

Evaluating Resistance toward Muslim American Political Integration

Brian R. Calfano

University of Cincinnati

Nazita Lajevardi

Michigan State University

Melissa R. Michelson

Menlo College

Abstract: Muslims in the United States are often constructed as anti-American and are perceived to have little engagement with politics. Moreover, Arab and Muslim identity is often conflated in the public mind. In this note, we introduce results from a randomized survey experiment conducted in three states with varying Muslim populations—Ohio, California, and Michigan—to assess how trustworthy respondents rate a local community leader calling for unity when that individual signals themselves to be an Arab, Muslim, or Arab Muslim, as opposed to when they do not signal their background. Across the board, and in each state, respondents rate the community leader as less trustworthy when he is identified as Muslim American or as Arab Muslim, but not when he is identified as Arab. These results suggest that the public does not conflate these two identities and that Muslims are evaluated more negatively than Arabs, even when hearing about their prosocial democratic behavior.

Considerable research shows that negative affect toward Muslim Americans is pervasive (Jamal and Naber 2008; Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009; Oskooii, Dana, and Barreto 2019) and driven by exposure to negative media and elite rhetoric, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001 (Lajevardi 2020). Recent studies and polls find a small minority of Americans have a positive view of Muslim Americans (e.g., Khan and Ecklund 2012; Oskooii, Dana, and Barreto 2019),¹ and Muslims are often politically constructed as symbolic threats (Argyle, Terman, and Nelimarkka N.d.), and the victims of sociopolitical

Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Nazita Lajevardi, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. E-mail: nazita@msu.edu

harassment (Welborne et al. 2018; Hobbs and Lajevardi 2019) and even violence (Westfall et al. 2017; Müller and Schwarz 2018). Within this context of widespread Islamophobia, we test whether Muslim identity will have a negative effect on perceived trust, even when that individual is engaged in prosocial behavior.

Scholarship on prejudice reduction shows consistent evidence that exposure to individual members of a marginalized group—either through interpersonal contact or through mediated contact—has the potential to substantially shift attitudes. The key is for the positive exposure to an individual to be generalized to a group. Then, the public must update its attitudes toward the entire group to which the individual belongs (rather than dismiss the individual as an exception). The ability to generalize from individual to group depends on contact being perceived as an intergroup encounter rather than as an interpersonal encounter (Hewstone and Brown 1986; Brown, Vivian, and Hewstone 1999).

To maximize generalization, the psychological link between subjects and their respective groups cannot be too salient during the interaction (Miller, Brewer, and Edwards 1985; Scarberry et al. 1997). Generalization also depends on the degree to which an outgroup representative is seen as typical according to an individual's prior attitudes about the outgroup (Skipworth, Garner, and Dettry 2010). Negative affect toward stigmatized group members can generate resistance to exposure to positive information due to confirmation bias or one's privileging of negative information (Baumeister et al. 2001; Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Merolla and Zechmeister 2018). The variable nature of this process helps explain why negative racial attitudes are deeply resistant to change, even in the face of stereotype-correcting information (Sears and Funk 1999; Paluck 2009; Nyhan and Reifer 2010; Tesler 2015). Conversely, there is some evidence that exposure to positive information about an outgroup can improve attitudes (Williamson 2019; Lajevardi 2021), especially in contexts where ingroup familiarity with an outgroup is low (Stephan and Stephan 1985; Blascovich et al. 2001; Voci and Hewstone 2003). In American politics, and regarding marginalized racial and ethnic minorities specifically, members of the socially dominant ingroup might view minorities with higher affect when learning that outgroup members demonstrate behaviors that align with democratic engagement. In the process, ingroup members may be less impacted by negative outgroups stereotypes (Dovidio et al. 1991; Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami 2003).

We assess how the public responds to positive information showing Muslim Americans engaged in behavior closely aligned with the

democratic process and contradicting contemporary (and historical) stereotypes about Muslims as anti-American. We also assess whether stereotypes conflate Arabs with Muslims (D'Urso *N.d.*). In the process, we examine public perceptions of positive information about Arabs, since there is often confusion about whether the widespread discrimination in the current era is targeted at ethnicity (e.g., Arab) or religion (e.g., Muslim). In the years before and immediately after the attacks on September 11, 2001, scholarly research wavered between a focus on Arab American mobility and discrimination and a focus on Muslim discrimination (see Lajevardi 2020 for a review).

The lack of consistent focus on both groups is understandable given that, prior to 2001, groups differentiated themselves by language (e.g., Arabic, Turkish, and Farsi), religion (e.g., Muslim, Christian, Bahai, and Jewish), ethnicity (e.g., Arab, Turkish, and Persian), and immigration histories to the United States. But today Muslim Americans are perceived as monolithic, despite being a demographically diverse religious group (Khan and Ecklund 2012; Lajevardi 2020). Recent analysis shows that a shift in media coverage—and by proxy, the national attention—from Arab American to Muslim American occurred between 2003 and 2007 (Lajevardi 2020). Since then, Arab Americans have all but disappeared from the spotlight, and negative attention has been re-centered on the religious group: Muslims. As such, in recent years, scholarship largely has focused on unpacking the antecedents and consequences of discrimination centered on adherents of Islam (Islamophobia).

This does not necessarily mean that anti-Arab prejudice disappeared. Cainkar (2006, 244) notes that after 9/11, “persons with Arabic-sounding names, whether Christian or Muslim, reported experiencing job discrimination and anti-Arab comments, and that persons with the ‘Arab/Middle Eastern’ phenotype have been physically attacked regardless of religion.” What is unclear, however, is whether these perceived experiences of discrimination among Arab Americans extend to the public’s current behavior now that the focus has turned to Muslims and whether the public continues to conflate Arab and Muslim Americans.

To clarify, we do not expect exposure to information of Muslims support of democratic engagement to lead the public to consider Muslim Americans as ingroup members (i.e., with non-Muslims). Rather, we test whether exposure to prosocial democratic behavior by a Muslim American can nudge the public toward more positive evaluations of the person engaging in the behavior. Specifically, we conduct a randomized survey experiment to assess whether a person taking on the

role of deliberation facilitator in local politics improves public affect assessments of the facilitator when the person is identified as Muslim, Arab, Arab and Muslim, or not identified at all. Compared to the control, we find that when the facilitator is identified as Muslim, respondents evaluate the organizer as having negative personal attributes, making them see the facilitator as less trustworthy. In addition, respondent purported contact with Muslims and reported party ID play no role in changing affect outcomes. As such, our results are fresh evidence that the opportunities for Muslim political incorporation in America remain limited.

THEORY AND EXPECTATIONS

Societal scrutiny of Muslims predates 9/11 and is rooted in a belief about the supposed incompatibility between Islam and core American values (Kalkan, Layman, and Uslander 2009; Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018; Lajevardi 2020, Dana et al. 2019). Negative views of Islam paint its followers as monolithic, barbaric, intolerant, violent, and at odds with democratic norms and principles (Said 1979; Dana, Barreto, and Oskooii 2011; Dana, Wilcox-Archuleta, and Barreto 2017; Jamal, Naber and Kazemipur 2014).

These negative stereotypes have become more pervasive over the past decade: Muslim Americans report psychological stressors when confronting their own stigma (Sediqe 2020) and heightened social and political discrimination (Oskooii 2016; Dana et al. 2019; Lajevardi et al. 2020), which peaked during the 2016 presidential campaign (Calfano, Lajevardi, and Michelson 2017) and resulted in a reduction of their online presence (Hobbs and Lajevardi 2019). Hostility toward Muslim Americans was an important predictor of Trump support in the 2016 election and is rooted in old-fashioned racism (Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018; Lajevardi and Abrajano 2019).

Notwithstanding this sociopolitical context, scholarly work has largely contradicted negative Muslim stereotypes. American Muslims mirror non-Muslim whites (who comprise the country's dominant social group) on many socioeconomic dimensions; American Muslims are also politically mobilized and active (Jamal 2005; Suhay, Calfano, and Dawe 2016; Dana, Wilcox-Archuleta, and Barreto 2017; Calfano 2018; Ocampo, Dana, and Barreto 2018). But when Muslims try to build on this political enfranchisement, they are often denied access to politics relative to the

public at large (Kalkan, Layman, and Green 2018; Lajevardi 2018). This reflects concerns by non-Muslims that Muslim participation poses a threat, e.g., that Muslims want non-Muslims to be forced to obey their religious beliefs.

Our theoretical framework focuses on ingroup projection and perceptions of identity prototypicality on affect toward outgroups. One possibility is that Muslim American participation in prototypically democratic activities signals a superordinate American identity to non-Muslims, which might reduce negative ingroup affect toward Muslim Americans, as predicted by self-categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987). Alternatively, the tendency for ingroup members to view themselves as more prototypical of the superordinate identity than outgroup members (Mummendey and Wenzel 1999; Weber, Mummendey, and Waldzus 2002), may make the signaling of identity prototypicality more difficult for outgroup members. In the case of Muslim Americans, recognition of their prototypicality as Americans when engaging in democratic behaviors hinges on whether non-Muslims can be convinced to update their beliefs about negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam.

There is reason to suspect that positive (i.e., group prototypical) signals intended to overcome negative information are at a disadvantage. The power of negative information in motivating individuals to “tune in” outstrips attraction to positive news (Merolla and Zechmeister 2018). Moreover, exposure to negative information about Muslim Americans, in particular, has a greater impact on shaping attitudes toward Muslim Americans and on increasing resentment toward them compared to positive coverage (Lajevardi 2021). Yet, although political engagement by scrutinized minority groups may pose a threat to socially dominant groups, some basic forms of political activity are less confrontational and potentially have the capacity to generate more positive perceptions of minority group members. This is especially true of deliberation facilitators on local political matters. Political deliberation is a hallmark civic value the general public holds in repute (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997), albeit a norm with which Muslims have not been associated with as facilitators in public settings that include non-Muslims (Papacharissi 2004).

To test these competing theories, we conducted a randomized survey experiment in three states selected for their variation in Muslim density. Using a block-randomized vignette experiment, we examine how residents respond to a newspaper article detailing the efforts of a person who coordinated and hosted a local candidate forum for city council. Under the control conditions, no information was given about the forum organizer’s

racial or religious identity. Under the treatment conditions, the organizer was identified either as Arab, Muslim, or as an Arab Muslim. We assess respondent affect by measuring attitudes toward the fictitious organizer's trustworthiness. Our full models control for anti-Muslim sentiment, using the "Muslim American Resentment" (MAR) scale.² Specifically, we hypothesize that respondents assigned to the treatment condition where the organizer is identified as Muslim will rate him as less trustworthy compared to respondents assigned to other conditions.

DATA AND METHODS

Data were collected using Lucid Academic, an online marketplace of opt-in responses that has been shown in multiple tests to be a strong replacement option for Amazon's Mechanical Turk, with the advantages of a less professionalized pool of respondents (Coppock and McClellan 2019). Data were collected July 18–23, 2018 from state-representative samples drawn from residents of Michigan, California, and Ohio.³ These states were selected to build on likelihood differences of subject contact with Arabs and Muslims based on relative Muslim densities, with Michigan having a high concentration of both minority groups, California a moderate concentration, and Ohio a low concentration (see Appendix for density maps). In our sample, 69.6, 76.8, and 79.2% of respondents reported knowing a Muslim personally in Ohio, California, and Michigan, respectively. Treatment and control condition assignments by state are listed in Table 1.

We include both Arab and Muslim American identity as treatments to reflect societal conflation of these two identities, and as a way to compare public reaction when the signaling of dominant ingroup prototypicality comes from an Arab, a Muslim, or both. Despite similarities

Table 1. Assignment to control and treatment conditions

	Ohio	California	Michigan
Control	119	127	122
Arab	132	149	137
Muslim	137	121	124
Arab Muslim	126	128	126
Total	514	525	509

Note: $N = 1,548$. Data collected July 18–23, 2018.

between Arabs and Muslims in terms of social scrutiny and otherization, Arab Americans likely do not face as much of a backlash as Muslim Americans. Indeed, the social psychology literature shows that while ratings of both groups are negative, the public generally evaluates Arabs more positively and more human-like than Muslims (Kteily et al. 2015). This suggests that prototypical behaviors, like encouraging political deliberation, when associated with Arabs, or even Arab Muslims, will be accepted more readily than those attributed to Muslims solely.

Respondents first answered three demographic questions, including their sex, race, and state of residence. These were used to ensure the state subject pools matched U.S. Census demographics for each state. Respondents were then shown one of four vignettes about the “Be Civil, Be Heard” city council candidate forum organized by local resident Ralph Georgy (Figure 1). The manipulated language is shown in bold. We

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Updated at 9:25pm

With attacks ramping up between city council candidates, at least one organization hopes to bring opponents together to focus on substantive policy proposals.

Ralph Georgy, curator of Be Civil, Be Heard, announced Monday that seven of the nine registered candidates for three open council seats accepted invitations to appear at Be Civil, Be Heard's candidates forum on Thursday at 7:30pm. The forum will be held at the Dickerson Elementary School auditorium on Ridgmont Road.

Be Civil, Be Heard describes itself in its promotional materials as "a place for city residents to deliberate on the issues that affect us all."

In a press release, Georgy said "We are excited about the opportunity for the public to hear from council candidates, and to make up their own minds about those who might best lead the city in the coming years."

Georgy has used Be Civil, Be Heard events to highlight the importance of community cohesion. "**(As an Arab and Muslim American/As an Arab/ As a Muslim/_____)**, I know the challenges of bringing people together to see our common purpose, and this event can help us realize this opportunity as a city."

Georgy says the forum is free and open to all, although he recommends arriving early to find convenient parking.

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FIGURE 1. Experimental template.

selected “Ralph Georgy” because it is a common name that could be construed as Muslim or Christian.⁴

After reading the vignette, respondents were asked to indicate their perception of Georgy’s trustworthiness on a scale of “0” = *completely untrustworthy* to “10” = *completely trustworthy*. Respondents were then asked whether they have personal contact with Muslims and Arabs. Both of these variables were masked by additional survey questions, including other evaluations of the organizer and questions about contact with members of other groups. Respondents then answered a series of demographic questions including information about their age, employment status, education, ideology, and political interest. Random assignment was not predicted by respondent demographic characteristics including gender, age, race, education employment status, or party identification. Table A1 displays the balance table. We found no evidence of non-random attrition across the three respondent groups.

RESULTS

Respondents in all three states rated the forum organizer (Georgy) as less trustworthy when he was identified as Muslim, as shown in Table 2. The finding persists whether Georgy is identified as Muslim or Muslim and Arab, but not when he is identified as Arab. This is evidence that the negative effect is due in the Muslim Arab condition to Georgy’s religious identity. The effect is strongest in Michigan, but persists across almost all states and conditions, with the exception of the Arab Muslim condition among California respondents.

Table 2. Evaluations of mean trustworthiness of forum organizer, by condition and state

	All respondents	Ohio	California	Michigan
Control	7.06	6.97	7.05	7.17
Arab	7.27	7.25	7.64*	6.91
Muslim	6.23***	6.17*	6.73*	5.79***
Arab Muslim	6.53**	6.55	6.66	6.36**

Note: Outcome variable from survey question: “On a scale of 0–10, how trustworthy do you believe Ralph Georgy is?” Responses ranged from “0” = *completely untrustworthy* to “10” = *completely trustworthy*. Differences in means are between the treatments and the control. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed tests).

Adding covariates, including the MAR, changes the results somewhat, as shown in Table 3, but we still find that a Muslim or Arab Muslim forum organizer is generally considered less trustworthy.⁵ In the aggregate (Model 1), the effect of the Muslim treatment and the Arab and Muslim treatment are both negative and statistically significant, though the Muslim treatment's coefficient indicates a larger effect. This pattern holds for the overall results and in all three state subsamples, although in a few cases the coefficient estimates fail to reach statistical significance (most notably in California). The coefficient on the Muslim coefficient remains large, negative, and statistically significant (relative to the other treatment conditions).

In terms of specific covariates, Republican were not more likely to rate Georgy as trustworthy compared to Democrats and Independents, whereas respondents who reported higher levels of education were more likely to rate Georgy as trustworthy. White respondents in Ohio found Georgy to be more trustworthy than their non-white counterparts, whereas white respondents in California found him to be less so. In the aggregate, however, race is not a consistent predictor of attitudes. Respondents with higher levels of anti-Muslim sentiment are significantly more likely to rate Georgy as less trustworthy.

For robustness, we use interactions to determine whether anti-Muslim hostility and partisanship condition the treatment effects; these tests are detailed in Appendix Tables A3 and A4. The signs on those interactions are almost universally negative, but are not particularly close to statistical significance. We conclude from those analyses that MAR and partisanship do not condition the treatment effects.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our hypothesis is supported by these data: participants rated the organizer of the forum less favorably if he was identified as Muslim or as a Muslim Arab, compared to when his race and religion was not identified. When the organizer was identified as Arab alone, however, he was not rated less favorably. Americans hold distinct, negative stereotypes against Muslims in particular, and not against Arabs, consistent with the shift in elite and media rhetoric that evolved in the years after 9/11.

This null finding for Arab Americans emphasizes the power of ongoing elite and media rhetoric for framing public attitudes toward stigmatized minorities. In the absence of constant external reinforcement, negative

Table 3. Evaluations of trustworthiness of forum organizer, multivariate model (standard errors in parentheses)

	Combined	Ohio	California	Michigan
Arab	0.173 (0.179)	0.200 (0.325)	0.537 ⁺ (0.291)	-0.341 (0.313)
Muslim	-0.863*** (0.182)	-0.988** (0.326)	-0.342 (0.306)	-1.463*** (0.319)
Arab Muslim	-0.554** (0.183)	-0.531 (0.328)	-0.400 (0.304)	-0.904** (0.321)
MAR	-0.549*** (0.0930)	-0.618*** (0.164)	-0.520** (0.157)	-0.476** (0.167)
Know Muslim	-0.196 (0.135)	0.0857 (0.248)	-0.307 (0.228)	-0.00508 (0.238)
Male	-0.103 (0.128)	-0.391 ⁺ (0.230)	0.286 (0.214)	-0.0339 (0.229)
Republican	-0.0317 (0.152)	0.123 (0.264)	-0.232 (0.273)	-0.170 (0.261)
White	-0.100 (0.138)	0.826** (0.304)	-0.586** (0.222)	0.166 (0.275)
Employed	0.0708 (0.134)	-0.0519 (0.245)	0.147 (0.223)	0.0283 (0.229)
Education	0.187** (0.0637)	0.244* (0.112)	0.0743 (0.109)	0.213 ⁺ (0.113)
Constant	7.997*** (0.371)	7.318*** (0.723)	8.263*** (0.579)	7.669*** (0.667)
<i>N</i>	1532	505	523	504
Adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.057	0.077	0.051	0.060

Note: Outcome variable from survey question: “On a scale of 0–10, how trustworthy do you believe Ralph Georgy is?” Responses range from “0” = *completely untrustworthy* to “10” = *completely trustworthy*. Model 1 includes all respondents, whereas models 2, 3, and 4 include only respondents in Ohio, California, and Michigan, respectively. The experimental reference group is the control. ⁺*p* < 0.10, **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

prejudices toward Arab Americans faded. This is an important reminder of the power of elites to allow prejudices to fade and be updated by positive interpersonal and mediated contact and information.

Further research is needed to better understand whether increased contextual contact with Muslims increases anti-Muslim hostility. Our results indicate that greater likelihood of contact with Muslims makes individuals less receptive to Muslims in political life. Future research should consider how Muslim participation in American politics and civic life might lead to lower levels of resentment or might mitigate feelings of suspicion and distrust. For example, additional experiments might test different forms of engagement, or use different message delivery methods (e.g., videos or photos). This will enable scholars to better understand the depth of Islamophobia held by the public and how those attitudes might be shifted toward increased inclusion and equality.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000668>

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NOTES

1. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.

2. The MAR scale was adapted to the specific case of Muslims in the United States and consists of nine items that assess whether respondents hold resentful attitudes toward Muslim Americans. The index is constructed from nine items: (1) Most Muslim Americans integrate successfully into American culture, (2) Muslim Americans sometimes do not have the best interests of Americans at heart, (3) Muslims living in the United States should be subject to more surveillance than others, (4) Muslim Americans, in general, tend to be more violent than other people, (5) Most Muslim Americans reject jihad and violence, (6) Most Muslim Americans lack basic English language skills, (7) Most Muslim Americans are not terrorists, (8) Wearing headscarves should be banned in all public places, and (9) Muslim Americans do a good job of speaking out against Islamic terrorism. The MAR scale has been previously used by Collingwood et al. (2018), Lajevardi and Oskooii (2018), Lajevardi and Abrajano (2019), Lajevardi (2020), and Lajevardi (2021).

3. Specifically, we contracted with Lucid Academia for state-representative samples of individuals who they sent to our survey instrument from their own panel of respondents. In developing these samples, Lucid typically relies on the following indicators that they balance on their end: age, gender, household income, ethnicity, percent Hispanic, education, political party, region, and ZIP code.

4. One issue with our design choice in using the name “Ralph Georgy” is that a certain percentage of control group subjects might assume that Georgy is an Arab Christian. Although the name is ambiguous with regard to religious affiliation, and though Arab Muslim and Arab Christians may use the same names, there is no guaranteed way for us to assume away the possibility that a certain percentage of control group subjects viewed Georgy as a Christian. The irony here is that our use of this name is based on personal knowledge of a real-life Arab Muslim named Ralph Georgy (who served as a teacher and mentor for one of the authors). The issue for researchers to be aware of in future research design choices, however, is that elements like name selection, even when based on real world knowledge, may not comport with the broader ways in which names and other labels are broadly interpreted by the public. One other limitation to note is that we did not ask in the post-test whether the name “Ralph Georgy” could be construed as Christian or Muslim, since there could be differences between respondent assumptions of the curator’s name post-treatment.

5. See Appendix Table A2 for predictors of MAR.

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Brian Calfano is an associate professor of political science and journalism at the University of Cincinnati. His research focuses on marginalized groups, religion, and media.

Nazita Lajevardi is an assistant professor of political science at Michigan State University. Her research centers on issues related to race and ethnic politics, political behavior, voting rights, and immigration.

Melissa R. Michelson is a professor of political science and Dean of Arts & Sciences at Menlo College. Her research focuses on how to best motivate Latinx and Black citizens to vote and how to reduce prejudice against members of the LGBTQ community.