



Do schools discriminate against homosexual parents? Evidence from a randomized correspondence experiment



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ABSTRACT

The recognition of homosexual rights is a controversial issue in many countries. Spain was the third country in the world (after the Netherlands and Belgium) to introduce a law recognizing homosexual marriage and the adoption of children by homosexual couples. In this paper, we examine for the first time whether schools are more hesitant about giving feedback to homosexual parents during children's pre-registration period in Catalonia (Spain). To do so, we designed a correspondence experiment to be conducted in schools. We created three types of fictitious couples—one heterosexual, one gay, and one lesbian—and sent emails to schools in which the couples' sexual orientation was explicit. Our results show that gay couples had a significantly lower (22 percentage points) call-back probability than heterosexual couples. No statistically significant differences in call-back probability were found between the lesbian and heterosexual couples.

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1. Introduction

The recognition of homosexual rights is a controversial issue in many countries. In 2001, the Netherlands was the first country in the world to recognize same-sex couples' marriage.¹ Since then, this right has also been recognized in other countries.² More recently, a number of countries have granted homosexual couples the right to

adopt children.³ In the United States (US), same-sex marriage has been legal nationwide since June 26, 2015, when the US Supreme Court ruled that state-level bans on same-sex marriage were unconstitutional. Both measures aim to recognize and normalize homosexual family structures. Although there is an abundance of literature that analyzes discrimination against homosexuals in the labor market, studies analyzing discrimination against homosexual couples and their children in the school environment are virtually non-existent. Given this recent implementation of policies in favor of homosexual rights and the normalization of homosexual families in many developed countries, we find this issue to be of special interest.

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¹ Denmark recognized same-sex couples marriage after the Netherlands, but was the first country in the world to legally recognize same-sex unions in 1989.

² South Africa, Portugal, Spain, Iceland, Argentina, Denmark, Uruguay, New Zealand, France, Brazil and the United Kingdom (UK) allow homosexual marriage, whilst in Mexico it is only allowed in some states, and in the US was also only permitted in some states until recently (source: www.freedomtomy.org).

³ Andorra, Argentina, Spain, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, the United Kingdom (UK), Uruguay, Finland, Germany, Israel, and Slovenia allow homosexuals to adopt children, whereas in Australia, Mexico, and the United States it is only allowed in some states (source: www.adoption.laws.com/gay-adoption).

Previous literature has documented the existence of discrimination in the labor market as well as the housing market. Based on these findings, we find it of special interest to investigate whether homosexuals are also discriminated against in the school environment. If this is the case, the existence of discrimination might affect not only same-sex parents, but also have far-reaching implications for their children regarding school and labor market outcomes. We believe that the topic of discrimination against homosexual parents and their children in the school environment is also very relevant from a policy perspective. Governments that allow homosexual couples to adopt children should ensure that discrimination in school is no barrier with respect to the right to adopt.⁴

In this paper we test for the first time whether private schools are more hesitant about interacting with homosexual than with heterosexual parents. To carry out our test, we use an experimental correspondence design. This technique has the interesting feature of allowing us to create situations in which people, in our case principals or administrative staff in schools, interact with fictitious homosexual individuals who clearly reveal their sexual orientation. The experiment was conducted in the region of Catalonia (Spain) during the pre-registration period in schools.⁵ Pre-registration is compulsory and has to take place before schools, either public or private, decide on children's admittance. In this study we focus on private schools. This study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to study discrimination against homosexual parents in the school environment.

Our correspondence experiment involved the creation of three different fictitious profiles (heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples) and sending emails to schools during the pre-registration period. We decided to consider both gay and lesbian couples to control for the gender of the homosexual parents.⁶

In the emails, our fictitious couples showed interest in the school and made a request for an interview and a visit. Their sexual orientation was made explicit. After processing all the call-backs from the schools, we created a database that allowed us to carry out a statistical analysis. Our results indicate that the call-back probability for homosexual parents was about 22 percentage points lower than for heterosexual couples. Lesbian couples also had a lower call-back probability than their heterosexual

counterparts (3.4 percentage points lower). However, the latter was not statistically significant. These findings are consistent with previous evidence based on correspondence experiments that have tested for discrimination against homosexuals.

The paper is structured as follows. In section two, we describe the institutional setting. In section three, we provide an overview of the existing literature regarding homosexual discrimination. The experimental design is described in section four and section five reports the empirical results. The final section summarizes and concludes.

2. Institutional setting

2.1. Attitudes toward homosexuality in Spain

Despite advances in the recognition of homosexual rights in developed countries, historical, sociological, and psychological research demonstrates the existence of homophobia and sexual prejudice around the world. These attitudes are more intense in countries where there is no clear separation between religious and political institutions. Indeed, there are some countries where homosexuality is still persecuted and punished, in some cases with the death penalty.⁷

Spain was the third country in the world (after the Netherlands and Belgium) to introduce a law recognizing marriage between same-sex couples. It was promoted by PSOE (the left-wing party in office) and became effective on July 3, 2005.⁸ It faced opposition from the Catholic Church and the PP (the main right-wing party), which claimed that this law was against the Spanish Constitution and took the case to the Spanish Constitutional Court. However, in 2012 their appeal was rejected. Under the same law, homosexual couples were also granted the same rights to adopt children as heterosexual couples.⁹ Since then, with the support of the main right-wing party (PP), the Catholic Church and Catholic pro-family conservative associations have organized several demonstrations against the right of homosexual couples to marry and adopt children.

In this context, one question that arises is: Is the polarization reflected in Parliament also reflected in society and institutions? The European Values Study places Spain in a middle position regarding homosexual acceptance compared to other EU15 countries.¹⁰ Around 20% of the Spaniards interviewed for the study declared that they did not like the idea of having homosexuals as neighbors (Fig. 1).¹¹ Portugal, Austria, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and

⁴ On January 29, 2014, the main national Spanish newspaper *El País* published the following news story: "The principal of a school was accused in court of turning down the application by a gay couple for their son." This happened in a private school in Seville. The principal of the school turned down the application, alleging that there were no vacancies. However, the parents of the child knew this to be untrue and therefore took the case to the Court of Justice.

⁵ We choose Catalonia because it is the only region for which corporate email addresses and data on school characteristics are available. When we carried out the experiment, this region was one of two regions for which the pre-registration period was still open. We also contacted the educational authorities in other regions and asked for a list of schools with corporate emails, but we did not receive any feedback. As we shall see below, Catalan schools do not differ much from Spanish schools.

⁶ This distinction is not trivial. There are a number of studies in the US that document different attitudes toward gays and lesbians (Herek, 2000, 2002; Kite & Whitley 1996).

⁷ Countries where homosexuality is punished with the death penalty are: Libya, Sudan, Mauritania, Nigeria, Somaliland, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Maldives (source: www.forbes.com).

⁸ The House of Representatives approved the law in the first round by 183 votes to 136. In the Senate, the law was rejected by 131 votes to 119. In Congress, the veto was lifted and the law finally passed by 187 votes to 147.

⁹ Law 13/2005, article 44.

¹⁰ This study shows that the ex-communist European countries are by far the most homophobic.

¹¹ In the question, the gender of the hypothetical homosexual neighbor is not specified.

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