

## **Unpacking Welfare Deservingness Theory: Evidence from Gig Workers' Deservingness**

### **Abstract (198 words)**

As perceived deservingness is related with the way social programs are designed and administered, deservingness theory explains the social legitimacy of welfare state. Especially, based on the established welfare deservingness criteria those with motivation to work (“reciprocity”) are perceived as more deserving. However, none have investigated how the nature of work might affect this relationship. This paper investigates the perceived deservingness of gig workers to fill the research gap. The American welfare state is rooted in a traditional employment model, and excludes so-called “gig workers” and other non-standard workers from important benefits, despite a growing share of the workforce. The political feasibility of reforms to address this issue depends on whether the American public views gig workers as deserving of public assistance. I conducted novel preregistered survey experiments as part of the 2022 Cooperative Election Study. The findings show gig workers are penalized relative to traditional workers in terms of their welfare deservingness despite motivation to work, and this “gig work deservingness penalty” is stronger for immigrants. These findings uncover the established criterion of ‘job searching’ is not homogeneous, and offer important insights on building consensus for policy reforms to provide security for newly emerging precarious worker groups.

**Word count: 8,440** (all including)

## **Introduction: Social Legitimacy of the Welfare States**

Since the early stages of welfare state formation, the debate about the fundamental moral question of ‘*who should get what and why*’ has dominated (Jeene 2015; van Oorschot et al. 2017), highlighting the importance of solidarity and social justice to the welfare state. This question implies that particular groups are more entitled to government support, while others should be excluded (Larsen 2008; Cook 1979; Laenen, T., & Roosma, F. 2022; van Oorschot 2000, 2006). Perception of beneficiaries is strongly related to actual policy because policy designs reflect perceptions of target populations (Schneider and Ingram 1993). These perceptions also influence the support of government programs and their social legitimacy (Gilens 1999; Petersen 2012). In the wake of labor market change and with the emergence of new working groups, any push to expand eligibility to such groups will inevitably rekindle the debate over deservingness. The social legitimacy of targeted welfare schemes to deal with new social risks is a vital consideration (van Oorschot et al. 2017; van Oorschot and Roosma 2017).

Perceived deservingness and policy design are interrelated. Perceived deservingness as the images of the target population can affect actual policy designs such as administrative burdens by impacting policymaker acceptance (van Oorschot 2006). For example, perceptions of deservingness have large effects on public support for pushing “undeserving” welfare recipients into requirements such as job training (Petersen et al. 2011). Also, policymakers might be less tolerant of strict conditions and sanctions and reduce administrative burdens if the individual claimant is seen as deserving (Baekgaard et al. 2021). The literature on social construction of target populations (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 1997) demonstrates that policy designs both reflect and reinforce shared beliefs about the deservingness of target groups in numerous policy areas including social welfare.

Different groups of the needy are perceived differently within welfare states (van Oorschot 2006). For example, social protection for the unemployed despite their capacity to work receives less support, and social protection for immigrants is least supported, whereas the elderly and disabled are seen as more deserving (van Oorschot 2006; Jeene 2015; van Oorschot and Roosma 2017, 7; Buss 2019; Geiger 2021). Also, the type and the delivery systems of government programs affect their social legitimacy and positive or negative images of the targeted groups (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Soss and Schram 2007; Ellis and Faricy 2020). Contributory social insurance schemes tend to bring higher social legitimacy than mean-tested tax-financed assistance as recipients' contributions to the former signal that they are entitled to benefits (Coleman 1982). Usually, the public is more generous when it comes to evaluating recipients' deservingness of in-kind benefits, especially healthcare, relative to cash benefits such as unemployment assistance (Jensen and Petersen 2017; Geiger 2021).

Perceptions of deservingness are clearly associated with the way social programs are designed and administered (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Existing literature about deservingness has demonstrated that criteria such as motivation to work or majority-group identity as bolstering the perception that people are deserving of assistance. Existing theory tells us little, however, about how the *nature* of work itself affects perceived deservingness. Particularly, with the rapid change in labor market with technological advancements, various types of non-standard workers have emerged. However, our understanding of how the public views their deservingness is currently limited. To fill these empirical and theoretical gaps, this project presents new evidence on the extent to which gig workers are penalized in terms of their deservingness of two categories of public aid, unemployment insurance and public healthcare benefits, compared to conventional

workers by using pre-registered survey experiments<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the public image of the emergent category of gig workers will likely shape the existence and design of benefits that are extended to them, if any.

Drawing on the insights of the existing literature, these experiments seek to answer two important research questions. First, “Does the American public perceive non-standard workers as less deserving of public assistance than those in more traditional employment?”, and second, “Do the effects of factors that have been shown to shape perceived deservingness, such as motivation to work and immigrant status, differ for non-standard workers relative to other workers?” To answer these questions, I focus on two established deservingness criteria, motivation to work (*reciprocity*) and immigrant status (*identity*) (van Oorschot 2000). In the first two experiments, I examine the effects of gig worker status relative to and in combination with these other criteria in 2X2 full factorial experiments. In the third experiment, I examine whether gig workers are perceived as more deserving of unemployment benefits or healthcare benefits.

As predicted by my pre-registered hypotheses, Americans consider gig workers to be significantly less deserving of unemployment benefits than traditional workers, and this penalty persists even when the workers are described as being motivated to work. In addition, I found that, in the case of public healthcare benefits, the “gig work deservingness penalty” is stronger for immigrants than for native workers, a paramount consideration given that immigrants and other disadvantaged groups are more likely to rely on the gig economy for employment. Lastly, the perceived deservingness of gig workers varies across the two policy areas, as Americans rate gig workers as more deserving of public healthcare benefits than unemployment benefits. These

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<sup>1</sup> All hypotheses and research questions along with the study design were pre-registered on the Open Science Framework website prior to receiving the data, on March 3, 2023. See the attached anonymous preregistration or the anonymous hyperlink: [https://osf.io/bhgxu?view\\_only=1046cf9a563b4c378575d75952b5ba1b](https://osf.io/bhgxu?view_only=1046cf9a563b4c378575d75952b5ba1b).

findings establish employment type as a key factor affecting the perceived deservingness of social programs. This “gig work deservingness penalty” and the findings showing that job status conditions the effects of established deservingness criteria represent important new contributions to the literature on social welfare politics and public opinion.

### **Deservingness Criteria and Images of Target Groups**

Existing work has suggested the ‘CARIN’ criteria (Control, Attitude, Reciprocity, Identity, Need) as a framework for understanding the criteria that influence perceived deservingness (van Oorschot and Roosma 2017; Cook 1979; van Oorschot 2000; van Oorschot et al. 2017). *Control* refers to the group’s control over its situation and whether they are blameworthy for their neediness. *Attitude* refers to whether welfare recipients display gratitude or are likable. *Reciprocity* is about whether claimants contribute to society in the past or future. *Identity* is about shared identity (e.g., nationality) between the recipient and the public. *Need* refers to the recipient’s need for assistance.

Depending on welfare claimants’ features such as work status, age, and immigrant status, welfare beneficiaries are subject to different rules (Buss 2019). According to the criterion of control over the situation, the unemployed who are not responsible for their job loss are seen as more deserving than those who are fired due to neglect of duty (van Oorschot 2000; Geiger 2021). Among the unemployed, engaging in job-seeking activities matters for perceived deservingness as those not working to help themselves are perceived negatively in terms of the reciprocity criterion (Larsen 2008; Buss 2019; Petersen 2012; Jeene 2015), though effort to find work can also be interpreted as related to the control criterion (Buss 2019). Normally, because the elderly are evaluated positively with respect to reciprocity because they have contributed to society, and assumed to have relatively little control due to their limited employability (Buss 2019; van

Oorschot and Roosma 2017), they tend to avoid the strict conditions and harsh sanctions applied to the younger unemployed with low perceived deservingness (Larsen 2008). Regarding the criterion of identity, immigrants or racial minorities are often deemed less deserving than majority-group citizens (Reeskens and van der Meer 2015; Reeskens and van der Meer 2019; van Oorschot 2008; Kootstra 2016).

However, there are unanswered questions about how the *nature* of work affects perceived deservingness. Specifically, while existing literature shows that motivation to work and work history are crucial for perceived deservingness in terms of reciprocity, it has not established whether non-standard workers are perceived as less deserving than other workers. Based on the CARIN criteria, gig workers could be perceived as less deserving in terms of reciprocity due to their lack of contribution to the conventional social insurance systems. On the other hand, gig workers may be perceived as more deserving because doing “hustle jobs” can be interpreted as an effort to escape their financial insecurity by themselves, suggesting positive evaluations on reciprocity and control. Second, if those in non-standard jobs are considered less deserving, which aspects of the jobs or the workers factor into this perception? Existing literature assumes that app-based gig workers are considered undeserving of government support because they are relatively young (Ravenelle et al. 2021), and if so, the gig penalty exists in terms of reciprocity and control criteria. Similarly, app-based workers might be considered less deserving since immigrants and racial minorities are more engaged in the app-based economy, which may activate the identity criterion.

To answer these questions, this project examines whether having a deviant work arrangement affects perceived deservingness of receiving two different forms of assistance – unemployment insurance (UI) and public healthcare insurance (HI) benefits, and whether the

established criteria of motivation to work (reciprocity) and immigrant status (identity) have divergent effects depending on work arrangement.

### **The New Type of Employment: Gig Economy**

With the rapid growth of the platform economy, the modern labor market facilitates new ways of commodifying labor that differ from the normative ideal of secure full-time work. The platform economy or gig economy means using short-term work arrangements with high flexibility by connecting workers, customers, and businesses on digital platforms (Anderson et al. 2021). These workers make up a growing share of the American workforce as about one in six Americans have earned money from an online gig platform (Anderson et al. 2021; Upwork 2020). Without any formal contracts, gig workers have a high degree of autonomy and flexibility (Katz and Krueger 2019; Smith 2016), which attracts many workers to the gig economy. However, this flexibility could be a double-edged sword, as it comes at the expense of job security and stability, and gig workers' financial status is more volatile and vulnerable to economic changes than that of traditional workers (Vallas & Schor 2020; Chen et al. 2019; Berg et al. 2018; Manyika et al. 2016).

A major concern regarding the future of work is that these especially precarious workers are not protected by the social insurance system or tax-subsidized employer benefits. Gig workers are often excluded from the existing social insurance programs such as employer-sponsored health insurance and retirement plans which were established based on the standard employment model (Berg et al. 2018; Behrendt et al. 2019). Gig workers' precarity also stems from the fundamental structure of the gig economy. Generally, the responsibility for bodily injury, damage to assets, and risks of employment are devolved onto gig workers rather than being assumed by the employer (Ravenelle 2019; Vallas and Schor 2020). Also, aside from their irregular working hours, gig

workers are subject to disruption to work because evaluation systems and algorithmic control could make them not have potential customers if they get unfavorable evaluation (Ravenelle 2019; Wood et al. 2019; Schor et al. 2020; Wood and Lehdonvirta 2022). The shifting of economic risks and the importance of modification of welfare systems to ensure living standards and security for gig workers leads to the question of whether such reforms are politically feasible. The answer depends in part on what the American public thinks about gig workers and their deservingness of public assistance.

## **Hypotheses**

First, I begin by considering how work arrangement and motivation to work (i.e., reciprocity) are likely to affect perceived deservingness for unemployment benefits considering the growing concern of moral hazard of unemployment insurance and doubt about the willingness to work of the unemployed who receive benefits (Krug et al. 2019; Larsen 2002).

### ***Work Ethic, Reciprocity, and Deservingness of Receiving Unemployment Benefits***

Americans value a strong work ethic (Bobo 1998; DeSante 2013) and tend to believe that people should take care of their personal problems by themselves first without relying on government aid (Sniderman and Brody 1977, 501). In that sense, those who are reliant on government programs may be considered lazy and subject to social stigma (Rein 2001; Krug et al. 2019). The hostility toward laziness and lack of work ethics stems from a strong belief in self-reliance. These cultural values have shaped a so-called “workfare” system that promotes labor market participation while limiting the provision of welfare (Rueda 2015; Brodtkin and Larsen 2013; Bonoli 2013; Clasen et al. 2016). Given this context, I expect that those who are looking for



jobs will be perceived as more deserving of unemployment benefits than those without the motivation to do so. This leads to the first of my pre-registered hypotheses:

*H1a: Americans will be more likely to perceive workers with motivation to work as deserving of unemployment benefits than those without motivation to work.*

While existing literature and the previous hypothesis argue that those with high work motivation are perceived as more deserving, they do not specify whether different types of work are more valued than others. In considering this question, I draw on the insights of existing literature and theory. Gig workers' atypical work arrangements might be treated as antithetical to Americans' strong belief in upward mobility through hard work (Kim 2022, DeSante 2013), since the public might believe that gig workers do not put enough effort or investment to secure better and more stable employment (i.e., they are not exercising *control*). This could be related to a belief that the working poor simply do not work enough or are lazy (McClosky and Zaller 1984; Schiller 1994). Based on this theoretical expectation relating to work ethic literature and the criterion of control, even if they have the same level of active job-seeking behavior, I expect that gig workers will be perceived as less deserving than traditional workers. This leads to another hypothesis:

*H1b: Americans will be less likely to perceive gig workers as deserving of unemployment benefits than traditional workers.*

In addition to these hypotheses, this manuscript also seeks to answer a specific pre-registered research question on the way work arrangements condition the effects of the established criterion of motivation to work. There are plausible arguments that the effect of motivation to work could be stronger or weaker for gig workers than for traditional workers. If the fact that someone

is a non-standard worker is more salient and drowns out other considerations and criteria, the effect of job search effort on the perceived deservingness of gig workers would be weaker than for traditional workers. Also, given the requirement of regular UI policy as status quo or path dependence, the public might assume traditional workers should show stronger motivation to work compared to non-standard workers, which would strengthen the impact of an explicit motivation cue on the perceived deservingness of traditional workers. On the other hand, if the public assumes that gig workers have a weak work ethic that keeps them from pursuing better and more stable jobs, counter-stereotypical information about an unemployed gig worker putting in the effort to search for work may have a larger effect than it would for a traditional worker. If so, gig workers might be evaluated as undeserving poor in terms of the control criterion. Given the privileges of traditional workers for accessing social programs and the strong work ethic for welfare politics in the U.S. context, I expect the degree of work ethic as motivation to work would be applied differently depending on the work status.

*Q1: Is the effect of motivation to work on perceived deservingness larger or smaller for gig workers as compared to traditional workers?*

### ***Immigration and Deservingness of Healthcare Benefits***

Now, I turn to the question of how perceived deservingness is affected by work arrangement and another well-established criterion: identity, specifically immigration status. Here, I focus on publicly provided healthcare benefits, another major category of social welfare expenditure based on healthcare chauvinism (Albrekt Larsen 2020; Larsen and Scheffer 2020; Eick and Larsen 2022). Given the trend of increased immigration to Western countries in the past few decades (Natarajan et al. 2022), recent research about public opinion and welfare policies has explored the effect of

immigration on welfare support, with Hispanic or Latino immigrants being the most salient target population in the U.S. context (Garand et al. 2015; Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Eger, M. A., & Breznau, N. 2017; Brady and Finnigan 2014; Soss et al. 2001; Hero and Preuhs 2007; Kootstra 2016; Sainsbury 2006; Burgoon and Rooduijn 2021; Schmidt-Catran and Spies 2016). Greater ethnic heterogeneity from immigration may reduce public support for social policy if the public believes that immigrants exploit the welfare system or pose a threat to public resources (Taylor-Gooby 2005; Semyonov et al. 2006; Haselswerdt 2021). The hostility toward immigrants taking advantage of welfare programs (Kitschet 1997) and the assumption that people immigrate in pursuit of welfare benefits (Borjas 1999; Allard & Danziger 2000) lead to concerns of economic threats to welfare state systems (De Koster et al. 2013) as well as cultural threats from cultural diversity (van de Waal et al. 2016). A number of studies show that immigrants are perceived as less deserving of welfare provision than other groups (van Oorschot 2000; 2006; Brady and Finnigan 2014; Fox 2012; Romero 2011; van der Waal et al. 2016). The CARIN criteria play a greater role in shaping the perceived deservingness of outgroups than of ingroups (Kootstra 2017). Similarly, other work shows that this deservingness gap is insurmountable even when immigrants are described as having favorable features, such as actively looking for work or long work history (Reeskens and van de Meer 2019; Kootstra 2016). Therefore, based on the deservingness criteria of identity and perceptions of lack of reciprocity from immigrants, I hypothesize that immigrant workers are seen as less deserving of healthcare benefits than native-born American workers.

*H2a: Americans will be more likely to perceive native-born American workers as deserving of public healthcare benefits than immigrant workers.*

As per H1b, I expect that gig workers will be seen as less deserving of public healthcare benefits than traditional workers.

*H2b: Americans will be less likely to perceive gig workers as deserving of public healthcare benefits than traditional workers.*

Additionally, I seek to answer a pre-registered research question about the possibly conditional effect of the established criterion, immigrant status, by work arrangement. If non-standard workers are considered less deserving, there may be a “floor effect” that prevents immigration status from having much of an impact. On the other hand, the emphasis on work ethic and hard work in welfare politics in the U.S. is not neutral in terms of national origins, and certain minorities are punished more severely for the same level of “laziness” (DeSante 2013). Similarly, when ethnic minority welfare claimants have unfavorable features, such as having a short work history, they are punished more severely than ethnic majorities as a double standard (Kootstra 2016). This implies that the negative effect of immigrant status would be stronger for gig workers than traditional workers.

*Q2: Is the effect of national origins on perceived deservingness larger or smaller for gig workers as compared to traditional workers?*

### ***Program Types and Perceived Deservingness***

Lastly, I consider whether the perceived deservingness of gig workers may vary depending on a social program’s features. For example, relative to other types of social programs, research shows that the public generally favors government health benefits, because they view those with health problems as inherently deserving (Jensen and Petersen 2017). In terms of welfare delivery

systems, in-kind benefits like health coverage, are generally preferred to cash assistance like pensions and unemployment benefits because of the low level of transferability (Ellis and Faricy 2020; Eick and Larsen 2022). Due to these features, in-kind benefits are more generously provided even to less-favored groups such as immigrants (Eick and Larsen 2022), which may also apply to gig workers.

*H3: Americans will perceive gig workers as more deserving of healthcare benefits than unemployment benefits.*

## **Experimental Design and Data**

To test these hypotheses and answer these questions, I administered survey experiments that randomly exposed respondents to hypothetical scenarios about people with different work arrangements who face the need for unemployment and healthcare benefits. The experiments were embedded in a 1,000-respondent module on the 2022 Cooperative Election Study (CES, formerly the Cooperative Congressional Election Study). First fielded in 2006, the CES is administered by the survey research firm YouGov in partnership with teams of university-based researchers. YouGov recruits a nationally representative sample of American adults from existing online panels using “sample matching,” a methodology for selecting representative samples from non-randomly selected pools of respondents (see Schaffner et al. 2023 for more details on sampling and weighting in the 2022 CES). Since the CES is fielded to a nationally representative sample of adults in the US, it has the advantage of generalizability compared to convenience samples (Schaffner et al. 2023). The survey itself consists of pre- and post-election waves fielded to the same sample, with about half of each devoted to “Common Content” questions while the other half is devoted to module-specific questions.

Each respondent in the module participated in all three experiments. To avoid the possibility of spillovers (Transue et al. 2009), I randomly varied the order of the experiments. In each experiment, the conditions randomly vary the characteristics of hypothetical workers to measure the impact of these characteristics on perceived deservingness. Specifically, the first survey experiment is a 2X2 full factorial survey experiment with random assignment to a job status cue (traditional/ gig worker) and work motivation cue (high/low) in the vignette description, which deals with unemployment benefits. In all conditions, the worker is described as having worked 40 hours a week before losing their job to establish information equivalence with respect to working hours. All respondents are asked to what extent they think the hypothetical worker deserves to receive the benefits using a four-point Likert scale. This experiment tests *H1a*, *H1b*, and *Q1*. The vignette for the first experiment reads as follows, with the manipulated text in bold:

Imagine [**a worker who had been working** 40 hours a week **at Walmart/ an Uber driver** who had been working 40 hours a week], but [lost their job/they experienced a significant drop in customers and could no longer make a living<sup>2</sup>], and [**is (not) looking for other jobs**]. In your opinion, how deserving is this person of receiving government unemployment benefits?

The second experiment is also a 2X2 full factorial experiment with treatments for job arrangement (traditional/ gig worker) and immigration status (a native-born American/ immigrant) and describes a scenario involving public healthcare benefits. Specifically, each vignette describes the case of a worker injured in a car accident on duty, though the nature of their employment (gig versus traditional) differs between the conditions. The other experimental factor randomly varies whether the worker is described as a native-born American or an immigrant. This design allows me to test the effects of job status and immigrant status on perceived deservingness, separately and

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<sup>2</sup> Gig workers do not typically experience “job loss” in the same sense as traditional workers. Thus, the ‘unemployed’ gig workers are described as having experienced a significant drop in customers that prevented them from making a living.

in combination. As with the first experiment, perceived deservingness is measured with a four-point Likert scale. This experiment tests *H2a*, *H2b*, and *Q2*. The vignette for the second experiment reads as follows, with the manipulated text in bold:

Imagine an [**American/immigrant**] who had been working as a full-time [**delivery worker for FedEx/ driver for Doordash, a food delivery app**]. On the way to make a delivery, the person is injured in an auto accident. In your opinion, how deserving is this person of receiving public health benefits?

The last survey experiment includes only two conditions, which describe a gig worker who needs either unemployment (cash) or healthcare benefits (in-kind) to determine whether the perceived deservingness of gig workers for government assistance differs depending on the type of program. In both conditions, the worker is described as experiencing misfortune: a drop in customers in the unemployment condition and an injury in an auto accident in the health benefits condition. As in the first two experiments, deservingness is measured with a four-point Likert scale. This experiment will test *H3*. The vignette for the third experiment reads as follows, with the manipulated text in bold, and see Appendix A for the full text and questionnaires of all treatments in all three experiments:

Imagine someone who had been working as a driver for Instacart, a grocery delivery app. However, [**they experienced a significant drop in customers and could no longer make a living/ On the way to make a delivery, the person is injured in an auto accident**]. In your opinion, how deserving is this person of receiving [**government unemployment benefits? / public health benefits?**]

For analysis, since the responses were given on a 4-point scale, I compared mean differences with t-tests for the outcome variable: perceived deservingness, using a two-tailed critical p-value of 0.1 for these tests as specified in the preregistration. Thus, the effects reported are sample average treatment effects. Also, to answer the two specific questions on heterogeneous effects, I estimated ordinary least squares regressions of the deservingness responses in each of the

first two experiments, with indicators of each treatment and the interaction term of the two treatments in each experiment as the independent variables. I also use a two-tail critical p-value of 0.1 for these tests.

## Results

I begin by testing *H1a* and *H1b* with a simple comparison of the treatment groups' mean with t-tests as displayed in Figure 1. Regarding *H1a*, Figure 1 shows that those with motivation to work are perceived as more deserving of unemployment benefits than those without motivation to work, regardless of work arrangement as traditional workers or gig workers. Specifically, the mean difference in the deservingness of unemployment benefits between traditional workers with motivation to work (mean = 3.55) and those without motivation to work (mean = 2.70) is substantively meaningful and statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ , Cohen's  $D^3 = 0.96$ ). The same is true in the gig worker scenarios though to a lesser extent (mean = 3.05 vs. 2.51,  $p < 0.01$ , Cohen's  $D = 0.53$ ). Thus, the results provide strong support for *H1a* and are consistent with other literature on the importance of motivation to work as a determinant of perceived deservingness.

Regarding *H1b* on the effect of job type, tests, Figure 1 also shows that gig workers are perceived as less deserving of unemployment benefits than traditional workers even when the motivation to work is held constant. Specifically, the mean difference between traditional workers with motivation to work (mean = 3.55) and gig workers with motivation to work (mean = 3.05) is substantively large and statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ , Cohen's  $D = 0.59$ ). Turning to the treatments describing workers without motivation to work, the negative effect of gig work is still

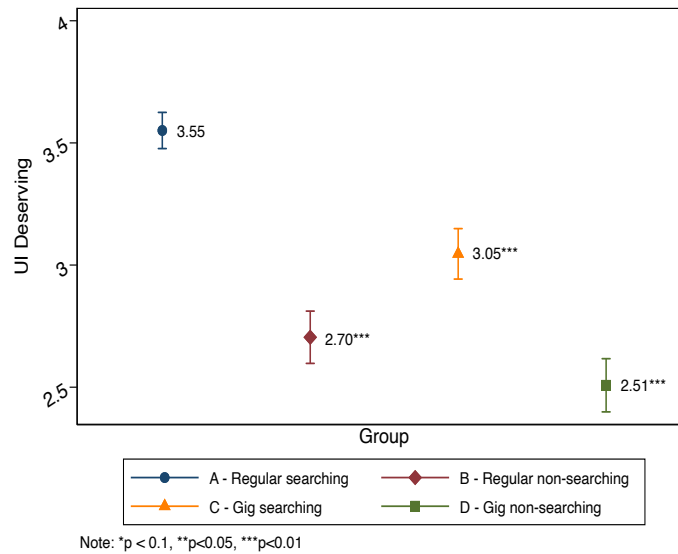
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<sup>3</sup> Cohen's  $D$  is a standardized effect size for measuring the difference between two group means, which is one of the most common ways to measure effect size.

$$Cohen's D = (M_2 - M_1) / SD_{pooled}$$



significant and notable, though apparently not as large (mean = 2.70 vs. 2.51,  $p < 0.05$ , Cohen’s  $D = 0.19$ ). Thus, the results support *H1b* that job arrangement is an important factor of perceived deservingness. Notably, the “gig work penalty” in perceived deservingness does not originate from differences in working hours (i.e., assuming gig workers only work part-time) because each vignette specifies that the worker formerly worked 40 hours a week. This “gig work penalty” is not insurmountable, however: motivated gig workers are seen as more deserving than unmotivated traditional workers (mean=3.05 vs. 2.70,  $p < 0.01$ , Cohen’s  $D = 0.34$ ).

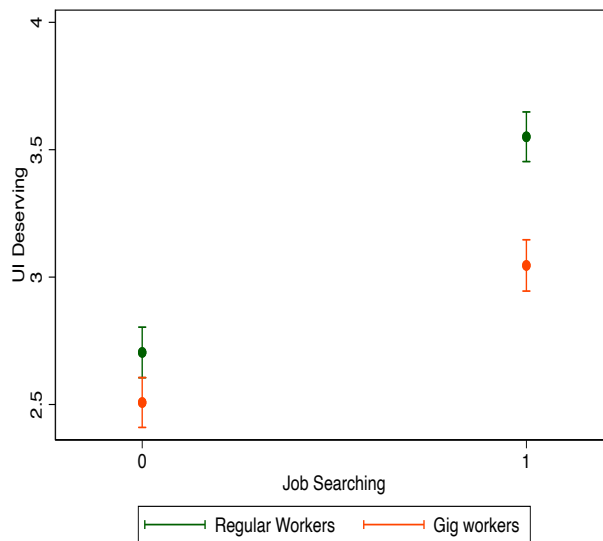


**Figure 1.** Mean deservingness of unemployment benefits in each group with 90% CIs (note: p-values are tested relative to the baseline of “A: Regular searching”).

Next, I conduct a formal test of whether job status conditions the effect of motivation to work on perceived deservingness per *Q1*. Figure 2 displays predicted ratings with 90% confidence intervals of different level of job status and engagement in job searching generated from an OLS regression.<sup>4</sup> This analysis confirms that the effect of motivation to work on perceived deservingness for UI benefits is larger for traditional than gig workers ( $p < 0.01$ ). Also, the marginal

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix Table B1 for full results.

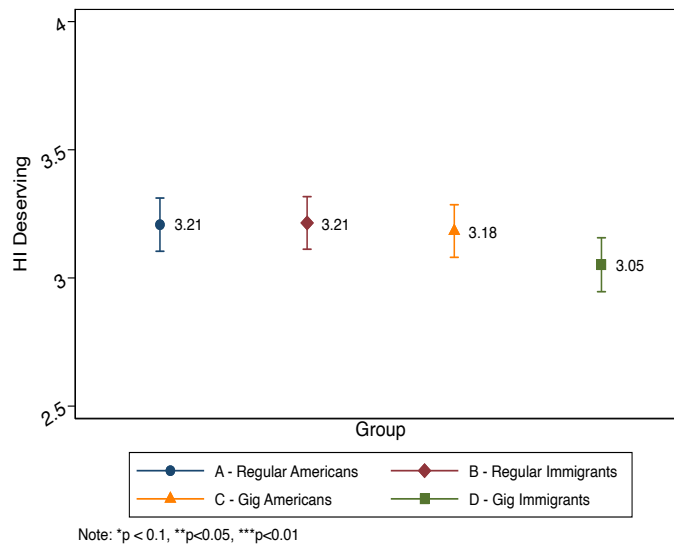
effects of gig employment on perceived deservingness are statistically significant in both the non-job-seeking condition (average marginal effect = -0.2,  $p=0.02$ ) and the job-seeking condition (average marginal effect = -0.5,  $p<0.01$ ). This could be because the gig work effect is salient and lessens the impact of other factors, or because it establishes a “floor effect” in which the negative impact of a lack of motivation to work is more limited for gig workers. Alternatively, it may reflect divergent expectations that the public has for these different categories of workers (e.g., that they hold traditional workers to a higher standard than gig workers).



**Figure 2.** Predicted rating of Deservingness for UI, by Work Arrangement and Job Searching Motivation (with 90% CIs)

Next, I test *H2a* and *H2b* on gig work and immigration status. Regarding *H2a*, Figure 3 shows that there is no statistically significant difference in the perceived deservingness of health benefits between native-born Americans and immigrants within either category of worker. This finding differs from some existing literature on healthcare chauvinism (Larsen and Schaeffer 2020), but is consistent with the findings of Jensen and Petersen (2017) on broad support for health benefits regardless of the characteristics of beneficiaries. Regarding *H2b*, Figure 3 shows that there is no statistically significant punishment for being a gig worker in deservingness of health benefits

in the case of native-born Americans. However, the comparison between the immigrant conditions in Figure 3 shows that an immigrant gig worker is perceived as less deserving of healthcare benefits than immigrant traditional workers (mean = 3.05 vs. 3.21,  $p < 0.1$ , Cohen's  $D = 0.17$ ). The fact that there was no main “nationality effect” suggests that this experiment is a difficult test for the importance of job status as a variable affecting perceived deservingness, making the significant penalty for gig work in the immigrant condition especially noteworthy.

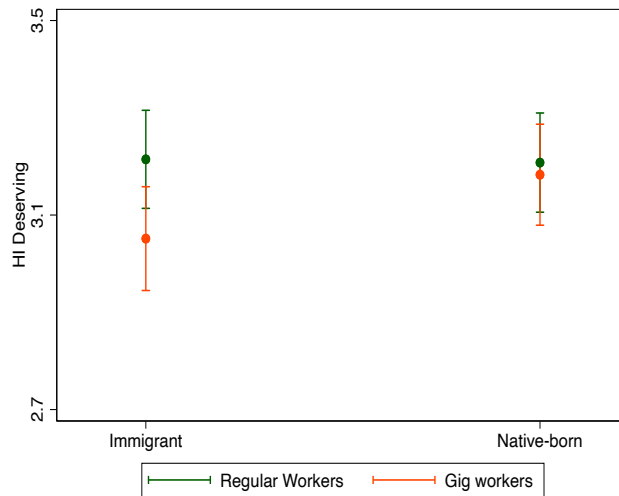


**Figure 3.** Mean deservingness of unemployment benefits in each group with 90% CIs (Note: p-values are tested relative to the baseline of “A: Regular Americans”.)

The apparent difference in the effect of gig work for natives and immigrants suggests that the public may penalize immigrants more for atypical work arrangements, which can be interpreted as a double standard. This is consistent with other work showing that immigrants are punished more severely for unfavorable behavior than others (Kootstra 2016). Figure 4 displays the results of a formal test for heterogeneous effects (using OLS regression), as specified in Q2.<sup>5</sup> The interaction term is statistically insignificant ( $p=0.272$ ), indicating that, while the effect of the gig

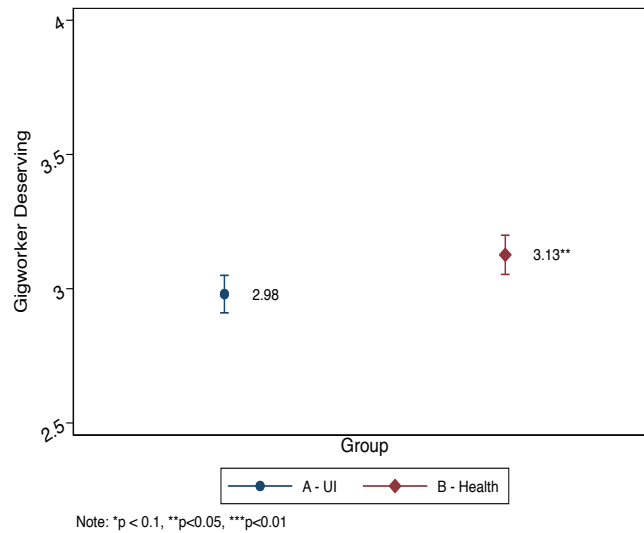
<sup>5</sup> See Appendix Table B1 for full results.

work treatment may be significantly different from 0 for immigrants, I cannot reject the null hypothesis that it is the same size as the effect for natives.



**Figure 4.** Predicted rating of Deservingness for HI, by Work Arrangement and Immigrant Status (with 90% CIs)

Lastly, in the third experiment, I test *H3* on the effect of policy type on perceived deservingness among gig workers. Figure 5 shows that Americans perceive gig workers as more deserving of public healthcare benefits than unemployment benefits ( $p < 0.05$ , Cohen's  $D = 0.15$ ), as predicted by *H3*. This result is consistent with existing literature finding more generosity in the context of healthcare benefits than other forms of aid (Jensen and Petersen 2017), even toward less favored groups such as immigrants (Eick and Larsen 2022). This finding is also consistent with work showing that the perceived deservingness of beneficiaries varies by the delivery system of social programs (Ellis and Faricy 2020). It implies that it might be easier to reach a political consensus of expanding public health benefits toward non-standard workers compared to the case of unemployment benefits for them.



**Figure 5.** Gig workers' deservingness of UI and HI (Note: p-value is tested relative to the baseline of “UI”.)

Besides the main results to test preregistered hypotheses and questions, I run additional analyses with the following control variables in Table B.2 of Appendix B to test for robustness: Race, Partisanship, Gender, Income, Education, US citizen, and Work status. I also test for heterogeneous effects by partisanship and anti-immigrant sentiment in exploratory tests in Appendix C. Table C.1. in Appendix C shows the heterogeneous effect of partisanship on HI benefits. Specifically, Democrats perceive native-born gig workers as more deserving than Republicans do. Other than that, the results show no strong evidence of heterogeneous effects<sup>6</sup>.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper is the first to present an empirical test of how specific work arrangements affect workers' perceived deservingness for social programs. Existing studies have found that work ethic is a vital factor in perceived deservingness, but they tell us little about how the *nature* of work

<sup>6</sup> For the heterogeneous of partisanship on UI benefits, even though shows it is not statistically significant in Table C.1., it is not too far away from the significance threshold. Thus, there might be some possibilities of heterogeneous effects on UI benefits as well if having enough power on that test.

itself affects perceived deservingness. This manuscript fills an important research gap regarding the social legitimacy of benefit obligations related to specific types of job status, especially given the growth of nonstandard work in the U.S. and across the world. The finding of gig workers' lower deservingness of unemployment benefits suggests potential avenues for future research on what factors might serve to mitigate the deservingness penalty of gig work. For example, per Keiser and Miller (2020), would Americans be more supportive of programs that aid gig workers if the administrative burdens were relatively high?

Furthermore, this study advances the literature by demonstrating the relationship between established criteria for perceived deservingness and specific job status. Existing literature has treated the motivation to engage in job-seeking as a homogeneously important factor (Buss 2019; Reeskens and van der Meer 2019), but I establish that its effect differs depending on the nature of work. Specifically, it appears that the effect of motivation to work is muted for gig workers compared to traditional workers.

Regarding healthcare benefits, this study found no significant differences in perceived deservingness when native-born Americans have either traditional or gig jobs. However, the public does appear to significantly penalize immigrants for gig work. This is aligned with the existing literature finding that ethnic minorities with unfavorable behaviors are punished more severely based on a double standard (Kootstra 2016). While this is an important finding, it must be noted that I fail to reject the null hypothesis that the effect of gig work is the same for native and immigrant workers.

The results of the second experiment are also consistent with existing work showing that support for healthcare benefits tends to be high regardless of how beneficiaries are described (Jensen and Petersen 2017). This relates to the finding of the third experiment that Americans

perceive gig workers as less deserving of receiving unemployment benefits than healthcare benefits. These results imply that consensus about expanding health benefits to cover non-standard workers could be reached more easily compared to the expansion and renovation of other benefits.

Despite the theoretical contributions of this paper, the policy status quo could structure respondents' perceptions of policy proposals (Haselswerdt and Bartels 2015). Regarding the deservingness of unemployment insurance benefits, respondents familiar with the benefits might notice that the policy does not apply practically to non-standard workers. Given that people's opinions are influenced by the policy status quo that does not favor gig workers currently, it might work as an important part of perceived deservingness. Similarly, in the case of healthcare benefits, respondents might not perceive regular workers as deserving of 'public' healthcare benefits because they assume that regular workers are typically covered by employer-sponsored health insurance.

Of course, there are some limitations to this study. Notably, the vignettes do not specify or fix the age, gender, or other characteristics of hypothetical workers, and it is possible that respondents might infer such differences based on the nature of employment, violating the assumption of information equivalence (Dafoe et al. 2018). For example, respondents might assume gig workers are relatively young, and therefore less deserving (Larsen 2008). Similarly, the vignettes about immigrants do not contain details such as the length of residence, country of origin, or documented status. Of course, there are trade-offs running either abstract or concrete versions of the experiment (Brutger et al. 2022), but these are important avenues for future study. Additionally, in the third survey experiment, the finding shows that Americans are more generous to gig workers receiving health benefits (in-kind) compared to unemployment benefits (cash assistance). Even though the finding implies that recipients of in-kind benefits are perceived as

more deserving, I am unable to distinguish between the effects of the delivery system and benefit type (Ellis and Faricy 2019).

Lastly, even though this paper establishes that there is a clear deservingness penalty for gig workers in American public opinion, the mechanisms behind this effect have not been clearly established. It may be because Americans consider gig workers as having a weak work ethic, assuming they have not put in enough effort to build their skills and get decent conventional jobs, even if they are described as being motivated to seek work. Alternatively, Americans might speculate that gig workers, especially immigrant gig workers, do not pay taxes properly or contribute less in taxes even if they are following the law. Investigating the theoretical mechanisms of the gap will provide insight into how it might be addressed. For example, according to Reeskens and van Oorschot's (2012) finding that immigrants receive equal access to welfare programs only after they have worked and paid taxes for a considerable time, the "gig work deservingness penalty" could be reduced if information about their taxpaying contributions is provided.

This study investigates how specific labor market characteristics affect the perceived deservingness of workers for public aid, and how they are related to well-established deservingness criteria. Considering that the motivation to work is codified into the liberal welfare regime with selective welfare programs and the "workfare" system in the U.S., the perceived deservingness of a newly emerging group is an important consideration in welfare politics. This study contributes to a long tradition of scholarship demonstrating that perceptions of deservingness play into the way that public programs are designed and administered (Schneider and Ingram 1993). The current social welfare system in the U.S. puts gig workers in a precarious position because of their ineligibility for certain programs based on traditional employment, indicating that these programs



should be revised to better fit the changing nature of work. The prospects for such change will depend largely on how society views this vulnerable and growing segment of the workforce.

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