

How Negative Sentiment toward Muslim Americans Predicts Support for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election

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Since 9/11, scholarly work has demonstrated that Muslim Americans are viewed unfavorably, but existing measures lack enough contextual specificity to capture the unique experiences and situation of Muslims in the United States. Given the central role that Muslims and the war on terror played in the 2016 presidential campaign and election, we fill this void by introducing a new measure that focuses on Muslim Americans, specifically, and then examine its role in explaining presidential vote choice in 2016. Across five distinct surveys fielded on convenience and nationally representative samples from May 2016 to June 2017, we find that anti-Muslim American sentiment is a strong and significant predictor of supporting Trump, even when controlling for a whole host of factors. Our measure of Muslim American sentiment also more strongly and consistently predicts support for Trump, relative to previous measures of anti-Muslim sentiment.

Since 9/11, scholarly work has demonstrated that Muslim Americans are viewed unfavorably and evaluated negatively along a series of stereotypes (e.g., Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009; Khan and Ecklund 2013; Panagopoulos 2006; Sides and Gross 2013). But the existing measures of Muslim American resentment (e.g., favorability ratings, feeling thermometers, group stereotypes) lack enough contextual specificity to capture the unique experiences of Muslims in the United States, particularly in light of the specific group stereotypes that have arisen in the aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror. Thus, to date, we lack any systematic or empirical evidence to determine the extent to which attitudes toward Muslim Americans have affected political outcomes.

This is a critical oversight given the undeniable role that attitudes toward Muslims played in Donald Trump's primary and general election campaigns during the 2016 US presidential election. A key pillar of his campaign was the highly con-

troversial promise of a ban on all Muslim immigration to the United States, which drew resounding cheers and standing ovations from his supporters. He also supported a national registry for all Muslims residing in the United States, as well as surveillance at mosques. These calls arrived at a time when anti-Muslim sentiment and discrimination were already quite high (Calfano, Lajevardi, and Michelson 2017; Collingwood, Lajevardi, and Oskooii 2017). In light of the increasingly negative rhetoric directed toward Muslim Americans, which in turn could stoke the fears and anxieties of US voters, resentment toward them could have produced a very real and tangible impact on the way voters cast their ballots in the 2016 general election.¹ This may be especially true in light of the way negative attitudes toward minority groups have been shown to influence political attitudes and behaviors (Kalmoe and Piston 2013; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Parker and Barreto 2014).

To more accurately assess the role that Muslim American sentiment played in explaining 2016 presidential

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Funding for this project was generously provided by University of California, San Diego's Policy Design and Evaluation Lab and Sanford Lakoff grants. Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/700001>.

1. As Brader (2006) demonstrates, invoking fear and anxiety is a very effective campaign strategy in persuading individuals.

vote choice, we introduce a new measure that recognizes the distinct experiences of Muslims in the United States. Across five different surveys fielded on both convenience and nationally representative samples from May 2016 to June 2017, we include our measure of Muslim American resentment (MAR) to assess the relationship between Muslim American affect and vote intention. Our findings indicate that in the context of the 2016 election, MAR was a strong and significant predictor of supporting Trump, even when controlling for a whole host of factors. The results demonstrate the significant predictive power that negative attitudes toward Muslim Americans played in explaining presidential vote choice, vis-à-vis other standard predictors of the vote (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2002; Alvarez and Nagler 1995; Carmines and Stimson 1980). In a series of robustness checks, we also find that the MAR scale is the only measure of Muslim American sentiment that consistently explains the likelihood of voting for and supporting Trump. Without the introduction of this measure, understanding just how much Muslim sentiment influenced the 2016 presidential vote would likely be understated.

EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

We test our hypothesis by estimating a model of vote choice on five different surveys that we fielded, all of which contain the MAR scale: (1) Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in May 2016 ($N = 676$), (2) the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) in October–December 2016 ($N = 916$),² (3) Survey Sampling International (SSI) in December 2016 ($N = 1,329$), (4) MTurk in January 2017 ($N = 422$), and (5) MTurk in June 2017 ($N = 1,056$). Both SSI and CCAP were conducted on nationally representative samples, whereas the MTurk surveys were conducted on convenience samples. Despite the latter three surveys being conducted on nonrepresentative populations, there is increasing evidence of their validity and comparability with surveys conducted on representative samples (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012). In each of these surveys, we use the presidential vote choice question as the dependent variable.³

Each of these surveys contains the MAR scale, which serves as our primary independent variable of interest. MAR, developed in Lajevardi (2017), draws on the work of Agirdag, Van Houtte, and Loobuyck (2012), who measure attitudes

held by teachers toward their Muslim students in Belgium. While it is not standard practice to include group attitude and policy measures together, we contend that, in this case, MAR is not simply an amalgamation of policy attitudes and stereotypes and instead performs a holistic function, rooted predominantly in group consciousness. When examining modern resentment in relation to group attitudes in the realm of politics, attitudes toward social groups are purposeful, based on “the desire to know who is getting what and whether they deserve it” (Conover 1988, 57; Piston 2018). MAR is a comprehensive measure and is meant to capture a combination of (a) how the public perceives the group and (b) what the public thinks the government should do about them. We conceive of MAR in political terms, similar if not analogous to group consciousness, which is nominally about group attitudes but in fact incorporates a political orientation insofar as it includes the belief that members of one’s group should work together in politics to achieve their ends (Miller et al. 1981). We acknowledge that group attitudes are often not combined with policy attitudes. Since the MAR scale incorporates policy attitudes, we note that scholars should feel comfortable using it as an independent variable in vote choice models but should not use the full set of items to predict policy attitudes. However, if scholars exclude the policy attitudes, the results typically still hold. As Lajevardi and Oskooii (2018) demonstrate, removing the policy-related items does not hamper the MAR scale’s prediction capabilities on policy-related dependent variables.

The MAR scale was adapted to the specific case of Muslims in the United States and is composed of the following nine statements: (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. Items 1, 5, 7, and 9 were reverse coded so that increasing values also indicated greater resentment.⁴

These nine items cohere well together, as the correlation between the items is $>.80$ in each of our data sets; the average

2. This survey is conducted by YouGov and is fielded during the campaign season via a rolling cross-section from July until election day. It conducts baseline and postelection interviews of respondents.

3. In the one survey conducted during the primaries (5/2016 MTurk), the question was phrased as follows: “On a scale of 1–100, how much did you support the following presidential contenders during this primary election season?”

4. We note that the scale varied in how it was measured from survey to survey: 5/2016, 1–6 Likert scale; 10/2016, 1–6 Likert scale; 12/2016, 1–100; 1/2017, 1–5 Likert scale, and 6/2017: 1–6 Likert scale. Respondents were also evenly distributed on the standardized MAR scale across each of the surveys (see fig. A1; figs. A1 and A2 are available online).

Cronbach's alpha across the five surveys is 0.91.⁵ We conducted factor analysis on the MAR scale as an additional test. Overall, we find that this measure is unidimensional, with the exception of one survey; the standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.573 to 0.897.⁶ Finally, we perform a series of correlation tests between MAR and existing measures of Muslim affect (stereotypes and feeling thermometers), as well as measures of resentment and favorability toward other racialized groups in table A15 (tables A1–A19 are available online). As expected, MAR is correlated with these variables, particularly with respect to the Muslim favorability question. This offers us some face validity regarding the robustness of our measure with these existing items, yet we are also encouraged by the fact that they are not perfectly collinear with any of them.⁷

MAR both captures racialized attitudes on a variety of dimensions and asks respondents for their attitudes about Muslims in the United States specifically. Existing measures of Muslims, such as those in the American National Election Study (ANES), use a feeling thermometer to assess affect toward Muslims since 2004.⁸ We view this measure, however, as too general to fully capture attitudes toward Muslims in the United States, and as previous research has noted, feeling thermometer items suffer from several methodological shortcomings (Aldrich and McKelvey 1977). Moreover, the word *Muslim*—without any reference to the US group—is vague and does not precisely guide the subject toward assessing the group in America.

As studies have noted (see Lajevardi 2017; Nisbet, Ostman, and Shanahan 2009; Sides and Gross 2013), media portrayals of Muslim Americans and Muslims are distinct in sentiment, topic, and content. Further, reference to these groups directs an individual to think of two distinct entities; while *Muslim* refers to adherent of Islam foreign and domestic, *Muslim American* clearly signals the group residing within the country. More complex, of course, is the use of questions guiding the reader to evaluate *Islam*, the religion (see, e.g., Panagopoulos 2006), and extrapolating those attitudes to Muslim Americans. Because much of the racialized coverage and discourse taking place in the news media and among the public relates to Muslims abroad and the Islamic religion, feeling thermometer

measures of Muslims or Islam—and not Muslim Americans—are imprecise and could be conflating attitudes. Further, three of the four stereotypes that Sides and Gross (2013) use for Muslim Americans (e.g., hardworking–lazy, intelligent–unintelligent, violent–peaceful) were originally developed to capture stereotypical attitudes toward blacks.⁹ As such, they are not directly related to the “prototypical Muslim American” as depicted by the mass media and popular culture, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 and the War on Terror.

The remainder of our controls account for the standard battery of factors that typically explain presidential vote choice—partisanship, demographics, and socioeconomic status. Given that the spatial proximity model suggests that voters will select the candidate closest to their own position on the issues (Alvarez and Nagler 1995; Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1985), we also control for respondents' policy preferences on issues that rose to prominence during the campaign: terrorism, immigration, and jobs/economy.¹⁰ Finally, we control for sentiments of racial resentment (Sears 1993), given their influential role in explaining presidential vote choice in recent elections (Tesler 2015).¹¹ Finally, to ensure that MAR better predicts vote choice than previous measures of Muslim sentiment, we also include the feeling thermometer question asking respondents to evaluate their “warmth” for Muslims in each of the models.¹² In the final models, we control for the ANES and Sides and Gross (2013) measures of Muslim stereotypes.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the ordinary least squares (OLS) and logit estimates from our models of presidential vote choice. Across all

5. The Cronbach's alpha for each data set is reported in table A14 of the appendix.

6. See table A13 for the full set of estimates.

7. We examine the relationship between the MAR scale and other factors predicting vote choice as an additional robustness check in table A16. The estimates indicated that party identification and education are consistent predictors of MAR, while age, race, and income show correlation sometimes but not consistently so.

8. The ANES fielded a feeling thermometer on Muslims in 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016.

9. In 2016, the ANES asked respondents to additionally rate Muslims on a patriotic–unpatriotic scale.

10. Table A8 in the appendix details how each of these issues was measured from one survey to the next.

11. We rely on four items to capture racial resentment: (1) Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors. (2) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class. (3) Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve. (4) It is really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites. We code the items so that increasing values indicate higher racial resentment. We then take an average of the items and standardize the values. When we include these items in our models, we call them “CCES [Cooperative Congressional Election Study] racial resentment.”

12. We note that favorability toward Muslims also varied from survey to survey: i.e., 5/2016, 1–5; 10/2016, 1–4; 12/2016, 1–100; 1/2017, 0–100; 6/2017, 0–100. We note that the MAR items, CCES racial resentment questions, ANES and Sides and Gross (2013) stereotype questions, and favorability questions toward blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Muslims were all measured on different scales from one survey to the next. Thus, for ease of interpretability, we standardize only these independent variables across the five data sets and in all of our models.

Table 1. Effects of Muslim American Resentment on Vote/Support for Trump, Controlling for Other Measures of Muslim Attitudes

	May 2016 MTurk Support Trump Primary (0–100) (1)	October–December 2016 CCAP Vote Trump General (Binary DV) (2)	December 2016 SSI Support Trump General (Binary DV) (3)	January 2017 MTurk Vote Trump General (Binary DV) (4)	June 2017 MTurk Vote Trump General (Binary DV) (5)	(6)
MAR scale	11.71*** (1.635)	2.019*** (.251)	.898*** (.123)	1.453*** (.316)	1.088*** (.316)	1.060*** (.175)
Constant	61.38*** (5.895)	.494 (.730)	1.068** (.415)	.701 (.896)	.171 (.494)	.116 (.502)
N	592	640	1,080	242	1,017	1,017
Adjusted and pseudo-R ²	.429	.6133	.4238	.4643	.4308	.4350

Note. Model 1 is an ordinary least squares regression. Models 2–6 are logistic regressions. Standard errors in parentheses. MTurk = Mechanical Turk; CCAP = Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project; SSI = Survey Sampling International; DV = dependent variable; MAR = Muslim American resentment. Appendix table A1 is the full table with controls.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

five data sets, we see a positive and statistically significant effect among those who are resentful toward Muslim Americans and their support for Trump. What is particularly remarkable is the predictive power of the MAR scale in explaining presidential vote choice, even when controlling for a whole host of other factors. For instance, the OLS estimates presented in model 1 indicate that primary election voters who scored higher on the MAR scale evaluated Trump 11.7 points more favorably on the 0–100 scale relative to voters who were less resentful. While the magnitude of this effect is not nearly as great as partisanship in explaining presidential vote choice, Muslim American sentiment is the only factor aside from party identification in all of the models that is consistently associated with increased likelihood of voting for Trump.

These findings also indicate that our MAR measure has greater predictive power on vote choice, relative to existing measures of Muslim sentiment. Notice that in model 6, where we control for the other measures of Muslim attitudes (favorability and stereotypes), only the MAR scale reaches statistical significance (see app. table A1).¹³ These results also lend credence to our contention regarding the ability of the MAR scale

to be a more accurate predictor of Muslim American sentiment, relative to these other measures. As such, previous works examining the impact of Muslim sentiment on a variety of political attitudes and behaviors might actually be underestimating its predictive power.

As we discussed earlier, racial attitudes and racial resentment have played an increasingly salient role in explaining presidential vote choice in the last two election cycles. The estimates from table 2 suggest that even when we control for these additional measures, the effect of the MAR scale on predicting support for Trump remains the same. The relationship between Muslim American resentment and support for Trump is robust to the inclusion of a voter’s position on issues that were salient in the 2016 election and were often discussed in relation to Muslims and Muslim Americans: immigration, the economy, and terrorism.¹⁴ In terms of the magnitude of these effects on presidential vote choice, the average marginal effect of the MAR scale is anywhere from an 8% to a 16% increase in the probability of support for Trump. In the months before the November election, voters who are resentful against Muslims Americans are 12.6% more likely to vote for Trump.¹⁵ As a point of comparison, these marginal effects are larger than for those who are racially resentful (5%) as well as for those who identify as Independents (10%), al-

13. We note that we are unable to assess whether the MAR scale is a mediating variable for these other attitudinal measures because of data constraints. Thus, it is plausible that alternative explanations for the relationship between the MAR scale and vote choice exist. Instead, we provide this model to demonstrate the MAR scale’s use and value.

14. See table A6 for these estimates.

15. These estimates are available in table A3 of the appendix.

Table 2. Effects of Muslim American Resentment on Vote/Support for Trump, Controlling for Other Resentment Measures

	May 2016 MTurk Support Trump Primary (0–100) (1)	October–December 2016 CCAP Vote Trump General (Binary DV) (2)	December 2016 SSI Support Trump General (Binary DV) (3)	January 2017 MTurk Vote Trump General (Binary DV) (4)	June 2017 MTurk Vote Trump General (Binary DV) (5) (6)	
MAR scale	7.420*** (1.764)	1.683*** (.278)	.892*** (.124)	1.506*** (.331)	.895*** (.164)	.882*** (.185)
Favorability of Muslims	.0952 (1.543)	–.226 (.240)	–.166 (.156)	.0995 (.403)	.0592 (.174)	–.0332 (.189)
Muslims: patriotic						.0455 (.135)
Muslims: intelligent						–.0134 (.130)
Muslims: lazy						.155 (.133)
Muslims: violent						.234 (.152)
Muslims: trustworthy						–.0148 (.134)
Constant	56.29*** (5.802)	.0897 (.799)	1.101** (.418)	.661 (.899)	.0643 (.508)	–.0181 (.515)
<i>N</i>	591	582	1,080	241	1,017	1,017
Adjusted and pseudo- <i>R</i> ²	.457	.6349	.4258	.4688	.4533	.4573

Note. Model 1 is an ordinary least squares regression. Models 2–6 are logistic regressions. Standard errors in parentheses. MTurk = Mechanical Turk; CCAP = Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project; SSI = Survey Sampling International; DV = dependent variable; MAR = Muslim American resentment.

* *p* < .05.

** *p* < .01.

*** *p* < .001.

though not as large as those for those who identify as Democrats (21%). The effect sizes of Muslim American resentment on presidential vote choice are similar for the analyses of the surveys fielded in 2017.¹⁶ Thus, across a range of different surveys spanning the time during the 2016 presidential primaries and the months after the general election, we find a strong and consistent relationship between resentment toward Muslim Americans and support for Trump.

16. Another way of contextualizing how high and low scorers on the MAR scale performed is through predicted probabilities for models 1–5 in table 2 (see table A19). Falling 2 SD below the mean resulted in a 1.47%–17.26% predicted probability of voting for or supporting Trump, and falling 1 SD below the mean yielded a predicted probability range of 5.95%–24.68% of voting for or supporting Trump. In contrast, being 1 SD above the mean resulted in a 27.49%–70.02% predicted probability of voting for or supporting Trump, and falling 2 SD above the mean yielded a 46.94%–92.62% predicted probability of voting for or supporting Trump.

We also disaggregated the data between whites and ethnic/racial minorities to determine whether the MAR scale has differential effects among other marginalized groups.¹⁷ The MAR scale is a positive and statistically significant predictor of the likelihood of supporting Trump for both minorities and whites in the majority of our data sets.¹⁸ Thus, despite being marginalized themselves, racial/ethnic minorities were also susceptible to the anti-Muslim rhetoric that dominated the 2016 presidential campaign.

17. The results are presented in tables A17 and A18.

18. In the 2016 MTurk sample and the January 2017 MTurk sample, the MAR scale is predictive of voting for Trump among whites but not nonwhites. The lack of a statistically significant effect on minority vote choice is likely due to the fact that these estimates are underpowered. The 2016 MTurk survey has 112 minority respondents, and the January 2017 MTurk minority sample is *N* = 36.

DISCUSSION

The results presented in this article make an important contribution to our understanding of the 2016 presidential election as well as to the larger literature on voting behavior. We empirically demonstrate that because of the specific and significant amount of campaign rhetoric toward Muslim Americans in this particular presidential race, attitudes toward Muslim Americans predicted vote choice in one of the most contentious presidential elections that we have witnessed in the last several decades. Harboring resentful attitudes toward Muslim Americans is strongly correlated with support for Trump, even when taking into account other factors that we typically use to explain presidential vote choice. These findings support the much believed, but not empirically tested, belief that Trump's negative emphasis on Muslim Americans during his campaign did indeed resonate with voters. While we certainly would not expect anti-Muslim sentiment to explain every election outcome, our results demonstrate that when a particular group is made highly salient and visible during an election campaign, voters' assessments of this group indeed enter into their vote calculus.

We also contribute to the existing research by introducing a scale that taps directly into attitudes toward Muslim Americans. Previous scholarship has examined favorability of attitudes toward Muslims in general—a foreign group—and stereotypes (such as violent, hardworking, and intelligent) that have been previously demonstrated to measure attitudes toward blacks. Given that the MAR scale was developed to capture the unique experiences of Muslims in the United States, we encourage scholars to use this scale to capture individuals' sentiments toward Muslim Americans and more accurately gauge public sentiment toward this group. As our results demonstrated, the MAR scale had more predictive power than previous measures of Muslim resentment. With no signs that the salience of Muslim Americans in the political landscape is diminishing, researchers would be well served to investigate the role that Muslim American resentment plays in the core political attitudes and behaviors in greater depth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the insightful feedback provided by the anonymous reviewers. A special thanks is also extended to Taylor Carlson, Fanny D'hondt, Zoltan Hajnal, Seth Hill, John Kuk, Kassra Oskooii, Spencer Piston, and Katerina Schenke.

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