



# Perceived Impact of Marriage and Concerns About the Future of Marriage Equality: A Mixed-Methods Study of LGBTQ+ Married Individuals in the United States

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## Abstract

**Introduction** The year 2024 marked the 20th anniversary of legal marriage for same-sex couples in the USA, which began in Massachusetts in 2004, and it has been almost a decade since *Obergefell v. Hodges* established marriage equality at the federal level. Several decades of research have established numerous positive impacts of marriage equality on LGBTQ+ people's lives. Legislative efforts to restrict the rights of LGBTQ+ Americans over the past several years in particular have fostered concerns related to future state and federal protections—including federal marriage equality.

**Methods** Using data from 484 married LGBTQ+ Americans (78% cisgender, 22% trans/nonbinary; 51% White, 49% of color) collected in Fall/Winter 2023–2024, this study aims to better understand the impact of marriage equality on their lives. Participants completed an online survey with closed and open-ended questions. Using descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis of open-ended responses, we explore the perceived impact of marriage equality on their lives, concerns about a potential legal challenge to marriage equality, and desire to move. Logistic regression models examine predictors of concerns about a potential legal challenge to marriage equality and desire to move out of the state or country.

**Results** Marriage was perceived by participants as impacting their well-being, life satisfaction, and relationships in largely positive ways, and many participants saw marriage as impacting key life decisions such as where to live and financial planning. Federal marriage equality was important to many participants inasmuch as it enabled security in terms of where to live and travel. Over three-quarters of participants were concerned about a potential legal challenge to *Obergefell*. Couples in which one or both partners were trans were more likely to be concerned about a challenge to federal marriage equality than cis men couples or cis women couples, and less educated participants were more likely to be concerned than more educated participants. More than one-quarter of participants wanted to move out of their state, and more than a quarter of participants wanted to move out of the country. Participants in states with poorer LGBTQ+ climates, participants who reported that they or their partners had disabilities, and older participants were more likely to want to move out of their state. Participants who were concerned about a legal challenge to *Obergefell* were more likely than those who were not concerned to want to move out of the USA.

**Conclusions and Policy Implications** Marriage equality has had profound impacts on LGBTQ+ Americans' lives, and even the threat of its potential loss is having serious disruptions on their individual, relational, and family well-being.

**Keywords** LGBTQ+ · Marriage equality · Obergefell · Moving · Legal insecurity

## Introduction

In the past several years, intensifying anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has advanced across the USA. In 2023 alone, more than 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced or passed that prohibited gender-inclusive restrooms, banned gender-affirming care, allowed health providers to discriminate on the basis of religious beliefs, and prevented teachers from talking about LGBTQ+ identities (Choi, 2023). In 2024, such legislation

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continued to be introduced at record levels—but with mixed results, causing some LGBTQ+ rights advocates to wonder if the most extreme state legislative attacks on LGBTQ+ rights may be waning, at least somewhat (Parks, 2024). But with the election of Donald Trump to a second non-consecutive term in November 2024, many LGBTQ+ rights advocates voiced their concerns about intensified legislative attacks on LGBTQ+ people, particularly at the federal level, given President Trump's prior and ongoing efforts to roll back protections for LGBTQ+ people (Wiggins, 2024).

Such concerns are grounded not only in the 2024 election outcome, but in recent legislative outcomes and associated discourse. In June 2022, the US Supreme Court issued their decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which determined that the US Constitution does not confer a right to abortion. In issuing his opinion, Justice Clarence Thomas wrote that the legal rationale for the *Dobbs* decision could be used to reconsider other landmark cases, including those that establish the right to same-sex marriage (Elliott, 2024). In turn, many LGBTQ+ advocates have warned that in the current sociopolitical climate, a variety of LGBTQ+ rights, including marriage equality, are now at risk (Aguilera, 2022; Elliott, 2024).

Contemporary anxieties about marriage equality coincide with the anniversaries of historic state and federal marriage equality decisions. The year 2024 marked the 20th anniversary of legal marriage for same-sex couples in the USA, which began in Massachusetts on May 17, 2004, and it has been almost a decade since the US Supreme Court extended marriage equality to all 50 states via its decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* on June 26, 2015. The current historical moment is one in which marriage equality is an established reality but also one that feels especially precarious. Seeking to establish both the impact of marriage equality on LGBTQ+ people's lives, as well as their concerns related to the future of marriage equality, the current mixed-methods study presents data from 484 married LGBTQ+ Americans, collected in Fall/Winter 2023–2024. We examined the perceived impact of marriage equality on LGBTQ+ people's lives, their current concerns about a potential legal challenge to marriage equality, and potential desires to move out of the state or country as a response to such concerns.

## The Significance of Marriage Equality

The issue of marriage equality has been debated for longer than 20 years, but the debate reached an apex in 2003 when the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the state must let same-sex couples marry, with Massachusetts becoming the first US state to establish marriage equality. LGBTQ+ advocates and their allies celebrated the decision, while some religious and political leaders and their allies expressed anger and dismay over what they saw as an attack on their moral and

religious values (Pew Research Center, 2009, 2022; van der Toorn et al., 2017). But the debate over same-sex marriage was far from over. During the next decade, many states passed state laws or constitutional amendments that prohibited same-sex couples from marrying. Other states extended marriage to same-sex couples through court decisions, state laws, and the ballot box (Pew Research Center, 2009, 2022).

By 2015, there was a patchwork of state laws regarding marriage equality, such that some states allowed same-sex couples to marry, and others did not. Not only did the uneven legal landscape create inequities for same-sex couples in terms of what rights were available to them, but it also created challenges when same-sex couples moved, since their marriages were not necessarily recognized. For example, parental rights established by marriage equality in one state might not be recognized if a same-sex couple moved to another state. Such unevenness also created problems when same-sex couples wished to divorce (Goldberg & Romero, 2019).

The landmark US Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* established that the fundamental right to marry must be extended to same-sex couples throughout the country and helped to address the complex and confusing legal landscape vis-a-vis marriage equality. Nationwide marriage equality also helped to address various inequities faced by same-sex couples that had important consequences for their economic stability, life planning, and mental health (Ogolsky et al., 2019a). Supporters of marriage equality argue that not only does extending the right to marry to same-sex couples carry legal and financial protections, but it is simply the right thing to do (Solomon & Patrick, 2015). Many same-sex couples have been together for many years and deserve the right to honor their relationship, love, and commitment with the legal act of marriage. Marriage, after all, carries great symbolic value in contemporary society. As a respected cultural institution, it signals mutual commitment and care, represents a cause for celebration, and may invite acceptance from family and community members (Badgett, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2009). Further, because of marriage's societal significance, children with unmarried same-sex parents may suffer from having their parents' relationship be treated as less legitimate than that of many of their peers (Goldberg, 2022; Meezan & Rauch, 2005; Ramos et al., 2009). Marriage not only benefits children of same-sex couples in its symbolic meaning, but also because it facilitates access to the material rights and benefits associated with marriage (e.g., health insurance, inheritance rights; Ball, 2014; Goldberg, 2022).

Opponents of marriage equality, especially religious fundamentalists, argue that marriage is intertwined with heterosexuality and the ability to reproduce and thus is foundational to family building. Extending the right to marry to same-sex couples, opponents argue, represents a serious deviation from the function of marriage and will weaken an

already threatened institution, making it a threat to societal stability more broadly (see Bernstein, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2009, 2022). Such arguments have continued to dominate contemporary debates about and resistance to marriage equality (Elliott, 2024).

### The Effects of Marriage Equality: Individual, Relational, and Societal Benefits

Both the existence of legal protections for LGBTQ+ Americans' relationships and, correspondingly, the denial of those protections have consequences for their lives and well-being (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010; Kail et al., 2015). A modest body of research has examined the effects of marriage equality for members of same-sex couples and has firmly established that the material, emotional, and symbolic benefits associated with marriage have implications for their economic stability, relationship quality and stability, mental health, and physical health. Married LGBTQ+ people appear to experience protections in terms of (a) increased social acceptance and "validation" (from society, family, and others); (b) the ability to make joint decisions about key life events and issues, such as medical care and having children; (c) greater sense of security regarding financial (e.g., taxes) and legal (e.g., hospital visitation) benefits; and (d) less stress surrounding issues such as travel and immigration (Drabble et al., 2021; Ogolsky et al., 2019a, 2019b; Reczek, 2020). Same-sex married couples also report greater acceptance of their sexual/gender identities, lower levels of hypervigilance and isolation, and less identity concealment, highlighting the important role of legal recognition in reducing minority stress (Karney et al., 2024; Riggle et al., 2016). Further, legal recognition may have direct effects on the quality and stability of LGBTQ+ people's relationships (Manning et al., 2016; Riggle et al., 2016) as well as their mental health (Chen & van Ours, 2022; Karney et al., 2024). Such positive effects in part reflect the reduction in anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes that marriage equality may initiate, inasmuch as structural change may invite more accepting attitudes and facilitate greater social inclusion of marginalized groups, thereby reducing minority stress (Flores & Barclay, 2016; Metheny & Stephenson, 2019). Indeed, rates of sexual orientation-motivated hate crimes and workplace discrimination have declined in states that passed marriage equality legislation, highlighting the potential for laws to change social norms and behaviors (Karney et al., 2024).

Not only does marriage equality benefit individuals, couples, and families, but it may have broader societal benefits, including economic benefits (Zhu & Smieliauskas, 2022). In the 5 years following *Obergefell*, wedding spending by same-sex couples who married and their out-of-state guests boosted state and local economies by \$3.8 billion

and generated \$244.1 million in state and local sales tax revenue (Mallory & Sears, 2020). In addition to boosting tourism, marriage equality has also, by extension, supported job creation (Mallory & Sears, 2020).

A recent comprehensive review of over 90 studies conducted over the past 20 years that examined various consequences associated with extending marriage equality and other forms of legal recognition to same-sex couples documented consistently positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ people, their children, and society in general (Karney et al., 2024). When states legalized marriage for same-sex couples, same-sex couple households in those states experienced more enduring relationships, greater earnings, higher likelihood of home ownership, and greater preparation for retirement and end-of-life decisions. Further, when states legalized marriage, LGBTQ+ people in those states were characterized by greater preventive health care use and declining rates of STIs and substance abuse, resulting in billion dollars of savings to the US health care system annually. Further, using multiple data sources to examine the causal effects of marriage equality by state, Karney and colleagues (2024) established that extending marriage equality did not have negative effects on heterosexual couples' marriage or cohabitation rates—a suggested possibility amid a potential "contamination" of the value or meaning of marriage. No evidence for such "contamination" was found; indeed, public attitudes towards marriage also did not change significantly (Karney et al., 2024).

### The Effects of Legislative Uncertainty: Contemplating the Future of Marriage Equality

Just as relationship recognition in the form of marriage has been found to benefit LGBTQ+ people's well-being, restrictive legislative efforts, such as in the form of state amendments denying LGBTQ+ people the right to be married, have been found to constitute major stressors with mental health consequences (Riggle et al., 2005; Rostosky et al., 2009). But even the possibility of legislative threats to LGBTQ+ rights can disrupt well-being: indeed, stress may be amplified amid legal uncertainty, including possible changes to laws (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024; Kazyak, 2015). During US campaigns associated with marriage amendments, for example, LGBTQ+ people reported hopelessness, anger, and fear (Flores et al., 2018), although some also maintained hope that legislative setbacks would be overcome and equality would prevail (Rostosky et al., 2010). And, during Donald Trump's first presidential election and administration, many policies were introduced that instantiated and reinforced LGBTQ+ -related discrimination, resulting in worries about job protections, healthcare access, and roll-back of civil rights, and a general sense of unease and lack

of safety, among LGBTQ+ people (Gabriele-Black et al., 2021; Price et al., 2023; Radis & Nadan, 2021). Further, a declining sense of safety as a result of legislative threat can result in greater awareness of the risks of being out, as well as hypervigilance and efforts to limit visibility (Goldberg et al., 2024; Veldhuis et al., 2018).

State, community, and neighborhood climate has implications for LGBTQ+ people's well-being, with multiple studies establishing that living in states with less LGBTQ+ affirming policies and laws is associated with poorer mental health (e.g., Drabble et al., 2022; Goldberg & Smith, 2011). In turn, the threat or reality of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation or an increasingly anti-LGBTQ+ climate may lead LGBTQ+ people to consider relocation to more LGBTQ+ affirming states or countries, to minimize the stress imposed by structurally stigmatizing environments (Goldberg, 2024; Goldberg et al., 2024). Indeed, in the US Trans Survey, a national survey of over 92,000 trans people, nearly 47% had considered moving to another state because their state had considered or passed legislation targeting the rights of trans people (James et al., 2024). Other work has found evidence that LGB+ individuals are more averse to moving to states that restrict LGB+ rights as compared to heterosexual people, signaling that, when possible, LGB+ people generally do consider the state-level protections or lack thereof when making decisions about where to live (Baumle et al., 2023).

Of course, individual, relational, and community factors all impact the degree to which LGBTQ+ people consider relocation. Individuals in states with fewer LGBTQ+ protective policies and/or a less affirming climate may be particularly concerned about the loss of federal marriage equality, which may act as a real or perceived buffer against state-level harms, motivating a desire to move (Flores et al., 2020). Likewise, LGBTQ+ people's individual resources (e.g., education and employment) may also impact whether they desire to move and whether they perceive relocation as feasible (Goldberg, 2024; Goldberg et al., 2024).

## Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by a structural stigma framework, which encompasses (a) structural stigma as a construct that includes "societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and well-being of the stigmatized" (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014, p. 2), as well as (b) a minority stress model, which explains stress processes: that is, the mechanisms by which stigmatized people respond to their environment, including their experiences and expectations of prejudice and discrimination, their internalization of stigma, and coping processes (Meyer, 2003; Meyer et al., 2011).

Structural stigma has been operationalized in many ways, but often includes national and state level laws and policies that limit the rights, protections, and opportunities offered to LGBTQ+ individuals, and those enacted by more proximal environments (e.g., schools and health care), as well as the discourses surrounding them, in that the law can be seen as codifying and perpetuating anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2024). In this study, we consider not only the act of limiting marriage equality, but also active threats to undermine it, as well as societal discourse that questions its value or necessity, to be forms of structural stigma that perpetuate "a culture of stigma and heterosexist social norms" (Rao et al., 2020, p. 452). In turn, they contribute to the marginalization of LGBTQ+ people, couples, and families, resulting in stress, worry, and reduced well-being (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2024).

And yet, the experiences and impacts of structural stigma may not be felt the same for all members of a marginalized group. Those with less privilege (e.g., related to gender identity and expression, race, and socioeconomic status) may be more vulnerable to its negative impacts, thus experiencing greater minority stress (Abreu et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2011; Price et al., 2023). For example, those with less privilege may be more worried about a potential challenge to federal marriage equality, inasmuch as the loss of federal protections may seem to pose a greater threat to their existence and well-being. Fearing the loss of protections, they may be more likely to desire relocation as a means of reducing minority stress, although it is also possible that, amid limited resources, they are less able to seek relocation (Goldberg et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2011).

## Research Questions

In light of the current research and sociopolitical landscape, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do LGBTQ+ people perceive the impact of getting married on their personal and relational well-being and future planning?
2. How did federal marriage equality change LGBTQ+ people's lives?
3. How concerned are LGBTQ+ people about a challenge to federal marriage equality? Who is most concerned?
4. How much do LGBTQ+ people want to move out of their state or out of the country? Who most wants to move?

We answer Questions 1 and 2 with descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis. We answer Questions 3 and 4 with descriptive statistics, logistic regression, and qualitative analysis.

## Method

### Procedure

The current mixed-methods study is based on data from 484 LGBTQ+ Americans in same-sex marriages. It focuses on their perspectives on marriage equality and how their lives—relationships, family, work, finances, health, and sense of security—have been impacted by marriage. Participants were recruited from the Community Marketing and Insights' (CMI) LGBTQ research panel. CMI's 50,000 person LGBTQ research panel was developed over two decades through partnerships with over 100 LGBTQ+ media, events, and organizations in the USA. This study recruited participants from known panel members in a same-sex legal marriage. Effort was made to invite potential participants who were trans/non-binary, lower income, of color, and in diverse regions across the USA. All participants received compensation.

This study recruited participants from known panel members in a same-sex legal marriage, including trans/nonbinary individuals who identified themselves as being in a same-sex marriage. This approach may undercount cisgender community members that identify as bisexual in part because it excludes people in different-sex marriages.

The survey included a variety of closed- and open-ended questions, including demographic items, questions about marriage (e.g., how marriage impacted various domains and how federal marriage equality made a difference to them), and questions related to moving (e.g., reasons for wanting to move), and was hosted on the online platform Qualtrics. The survey instrument was reviewed by stakeholders, including social scientists and legal and policy scholars, who shared that it captured the objectives of the study, the questions were easy to read, and the language used was accessible to community members. The survey was approved by the Clark University institutional review board. All respondents were compensated for their participation.

### Sample Selection

While the full study sample was  $N = 589$ , our sample included only the 484 individuals, who were currently married and who characterized their current marriage as a same-sex marriage. Individuals who had been divorced or widowed and were not currently in what they viewed as a same-sex marriage were excluded.

### Sample

See Table 1 for details on relationship length, race/ethnicity, religion, parenthood route, income, political affiliation, and geographic region. All participants were in a same-sex

marriage. Most indicated that they had only been married once, to their current partner ( $n = 462$ , 95.5%). Most ( $n = 350$ , 72.3%) were married in their state, 118 (24.4%) in another state, and 16 (3.3%) in another country. Speaking about when they first married their partner, most ( $n = 431$ , 89.0%) said that their marriage was legal in the state they were married. Among those who traveled to marry, the most frequent reason was that it was legal there but not in their state ( $n = 63$ , 47.0%), with others saying they traveled for a specific venue ( $n = 36$ , 26.9%), to celebrate with family ( $n = 25$ , 18.7%), it was spontaneous ( $n = 10$ , 7.5%), or something else ( $n = 13$ , 9.7%) (e.g., eloped).

Participants were mostly cisgender (cis) men ( $n = 192$ , 39.7%) and cis women ( $n = 186$ , 38.4%). The rest were trans ( $n = 45$ , 9.3%) and nonbinary individuals ( $n = 61$ , 12.6%). Participants' partners were also mostly cis men ( $n = 199$ , 41.1%) and cis women ( $n = 215$ , 44.4%). The rest were trans ( $n = 26$ , 5.4%) and nonbinary individuals ( $n = 44$ , 9.1%). When considering participants' gender identities in relation to their spouses' gender identities, most were in cis men couples ( $n = 189$ , 39.0%) or cis women couples ( $n = 156$ , 32.2%); the remaining same-sex marriages comprised of a cis partner and a trans/nonbinary identified person ( $n = 101$ , 20.1%) or two trans/nonbinary people ( $n = 38$ , 7.9%).

The average age of participants and their spouses was 48.0 years ( $SD = 14.0$ ; range 21 to 83 years). Almost half of the sample was of color, including biracial/multiracial ( $n = 235$ , 48.6%); 249 (51.4%) were White only. More than two-thirds of participants' spouses were White ( $n = 342$ , 70.7%); 142 (29.3%) were of color.

In terms of highest level of education obtained, 1 (0.2%) had less than high school, 32 (6.6%) had a high school diploma or GED, 158 (32.6%) had some college/an associate's degree, 178 (36.8%) had a college degree, 81 (16.7%) had a master's, and 34 (7.0%) had PhD/MD/JD. Thus, almost 40% of the sample had less than a college degree. Regarding family income, 53 (11.0%) reported < \$50 K/year; 155 (32.0%) reported \$50 K–\$100 K/year; 141 (29.1%) reported \$101 K–\$150 K/year; 68 (14.0%) reported \$151 K–\$200 K/year; 31 (6.4%) reported \$201 K–\$250 K/year; and 36 (7.4%) reported over \$250 K/year. Fifteen (3.1%) identified as lower-class, 125 (25.8%) as working-class, 246 (50.8%) as middle-class, 89 (18.4%) as upper middle-class, 3 (0.6%) as upper-class, and 6 (1.2%) said "something else" (e.g., lower middle-class).

A total of 258 (53.3%) were employed full-time, and 51 (10.5%) were employed part-time. Sixty-six (13.6%) were retired, and 14 (2.9%) were not working due to disability. A total of 132 (27.3%) participants had a disability, and 126 (26.0%) had partners with a disability. In over one-third of couples ( $n = 185$ , 38.2%), participants and/or their partners had a disability.

**Table 1** Select demographic details for full sample ( $N=484$ )

Variable	<i>M</i> , <i>SD</i>	<i>N</i> , %
Total length of relationship with married partner, years	16.63 (10.61)	
Length of relationship at the time of marriage, years	9.1 (8.5%)	
Participant race <sup>a</sup>		
White	334 (69.0%)	
Black/African American	87 (18.0%)	
Hispanic	73 (15.1%)	
Latino/a/x	51 (10.5%)	
Asian	40 (8.3%)	
American Indian/Alaska Native	25 (5.2%)	
Native Hawaiian	6 (1.2%)	
Something else (e.g., Caribbean, Chicana, and Middle Eastern)	18 (3.7%)	
Religion		
Nothing in particular		170 (35.1%)
Atheist		77 (15.9%)
Agnostic		64 (13.2%)
Protestant		58 (11.6%)
Roman Catholic		36 (7.4%)
Jewish		12 (2.5%)
Buddhist		7 (1.4%)
Something else (e.g., Baptist, Lutheran, and Spiritual)		60 (12.9%)
Born Again or Evangelical Christian		21 (4.3%)
Parenthood route		
Donor insemination		51 (10.5%)
Stepparent		42 (8.7%)
Intercourse		41 (8.5%)
Adoption		23 (4.8%)
Surrogacy		6 (1.2%)
Reciprocal in vitro fertilization		6 (1.2%)
Foster parent		5 (1.0%)
Personal income		
Under \$25 K/year		78 (16.1%)
\$25 K–\$50 K		125 (25.8%)
\$51 K–\$75 K		123 (25.4%)
\$76 K–\$100 K		67 (13.8%)
\$101 K–\$125 K		37 (7.6%)
\$126 K–\$150 K		18 (3.7%)
Over \$150 K		36 (7.4%)
Political affiliation		
Democrat		372 (76.9%)
Independent		78 (16.1%)
Republican		8 (1.7%)
Something else (e.g., unaffiliated and Democratic Socialist)		26 (5.4%)
Region of the USA		
South		146 (30.2%)
Midwest		138 (28.5%)
West Coast		111 (22.9%)
East Coast		88 (18.2%)

<sup>a</sup>Participants could indicate as many racial/ethnic categories as applied to them

A total of 148 participants (30.6%) were parents. Fifty participants (10.3%) had one child, 59 (12.2%) had two, and 39 (8.1%) had three or more. A total of 33 (6.8%) had children < 6 years, 48 (9.9%) had children 6–18 years, and 95 (19.6%) had children 18+ years,

Participants lived in all 50 states plus Washington DC, with > 2.5% in California (11.4%), Florida (6.0%), Georgia (4.9%), Illinois (3.7%), Massachusetts (3.3%), Michigan (3.3%), New York (6.4%), North Carolina (3.9%), Pennsylvania (2.9%), Tennessee (2.7%), Texas (7.9%), and Wisconsin (2.9%). Most lived in urban ( $n=198$ , 40.9%) or suburban ( $n=191$ , 39.5%) communities; 62 (12.8%) lived in a rural community and 33 (6.8%) indicated “something else” (e.g., small town).

## Measures

### Outcomes

**Concern Over Challenge to *Obergefell*** Concern about a challenge to marriage equality was measured by a single item. Participants were asked, “How concerned are you about the possibility of marriage equality being overturned?” and given the following response options: Very, somewhat, neutral, not very, and not at all. These responses were recoded such that 1 = *very/somewhat concerned* and 0 = *neutral/not very/not at all concerned*.

**Desire to Move** Desire to move was measured by two single items. Participants were asked, “Do you currently want to move **out of state**?” and given the following response options: Yes, very much; yes, somewhat; neutral/mixed; no, not very much; and no, not at all. These responses were recoded such that 1 = *yes/somewhat* and 0 = *neutral/not very much/not at all*. Participants were also asked, “Do you currently want to move **out of the country**?” and given the same response options which were recoded in the same way.

### Predictors

**Race** Participants were asked: “What is your race/ethnicity?” and given the following options (they could select as many as applied): White, Hispanic, Latino/a/x, Black/African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, or Something else. Those who indicated any non-White/Caucasian racial/ethnic identifiers were coded as of color (1); those who only indicated White were coded as not of color (0).

**Education** Education was coded as 1 = < high school, 2 = high school diploma/GED, 3 = some college/associate’s degree, 4 = college degree, 5 = master’s degree, 6 = PhD/MD/JD.

**Employment** Individuals were asked if they were employed part-time, full-time, or not at all. This item was recoded such that 1 = *employed* and 0 = *not employed*.

**Couple Type** This was coded dichotomously as cis men couple, cis women couple, or couple with at least one trans partner (0, 1).

**Family Income** Income was coded as 1 = < \$50 K, 2 = \$50 K–\$100 K, 3 = \$101 K–\$150 K, 4 = \$151 K–\$200 K, 5 = \$201 K–\$250 K, and 6 = > \$250 K.

**Presence of Children < 18** Participants were asked if they had children < 18, children 18+, or no children. This item was recoded such that 1 = *children < 18* and 0 = *no children < 18*.

**Disability** Individuals were asked: “Do you have a disability?” This item was coded such that 1 = *has disability* and 0 = *does not have a disability*. They were asked the same question about their partner. A variable was created to capture the presence of disability in the partnership, such that 1 = *participant or partner has disability* and 0 = *neither has a disability*.

**LGBTQ+ Policy Context** Using Movement Advancement Project (MAP)’s LGBTQ+ state policy data (MAP, 2024), which tracks 50 different LGBTQ+ related laws/policies and categorizes states by their level of protection (positive to negative) for LGBTQ+ people, we categorized participants as living in 1 = *poorest climate*, 2 = *poor climate*, 3 = *fair climate*, 4 = *somewhat positive climate*, or 5 = *positive climate*.

**LGBTQ+ -Friendliness of Community** Participants indicated how LGBTQ+ friendly they regarded their immediate community, from 1 = *very LGBTQ+ friendly*, 2 = *somewhat LGBTQ+ friendly*, 3 = *neutral/mixed*, 4 = *not very LGBTQ+ friendly*, and 5 = *not at all LGBTQ+ friendly*. We reverse coded so that higher scores equal more positive ratings.

**Concern over Challenge to *Obergefell*** Concern about a challenge to marriage equality (see *Outcomes*; 1 = *very/somewhat concerned* and 0 = *neutral/not very/not at all*) was also used as a predictor in the regressions examining desire to move out of state and out of the country.

### Open-Ended Questions

A series of open-ended questions were asked, which were the focus of our qualitative analysis: (1) Please elaborate or explain on the items you endorsed above: i.e., how did the legalization of marriage make a difference to you? (2) Did marriage affect your life planning in terms of where to live,

moving, etc.? Please elaborate/explain. (3) Did marriage affect your life planning in terms of working and earning income? Please elaborate/explain. (4) Did marriage affect your life planning in terms of saving, investing, and planning financially for the future? Please elaborate/explain. (5) Are there other ways in which marriage affected your life planning? Please explain. (6) Did marriage provide some stability to your relationship, in your opinion? If yes, how? (7) Did marriage provide some stability or security for your kids, in your opinion? If yes, how? (8) What are some of the most important ways that being married to your spouse has changed your life? (9) Has marriage made a difference in the way you have been treated by other people? If yes, please explain. (10) Have you taken any steps and/or made any decisions out of fear that marriage equality might be challenged? If yes, please explain.

### Data Analysis

This study employs a mixed-method design, combining inductive and deductive approaches. We draw on the unique insights gained by both approaches, facilitating a more comprehensive, nuanced understanding of phenomena (Mason, 2006; Suito & Gilligan, 2022).

A mixed-methods approach can be especially useful in exploring complex social issues, particularly those that have been the focus of limited prior exploration (Mason, 2006). Our quantitative approach enables us to focus on general patterns in the data as well as associations between variables of interest, whereas our qualitative component gives depth and meaning to the quantitative findings, as well as highlighting findings that may be infrequent but are nevertheless important (Charmaz, 2006; Mason, 2006). Some of our open-ended questions were fairly focused or mapped closely onto the quantitative data (e.g., asking for examples or elaboration) in order to provide focused but meaningful illustration of the patterns in the data, while others were more general, seeking to understand participants' perspectives in their own words.

### Quantitative Analysis

Three logistic regression models were fit to examine which individual, couple, and community characteristics predicted (a) concern about a potential challenge to *Obergefell*, (b) desire to move to another state, and (c) desire to move to another country. To examine which characteristics were most strongly predicted concern over a challenge to *Obergefell* (1 = *very/somewhat concerned* and 0 = *neutral/not very/not at all*), a logistic regression model was fit, with predictors at the individual level—race (of color vs. not), age, education; at the couple level—type of couple (cis women couple, cis men couple, couple with at least one trans member),

family income, presence of children < 18, at least one partner has a disability; and contextual variables—LGBTQ+ state policy context (reverse coded from negative to positive) and perceived community LGBTQ+ friendliness. To examine which participants were most likely to express a current desire to move out of state and desire to move out of the country (1 = *very/somewhat*, and 0 = *neutral/not very much/not at all*), logistic regression models were fit with the same predictors as above, as well as whether the participant was working (vs. not) and concern over a challenge to *Obergefell* (vs. not). To examine differences between different couple types, initial regression models included cis women couple and cis men couple as predictors; thus, couples with at least one trans partner was the default variable. Models were then refit replacing cis men couples with trans couples, making cis men couples the default category and testing for differences between cis men couples and cis women couples.

### Qualitative Content Analysis

Responses to the open-ended survey portions ranged from one sentence to almost one page of text, with most respondents providing responses of 2–5 sentences. We used qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to examine responses from the open-ended portions of the survey. Content analysis is a standard method for examining open-ended responses to survey questions, generating new insights through the process of systematically identifying, coding, and categorizing primary patterns or themes in the data. Through careful exploration and classification of qualitative data, we condensed words to text into a smaller number of content categories to develop a coding system to organize the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

For this paper, the first author's analysis focused on participants' responses to the open-ended questions described earlier, which center on perceived impacts of marriage equality on them and their relationships/families. The first author first read all open-ended responses to gain familiarity with the data, including overarching themes in responses (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). Then, responses were annotated: that is, via line-by-line coding, the first author labeled phrases relevant to the primary domains of interest (e.g., ease of medical decision-making and increased acceptance from family emerged as dimensions that shifted with legal marriage). These codes were abstracted under larger categories and subcategories (e.g., legal security; social acceptance), which were positioned in relation to each other such that connective links were established to meaningfully capture participants' responses. A tentative coding scheme was produced and reapplied to the data, such that all data was recoded according to the revised scheme (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). At this stage, the first author examined themes according to key demographics to

determine if major themes varied by age, gender, region, or parental status.

Afterward, a student research assistant served as an auditor and analyzed a random selection of open-ended responses to the survey, reading approximately 1 out of 10 respondents' data, as a basic "check" on primary themes, to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. Minor discrepancies were discussed and reconciled with the first author, which led the author to make minor modifications in the scheme. Then, the second author provided further feedback about the finalized coding structure, resulting in rearranging several sections for cohesion and flow.

In reporting quotes, we provide descriptive details about participants—namely, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and state. We also provide participants' general adult developmental stage: young adult, age 20–34; early middle age, 35–44; late middle age; age 45–64; and older adult, 65+ years (Halloran, 2024; Medley, 1980).

## Results

Reflecting the research questions, we organize our findings as follows: (a) how getting married impacted their personal and relational well-being and future planning; (b) how federal marriage equality changed their lives; (c) concerns about a challenge to marriage equality; and (d) in light of their concerns and other legal/political changes, desire to move.

### Research Question 1a: The Impact of Marriage on Relationship Quality and Well-Being

When asked how marriage changed their lives (Table 2), the majority of respondents described positive changes or no change in all areas, with over 60% of participants describing

positive changes in sense of safety and security (83.1%), life satisfaction (74.6%), and closeness to their partner (61.0%). Frequency of sex and exercise habits were the only areas perceived as negatively affected by over 10% of participants. That is, 13.0% and 11.8% indicated that sex and exercise, respectively, were negatively impacted by marriage.

Participants' narrative responses provide nuance to the items they frequently endorsed. Speaking to the enhanced sense of safety and security they felt in their relationship, participants detailed how the sense of permanence that marriage offered had eased their anxiety over abandonment, enabled them to argue without fear (and therefore fights were less stressful and resolved more quickly), and allowed them to feel more "emotionally settled" in the relationship. Some were surprised by the deeper sense of relational security they felt as a result of getting married. A White queer non-binary older adult in New Mexico said, "I feel secure in our relationship in a way I never thought would be possible... despite the occasional problems and issues we have." Participants also elaborated on how their life satisfaction was enhanced by marriage, noting that they felt that life was now more "full and meaningful." A Black queer cis woman in early middle age in Missouri said, "It provided a life partner and best friend. We [grew] a family. It made life fulfilling." Finally, speaking to how marriage had facilitated an enhanced sense of closeness, a White pansexual cis man in early middle age in Ohio said, "It helped solidify our love for each other." Similarly, a White cis lesbian woman in early middle age in Pennsylvania shared, "Marriage has deepened our connection and outwardly validated our relationship. I love saying I'm married."

### Additional Changes

When asked about other areas that may have changed due to marriage, participants volunteered a number of related domains. A frequent theme was an *enhanced sense of social*

**Table 2** Changes in relationship quality and well-being after getting married ( $N=484$ )

	Positive change ( $N, \%$ )	No change ( $N, \%$ )	Negative change ( $N, \%$ )
Intimate relationship: closeness and sense of "belonging" with your partner	295 (61.0%)	183 (37.8%)	6 (1.2%)
Sexual relationship: quality and frequency of sex with your partner	79 (16.3%)	343 (70.7%)	63 (13.0%)
Mental health	253 (52.3%)	218 (45.0%)	13 (2.7%)
Stress (positive change = less stress)	218 (45.0%)	219 (45.0%)	43 (8.9%)
Physical health	124 (25.6%)	333 (66.8%)	27 (5.6%)
Exercise habits	86 (17.8%)	341 (70.5%)	57 (11.8%)
Substance use (positive change = less use)	81 (16.7%)	388 (80.2%)	15 (3.1%)
Life satisfaction	361 (74.6%)	112 (23.1%)	11 (2.3%)
Sense of safety and security	402 (83.1%)	79 (16.3%)	3 (.6%)

*recognition* of their relationship: it was easier to explain to others and they experienced more social acceptance by society and their family of origin. They felt “more comfortable and legitimized talking about [their] wife [than girlfriend]” and experienced a “sense of broader societal legitimacy.” This enhanced sense of validation was healing for some, as it helped to alleviate their own or their partners’ internalized homonegativity. A late middle age Black cis lesbian woman in Arizona asserted, “It helped normalize our relationship which is important because my Jamaican partner suffers with some degree of internalized homophobia herself. We struggle with her inability to integrate me into her family. That is our hardest...struggle.”

Some participants felt that they were *less likely to be discriminated against*, which was especially appreciated given the broader sociopolitical climate. According to a late middle age Middle Eastern queer trans man in Ohio, marriage had resulted in “less discrimination due to having increased legal protections...We are legally protected from numerous and massively discriminatory policies in the US.” Other less frequently named positive impacts were shared goals, greater self-esteem, an expanded support system, and greater closeness with family.

A small number mentioned *negative changes* they had observed as a result of marriage. Namely, a few noted that they became less social when they got married. A few mentioned increased financial stress (e.g., due to partners’ debt) and additional financial burdens due to the tax implications of marriage. Finally, a few said they traveled less now that they were married.

### Research Question 1b: The Impact of Marriage on Future Planning

Many participants indicated that marriage had changed their life plans in terms of where to live, their work lives and earning income, and their investments, savings, and retirement plans.

Almost two-thirds ( $n = 297$ , 61.4%) affirmed that marriage affected their life planning in terms of *making decisions about where to live*. Asked to elaborate, many did, noting that marrying meant “moving for one another whenever necessary” and “we are even more conscious of the impacts of possible moves on the other person.” A White gay cis man in late middle age in New Mexico said, “Before marriage we were committed to stay together, but once married we make all plans together on where to move and what the future will look like.” Many also noted that marriage impacted where they lived in that they had moved for each other’s jobs or to be near family. A White gay cis older adult man in New Hampshire said, “Before marriage my husband was living

and working in another state. He changed his work location and moved before moving in with me before we were married.”

Sometimes issues of where to live and/or possible relocation were complex and required compromise and sacrifice (e.g., one or both partners had to move). A White bisexual cis man in late middle age explained: “I’m more of a warmer climate person; he prefers his home state of Michigan. I live in Michigan because I love him, and our marriage, but we have plans to buy a home somewhere warm and sunny for the winters.” An early middle adult Latinx gay cis man in Texas said:

Prior to marriage, I planned to and more easily could live in different locations and bring my work with me. Now that I’m married, the flexibility of moving isn’t as easy. It’s still possible for us, but less easy because my partner prefers to stay where his family lives.

Almost two-thirds of participants ( $n = 295$ , 61.0%) felt that marriage affected their life planning in terms of *working and earning income*. Asked to elaborate, many participants articulated that marriage meant greater work/career flexibility. That is, being married enabled couples to designate one partner to work at a reliable or steady job so that the other could take career risks, pursue satisfying but less lucrative work, go back to school, or stay home with children or take turns being the “steady earner” to allow each other freedom to pursue lower-paying or less predictable work opportunities. A White queer nonbinary young adult in Missouri shared, “I am able to work only once a week in a job I enjoy, being financially supported by my wife. I would not be able to financially support myself...because of disability.” An Asian queer nonbinary participant in early middle age in California said, “It gave me the freedom to make a career change and to not work for pay to support both my mental health and our family.”

Often, partners took turns in being the one to work full-time, work a less fulfilling job, and/or carry the insurance (e.g., while the other partner was a student or stayed home with children). In a few cases, participants highlighted how one individual was able to retire early because they could count on the other’s income. And, in a few cases, participants spoke about how being married inspired them to work harder, more, and/or to take professional risks so as to better support their families and plan for a shared future.

A total of 287 (59.3%) of participants said marriage affected their life planning in terms of *saving, investing, and planning financially for the future*. A late middle age White lesbian trans woman in Illinois said, “We plan for the future together and I plan the future for her without me as I’m older.” A biracial queer cis woman in early middle age in New York shared:

We combined accounts after we married, and make all our investing decisions based on planning for retirement together. Sometimes that means putting our combined incomes into one person's retirement accounts first, then another. Because I am 10 years younger and make less income on average, being married has significantly increased my ability to save, pay off my student loans, etc. My spouse in general has been able to cover rent/mortgage and essentials, which has been a gift.

Many participants, too, shared how marriage had prompted them or their partners to be more judicious in terms of saving and investing, now that they had another individual to think about. In some cases, this meant one partner took over the finances or supported the other in becoming more financially savvy. In others, it meant working together towards retirement goals and/or ensuring financial stability for the surviving partner should one partner die. A late middle age Latinx gay cis man in California said, "I never really cared too much about [saving and retirement]. However, marriage changed all of that. We both want to make sure we are taken care of while alive and when we pass."

Saving, too, was mentioned not just in relation to retirement and the possibility of illness/death of one spouse but also in family planning (e.g., saving for fertility treatments and for children). This theme was especially prominent among women and nonbinary individuals and younger individuals. A Black queer nonbinary young adult in North Carolina shared, "I was less into saving and planning financially before getting married but now we are both very dedicated to...planning for the future...since we want to have a baby."

A few mentioned negative aspects of marriage vis a vis saving. Specifically, they shared that they had more bills/debt ("Now, all debts, gains, and plans are ours, not 'mine' and 'yours'").

## Research Question 2: Impact of Federal Marriage Equality on Same-Sex Couples' Lives

In 2015, the Supreme Court extended marriage equality to all states with its decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Most participants were married post-*Obergefell* ( $n = 304$ , 62.8%), with 180 (37.2%) indicating that they were married pre-*Obergefell*. When asked what year they legally married their partner, meaning that the marriage was legal in the state in which they married, the average was 2015 ( $Mdn = 2016$ ,  $SD = 5.7$  years).

Participants were asked whether and how federal marriage equality made a difference to them, and almost all indicated that it did ( $n = 456$ , 94.2%). They were also asked about 10 specific ways it may have made a difference (see Table 3) and queried in an open-ended manner how marriage made a difference. Their qualitative responses nuanced the quantitative items they endorsed and highlighted additional areas of note.

About three-fourths of respondents affirmed that what made a difference was *full legal recognition* in terms of rights and responsibilities ( $n = 385$ , 79.5%). They often emphasized the medical and financial protections associated with federal marriage equality as among the full legal protections that made a difference to them. An early middle age White gay nonbinary participant in Alabama said, "It gave us protection in the form of decisions about our lives; it gave us access to benefits we hadn't had before (like spousal access to health insurance, life insurance, etc.) and it protected us." A White cis lesbian older adult in California emphasized, "No more worries about greedy kin swooping in and making me homeless if she dies first. No more being kept from my beloved in the hospital because I wasn't 'family.' Those indignities are now a thing of the past." A late middle age White gay cis man in Washington State recalled,

**Table 3** How legalization of marriage made a difference ( $N = 484$ )

	<i>N</i>	%
Full federal recognition in terms of rights and responsibilities made a difference to me	385	79.5%
It made a difference in that it would be recognized in all 50 states	361	74.6%
Having the validation of marriage equality as a constitutional right made a difference to me	351	72.5%
The widespread public discussion of marriage equality and increased public support around the time of <i>Obergefell</i> made a difference to me	192	39.7%
I lived in a state that didn't have marriage equality until same-sex marriage was legalized nationwide in June 2015	168	34.7%
I did not want to get married until after marriage equality was legalized nationwide	41	8.5%
My friends started asking if we were getting married	31	6.4%
My family members started asking if we were getting married	24	5.0%
My partner did not want to get married until after marriage equality was legalized nationwide	13	2.7%
Other ways it made a difference (e.g., taxes, protection of assets, immigration, legal protections for current/future children, and could stay married after gender transition)	52	10.7%
It did not make a difference to me at all	28	5.8%

“Before we were married, my husband needed urgent medical care and I was very concerned that the hospital would not permit visitation. Being married has given us the assurance that we have protections in place that we might not otherwise have had.”

Likewise, about three-fourths of respondents affirmed that *marriage being recognized in all fifty states* made a difference for them ( $n = 361$ , 74.6%); indeed, for over one-third ( $n = 168$ , 34.7%), the *Obergefell* decision made a very practical difference in that they lived in one of the states that did not have marriage equality until *Obergefell* was decided. Participants’ open-ended responses often highlighted the problems with leaving marriage equality up to the states and how federal marriage equality had impacted their lives in terms of where they could live as well as travel. A multi-racial gay cis man in late middle age in Idaho explained, “It makes it easier to live in a more conservative state.” A White pansexual trans man in late middle age said, “My home state of Tennessee would never have legalized same sex marriage, so the *Obergefell* decision was really impactful for me.” A Latinx gay cis man in early middle age said, “We married in Pennsylvania...After having our son, since marriage was accepted in all states we decided to move to Florida. If not, we would have stayed in Pennsylvania.”

For almost three-fourths of participants, what was meaningful to them was that *marriage equality validated a constitutional right* ( $n = 351$ , 72.5%). They expressed gratitude and relief to finally “get the same equality as straight people,” and also acknowledged the many years of work by LGBTQ+ advocates and pioneers that enabled this reality—access to a “legal standing” that had “great power”: “So many have fought for it and now we actually get to live it.”

For almost 40% of participants ( $n = 192$ , 39.7%), the *public discussion, support, and acceptance associated with the Obergefell ruling* made a difference to them. Many of their responses emphasized the symbolic affirmation and legitimacy that federal marriage equality offered. A White gay cis older man in Nevada shared, “Banks, loan officers, tax preparers, doctors, hospitals all treated us as spouses. We were never denied access because our marriage wasn’t recognized.” A White cis lesbian in early middle age in Washington DC said, “Our relationship to each other is taken much more seriously by people who don’t know us well.”

Participants’ open-ended responses emphasized how greater perceived legitimacy associated with federal marriage equality specifically impacted family acceptance and inclusion. A Black cis lesbian in early middle age in North Carolina said, “My wife’s extended family started inviting me to their family gatherings after we got married. They had [Christmas] parties for years while we were dating, but I was not invited prior to marriage.” A White asexual queer nonbinary young adult in Tennessee said:

Because my wife and I are both asexual, our families didn’t take our relationship seriously until after we got married despite being together for a very long time. However, once we got married, my parents began treating her with the same respect they do my brother-in-law and sister-in-law.

### Other Impacts of Federal Marriage Equality

Participants’ open-ended responses also frequently addressed something that was not explicitly asked about in our series of closed-ended questions: namely, federal marriage equality offered important protections amid an *unstable and shifting sociopolitical climate*. Participants described uneasiness associated with recent shifts in the sociopolitical landscape and appreciated the security federal marriage equality offered. A White bisexual cis man in early middle age in Oregon said, “We...wanted to make sure that we got married *before* the rising fascism in this country stripped it away.” A Hispanic cis lesbian in late middle age in New Mexico said, “We at first didn’t care about the piece of paper but when *Roe vs. Wade* got overturned we got nervous.”

Some trans participants emphasized that marriage equality ensured that their marriage was recognized despite the fact that they had *transitioned after being legally married*. A late middle age White gay trans man in North Carolina, said, “I did not transition until many years after I had already been legally married. If same-sex marriage had not been recognized as legal, my marriage would have become illegal when I had my gender marker changed.”

### Research Question 3: Concerns about the Future of Marriage Equality

Asked how concerned they were about the possibility of federal marriage equality being overturned, almost 80% said they were very ( $n = 198$ , 40.9%) or somewhat ( $n = 186$ , 38.4%) concerned; 25 (5.2%) said neutral, 56 (11.6%) said not very, and 19 (3.9%) said not at all.

### Predicting Concerns About a Challenge to Federal Marriage Equality

A logistic regression model was fit to predict which participants were most likely to be concerned about a challenge to *Obergefell* (very/somewhat versus neutral, not very, and not at all). Individual level demographics (of color vs. not, age, education), couple level demographics (type of couple, family income, presence of children < 18, at least one partner with a disability), and contextual variables (LGBTQ+ state policy context and perceived community LGBTQ+ friendliness) were included as predictors. See Table 4.

We determined that over 40% of the sample lived in a state with poor protections for LGBTQ+ people. Specifically, 127 (26.2%) lived in a state with a negative overall policy tally (poorest climate); 77 (15.9%) lived in a state with a low overall policy tally (poor climate); 24 (7.0%) lived in a state with a neutral overall policy tally (fair climate); 48 (9.9%) lived in a state with a moderate overall policy tally (somewhat positive climate); and 198 (40.9%) lived in a state with a high overall policy tally (positive climate). In terms of the LGBTQ+ -friendliness of their community, over one-third described it as very LGBTQ+ -friendly ( $n=181$ , 37.4%), and over one-third described it as somewhat LGBTQ+ -friendly ( $n=169$ , 37.9%). Almost one-fifth ( $n=91$ , 18.8%) said it was neutral/mixed, 37 (7.6%) said it was not very LGBTQ+ -friendly, and 6 (1.2%) said it was not at all LGBTQ+ -friendly.

Regression results showed that cis men couples and cis women couples were less likely to express concern than trans couples, with 0.81 and 0.77 lower odds, respectively (see Table 4). More educated participants were also less likely to have concern than lower educated participants, with 0.22 lower odds for each level of education (< high school, high school diploma/GED, some college/associate's degree, college degree, master's degree, PhD/MD/JD).

A follow up chi-square analysis was conducted to determine whether concern varied depending on whether participants or their partners were trans. Cis participants with cis partners, trans participants with cis partners, and cis participants with trans partners were compared on concern, which revealed a significant difference across the three groups,  $\chi^2(2, 484) = 18.33, p < 0.001$ . Among cis participants with cis partners, 74.5% (257 of 345) were concerned, compared to

93.4% of trans participants with cis partners (99 of 106) and 84.8% of cis participants with trans partners (28 of 33). Pairwise follow-up chi-squares showed that trans participants were significantly more likely to voice concern than cis participants with cis partners,  $\chi^2(1, 451) = 17.43, p < 0.001$ , but not compared to cis participants with trans partners,  $\chi^2(1, 139) = 2.33, p = 0.123$ , and cis participants with trans partners were also not significantly different from cis participants with cis partners,  $\chi^2(1, 378) = 1.74, p = 0.132$ . While this analysis suggests that the results of the logistic regression may be driven by the concern of trans individuals in trans couples, it does not take into account the other predictors in the multivariate model.

### Protective Actions Amid Concerns About Challenge to Federal Marriage Equality

When asked if they had taken any steps and/or made any decisions out of concern that marriage equality might be challenged, 122 (25.2%) said yes. Asked to elaborate, participants offered up a variety of actions they had taken to protect themselves and/or their families. Some *sped up their timeline for marriage* in part due to concerns about marriage equality being challenged or the changing political climate. Several mentioned the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* as a key event that prompted them to marry. As an early middle age White queer cis man in Texas said, "We got engaged the day that the Supreme Court ruled on the Dobbs Decision and got married one week after." Others were spurred to marry by the election of President Trump to his first term or general shifts in the sociopolitical climate. An early middle age White gay cis man in Michigan

**Table 4** Predicting concern for overturning of *Obergefell*, desire to move to another state, and desire to move to another country ( $N=484$ )

Predictor	Concern re: <i>Obergefell</i>		Desire to move-state		Desire to move-country	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE B</i> )	$e^B$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE B</i> )	$e^B$	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE B</i> )	$e^B$
Race (of color vs. not)	-.18 (.24)	.84	-.11 (.23)	.90	.15 (.21)	1.17
Age	.02 (.01)	1.02	-.02 (.01)*	.98	-.02 (.01)	.98
Education	-.25 (.12)*	.78	-.19 (.12)	.82	.02 (.11)	1.02
Employed	---	---	.12 (.26)	1.13	.38 (.24)	1.46
Concern re: <i>Obergefell</i>	---	---	.23 (.30)	1.26	.95 (.30)**	2.57
Cis Men Couple vs. Trans	-1.64 (.40)***	.19	.00 (.31)	1.00	-.21 (.29)	.81
Cis Women Couple vs. Trans	-1.46 (.39)***	.23	-.38 (.31)	.68	-.41 (.29)	.67
Family Income	.09 (.09)	1.10	.11 (.09)	1.12	-.13 (.08)	.87
Presence of Children < 18	-.05 (.36)	.95	.06 (.33)	1.06	-.15 (.31)	.86
Disability	.27 (.27)	1.31	.88 (.24)***	2.40	-.17 (.23)	.84
LGBTQ+ State Policy	-.06 (.08)	.94	-.39 (.07)***	.68	-.04 (.07)	.96
LGBTQ+ Community Friendliness	-.04 (.14)	.96	-.28 (.12)*	.75	.05 (.12)	1.05
Constant	2.91		2.33		-.65	

$e^B$  = exponentiated *B*. To test for differences between participants in men and women couples, all models were refit replacing trans couple with men couple as the default variable. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

said, “[One] factor that played a role in our wedding date was the fact that Donald Trump was wanting to overturn the legalization of same sex marriage. We were hoping that if that did happen after our wedding we would be grandfathered in.”

Others sought *second parent adoptions* to ensure that their legal relationship with their children was protected, independent of marriage. A White nonbinary lesbian in early middle-age in Massachusetts said, “We had my wife (non-biological parent) do a second parent adoption for both kids even though we were married when they were born and she’s on the birth certificates.” A Black cis queer woman in early middle age in Missouri said, “We completed second parent adoptions for both of our children in case of any legal concerns. We hadn’t done one for our second daughter but after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe*, we moved quickly to complete it.”

A few participants said that they *completed or updated legal documents* (e.g., powers of attorney, wills, and trusts) out of fear that marriage equality might be threatened. A biracial gay trans man in early middle age in Nebraska said: “We got additional legally-binding documents created... just in case our marriage would be considered invalid in the future. Basically, all the documents that come automatically with marriage, we did again, after being married.”

Finally, a few participants said they *sped up the timeline for parenthood*. A biracial cis lesbian in early middle age in Illinois said, “We’ve decided to start having children earlier than we otherwise might, to ensure when our children are born, they will be born with legal connections to both parents because of marriage.”

#### Research Question 4: Desire to Move

Amid concerns about anti-LGBTQ+ laws and a potential loss of federal marriage equality, some participants were motivated to move.

##### Desire to Move

Asked if they wanted to move *out of state*, over one-quarter ( $n = 140$ , 28.9%) said they did. Specifically, 53 (11.0%) very much wanted to move, and 87 (18.0%) somewhat wanted to move. Eighty-four (17.4%) said neutral/mixed, 87 (18.0%) did not really want to move, and 173 (35.7%) did not want to move at all. When asked about the likelihood of moving out of state in the next two years, from 0 to 100%, participants generally felt that there was a 47% likelihood ( $Mdn = 47%$ ,  $SD = 35.6%$ ). Some elaborated on their desire to move. A late middle age White gay cis man in Texas said, “We are concerned about the current politicized Supreme Court striking down marriage equality. If it does we are preparing to move to a...more accepting state.”

Asked if they wanted to move *out of the country*, over one-quarter ( $n = 148$ , 30.6%) said they did. Namely, 42 (8.7%) very much wanted to move, and 106 (21.9%) somewhat wanted to move. A total of 110 (22.7%) said neutral/mixed, 62 (12.8%) did not really want to move, and 164 (33.9%) did not want to move at all. When asked about the likelihood of moving out of the country in the next two years, from 0-to 100%, participants generally felt that there was a 30.7% likelihood ( $Mdn = 20%$ ,  $SD = 31.9%$ ). Some elaborated on their desire to move out of the country. One older multiracial queer trans man in Illinois shared, “We’ve planned with a relative the possibility of moving to a country that’s LGBTQ+ friendly.” A White gay cis man in late middle age in Massachusetts said, “My husband is a dual citizen of another country. We have secured dual citizenship and passports for our children [and] made initial arrangements to deal with finances and immigration should it be necessary for us to move out of the US.”

##### Reasons for Wanting to Move (Out of State)

Considering just those participants who indicated that they very much or somewhat wanted to move *out of state* ( $n = 140$ ), we inquired about their reasons for wanting to move. Among those who indicated that they very much or somewhat wanted to move, the top three reasons for want to move were the sociopolitical climate (52.9%), concerns about anti-LGBTQ+ laws (48.6%), and fears about losing rights an LGBTQ+ person and/or as a person in a same-sex marriage (43.6%). See Table 5 for the full list of reasons.

##### Predicting Desire to Move to Another State

Table 4 reports the findings of a logistic regression predicting desire to move out of state (somewhat or very much), using the same predictors as in the first regression, as well as employed (vs. not) and concern regarding the overturning of *Obergefell* (vs. not). Findings revealed that older individuals were less likely to want to move. For every year of age, the odds of wanting to move were 0.02 smaller. Couples where one or both partners had disabilities were more likely to want to move, with odds 1.40 times greater than those without disabilities. Individuals living in states with more positive climates were less likely to want to move. The odds of wanting to move were 0.32 times lower for each additional level of climate positivity (from 1 = negative overall policy to 5 = most positive overall policy), such that those in states with the most positive policies had 0.21 times lower odds than those in states with the least positive policies. Those who were in more LGBTQ+ -friendly communities were less likely to want to move. For each level of perceived LGBTQ+ friendliness (from 1 = not at all to 5 = very friendly), they had 0.25 times lower odds of wanting

**Table 5** Reasons for wanting to move out of state ( $N=140$ )

Reasons for wanting to move out of state	$N$ (%)
Social-political climate	74 (52.9%)
Concerns about anti-LGBTQ+ laws	68 (48.6%)
Fears of losing rights as an LGBTQ+ person/person in a same-sex marriage	61 (43.6%)
Weather	53 (37.9%)
Cost of living	44 (31.4%)
Tourism/things to do	31 (22.1%)
Be closer to family	19 (13.6%)
Employment reasons	16 (11.4%)
<b>Other reasons:</b> Fear of losing access to trans-affirming health care; fearful of anti-LGBTQ+ climate in my state; for retirement; climate change; want to live in a city	

to move, such that those in “very friendly” communities had 0.32 times lower odds than those whose communities were “not friendly at all.”

### Predicting Desire to Move to Another Country

The results of the logistic regression predicting desire to move to another country, using the same variables as above, showed concern for the overturning of *Obergefell* to be the only significant predictor (see Table 4). Those who expressed concern about a potential overturning of federal marriage equality had 1.57 times greater odds of wanting to move to another country.

## Discussion

This study provides important insights into the perceived impact of marriage equality on LGBTQ+ Americans’ lives. It also highlights how the broader sociopolitical climate and specific fears about the possibility of federal marriage equality being overturned are currently impacting LGBTQ+ Americans’ well-being and planning for the future. The diversity of our sample is notable, especially with respect to its inclusion of trans/nonbinary individuals, individuals of color, and individuals from a variety of geographic regions—groups that are often understudied in research in research on LGBTQ+ Americans (Institute of Medicine, 2011).

Significantly, many participants (> 60%) reported increases in their sense of safety and security, life satisfaction, and relational closeness after marrying, with negative impacts rarely endorsed. They also spontaneously noted additional positive impacts such as increased social recognition and acceptance—which in some cases helped to address internalized homophobia—and reduced exposure to discrimination. These findings speak to not only the actual act of marriage, but also the broader implications of *Obergefell*, in reducing the negative mental health effects associated

with structural stigma: indeed, prior work suggests declines in internalized homophobia and distress following marriage equality legislation (Huang & Liang, 2022; Ogolsky et al., 2019b). Our findings also build on a robust literature highlighting the relational and mental health benefits of marriage for members of same-sex couples (e.g., Chen & van Ours, 2022; Drabble et al., 2021; Karney et al., 2024).

About 60% of participants said that marriage had impacted their decision-making about where to live, working and earning income, and saving and investing for the future. Especially notable were their narratives about the ways in which being married had enabled them to make decisions that enhanced their mental and physical well-being—including pursuing work opportunities that paid less, working less due to disability, and more effectively pooling resources to ensure a more secure future. Consistent with the finding that same-sex couples in states that legalized marriage showed greater preparation for retirement and end-of-life decisions (Karney et al., 2024), our findings underscore the varied ways that married same-sex couples are making important joint decisions that may benefit their future financial and physical health.

Turning to the value and meaning of federal marriage equality, approximately three-quarters of participants emphasized full legal recognition, recognition in all states, and marriage as a constitutional right, as important ways that nationwide marriage equality made a difference to them. Some pointed to the unstable political climate as a reason why federal marriage equality now mattered more than ever: it protected them amid unpredictable or harmful legislation in their state of residence and allowed them to consider moving elsewhere without fear of being stripped of basic rights tied to marriage. By alleviating one aspect of structural stigma—and introducing one major practical and symbolic act of affirmation and protection—*Obergefell* functioned to offset, in part, the harmful effects of state laws around the USA (Flores et al., 2020). Participants’ awareness of the significance of *Obergefell* is apparent elsewhere in our findings: for example, some participants spontaneously offered

that among the reasons they married was concern about the potential for *Obergefell* to be overturned; in turn, they were hoping to be “grandfathered in” if same-sex couples’ right to marry was taken away.

Likewise, when asked about whether they were concerned about a potential challenge to federal marriage equality, over three-quarters of participants indicated that they were very or somewhat concerned, with over 40% alone being “very” concerned. Trans couples were especially likely to voice concern about the potential loss of legal protections and symbolic meaning that are conferred by marriage. Trans people are more likely to face discrimination in many domains of society, including health care, education, and employment; in turn, marriage equality may offer especially valued protections that offset or minimize the harms of various structurally stigmatizing contexts (James et al., 2024). Indeed, the limited work on the effects of marriage for trans people suggests that being married may impact experiences of discrimination (Liu & Wilkinson, 2017). It is important to keep in mind that the logistic regression analysis considered gender at the couple level (i.e., treating couples as trans if either participants or their partners were trans); however, follow-up bivariate analyses found that although concern was high for both trans people and their partners, it was greater among trans individuals than cis individuals with trans partners. Future research can continue to tease apart the different experiences and impacts of marriage for trans people and their partners.

We also found that less educated participants—another group that may be additionally vulnerable due to their lower resources—were disproportionately likely to voice concerns about the loss of federal marriage equality. In that lower levels of education are related to a lower likelihood of health insurance and less access to certain workplace benefits (Branch, 2023), it is possible that less educated individuals were more worried about protections, such as health insurance, that accompany marriage. Future research can examine whether specific aspects of marriage (e.g., access to health insurance and access to Social Security benefits) are perceived as differentially impactful by more and less vulnerable members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Of note is that participants living in less LGBTQ+-affirming states or communities were not more likely to be concerned about a challenge to *Obergefell*: rather, concern was endorsed by participants in a variety of states and communities. It is possible that using different, or more refined, indicators of sociopolitical climate and/or LGBTQ+ protections (e.g., community voting history, by political affiliation; number of anti- or pro-LGBTQ+ bills introduced or passed in the past year) might result in a different set of findings. But our findings may also reflect the power and perceived import of federal marriage equality specifically even amid other LGBTQ+ protective policies, as well as growing unease

among LGBTQ+ people across the country regarding the national climate surrounding LGBTQ+ people (Goldberg et al., 2024).

We found, too, that some participants—one-quarter of the sample—had or were planning to take action amid a potential challenge to federal marriage equality, including speeding up the timeline of marriage or parenthood and obtaining second parent adoptions. Having to seek out such protections amid legal uncertainty and the threat of losing rights is inherently stressful and may be harmful to LGBTQ+ people’s mental and physical health (Goldberg & Abreu, 2024; Institute of Medicine, 2011; Kazyak, 2015).

More than one-quarter of participants very much or somewhat wanted to move out of state, and more than a quarter of participants very much or somewhat wanted to move out of the country. Reasons for wanting to move frequently centered on the sociopolitical climate, anti-LGBTQ+ laws, and fears of losing rights. Goldberg et al. (2024) found that 40% of LGBTQ+ parents in Florida wanted to move out of Florida because of the passage of the state’s Don’t Say Gay law, highlighting how shifting legal landscapes are creating fear and relocation desires across a broad swath of LGBTQ+ Americans. Consistent with this, and unsurprisingly, we also found that participants in states with poor LGBTQ+ climate and those who perceived their communities as less LGBTQ+ friendly were more likely to want to move out of state. These data are important, and both complement and extend prior findings documenting the importance of state-level LGBTQ+-related protections in decisions to relocate—although, as Baumle et al. (2023) documented, the relative importance of such state-level protections may vary based on other intersecting identities (e.g., race and parental status). We also found that participants who endorsed disabilities among themselves or their partners, and those who were older, were more likely to want to move out of state. LGBTQ+ people with disabilities face multiple oppressions and heightened discrimination and may be especially vulnerable to the effects of anti-LGBTQ+ policies and attitudes (Kempapadis et al., 2024), which may intersect and overlap with ableist policies and attitudes (World Institute on Disability, 2024). For example, some advocates warn that rising anti-trans legislation across many states can be viewed as a form of fascism, which has its roots in ableism (World Institute on Disability, 2024). Our findings for age may reflect greater perceived flexibility in being able to move (e.g., more resources; nearing retirement age).

Although multiple factors predicted the desire to move out of state, when it came to moving out of the country, concern about a potential challenge to federal marriage equality in the USA emerged as the single dominant predictor, suggesting the breadth of the potential impact that some participants foresee—and the possibility that LGBTQ+ people perceive such a legal challenge as a harbinger of other serious attacks on LGBTQ+ rights to come. Participants suggested

that resources such as dual citizenship, family members living abroad, and financial resources play important roles in considering a move abroad. Given that such resources are likely in limited supply for many LGBTQ+ Americans, the desire to move abroad may not be entirely realistic—underscoring, again, how privilege significantly impacts LGBTQ+ Americans' ability to protect themselves and their families (Goldberg, 2024; Rao et al., 2020).

## Limitations and Implications

The current study is limited by the fact that it collected data using an online survey, and we could not probe for elaboration or clarification as we would in an in-depth interview. Further, our open-ended questions were in some ways limited by the fact that they were framed in such a way as to specifically explore the perceived effects of marriage and marriage equality—the overarching focus of the study. Our goal was to be targeted in our line of questioning so as not to have a large amount of only loosely-related responses. However, a potential downside of this approach is that our questions may have biased participants toward a particular way of responding, curtailing our ability to gather a more expansive set of impressions and experiences.

Insomuch as our study is cross-sectional, we do not know how participants' responses may change over time amidst the swiftly changing sociopolitical landscape and impending US presidential election. It is possible, for example, that concerns about the possibility of marriage equality being challenged may become amplified for certain individuals, such as those who live in more LGBTQ+ -unfriendly states. Likewise, desire to move may increase over time, especially among more vulnerable groups. Future longitudinal work focused on LGBTQ+ Americans in a broad range of US states and climates can build on our findings to address these possibilities. Finally, our methodology likely excluded some especially marginalized members of the LGBTQ+ community, such as intersex people and trans/nonbinary people in different-sex marriages. Understanding marriage experiences and impacts among diverse trans people is important, especially given that most research on married trans people has not explored how intersections among gender identity, race, and partner sex/gender may be differentially related to the impacts of marriage on trans people's lives (Dawson et al., 2022; Liu & Wilkinson, 2017).

Our findings highlight the many profound and far-reaching effects that marriage has had on a diverse group of LGBTQ+ Americans' lives, including their mental, relational, and financial well-being. Marriage also appears to confer benefits in terms of expanding social acceptance and family support, which likely further enhance the safety, security, and well-being of LGBTQ+ Americans and their

families (Drabble et al., 2021). Our findings also highlight how, amid a swiftly changing sociopolitical climate and rapid expansion of LGBTQ+ laws across the USA (Choi, 2023), LGBTQ+ Americans are highly aware of the benefits and protections of marriage and how much is “on the line” with respect to a potential challenge to federal marriage equality. It is more important than ever that policymakers and advocates seek to protect federal marriage equality, as well as continuing to advocate for expanded protections across all domains of life for LGBTQ+ Americans.

**Author Contribution** Abbie Goldberg was responsible for the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and qualitative data analysis were performed by Abbie Goldberg. Quantitative data analysis was conducted by JuliAnna Smith and Abbie Goldberg. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Abbie Goldberg, and JuliAnna Smith commented on and contributed to subsequent versions of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Data Availability** The participants in this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, and because of the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data are not available. Questions about the study or data can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** The study was approved by the Clark University Internal Review Board. All participants provided consent for their participation in the anonymous survey.

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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