

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

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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 United States 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 United States. 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 results also 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 sheds light on public opinion of an understudied but politically salient group.

## Introduction

Do Americans view lesbian and gay (LG) migrants as more deserving to enter the United States than their straight counterparts? Recent changes in US federal policy have contributed to significant increases in LG migrants (Vogler 2016; Hoffmann and Velasco 2024). From 2008 to 2019, different-sex couples containing immigrants increased by 22 percent (from 7.8 million to 9.5 million), while those of corresponding same-sex couples grew by 140 percent (from 44,000 to 107,000) (Hoffmann and Velasco 2025). Despite

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this growth, how Americans view this emergent population is unknown. Aside from evaluating this case for its own sake, LG migrants are important to investigate because they lie at the intersection of two ongoing processes in American society. First, Americans are increasingly polarized on immigration, particularly along the sociotropic and cultural aspects of migration (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Johnston, Newman, and Velez 2020). Second, there is increasing bipartisan support for some aspects of LG rights, such as marriage equality (Gallup 2023). Moreover, positions on LG rights in international contexts often span partisan divides, conveying national and cultural supremacy vis-à-vis countries in the Global South (Puar 2007; Martel 2018; Alessi et al. 2020; Danisi et al. 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte and López Ortega 2024).

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

To answer these, we administer a conjoint survey experiment that asks respondents to choose between two hypothetical immigrants for admission to the United States, and they are also asked to indicate which profile they see as more culturally similar to the United States. 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 small negative yet nonsignificant effect of sexual-minority status on perceived deservingness. When disaggregated by respondent characteristics that may be more sympathetic to both LG rights and migration—such as Democrats and nonreligious—positive effects reach our preferred significance threshold. Yet, despite prior literature suggesting that sexual-minority status may signal cultural similarity, these migrants are viewed as significantly *less* culturally similar compared to their heterosexual counterparts, even among groups that think they are more deserving of entry. This study contributes to literature on immigrant deservingness, political culture, and the emerging field of queer migration.

## Background

Policy related to LG migrants has seen major changes in recent years. In 2011, President Barack Obama moved to make queer refugees a “population of concern” (Vogler 2016), boosting the number of successful asylum claims

(Shaw et al. 2021). In 2013, the end of the Defense of Marriage Act allowed US citizens and permanent residents to sponsor the visa of a same-sex partner for the first time (Edwards 2013). Likely due to these changes, numbers of same-sex couples containing immigrants increased 140 percent between 2008 and 2019 (Hoffmann and Velasco 2024). While most scholarship on LG immigrants focuses on asylum seekers and others fleeing repression (Murray 2014; Sam and Finley 2015; Akin 2017; Dhoest 2019; Giannetta 2020; Saleh 2020), recent work suggests that the typical LG immigrant may be privileged and coming from progressive contexts (Hoffmann and Velasco 2025). These observations motivate our central question: To what extent do Americans consider sexual orientation a salient factor in evaluating the deservingness of potential migrants?

We hypothesize that *cultural similarity* will be the primary mechanism through which Americans determine LG immigrant deservingness. Other work finds that “norms-based” and “sociotropic” explanations often account for how US citizens perceive immigrant deservingness (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). For example, Westerners are biased against Muslims and speakers of foreign languages, while they view Christians and speakers of the host-country language more favorably (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Donnalaja 2022; Aviña et al. 2024). These trends raise an important question: To what extent is a new norm developing that characterizes the United States as welcoming of LG individuals—at least internationally (Snow and Cull 2020; Novitskaya 2023)? Many right-wing parties across Western democracies, including the United States, promote gay-friendly positions abroad (Moreau 2018; NBC 2019; Janoff 2022; Magni and Reynolds 2023). Often, this is done to justify opposition to supposedly homophobic Black, Brown, and Muslim immigrants or to motivate interventions through foreign aid conditionalities (i.e., homonationalism) (Puar 2007; Kwon, Scarborough, and Taylor 2023). This promotion is enabled by the fact that US public opinion is increasingly supportive of LG rights. In 2022, for example, US support for marriage equality reached 71 percent, and 93 percent of Americans agreed that gays and lesbians should have equal employment rights (Gallup 2023). These attitudes are related to both increasing US LGBTQ+ identification (7.6 percent in 2023) and increasing contact with such individuals (Gallup 2024).

Yet there are reasons to be suspect of such national narratives. Recent adoptions of anti-LGBTQ+ policy and hardened anti-immigrant sentiments in the United States may mean that LG immigrants are particularly vulnerable to perceptions of cultural distance and undeservingness (Jones 2025). Americans’ preferences for admission may be based on an “ideal American” rooted in family values—such as heterosexual reproduction and commitment to Christian values—that may stand in contrast to LG migrants (Lehr 1999; Behrman and Weitzman 2024; see also Turnbull-Dugarte 2024 on LG

surrogacy support). Another possibility is that Americans are simply indifferent to sexuality when considering potential immigrants.

Besides cultural similarity, previous work raises two other possible theories for how Americans might evaluate deservingness for admission. Theories of *economic potential* have the greatest empirical support. Highly educated migrants working in prestigious, high-earning professions are seen as particularly deserving of entry (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Helbling and Kriesi 2014; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Donnalaja 2022). Although economic potential is not a legal consideration when awarding refugee status, respondents find hypothetical refugees with economic potential to be more deserving (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Lawlor and Paquet 2022). And, while LG Americans are not economically advantaged, this population is often perceived as being wealthy (DeFilippis 2016), which could translate to perceptions of greater economic potential for LG immigrants.

Additionally, work on refugees has highlighted the importance of *humanitarian merit* in matters of deservingness. While Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner (2016) find greater support in Europe for immigrants with greater economic potential, they also find that respondents favor immigrants coming for “humanitarian” rather than “economic” reasons. In the Danish context, Hedegaard (2022) finds that refugees are considered more deserving than economic migrants. As repression against LG communities increases in countries such as Russia (Velasco 2023), this may prime Americans to be more sympathetic toward LG migrants on humanitarian grounds.

It is therefore important to disentangle cultural theories of immigrant deservingness from economic or humanitarian explanations. Doing so has yet to be convincingly executed, neither for LG immigrants nor more broadly. Many of these aspects of countries and individuals are correlated, and few studies have assessed cultural similarity theory beyond religion and language. We use sexual-minority status as a measure of cultural similarity that overcomes these issues. Sexual minorities are present throughout the world, avoiding issues of country-level correlates. We also directly ask about cultural similarity.

## Methods

We use a conjoint survey experiment to isolate these components of deservingness (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014).<sup>1</sup> 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,

1. Replication data and code are available from the Harvard Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3FONBK>.

we also ask respondents to choose which profile they see as more culturally similar to the United States. 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 [Supplementary Material section H](#)), we fielded the main survey on June 20, 2023, to 1,650 US citizen respondents using Prolific.<sup>2</sup> [Supplementary Material section B](#) contains details of the ethical principles we adhered to during data collection. The conjoint survey design asks respondents to read two vignettes describing hypothetical immigrants and choose the one they prefer to gain entry to the United States. Each respondent completed this task four times. We vary seven features of immigrant profiles: gender, country GDP, skill, language, religion, sexuality, and reason for migration (see [table 1](#) for details). In all, this creates 192 potential profiles for respondents to evaluate. We re-weight the data to better match the US population as a whole, using the July–August 2022 American Trends Panel ([Pew 2022](#)); see [Supplementary Material section C](#) for details. Due to missing data for age, we drop 29 respondents from the analysis, resulting in a final sample of 1,621.

One example profile reads: “Immigrant 1 wishes to be admitted as an immigrant to the United States. She comes from a moderately wealthy country, has a primary school education, and works as a cleaner. She does not speak English, is Christian, and identifies as lesbian. She had to leave her country because she could not find work due to high unemployment.”

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

In addition to estimating average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for the features of interest ([Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014](#)), we estimate two other quantities. We examine the interaction ([Egami and Imai 2019](#)) between profile sexuality and reason for migration; we expect that sexual minorities fleeing persecution will be seen as more deserving than

2. This study was preregistered on OSF, and we did not deviate from our planned analyses except where specified: <https://osf.io/26wfm>.

**Table 1.** Immigrant 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

those looking for work, and this difference may be greater for sexual minorities than straight immigrants. We also test for the presence of heterogeneous effects for subsamples of respondents (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020), including by political party affiliation, education, religion, sexual orientation, whether someone has LG friends or family, and whether someone is concerned about overpopulation. We expect that support for LG migrants will be highest among Democrats, the highly educated, sexual minorities, those concerned about overpopulation,<sup>3</sup> 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 preregistered hypotheses in table 2.<sup>4</sup>

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

4. Hypothesis H1b was not preregistered, but it was added following a reviewer's suggestion.

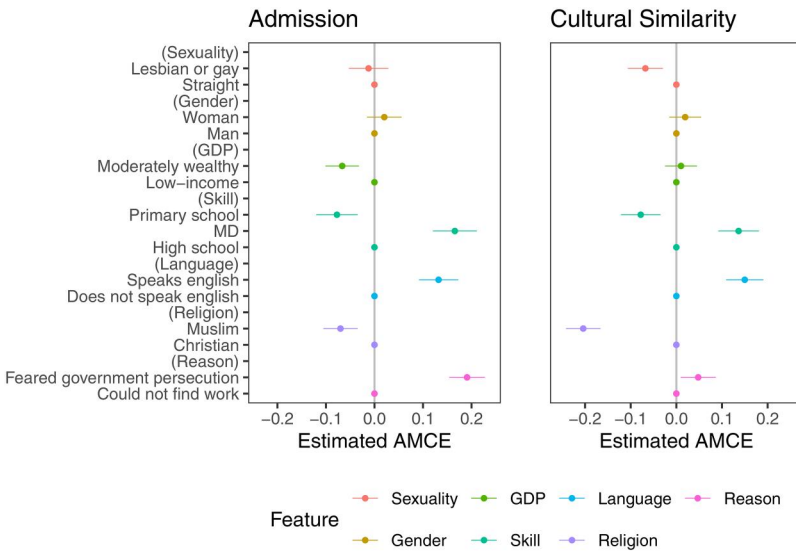
**Table 2.** Preregistered hypotheses.

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 US, 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.
<i>Heterogeneous effects for marginal means for lesbian/gay identity</i>	
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.

## Results

Results for H1a and H1b are shown in [figure 1](#), which presents AMCEs for all features. (Full tables of all results, including standard errors and  $p$ -values, are in [Supplementary Material section G](#).) For LG profiles, we see a trivial AMCE effect size of -0.012, and it is nonsignificant. Neither H1a nor H1b is supported; overall, LG profiles are not more or less likely to be selected for admission to the United States.

H2 hypothesized mediation, that is, that controlling for shared values would attenuate the effect of LG profiles on being chosen for admission.



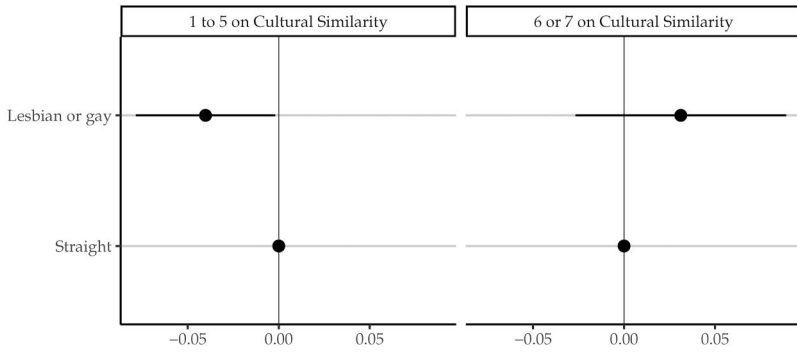
**Figure 1.** Estimated AMCEs for admission and cultural similarity for all features. Lines represent 95-percent asymptotic confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered within respondent.

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 United States.<sup>5</sup> 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 United States. Interestingly, among profiles that were designated as not having shared values with the United States, 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.<sup>6</sup> 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

5. In [Supplementary Material section E](#), we examine how cultural similarity determinations vary by respondent characteristics. All subgroups except the nonreligious see LG profiles as less culturally similar.

6. In [Supplementary Material section F](#), we present interactions with sexuality for all features.

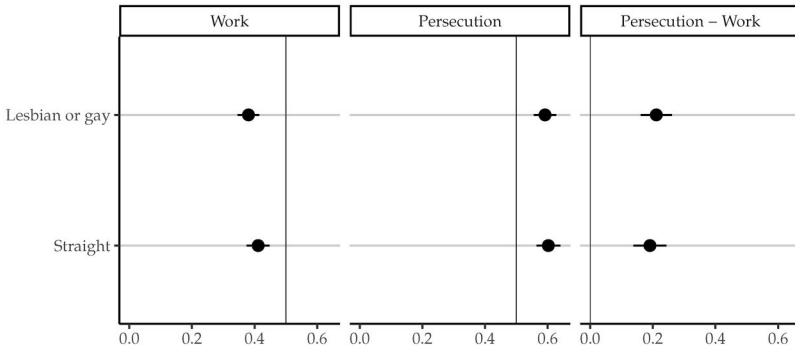


**Figure 2.** AMCEs for admission for sexuality, stratified by whether the profile received a 6 or 7 out of 7 on cultural similarity ratings. Lines represent 95-percent asymptotic confidence intervals.

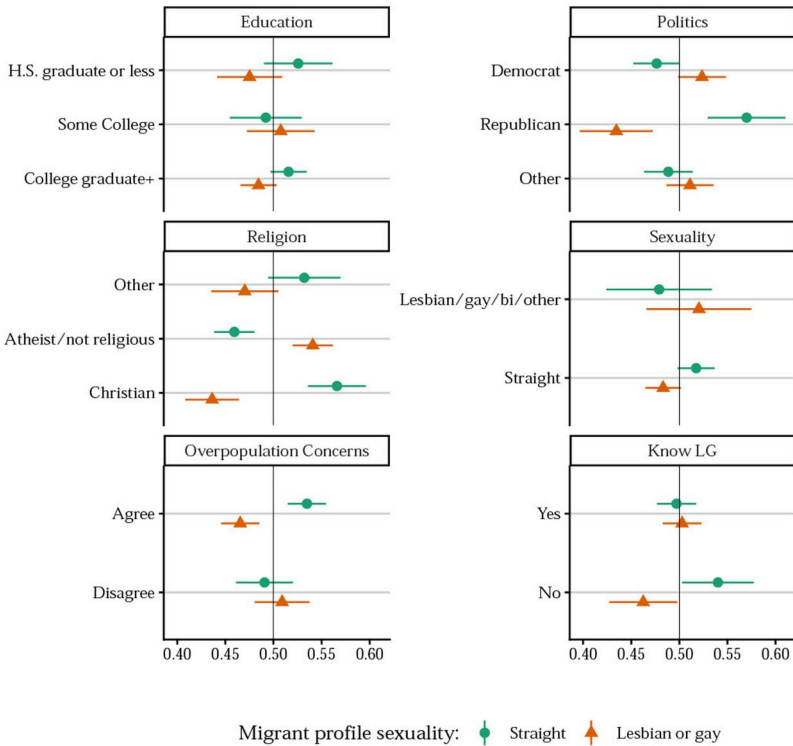
difference of 0.211 is larger than the corresponding difference for straight profiles (0.191), but not quite significantly so.

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 deserving 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 nonreligious, who are significantly more likely to admit LG migrants than straight ones. As for sexuality, sexual minorities see LG immigrants as more deserving than straight ones, in line with H4d.

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



**Figure 3.** Marginal means of choosing a profile for admission, interacting sexuality and the reason for migration. Lines represent 95-percent asymptotic confidence intervals.



**Figure 4.** Marginal means for heterogeneous effects of choosing for admission, by respondent characteristics. Lines represent 95-percent asymptotic confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered within respondent.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This conjoint survey experiment constitutes one of the first attempts to understand attitudes toward 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 United States. This prediction failed to hold: on average, US citizens give no preference to LG migrants, and in fact they view them as *less* culturally similar to the United States than straight immigrants. Despite the United States promoting pro-LG positions in international affairs, this orientation does not translate to public preference for LG migrants. This may reflect the lingering impact of traditional family values and the sentiments behind recent anti-LGBTQ+ legislation (Lehr 1999; Jones 2025).

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, and 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 the United States for humanitarian reasons as opposed to economic—supporting prior research suggesting that citizens support granting entry to humanitarian migrants (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Hedegaard 2022). And third, while Americans view LG migrants as less culturally similar, when they *do* find them more similar, there is some evidence that they prefer them over straight migrants.

There are important limitations to this study that should be addressed through future research. Although we adjust our sample with population weights, future studies should use a nationally representative sample. Additionally, this study reveals several sources of heterogeneity that raise questions for further investigation. If cultural similarity is not the primary driver of US attitudes toward LG migrants, then what is? Perceived humanitarian need—especially amid rising global backlash to LG people—or overall partisan polarization may be more promising routes to explore. For now, 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.

## Appendix A. AAPOR-Required Disclosure Elements

*Data Collection Strategy: Survey*

*Who Sponsored the Research and Who Conducted It:* Prolific conducted the survey, and the authors undertook all analyses. There was no sponsor besides the authors.

*Measurement Tools/Instruments:* Questionnaires with survey questions and response options, as shown in [Supplementary Material section I](#).

*Population Under Study:* US citizens age 18 and older

*Method Used to Generate and Recruit the Sample:* Prolific recruits respondents through convenience sampling. Respondents sign up to take surveys online through Prolific's interface. We chose to use Prolific's option to recruit a gender-balanced sample. Respondents were paid \$1 for their participation, delivered through Prolific.

*Method(s) and Mode(s) of Data Collection:* Surveys were administered online on respondents' computers, tablets, or phones on the Qualtrics platform.

*Dates of Data Collection:* June 20, 2023

*Sample Size:* 1,650 respondents

*How the Data Were Weighted:* To re-weight the Prolific survey sample to be closer to the US population, we construct inverse probability weights using the July–August 2022 American Trends Panel (Wave 112,  $n = 12,147$ ), based on four variables: political party, age (in four categories), education, and gender.

*How the Data Were Processed and Procedures to Ensure Data Quality:* We embedded two attention checks in our survey. After the first conjoint task, participants are asked to enter the color “green” when asked their favorite color. After the fourth conjoint task, participants are asked to solve  $3 + 6$ . We rejected from the sample the single respondent who failed an attention check.

*Dispositions Rates:* 1,657 completed (of which 7 discarded), 1 rejected, 62 returned, 18 timed out.

*Final Sample Size:* 1,621, due to missing data from Prolific for age.

*Measurement and Model Specification:* We use the `cj()` function from the `cregg` package in R to calculate average marginal component effects (AMCEs), marginal means, and interaction effects.

*A General Statement Acknowledging Limitations of the Design and Data Collection:* Because it is an online convenience sample, this survey is not representative of US citizens. In addition, the conjoint task in the survey is likely reflective of but may not be interpreted as equivalent to attitudes toward immigrants and their admission to the United States.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary Material may be found in the online version of this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaf054>.

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## Data Availability

Replication data and documentation are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3FONBK>.

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Research note