

Outsiders at Home: The Politics of American Islamophobia

By Nazita Lajevardi. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 306 pp., \$79.99 Cloth/\$24.99 Paperback

Youssef Chouhoud 

Christopher Newport University

Corresponding author. E-mail: youssef.chouhoud@cnu.edu

(Received 2 March 2021; accepted 10 March 2021)

Social scientific research can contribute to our collective understanding of society in myriad ways. In the study of race and ethnicity, for example, political scientists often shine a light on overlooked or understudied societal currents. These scholars thus expand an otherwise truncated view of social phenomena, allowing for more holistic theory building and policy analysis. Even when a set of circumstances are widely recognized, however, systematic research can still prove quite valuable. Such work pushes us beyond intuition and anecdote, thereby making it more difficult to dismiss, for instance, the plight of marginalized groups or other inconvenient injustices.

Nazita Lajevardi's expansive book on the insidiousness of anti-Muslim bias is a vital resource both for what it reveals and what it confirms. *Outsiders at Home: The Politics of American Islamophobia* illuminates the ways in which discriminatory attitudes towards Muslims inform political preferences and condition access to democratic institutions. It does so through multi-method research that probes the dynamics of Islamophobia across various domains. Complementing these inferential deep dives are compelling analyses on the socio-political environment for Muslims in the United States. Even if it is largely taken for granted that negative media depictions of Muslims since 9/11 are the norm, Lajevardi provides clear evidence that scholars and practitioners alike can point to in the future when referencing this tendency.

Across six empirical chapters, Lajevardi's findings paint a vivid picture of the pernicious effects of Islamophobia. The introduction of the Muslim American Resentment (MAR) scale in chapter three highlights how methodological advancements and innovative approaches are the driving force behind this book. Equipped with this novel survey instrument, Lajevardi connects MAR to support for both Donald Trump and a number of intrusive policies targeting Muslims. She then goes on to demonstrate through a series of survey experiments that hypothetical Muslim candidates are at a disadvantage when it comes to running for the very offices that would allow them to shape policy (chapter four).

Along these same lines, chapter seven provides evidence that American Muslims' access to current office holders is blunted at both the mass and elite levels. Lajevardi builds these inferences through a research design that prompts state legislators for assistance or access via hypothetical petitioners, varying only the traits that may be sources of potential discrimination. These audit studies, which not only replicate

prior work in the field but also incorporate critical adjustments for context, are in line with the sobering outcomes that populate the book as a whole. Even so, these particular findings may be all the more worrying given that “members of marginalized groups are truly hindered from integrating into the public arena when their community leaders are ignored” (158).

The portion of the book that is likely to garner the most interdisciplinary interest deals with news media content in the years leading up to and since 9/11. This analysis, presented in chapter five, is the product of Lajevardi collecting and coding thousands of news transcripts from CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. She finds that in the years following 9/11, coverage of Muslims was consistently negative across all three platforms, even compared to other minority groups. The plots and other visualizations in this chapter are especially useful for researchers wanting to stand on firmer empirical ground when making claims about Muslim media perception. The data on pre-9/11 media tendencies are more limited (transcripts for the years 1992–1999 are exclusively from CNN), but nonetheless offer a serviceable quantitative baseline, which Lajevardi uses to demonstrate that the salience of marginalized groups in general was lower prior to the September 11th attacks with much more parity between groups in terms of sentiment.

While this book is laudable for the way it leverages various research modalities to weave a coherent narrative, discerning readers will be left with a lingering methodological qualm. Specifically, despite the MAR scale’s central role across multiple analyses, it is unclear whether its composite items all tap into a single underlying sentiment. To this end, factor loadings for each of the nine component variables would have been immensely useful, particularly for researchers who wish to subsequently utilize the scale. Going solely off question wording, it seems unlikely that “Most Muslim Americans lack basic English skills” and “Most Muslim Americans are not terrorists” both reflect the same latent attitude. This critique does not necessarily undermine any of the book’s top-line takeaways, but suggests that there may be some meaningful heterogeneity buried in the results. In much the same way that we recognize a distinction between old-fashioned racism and symbolic racism (and their corresponding downstream effects), there are likely gradations to anti-Muslim bias.

Yet, perhaps the biggest (as yet, unanswerable) question at the end of this comprehensive volume is whether the troubling findings represent a snapshot in time or a new normal in American society. Lajevardi is no doubt in the strange position of desiring her just-published research to immediately reflect a bygone era. While, unfortunately, anti-Muslim bias will likely continue to influence political attitudes and behavior for some time, Lajevardi herself does indeed find some signs that the underlying dynamics driving this sentiment are shifting (or are at least shiftable given the right circumstances). For example, she explains a noticeable dip in baseline MAR across a set of experiments conducted over two years by remarking that, relative to 2016, “the general public’s anxieties about Muslim Americans had...abated” (118). This potential malleability invites researchers to revisit and replicate Lajevardi’s work moving forward. Fortunately, the rich insights found in *Outsiders at Home* will reward each return trip.