

**U.S. Sanctuary Policies and Mexicans' Migration Preferences:  
A Conjoint-Experimental Study**

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## **Abstract**

The debate on immigration policy and enforcement in the United States often revolves around the phenomenon of sanctuary cities. While past research accounts for Americans' attitudes toward sanctuary cities and the effects of sanctuary policies on immigrant and Latino communities, less is known about how potential migrants factor sanctuary status into moving decisions. In this study, we implement a conjoint experiment with respondents in Mexico. Its results reveal that sanctuary status indeed increases attractiveness of potential immigration destinations in the United States. However, its effect is overshadowed by preferences for localities with many jobs and low crime rates, as well as ones that voted for Biden in 2020. Despite emphasis on sanctuary cities in U.S. political rhetoric, sanctuary policies only modestly increase the attractiveness of cities for potential migrants.

The debate on immigration policy and enforcement in the United States often revolves around the phenomenon of sanctuary cities, with conservative and liberal politicians often offering opposite views on sanctuary policies.<sup>1</sup> Those who advocate for restrictive immigration policies routinely argue that sanctuary policies increase crime. For instance, former Attorney General Jeff Sessions commented: “Jurisdictions that adopt so-called ‘sanctuary policies’ also adopt the view that the protection of criminal aliens is more important than the protection of law-abiding citizens and of the rule of law.”<sup>2</sup> Proponents of sanctuary initiatives, in turn, claim that they foster social inclusion of immigrants. For instance, the City of San Francisco claims that, under its sanctuary policy, “all residents, regardless of immigration status, feel comfortable accessing... public health services and benefit programs.”<sup>3</sup>

Social scientists have evaluated both claims and found different amounts of support for them. For instance, existing research shows that sanctuary policies have no discernable effect on crime rates (Gonzalez O’Brien, Collingwood, and El-Khatib 2019). At the same time, strict immigration enforcement imposes a substantial toll in terms of public health and social isolation, and these negative outcomes disproportionately impact Latino communities (Nichols, LeBron, and Pedraza 2018; Simmons, Menjivar, and Salerno Valdez 2021; Wang and Kaushal 2019). Sanctuary policies, conversely, can improve the sense of belonging and cooperation with law enforcement—and Latinos, again, are most strongly affected (Huo et al. 2018; Martinez-Schuldt and Martinez 2021).

With local-level sanctuary initiatives increasingly in the spotlight of national politics,

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “sanctuary” to refer to policies that limit localities’ cooperation with the federal government’s effort to enforce immigration law. It is worth noting that such policies can apply at the county level and are not solely found in urban areas.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-sends-letters-29-jurisdictions-regarding-their-compliance-8-usc-1373>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sf.gov/information/sanctuary-city-ordinance>

scholars have recently moved to explore how Americans view sanctuary policies. For instance, existing evidence suggests that opinions on immigration enforcement and sanctuary cities in the United States are influenced by racial attitudes and partisanship (Casellas and Wallace 2020; Collingwood, Gonzalez O'Brien, and Tafoya 2020). At the same time, much less is known about what potential immigrants—the very people sanctuary initiatives are supposed to protect—think about these policies.

We address this gap by examining how respondents in Mexico consider sanctuary city status in evaluating potential moving destinations in the United States. To compare the effect of sanctuary status on migration preferences to other characteristics of localities, we use conjoint experimental design. Results shows that sanctuary status has a significant, non-trivial effect on the perceived attractiveness of moving destinations. At the same time, jobs availability, crime rate, and presidential vote in 2020 all have larger effects on Mexicans' migration preferences. Overall, despite emphasis on sanctuary policies in U.S. political rhetoric, they only modestly increase the attractiveness of cities for potential immigrants.

### **Migration Decisions as Multidimensional Choices**

Sanctuary jurisdictions in the United States are not evenly distributed. Places with educated, racially/ethnically diverse, and liberal populations are more likely to have sanctuary policies (Huang and Liu 2018). Studying preferences with respect to such policies thus requires a method that allows us to isolate sanctuary status from other attributes of a potential destination that can simultaneously impact moving decisions and can be correlated with the immigration enforcement regime.

We study how sanctuary policies factor into peoples' preferences for potential immigration destinations using a conjoint analysis, a survey-experimental technique designed to

assess multidimensional decisions (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Conjoint experiments have been validated as a measure of preferences (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015), and they are resilient to satisficing (Bansak et al. 2019). Conjoint experiments have already been used to study residential choices (Mummolo and Nall 2017), as well as migration intentions (Duch et al. 2022; Ferwerda and Gest 2021).

Given that Latinos are disproportionately targeted by U.S. immigration enforcement, we expect that localities with sanctuary status will be seen by Mexican respondents as more attractive moving destinations. At the same time, we do not have strong theoretical expectations about the relative magnitude of the sanctuary attribute relative to others, such as availability of jobs. Making such comparisons, made possible by the conjoint-experimental design, is an important innovation of our study. We also explore potential heterogeneity of effects for the sanctuary attribute across respondents' skin color (Ostfeld and Yadon 2022; Villareal 2010), socioeconomic status, and political ideology.

### **Research Design**

In June 2021, we designed and fielded an original survey-experimental study in Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Not only is Mexico a country with primarily Latino residents, but about one-quarter of immigrants in the United States were born in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, these factors make Mexico a good case study for the purpose of our research question. We recruited 972 respondents from a proprietary panel maintained by a research firm Netquest. The gender ratio in the final sample was 52.2% male to 47.8% female. Mean age was 41.6 years. The sample also covered all major geographic regions of the country.

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<sup>4</sup> The survey was fielded in Spanish. In the paper, we present English translations of the materials.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ilctr.org/quick-us-immigration-statistics/>

The main component of the online survey was a conjoint experiment, in which respondents were asked to evaluate hypothetical moving destinations in the United States. Specifically, respondents were asked to identify places where, in their opinion, others would prefer to live and work.<sup>6</sup> Destinations (cities) were described in terms of six attributes corresponding to the key “pull” migration factors. Besides sanctuary status, these attributes were the following: job opportunities, Mexican community size, crime rate, and geographic region. Since sanctuary status can signal cities’ political climate more broadly, we also included an attribute for the Biden vs. Trump vote in the 2020 presidential election.<sup>7</sup> Each respondent made ten choices and thus saw the total of 20 cities’ descriptions. See Table 1 for the full list of conjoint attributes with possible values.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1.** Conjoint attributes and values

Attribute	Values
Sanctuary city (doesn’t cooperate with immigration enforcement in the U.S.)	Yes No
Job opportunities	Many Few
Mexican community	Large Small
Crime rate	Low High
Candidate with most votes in the 2020 U.S. presidential election	Biden Trump
Region	Midwest Northeast South West

After completing the conjoint task, respondents were asked about their skin color and

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<sup>6</sup> There were two reasons for choosing this formulation. First, we did not want to imply that all our Mexican respondents would want or had plans to move to the United States. Second, asking respondents about alleged preferences of others is a common survey technique that can reduce social desirability concerns.

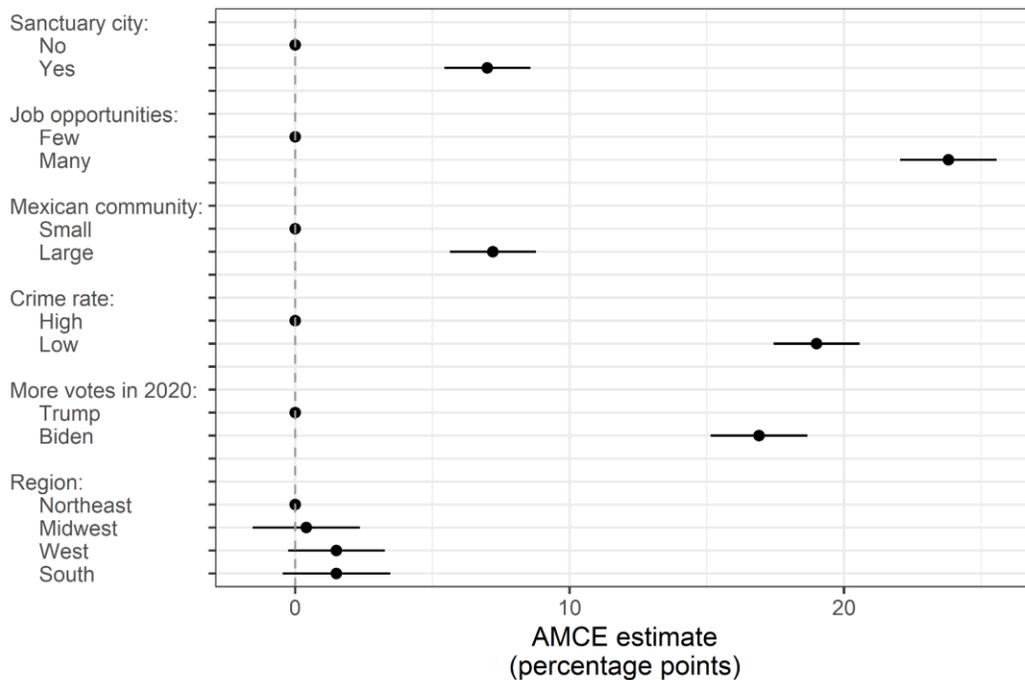
<sup>7</sup> The “Trump factor” has been shown to impact public opinion in Latin America (Carreras Visconti, and Acacio 2021), and thus may be relevant for migration preferences among Mexicans.

<sup>8</sup> See Figure A1 in Online Appendix for an example of places’ descriptions as seen by respondents.

political ideology.<sup>9</sup> Data on socioeconomic status was provided by Netquest.

### Results

We estimate average marginal component effects of destinations’ attributes on perceived attractiveness using the standard procedure: OLS regression with standard errors clustered by respondent. Results are presented in Figure 1. Among the six attributes, job opportunities are most important: Places with many jobs are 24 percentage points more likely to be seen as the preferred migration destination compared to those with few jobs. This is followed by crime rate and the 2020 presidential vote, with the corresponding effects of 19 and 17 percentage points, respectively. A city with sanctuary status is 7 percentage points more likely to be perceived as an attractive place to move compared with a non-sanctuary city—equal to the effect of large vs. small Mexican community size. Region does not have significant or sizable effects.



**Figure 1.** Effects of destination attributes on probability of being preferred

<sup>9</sup> The skin color question used the validated PERLA scale (Telles and Paschel 2014).

We also explore effects' heterogeneity across respondents' skin color, socioeconomic status, and political ideology (see Figure A2 in Online Appendix). We find significant, but moderate, preferences for immigration destinations with sanctuary policies across all these characteristics. We also do not find sizable heterogeneities for the effects of other attributes.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have explored how potential migrants factor sanctuary policies into their moving preferences. Following existing research on Latinos bearing the disproportionate burden of immigration enforcement in the United States, we have hypothesized that potential immigrants from Mexico will prefer sanctuary jurisdictions. We indeed have found that sanctuary status has a significant and non-trivial positive effect on the perceived attractiveness of potential migration destinations. At the same time, it is significantly and substantially lower than the corresponding effects of job opportunities and crime rates. Moreover, the 2020 presidential vote seems to serve as a more powerful cue for the place's friendliness toward immigrants from Mexico than the official sanctuary status. These effects do not depend on respondents' skin color, socioeconomic status, or political ideology.

Importantly, we cannot speak to how the results of our study generalize beyond the attitudes of Mexicans, even to neighboring countries and regions such as Central America. Future research may consider how potential migrants from parts of the world other than Latin America consider sanctuary policies in U.S. cities. Additionally, our analysis does not specifically consider preferences of those who intend to immigrate to the United States outside of the legal channels—and who may show stronger preferences for sanctuary jurisdictions. At the same time, it is unclear how sanctuary cities' attraction of undocumented immigrants will be seen by the public, given Americans' strong opposition to unauthorized immigration across the

partisan divide (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Wright, Levy, and Citrin 2016).

Overall, our results suggest that localities with sanctuary policies may attract larger numbers of potential immigrants—but this effect is lower than supporters of such initiatives may have hoped. Migration decisions, instead, are predominantly driven by other structural factors, such as availability of jobs and crime rates. Official sanctuary policies only modestly boost the attractiveness of cities with social and political climates that are otherwise welcoming to newcomers.

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## Online Appendix

### Survey materials

#### *Conjoint preamble*

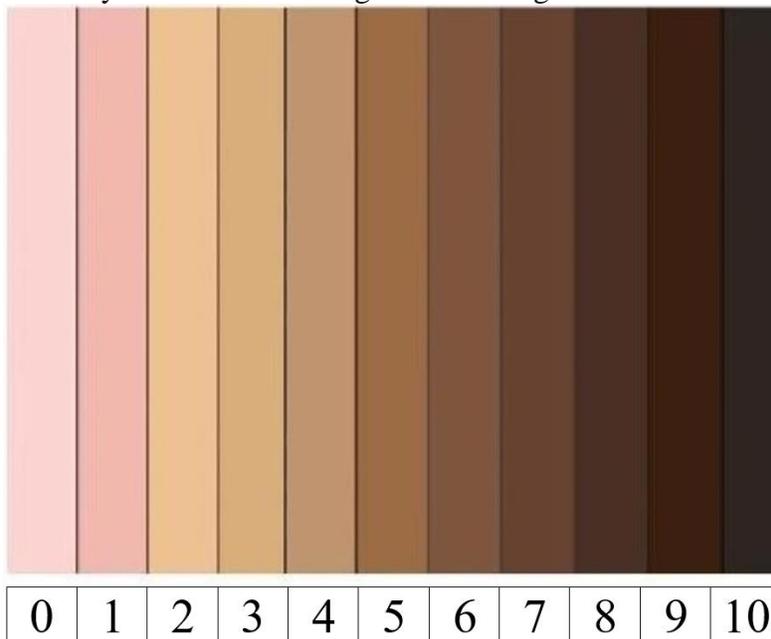
“This study considers how people decide on places in which to live and work. For the next few minutes, we are going to ask you to think of people moving to live and work in the United States -- either temporarily or permanently. We will provide you with several pieces of information about places someone may have an opportunity to move to. For each pair of places, please indicate which of the two, in your opinion, others would prefer to live and work in. This exercise is purely hypothetical. Even if you aren't entirely sure, please indicate which of the two places you think would be more attractive to people who move to the United States.”

#### *Ideology*

“In politics people sometimes talk of ‘left’ and ‘right.’ Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?”

#### *Skin color*

As you know, humans display a wide variety of physical attributes. One of these is skin color. How would you describe your skin color using the following scale?



Pair 1 of 10

Please carefully review information about the two U.S. places presented below, then answer the questions.

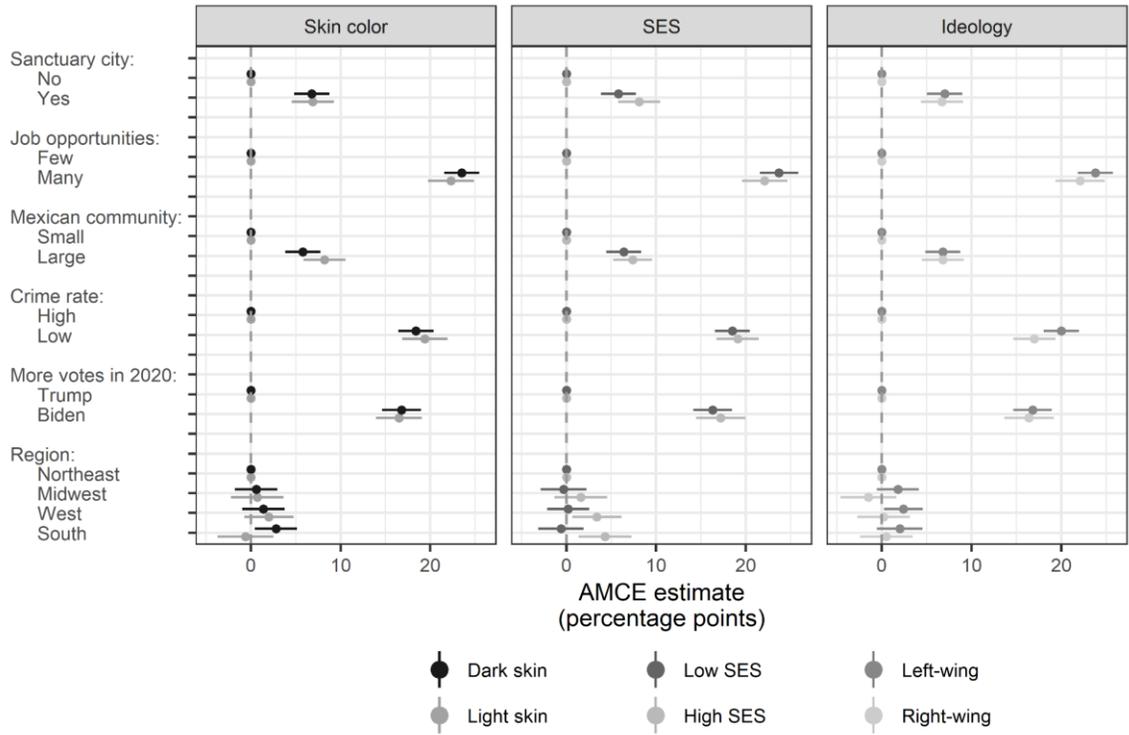
	<b>Place 1</b>	<b>Place 2</b>
<b>Sanctuary city (doesn't cooperate with immigration enforcement in the U.S.)</b>	Yes	No
<b>U.S. region</b>	Midwest	Northeast
<b>Crime rate</b>	Low	Low
<b>Candidate with most votes in the 2020 U.S. presidential election</b>	Biden	Biden
<b>Job opportunities</b>	Many	Many
<b>Mexican community</b>	Small	Small

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Which of the two places described above, in your opinion, would others prefer to live and work in?

- Place 1
- Place 2

**Figure A1.** Conjoint design: sample city descriptions



**Figure A2.** Effects of destination attributes on probability of being preferred by respondents' skin color, socioeconomic status (SES), and political ideology