

Research Articles

Sexual Prejudice and the Relevance of Political Culture: Trends and Correlates in El Salvador

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Abstract

The correlates of sexual prejudice –negative attitudes toward gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals– are well-known in the literature, but the relevance of the social-political environment in which these correlates insert has received less attention. This study examines trends and correlates of sexual prejudice in El Salvador, a country frequently ranked as one of the most homophobic in the Americas. Using a representative sample from national-level surveys conducted between 2008 and 2016, it was found that the Salvadorian population displayed high levels of sexual prejudice in this period, although these levels varied significantly over time. Analysis with 2016 data showed that socially precarious conditions, religion, and traditionally gendered worldviews, were positively associated with sexual prejudice. Sexual prejudice also correlated with political and social beliefs that encompass authoritarian and misogynistic tendencies. Three clusters of predictors of sexual prejudice were identified: Religious conventionalism, unsophisticated masculinity background, and a deficient democratic socialization. This study supports previous findings about correlates of sexual prejudice while highlighting the lesser-studied role of the social-political environment, and oscillations in a democratic culture, in perpetuating sexual prejudice.

Keywords: Sexual prejudice, homophobia, same-sex marriage, religious conservatism, LGBTI

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The correlates of prejudice based on sexual orientation, or sexual prejudice, are well-established in the literature and based on the existing studies, it has been found that the profile of a prejudiced person is that of an individual from lower socio-economic strata, with few years of education, and highly conservative and religious (Costa et al., 2015; Cramwinckel et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2013). Researchers have examined these characteristics in diverse contexts, such as the United States (Dodge et al., 2016) and The Netherlands (Haney, 2016), Singapore (Aminnuddin, 2019), Hong Kong (Lau et al., 2014), the United Kingdom (Watt & Elliot, 2019), Brazil (Costa et al., 2015); Jamaica (West & Cowell, 2015), and several other countries in the Americas (Maldonado, 2015; Suárez & Madrigal, 2007).

However, less discussed is the context of political culture and social beliefs in which these and other individual characteristics are inserted, and whether changes in this wider context can be related to variability in sexual prejudice levels over time. To address this gap in research, this study examined social-political trends and correlates of sexual prejudice in El Salvador, one of the most homophobic countries in the Americas (Pew Research Center, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2014). Using secondary data from a nation-wide survey spanning nine years (Vanderbilt University, n.d.), sexual prejudice levels were estimated based on the respondents' approval of non-heterosexual people to run for public office, and to have the right to marry. These responses were linked to measures of political culture and social beliefs, to further understand the dynamics between people's prejudicial attitudes and the socio-political environment in which they are manifested.

Defining sexual prejudice

The collective of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) people, and other queer identities, comprise the sexual and gender diversity in society. Although some of the issues addressed in this paper allude to prejudice based on sexual orientation and on gender identity, the analysis focused only on prejudice towards non-heterosexual individuals: Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, which are referred to as LGB in this paper. It should be noted that bisexuality tends to be omitted when speaking of non-heterosexual orientations (Worthen, 2013); most sources used in this study refer to "homosexuality", "homophobia", gay men and lesbians, and these terms are reproduced in this paper to reflect the content of the sources. Whenever possible, the language in this paper regarding non-heterosexual people is meant to include bisexuality (e.g., same-sex couples).



Herek (2000a) defined sexual prejudice as negative attitudes towards individuals based on their sexual orientation. Most frequently, this term refers to negativity from heterosexual people towards their LGB counterparts, following the understanding that prejudice comprises ideological tools that justify dominance of one group over another (Barrientos & Cárdenas, 2013; Zick et al., 2011). The notion of sexual prejudice implies that these negative attitudes constitute a socially construed aversion, in contrast with the better-known term homophobia, which assumes that negative attitudes emanate from individual, irrational fears (Herek, 2000a).

Sexual prejudice can be elusive and respond to a number of purposes. Sexual prejudice can be concealed or suspended temporarily in exchange for titillation, such as that among non-LGBTI onlookers at Pride parades (Tomsen & Markwell, 2009). It can include seemingly positive components, such as paternalistic views, besides the negative ones (Dixon et al., 2013). Furthermore, prejudice can be a vehicle to perform one's social identity (Durrheim et al., 2016). In this sense, sexual prejudice has psychological functions for the individual, and for group identity and differentiation (Durrheim et al., 2016; Herek & McLemore, 2013; Zick et al., 2011). Attitudes can serve to assert allegiance to moral or political principles that are central to one's self-concept, and thus expressions of sexual prejudice can aid individuals to demonstrate to others that they measure up to the cultural (heteronormative) standards of their gender roles (Carnaghi et al., 2011; Herek, 2000b).

Sexual prejudice in contemporary El Salvador

El Salvador is currently considered one of the most dangerous countries in the planet without an ongoing armed conflict, with high homicide rates surrounding the 100 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants (Mc Evoy & Hideg, 2017; Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (PNUD), 2018). El Salvador shows persistent socio-economic inequality and precariousness, due to the uneven distribution of resources, massive informal employment, and the low wages paid to the majority of the population (Departamento de Economía Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, 2017; PNUD, 2013). Research has also identified deficits in the democratic political culture, which include citizens' decreasing support of democracy and increasing political intolerance (Córdova Macías et al., 2017; Latinobarómetro, 2017).



El Salvador lacks systematic research practices to investigate sexual prejudice, and the task of documenting this phenomenon has been undertaken by public opinion polls, particularly since the late 1990s (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), 1999). National-level surveys spanning the 1999-2009 decade suggest that sexual prejudice trends have remained steady, with respondents consistently reporting high levels of prejudice (IUDOP, 2002, 2009; Lodola & Corral, 2010; Seligson & Moreno Morales, 2010). For instance, The University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP, 1999, 2002, 2009) has reported that the majority of the Salvadoran population considers homosexuality as not justified and as a perversion, rejects having homosexual people as neighbors, and opposes to the church supporting same-sex marriage. In 2008, less than 20% of Salvadorans approved of LGB to nominate themselves for a public service position (Seligson & Moreno Morales, 2010). Surveys from the 2010s comparing countries in the Americas and the Caribbean show that El Salvador ranks in the lowest positions in terms of same-sex marriage approval (Lodola & Corral, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2014), and highest in disagreement with acceptance of homosexuality (Pew Research Center, 2013).

These data barely uncover the everyday life-threatening conditions for LGBTI people in El Salvador. A “culture of impunity” (Clínica Legal de Derechos Humanos Internacionales, Universidad de California, Berkeley, 2012, p.19) prevails in the country, which enforces discrimination of LGBTI people in all domains of life. Since late 1990s, over 600 hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity have been registered, with most of them left unsolved (Cidón, 2017; Nóchez et al., 2016). The bodies of LGBTI victims of crime tend to show signs of torture, and media coverage blames the victim for provoking the crime, misgenders the victim (i.e., reporting the victim’s sex and name assigned at birth instead of their manifested gender identity), or the media omits that the crime was committed in response to the victim’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Clínica Legal de Derechos Humanos Internacionales, Universidad de California, Berkeley, 2012). The most visible perpetrators of anti-LGBTI crimes are gang members, and the police and army forces (Feder & Chávez, 2016), but the most immediate sources of prejudice and threat for LGBTI people are their own family and community (Mackey, 2016). Feder (2014) reported that LGBTI youth from Central America fled for the United States trying to escape not only the gangs and the police, but also their own family members.



This high degree of sexual prejudice in the country is reflected and reinforced through speech, in the form of opinion columns in print and online media about “homosexuality” (referring to all LGBTI people) authored by members of conservative groups from higher socio-economic strata (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018; Orellana, 2017). Arévalo and Duarte (2018) analyzed such columns published between 2003 and 2017 in the most prominent national newspapers, and they identified two discursive strategies. The hardcore strategy ranges from verbal assaults to what can be defined as hate crime instigation (see Orellana, 2017). The light strategy relies on the revival of the pathological or deviant narratives of homosexuality, and it is based on classism and “cordial homophobia” (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018, p.43). The columns reported in Arévalo and Duarte’s (2018) study showed that the classist viewpoint was that elite-belonging “homosexuals” were tolerated because they remained quiet about their orientation (i.e., they concealed their sexual identity to avoid sexual stigma, Herek & Capitanio, 1996), while lower-class “homosexuals” were a threat to heteronormative values and institutions such as marriage or “the family”. “Cordial homophobia” is based on a contemporary Christian rhetoric that establishes heterosexuality as a morally superior position, showing condescending tolerance toward LGBTI people (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018). Overall, these discursive strategies reveal that sexual prejudice is not only a set of individual negative attitudes, but also a classist dispositive of domination which keeps LGBTI people excluded from the public sphere.

Relevant correlates of sexual prejudice

In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, research has found that sexual prejudice is more common among people with low educational level, of older age, living in rural areas, and who are authoritarian (Cramwinckel et al., 2018; Herek & McLemore, 2013; Napier & Jost, 2008). However, sexual prejudice has also been found to be prevalent among groups at the other side of the spectrum (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018; Crawford et al., 2015; Napier & Jost, 2008; Orellana, 2018). Evidence suggests that the prevailing narrative against sexual and gender diversity in El Salvador is also widespread in urban, high-income, highly educated groups (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018). Napier and Jost (2008) explained that high-income individuals adhered to authoritarian ideologies to preserve their advantageous circumstances, while lower-income groups adhered to them to cope with economic insecurity. Moreover, research suggests that prejudicial tendencies in El Salvador, for all societal strata, respond to a mixture of lower cognitive ability, sensitivity to



threat, and right-wing conservative reactions that target unconventional social groups, such as LGBTI people (Brandt & Crawford, 2016; Crawford et al., 2015; Hodson & Dhont, 2015; Orellana, 2018). This suggests that, while demographic factors are correlates, there are some other variables that can also explain sexual prejudice.

One such factor is religion, which can play a major role where it is dominant, influencing attitudes and behaviours (Costa et al., 2015; Cui et al., 2019; Herek & McLemore, 2013). The specific impact of religion in fueling sexual prejudice can be seen in El Salvador and other countries (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018; Costa et al., 2015; Herek & McLemore, 2013; Maldonado, 2015; Orellana, 2017, 2018). Comparative studies between countries in the Americas show that some of the main determinants of same-sex marriage disapproval are religiosity, and adherence to evangelical denominations (Lodola & Corral, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2013). In the case of El Salvador, nearly its entire population identifies themselves as religious (IUDOP, 2009). Membership to Evangelical churches have remarkably increased in contrast to Catholicism (Pew Research Center, 2014), while Orellana (2017) found that belonging to an Evangelical denomination constituted a strong predictor for right-wing authoritarianism's dimension of conventionalism. Additionally, religious membership is often embraced by political elites to attract the popular vote (Corrales, 2018), reinforcing the link between religion and political conservatism (Van der Toorn et al., 2017). Overall, LGBTI people are considered unacceptable to society in El Salvador mainly on the grounds that they go against nature and the order established by God (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018; Orellana, 2017).

Lastly, another key correlate of sexual prejudice is gender (Cramwinckel et al., 2018; Herek, 2000a; Herek & Capitano, 1996; Herek & McLemore, 2013; West & Cowell, 2015; Willer et al., 2013). A consistent finding in sexual prejudice research is that men are more susceptible than women to see threats to their gender norms (Cramwinckel et al., 2018). Men actively seek to affirm their masculinity by expressing dominant tendencies, upholding hierarchical worldviews, and supporting traditional gender roles and family structures (Herek, 2000a; Herek & McLemore, 2013; Willer et al., 2013). Hence, heterosexual men tend to be more sexually prejudiced than women, and more disapproving toward gay and bisexual men than toward lesbians and bisexual women (Herek & Capitano, 1996; West & Cowell, 2015).

Building on this background, the aim of this study was to examine social-political trends and correlates of sexual prejudice in El Salvador between 2008 and 2016. To this end, data was



analyzed from nation-wide surveys conducted during that period by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), from the University of Vanderbilt (see [Córdova Macías et al., 2017](#)). The LAPOP surveys register dimensions of political culture and social beliefs, plus associated sociodemographic information. While sexual prejudice is not measured explicitly, these surveys ask about approval of inclusion of LGB in civil life (running for public office and having the right to marry). These items can be used to reflect sexual prejudice toward LGB. Hence, these surveys provide substantial information to analyze sexual prejudice manifestations and correlations within a specific social-political environment.

Method

Data and sample

This study focused on the Salvadoran context and relied on individual-level data from the LAPOP/AmericasBarometer Project ([Vanderbilt University, n.d.](#)). The data used was obtained between 2008 and 2016, although the main focus of this paper is the 2016/2017 survey round, conducted between October and December 2016. Data collection fieldwork and sample characteristics were similar for all survey rounds included in this paper, which drew upon a national stratified representative sample of around 1,500 non-institutionalized Salvadoran adults from heterogeneous social backgrounds ([Cohen et al., 2017](#); [Córdova Macías et al., 2017](#)). The estimated margin of sample error was +/- 2.5% at a 95% confidence level. Data access for the survey rounds analyzed in this paper is free and publicly available through The AmericasBarometer by the LAPOP ([Vanderbilt University, n.d.](#)).

Participants in this survey were gender-balanced (774 men and 777 women, that is, 49.9% male and 50.1% female), with ages ranging from 18 to 93 years ($M = 40.2$, $SD = 16.7$), and 8.9 ($SD = 4.7$) years of schooling on average. Household monthly income category selected on average by the participants were USD\$196-\$220. Regarding religion affiliation, almost half of the sample (48.9%) declared being Catholic, 28.7% Evangelical/Protestant, and 7.9% non-religious or atheist, while the remaining 14.5% practiced other religion or faith.



Measures

The main variable in this study was sexual prejudice. This variable resulted from the combination of two items included in the LAPOP survey (Vanderbilt University, n.d.). The first item assessed the respondents' spurious association between individuals' competence to work in a public post and their sexual orientation: "Thinking of homosexuals, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office?" The second item read: "How strongly do you approve or disapprove of same-sex couples having the right to marry?" Both questions were transformed to a 0-10 scale (0 = Strongly Approve, 10 = Strongly Disapprove), where high scores meant high disapproval of LGB's access to these two domains of civil life. Both items were summed to obtain a unique continuous scale ($\alpha = .66$), ranging 0-10 points, where higher scores indicated higher sexual prejudice.

The remaining measures in this study consisted of sociodemographic, political, and social beliefs measures available in the survey. The variables are listed, and their operationalization is displayed in Table 1.

Procedure

LAPOP's data collection procedure in El Salvador followed the standard 2016/17 survey rounds (Córdova Macías et al., 2017; Vanderbilt University, n.d.). A general description of these rounds applicable to this country is reported by Córdova Macías et al. (2017), while the specific technical details of the survey rounds and procedures are available at the LAPOP's website (Vanderbilt University, n.d.). The analysis conducted in this study comprised three steps. The first one was to describe sexual prejudice trends from LAPOP's surveys data available from 2008 to 2016 by combining descriptive statistics with bivariate analysis (i.e., one-way ANOVA). The next step was a focus on the analysis on the 2016 data to obtain sexual prejudice correlates. Lastly, a linear multiple regression was performed to establish the predictors of sexual prejudice among the correlates identified.



Table 1

Measurement and operationalization of variables used in the analysis

Sociodemographic Variables	Operationalization
1. Age	Number reported
2. Years of formal education	Number reported
3. Importance of religion in life	A single 4-point item, from 1 = Not important to 4 = Very Important
4. Frequent religious activities	Two items on a 9-point scale regarding frequency of attendance of religious services ($\alpha = .87$)
5. Household monthly income	Monthly family income (a 16-point scale of income categories)
6. Number of children	Number reported
7. Household equipment	A 12-point scale of house equipment ownership, such as a TV or a refrigerator ($\alpha = .74$)
8. Poor/rich self-identification	A 10-point scale ranging from 1 = Poor to 10 = Rich.
9. Life satisfaction	1 = Very Satisfied, 0 = Very Unsatisfied
10. Internet frequency use	A single 5-point item, from 1 = Never to 5 = Daily
11. Religion	1 = Evangelical, 0 = Other
12. Sex	1 = Male, 2 = Female
13. Marital Status	1 = Married or free union, currently or previously, 0 = Single
Political culture and social beliefs variables	
1. Political tolerance	Four items forming a 4-40 points scale on approval/disapproval of "those who speak bad things" against the government having the right to vote, to conduct peaceful demonstrations, to run for public office, and to appear on television to make speeches ($\alpha = .71$)
2. Trust left-wing or right-wing radicals	Two items forming a 10-point scale of trusting in leftist or rightist radicals, ($\alpha = .70$)
3. Acceptance of political radical opinions	Six items forming a 10-point scale of approving leftist or rightist radicals to give a public speech, teach in a public school, and run for a public office ($\alpha = .82$)
4. Institutional trust	Sum of 13 items measuring the respondent's trust on the same number of social and political institutions like armed forces, catholic church, legislative assembly ($\alpha = .90$)
5. Democracy is better than any other form of Government	A single item with response options from 1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree);
6. Ideology (Left/Right)	1 = Left, 10 = Right
7. Approval of husband hitting wife if she neglects household chores	1 = Approves or understands, 0 = Not Approve nor understand
8. Justifying abortion when mother's health is in danger	1 = Yes, 0 = No
9. Interpersonal trust	1 = Very/somewhat trustworthy, 0 = Not Very/Untrustworthy.



Results

Sexual prejudice trends in El Salvador for 2008-2016

Sexual prejudice was measured via two components: (1) Disapproval of homosexual people in public office, and (2) Disapproval of same-sex marriage. Table 2 shows the average trends of sexual prejudice in El Salvador in the 2008-2016 period.

Table 2

Average 2008-2016 comparative trends of sexual prejudice and its dimensions

	2008 <i>M(SD)</i>	2010 <i>M(SD)</i>	2012 <i>M(SD)</i>	2014 <i>M(SD)</i>	2016 <i>M(SD)</i>	2008-16 <i>M(SD)</i>
a) Disapproval of homosexual people in public office <i>F</i> (4, 7052) = 501.821, <i>p</i> < .0001	2.80 (3.5)	7.5(3.1)	7.4(3.4)*	6.8(3.4)	6.6(3.5)	6.2(3.8)
b) Disapproval of Same-Sex Marriage <i>F</i> (3, 5312) = 30.292, <i>p</i> < .0001	N.d.	9.0(2.3)	9.0(2.4)	8.6(2.7)	8.1(3.1)	8.6 (2.7)
c) (a + b) Sexual Prejudice <i>F</i> (3, 5251) = 32.383, <i>p</i> < .0001	---	8.2(2.3)	8.1(2.5)	7.7(2.6)	7.4(2.9)	7.8 (2.6)

Note: *N* mean 2008-16 = 1,461. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation. N.d.: No data available. The disapproval /approval of Same-Sex Marriage were measure in LAPOP's surveys for the first time in 2010. Disapproval of homosexual people in public office, Disapproval of Same-Sex Marriage and Sexual Prejudice are 0-10 scales.
*In 2012 Disapproval of Same-Sex Marriage was registered just for around the half of the usual sample (*N* = 729) due to particular round survey research objectives.

The first row of Table 2 (row *a*) shows significant differences between the means of disapproval of homosexual people in public office during 2008-2016 period. According to the Scheffe post-hoc test, these differences were found between the year 2008 and the rest in this period (*p* < .0001 in all cases). While the 2010 and 2012 disapproval rating means were statistically similar (*p* = .937), 2014 and 2016 differed significantly of these two previous years (*p* < .001 and *p* < .0001, respectively), but did not differ between each other (*p* = .368). Beyond the variations in the level of disapproval of homosexual people running for public office –very low in 2008, and higher but showing a decreasing pattern in the 2010-2016 period– the average disapproval for the whole period reached an intermediate level (*M* = 6.2).



The results on the second row of Table 2 (row *b*) suggest a disapproving view of same-sex marriage, as well as significant variations in this view between years. Scheffé's multiple comparison test indicated significant differences between 2010 and 2014 ($p = .002$) and 2016 ($p < .0001$), between 2012 and 2014 ($p = .014$) and 2016 ($p < .0001$), and between 2014 and 2016 ($p < .0001$). There were no significant differences between 2010 and 2012 ($p = .997$), suggesting that same-sex marriage disapproval during the 2010-2012 period was significantly higher than in the 2014-2016 period. Nevertheless, the mean score of same-sex marriage disapproval was high ($M = 8.8$) during the seven-year frame of 2010-2016.

The combination of the two items above provided a sexual prejudice measure (Table 2, row *c*). A one-way ANOVA and Scheffé's post-hoc test supported the existence of significant differences in sexual prejudice between years. Sexual prejudice levels replicated the tendencies found for same-sex marriage disapproval, that is, significant differences were found between 2010 and 2014 ($p < .0001$), 2010 and 2016 ($p < .0001$), between 2012 and 2014 ($p = .010$), and 2012 and 2016 ($p < .0001$), and between 2014 and 2016 ($p = .003$). Likewise, there were no significant differences between 2010 and 2012 ($p = .825$). This analysis suggests that, in the 2014-2016 period, sexual prejudice significantly decreased in comparison to the 2010-2012 period. Overall, sexual prejudice levels in El Salvador can be classified as high ($M = 7.8$) for the 2008-2016 period.

Additional data supports the finding that sexual prejudice levels remained high in El Salvador in the second half of the 2010 decade. As a unified construct, sexual prejudice presented a mode of 10 points (in the case of disapproval of same-sex marriage, 10 was also the median), the highest level possible from this data. Around one third of the 2016 Salvadorian survey respondents situated themselves in the extreme point of the scale (10) of disapproval of homosexual people running for public office (36.4%), and in the composite sexual prejudice construct (33.4%). The sample proportion in the highest point of same-sex marriage disapproval doubled (63.4%) in the aforementioned rejection stance.



Sociodemographic, political culture and social belief correlates of sexual prejudice for 2016

Means, standard deviations and correlations between sexual prejudice and sociodemographic variables are shown in Table 3. Results indicate that sexual prejudice was positively correlated with age, importance of religion in life, frequency of attendance of religious activities, and number of children. Moreover, sexual prejudice was negatively associated with years of education, household monthly income, household equipment, poor/rich self-identification (meaning poorer self-identification), life satisfaction, and internet use frequency. Being evangelical, been or having been married, and male gender, also correlated significantly with sexual prejudice.

Among sociodemographic variables, a consistent middle-lower class and mature individual profile appears (mean age = 40.2), with associated material and family situations expected from such social position by Salvadoran standards. For example, household monthly income (mean category = 7.9 = \$196-\$220), as an indicator of socio-material condition, positively correlated with years of education, household equipment, richer self-identification, life satisfaction, and internet use frequency. Income also negatively correlated with importance of religion in life, number of children, and being of male gender. Importance of religion in life, a variable related to traditionalist views, positively correlated with age, frequent religious activities, number of children, being evangelical, being of female gender, and being currently or previously married.



Table 3

Descriptive statistics and correlations for sexual prejudice and sociodemographic variables (2016)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
1. Sexual Prejudice	-												
2. Age	.22**	-											
3. Years of Education	-.19**	-.35**	-										
4. Importance of religion in life	.18**	.12**	-.13**	-									
5. Frequent religious activities	.16**	.12**	-.06*	.34**	-								
6. Household monthly income	-.08**	-.02	.51**	-.07**	-.05	-							
7. Number of Children	.17**	.61**	-.44**	.13**	.11**	-.13**	-						
8. Household Equipment	-.13**	-.04	.50**	-.10**	-.04	.64**	-.17**	-					
9. Poor/Rich self-identification	-.10**	-.18**	.28**	-.05	.00	.23**	-.20**	.26**	-				
10. Life Satisfaction	-.05*	-.18**	.09**	-.01	.03	.11**	-.09**	.09**	.13**	-			
11. Internet Use Frequency	-.20**	-.54**	.60**	-.13**	-.10**	.39**	-.44**	.49**	.30**	.14**	-		
12. Religion (Evangelical)	.13**	-.01	-.05	.13**	.14**	-.01	.02	-.01	-.01	.00	.02	-	
13. Sex (Women)	-.11**	-.04	-.09**	.08**	.14**	-.16**	.06*	-.13**	-.10**	.01	-.10**	.01	-
14. Marital Status (Non Single)	.11**	.35**	-.18**	.06*	.06*	-.02	.42**	-.08**	-.16**	-.04	-.25**	.01	.03
M	7.4	40.2	8.9	3.8	5.3	7.9	2.2	6.1	3.2	0.80	2.9	-	-
SD	2.9	16.7	4.7	0.6	2.6	5.0	2.2	2.5	2.0	0.40	1.8	-	-

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 4 reports descriptive statistics and correlations between sexual prejudice and political culture and social belief variables. Among this group of variables, sexual prejudice negatively correlated with most political culture variables included in the analysis; specifically, higher sexual prejudice correlated with lower political tolerance, lower acceptance of radical political positions and lower agreement with democracy being better than other forms of government. Trusting left-wing or right-wing radicals, institutional trust, and ideology did not correlate with sexual prejudice. Regarding social beliefs, sexual prejudice positively correlated with the approval of a husband hitting his wife if she neglects household chores. Justifying abortion when the mother's health is in danger, and interpersonal trust, also correlated negatively with sexual prejudice.



Table 4

Descriptive statistics and correlations for sexual prejudice and political culture and social beliefs variables (2016)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
1. Sexual Prejudice	1.0									
2. Tolerance	-.26**	1.0								
3. Trust Left or Right Radicals	-.05	.13**	1.0							
4. Acceptance of Political Radical opinions	-.14**	.19**	.40**	1.0						
5. Institutional Trust	-.05	.15**	.30**	.15**	1.0					
6. Democracy is better than any other form of Government	-.09**	.17**	.12**	.12**	.29**	1.0				
7. Ideology (Left/Right)	-.01	.06*	.02	.01	.14**	-.06*	1.0			
8. Approval of Husband hitting Wife if she neglects chores	.09**	.01	.11**	.01	.15**	-.01	.04	1.0		
9. Justifying abortion when mother's health is in danger	-.13**	.08**	.03	.01	.05	.03	.01	-.01	1.0	
10. Interpersonal Trust	-.06*	.02	.07**	.06*	.13**	.06*	.03	-.04	.05	1.0
M	7.4	21.2	2.1	5.7	51.6	4.6	5.6	0.3	0.5	0.6
SD	2.9	7.6	2.4	3.5	16.3	1.6	2.7	0.5	0.5	0.5

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Determinants of sexual prejudice

The final part of the analysis entailed a linear multiple regression where all the above correlates served as independent variables, with sexual prejudice as dependent variable. As presented on Table 5, a significant 10-variable regression model of sexual prejudice emerged, which included sociodemographic (e.g., male), political culture (e.g., low tolerance), and social beliefs variables (e.g., justifying abortion). This model explained a fifth part of the variance ($Adj. R^2 = .195$).

Table 5



Determinants of sexual prejudice in El Salvador in 2016

Variables	B	SE	β	T	Sig.
Gender (Men)	-1.071	.203	-.185	-5.274	.0001
Tolerance	-0.071	.014	-.183	-5.145	.0001
Frequent religious activities	0.152	.043	.134	3.534	.0001
Number of Children	0.175	.055	.120	3.211	.001
Importance of Religion in Life	0.522	.167	.117	3.123	.002
Acceptance of Political Radical opinions	-0.088	.029	-.107	-3.013	.003
Years of Schooling	-0.067	.025	-.101	-2.705	.007
Evangelical	0.581	.227	.090	2.557	.011
Democracy is better than any other form of Government	-0.153	.065	-.083	-2.360	.019
Justifying abortion when mother's health is in danger	-0.453	.206	-.078	-2.197	.028
$F(10, 667) = 17.349, p < .0001, R^2 = .206, Adj. R^2 = .195$					
<i>Note.</i> Stepwise Method applied. The independent variables have been ordered by the decreasing weight of the Standardized Beta Coefficient.					

The analysis above (Table 5) showed that gender, tolerance and attending religious activities more frequently were strongly associated with sexual prejudice. Specifically, being a woman and reporting more tolerance tended to decrease sexual prejudice, while attending religious activities more frequently tended to increase it (respectively, $\beta = -.185$, $\beta = -.183$ and $\beta = .134$, $p < .0001$ in all cases). Additionally, sexual prejudice appeared to increase alongside having more children, the importance given to religion in life, and being evangelical. On the contrary, sexual prejudice tended to decrease with higher acceptance of political radical opinions, more years of schooling, thinking that democracy is preferable over other forms of government, and with justifying abortion when the mother's health is in danger.

Discussion

This study examined trends and correlates of sexual prejudice in El Salvador during the 2008-2016 period. Findings support the assertion that sexual prejudice is highly prevalent in Salvadoran society (IUDOP, 1999, 2002, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2013, 2014). These high levels of prejudice are linked not only to socio-demographic characteristics, but to social-political stances, which can fluctuate over time.



Sexual prejudice trends in El Salvador for 2008-2016

The indicators of sexual prejudice in this study were the degree of disapproval of homosexual people running for a public post, and the degree of disagreement with same-sex marriage. During 2008-2016, the first indicator, on average, reached intermediate levels of disapproval, while the second indicator reached high levels. This difference suggests that Salvadorian society tends to defend traditional, religion-based institutions (marriage) over secular ones (public service). Despite its religious connotation, however, marriage is also a legal union that allows individuals access to resources that protect against vital stressors, such as acquiring a disability or the partner's death (Van der Toorn et al., 2017). The majority of the sample in this study approved excluding people from access to social and patrimonial benefits on the basis of their sexual orientation (see Frost et al., 2017). Furthermore, for religious and/or conservative groups, this exclusion of LGB groups may serve to reassure the prevailing heteronormativity and their own group's moral superiority (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018; Dixon et al., 2013; Durrheim et al., 2016; Herek, 2000b; Lodola & Corral, 2010).

Sexual prejudice showed variability over the period analyzed. Although 2008 showed an inexplicable and dubious low level of disapproval (concerning only disapproval of homosexual people in public office, but no data was available for disapproval of same-sex marriage), a significant increase in the mean disapproval of homosexual people in public office was seen between 2008 and the 2010-2012 period. In contrast, there was a significant decrease between these years 2010-2012, and the 2014-2016 period. A similar decreasing pattern was observed in same-sex marriage disapproval, and in the sexual prejudice compound measure between the 2010-2012 period, and the 2014-2016 period, and between these two last years (Table 2).

These fluctuations in sexual prejudice may be explained by particularities of the political context (context here is not a variable but a scenario of meaning). After 20 years of a right-wing presidential office, the Salvadoran left-wing party took the presidency of the country in two consecutive terms, 2009-2014, and 2014-2019 (Goodfriend, 2019). The lower levels of sexual prejudice manifested in 2008 (no full data for 2008), 2014, and in 2016/17, seem to coincide with impending major political administration changes. The trait of political tolerance (see Table 1) seemed to variate in accordance with major electoral events. For instance, Córdova Macías et al., (2017) reported a significant decrease in political tolerance between 2008 and 2010 (i.e.,



higher disapproval of homosexual people in public office), and a significant increase between 2014 and 2016 (i.e., higher same-sex marriage approval, and overall decrease in sexual prejudice). These changes may also be tied to the country's political democratic culture, which research characterizes as volatile due to ongoing democratization and de-democratization processes (Cohen et al., 2017; Córdova Macías et al., 2017).

The decrease in political tolerance in 2008-2010 can be interpreted as a period of rejection of dissension; in these years, a left-wing government was established after 20 years of right-wing presidencies. In contrast, the 2014-2016 period seems to bring an opening to dissension and higher political tolerance: as presidential elections approached in 2019, public opinion reports showed that two left-wing administrations had not improved living conditions in the country (Departamento de Economía Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, 2017; PNUD, 2018). It can be hypothesized that every end of presidential term prompts an increase in political tolerance, as it signals an opportunity for a change that will resolve the country's urgent matters. This increase, in turn, may favor the reduction of sexual prejudice (this was observed in 2016, where there was a strong negative correlation between sexual prejudice and political tolerance, $r = -.26$, $p < .001$). However, regardless of the significant decrease in sexual prejudice between 2014 and 2016, sexual prejudice remained high among the Salvadoran adult population.

This is not to say that LGBTI organizations in El Salvador have not advanced the discussion of issues pertaining to this population. The current struggles of the Salvadoran LGBTI population aim for basic identity recognition, namely, a gender identity law for transgender people (Her Cruz, 2017; Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de Derechos Humanos, 2018), and inclusion in everyday spaces. In regard to the latter, as shown in this study, non-heterosexual people are not considered suited to get involved in politics by the general public. Oftentimes, the struggle for Salvadoran LGBTI populations is merely to survive (Mackey, 2016; Riaz, 2017). Nevertheless, the aforementioned high sexual prejudice levels and volatile political tolerance counter these efforts and prevent making triumphal claims regarding the acceptance of sexual diversity in contemporary El Salvador (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018; Orellana, 2017).



Sociodemographic and social and political correlates of sexual prejudice

The socio-demographic correlates of sexual prejudice found in this study align with those found in previous research (Flórez-Salamanca et al., 2014; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Herek & McLemore, 2013; Napier & Jost, 2008; West & Cowell, 2015; Willer et al., 2013). This study found that higher prejudice was associated with older age, fewer years of formal education, higher importance attributed to religion in life, lower income, higher number of children, fewer household items, higher self-identification as poor, lower satisfaction with life, and lower frequency of internet use. Other relevant correlates were being male, of evangelical religion, and being or having been married. In brief, the Salvadoran sociodemographic profile linked to sexual prejudice points to material and education precariousness, conservative religiousness, and adherence to worldviews typically associated with masculinity.

Notwithstanding these findings, some of the correlates observed in this study and other studies (IUDOP, 2009; Orellana, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2013, 2014), suggest the need for expanding this traditional prejudice profile. For instance, there is emerging evidence that sexual prejudice in El Salvador is not exclusive to those in lower socioeconomic strata. Salvadorans in higher socioeconomic strata, inasmuch as they are highly conservative and religious (IUDOP, 2009; Orellana, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2013, 2014), are equally prone to excluding non-heterosexual individuals from the public sphere. For instance, Salvadorian “pro-life” organizations opposing same-sex marriage are backed by Catholic *Opus dei* high-class schools (Aguilar & Carías, 2012); the conservative elites in charge of media outlets tend to support light speech (Arévalo & Duarte, 2018); and both right-wing and left-wing political parties refuse to support same-sex legal protections (Aguilar, 2012; Arévalo & Duarte, 2018; La Prensa, 2015; Rauda Zablach, 2016). Moving up the social ladder (i.e., more years of formal education, better equipped home, access to internet) is not an automatic antidote to sexual prejudice, at least in a strongly conservative and highly religious society such as El Salvador.

In terms of socio-political correlates of sexual prejudice, this study found that higher prejudice was linked to lower political tolerance, lesser acceptance of radical political postures and lower preference for democracy. Additionally, sexual prejudice was associated with higher approval of a husband hitting his wife if she neglects household chores; lower justification of abortion when the mother’s health is in danger; and lower interpersonal trust. Overall, sexual prejudice was



associated with anti-democratic stances, narrower openness to difference, misogynistic tendencies and suspicion towards others.

By 2016, building on the linear regression model obtained, the correlates of sexual prejudice in El Salvador make up a coherent “cultural profile”. This profile is characterized by: (1) Unsophisticated masculinity background: Being male, having fewer years of formal education and higher number of children, and not justifying abortion when the mother’s health is in danger; (2) Religious conservatism: Evangelical, higher importance of religious in life, and high frequency of attendance to religious events; and (3) Authoritarian socialization: Lower political tolerance, rejection of radical politics opinions, disagreement of democracy as a better form of government.

Limitations and future studies

The first limitation of this study is that the data comes from the LAPOP surveys, which are designed from a political standpoint ([Vanderbilt University, n.d.](#)), and they are not tailored to measure intolerance towards intergroup difference. Similarly, a distinction cannot be made in this study between the fluctuation of public opinions and perceptions about LGBTI issues versus specific behaviors and acts of prejudice towards this group (e.g., reports on hate crimes).

A second limitation of this study is that it focuses on the specific context of a Central American country with extremely high violence rates. The link between sexual prejudice indicators and threatening social environments should be examined in countries with different socio-political profiles than El Salvador. Nevertheless, this study suggests that the role of politics and current formal democracies as breeding grounds for prejudice should not be underestimated. Research should look not only at the open opposition to human rights for non-normative groups, but also at subtle everyday-life authoritarian and discriminatory social practices, e.g., conservative elites may reinforce a confessional “democratically imposed” model of society, using LGBTI people and their rights demands as a scapegoat ([Arévalo & Duarte, 2018](#)). When prejudice is studied in democracies whose political culture is erratic and chronically weak ([Córdova Macías et al., 2017](#), [Latinobarómetro, 2017](#)), it is recommended that social and political psychology research adopts a multidisciplinary –particularly a political science– approach.



Lastly, future studies should investigate factors that make stigmatized identities “uncontactable”. Contact theory states that prejudice from one group to another can be reduced through encounters between members of these groups (Herek & McLemore, 2013); meta-analytic evidence shows that this principle holds for sexual prejudice (Smith et al., 2009). In the Salvadorian context, Arévalo and Duarte (2018) reported that public figures of the conservative elites acknowledged that LGB people were part of their social circles; that is, members of the normative group also possessed a stigmatized identity (Herek & Capitano, 1996). Yet these public figures also admit to “accepting” these members under the conditions that they conceal their non-heterosexual identity, effectively preventing meaningful interactions involving these identities. Furthermore, attempts to foster indirect contact (Brown & Paterson, 2016), such as showing portrayals of outgroup members through mass media, are obstructed in the country (e.g., the ban of a television advertisement depicting sexual and gender diversity, see Cabrera, 2016). Although these are anecdotal examples, they show how LGBTI people can be construed as “uncontactable others”, regardless of their presence in public spheres. More research is needed to test how contact interventions can bypass this active suppression of stigmatized outgroup identities, especially when this stigma coexists with an ingroup identity.

Conclusions

The sociodemographic and social-political correlates of sexual prejudice found in this study align with those previously reported in the literature as specified in the introduction. Results emphasize unsophisticated masculinity background, socio-material scarcity, and religion (Herek & McLemore, 2013; Napier & Jost, 2008; Willer et al., 2013) as predictors of sexual prejudice. Moreover, as findings from this study come from longitudinal and national-level data, it was shown that sexual prejudice in El Salvador was highly prevalent across people of all socio-economic strata. This type of prejudice is grounded in religious and conservative beliefs, and anti-democratic stances, which are associated with a generalized rejection of LGBTI people, and their access to public spheres and civil rights. These social-political correlates indicate a contribution of political culture to the maintenance of sexual prejudice among the Salvadorian population.



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Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.



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