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Does Islam play a role in anti-immigrant sentiment? An experimental approach

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ABSTRACT

Are Muslim immigrants subjected to targeted opposition (i.e., Islamophobia) on their pathway to US citizenship? Using a list experiment and a representative sample of the US population, we compare explicit and implicit opposition to Muslim and Christian immigrants. We find that Muslim immigrants, relative to Christian immigrants, experience greater explicit resistance. However, when social desirability bias is taken into account via the list experiment, we find that opposition to Christian and Muslim immigrants is the same. The explanation is that respondents conceal a significant amount of opposition to Christian immigrants. Muslim immigrants, on the other hand, are afforded no such protection. We find that religiosity or denomination do not play a significant role in determining implicit or explicit opposition. We conclude that Islamophobia, which is only explicitly expressed, is best understood as reflective of social desirability bias from which Muslim immigrants do not benefit.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Islam has emerged as a particularly contentious immigrant identity in the US public and political arenas. Underlining a need for greater understanding, this contentious attitude toward Muslims, especially Muslim immigrants, is visible in debates about President Obama's alleged Muslim background, the preemptive prohibition of Sharia law, and the opposition to mosque expansion projects. Such a focus on Muslim immigrants is distinct from public perception of undocumented immigrants, as it targets a specific religious identity independent of any legal justification for exclusion. But are Muslims really perceived much differently than other religious immigrant groups? Or is opposition reflective of more generalized prejudice toward outgroups in the US context? This paper addresses these questions by exploring the theoretical and empirical evidence that legal Muslim immigrants are the recipients of targeted opposition.¹

Using an experimental design and a representative sample of the US population, we seek to account for the role of normative influences and social desirability bias in the expression of opposition to the legal incorporation of Christian and Muslim immigrants. Drawing on a representative sample of US Christian natives as the ingroup of interest, we directly test

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whether legal Christian immigrants (ingroup) receive a greater degree of acceptance than their Muslim (outgroup) counterparts. Our application of the list experiment allows us to measure with a high level of certainty the relative explicit and implicit opposition to citizenship for Christian and Muslim immigrants. Our goal is to untangle the pattern attributable to group identity from that due to social desirability pressure to appear tolerant.

Our experimental design will allow us to directly test multiple hypotheses. First, we look at whether Christian “natives” are explicitly more accepting of citizenship for legal Christian immigrants than for legal Muslim immigrants. If we find that opposition to the acquisition of citizenship significantly varies by the religious background of the immigrant, this supports theoretical frames that predict targeted opposition against the outgroup. If we find equal levels of resistance to Christian and Muslim immigrants, then a more generalized conception of opposition offers a more compelling explanation. This explanation posits a more universal opposition toward *all* immigrant outgroups – independent of religious identification. Our task here is not to adjudicate between plausible theories in an absolute sense. Rather, we seek to assess the extent to which these theoretical frames are able to explain the explicit and implicit expression, the latter derived from an experimental design, of opposition to certain immigrants groups based on their religious affiliation.

We find that explicit opposition to citizenship significantly targets legal Muslim immigrants. Muslim immigrants are a definable outgroup subject to distinct intolerance, and at face value, this corroborates the predictions of targeted opposition. However, when social desirability bias is taken into account, we find little evidence that Muslim immigrants alone constitute the outgroup, indicating that Muslim immigrants are not *uniquely* targeted, but instead are perceived similarly to Christian immigrants in terms of opposition. Indeed, implicitly measured opposition to Christian immigrants is not significantly different than that faced by Muslim immigrants. We, however, do not suggest that openly expressed anti-immigrant sentiment is irrelevant. Given that immigrants, Muslim or otherwise, live in the public sphere, it is perhaps the *explicit* expression of opposition to citizenship, and not the *implicit* expression of it, that is of greater concern.

2. Generalized and targeted opposition

Some frames for understanding group-level affinities suggest that outgroup members constitute a generalized other. Rooted in notions of ethnocentrism,² this conception constitutes a readiness to act in favor of ingroups and in opposition to outgroups (Sumner, 1906; Levinson, 1949; Adorno et al., 1950).³ Because ethnocentrism offers a general group delineation that divides people into “us” and “them” (Kinder and Kam, 2009; Kalkan et al., 2009; LeVine and Campbell, 1972; Sumner, 1906), it offers a theoretical frame in which there exists a generalized preference for ingroups and a disposition to see *all* groups that are not ingroup members as outsiders.

Rooted in the work of Sherif and Sherif (1979), more targeted explanations of outgroup bias (e.g., termed realistic group conflict theory⁴), suggests that opposition to outgroups emerges from actual group-level conflicts and competition over goals and resources (Jackson, 1993).⁵ Tension could be derived from competition between immigrants and non-immigrants (Burns and Gimpel, 2000; Mayda, 2006; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010). Economic conceptions of this conflict involve around employment (Malchow-Møller et al., 2008) or transfers from a limited welfare state (Facchini and Mayda, 2009).⁶

Perhaps most relevant for this work, conflict can also emerge from symbolic or cultural concerns (Bauer et al., 2000; Burns and Gimpel, 2000; Chandler and Tsai, 2001; Citrin et al., 1997; Dustmann and Preston, 2007; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996; Fetzer, 2000; McLaren, 2003; Meuleman et al., 2009). This is sometimes referred to as intergroup conflict or competition (Esses et al., 1998, 2001). Cultural differences marked by visual and aural cues may elicit negative reactions from the non-immigrant population (Brader et al., 2008; Sides and Citrin, 2007; Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 2007; Putnam and Campbell, 2010). The focus of this work is on the role of the religious affiliation of the immigrant group, which has a clear link to a targeted pattern in which one expects greater opposition to more culturally distinct outgroups (i.e., Muslim immigrants) relative to other immigrant groups that share a religious background with the majority of the non-immigrant US population (i.e., Christians).

An additional theoretical frame that considers the emergence of targeted opposition is social identity theory, which allows for ingroup favoritism to emerge even in the absence of any serious threat or conflict with the outgroup – economic or otherwise (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Current work in social identity theory points out that identity or selfhood, in Brewer’s account (2007), is more about placement within the ingroup than disassociation from the outgroup. In addition, a person can maintain multiple group identities (Turner, 1990) and, by extension, a group may be defined as an outgroup on one dimension, but as an ingroup on another. Thus, one identity generates a positive bias that

² Following the work of Kinder and Kam (2009), we distinguish ethnocentrism, which includes outgroup hostility and ingroup loyalty, from nativism, which overlays explicit political ideology (Higham, 1981) and/or national identity such as the “American way of life” (Knoll, 2013a,b).

³ In the words of Kinder and Kam (2009, pg 8) “ethnocentrism is a mental habit. It is a predisposition to divide the human world into ingroups and outgroups. It is a readiness to reduce society into “us” and “them”. . . [And] this orientation has consequences.

⁴ As with ethnocentrism, realistic group conflict theory shares some characteristics with nativism. As pointed out by Knoll (2013a, 8), “nativism can be defined as the opinion that a distinct and uniquely American way of life needs to be protected against foreigners or foreign influence.”

⁵ It should be noted that social identity theory allows for ingroup favoritism to emerge even in the absence of any serious threat or conflict with the outgroup – economic or otherwise (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

⁶ For a recent review of the determinants of anti-immigrant sentiment see Ceobanu and Escandell (2010) and Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014). For a review of Labor Market Competition Theory, which encapsulates most theoretical conceptions of economic conflict, see Malhotra et al. (2013), Hainmueller et al. (2011) and Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010).

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