

**Religion and Politics:**  
**What U.S. Muslims Mean for American Democracy**

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Seven years after the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil catapulted Muslims into the American spotlight, concerns and fears over their presence and assimilation remain at an all-time high. Recent nationwide polls find that four out of ten Americans have an unfavorable view of Islam, five out of ten believe Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence, and six out of ten believe that Islam is very different from their own religion, even though seven out of ten admit they know very little about Islam. The extent of fear is evidenced by the fact that Americans rank Muslims second only to atheists as a group that does not share their vision of American society. Put simply, most Americans fear that U.S. Muslims pose a threat to the democratic foundation of American life.

Two widespread assumptions fuel these fears. The first is the belief that there is only one kind of Islam and one kind of Muslim, both characterized by violence and anti-democratic tendencies. The second is the belief that being a Muslim is the most salient identity for U.S. Muslims when it comes to their political attitudes and behaviors, that it trumps their social class position or national origin or racial/ethnic group membership or gender, or worse, that it trumps their commitment to a secular democracy.

Ironically, these fears undermine the very civil liberties that our democratic institutions are meant to protect by legitimizing the mistreatment and denial of rights to a growing segment of the U.S. population (many of whom are U.S. citizens). In 2001, the U.S. Department of Justice recorded a 1600 percent increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes from the prior year, and rather than diminish over time, anti-Muslim hate crimes have continued to climb, rising 10 percent between 2005 and 2006. The Council on American-Islamic Relations processed 2,647 civil rights complaints in 2006, a 25 percent increase from the prior year and a 600 percent increase since 2000. The largest category of complaints involved those with U.S. governmental agencies (37 percent).

These fears over Muslim integration also appear to be unfounded, or at the very least, way overblown. Interviews with 3,627 U.S. Muslims in 2001 and 2004 (Georgetown University MAPS project) and 1,050 U.S. Muslims in 2007 (Pew Research Center) show that U.S. Muslims are diverse, well-integrated, and largely mainstream in their attitudes, values, and behaviors. The data also show that being a Muslim is less important for politics than how Muslim you are, how much money you make, whether you are an African-American Muslim or an Arab-American Muslim, whether you are a man or a woman. The academic term for this is “identity politics,” but academic jargon aside, it simply means that privileging Muslim identity over other forms of identity is more of a social construction than a reality, something that society has projected onto the group rather than something that has emerged from the group. Muslims don’t uniformly vote on issues because they’re Muslim—they vote for tax cuts if they are wealthy, they oppose abortion and gay marriage if they are religiously devout, and they favor stem cell research if they are secular.

If wealthy Muslims look like wealthy Americans, secular Muslims look like secular Christians, and devout Muslims look like the Christian right, then why are mainstream perceptions so divorced from reality?

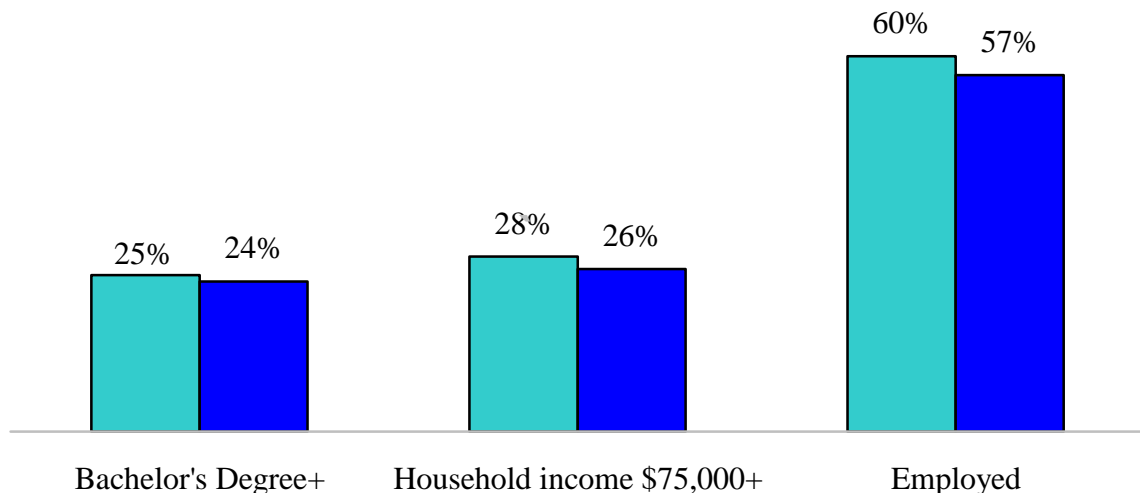
## *Why the stereotypes don't fit*

A good place to start is by describing what the reality is. Who are U.S. Muslims? Size estimates of the population are contentious, ranging anywhere from 2 to 8 million, but there is general agreement on the social and demographic characteristics of the community. U.S. Muslims are the most ethnically diverse Muslim population in the world, originating from over eighty countries on four continents. Contrary to popular belief, most are not Arab: About one-third are South Asian, one-third are Arab, one-fifth are U.S.-born black Muslims (mainly converts), and a small but growing number are U.S.-born Anglo and Hispanic converts. Roughly two-thirds are immigrants to the United States, but an increasing segment is second- and third-generation U.S.-born Americans. The vast majority of immigrants have lived here for ten or more years. They are not recent immigrant arrivals.

U.S. Muslims tend to be highly educated, politically conscious, and fluent in English, all of which reflects the selective nature of immigration and restrictive immigration policies that limit who gains admission into the U.S. On average, they share similar socioeconomic characteristics with the general U.S. population: one-fourth has a bachelor's degree or higher, one-fourth lives in households with incomes of \$75,000/year or more, and the majority are employed. But not all Muslims share these average traits—some are living in poverty with poor English language skills and few resources needed to improve their situation.

### **Socioeconomic Characteristics**

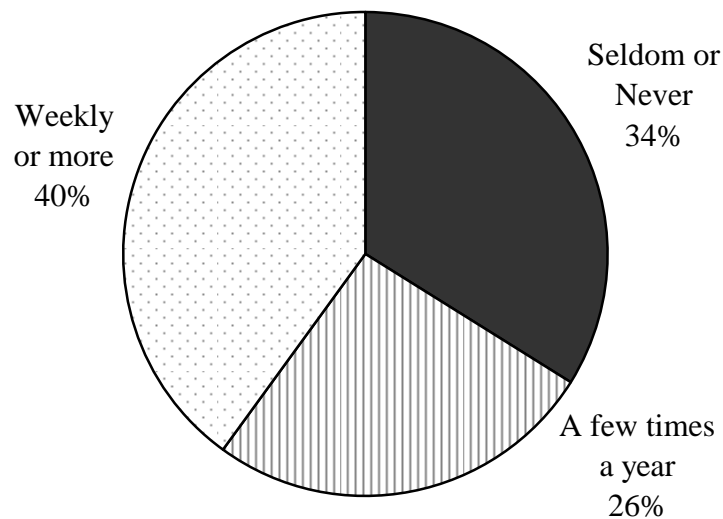
■ U.S. Average ■ U.S. Muslims



One of the most important and overlooked facts about U.S. Muslims is that they are not uniformly religious and devout. Some are religiously devout, some are religiously moderate, and some are non-practicing and secular, basically Muslim in name only,

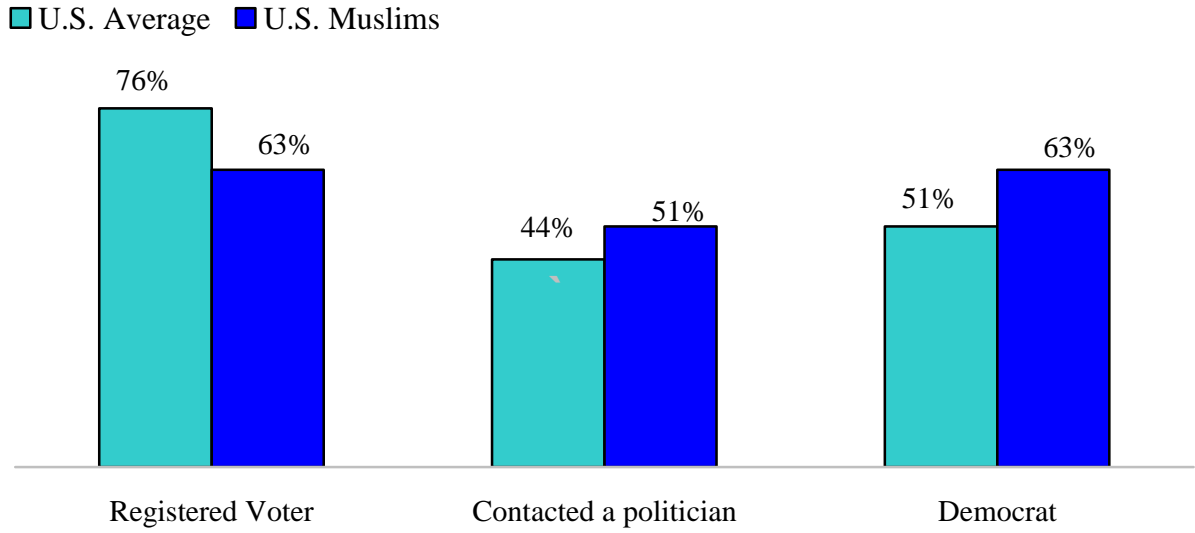
similar to a good proportion of U.S. Christians and Jews. Some attend a mosque on a weekly basis and pray every day, and others don't engage in either practice. Even among the more religiously devout, there is a sharp distinction between being a good Muslim and being an Islamic extremist. In reality, many U.S. Muslims emigrated from countries in the Middle East that are now targeted in the war on terror in order to practice—or not practice—their religion and politics more freely in the United States. And their religion is diverse. There is no monolithic Islam that all Muslims adhere to. Just as Christianity has many different theologies, denominations, and sects, so does Islam. And just like Christianity, these theologies, denominations, and sects are often in conflict and disagreement over how to interpret and practice the faith tradition.

### U.S. Muslim Mosque Attendance



Given such diversity—diversity that characterizes other ethnic and immigrant groups—one might expect that U.S. Muslims would be better positioned for political integration than common stereotypes imply. Evidence from the MAPS project, the Pew Research Center, and the General Social Survey confirm this expectation. Consider some common indicators of political involvement, such as party affiliation, voter registration, and contact with politicians. U.S. Muslims appear politically engaged on all of these fronts. Compared to the general public, U.S. Muslims are slightly less likely to be registered to vote, reflecting the immigrant composition and voter eligibility of this group (63 percent compared to 76 percent of the general population), slightly more likely to have contacted a politician (51 percent compared to 44 percent of the general population), and slightly more likely to affiliate with the Democratic Party, which falls in line with other racial and ethnic minorities (63 percent compared to 51 percent of the general population).

## Political Involvement



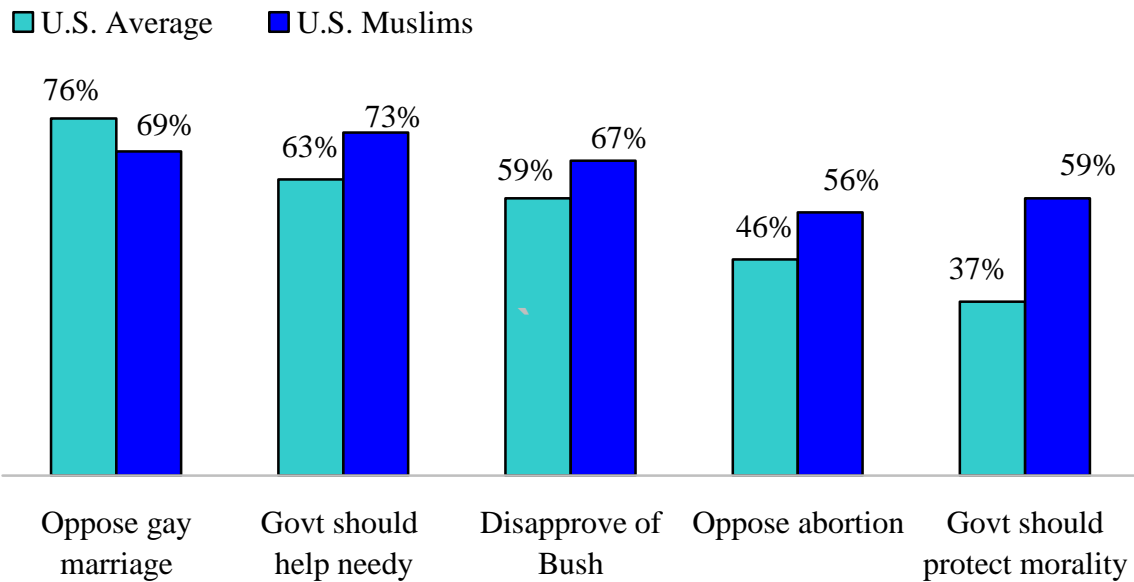
But where do U.S. Muslims fall on more hot-button political issues, like gay rights, stem cell research, abortion, poverty, and U.S. foreign policy?

### *Right-leaning on Social Issues, Left-leaning on Foreign Policy*

Contrary to popular belief, U.S. Muslims hold views that are quite similar to other Americans on these issues. The majority of both groups oppose gay marriage (69 and 76 percent for U.S. Muslims and the general public, respectively); favor increased federal government spending to help the needy (73 and 63 percent); and disapprove of President Bush's job performance (67 and 59 percent). U.S. Muslims are slightly more conservative than the general public when it comes to abortion (56 percent oppose it compared to 46 percent) and when it comes to the federal government doing more to protect morality in society (59 percent compared to 37 percent).

Perhaps less surprising is the fact that U.S. Muslims are more critical than the general public of U.S. foreign policies in the Middle East. In 2007, the general public was nearly four times as likely to say that the war in Iraq was the "right decision" and twice as likely to provide the same response to the war in Afghanistan (61 percent compared to 35 percent of U.S. Muslims).

## Social and Domestic Issues

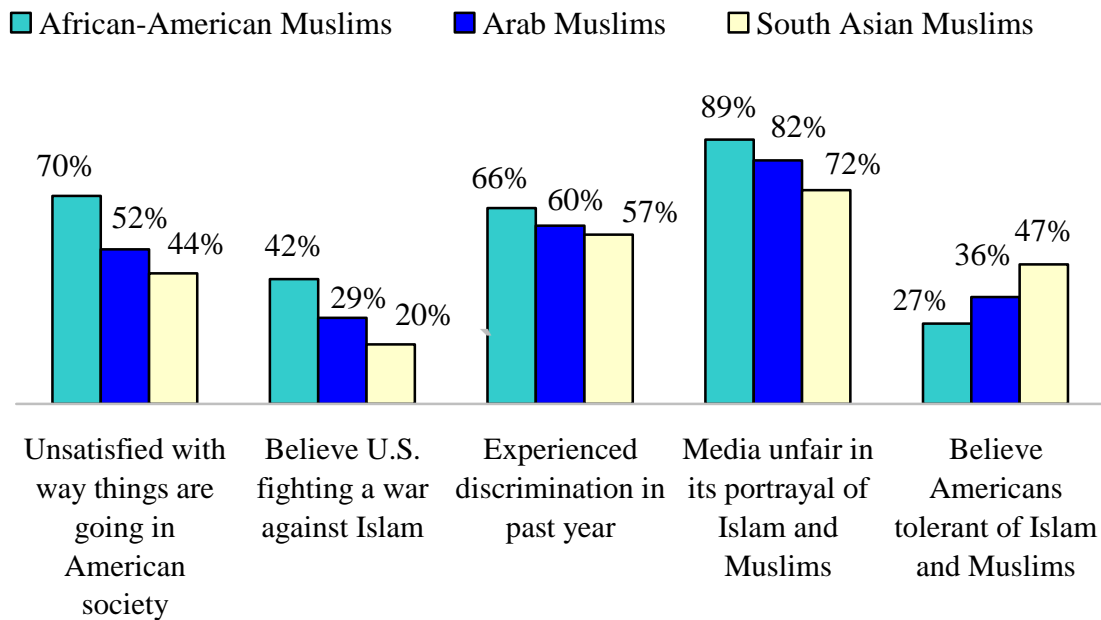


But these numbers don't tell the whole story. They tell us that, on average, U.S. Muslims have views that look similar to other Americans on social and domestic issues but diverge from the general public when it comes to U.S. foreign policy. These averages don't demonstrate the diversity that exists within the Muslim population by racial and ethnic group membership, by national origin, by socioeconomic status, by degree of religiosity, or by nativity and citizenship status.

Let us consider, for example, U.S. Muslim's levels of satisfaction and feelings of inclusion (or exclusion) in American society—major building blocks of a liberal democracy—and then let us examine how these perceptions vary by racial and ethnic group membership. Here we see that African American Muslims express more dissatisfaction and feel more excluded from American society than Arab or South Asian Muslims. They are more likely to feel that the U.S. is fighting a war against Islam, to believe that Americans are intolerant of Islam and Muslims, and to have experienced discrimination in the past year (whether racial, religious, or both is unclear). South Asians feel the least marginalized, with Arab Muslims falling in between. These racial and ethnic differences reflect a host of factors, including but not limited to the immigrant composition and higher socio-economic status of the South Asian and Arab populations and the long-standing racialized and marginalized position of African Americans. Indeed, many (though not all) African Americans converted to Islam seeking a form of religious inclusion they felt lacking in the largely white Judeo-Christian traditions.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Most African-American Muslims adhere to mainstream Islam (Sunni or Shi'a), similar to the South Asian and Arab Muslim populations. They should not be confused with the Nation of Islam, a group that became popular during the Civil Rights era by providing a cultural identity that separated black Americans from mainstream Christianity. Indigenous Muslims have historically distanced themselves from the Nation of Islam in order to establish organizations that focus more on cultural and religious (rather than racial) oppression.

## Diversity among U.S. Muslims



To this point, we have examined similarities and differences in U.S. Muslims' attitudes and behaviors. But we haven't looked at what predicts these views. What determines who is opposed to abortion and who favors it? What are the characteristics of those who are against gay marriage compared to those who aren't? Most importantly, do the factors that predict other American's political attitudes and behaviors—such as age, income, and degree of religiosity—work any differently for U.S. Muslims?

Here it is instructive to step back and place U.S. Muslims in a broader historical context of religion and American politics.

### *When religion matters...and when it doesn't*

U.S. Muslims are not the first group that has been considered a threat to America's religious and cultural unity. At the turn of the twentieth century, Jewish and Italian immigrants were vilified in the mainstream as racially inferior to other Americans. The primary concern was that Jews and Italians would dilute America's superior Anglo-Saxon (white) population. Fast forward to the present, and those fears have long been dismissed, only to be replaced by new concerns over perceived threats posed by Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern immigrants. The U.S. Muslim case has its own unique twist in that it brings religion into the mix, and along with it, the fear that Islam will dilute, possibly even sabotage, America's thriving religious economy.

Yes, thriving. By all accounts, the U.S. is considerably more religious than any of its economically-developed Western counterparts. In 2000, 93 percent of Americans said they believed in god or a universal spirit, 86 percent claimed affiliation with a specific

religious denomination, and 67 percent reported that they were a member of a church or a synagogue. The vast majority of American adults identify themselves as Christian (56 percent Protestant and 25 percent Catholic), with Judaism claiming the second largest group of adherents (2 percent), giving America a decidedly Judeo-Christian face. There are an infinite number of denominations within these broad categories, ranging from the ultra-conservative to the ultra-liberal. And there is extensive diversity among individuals in their levels of religiosity within any given denomination, again ranging from those who are devout, practicing believers to those who are secular and non-practicing.

This diversity has sparked extensive debates among academics, policy-makers, and pundits over whether American politics is characterized by “culture wars,” best summarized as the belief that Americans are polarized into two camps on moral and ethnical issues, such as abortion and gay rights—into those who are conservative and those who are liberal. Nowhere has the debate played out more vividly than in the arena of religion and politics, where religiously-based mobilization efforts by the Christian right helped defeat liberal-leaning candidates and secure President Bush’s reelection in 2004. Electoral victories, however, have not usually translated into policy victories, as evidenced by the continued legality of abortion and increasing protection of gay rights. So when does religion matter for politics and when doesn’t it?

Here we come back to the U.S. Muslim case. Like U.S. Muslims, Americans generally have multiple, competing identities that shape their political attitudes and behaviors—93 percent of Americans may believe in god or a universal spirit but 93 percent of Americans don’t base their politics on that belief alone. In other words, just because most Americans are religiously affiliated doesn’t mean that most Americans base their politics on religion. Religion may matter for the devout when it comes to their position on moral issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion, but religion may matter a lot less for their position on tax cuts and welfare reform.

This does not explain why religion has had a more powerful impact on election outcomes than policy outcomes. Two things are probably at play. First, although the Christian right is a minority, comprising roughly 15 percent of the population, it is a *cohesive* minority that constitutes an influential voting bloc that has been successful in achieving electoral victories, especially when other segments of the population are divided, as was the case with the Obama and Clinton campaigns. Second, focusing on the demand side of the religion-politics connection—what religious voters want—ignores the supply side—what politicians give. Politicians are like the general public in that they have multiple competing identities, affiliations, and allegiances that they have to juggle while in office. So promises made on the campaign trail do not always translate into policy changes while in office. Again, the term identity politics is useful for understanding when religion matters for politics and when it doesn’t.

Which brings us back to the demand side of the equation and factors that influence U.S. Muslim political involvement. In a sentence, the same factors that influence other American’s attitudes and behaviors influence U.S. Muslim’s attitudes and behaviors. Those who are more educated, have higher incomes, higher levels of group consciousness, and who feel more marginalized from mainstream society are more politically active than are those without these characteristics. Similar to other Americans,

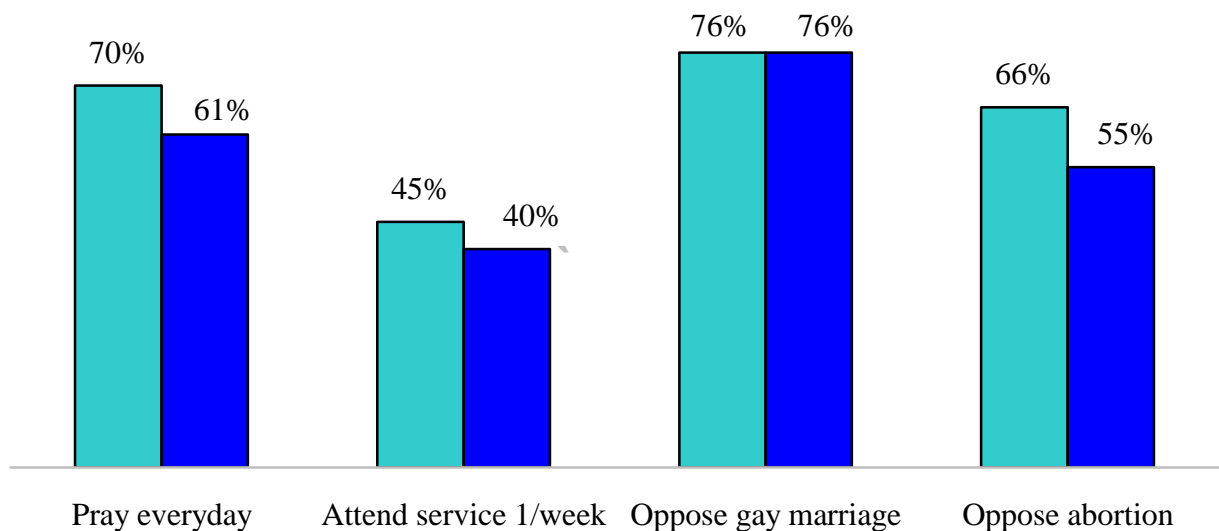


these are individuals who feel that they have more at stake in political outcomes, and thus are more motivated to try and influence such outcomes.

Why do Muslims, on average, look like other Americans on social and domestic policies? Because, on average, they share the same social standing as other Americans (see socioeconomic comparisons above), and on average, they are about as religious as other Americans. Consider two common indicators of religiosity, frequency of prayer and frequency of church attendance, and compare U.S. Muslims to U.S. Christians on these indicators. We see that both groups are quite religious with the majority praying everyday (70 percent of Christians compared to 61 percent of Muslims) and a sizeable proportion attending services once a week or more (45 percent compared to 40 percent). And they look similar with respect to attitudes on gay rights and abortion, in part because Christian and Muslim theology take similar stances in their views on procreation and gender roles.

### Compared to U.S. Christians

■ U.S. Christians ■ U.S. Muslims



Again, these numbers only tell part of the story. What they don't tell is that religion's relationship to politics is not uniform. In more complex analyses not shown here, I find that the more personal dimensions of religious identity—or being a devout Muslim who prays everyday—have little influence on political attitudes or behaviors, which runs counter to stereotypes that link Islamic devotion to political fanaticism. In contrast, the more organized dimensions of Muslim identity, namely frequent mosque attendance, provide a collective identity that stimulates political activity. This is similar to what we know about the role of the church and synagogue for U.S. Christians and Jews. Congregations provide a collective environment that heightens group consciousness and awareness of issues that need to be addressed through political mobilization, such as

abortion and gay rights. Thus it is somewhat ironic that one of the staunchest defenders of the war on terror—the Christian right—may be overlooking a potential ally in the culture wars—devout U.S. Muslims.

### *Looking ahead to the challenges for American Democracy*

In many ways, the findings I've presented here track closely with what is known about the religion-politics connection among other U.S. ethnic and religious groups, such as Evangelical Christians and African Americans, and suggests that the Muslim experience may be less distinct than popular beliefs imply. In fact, U.S. Muslims share a lot in common with earlier immigrant groups who were considered inassimilable even though they held mainstream American values (think Italian, Irish, and Polish immigrants).

At the same time, it would be overly simplistic and misleading to conclude that there is nothing new and unique about the U.S. Muslim experience, that its relationship to U.S. democracy is identical to that of earlier ethnic and religious immigrant groups. Particularly since 9/11, the U.S. Muslim experience has been “exceptional” in a U.S. context that has witnessed the declining salience of religious boundaries and increasing acceptance of religious difference. U.S. Muslims have largely been excluded from this ecumenical trend. Islamic forms of religious expression—such as wearing the hijab and praying five times a day—are challenging long-standing assumptions about the role of religion in U.S. public life. Should employers provide space for their Muslim employees to pray during work hours? Should universities hire imams to minister to their Muslim students? Should Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab be required to remove it for identification purposes? Should U.S. governmental agencies, like the F.B.I., be allowed to profile its citizens in the name of national security?

How we respond to these questions will define the future of American democracy. If we take a hard-line stance and deny U.S. Muslims (and others who are perceived to be Muslim) their civil liberties, then the very policies aimed at strengthening democracy will result in the exclusion of these groups from civic engagement and integration. If, on the other hand, we move past the fear that U.S. Muslims are un-American and bring them into the national dialogue on the war on terror, then we can begin to face our nation's challenges in a more inclusive and democratic way.

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