

Same-sex marriage recognition helps countries attract and retain highly skilled workers, research suggests

July 24 2024, by Sara Zaske



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Marriage equality appears to have a major economic benefit for countries. Washington State University researchers found that European

countries that recognized same-sex marriages kept more of their highly skilled workers from emigrating to the U.S.

The researchers analyzed 20 years of data on HB1 visas, which are reserved for immigrants to the U.S. with advanced degrees and specialized skills. From 2000–2019, a total of 13 European Union countries legalized same-sex marriage—and following that move, the U.S. saw a decrease in new HB1 visas from each of those countries, a drop of about 21% on average. The pattern held even though the enactment of marriage equality in the EU countries happened in different years and under different economic conditions.

"This just shows that having more inclusive policies can make a country more attractive for skilled labor," said Koroles Awad, a WSU Ph.D. candidate in economics.

Awad and co-author WSU economics Professor Jill McCluskey reported their findings in [AEA Papers and Proceedings](#). Their analysis focused on [skilled workers](#) coming from European Union countries since it is a political and economic union with a shared labor market, making it possible to isolate the effect of same-sex marriage legalization. In addition, the EU presented a natural experiment as about half of the 27 member countries had enacted marriage equality by 2019, and the other 14 countries had not—and could serve as a control group.

The researchers also looked at the effect of the U.S. first recognizing foreign same-sex marriages in 2013. They found the enactment of that [policy](#) slowed the decline of visa admissions from EU countries that already had marriage equality policies, including The Netherlands, Belgium and Spain.

These [foreign workers](#) are highly sought after, Awad noted, particularly in STEM fields, those dealing with science, technology, engineering and

math.

"There is a lot of effort within the U.S. and in foreign countries to compete for these graduates and keep advanced degree holders in the country," he said. "Marriage equality could be a non-monetary incentive to attract skilled workers, keep them in our economy and keep that STEM advantage."

These findings build on previous work on migration within states in the U.S. before federal marriage equality. That study found that same-sex couples and [heterosexual couples](#) with a female head of household were more likely to move to states that recognized [same-sex marriage](#).

The data in this study does not include the [sexual orientation](#) of H1B visa holders, but the effect of the recognition of marriage [equality](#) was clear on the movement of skilled labor. Statistically, [same-sex couples](#) tend to have higher levels of education, but the researchers said the change could also simply indicate that many highly skilled people are drawn to areas with more inclusive policies.

"In general, discriminatory policies are bad for the economy, and this is one way that shows it," said McCluskey. "As a country, we should try to have all people be able to fulfill their potential. If we have policies that are non-discriminatory, then everyone can do better, and it will be better for the economy."

More information: Koroles Awad et al, Marriage Equality and the Transnational Flow of Skilled Labor: The Impact of Same-Sex Marriage Legalization in the United States on the Inflow of Skilled Labor, *AEA Papers and Proceedings* (2024). [DOI: 10.1257/pandp.20241039](https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20241039)

Provided by Washington State University

Citation: Same-sex marriage recognition helps countries attract and retain highly skilled workers, research suggests (2024, July 24) retrieved 24 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-07-sex-marriage-recognition-countries-retain.html>

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