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Article

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What Makes People Want to Come to Germany

A survey experiment in Senegal and the Gambia

[Dario Portong](#)

Policy makers, civil society actors and migration researchers often argue that people from authoritarian states are fleeing to Germany to seek democracy and freedom. Others counter that economic opportunities are the primary motivation. A survey experiment in Senegal and the Gambia, two West African Muslim countries, provides clues as to why migrants are drawn to Germany.

[In recent years, many refugees arrived in Germany from non-Western, Islamic countries.](#)

They come from countries characterized by political instability or even civil war and massive economic problems. What are the values and beliefs these migrants bring with them? What is their attitude towards the liberal democracy they are entering?

It is often argued that refugees from authoritarian states come to Germany because they seek democracy and freedom. In migration research terminology, this means that liberal democracy serves as a pull factor – an aspect that attracts people. Critics of this argument point out that the main reason why Germany appeals to people from poorer countries is its high level of prosperity and its strong welfare state. However, even if the first claim – the appeal of liberal democracy – is true, this does not mean that migrants are staunch supporters of liberal-democratic institutions. They might simply endorse liberal-democratic principles for instrumental reasons, for example because they want to benefit from refugee protection, minority rights and religious freedom, without embracing liberal democratic values on principle.

In my doctoral dissertation, I investigate how the non-migrant population in Germany differs from the population in Muslim migrants' countries of origin with respect to liberal-democratic values. Furthermore, I want to assess the extent to which these cultural differences change through the process of migration and integration. For one thing, migrants do not simply represent the population of their home countries; more likely, they differ from this population. The question is what explains these differences. According to the theory of "cultural self-selection", individuals who migrate are not just a random cross-section of their origin population but tend to have special cultural characteristics. For example, people with liberal-democratic values, or "democrats" for short, may be attracted by the liberal-democratic qualities of the host country. However, democrats may also be more likely than non-democrats to migrate to democracies for other, indirect reasons, for example because they tend to have a different "mindset", such as being more open to change.

Studies show that migrants from autocratic countries often entertain significantly stronger liberal-democratic values than people in their countries of origin. This even

applies to recent arrivals, for whom integration effects can only be very small. This is shown, for example, in studies by [Jürgen Schupp and colleagues for the Institute for Employment Research](#) and by [Lukas M. Fuchs](#), which are based on a large-scale survey of refugees conducted by the Institute for Employment Research and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees in collaboration with the German Socio-Economic Panel. In this survey, refugees were not only asked about their liberal-democratic attitudes, but also about their personal reasons for leaving their country of origin and immigrating to Germany. When the results were published, then Federal Minister of Labor Andrea Nahles (SPD – Social Democratic Party in Germany) felt confident: “[The people coming here have come to Germany because of our values and civil and minority rights.](#)” The quality of those findings is limited, however, because many respondents did not want to provide information on politically sensitive issues and at least some of them can be assumed to have given socially desirable answers. Moreover, it is unclear whether a causal link between migration and democracy can in fact be established.

I specifically investigate this question by analyzing the West African countries of Senegal and the Gambia. If liberal-democratic qualities of the destination country are deemed particularly desirable by democrats and make them want to migrate there, then this may contribute to cultural self-selection in relation to liberal-democratic values. However, there is something important to keep in mind here: People cannot simply turn their plans and aspirations, which depend on certain pull factors and push factors, into reality. They must also have the opportunity to do so. According to surveys, while many people in West Africa would like to migrate to an attractive destination country, only very few of them end up doing so. In my study, I look only at people’s aspirations, not at whether they implement those aspirations.

Another important limitation to my study is that the research results cannot be fully applied to people from civil war countries or countries marked by strong political repression. The political systems of Senegal and the Gambia occupy a middle ground between fragile democracy and electoral autocracy. That said, both countries are nowhere near qualifying as consolidated democracies, especially when it comes to individual liberties, which is my focus. That means citizens of Senegal and the Gambia can gain a lot of freedom by migrating to a country with a consolidated, liberal democracy.

To answer my research questions, I analyze the first wave of the “Senegambia” survey. Colleagues in the research unit Migration, Integration, Transnationalization conducted this survey in Senegal and the Gambia in 2019 as part of the [ExiTT/TRANSMIT project](#). It includes more than 6,200 respondents who are broadly representative of the group of potential migrants (15 to 35 years old, predominantly male). The survey consists of multiple parts; for my research, I mainly draw on a survey experiment. In that experiment, participants were asked how much they would like to migrate to a certain country. Various fictitious countries were presented, differing in five dimensions: freedom of expression, self-determination for women (liberal-democratic characteristics), majority religion, large diaspora (ethnic-religious composition), and good job opportunities (economic conditions). In the survey, each respondent was randomly given a description of only one of the 32 versions of the fictitious destination country. After

reading the description of the destination country, respondents were asked how much they would like to emigrate to this country. The specific question read as follows:

“Consider a [Muslim, Christian] country, in which people [can, cannot] freely criticize the government [and, but] women [can, cannot] freely decide how they want to live. In this country there is a [large, small] community of your compatriots [but, and] it is [easy, difficult] to find a job. On a scale from 0-100, where 0 stands for ‘not at all’ and 100 for ‘very much’, how much would you like to migrate to this country?”

The survey experiment allows me to test Andrea Nahles’ causal claim that people come to Germany because of its liberal-democratic principles. Of course, I can only test her claim in relation to people from Senegal and the Gambia and in relation to the liberal-democratic characteristics of the given destination country. Other liberal-democratic principles might have a different pull effect. I examine whether respondents who were presented with a fictitious country featuring one or both liberal-democratic characteristic(s) differ regarding their migration aspirations from respondents whose fictitious country does not feature this characteristic. Given the random assignment of the specific fictitious country versions to respondents, the two groups only differ in terms of the characteristics of the fictitious destination country and not in terms of other characteristics such as gender, income, or personality traits. The design of the experiment allows me to rule out the possibility that factors other than country characteristics explain differences between the groups. For example, if I find that Gambians and Senegalese whose hypothetical destination country is characterized by freedom of expression are more willing to emigrate than Gambians and Senegalese whose hypothetical destination country does not have freedom of expression, then the pull factor of freedom of expression alone explains these differences. Furthermore, I examine whether democrats are more attracted to these liberal-democratic characteristics than non-democrats. An additional level of analysis results from the fact that respondents were also asked directly, regardless of the fictitious countries, which characteristics they would consider important in a target country.

When people in Senegal and the Gambia are asked directly about the preferred characteristics of the destination country, liberal-democratic characteristics do play a role, but less so than economic opportunities. This is even more evident in the survey experiment. Here, the analyses show that while potential migrants from Senegal and the Gambia are somewhat attracted by both the fundamental right to freedom of expression and self-determination for women in the destination country, good job opportunities have a much greater effect. Senegalese and Gambians are also more inclined to migrate to the fictitious destination country if the majority religion matches their own, as in the case of Muslims from Senegal and the Gambia migrating to another Muslim country such as Turkey. The size of the diaspora – that is, the number of Gambians and Senegalese living in the hypothetical destination country – does not have an effect. At first, I was surprised by this finding because the diaspora has played a major role in migration research explaining migration preferences. This apparent contradiction may be resolved by various considerations: First, in the experiment I compare a fictitious country with a large diaspora to a fictitious country with a small diaspora. Possibly, potential migrants are fine with a small diaspora, meaning that a larger diaspora does not add much value.

Second, the quality of the diaspora is likely to matter more to potential migrants than its quantity, that is, the prospect of connecting with family and friends in the destination country. Third, and perhaps most importantly, diaspora networks are not necessarily the reason why people want to emigrate to a country. However, the diaspora enables potential migrants to make their migration aspirations a reality. In the survey experiment, however, I only consider aspirations, as described above.

Thus, a destination country's liberal-democratic characteristics do indeed serve as pull factors, but they are much less important than the economic pull factor. However, this does not mean that those who come to democratic countries are more likely to support democratic principles. For evidence of this, democrats would have to be shown to be more attracted to liberal-democratic characteristics than non-democrats. In fact, however, I find no differences between democrats and non-democrats in this regard: the evidence does not suggest that democrats disproportionately want to migrate to liberal democracies. Possibly, cultural self-selection is more indirect, then – meaning that democrats are more attracted to the [economic strength of liberal democracies](#) than non-democrats? The data indeed show that democrats are more attracted to good job opportunities than non-democrats. That said, even with good job opportunities, democrats are not more inclined to migrate than non-democrats. In fact, democrats tend to be less willing to migrate, possibly because they have better prospects in their home country. Democrats also tend to be better off in socioeconomic terms than non-democrats.

In Senegal and the Gambia, democrats are just as keen as non-democrats to emigrate to a prosperous and free country like Germany. The mechanism of cultural self-selection cannot be used to explain why Muslims in Germany have significantly stronger liberal-democratic values than people in their countries of origin. Does this mean that integration processes and possibly migration experiences alone explain the higher values? I must point out once again that in my analysis I only look at migration aspirations and not the possibility of implementing them. Future research might investigate whether potential migrants with stronger liberal-democratic values are more likely than others to have the opportunities to realize their migration aspirations and plans. In fact, a first look at my data points in this direction because, as mentioned, democrats are better off in socioeconomic terms. This should put democrats in a better position to realize their migration aspirations, even if these are less pronounced overall than for non-democrats.

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