
12-17-2020

Critical Dialog: Response to Rachel M. Gillum's Review of The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States

Bozena C. Welborne
Smith College, bwelborne@smith.edu

Aubrey L. Westfall
Wheaton College - Wheaton

Özge Çelik Russell
Hacı Bayram Veli University

Sarah A. Tobin
Chr. Michelsen Institute

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.smith.edu/gov_facpubs



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Welborne, Bozena C.; Westfall, Aubrey L.; Russell, Özge Çelik; and Tobin, Sarah A., "Critical Dialog: Response to Rachel M. Gillum's Review of The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States" (2020). Government: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA. https://scholarworks.smith.edu/gov_facpubs/54

This Response or Comment has been accepted for inclusion in Government: Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu

Critical Dialogue

The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States.

By Bozena C. Welborne, Aubrey L. Westfall, Özge Çelik Russell, and Sarah A. Tobin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 264p. \$115.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.
doi:10.1017/S1537592720003540

— Rachel M. Gillum , Stanford University
rgillum@stanford.edu

Unlike in many European countries, Muslim women in the United States have the legally protected right to wear (or not wear) religious head coverings. However, by practicing this right, Muslim American women face consequences that can, in ways, limit their access to the full benefits of US citizenship. Because they are among the most visible adherents of Islam, covered Muslim women are frequently targets of hostility and discrimination. This is especially true in the post-9/11 era and, more recently, following the 2016 US presidential race, when the country witnessed openly Islamophobic statements by politicians and national leaders and a simultaneous spike in hate crimes and acts against Muslims.

The authors of *The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States*, Bozena C. Welborne, Aubrey L. Westfall, Özge Çelik Russell, and Sarah A. Tobin, set out to investigate the effects of head covering on Muslim women's social, religious, and political lives. This timely book makes the case that, although donning a headscarf is not typically meant to be an explicitly political act, it does result in important social and political consequences for the woman who wears it. It can not only serve as a point around which to build community, socially engage, and feel included but also can lead to political and social marginalization, affecting women's political attitudes and actions.

The study offers important contributions to the literature on Muslim Americans by investigating a minority segment of this growing and diverse religious population. Impressively, the authors capture the views of nearly 2,000 women from 49 US states. Surveying Muslim Americans is particularly difficult, because they comprise a relatively small percentage of the overall American population (estimates suggest around 1%), and the true composition of the community is unknown because the US Census does not ask individuals to identify their religion. So, although the study is not statistically representative of the

community, it offers an important empirical contribution that advances our understanding of the unique experiences and perspectives of this group. It is further enriched by 17 focus groups from which the authors were able to capture the nuanced perspectives of these women and how they are experiencing life in the United States.

The book explores Muslim women's expressed reason for wearing a headscarf, their experiences of "othering" as a result, and the dynamics it creates among other Muslims of various backgrounds. Head covering is almost universally framed by respondents in this study as a free choice, with most citing reasons of piety, stating it is a requirement of their faith.

In what appears to be the central analysis of the study, the authors address the relationship between choosing to wear the headscarf and political engagement. They theorize that the mosque and other social and religious organizations support political mobilization through the diversity of networks to which members are exposed. They observe, however, that despite covered respondents attending mosque at a higher rate, these women tend to be significantly less politically engaged than their noncovered counterparts.

The authors argue that the primary mechanism through which the headscarf negatively affects political participation is that covered women belong to more religiously homogeneous social circles. They primarily maintain friendships with and marry almost exclusively other Muslims; these social circles themselves are a result of the "othering" they experience in the broader society and their desire to socialize with like-minded individuals. The authors assert that these women, in turn, have a heightened sense of dissatisfaction and disengagement with a political system that has been largely nonresponsive to Muslims and has not upheld its side of the "bargain" in protecting their rights of citizenship. This thesis has the potential to provide important nuance to some of the conflicting research about the role of mosques in promoting Muslim engagement within the American political system and should be explored further.

This study provides an essential foundation for understanding the reasons behind women's choice to cover and the political and social consequences they face in the United States for this decision. The authors also touch on several important potential mitigating factors to their

findings that are ripe opportunities for future research. I will touch on these issues in the space remaining here.

How might covered women differ systematically from noncovered women in ways that could explain differences in their expressed religiosity and their social and political choices? For example, some research suggests that socioeconomics and the desire to marry can influence Muslim women's adoption of more conservative views and behavior (Lisa Blaydes and Drew Lizner, "The Political Economy of Women's Support for Fundamentalist Islam," *World Politics*, 60 (4), 2008). Although the authors do not explore the role of socioeconomics in their text, this could be an interesting line of future research given what we know about the effects of income and education on political engagement more generally in the political science literature. Given that the large majority of the study's sample is composed of women in romantic relationships with Muslim partners (p. 42), how might single women differ in their religiosity and political behavior? Although the composition of the respondents provides novel insight into the perspectives of covered women (upward of 85% are covered), it will be imperative for future studies to examine and control for these additional factors in order to isolate the effect of the head scarf.

Relatedly, there is the opportunity to further empirically explore the intersecting effects of race, ethnicity, and immigration on these women's choices and experiences. I applaud the authors for seeking racial, ethnic, and generational diversity in their sampling and for highlighting some of these differences throughout the study. For example, in their focus group interviews and discussion of key literatures, the authors provide expressive consideration to the experience of African American Muslims, a group that is often overlooked in studies on Muslim Americans. They find, as I do in my work, that despite the ideal of a "color-blind" *ummah*, racial and ethnic divisions still play a pronounced role in the dynamics of many Muslim American communities.

Given the authors' rich data, it would also have been informative to know whether these demographic differences—which are known to affect political views and participation in the United States—have similar or intervening effects on covered women's political participation, for example. My work, as does this book, suggests a strong relationship between perceived discrimination and feelings of closeness with the Muslim American community. However, I find that this effect is strongest with Black and Arab Muslims who were born in the United States and minimal among certain immigrant communities. In addition, as the authors note, experiences abroad can significantly shape political perceptions and behavior in the United States. My work shows these effects can be sticky and vary based on the country from which foreign-born Muslims came, how old they were when they emigrated, and how long they have lived in the United States. I also



find that political participation and diversity of social networks increase across generations within the Muslim community. The authors were able to capture so many foreign-born women in their sample, and the field would benefit from understanding how these varied experiences interact with women's decision to cover or engage politically.

Finally, as scholars continue to study the experiences and attitudes of Muslims in the United States and globally, research designs should account for the unique types of interviewer effects that might influence survey and interview responses for this population. Evidence from my past work suggests that the mere presence of other covered women can elicit more pious responses from survey and interview participants, with the strongest effects among younger, poorer, and less educated women (Lisa Blaydes and Rachel Gillum, "Religiosity-of-Interviewer Effects: Assessing the Impact of Veiled Enumerators on Survey Response in Egypt," *Politics & Religion*, 6 (3), 2013). Could being asked about one's religious views in a group of other veiled women—or being asked to fill out a survey based on one's decision to veil—affect responses to questions of religiosity? Although the authors seemed to have been explicitly seeking women who covered to participate in their survey, they note that some of their focus groups comprised entirely women who covered, whereas others were mixed. Depending on the details of the study design, they may be able to revisit their data to assess whether such "interviewer effects" were at play in their focus groups, which could constitute a substantial contribution to the field of research methodology.

Overall, this excellent study provides much-needed voice to an often discussed, but rarely heard from, group with implications for Muslim social integration, political identity, and mobilization. This book is a must-read for scholars interested in studying Muslims or other religious minorities in Western societies, as well as those who are more broadly interested in topics relating to religious and American identity, race and ethnicity, and politics.

Response to Rachel M. Gillum's Review of *The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States*

doi:10.1017/S1537592720003539

- Bozena C. Welborne 
- Aubrey L. Westfall
- Özge Çelik Russell 
- Sarah A. Tobin

We thank Rachel Gillum for her thoughtful summary of our book and its contributions to current scholarship. We also appreciate her recommendations for future research, which we are happy to engage with here.

Gillum expresses concerns that our research design might have influenced our findings: a survey about head

covering might prime more pious responses, and noncovered women's responses might have been influenced by the presence of covered respondents in the focus groups. We are transparent about this bias in our introduction, highlighting how our convenience sample allowed us to unpack the intersection of Muslim American women's religiosity and political engagement with a focus on the experiences of covered women. Although we observed that focus group composition influenced the conversation, the effects were attributable to preexisting relationships between participants, culture, race, age, and conversion experience, in addition to covering. These possible effects deserve future research.

Gillum mentions the need for a more systematic exploration of the difference in the religiosity and sociopolitical engagement of both uncovered and covered Muslim women. Although covered women constituted the majority of our survey participants (77%) and focus group participants (85.5%), we investigated the differences between the covered and noncovered women where the analysis was warranted. Both categories of participants were very politically engaged by the standards of the American public with 63–68% of covered and 71–78% of noncovered women voting in the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012. Similarly, 62% of covered and 74% of uncovered participants reported a party affiliation. It was the covered respondents who were closer to the mainstream American voter, 59% of whom voted and 65% of whom affiliated with a political party in 2012. Our research implies that further differences between covered and uncovered women could be discovered with a randomly selected sample and a survey instrument that does not explicitly focus on head covering.

Gillum questions the way socioeconomic factors influence religiosity and social and political behaviors. We offer some insights about socioeconomics in our statistical models, which controlled for marital status, education, and employment, and found that they affect political participation indirectly by influencing the diversity of women's social networks. But our primary finding is that covering is a complex practice motivated by family, culture, and, above all, personal piety. Our respondents nearly universally describe their decision to cover as a free and informed personal choice within a liberal democratic political culture.

Gillum notes that her recent book, *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America: A Survey of Attitudes and Beliefs and their Implications for U.S. National Security Policy*, and ours are in conversation with each other around how race, migrant history, integration, and, in some cases, religious conversion interact with perceived discrimination and ties to the Muslim community, and so influence political perceptions and behaviors. One difference between our books is Gillum's focus on more state-sanctioned discrimination and our exploration of social forms of discrimination. We

encourage future work to deliberately and explicitly include and explore both forms of discrimination and to treat them as distinct phenomena that occur along a spectrum of severity. Our work suggests that the type and severity of discrimination experienced by individual Muslims are gendered and conditioned by other demographic factors, and especially by visible markers of differentiation such as race and head covering. We hope that these lines of future inquiry will build on the contributions of our respective books to substantially inform collective knowledge on the Muslim American experience.

Muslims in a Post-9/11 America: A Survey of Attitudes and Beliefs and their Implications for U.S. National Security Policy. By Rachel Gillum. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018. 248p. \$75.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.
doi:10.1017/S153759272000362X

— Bozena Welborne, *Smith College*
bwelborne@smith.edu

— Aubrey Westfall, *Wheaton College*
westfall_aubrey@wheatoncollege.edu

— Özge Çelik Russell, *Hacı Bayram Veli University*
ozge.celik@hbv.edu.tr

— Sarah A. Tobin, *Chr. Michelsen Institute*
sarah.tobin@cmi.no

Rachel Gillum's *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America: A Survey of Attitudes and Beliefs and their Implications for U.S. National Security Policy* explores the consequences of counterterrorism and counter-violent extremism (CVE) policies for Muslim Americans' identity, sense of national belonging, and trust in law enforcement. Early in the introduction, Gillum evocatively states that "the tremendous amount of resources put toward tracking...Muslim American communities may have actually been counter-productive in making the country safer and eroded confidence in American institutions" (p. 2). This key insight is explored through interviews and analysis of data from an original survey of Muslim and non-Muslim Americans—the Muslim American National Opinion Survey; MANOS—in 2013. The survey allows for a comparison of both communities' attitudes toward political violence and the perceived legitimacy of security responses. Her findings suggest that the most socially and politically integrated Muslim American citizens are actually less trusting of US institutions, which has significant implications for policies addressing security issues through community integration and political buy-in.

In the first three chapters, Gillum provides a detailed account of the sociodemographics of Muslim Americans, exploring in-group dynamics across ethnic, racial, and denominational spheres, while connecting them to broader national security concerns. The first two chapters survey the basic assumptions about Muslims Americans underlying much of CVE policy—for example, that

Muslims are more sympathetic to religious terrorism—and compare them with data from the MANOS survey and other empirical sources. Gillum reveals that Muslim Americans' tolerance of political violence is not significantly different from other groups in US society. She further demonstrates that the community is well integrated into the broader culture with high levels of attachment to their American identity. At the same time, chapter 3 also demonstrates that most Muslim Americans still feel a heightened level of collective threat due to the social and institutional othering they experience, and they report a significant distrust of law enforcement.

The primary analytical contribution of *Muslims in Post-9/11 America* is found in chapters 4 and 5, where Gillum presents the results of survey experiments capturing Muslim Americans' expectations of and willingness to assist US law enforcement. Gillum's findings show that, in contrast to foreign-born Muslim immigrants and noncitizens, US-born Muslims are less likely to expect law enforcement to treat Muslims fairly. Furthermore, the majority of Muslim Americans are also less likely to voluntarily assist police in criminal investigations when the suspect is a Muslim, with the important exception of Black Muslims. The difference between racial groups of Muslims allows Gillum to engage in a spirited discussion on the distinct experiences of the Black Muslim minority and why, in so many cases, they represent an outlier even within the Muslim community. For example, she finds that "mainstream Black Muslims are the least likely to believe that the use of violence to oppose US influence can be legitimated" (p. 166). At the same time, Black Muslims frequently felt that the post-9/11 environment was "even harder" for them due to discrimination based on their intersectional identities of being both Black *and* Muslim. Still, many Black Muslims felt that they "can be effective liaisons between police and the Muslim American community and may want to help to ensure that Muslim suspects are treated fairly" (p. 165)—a rather surprising and complicated finding in light of recent protests against police brutality against racial minorities.

Although *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America* offers many scholarly insights, it does have some conceptual and methodological limitations. The construction and distribution of an original survey to a hard-to-reach population, as well as the insights gleaned from it, represent a substantive contribution to the scholarship on religion and politics. However, the absence of the survey instrument in an appendix makes it challenging to understand how important concepts were measured and constructed, beyond the brief discussions in relevant chapters. In a few instances, underspecified concepts, such as collective threat and integration, confuse the mechanisms that inform Gillum's quantitative results. Based on her descriptions in the text, we identified instances where concepts were mis- or underspecified in a way that could affect

Gillum's statistical models and, ultimately, her conclusions.

For example, the concept of *collective threat*, which plays a critical role as an explanatory mechanism for the variance in expectations of and cooperation with law enforcement, is underspecified. Gillum defines collective threat as the feeling of attachment to a group and the likelihood to perceive and experience group-based discrimination. She measures it using three indicators in which respondents are asked to agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) *Being a member of my religious community is important to my life*; (2) *I am treated with less respect than other people because of my religion*; and (3) *Americans are hostile toward my religious group*. She then links this measure of collective threat to respondents' perception of both informal and official discrimination. Gillum could have made stronger claims about the differential effects of informal versus formal discrimination if she had included multiple measures of group threat coming from different sources (the public, commercial actors, the police, the TSA, the military, governmental officials, and so on). A more nuanced approach would allow Gillum to confidently distinguish whether Muslim Americans see society, the government, or law enforcement as greater barriers to trust and cooperate with law enforcement.

Gillum also identifies *integration* as an important mechanism for explaining differential expectations of and cooperation with law enforcement between US-born and foreign-born citizens. Throughout the book Gillum depicts integration as a linear process over time and across generations (see the work of Alejandro Portez for a more nuanced consideration of integration), which perhaps inadvertently leads her to present foreign-born individuals as being naïve about the government, customs, and culture of their host society. Gillum then links this idea of integration to her measurement of perceptions of collective threat and relies on place of birth and naturalization status as proxy measures of integration. These methodological and conceptual leaps make Gillum's discussion of the mechanisms underlying the connection between collective threat and a lack of trust in US institutions inferential, rather than empirical.

A significant strength of Gillum's work in *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America* is her triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. However, although Gillum describes her survey and quantitative models in the text, she neglects to use a consistent methodology to analyze her qualitative data. The impressive number of interviews (182, 43 of which were open-ended survey responses) is a rich source of information, but it is not obvious how the qualitative data were analyzed or coded, and there is little overt discussion of how frequently key concepts—such as collective threat—appear in the transcripts of the interviews. Gillum describes two distinct groups of interview subjects: Muslim community leaders and a convenience sample of

contacts. Interview data are considered alongside material from topical conferences and workshops and interviews with government agencies. In the text, it is not always clear which type of respondent is speaking, making it harder for the reader to evaluate what role the social status and personal stake of a respondent plays in driving Gillum's findings. Women are also significantly underrepresented in her interviews (only 29% of the sample), which challenges the degree to which insights from these elite interviews can be generalized to the broader Muslim community.

Finally, given the often-gendered nature of threat perception and the important public-facing role of Muslim women, the book would have benefited from incorporating a gendered lens alongside the existing security focus. Our own work demonstrates the way the headscarf, as an unambiguous marker of Muslim identity, has made women, for better or worse, the public representatives of Islam. We found that many women embrace this role because they understand that Muslim men are more likely to be perceived as a security threat. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have demonstrated that wearing a headscarf is associated with discrimination and heightened threat perception. Furthermore, Muslim women (especially covered Muslim women) are often the explicit targets of integration efforts, based on assumptions about traditional gender roles within Islam, which would necessarily affect their trust of political and especially security institutions, broadly conceived.

Overall, we find *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America* offers a significant contribution to the broader field of political science and the study of religion and politics through its ground-breaking focus on the Muslim American experience with law enforcement and their treatment by police. In the post-9/11 environment, Gillum demonstrates that the social and cultural fabric of US society challenges Muslim American identity through acts of prejudice and discrimination, as well as enhanced institutional surveillance and suspicion. Nevertheless, Muslim Americans willingly participate in keeping America safe. In particular, the empirical finding that Black Muslim Americans see themselves as a bridge between law enforcement and their fellow Muslim Americans is intriguing, as is their greater willingness than other Muslims to assist law enforcement. This unexpected finding deserves further investigation, especially in light of the current protests against police brutality and the experiences of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Response to Welborne et al.'s Review of *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America: A Survey of Attitudes and Beliefs and their Implications for U.S. National Security Policy*

doi:10.1017/S1537592720003631

— Rachel M. Gillum

I thank the authors—Welborne, Westfall, Çelik Russell, and Tobin (Welborne et al.)—for their thoughtful

comments regarding my book and this journal for giving me the opportunity to respond.

I address first their comments on research methodology, specifically on how my qualitative data relate to my findings. As laid out in the introduction, the central findings of my study are based on nationwide, nationally representative surveys of Muslims and non-Muslims living in the United States. I provide color to these findings by including details from interviews, focus groups, and case studies throughout, but do not attempt to make generalized empirical claims based on this qualitative data, given its limitations. Instead, the representative survey data allow me to systematically examine relationships that have previously only been theorized and to examine how features—such as gender, age of migration, time lived in the United States, generation, and race—can shape Muslim Americans' experiences and views of the post-9/11 environment. Their second point—that the complete list of survey items is not included in the appendix—is fair but is fundamentally a stylistic critique: a full description of each survey item, its coding, and model specification appears in each relevant chapter, with additional information in the appendices.

Next, I challenge Welborne et al.'s suggestion that I assume integration to be a linear process. Rather than attempting to make a theoretical claim about Muslim American integration, I *empirically* observe that Muslims reflect their non-Muslim counterparts increasingly across generations, with a diversity of experiences within various segments of the population across race, gender, age, and naturalization, which I discuss at length. The abundance of theories on the contested and complex models of integration, incorporation, and assimilation also means that scholars lack a common empirical measure for these concepts (though see my colleagues' and my efforts to establish a common metric: Niklas Harder et al., "Multi-dimensional Measure of Immigrant Integration," *PNAS*, 2018). In an effort to address the prevailing assertion that Muslims refuse to integrate into Western society and are somehow fundamentally distinct from other Americans, I compare how survey respondents are distributed across dimensions that are believed to be associated with various models of integration—economic, social, civic, cultural, and psychological. It is in assessing the psychological dimension of integration that I use measures in line with the work of Amado M. Padilla and William Perez and several others—such as my *collective threat* index—to capture the degree to which Muslims express generalized feelings of identification with US society and whether they feel accepted and respected within the host society.

Per the authors' preference for more specified measures that identify the source of discrimination, in my chapter focusing on Muslim Americans' relationship with law enforcement, I use a measure specifically designed to capture respondents' expectations for whether law

enforcement will treat a criminal suspect fairly, mirroring the work of Tom Tyler on procedural justice. With a randomized experiment, I assess how these expectations of fairness differ depending on whether the suspect is a Muslim or a non-Muslim; I again find that negative expectations increase significantly across generation (and likewise with time in the United States and naturalization), with variations depending on country of origin and race. Based on my observations related to Muslim integration, I do point to connections between these parallel findings, as well as to other literature that similarly finds that higher levels of integration among second-generation immigrants can reduce trust in government institutions (for example, see Melissa Michelson, "The Corrosive Effect of Acculturation: How Mexican Americans Lose Political Trust," *Social Science Quarterly* 84 (4), 2003).

Finally, the authors note that my findings as they relate to Black Muslims deserve further investigation, especially in light of the Black Lives Matter movement. I could not agree more. My book explores Muslims' varying experiences by race and ethnicity, including the Black Muslim community, a group that is often overlooked in studies of Muslim Americans. I find that Black Muslims, consistent with their non-Muslim counterparts, are significantly more likely than Muslims of other races to distrust the

police. However, despite this shared distrust among Black Muslims, I observe differences in approaches to addressing inequities. For example, those who identify with the Nation of Islam express more adversarial views toward and actively avoid US law enforcement, which is unsurprising given the group's history. In contrast, Blacks who identify with some form of "mainstream" Sunni Islam appear to prefer more direct engagement to address grievances.

Consistent with my survey findings, mainstream Black interviewees felt their "know-how" and history of political activism could be helpful to immigrant Muslims under federal scrutiny, whereas immigrants, especially noncitizens, were more fearful of engaging with law enforcement due in part to their more vulnerable status in the country. Looking to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, we see parallels regarding the differing strategies groups employ to address police misconduct, as well as concerns over the use of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and other federal officers to control protestors, creating fear especially for those with immigrant backgrounds. Black Muslims, like their non-Black and non-Muslim counterparts, are not a monolith, and we should expect that these complex histories and experiences will shape attitudes and behavior toward law enforcement.