



Information and anti-American attitudes[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how attitudes towards the United States are affected by provision of information. We generate a “panel” of attitudes in urban Pakistan, in which respondents are randomly exposed to fact-based statements describing the US in either a positive or negative light. Anti-American sentiment is high and heterogeneous in our sample at the baseline, and systematically correlated with intended behavior (such as intended migration to the US). We find that revised attitudes are significantly different from baseline attitudes: attitudes are, on average, revised upward (downward) upon receipt of positive (negative) information, indicating that providing information had a meaningful effect on US favorability. The within-subject design and data on respondents’ priors allows us to investigate the underlying mechanisms. We find that revisions are largely a result of salience-based updating. We reject unbiased information-based updating as the only source of revisions. In addition, a substantial proportion of individuals do not respond to the information. This heterogeneity in revision processes means that there is no convergence in attitudes following the provision of information.

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1. Introduction

Favorable attitudes towards the US are rarer in the Muslim world than anywhere else (Kohut and Stokes, 2006; Pew Global Attitudes Project, Gallup World Poll). This anti-American sentiment is a concern because it delegitimizes democratic values, weakens America’s influence in foreign affairs,¹ and correlates positively with a greater incidence of international terrorism directed towards the US (Keohane and Katzenstein, 2007; Krueger and Maleckova, 2009). In addition, many of

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¹ Anti-American sentiment is generally cited as being a concern for US foreign policy in three main areas: (1) spurring terrorism toward the US or its citizens, (2) harming US commercial interests abroad, and (3) making it more difficult for the US to achieve its policy goals or to rally support for its specific political objectives (Lindberg and Nossel, 2007). While there is little robust evidence suggesting that anti-Americanism threatens cooperation to

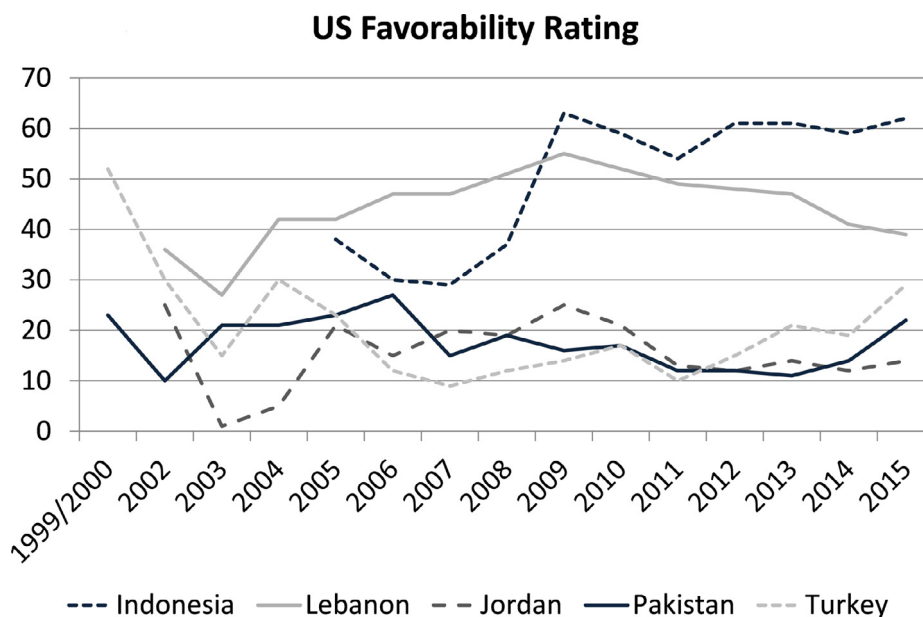


Fig. 1. Evolution of US Favorability across selective Muslim Countries (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2011).

the intractable conflicts in the world today involve Muslim countries, and the ability of the US to influence the outcomes of these disputes depends on how it is viewed by the locals. Therefore, understanding the sources of the anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world has far-reaching political implications. However, there remains little direct evidence on what drives these attitudes and whether providing information may change them.

Some experts have argued that anti-Americanism is a cultural phenomenon arising from fundamental disagreements about social norms and values (Huntington, 1996). An alternate explanation is that American foreign policy drives anti-Americanism (Cole, 2006; Esposito, 2007). An additional factor in the Muslim world is the well-known anti-Western slant of media coverage and the manipulation of public perceptions by political leaders and agencies (Ajami, 2001; Fair, 2010; Reetz, 2006). This distortion of information may play an important role in the formation of attitudes and beliefs. As a result, policy-makers have argued that more information could improve attitudes toward the US in the Muslim world (see examples in Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2004). But existing work also shows that more information does not necessarily lead to convergence in attitudes (e.g., Lord et al., 1979). In this paper, we present evidence on whether providing information to urban Pakistani youth can shape their attitudes towards the US, and the mechanisms through which that may happen.

For this purpose, we conduct a randomized information-based experiment embedded within a survey with young urban Pakistanis from distinct backgrounds. We surveyed a random sample of 735 respondents from two large cities, and a sample of 1691 students pursuing Bachelor's-equivalent degrees at three higher educational institutions in the two cities. The students at these educational institutions differ in their religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, and have varied exposure to Western and English-language news sources. Because of the institutional sorting based on socioeconomic and other characteristics, these sub-groups represent very different segments of the Pakistani society.

We focus on Pakistan since it presents a particularly interesting case: First, it is considered a crucial partner in the war on terror.² Second, despite being a close geopolitical ally of the US and a major recipient of US foreign aid, there is widespread concern in US policy circles about the increasing anti-American sentiment in Pakistan.³ Third, as shown in Fig. 1, Pakistani attitudes towards the US are negative compared even to responses from other Muslim countries, and have become increasingly negative since 2006. We focus on youth because the Pakistani population is overwhelmingly young (72% are younger than 34, US Census Bureau, 2011), and give particular attention to elite groups-defined as college-level students-because these individuals will most likely exert a strong influence in their communities and some will eventually

fight terror, there seems to be greater consensus that anti-Americanism is associated with increased flows of personnel into terrorist recruitment streams (Berman, 2006; Charney and Yakatan, 2005), and with impeding diplomacy and inhibiting implementation of US policy (Robichaud and Goldbrenner, 2006).

² For example, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, while speaking to reporters on December 13, 2011 said "Ultimately, we can't win the war in Afghanistan without being able to win in our relationship with Pakistan as well". Similarly, his predecessor, Robert Gates, speaking at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) on May 25, 2011, said, "Pakistan is very important, not just because of Afghanistan but because of its nuclear weapons, because of the importance of stability in the subcontinent."

³ The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in a speech to the Asia Society on February 18, 2011, when referring to the dire state of Pakistan's public finances said "shocking, unjustified anti-Americanism will not resolve these problems" (<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156815.htm>). Similarly, on her first visit to Pakistan on May 27, 2011, following the raid that killed Osama bin Laden, she commented "Pakistan should understand that anti-Americanism and conspiracy theories will not make problems disappear".

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