Muslim Mistrust: The Resilience of Negative Public Attitudes after Complimentary Information

Brian Robert Calfano, Paul A. Djupe, Daniel Cox & Robert Jones

To cite this article: Brian Robert Calfano, Paul A. Djupe, Daniel Cox & Robert Jones (2016) Muslim Mistrust: The Resilience of Negative Public Attitudes after Complimentary Information, Journal of Media and Religion, 15:1, 29-42, DOI: 10.1080/15348423.2015.1131041

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2015.1131041

Published online: 01 Mar 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 55

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Muslim Mistrust: The Resilience of Negative Public Attitudes after Complimentary Information

Brian Robert Calfano\textsuperscript{a}, Paul A. Djupe\textsuperscript{b}, Daniel Cox\textsuperscript{c}, and Robert Jones\textsuperscript{d}

\textsuperscript{a}Missouri State University; \textsuperscript{b}Denison University; \textsuperscript{c}Pew Research Center; \textsuperscript{d}Public Religion Research Institute

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Muslims have arguably been the most consistently demonized group in American politics of the past decade, factoring heavily in Republican presidential and congressional politics since 2002. Opinions about Muslims have split the American electorate, and we investigate why. Our explanation focuses on interlocking institutions—party, religion, and media—in encouraging beliefs about American Muslims that prove intransigent. Using data from three nationally representative surveys, including a survey embedded experiment, we examine the correlates of anti-Muslim beliefs. Our analysis finds that ceiling effects in the correlates of holding anti-Muslim attitudes and subject trust in Fox News Channel encourage a negative reaction to information that might repair public opinion about American Muslims.

What is the number of Islamic terrorists? One percent? I think it's closer to ten percent but the rest of the PC world will tell you, 'oh no, it's minuscule.' OK, well, let’s take you at your one percent. Look at the havoc one percent of Muslims is causing in the rest of the world. You don’t think one percent, half a percent here in the United States of radicals, of people who want to violently overthrow the government, is a problem?” —Former Fox News Host Glenn Beck, December 11, 2010

Muslims have endured a long season of public negativity in the United States and Europe, with some vestiges of discrimination stretching as far back as the early 20th century (Cesari, 2006). The triggering event for the most recent wave of Islamophobia was the September 11, 2001, attacks (see Soldatova, 2007), and these negative views have been sustained by elite discourse in and out of political campaigns. At the same time, growing numbers of surveys of American Muslims, which report them to be moderate, middle class, and patriotic, continue to defy public stereotypes. While there have been several investigations of public attitudes toward Muslims in America, none has examined the durability of public opinion about Muslims and Islam. What, for example, accounts for divisions in views about Muslims and the reliability of those views? At the same time, in the face of countervailing information that confounds stereotypes, is the American public willing to update its beliefs about Muslims?

We present a cultural theory of negative beliefs about American Muslims (Wildavsky, 1987) to address these questions by showcasing how exposure to the polarizing institutions of media, religion, and party are associated with anti-Muslim attitudes. We then turn to results from a survey-embedded experiment presented to a nationally representative population sample. Here, we test for whether random introduction of positive or negative information about Muslims compels subjects to reconsider their beliefs about this scrutinized minority. The experimental results confirm the mediating effects of the polarizing institutions under study—Americans translate the treatments through the cultural lens of their institutional affiliations, especially Fox News Channel (FNC). This confirms how difficult it is to dislodge certain beliefs once cultural boundaries are drawn.
**Political Background**

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, then-President George W. Bush took great pains to separate the violence done by Islamic extremists and the religion of Islam, with its 1.57 billion adherents (Pew Research Center, 2007). Despite President Bush’s leadership on this issue, hate crimes against Muslims and Arabs spiked, never returning to their pre-9/11 levels (Disha, Cavendish, & King, 2011). At the same time, criticism of Muslims and attacks on Islam featured in public discourse and public opinion (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006), and American Muslims perceived themselves as victims of government scrutiny due to little more than their religious affiliation (Calfano, Djupe, & Green, 2008, 2012). Some of the most frequent critics of Muslims and Islam were conservative commentators featured on FNC, right-leaning blogs, and news websites. Nonmedia organizations also carried the critique, including select churches (usually of an evangelical or fundamentalist identity), elements in the Republican Party, and factions of the Tea Party movement. Evidence suggests that attitudes about Muslims are fractured along partisan lines with Republicans, particularly conservatives, embracing much more negative views of Muslims than Democrats (Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2010). What is more, the American public remains generally ignorant about Islam (Panagopoulos, 2006), even as fears about Islam’s compatibility with Western values continue to grow.

Despite his appeal to Muslim voters (see Calfano et al., 2012), conditions for American Muslims became arguably worse during the Obama Administration’s first term; and Obama himself has been erroneously linked to Islam by large segments of the general public (see Hartman & Newmark, 2012). For example, in 2010, a Florida evangelical pastor planned to host an “International Burn a Quran Day” on the ninth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, while planned construction of a mosque and Islamic center a few blocks away from “Ground Zero” was vociferously opposed by Fox News Channel commentators Sean Hannity, Bill O’Reilly, and Glenn Beck. In 2011, New York Republican Congressman Peter King, chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, organized a series of hearings on the “radicalization” of American Muslims. Additionally, Republican presidential candidates Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich offered extensive critiques of Islam during the opening months of the Republican primary campaigns in 2011. Cain, in particular, leveled extreme pledges about Muslims, indicating that he would not allow a Muslim to serve in his cabinet and that Americans have the right to ban mosques in their communities. Finally, by 2011, at least a dozen states saw fit to bring legislative consideration about whether judges can take Shari’a Law into account when issuing decisions, with Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Kansas legally banning the option.

**The Public View of U.S. Muslims**

Scholars have found that Islamophobia and other negative views of American Muslims have become well-entrenched, with an average of half of U.S. opinion survey respondents expressing negative attitudes (Deane & Fears, 2006; Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Putnam and Campbell (2010) show that Muslims receive the lowest feeling thermometer scores of any U.S. religious minority, including Buddhists and Mormons. Yet the public’s assessment of American Muslims in a 2011 Gallup study was more variable and could even be described as positive, depending on the particular survey item. This opinion variability can be found not just in the Gallup results but also in Pew Research Center surveys conducted since fall 2002. These studies show a 19% increase in negative public perception of Muslims between 2002 and 2003 and a 10% decrease in negative perception between 2007 and 2010 (Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2011). This trend does not include the significant spike in negative assessments of Arabs and Muslims immediately after 9/11, or the increased support for intrusive law enforcement policies targeting...
these groups measured in fall 2001 polling. Taking these percentage shifts at face value, public attitudes toward American Muslims can be said to have moved substantially toward the negative side of the ledger before swinging back somewhat in recent years. Yet while the general public has a more negative aggregate perception of Muslims than it did prior to September 11, the opinion shifts themselves suggest room for change in public perception.

The generation of anti-Muslim attitudes can be distinguished along partisan lines with Republicans (particularly conservative Republicans) embracing more negative views than Democrats (Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2010). A number of forces relevant to Muslim attitudes have considerable overlap with party affiliation, including religious affiliation, movement identification, and group affect. These forces may even predict attitude outcomes that differ from a partisan effect. This may be particularly true of self-described Tea Party members. While it is often assumed that the Tea Party represents a new euphemism for economic conservatism or libertarian attitudes, several recent investigations have found Tea Party identifiers to hold latent forms of racism that are not contained in standard conservative ideology or GOP rhetoric (Barreto et al., 2012; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). This suggests that anti-Muslim attitudes may not be structured along traditional party or ideological orientations, but by the constellation of views toward minorities writ large (Kalkan, Layman, & Uslaner, 2009).

**Cultural Theory of Misinformation Persistence**

Observers have been continually troubled by the lack of information people have about American politics. It is not, however, just the lack of information that is of concern, but also the misinformation that people have about politics. The public often believes the wrong thing with confidence. The size of the foreign aid budget, the proportion of the minority welfare rolls, and the solvency of the Social Security program are just a few of the better known examples of this phenomena. It is one thing if wrong ideas can be corrected, but a growing amount of evidence suggests that beliefs in incorrect information are difficult to alter (Kuklinski et al., 2000, 2001; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), even if opinions appear to respond closely to what elites are saying (Jerit & Barabas, 2006). Once a belief helps to establish an opinion, which can happen either through holding particular beliefs or through the creative interpretation of a belief (Gaines et al., 2007), the individual is motivated to process information in ways that support said belief and associated opinions—motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; Lodge & Taber, 2000). Thus, corrections can actually backfire in certain instances, resulting in an ironic reinforcement of the incorrect beliefs (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

Demonstrating that beliefs can be self-sustaining begs the question of where the beliefs originate. Investigating this question is likely to implicate a cultural institution such as a party, ideological movement, religious group, or media source. It is also plausible that beliefs and values motivated institutional participation in the first place. Misinformation is even more problematic if it is not randomly distributed but, instead, falls under the umbrella of intermediary institutions—media outlets, parties, and religious institutions—with programmatic motives in stoking group conflict (Leege et al., 2002). Therefore, and rather than sorting out the causal ordering of beliefs and institutional choice, it may be more productive to examine whether there is association between the two, and how the confluence of belief and exposure drives information processing. This is our intent.

Collectively, developments of the last 10 years point to efforts by media, religious, and political entrepreneurs to transmit anti-Muslim or Islamic messages. There are a number of theories that would predict why individuals exposed to polarizing intermediaries hold negative beliefs about Muslims. Most of them can be subsumed under a cultural theory in which institutions provide an identity, generate preferences, and offer bounds on appropriate relationships (Wildavsky, 1987; Leege, 2001). This framework is particularly appropriate here given the difficulty in assessing risk

---

1See fall 2001 polling reports from Polling the Nations (http://poll.orspub.com) and ABC News/Washington Post, available through ICPSR.
and the institutional limits that individuals encounter in sourcing new information. But it is important to note that cultural theory as applied to public opinion studies is simply a way of packaging a set of (potentially) reinforcing mechanisms.

For instance, Gastil et al. (2011, p. 711) suggest how social institutions aggregate mechanisms shaping opinion:

…[A] cultural orientation determines the valence of our affective response to policy proposals (Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991), guides the selective search for and receptivity to information (Graber, 2004), informs perceptions of which advocates are credible (Lupia, 2002), and stocks the inventories of considerations we draw on when asked to take a policy stand on some contested issue (Zaller, 1992).

It is quite possible that the likelihood of initially adopting a factually incorrect political belief hinges on its consonance with an already acceptable frame, value, identity, or opinion (Conover, 1988; Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980; Lupia, 1992). Elite or intermediary cues that show these values to be under threat might trigger an emotional response affecting audience information stocks. Importantly, the elites involved in conveying such cues were either selected as trusted defenders of particular values or were involved in shaping worldviews at some earlier date. Taken together, these interlocked institutional and psychological forces should make belief updating with new, factual information difficult once the cultural boundaries are drawn, even for ingroup elites.

As applied here, beliefs about Muslims as threatening to American values and national security should be especially difficult to counter among self-selected audiences of conservative media, conservative Christian churches, and movements such as the Tea Party (Newman & Smith, 2007; Prior, 2007). These bounds should be reinforced by the association of threat perception with political conservatism (Jost et al., 2003) and a need to manage uncertainty or ambiguity (Bonanno & Jost, 2006; Nail & McGregor, 2009).

We want to push farther than suggesting that a batch of cultural institutions shape beliefs about Muslims. While we cannot discern just who is responsible for initiating anti-Muslim beliefs, we can assess which affiliations are best correlated with holding those beliefs in the mass public and which affiliations mediate processing incoming information. For several reasons, we suggest that the mass media, and FNC in particular, is the keystone.

The U.S. media environment has changed dramatically in the past several decades, where a fragmented and segmented media market has developed (Webster, 2005). Recent research has also shown a substantial rise in political polarization, with particular media outlets catering to the ideological demands of specific ideological and even religious constituencies (Newman & Smith, 2007; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Media consumers are seeking out news outlets that reinforce their worldviews and reaffirm political views. In this new news climate, partisans are more likely to attribute bias to news sources not aligned with their preferred source—a more pernicious form of the hostile media effect (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Smith, Licther, & Harris, 1997). This phenomenon is consistent with much of the early cognitive consistency theories that documented a tendency for people to seek out confirmatory information and avoid dissonant content (Festinger, 1957).

Other research has shown that particular media outlets have a partisan slant in their political coverage. Studies of FNC, for example, have found that the news organization is more consistently conservative than its network competitors (e.g., ABC, NBC, CNN, and NBC) (Groeling & Baum, 2008; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005). The FNC coverage effect on viewers appears significant. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) found FNC’s introduction in certain cable markets increased vote share for GOP candidates in 1996 and 2000. At the same time, Morris (2005) showed that compared with CNN viewers, the FNC audience was more likely to underestimate the number of U.S. casualties in the Iraq war (see also Lin, 2009). Regarding American Muslims, the misinformation effect on FNC audiences would suggest that, in addition to the other cultural purveyors of political information, media outlets like FNC play a key role in the misinformation persistence among self-selected audiences. This occurs even
when audience members encounter positive stimuli about the target group that should spur a reconsideration of existing beliefs.

**Design and Data**

Our strategy is to first assess the correlates of public beliefs about U.S. Muslims. We suspect that those identifying with polarizing intermediary organizations will have more negative or anti-Muslim attitudes. Since it is not possible to distinguish the degree of selection involved in generating these beliefs in observational survey data (as people with anti-Muslim beliefs may have chosen to identify with the Tea Party, watch FNC, etc.), we turn to an experimental design where we randomly manipulated exposure to information bearing on belief content concerning Muslim political behavior.

The observational research is based on data from two different national public opinion surveys conducted by Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) in 2010 and made available to the authors. The 2010 postelection American Values Survey included 1,494 respondents who were re-interviewed two months after responding to the original pre-election American Values Survey. The original pre-election survey consisted of a large, nationally representative sample of adults. It relied on random digit dial sampling strategy and included 2,250 respondents reached on a traditional landline phone, and 750 respondents reached on a cellular telephone. The postelection survey, conducted November 3–7, 2010, included 1,218 respondents interviewed on a landline telephone and 276 interviewed on a cellular telephone. The final sample was weighted to ensure proper representativeness and was accomplished in two stages. The original survey’s final weight was used as a first stage weight to correct for the dual-frame sample design and any disproportionate non-response associated with the original survey. In the second stage, sampled demographics were balanced by form to match target population parameters for gender, age, education, race and Hispanic ethnicity, region (U.S. Census definitions), population density, and telephone usage. Both surveys were conducted in Spanish and English.

Data for our survey embedded experiment come from an omnibus landline telephone survey among a random sample of 1,012 adults in early July 2011. The sample was based on a random-digit dial selection from all landline telephone numbers. Though we applied a sampling weight to our 2010 survey data, consideration of the use of weights on experimental data is in its infancy (see Mutz, 2011, pp. 112–122). As Mutz argues, weights increase the representativeness of samples drawn from populations with known parameters (i.e., as defined with census-like data). Because sample representativeness only extends to the weights constructed with those known parameters in mind, using weights is sensible to ensure that treatment effects are proportionate on sex, age, income, and similar perimeters. However, weights can be problematic when applied to variables with unknown distributions in the population, especially when heterogeneous treatment effects are expected. Given our analytic focus on assessing whether subgroups behave differently when presented with conditions, we are not interested in population-average treatment effects; thus weighting is not necessary. Instead, employing interaction terms is an appropriate strategy.

The survey included an embedded experiment that randomly assigned subjects to one of three conditions—two treatment exposures and one control. The treatments included a brief, positive description about Muslims and a brief negative description about Muslims. The control group was not read any statement. All respondents were then asked about their level of agreement with three statements read in random order—two about American Muslims and one about Islam that match questions asked in the 2010 surveys. We first work through the survey results before turning to the experimental design.

**Survey Results**

We begin by assessing the degree to which people trust FNC to document the extent to which institutions may constitute a distinct, and overlapping, political culture. Table 1 presents the results
from the two PRRI surveys, one in November 2010 just after the midterm elections and the other in July 2011. The snapshots offered by these two surveys are closely aligned. In these samples, just over a quarter of respondents trust FNC over other media sources, a figure that grows tremendously when identification with other target intermediaries is considered. Specifically, just over two-fifths of evangelicals trust FNC, about 55% of Republicans trust FNC, and 75% of Tea Party identifiers do the same (about 90% of Tea Party identifiers also identified as a Republican in 2010, while 80% were Republican in 2011). These figures are additive to an extent, so that just about two-thirds of evangelical Republicans trust FNC and approximately 80% of the other combinations—Tea Party evangelicals, Tea Party Republicans, and evangelical–Tea Party–Republicans—trust FNC.

Table 1 also shows the sample portion that adopts the various combinations of identifications. Note that there is considerable slippage between these four intermediaries. Not all evangelicals are Republicans or Tea Party identifiers. Most Tea Party identifiers are Republican, but not the reverse. And the highest concentrations of trust in FNC are in a relatively small segment of the electorate in which Tea Party identification is common.

These political and religious identifications are our key independent variables. But we also include a variety of variables as controls (see the Appendix for complete variable coding). Aside from evangelical Protestant identification, we include Roman Catholic and “religious none” identifications, southern residency, gender, age, education, and race. In one model, we also include a religiosity measure, whether the respondent has a gay friend (as a proxy for attitudes toward other minority groups), and Tea Party identification. Moreover, we also included data from the Pew Forum, which collected the incidence of Islamic center/mosque controversies in states (such as the one surrounding the Park 51 Islamic center planned near Ground Zero).

The estimates of the effects of identification with these intermediaries on attitudes toward American Muslims are shown in Table 2. The dependent variables are as follows:

- Since 2001, Muslims in the United States have been unfairly targeted by law enforcement. (1=strongly disagree/disagree [60.9%], 0=strongly agree/agree)
- American Muslims ultimately want to establish Shari’a or Islamic law as law of the land in the United States. (1=strongly agree/agree [27.1%], 0=strongly disagree/disagree)
- American Muslims have not done enough to oppose extremism in their own communities. (1=strongly agree/agree [63.2%], 0=strongly disagree/disagree)
- Do you think holding hearings to investigate alleged extremism in the American Muslim community is a good idea or a bad idea? (good idea=1 [61.9%], bad idea=0)
- The values of Islam, the Muslim religion, are at odds with American values and way of life. (1=strongly agree/agree [49.1%], 0=strongly disagree/disagree)

Thus, all of the dependent variables are coded so that negative views toward Muslims are placed on the high end—positive effects of the independent variables signal the production of more negative
views. All of the logistic regression models are similarly specified except for the final model, which relies on the postelection dataset and includes a few more items, including Tea Party identification (it was not asked in the pre-election survey).

Across the models, those who trust FNC most (=1) are more likely to hold anti-Muslim attitudes than those who trust another news source (=0). The effect sizes are roughly consistent, varying from a .14 increase in the probability of agreeing that Muslims have not done enough to oppose extremism in their communities to a .31 increase in the probability of disagreeing that Muslims have been unfairly targeted by law enforcement, holding all other variables at their means. Likewise, identifying with the GOP and evangelicalism increases the propensity of anti-Muslim attitudes across the board. The increases from identifying with the Republican Party are all within the range of .16 \( - .21\). The increases from identifying as an evangelical range from .13 (Sharia law) to .18 (King hearings) with all other variables held at their mean.

We tested a wide range of interactions between evangelical, Republican, and trust in FNC. Very few, however, were significant.\(^2\) One of the exceptions is the interaction between evangelical identification and trust in FNC (column 1 of Table 2), which indicates that trusting FNC makes little difference to evangelical opinion, as evangelicals are already likely to think Muslims are fairly targeted by law enforcement. Instead, trusting FNC greatly increases the probability among non-evangelicals (by 30%, on average) of thinking Muslims were fairly targeted. This equalizes the probability of that belief for evangelicals and nonevangelicals (and holding all other variables at their mean).

It is also worth examining the same interaction term in the “Muslims not done enough” model (column 3). Whereas the previous interaction suggested a ceiling on negative views toward Muslims, this interaction suggests that evangelicals have a higher probability of believing that Muslims have not done enough to prevent extremism, and that trusting FNC increases the likelihood of that belief.

\(^2\) Though the significance of the coefficient reported in statistical packages may be misleading in the sense that the full range of the interaction may not be significant (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006), the reported significance level provides an important indicator that there are, on the whole, differences worth examining.

---

### Table 2. Logistic Regression Estimates of Five Beliefs about American Muslims and Their Intentions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Muslims unfairly targeted (disagree=1)</th>
<th>Muslims want Sharia Law (agree=1)</th>
<th>Muslims not done enough (agree=1)</th>
<th>Peter King hearings (good idea=1)</th>
<th>Islamic values at odds w/ U.S. (agree=1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em><em>β</em> p</em>*</td>
<td><em><em>β</em> p</em>*</td>
<td><em><em>β</em> p</em>*</td>
<td><em><em>β</em> p</em>*</td>
<td><em><em>β</em> p</em>*</td>
<td><em><em>β</em> p</em>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox most trusted source</td>
<td>1.56 *** 1.03 ***</td>
<td>1.06 ***</td>
<td>0.65 ***</td>
<td>1.36 ***</td>
<td>0.87 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Protestant</td>
<td>0.68 *** 0.69 **</td>
<td>0.31 **</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.34 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox* evangelical</td>
<td>-0.99 ** -0.14</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.34 **</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican identifier</td>
<td>0.85 *** 1.12 ***</td>
<td>0.74 ***</td>
<td>0.77 ***</td>
<td>0.97 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State mosque controversy</td>
<td>0.06 -0.08</td>
<td>0.26 *</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.27 **</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>-0.28 0.20</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.44 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious none</td>
<td>-0.04 0.17</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern resident</td>
<td>0.12 0.32</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.02 0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.06 *</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.40 ** 0.15</td>
<td>-0.38 **</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.06 *** -0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.07 ***</td>
<td>0.01 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>-0.09 0.12</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.67 *** -0.56 ***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>— —</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay friend</td>
<td>— —</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea party identifier</td>
<td>— —</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.93 * -1.97 ***</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>1.03 ***</td>
<td>-1.01 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model statistics</td>
<td><strong>χ²=210.97</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>χ²=210.40</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>χ²=168.58</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>χ²=318.83</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>χ²=445.07</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=841</td>
<td>N=844</td>
<td>N=792</td>
<td>N=832</td>
<td>N=1478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pseudo R²=.14</td>
<td>Pseudo R²=.14</td>
<td>Pseudo R²=.10</td>
<td>Pseudo R²=.14</td>
<td>Pseudo R²=.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: PRRI 2010, PRRI 2011. Standard errors are corrected for clustering at the state-level. ***p < .01, **p < .05, *p < .10 (two-tailed tests)

\(^a\) Source: Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2010.
at a higher rate than for nonevangelicals. Trusting FNC provides a .15 increase among nonevangelicals but a .22 increase among evangelicals (other variables constant), which provides some evidence of an opinion spiral generated by overlapping involvement with polarizing intermediaries.

Most of the statistical controls had no consistent effect. For instance, older Americans are more likely to disagree that Muslims were unfairly targeted by law enforcement and that Muslim values are at odds with American values, but were less likely to think the Rep. King hearings were a good idea. Whites were more likely to disagree that Muslims were unfairly targeted, but were less likely to believe that Muslims want to establish Shari’a law. Higher education generates a lower probability of thinking the King hearings were a good idea and that Muslim values are at odds, but had no effect on the other three dependent variables.

One particularly intriguing variable was the presence of a mosque controversy as reported by the Pew Forum (2011). Though each controversy varied in the details and in the amount of media coverage generated, they all involved some tension in a community over the building of a mosque or Islamic community center. This variable had no effect in three of the models but did have an effect in two, changing the probability by .06 in each (other variables held at their mean). Specifically, the presence of a mosque controversy boosts the probability of believing that Muslims have not done enough to prevent extremism, but drops the likelihood of believing that Islamic values are at odds with “American” values. It is entirely possible that the media coverage engendered by a controversy may help people to learn about the American Muslim community, among whom there are a very small number of radicals, while the typical resident is viewed as moderate, middle class, and politically involved (Calfano et al., 2012; Gallup, 2009, 2011).

**Experimental Results**

From the above examination, we found that identification with polarizing intermediaries is correlated with more negative beliefs about U.S. Muslims. This includes not only evangelical identifiers, but GOP partisans as well. Given the limitations of assessing causality in observational data, we turn now to our experimental results. The key questions for this part of the analysis are two. First, we wanted to assess whether, in fact, there are ceiling effects in negative assessments of Muslims. Thus, one condition applied to one third of the sample was a negative statement read to respondents that mimicked news coverage of a sentiment expressed by Rep. Peter King (R-NY), while purposefully avoiding a partisan cue:

> Recently, some national political leaders have claimed that an overwhelming majority of Mosques in America are being run by radical Muslim Clerics who express anti-American views.

If this negative sentiment is unable to distinguish respondent views from the control (one-third of the sample), in which no statement was read, then we have some evidence of a ceiling effect—that the baseline opinion of some Americans at this point is so negative that there really is no room to move.

Second, we are also interested in whether it is possible to move opinions about Muslims in a positive direction. The role of polarizing intermediary elites and institutions is not just to supply information, but to supply criteria to use in evaluating information in a way that encourages adherents not to trust other information suppliers or update information and beliefs about the target group. If true, then adherents of polarizing institutions—including FNC—should react to contrary information regarding Muslims in a positive manner. That is, we expect them to react negatively to our positive treatment condition:

> A recent national political study claims that most American Muslims are moderate and middle class and an overwhelming majority celebrates traditional American holidays like the 4th of July.

Note that the information in both vignettes is factual, with the content in the positive vignette coming from recent Pew (2007) and Gallup (2009) studies of U.S. Muslims. Notice also that both
vignettes generally reference cues from elites or institutions. Though not specific enough to be of the intermediating variety reflective of religious denomination, political party, or cable news content, their broad reference to political leaders and national polls provides grounding in elite legitimacy. Hence, subjects can be reasonably considered to have received factual information about U.S. Muslims through plausible, though broad, elite cue channels.

We expect that other Americans who do not identify with a polarizing institution should react in a consonant fashion, expressing more positive views of Muslims in America. Therefore, non-Republicans, non-Tea Party identifiers, nonevangelicals, and those who trust other media sources than FNC should have more positive views of Muslims after hearing this statement read to them.

The dependent variable is an index constructed from three items repeated from the earlier surveys assessing agreement with the following statements: 1) The values of Islam, the Muslim religion, are at odds with American values and way of life (52% agreed); 2) American Muslims have not done enough to oppose extremism in their own communities (65% agreed); and 3) American Muslims ultimately want to establish Shari’a or Islamic law as law of the land in the United States (36% agreed). The distribution is shown in Figure 1, which reveals a nonskew distribution that is a bit too flat to be normal and with a mean equal to the scale middle (Mean=2.5, SD=0.9).

The results of our model are shown in Table 3. Our first test is of the effect of the negative treatment—a close copy of Republican Rep. Peter King’s claim, but without a partisan cue. The condition itself has no effect compared to the control; neither does it interact with trust in FNC. This, essentially, is a reflection of the state of American politics; Americans are used to hearing negative information about Muslims and are divided in their opinions, as Figure 1 demonstrates.

The results in Table 3 offer evidence that attitudes about Muslims are malleable when confronted with positive information, referencing Muslims as moderate, middle class, and patriotic. Yet the opinion movement is conditional on whether the respondent trusts FNC or some other media source. To assist in interpretation, Figure 2 shows these interactive effects, which indicate that those who trust FNC react oppositely from those who trust another media source. Non-FNC viewers see Muslims as having less nefarious values and motives after hearing the positive statement, whereas those who trust FNC think Muslims have more nefarious values and motives (compared to the control) after hearing about their patriotism and moderation. The difference in the estimates

Figure 1. Kernels density plot of beliefs about Muslims index (July experimental data).
between those who trust FNC versus another news source is equal to the difference between Republicans and non-Republicans (−0.4; or just over 10% of the scale). These effects are equivalent to identification with the Tea Party (−0.35) and are just under twice as large as identifying as an evangelical (−0.24). We also tested interaction terms consisting of the positive condition and GOP, Tea Party, and evangelical identifications individually. None of these were significant at conventional levels, but did achieve $p$ values just outside conventional levels (.15). All of these effects show a similar interplay to the FNC*positive condition interaction.

Identification with all of the polarizing intermediary institutions with regard to the place of Muslims in America is related to more negative assessments of the values and motives of Muslims. But only trust in FNC changes how people process information about Muslims so that even positive information about Muslims is seen in a negative light. This suggests a basic refusal of the FNC-trusting respondents to process information about Muslim behavior reflective of dominant socio-

### Table 3. Estimated Treatment Effects on a Beliefs about Muslims Index (OLS Regression Estimates)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$\beta^*$</th>
<th>(S.E.)</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$\Delta$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive condition</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative condition</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox trust</td>
<td>−0.21</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox* positive condition</td>
<td>−0.26</td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican identifier</td>
<td>−0.41</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>−0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea Party identifier</td>
<td>−0.35</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>−0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>−0.24</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>−0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>−0.11</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>−0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern resident</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PRRI, July 2011. ***$p < .01$, **$p < .05$, *$p < .10$ (two-tailed tests)

$\Delta$ Entries in this column reflect the change resulting from a difference of two standard deviations (one below the mean to one above the mean).

*See Figure 2 for effects involved in the interaction term.

### Figure 2. The interactive effects of trusting Fox and the positive statement condition on beliefs about Muslims. Source: PRRI, 2010; 2011. Based on estimates shown in Table 3. Caps reflect 95% confidence intervals.
political norms in a positive manner. The reaction is so strong that it appears FNC-trusting respondents may have reacted with suspicion about Muslim motives for their behavior when not attributed to information from FNC, although we cannot make a precise conclusion on this aspect of the results. In these data, the effects of identifying with the intermediaries compound negative attitudes with no apparent floor. On average, evangelical, Tea Party, Republican identifiers who trust FNC are about 1.2 points more negative about American Muslims, which is just over one standard deviation (and just over one-third) of the index.

Conclusion

Muslims have been in the United States since the nation’s founding, but only in significant concentrations since the last century. Islam has always been the most misunderstood religion in America, and Muslims have spent considerable effort simply explaining their faith and their commitments to others (Eck, 2001). Of course, at the same time, some elites have found it in their interests to promote extreme visions of American Muslims, especially when international events make such a frame salient as we described in the introduction to this article. These elites are religiously and politically conservative; consequently, religious and political conservatives hold the most negative beliefs about American and foreign Muslims. The irony, perhaps, is that a plurality of Muslims voted for George W. Bush for president in 2000, though by 2004 they turned against the Republican Party in large numbers (Ayers, 2007; Ayers & Hofstetter, 2008; Calfano et al., 2008).

In this article, we sought to understand the correlates of negative beliefs about Muslims, especially whether negative beliefs are concentrated among those identifying with what we call polarizing intermediaries—parties, religious organizations, and media that may have an interest in promoting negative beliefs in order to emphasize group boundaries—consistent with a cultural theory of public opinion. Emphasizing group boundaries promotes the intermediary by highlighting the danger of seeking information elsewhere, thus maintaining adherence to the organization. We confirmed that negative beliefs are concentrated among those tied to polarizing intermediaries with respect to Muslims in America—the Republican Party, evangelical Protestantism, and FNC. This does not mean that these organizations attempt to polarize Americans on all issues, but only that elites within their groups have been active promoting negative beliefs about Muslims and identifiers have more negative beliefs than others.

Theory suggests that identification with these intermediaries affects how people process information, leading identifiers to more negative assessments of positive information. The results from a survey-embedded experiment suggest that those who trust FNC over other media outlets interpret attempts to repair the image of Muslims differently and negatively; the results are also suggestive that identification with the other polarizing intermediaries on this issue occasion negative reactions to positive information about Muslim political behavior. Of course, this means that those who do not identify with these intermediaries respond positively to learning that American Muslims are middle class, moderate, and politically engaged.

The results from the combination of studies reported on here indicate the hurdles that minority groups face in gaining widespread acceptance in society. Some elites will find these groups in their interest to demonize, promoting beliefs about the group as antithetical to American ideals. Once established, it appears to be hard to replace those beliefs with more positive images, even when there is widespread factual evidence to support them, such as featured in our experiment. Clinging to misinformed beliefs may be much more troublesome to democracy than failing to have any beliefs (Kuklinski et al., 2000). This is especially the case where trust placed in specific media sources encourages negative reaction to positive information about a suspected minority group. In this process, the minority group’s prospects for bettering their collective conflict appear stunted, even when undertaking behavior that, other things equal, should be met with a positive reception from those harboring a negative impression.

The existing literature has rooted this phenomenon in motivated reasoning and we think that choice is appropriate. However, we argue that reasoning fenced in by social identity may be more
nettlestone than that driven simply by contrasting information stocks. Misinformation would then be understood as a structural problem, reinforced by the ongoing efforts of trusted elites rather than merely a problem which individuals own. Interventions to correct such misinformation would require a two-step process rather than generalized education campaigns. Our tests do not allow us to confirm or disconfirm this distinction, but given the potential contribution both to our understanding of motivated reasoning as well as the degree of intractability of misinformation in the electorate, we believe this line of argument is well worth pursuing.

The presence and persistence of misinformation and the self-selection of media sources in the electorate presents a challenge for public opinion theories that address elite influence. As Kuklinski et al. (2000) argue, framing efforts (Druckman, 2001; Needham, 2005) and other means of elite influence (e.g., Zaller, 1992) run into persuasion roadblocks given individuals’ motivations to protect their beliefs and the subsequent opinions based on those beliefs (Darmofal, 2005). Hence, whereby an elite-based media cue may have been responsible for setting certain public audiences on an opinion trajectory of suspicion regarding a scrutinized outgroup, it may take more than a countervailing elite cue to correct this opinion course. The ability to fend off elite framing attempts can be seen as a democratic good (see Chong & Druckman, 2008; Druckman, 2001, 2004), unless the ability to defend against framing was driven by elite manipulation in the first place. That is, commitment to misinformed beliefs surely limits future elite suasion, even as it is the likely product of elite influence at some initial point of consideration. Resistance to elite framing leads us to consider the source of the standards and information stocks that enable the defense. Unless the source is a deliberative exchange (Druckman & Nelson, 2003), the source is likely to be an elite from a cultural institution.

References


### Appendix A

#### Variable Coding

Dependent variable coding is listed in the text.

**FNC most trusted source:** “Which of the following television news sources do you trust the MOST to provide accurate information about politics and current events?” 1=Fox News Channel, 0=Broadcast network news such as NBC, ABC, or CBS; CNN; MSNBC; Comedy Central’s Daily Show with Jon Stewart; Public Television; Other; Do not watch television news; or Don’t know.

**Evangelical Protestant:** 1=Protestant or Other Christian who also identify as born again/evangelical; 0=otherwise.

**Republican identifier:** “In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican (=1), a Democrat (=0), or an Independent (=0).”

**State mosque controversy:** As identified by the Pew Forum on September 22, 2010, the following states hosted a controversy regarding a mosque or Islamic center being built in CA, CT, FL, GA, IL, KY, NY, NJ, MA, MD, ME, MI, MS, OH, TN, and WI. Respondents living in those states were coded 1, 0=otherwise.

**Catholic:** “What is your present religion, if any?” 1=Catholic, 0=otherwise.

**Religious none:** “What is your present religion, if any?” 1=Atheist, agnostic, nothing in particular, don’t know; 0=otherwise.

**Southern resident:** 1=resident of a former-confederate state, 0=otherwise.

**Education:** “What is the last grade or class that you completed in school?” 1=0-8th grade, 2=some high school, 3=high school graduate, 4=technical/trade/vocational school, 5=some college, 6=4-year college graduate, 7=post graduate training.

**Female:** 1=female, 0=male

**Age:** in years

**Rural:** 1=“in ‘non-metropolitan area”, 0=otherwise.

**White:** “What is your race?” 1=white, 0=otherwise.

**Religiosity:** A factor score composed of religious attendance and religious importance (higher is more of each). Religious importance is “How important is religion in your life? 5=the most important thing, 4=very important, 3= somewhat important, 2=not too important, or 1=not at all important?” Religious attendance is “Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services? 6=more than once a week, 5=once a week, 4=once or twice a month, 3=a few times a year, 2=seldom, or 1=never.”

**Gay friend:** Do you have a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian? 1=yes, 0=no.

**Tea Party identifier:** Do you consider yourself part of the Tea Party movement or not? 1=yes, 0=no.