory patterns (Cantú 2009; Fitzgerald, Leblang, and Teets 2014; Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha 2016; Carrillo 2018).

We take advantage of an underused data source: self-reports of same-sex immigrant couples in the ACS from 2008 to 2019. Despite this being one of the few national surveys to identify immigrants in same-sex couples, these data have been largely untapped for this purpose. In light of possible reporting issues (Gates 2013; Goodnature and Neto 2021), we probe the sensitivity of our findings only to find remarkable robustness, even to potentially high levels of misreporting. As such, these data allow us to make one of the first large-*N* investigations of same-sex immigrant couples in the US and to make an important addition to this area of scholarship.

Our findings offer several important contributions. First, existing scholarship on immigrants in same-sex couples, and queer migration more broadly, has been small in scale. This is understandable, given the hard-to-reach nature of this population, but it is unclear which patterns these studies illuminate generalize across the full population of immigrants in cohabiting, same-sex couples in the US. Furthermore, while queer migration scholarship is quickly growing, there is a disproportionate emphasis on asylum and refugee processes (Luibhéid 2008; Vogler 2016). Even research on nonrefugee LGB migrants — despite showcasing socioeconomic diversity among these individuals — tends to select cases from relatively repressive contexts (Manalansan IV 2003; Kong 2010; Carrillo 2018; Choi 2022; Vuckovic Juros 2022). Although such studies are not seeking generalizability, this emphasis within queer migration scholarship can leave an impression that migrating from repressive to progressive contexts (either real or imagined) is typical. As such, while these experiences certainly occur (and are perhaps more common in immigration contexts outside of the US), such an emphasis potentially distorts our understanding of who these immigrants are, the types of environments they are coming from, and their motivations to seek entry into the US. In fact, we find that immigrants in same-sex couples generally have higher incomes and occupational prestige and are somewhat more educated than their counterparts in difference-sex couples. They are also positively selected on these characteristics at the country level, in line with what cumulative causation theory would predict for "pioneer" migrants engaging in a new migration pathway. This descriptive profile alone is an important contribution.

Second, we build upon our understanding of who these migrants are by assessing how LGB policies in their countries of origin are related to patterns of migration. Despite existing scholarship portraying LGB migrants seeking refuge from repression, we find support for Luibhéid's (2005, xxv) caution against this "narrative of

movement from repression to freedom." As results in Table 3 and trendlines in Figure 4 reveal, immigrants in same-sex couples are coming from environments that are increasingly more progressive. This is true even after accounting for factors from longstanding migration models. Though more research is needed, these results — in conjunction with the fact that these LGB immigrants achieve higher incomes and greater occupational prestige — describe a situation in which perhaps it is precisely the supportive policy environment, access to material benefits that come from marriage and employment protections, and cultural and state validation of these family formations that enable individuals to achieve the resources necessary to migrate and seek out cohabiting partnerships. Such an explanation fits within an aspirations–capabilities framework (de Haas 2021): migration is enabled when desires and resources align within an auspicious international opportunity structure. Relatedly, possessing such capital or coming from a country with a progressive policy environment likely increases the probability for such migrants to successfully navigate the US immigration system to acquire a visa. Especially if individuals are coming from countries where they can openly express their relationship to friends and family or even legally get married, this increases the perceived legitimacy of the relationship to US immigration officials. Thus, while the DOMA decision opened up this pathway to all same-sex couples, the inequities in the immigration system likely mean that known patterns of discrimination and bias are being reproduced in this new population (Carron 2015).

And, third, after immigrants in same-sex couples migrate to the US, we find that they tend to cluster in states with more progressive policy environments. This finding is important, as it helps to address a particular puzzle in LGB international migration. As a whole, the US has less affirming and supportive policies for LGB communities than many countries, both in Europe and Latin America. So why would LGB migrants from supportive environments choose to come to a country that guarantees fewer rights? One possible answer is that the unique federated system creates variation among US states where more progressive and affirming policy environments can exist, even if the US as a whole may be more repressive. The higher incomes, occupational prestige, and education levels of immigrants in same-sex couples — as well as greater familiarity with progressive policies in their countries of origin — may endow them with the necessary capital to understand and navigate the federated US system. This pattern aligns with research finding that US-born LGB individuals are more likely to live in states with affirming policies (Beaudin 2017), as well as with research showing how privileged same-sex immigrant couples in other national contexts are able to navigate complex policy environments (Suen 2021). An alternative answer as to why LGB immigrants would still migrate to the US is that, during his presidency, Barack Obama promoted LGBT equality in foreign policy, burnishing an LGB-friendly image of the US in the imagination of global communities.

These insights provide a number of implications for future research. First, in demonstrating the importance of the state beyond migration-specific policy, the theoretical model presented here can be applied in other domains. The state may condition

other dimensions of well-being that are relevant to migration, such as climate policy for environmental migrants or responses to the Black Lives Matter movement for Black migrants. Second, finding that immigrants in same-sex couples are both coming from more open policy environments and residing in progressive US states raises an important follow-up question: Are there reciprocal effects? Once rights are granted, LGB communities are instrumental in consolidating new benefits by bringing them to life — utilizing them, demonstrating that supposed negative effects do not occur, and normalizing them to non-LGB communities through interaction (Ocobock 2020). As such, immigrants who had access to benefits in their home countries, but no longer do in the US, can impact policy changes by similarly bringing benefits to life and becoming agents of change (Ayoub and Bauman 2019; Ocobock 2020; Suen 2021).

Third, do different policy environments have differential effects based on couple composition? While our primary motivation is to understand the differences between same- and different-sex couples, same-sex couples are a heterogeneous category. While we shed light on some differences between one-immigrant and two-immigrant couples in the Online Supplemental Appendix, we do not fully assess the distinctions between these types of LGB couples. However, it is understandable that one-immigrant couples seem to be driving the results, as one partner must be either a US citizen or permanent resident in order to acquire a spousal or fiancé(e) visa following the DOMA decision. Additionally, current data limit our ability to understand partnering processes and modes of entry into the US. Future research should seek to understand whether those who come to the US as couples are different from those who form relationships once in the US, or the degree to which mixed-nativity couples result from US citizens meeting a partner abroad.

Fourth, although we find compelling patterns, our statistical investigation cannot determine why these couples are deciding to migrate to the US and their motivations for choosing their state of residence. Due to limitations of the data, we are also unable to say whether these migrants came directly to the US from their countries of birth or engaged in stepwise migration. We encourage future scholarship to further investigate these processes and mechanisms. We underscore that the results presented here are descriptive, not causal; more rigorous methods of causal inference are necessary to invoke causality.

Lastly, this is an analysis of cohabiting couples. This particular focus has justification: the DOMA decision itself carries significant relevance to couples and, therefore, attention to cohabiting couples is appropriate. Nevertheless, our findings are unable to generalize to noncohabiting couples or single migrants. The inclusion of such individuals in our analysis could augment the findings presented here in a few ways. On the one hand, single LGB migrants may come from less progressive countries; as mentioned, supportive policy environments may both be the result of and further reinforce self-disclosure and same-sex relationships. However, we believe that the present findings likely hold for single LGB migrants as well.

Without the assistance of a US-based partner, single migrants face greater barriers to migration. While cohabiting LGB migrants may enter the US on family-based visas, this migration pathway is less likely for single migrants. Instead, single LGB migrants are more likely to come to the US on employment visas, which favor more positively selected migrants (Jasso and Rosenzweig 1995). High-profile migration of disadvantaged single LGB refugees does not discount the fact that refugees constitute a tiny proportion of all migrants to the US. Hence we believe that analysis of data containing single LGB individuals will likely reinforce our findings that LGB immigrants to the US tend to be advantaged and come from progressive policy environments. Regardless, identification of single LGB individuals in nationally representative surveys is urgently needed, and future work must attend to whether response rates covary with the country of origin policies.

Although our focus is on same-sex couples, this study offers a broader correction to standard models of migration. Theories of lifestyle migration generally describe affluent people moving in search of a better way of life (Benson and O'Reilly 2009). But what the present study contributes is that sexuality shapes how that "better way of life" is conceptualized and motivated (Dixon 2020). Our findings raise additional questions as to how sexuality motivates migration patterns and (in)directly influences seemingly economic or network dynamics, even for heterosexual couples. Finally, we build on work interrogating the role of the state in migration (Cantú 2009; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha 2016; Choi 2022). Conventionally, state policies are less integrated into models of migration, especially those policies that do not explicitly govern migration. But what this study suggests is that, once the DOMA ruling created a legal opening to migration for same-sex couples, it was policy specific to LGB issues, rather than to migration more broadly, that enabled their entry into the US. This opens up questions as to how state policies relative to a particular group, but not explicitly in the domain of immigration, create structural opportunities for certain individuals to leave their home countries. This points to the importance of further studying the role of identity, and the state's governance of it, in migratory processes.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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