Critical Dialogue

The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States.
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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 socioeconomic 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
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— 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