ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Comprehensive Study of Muslim American Discrimination by Legislators, the Media, and the Masses

by

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Overview of my dissertation. In my dissertation, I focus on one question: *to what extent do Muslim Americans face discrimination by legislators, the media, and masses?* As such, it provides the first comprehensive analysis of Muslim American political discrimination. This question is important because while anecdotal signs of increasing Islamophobia in each of these domains are pervasive, they are unsupported by quantitative evidence. In contrast, my dissertation uses quantitative methods, including survey experiments, field experiments, and text analysis of media transcripts, to systematically develop a nuanced theory of America's racial hierarchy that (a) takes into a

account a new group (Muslim Americans) and (b) demonstrates that racial groups exhibit malleable status relative to other groups over time.

Argument. There are 3.3 million Muslims in the U.S., about 1% of the total population. Attacks on Muslim Americans have become increasingly common, particularly since the attacks of September 11, 2001, and have surged in response to episodes of violence perpetrated by Islamic extremists and to the political rhetoric by GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump (Abdelaker 2016). Despite their increasing political relevance, however, very little is known about the treatment of and political attitudes towards Muslim Americans. I argue this rampant racialization of Muslim Americans – that is observable in the media, by legislators, and among White attitudes – has led to a shifting racial hierarchy where Blacks no longer are at the bottom, but which is malleable over time and in different contexts. The shift in mass attitudes has likewise moved the racial hierarchy to situate Muslim Americans near the bottom and has stark implications for their status in American democracy.

Part I. Through two audit studies, the first part of my dissertation evaluates the quality of legislator responsiveness to Muslim Americans. The first experiment was conducted on *all* state legislators and evaluates responses to individual constituents who ask for an application for a political internship. The second was run on state legislators from states with large Muslim American populations, and evaluated responses to requests for a legislative visit by a Muslim American religious leader in that state. These two experiments find widespread discrimination against Muslim Americans across the country. However, in states with larger Muslim American populations, Democratic legislators exhibit less discrimination, supporting a theory of substantive representation.

Part II. Next, my dissertation examines how public attitudes towards Muslim American candidates for political office. Little information exists on how the public assesses and treats Muslim candidates for political office. To fill this gap, I ran multiple

candidate evaluation survey experiments to answer the question: "Do individual Americans demonstrate discriminatory behavior against Muslim-American candidates relative to Whites?" In Democratic primaries, respondents are significantly less likely to vote for the Muslim American as opposed to the White candidate. In Republican primaries, however, Muslim American candidates were not statistically disadvantaged compared to their White counterparts. All of this supports the theory that minority Republicans can be uniquely advantaged.

Part III. Finally, my dissertation examines how television news has framed Muslim Americans in its broadcasts, relative to other groups, and how this coverage, in turn, affects public's attitudes. For this project, I collected all available CNN, MSNBC, and FOX news broadcast transcripts from 1992-2015, conducted sentiment analysis, and ran a survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of Whites. I find evidence for a shifting racial hierarchy that has varied over time and has situated Muslim Americans at the bottom. I also find that negative coverage increases resentment towards Muslim Americans and increases support for policies restricting their freedoms, while positive coverage has no effect.

Conclusion. These bleak findings have stark implications for the quality of Muslim American participation and representation in American democracy. Moreover, my method of *reconstructing* America's racial hierarchy through the sentiment each racial group experiences in its media coverage repositions groups and argues for a more fluid racial hierarchy that is tied to the events of the day.