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**MUSLIM IMMIGRATION TO CONNECTICUT: AN ANALYSIS OF MUSLIM
COMMUNITIES' ROLE IN IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION.**

A thesis presented

by

Hannah M. Lynch

to

The Political Science Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Honors in Political Science

Trinity College
Hartford, CT
April 22, 2022

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between Muslim religious identity and immigrant incorporation outcomes in the United States. There is much existing literature discussing the outcomes of different immigrant groups to the United States, but Muslim immigrants have been largely left out of the discussion. Through interviewing Muslim immigrant residents of Connecticut, I discovered a two-fold relationship between Muslim identity and immigrant outcomes. On one hand, Muslim immigrants were able to incorporate more successfully through their Muslim religious community, such as their mosque. On the other hand, Muslim immigrants faced more difficulty incorporating because of negative attitudes towards Muslim immigrants from Americans.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Immigration to the United States is one of the most salient issues facing any administration at the state or federal level today. In the most recent census (2010), 40 million United States residents identified themselves as an immigrant, with over a quarter (13.9 million) stating that they had entered the country since 2000 (Pew 2017). Since 2010, over a million immigrants have arrived in the United States every year (Pew 2018), meaning the immigrant population could now be estimated at well over 50 million. This number continues to grow rapidly, and with the new census data coming soon there will be an even more accurate representation of the number of immigrants in the United States. With this continued growth and the estimation that immigration is going to increase over the next decade, the immigrant population of the United States could reach as high as 75 million by 2050 (Pew 2019), and with such a huge population being immigrants, the political discourse around immigrants continues to be important.

Focusing on immigrants is not a new feature of political science. Much literature already exists about how immigrant groups impact the United States politically, from their ability to incorporate fully to their influence over electoral decisions and the ways that they interact with the political system. While there is already plenty of literature about immigration in the political context, there has been relatively little written about Muslim immigrants to the United States, even though the Muslim immigrant population continues to grow at an increasing rate. Part of this rapid growth is due to refugees, who reach the United States in search of a better life, but a large part of this growth is simply due to increased immigration levels from Muslim majority countries such as Pakistan and regions such as the Middle East (Pew 2019).

In trying to research Muslim immigration, however, it becomes abundantly clear that it is a topic that is not simple to quantify. There is no single source to be able to accurately calculate the number of Muslim immigrants in the United States recently or over any time, and the data that we do have has limitations. We can accurately state that the overall Muslim population in the US is growing by around 100,000 people a year, a minority of which are from births, but the majority of which are from immigration to the United States (Pew 2021). As the Muslim population continues to grow rapidly, it becomes more important than ever for political scientists to understand political incorporation through the specific lens of Muslim immigrants, so that they can better aid and interact with this group.

The measure through which political scientists are able to discuss immigration and politics is called immigrant political incorporation. Immigrant political incorporation, in a nutshell, is an indicator of an immigrant's engagement in their new country politically – this includes their attainment of citizenship, registering to vote, engagement in political debate and a higher stage of running for public office (Bloemraad 2006). When an immigrant arrives in the United States, this marks the first step in what can be a very long process to engaging both civically and politically in the country. While citizenship cannot be attained until later in the process, these first years are formative in an immigrant's likelihood of incorporating in their new home (Bloemraad 2006). With immigration growing continuously in the United States, and where communities incorporate more immigrants into their societies, questions about incorporation are critically important to the political health of the United States as immigrants begin to represent a growing proportion of the population.

Immigrant political incorporation has been widely studied in the field of political science, with much literature already existing surrounding the ability of immigrants to incorporate and importantly what markers should be included in an overview of immigrant incorporation. The importance of this field cannot be emphasised enough, the decision of

immigrants to apply for citizenship (when they are able to) and to engage politically in their new homes demonstrates much about the health of democracy and the kind of communities that are being built across the United States. As a nation that welcomes many immigrants of all different types, from those seeking work, education, marriage, to those seeking a better life, it is critical that the system reflects those entering the country permanently and it is important that all these immigrant voices are heard in the political process.

Muslim religious identity is a varied factor depending on the individual, but there are some characteristics that are common across the group which make it so key to understanding. Politically, Muslims hold some consistent views across the faith, including a drive to work for social justice, a desire to protect the environment and the stressed importance of their faith to their daily lives (Pew 2017). Moreover, Islam is something that most cultural Muslims hold as something that is crucially important to inform the way they make decisions, especially politically, and the majority also describe their mosque community as hugely important for their daily lives (Pew 2017). Therefore, while Islam is a widely diverse religion across ethnic lines and even within the religion itself, there are some consistent beliefs throughout that mean it is an interesting group to study and can be grouped as one for these purposes.

There is already much that has been written about the immigrant political incorporation of specific groups in the United States. Bloemraad's work, *Becoming a Citizen*, dealt specifically with Portuguese and Vietnamese immigrants in large cities. Other similar works have also dealt with similar racial groups in large cities, breaking immigration down by the country of origin (Bloemraad 2006). Existing work in this field deals with other religious immigrant groups, specifically Catholic and Jewish immigrants. Muslim immigrants, while having not been dealt with individually, are a particularly unique case as there is much about being a religious Muslim that impacts day to day life and interactions

with political entities as already described. Community is something that is deemed as crucially important to forming political engagement among all immigrants, and religious engagement with a mosque or other religious dwelling can create that kind of important community for immigrants (Bloemraad 2006, Lajevardi 2020).

Therefore, I will explore the relationship between holding Muslim religious identity and immigrant political incorporation for several reasons. The first of these is that in academia Muslim immigrants have not yet been researched specifically. With the large-scale increase of immigration among this group it is crucial to develop an understanding of their political incorporation. Moreover, understanding immigrant political incorporation, in general, is of the utmost importance to political scientists trying to uncover the health of American democracy. Finally, this group is one that has been pushed into the forefront of some political debates recently, especially over perceptions of national security due to their Muslim faith (following 9/11) and thus it is important to be able to ascertain how this group incorporates politically to quell these kinds of perceptions (Akhtar 2011).

Literature Review

Demographics

Muslim immigration to America is not a phenomenon unique to the recent past; in fact, for as long as America has been a nation there has been Muslim immigration (Serhan, 2014).

Beginning in the earliest days of the Atlantic slave trade, Muslims from North and West Africa were brought to the United States as slaves. Modest levels of Muslim immigration continued throughout the 19th century with immigration from India, North Africa and much of the Arab-speaking world. Post-WWII, Muslim immigration came primarily from countries affected by the fallout of colonisation; specifically, refugees from Palestine made their way to America as their land was taken away from them and immigration to other parts of the Arab

world was not possible. Throughout the 20th century, American involvement in various crises in the Middle East led to further Muslim immigration from Iran, Iraq and the Gulf States and culminated in the 21st century with a steady stream of diverse Muslim immigrants from all over the world, including places such as Syria and Yemen, but also from countries already providing substantial immigration to the US like Pakistan (Serhan, 2014).

As of 2018, Pew estimates that there are around 3.45 million Muslims in the US, while other sources claim this number is as high as 7 million, with the population growing by over 100,000 every year due in large part to consistent immigration (Pew, 2021). With those figures in mind, it stands to reason that the Muslim population in America could well be much closer to 4 million or 8 million now, with over 60% being first- or second-generation immigrants. Black Muslims account for around a fifth of all American Muslims, between 800,000 and 2 million (Pew, 2021).

Muslim immigrants to America, however, are not a homogenous group. Not only do they come from incredibly diverse backgrounds in terms of the home country, but they also come from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds, with Muslim immigrants being both the most likely immigrant group to hold a college degree and the most likely group to enter the United States seeking asylum (Pew, 2021).

Muslim Americans are also diverse in several different ways. Among Muslims (both foreign and native-born), 30% hold a college degree, with a further 11% holding a postgraduate degree, higher than the American population as a whole. They are more likely than the average American family to have income over \$30,000 and the majority of Muslims in the United States are middle-class (Pew, 2018).

Of first-generation Muslim immigrants, the largest group have come from South Asia, at over a third of immigrants, with other large groups of immigrants originating from Asia-Pacific and West Africa (Pew, 2018). Thirty per cent of all Muslim immigrants to enter the

United States have arrived since 2011, with the figure continuing to rise sharply. Of foreign-born Muslims who are eligible to, 65% have naturalized since arriving in the United States, putting them below the national average naturalization rate which stands currently at over 70% (Pew, 2018). A plurality of Muslim immigrants identify as white (including Persian and Middle-Eastern), but over a third are Asian and the fifth identity is black (Pew, 2021).

Immigrant Political Incorporation

Much literature has already been written about immigrant political incorporation in the United States, with recent authors focusing specifically on different minority groups and the changing experience for these groups (Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001; Hochschild & Mollenkopf 2009; Bloemraad 2006). While Muslims as a group have not explicitly been singled out in previous studies, and despite the differences between Muslim immigrants and many of the other immigrant groups to the United States, the foundations of existing research on immigrant incorporation establish markers through which Muslim immigration can be analyzed.

Immigrant political incorporation literature has traditionally focused on determinants of political incorporation among immigrants and their naturalization rates as markers of incorporation, thus dealing primarily with citizenship and voting as indicators of political incorporation. While this work is useful, and the determinants of incorporation discussed are still relevant today, in dealing with only citizenship the scholarship leaves other important markers of incorporation aside and fails to establish a fuller picture of what is happening to immigrants (Liang 1994; Yang 1994; Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001). Historically, scholarship on immigrant political incorporation has surmised that after acquiring citizenship voting is the absolute marker of immigrant political incorporation; this literature argues that voting demonstrates the highest commitment possible to the new country and demonstrates a

willingness to engage in the new country politically (Bueker 2005; Yang 1994). In this model of immigrant incorporation, citizenship is the first marker of incorporation through which people pass to vote, thus voting is seen as the final stage in the sequence of incorporation and marks the highest attainment of incorporation possible.

While this approach has its merits, it generally fails to consider sociocultural issues surrounding citizenship which may impact the likelihood of recent immigrants' ability to obtain citizenship and thus in turn will impact an immigrants' likelihood to be able to vote; problems around acquiring citizenship are wide and varied, but include gender-based differences, language-barriers, cost of applying, difficulty translating required forms and a lack of 'feeling American' (Waters & Pineau 2015). This approach also fails to include the 10 million undocumented immigrants, around a quarter of all immigrants to the US, with virtually no path to naturalization or voting (Pew, 2021). Immigrants with lower education levels, lower income and fewer family members in the United States are also less likely to naturalize, meaning that they stumble at the first hurdle of incorporating politically into the United States (Waters & Pineau 2015). Furthermore, assuming an immigrant is able to overcome the obstacles of seeking citizenship, this approach of analyzing immigrant incorporation also fails to consider barriers to voting that may impact certain immigrant groups more than others, leaving aside a whole swathe of discussion around how immigrants to the United States interact with their voting institutions (Bueker 2005; Yang 1994). The existing literature also fails to consider other features of political incorporation that are just as salient to the discussion, and in doing so alienates large portions of the immigrant community from the debate about incorporation (Bueker 2005; Liang 1994; Yang 1994; Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001).

Other approaches to understanding immigrant incorporation have developed in response to the narrower citizenship and voting approach. Some scholars stress that there are

two factors of incorporation to look at: absorption into the new country versus inclusion into the new country (Minnite 2009). While two very similar concepts, scholars have argued frequently that the differentiation between someone being included as they are into their new country versus being absorbed and assimilated in is the marker of healthy immigrant incorporation, and a balance is a right approach (Minnite 2009)

Recent literature now contends that there are three major categories of immigrant political incorporation which are crucial to understanding an immigrants' journey in the United States, these are: legal, cultural, and institutional (Bloemraad 2006; Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001; Gerstle 2010). Only through analysis of all three of these categories can a full picture of incorporation be developed, and thus literature that does not address all three is lacking in some way. The benefit of addressing three categories of incorporation is the ability to look at conflicts arising between facets of each of the categories, and the fallout when one or more categories is lacking while the other(s) are not; this forms the basis of much of the most recent scholarship on this subject (Gerstle 2010).

Furthermore, literature on immigrant political incorporation has taken the multi-faceted approach to analysis, taking into consideration a wide range of incorporation factors including party affiliation, voting habits, decision-making and day-to-day engagement with political debate, including all three categories of incorporation (Bloemraad 2006; Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001; Barreto & Bonzonelos 2009). This model of immigrant political incorporation as a combination of political debates, practices and decision-making is a product of research by Bloemraad which has since been used and added to by a wide range of scholars, many of whom have applied this framework to research about different minority/ethnic immigrant groups (Ramakrishnan 2001; Calfano & Lajevardi 2019; Mishra 2016). Combining the multi-faceted approach to immigrant political incorporation with

multiple markers of incorporation helps to give a fuller picture of the situation, and is crucial to take into consideration as a framework for looking at Muslim immigrant incorporation.

Throughout existing research within this field, questions about the role of racial and ethnic groups in political incorporation have also been raised. In this line of inquiry, authors contend with questions of how an immigrant's ethnicity or race will impact their likelihood of incorporating politically, if at all, and how these ethnic groups of immigrants might help or hinder incorporation into a new political environment (Mishra 2016; Hochschild & Mollenkopf 2009). At the same time, other literature argues that the social context which someone is emigrating into will have a larger impact on their incorporation levels than other ethnic or racial factors. This argument instead contends that a person's likelihood to incorporate is determined by the encouragement of those around them in their social contexts, such as communities they integrate into, instead of racial or ethnic factors (Bueker 2005; Fraga 2009). Communities are important in this model for helping immigrants to fill out paperwork, find out what they need to be doing to acquire citizenship, help them to understand the current political debates, teach them English and find a place within American society (Waters & Pineau 2015). This argument can also be used by those who see racial and ethnic groups as a factor in determining immigrant political incorporation because many immigrants to the United States find themselves living in communities who share their ethnic or racial identity (Bloemraad 2006). Moreover, it has been consistently demonstrated in the literature that ethnic communities play a huge role in helping new immigrants to settle faster in their new environment, creating important social structures that are likely to have an impact on incorporation as a whole (Bloemraad 2006; Hochschild & Mollenkopf 2009; Schuck 2009; Freeman 2004; Waters & Pineau 2015).

Muslim Immigrant Incorporation

There has been a recent movement in literature to understand Muslim immigrants in several areas, including their voting habits and their integration into American life. Saliently, recent studies have begun to investigate the impact of Muslim religiosity on participation in politics, following trending studies into religiosity of Evangelical Christians, Jewish and Catholic groups in American society (Bonzonleos & Barreto 2009; Calfano et al 2021). As the Muslim population continues to grow in the United States, fueled in large part by immigration, it has become increasingly important for scholars to understand Muslim immigrants in the same way that other religious groups in the US are understood.

In the past two decades, events that have taken place in the US have affected the nature and content of scholarship on Muslim Americans. For example, the fallout from the 9/11 terrorist attacks brought Muslim-American issues into the forefront, with such discussions as the compatibility of Islam as a faith system with so-called ‘American values’ becoming mainstream; a level of scrutiny not afforded to other large immigrant groups with religious backgrounds (Calfano et al 2021; Calfano, Lajevardi & Michelson 2019). Conflicts within the Middle-East region (a region which to many Americans is synonymous with Muslim religious identity), such as the Syrian and Yemeni refugee crisis, have reframed Americans’ understanding of Muslim identity, creating for some Americans a warped view of Islam and Muslim values, but have also created interest around studying this topic (Bilici 2011).

Moreover, recent scholarship on Muslim immigrants to the United States argues that the problem facing Muslim immigrant incorporation is not Muslims coming to the United States and being unwilling to incorporate, but a fact of intolerance on the part of Americans especially following 9/11 which has acted as a tool for preventing Muslims from naturalizing and incorporating and the same rates as counterparts from other ethnic and religious groups

(Bayoumi 2011; Bilici 2011; Schuck 2009). Muslim immigrants must then choose to naturalize, take part in politics, engage politically and create social networks in a country that outwardly does not seem to want them there. It requires a huge amount of mental energy to incorporate politically, and for many Muslim immigrants to the United States, it stands to reason that they would not want to do this given the outward hatred spouted towards them by some 'fellow' Americans (Bilici 2011).

In addition to the normal hurdles immigrants to the United States encounter, Muslim immigrants therefore must also deal with prejudice toward their religious identity, which some see as an obstacle to their ability to incorporate fully (Calfano, Lajevardi & Michelson 2020; Bilici 2011). This discrepancy has caused much literature about how Muslim religious identity impacts a wide array of things for Muslims, including their ability and likelihood to incorporate into other (Western) countries, with much of this originating from France and German scholarship (Freeman 2004). Given this, much American literature attempts to answer the question of whether Muslim religious identity is compatible with American identity, and whether Muslims can complete their faith duties in a secular society such as the United States (Barreto & Bonzonleos 2009; Bilici 2011; Calfano et al 2021; Calfano, Lajevardi & Michelson 2020). There is no clear answer to this question with much of the literature divided on their conclusions.

On one hand, many scholars see that being a Muslim should and does have nothing to do with incorporating into a non-religious society like the United States, in the same way, that Catholic immigrants from South America are not excluded from incorporating politically due to their religious identity (Calfano et al 2021; Tekelioglu 2019; Lajevardi et al 2020). On the other hand, some scholars argue that there are particular characteristics of Islam, unique to the religion, that makes holding that religious identity different from any other religious identity, and thus negatively impacts the likelihood of an immigrant being able to incorporate

fully (Akhtar 2011; Bayoumi 2011; Ghaffari 2010). For those who argue that being a Muslim does hold certain religious differences that prevent incorporation, the main argument follows that strict adherence to the Qur'an, Hadith and Sura, with a strong reliance on the Ummah (community) from a Mosque, means that Muslim immigrants are not able to have the freedom of political expression in the same way as other immigrants are (Schuck 2009; Akhtar 2011). While this could be true in some scenarios, the most recent and emerging literature instead argues that the religious identity of Muslims, including their devotion and reliance on Ummah and their Mosque community, is instead the exact reason why Muslim immigrants should be incorporated at greater rates than other religious groups (Akhtar 2011; Lajevardi et al 2020).

Research Question

Accordingly, my thesis will be guided by two key questions to present a full picture of Muslim immigrant political incorporation. The first, and broadest of these, is: to what extent does holding a Muslim religious identity impact an immigrant's likelihood of fully incorporating politically in the United States? To what extent are social networks within Muslim communities important to developing political engagement among immigrant groups? My research questions culminate together to illustrate a full picture of immigrant political incorporation as it pertains to Muslims and could very well be different from the picture for different immigrant groups in the United States. I anticipate that Muslim immigrants who find community in their mosques will have an easier time engaging politically than Muslim immigrants who do not. Furthermore, I hypothesize that being a Muslim does not impair someone's ability to incorporate fully, and instead can aid someone's journey to political engagement as a Muslim.

Methodology

To examine these questions, I interviewed 16 Connecticut residents who identify as holding both Muslim religious identity and are immigrants to the United States. I chose to interview Muslim immigrants in Connecticut for several reasons. While it is difficult to quantify exactly the number of Muslim immigrants to Connecticut, the state has a large and diverse immigrant population – with around 15% of the population being foreign born (US Census 2010). While there is no specific mention of religious affiliation in Census data, we can estimate the Muslim immigrant population of Connecticut using population-based estimates from countries of foreign-born immigrants to the state. In total, Muslim-majority countries contribute 9% of all immigration to Connecticut (Pew, 2019). This means Connecticut has the same proportion of Muslim immigrants as the United States as a whole (Pew, 2019). While obviously just an estimate, this places the Connecticut Muslim immigrant population at around 55,000 people, growing each year by an estimated 5,000 immigrants. While this total is not overwhelmingly large, it does represent a solid number of Muslim immigrants to Connecticut – a state which welcomes a large number of immigrants, making it a good case study to understand Muslim immigration into a state with already established Muslim communities and a large immigrant population.

Through interviews with CT-based Muslim immigrants, I hoped to explore their experiences with emigrating to the United States and incorporating politically, any challenges they have faced through this and how they feel the system responds to Muslim immigrants in general. While each of these interviewees holds a Muslim religious identity, they have a wide range of experiences of immigration including length of residence, immigration status and country of origin, which could impact their experience. These interviews help to illustrate how social networks play a role in political incorporation, specifically within the Muslim community, and how this can impact political engagement. The format of these half-hour

interviews was semi-structured, following an interview guide. I asked a range of questions to gauge how different people see their time in the United States politically and areas that they highlight as important, but left the interview relaxed enough that the interviewees were able to bring up whatever felt most important to them. Chapter two will describe the interview methodology in further detail.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is centered upon the argument that holding a Muslim religious identity plays a role in an immigrants' likelihood to incorporate politically and that this is dependent on the individuals' interactions and engagement with a faith community. To illustrate this argument, my thesis has been divided into three chapters. This first chapter has been an introductory overview of immigrant political incorporation and Muslim religious identity and the intersection between the two, it has served to describe the existing literature on this subject and to demonstrate the holes in this literature that my thesis will fill. I have also justified my basis for interviews with Connecticut residents and explained why Connecticut was a good place to do these interviews. My next chapter will be a qualitative analysis of my interviews, including overviews of the impressions I received from the interviews, and individual analysis of different immigrants' perceptions of immigrant incorporation. I will engage in analysis of different factors presented by immigrants which may impact incorporation and individual-level factors which may have consistent impacts on immigrant incorporation including country of origin, socio-economic factors and mosque attendance. Finally, I will conclude in the third chapter that the experience of Muslim immigrants to the United States is not binary, there is a simultaneous benefit of Muslim identity through the experience of religious community, while also the negative of Muslim identity from alienation due to faith and Islamophobia.

Chapter II

Interview Process

In order to answer the questions of how holding Muslim religious identity impacts an immigrants' likelihood to incorporate, and to what extent social networks play a role in developing political engagement among immigrants to the United States – I conducted 16 interviews with Muslim immigrants to Connecticut over the month of January 2022. To answer this important question as wholly as possible, interviews were crucial to understand the many nuanced role of religion and religious communities in incorporating in a new country. What was clear from these interviews is that the impact of Muslim religious identity is multi-faceted, offering both opportunities and challenges to political engagement; moreover, it is clear that religious communities – like Mosques – are hugely important to engagement and incorporation in the United States, leading to higher levels of engagement and fulfilment.

I recruited interviewees for this process in a snowball kind of method. I reached out to people who I knew to have Muslim immigrants within their communities and groups such as Muslim Student Associations at colleges. As I received interest from people to take part, those people then reached out to their social networks to recruit further participants. This method was useful in some ways, as it ensured I was able to get a good number of interviewees in a relatively short period of time and with a high success rate for wanting to take part. On the other hand, this approach has its setbacks. The main setback being that having interviewees from the same social groups/networks has the possibility of skewing the results to represent only what that group in particular experience in the United States. Moreover, especially when discussing the impact of religious community attendance, having a snowball method where people reach out to Muslim immigrants from their community – which some of the time was their Mosque community – has the possibility of meaning the

results show higher mosque attendance than is normal given the recruitment method.

The interviews were conducted over Zoom with audio recording, however two interviewees refused to be recorded and thus these were conducted over Zoom while I took detailed notes. One interviewee did not have access to Zoom, so this interview took place over the phone and was recorded using my phone's audio recorder. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted around 30-45 minutes. I started each interview asking the participant for an overview of their personal history, to ascertain where they were from, how long they had been in the US (and specifically in CT), and in general why they had moved here. The interviews then asked about adjustment to life in the US, including obstacles to feeling at home; and moved then into political engagement. I asked next about religious identity, mosque attendance, and intersections between religious identity and feeling at home in the United States and ended with an opportunity for interviewees to bring up any other topics they felt were important or useful for me to know about.

The interviewees represent a diverse cohort of Muslim immigrants across age, gender, ethnicity, education level and status in the United States. Of the 16 interviewees, 9 were male at 56% with the remaining female. Interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 68 years of age, with almost half - 7 interviewees - under the age of 34, this group represents the large college age population that responded to my requests for interview. The rest of the interviewees were distributed evenly from the ages of 35 to 68. There was also diversity of country or origin across the group. The two most represented countries, Egypt and Pakistan, represented half of the interviewees together (8/16), while the other 8 interviewees were each from a different country: Ethiopia, Russia, Palestine, Morocco, Iran, Lebanon, India and Afghanistan.

Furthermore, there was significant differences in the education levels of interviewees, ranging from some High School education for one interviewee, all the way through to PhD and MD completion, with completion of graduate studies for 5 interviewees, nearly a third of

those interviewed (31%). Notably, the total of all those with either a graduate, undergraduate or in the process of completing an undergraduate degree came to 12 interviewees, 75% of the total respondents, thus a huge proportion of the interview pool were college educated to differing extents. Finally, 63% had naturalized into the United States as citizens, nearly two-thirds of those taking part, while the rest were in the United States on either Lawful Permanent Resident status or on their path to that milestone, representing diversity in status and in time spent in the United States.

Characteristic	n	%
Sex		
Male	9	56
Female	7	44
Total	16	100
Age (years)		
19-34	7	44
35-54	5	31
55 +	4	25
Total	16	100
Education		
< High School		
School	1	6
High School	3	19
Some College	4	25
BA	3	19
Graduate	5	31
Total	16	100
Status		
Citizen	10	63
LPR	6	37
Total	16	100

Figure 1: Table of Demographic of Interviewees

Analysis of the interviews was conducted in several steps. Firstly, interviews were transcribed using the Zoom automatic transcription service and then checked manually. For interviews that refused recording I typed up my notes immediately following and did my best

to represent the exact dialogue. For one interview which was recorded using my phone's audio recorder, I transcribed the interview manually onto a word document. I used the Atlas.TI software to analyze transcripts, coding interviews to identify the common themes that emerged, such as political engagement, Muslim community, and identity. I utilized the software to identify repeated phrases, people, and places, which was useful in identifying recurring ideas in the interviews. The coding software also enabled me to identify negative and positive rhetoric within the already coded themes.

Findings

Muslim Faith

An important aspect of the interview process was understanding the individuals' Muslim religious identity. I asked about this in two main ways: how important their faith was to their daily lives and how they practiced that faith - hoping to understand a little better the interaction between faith and the way they live, if there was a correlation at all. Of those interviewed, 50% (8/16) reported that their Muslim faith was a 'very important' aspect of their lives, with one interviewee commenting that 'I would not be who I am today with my Muslim faith'. To a further 43% (7/16) of respondents, their faith was 'important' to their daily lives, something that was a part of their interactions consistently, and helped them to make decisions and formulate opinions about the world, but perhaps not as consuming as to those who found it to be 'very important'. Just one interviewee, a recent immigrant, noted that their faith was only 'somewhat important' to them, saying that they felt this would be different if they attended as Muslim faith community, "my faith was more important to me at home when I attended mosque, but I just have not found a good one yet here." Of those reporting their faith as a very important aspect of their lives, all were regular attendees of a Muslim faith community. Specifically, in fact, all who reported faith as very important were

attendees of a Mosque. The one interviewee who reported faith as only ‘somewhat important’ was in the process of looking for a Mosque to attend, something they cited as being difficult due to the particularities of their faith, suggesting a relationship between regular attendance of a faith community, particularly a Mosque, and the importance of faith to an individual’s daily life.

Other than attending a faith community, interviewees also reported praying regularly, taking part in Muslim religious holidays (including fasting at Ramadan) and reading the Qur’an as ways that they practiced their faith. Of those who read their Qur’an regularly (12/16 - 75% of interviewees), all but one reported the importance of the Qur’an to their decision-making abilities in their day-to-day life, helping them to make decisions about what was right or wrong, and how to be a good neighbour. This extended into the political realm for all those who read the Qur’an regularly, with interviewees responding that the Qur’an’s outlook on the world was able to give them the tools in which to make political decisions. This was observed most often in one interviewee’s (an elderly man) assertions that, “the Qur’an mandates peace and humanity of all of mankind,” repeatedly; an assertion that gave many of the interviewees peace of mind in decision-making. This mandating of humanity for all, meant that for many respondents they felt responsible for ensuring this across the world, and thus were more likely to be involved in humanitarian causes, donations, and refugee programs than their Muslim peers who did not read the Qur’an regularly.

Political Engagement

Political engagement came in a variety of ways from respondents. The most common of these was through voting (for those with citizenship), with every single naturalized citizen (10/10) reporting that they were a consistent voter and had voted in every single election possible since acquiring citizenship, including local office. That was as far as political engagement

went for a number of those interviewed, but for others (6/10 citizens, 4/6 unnaturalized immigrants) they also engaged through community action, helping to register others for voting and organizing get out the vote efforts, or engaging in protests. Other reported engagement included rallying and flyering for candidates up for election, writing to representatives, organizing educational events and even running for office.

There was little to no correlation between political involvement in country of origin and political involvement in the US. For example, one interviewee was hugely involved in their home country of Lebanon, working in resistance movements, creating information channels and an opposition party; but had no interest at all in engaging in the United States beyond voting. There are many reasons for the lack in correlation between the two. Different political environments encourage and produce different engagement among individuals, in this case the harsh political environment encouraged outward engagement in the home country, while the calmer political environment in the US did not provide the same onus for engagement, as an interviewee from Afghanistan told me, "I came to the US to be somewhere where I didn't have to fight every single day. And while I might reach a point where I want to do that again, I fled to be free from the need to do that." There was a slight increase in political engagement among female respondents in comparison to male respondents. Of all women interviewed just one reported minimal political engagement, while among men interviewed three reported minimal engagement. It is unclear from the interviews why this would be the case.

Age played an important factor in these responses, but not in the way previously anticipated. Those over the age of 40 (making up 50% of interviews) reported higher engagement than those aged under 40. While there are a few practical reasons for this -- lack of citizenship at a younger age and being in the US for less time -- something else also played a role here. Frequently, those over the age of 40 responded that they were highly politically

engaged because of how long they had been here and how little had changed in respect to immigrant status and importantly the way Muslims were treated by Americans. One respondent noted that the treatment of Muslims, in her eyes, had worsened since she first moved to the United States back in the early 1980s and so she felt not only a personal motivation, but an obligation to the younger Muslim immigrants to do something about the changing political tides which caused them harm and discomfort, specifically, “I thought things were bad after 9/11 and had gotten better, but the direction of all of this now means I have to do something, I just don’t have a choice.”

Challenges

While Muslim faith and community offer the means to foster engagement and incorporation into the United States, they did not always offer a decidedly positive impact on immigrants. This was not the fault of the Muslim communities themselves, or the individual Muslim immigrants, but a result of broader national and geopolitical forces, and an environment of Islamophobia, meaning that in many circumstances, adjusting to life in the US as a Muslim immigrant was difficult. Some of these challenges manifested themselves in barriers to adjusting to life in the United States, causing immigrants difficulty in finding a home for themselves, while other challenges made it difficult for immigrants to want to engage, or to be able to engage through their Mosque community.

There was a repeated sentiment that one of the hardest things about adjusting to life in the US was the way that Americans acted in general. Americans were described as ‘landlocked’ in their mentality, knowing little about what was going on outside of their country. Many also pointed to Americans’ seeming unwillingness to learn anything about things outside of their world, with respondents highlighting that they felt Americans both did not know and did not care to understand what a Muslim is and what Islam is, as one female

interviewee commented, “I have been asked more times than I can count what a Muslim is, and how I can be a Muslim and not look Middle-Eastern, it’s just a total ignorance on behalf of Americans.”

A comment repeated by every single person interviewed was that they had been shocked upon arrival in the US at how openly Americans were willing to talk about politics, including deep and divisive topics that the immigrants would not have discussed at home, but found Americans to be unwilling to discuss religion or issues that were affecting people right around them. This contributed to the idea that Americans both did not know about immigrants and the struggles they faced and did not care; they were more concerned in the eyes of these respondents with debating foreign policy and tax breaks than they were talking about religion and understanding their neighbors, summing this up well, one recent immigrant noted that, “I was asked more about what I thought about Trump’s tax policies than I was about his blatant Islamophobia, despite telling my peers over and over again that I was a Muslim and this did affect me.” In turn, this helped to foster an environment where Muslim immigrants did not feel welcome or wanted in their new American communities, surrounded by discussions they felt uncomfortable with and people who did not want to spend the time to get to know them.

This ignorance on the part of Americans continue to contribute to making immigrants feel out of place based on their identity. Interviewees mentioned how, whether blatant or not, the refusal from Americans in their community to learn anything about Islam that might help them to understand their new neighbors, one naturalized citizen told me, “It wasn’t so much that they hated me for being a Muslim, it was just that they had this tiny, preconceived notion of a Muslim and didn’t take any time to see if that was correct.” This came up in every single interview, that Americans would discover the person in question was a Muslim immigrant and assume that they knew everything they needed to about the person. In college situations,

this manifested every time as exclusion because of an assumption the immigrant would be bigoted, close-minded, and judgmental of them for drinking alcohol, dating, or engaging in casual sex, as one college student explained, “I would be uninvited from parties when people discovered I was a Muslim and when I asked why I was told it was because I would be judgmental of the people ‘enjoying themselves’ at the party.” Every person interviewed spoke about how harmful this assumption was, making conclusions about them as people before even getting to know them based on rules within their religion. Outside of college, respondents spoke about how even the most tolerant of people made comments about Islam that were uneducated and from a place of fear, as one young Hijabi woman told me, “I have been told constantly that I am a willing part of an oppressive religion, that wearing the Hijab is a symbol of how I am being controlled. If they had asked, they would know it is my choice to wear. Women avoid me because they think that I am brainwashed or that I will try to convert them or tell them they are whores for not wearing Hijab.”

Interviewees also spoke to the feeling of being a cultural other in the United States as a factor in feeling disengaged civically and politically. An interviewee who emigrated for work told me, “I felt hyper-aware of what I wore, and what I ate in the office because I didn’t want to give people any other excuse to be able to other me.” For better or worse, the interviewees who spoke about this most intensely, five out of the sixteen interviewed (31%), said that they only felt safe engaging in their religious community outside of their homes, and would not even consider joining a new community in their town or city. Speaking to this, one interviewee who had just recently achieved citizenship noted that, “American society is just something I will never fully be a part of. I am a Muslim and a foreigner first, even though I am now a citizen. That has changed nothing.” This quote ties in with what was found in the coding of the interviews, where 50% of the interviewees (8/16) mentioned at one time or another throughout the interview that while America was their home, and they were for all

intents and purposes American, they would never be and never feel “as American” as their neighbors or those who had been born in the United States.

A sentiment repeated multiple times was the feeling that being a Muslim and being an American were, “incompatible” in nature, one could not exist with the other in harmony, and this was something that clearly troubled many of those interviewed. This stemmed directly from the interactions immigrants had within their communities, and is summed up well by this statement from a recent immigrant to the United States, “I was told over and over again by people who were my ‘friends’ that I couldn’t be invited to things because I was a Muslim, and with comments like that and about how ‘real Americans’ drink beer and eat bacon, that was kind of the final straw and just made me feel that no matter how hard I tried I would always be just that little bit different.”

Barriers to engagement were not limited to interactions that interviewees had (or did not have) with their immediate surrounding communities – a changing political tide in the United States since 9/11 has led to increased hostility toward Muslim Americans and immigrants and was frequently mentioned as a challenge faced by immigrants.

FOX News was mentioned 26 times in total throughout the interviews, with 14 interviewees (87%), bringing the corporation up at least once in their interview. Every time FOX was mentioned, it coded as a negative sentiment, and was brought up to emphasise the impact that the media had on the lives of Muslims in the United States. FOX News was reported as being a key source of the anti-Muslim rhetoric that interviewees felt was sweeping the United States and has been around since the rise of Trump in 2015. FOX News was reported as alluding to the fact that all Muslims were terrorists, but especially Muslim immigrants, were coming to the United States to spread Sharia Law and attempt to convert Americans to Islam forcibly. As one male interviewee told me, “I remember sitting in a bar in the airport and FOX News was on and the host was talking about some asinine aspect of

Islam that no-one follows, and he was using this to demonstrate how every single person who called themselves a Muslim was plotting to destroy America and how women were used as sex slaves and had no rights in Muslim countries.”

Also mentioned frequently in relation to adjusting to life in the US, was the impact that President Trump had had on Muslim immigrants. Across all the interviews, the terms “Trump” and “President Trump” came up an overwhelming 38 times and was mentioned by all but one of the respondents at least once. Every single mention of Trump coded as negative in nature and upon analysis were in fact highly negative regarding the former President. Among comments made, the frequent rhetoric was that he had made life near unbearable for Muslim Americans and immigrants in particular - his vitriolic rhetoric towards immigrants and asylum seekers as “flooding America under false pretences and taking our jobs, combined with his outward hatred and disgust of Islam as a religion and all Muslims as adherents, even Americans” as one interviewee recalled seeing, meant that Muslim immigrants particularly felt targeted by Trump. Many of those who had been in the US before Trump became president noted a marked shift in the way they felt in the country after he was elected in November of 2016, with some claiming that some of the abuse they faced as a Muslim only came about after Trump became president. As one young woman explained, ‘It was like Trump made all these people feel like they could say what they really felt about us, and it is terrifying. I’ve been here for 40 years and never felt anything like it until he was elected’.

The so-called ‘Muslim Travel Ban’ enacted by President Trump in 2017 was mentioned 15 times in interviews and mentioned at least once by 75% of interviewees (12/16). This piece of legislation, signed in 2017, banned travel to the US from 7 predominantly Muslim countries (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria & Yemen) and suspended the resettlement of all Syrian refugees (Immigration History, 2017).

Understandably, this ban caused extreme discomfort and stress for many of those I interviewed, not just out of concern for family members, but also deep concern about their own status in the US - especially among those here seeking asylum/refugee status - and notably was an outward display of exactly how the Trump administration saw Muslims. One of the interviewees who worked in government told me that, “the banning of predominantly Muslim countries proved that he saw us as a threat, that Muslims coming into the United States was, in his eyes, a national security risk. I can’t even describe how that feels, to know that the President, this man with so much influence, sees your very existence as a threat.” This specific episode was linked directly to a desire to leave the United States, and for two interviewees reversed their decision to naturalise as a citizen, as one explained to me, “I couldn’t fathom going through all of that work, severing ties with my home country, to be a part of a country that believed that and had voted for someone that would outwardly do those things.”

Another frequently cited issue that caused discomfort for Muslim immigrants was the Israel/Palestine conflict, which came up in interviews over 20 times, in 13 of 16 interviews (81%). This issue was problematic for many of the respondents who felt that their view on this matter was not as important as the view of American Jewish people who were able to speak how they felt. One such incident reported was in a Facebook post, where the man in question (originally from Palestine) posted a photo in support of the Palestinian cause and was immediately called out by friends and co-workers accusing him of being anti-Semitic and pro-violence because of the terrorist groups active in Palestine; as he explained to me, “There was this underlying sentiment that because I was a Muslim and supporting Palestine, I was inevitably supporting terrorists and there was no way I was just in support of my home.”

This incident is typical of the sorts of things interviewees experienced upon voicing their support for Palestine. These experiences left them feeling as if their opinion did not have

a place as it was not the majority opinion of the US. Moreover, American rhetoric on the issue (especially from the media), covering the ‘terrorist Muslims’ fighting against Israel and Hezbollah and how all Palestinians support a terrorist group, only furthered the feeling many experienced of being called a terrorist for being a Muslim, even if that was not directly the words people were saying. Being asked how they could possibly support a ‘terror movement’ in Palestine felt to many as if they were being called a terrorist for allying themselves with their fellow Muslims.

An interesting phenomenon which occurred in around half of the interviews, was the repeated sentiment that interviewees’ faith identities had changed and adapted as their time in the US had gone on. Every one of the people reporting this said that when they first arrived in the US their faith was pushed to one side. Of those who mentioned this explicitly in their interviews (11/16, 68%), there was some difference in opinion whether this was a subconscious decision, or something that they had intentionally done in order to feel safe or more at home. For those who had intentionally pushed their faith to the side (6/11 who mentioned this), interviewees told me that they felt that their Muslim faith was, “incompatible with life in America,” and that to fully be able to settle here it was something that needed to be, “brushed aside and hidden, for a while.” For some, this came from how secular they saw the US to be, and how different it was from their home country, telling me that they couldn’t believe the way people acted and how different it felt from their home communities which were highly religious. For others, this was a conscious decision to ‘fit in’, being a Muslim to these interviewees was, as one told me, “Un-American, I did not drink, did not swear, did not date and that made me different,” and so separating that aspect of themselves was a deliberate attempt to soften their Muslim identity and ‘assimilate’ into the US. Their Muslim identity made them feel othered, and on top of already being an immigrant was too much of a risk of sticking out to bear, factor into that the growing Islamophobia that

interviewees reported since 9/11 and with the Trump administration, many felt it would be outright dangerous for them to practice their faith openly and devoutly.

Despite the clear importance of religious communities to helping immigrants feel more at home in the United States, much of this work was limited in scope in terms of engagement due to the harsh scrutiny that Muslim communities faced. A faith leader I interviewed told me about how, “we can’t do anything seen as overtly politically, obviously in part due to our 501c status, but also just generally if we were to engage in that in any way, even in friendly debate, we would inevitably be seen as meddling, and trying to influence decision-making from like a Muslim perspective.” Interviewees also told me that they wished there was more done to politically engage Muslim immigrants, telling me that they felt it was a, “shame, a religious community is so important for immigrants and would be a great resource even to just educate us about bills and what it means for us, avoiding getting partisan or particular about it.” Reaching this level of engagement politically is seen as crucial to helping the Muslim immigrant population feel more at home, despite the concerns that this work would invite intensified scrutiny on their community.

These few examples highlight the nuanced and diverse issues that Muslim immigrants to the US face, on top of those of simply being an immigrant. Not only must they contend with navigating a new environment and finding a place in the society for them, but they must also contend with media that continually paints them as villains, a President who banned people with the same faith as them from the country just for having that faith, and an inability to speak on issues that hit close to home for them without being labelled as a terrorist. These were not the only issues brought up in this vein either, there was frequent mention amongst those who had been in the US for longer about how their lives had changed post 9/11, with similar rhetoric of being called a terrorist or an infiltrator of American society.

Opportunities

Scholars have hypothesized that there are several factors that might impact an immigrant's ability and likelihood to incorporate politically. These factors may include length of stay, country of origin, socioeconomic status, and gender. Among the interviewees I spoke to it is true that all of these played something of a role, but over and above participating in a Muslim religious community played the most significant role in fostering engagement and incorporation. Despite the challenges, holding Muslim religious identity offered many opportunities for political incorporation in the United States. Most commonly, this manifested itself through immigrants' engagement with a Muslim religious community; being a member of these communities was intrinsically linked with higher levels of engagement, better adjustment to life in the United States and more satisfaction with life in the US. Muslim communities did not just offer basic links to incorporate in the United States, interviewees made it clear that these communities offered a sequential kind of support throughout the immigrant process, even after the immigrant in question had achieved citizenship.

Key to this point, was the importance of community to immigrants to the United States. Of those interviewed, 87% (14/16) reported being a current member of a Muslim religious community, including Mosque communities and Muslim Student Associations within colleges, and of those not attending a religious community. Of the two not currently a member of a religious community, one reported they didn't attend as they had not yet found one which was the right fit for them and their religious beliefs. Both interviewees were keen to find a community in the future. Being a member of a religious community was a positive experience for those interviewed across the board, with every mention of "mosque" or "MSA" coding as positive in Atlas.TI. Many interviewees reported that finding a religious community was the turning point in their time in the US, "Once I started attending mosque

regularly, that was when I felt the most welcome here and finally started to feel like I could call this my home.” To some, this community was key in, “solidifying my place as both a Muslim and an American,” while to another the religious community was, “the only place I felt at home.” The extent to which this was a positive experience did differ somewhat, and the importance of the community to them differed also - while positive universally, some felt a stronger affinity to the community than others, and there were still those who sought more community than they were currently offered.

Religious communities not only provided immigrants with an outlet in which they could authentically be themselves, free to practice their faith in a way that felt correct to them; they also provided immigrants with vital services and education that allowed them to better incorporate into the United States. Of those regularly attending a Muslim religious community, 71% (10/14) reported that their community engaged in education of immigrants politically, especially around election times, this varied somewhat in scope, but was generally, “just being told what voting was, why it was important, how we as Muslims deserved to have our voices heard.” Political education was described as some as an important aspect of their religious engagement, with a common sentiment highlighted by one interviewee, “I wouldn’t trust political education from elsewhere, it’s important that it comes from religious leaders or this community that I trust completely.”

Education did not represent the full extent of this engagement. At mosques, interviewees reported the important work their community did in helping immigrants to maintain their status: translating and helping to fill out immigration documents and providing the members of the community with resources to smooth their transition into the US. These services were not unique to Muslim religious communities, with one interviewee telling me, “my Catholic friend told me that her church offered this kind of stuff and so I should see if my mosque did as well.” While there are many Muslims in the United States who are not

immigrants, the overwhelming majority of American Muslims are new immigrants (over 60% - Pew, 2019), and so the importance of these kinds of services cannot be overlooked, especially in the long process of helping immigrants to naturalize in the US. While mostly apolitical in nature, the providing of immigration services even informally clearly has a massive impact on immigrants, with most of those interviewed marking this as a formative experience, and something they wanted to be a part of in helping newer immigrants incorporate. One interviewee reported that, “I don’t know how I would’ve managed when I was applying for citizenship without the help of the mosque. These forms are so hard, and I couldn’t afford an immigration attorney. Having someone who has your back like that, especially a community, it was invaluable at the time.”

While President Trump came up frequently as a negative for immigrants, as previously discussed, there were some positives that came out of his presidency for Muslim immigrants. Interviewees were clear that in the aftermath of his election and the Muslim Travel Ban, their religious communities came together closer and rallied around one another for support. In moments where immigrants felt the most separate from the United States and othered by the President, religious communities became an important place where immigrants could feel at home and could voice their concerns in a judgement-free space. Importantly also, the high proportion of Muslims who are first generation immigrants meant this issue affected them more intimately than those who have been in the US for extended periods of time. “It was a kind of unintended consequence I think, kind of paired with the horror of hearing the President say those things was the sense that we needed to protect our own, and that was where the mosque came in and really rallied around us,” noted one interviewee, who told me the aftermath of the Trump presidency was the closest she had felt to her community in the forty years she had been in the US.

Of those who had naturalized in the US (10/16, 62%) every respondent spoke about how their religious community had been a key factor in helping them to feel ready to take the step of citizenship. Helping them to bridge the divide that they originally felt upon arriving in the US, between their Muslim identity and their desire to become an American. These interviewees singled out their Muslim community as being the difference in making them feel at home in the US, with one interviewee telling me that, “I was so sure I didn’t want to become a citizen, and after being a part of my mosque for three or four years I felt that there was space for me, a seat at the table if you will.”

In reference to the phenomenon previously addressed, of Muslim immigrants hiding their religious identity in an effort to “assimilate” better; Muslim community was cited frequently as the one way they were able to overcome this feeling. The time it took for this sentiment to go away differed from each individual, but there was an overwhelming sense that coming ‘back’ to their faith was an important moment for each of those interviewed and was the point at which they, “finally felt like America was really my home - when I could be both a Muslim and an American.” The way that this coming back to faith was achieved, was through connection or reconnection to their faith community, which served as a resource through which they could see meaningful interactions between Americans and Islam. For those who had reported their faith as originally being hidden or less important upon entering the US, all stated that it was now a very important aspect of their lives, and there was a sense that the time away from the faith or from hiding their faith made it more obvious how much they needed it.

Importantly, among those who attended a Muslim religious community regularly (14/16 interviewees, 87%) all reported high levels of political engagement in the US. This is a correlation of massive importance: every individual who reported a lower level of political engagement did not regularly attend a religious community. Even more saliently perhaps, of

the 14 who reported regularly attending a Muslim religious community, 6 of these had gone through a period of time in the US when they did not attend a religious community. For every single one of those six people, they were markedly less politically and civically engaged when they were not a member of their religious community, not engaging in voting, protesting, education or helping in their community. As one described to me, “before I came to the mosque, I saw myself as a Muslim in an American Christian country, and that meant I didn’t want to be involved, at all really. When I joined the mosque, I wanted to give back, and I wanted my voice heard.” As already discussed, attending a religious community provided individuals with a space where they could both authentically be themselves, but also a space in which they could learn about the US and discuss ways to engage.

Overall Findings

For Muslim immigrants to the United States, religious identity presents both challenges and opportunities for political incorporation. Muslim immigrants face greater scrutiny and stigmatization, which can complicate interactions with government officials. However, Muslim religious communities help this process by providing resources and networks that also facilitate incorporation. For Muslim immigrants, it was quantifiably more difficult to adjust to life here as a direct result of being a Muslim: they faced increased scrutiny, hostile behavior from those around them, and a culture shock unlike that of other religious groups. Moreover, there were frequent mentions of increased difficulty in dealing with immigration officials as a Muslim-presenting person. These interactions included increased stop and searches at airports, being taken into side rooms to be interviewed about visa documents, and in general finding the process more difficult than their non-Muslim (and mostly white) peers. Nine of the 16 people I interviewed told me about a time that they felt they had experienced increased scrutiny at an airport because of being an immigrant, with the ‘random searches’

being the predominant way this manifested. However, having access to a Muslim religious community was also associated with increased engagement and thus incorporation, contributing to a nuanced picture of the impact of Muslim faith on immigrant incorporation.

Muslim religious identity also does not offer the full picture of political incorporation. There are a wide number of other factors that also contribute to an immigrants' ability and willingness to incorporate politically. Included in these are the status of the immigrant in question. The interviews suggest that it is much easier to engage politically once the immigrant has achieved citizenship, both for the stability that citizenship offers and for the ease of participating in voting and elections. Another factor to consider in incorporation are how long an immigrant has been in the US, with longer tenure increasing engagement.

Overall, however, attending a Muslim religious community was by far the largest indicator of an immigrant's level of political engagement. Other factors were salient, but consistently being a part of a Muslim community was linked directly to increased political engagement and further increased incorporation into the United States in general. As hypothesized, this is consistent with what has already been discovered in other literature concerning immigrant political incorporation. Bloemraad speaks about the importance of church to Portuguese immigrants, stressing that community and social networks help to do some of the heavy lifting of immigrant incorporation (Bloemraad, 2006). This is clearly true for Muslim immigrants as well, where mosques and other Muslim community groups are described as being crucial to many immigrants feeling at home in the US. These groups carry out multiple functions, acting as a resource for immigrants with help in maintaining status and some of the more menial tasks of being an immigrant like paperwork and interviews, while also carrying out the social function of providing a space for Muslim immigrants to feel at home and to be authentically themselves in their faith - important given the context of Islamophobia and hostility in the US. Moreover, for many, these communities offer

opportunities for education and discussion about the United States politically, offering resources for understanding voting and elections. Even further than that, for the most politically engaged immigrants, their communities also offered voter registration events, organized protests and marches and education events for the wider community to engage in. The correlation in the interviews is clear, the more engaged a person is in their Muslim community and the more that the community does to encourage and foster that engagement, the more politically incorporated and settled the individual is in the United States.

It is possible, however, that people who are already more engaged both politically and civically are attracted to more engaged mosques. For this reason, I can't establish a causal link between engagement and Muslim religious communities in any given small sample at one point in time. However, as already discussed, my interviews show that in the cases of six of the interviewees, there is a clear before and after in terms of joining a mosque and being engaged. These interviewees assert that before joining a mosque community they were less engaged both civically and politically, and that joining a mosque acted as the catalyst needed to help them engage, offering resources and space in which to do this.

Among those who did not attend a Muslim community, engagement was much lower than for those who did. It was a common sentiment among these interviewees that they felt they needed a community to, "help me feel at home," but were not able to find one that they felt comfortable attending, or that fit their spiritual needs. Finding a Muslim community was key to many of these immigrants deciding to make the United States their permanent home. In fact, three respondents reported that upon finding the right mosque community to attend regularly, they were then able to make the decision to remain in the US after years of being unsure if this was the right decision for them.

Discussion

Entering the interview process, I had hoped to find evidence that religious communities provided the social networks that helped new immigrants find their place in American society and thus incorporate more successfully politically. The concept of social networks and their importance to incorporation comes from a wide variety of existing literature, notably Irene Bloemraad's work 'Becoming a Citizen'. What is clear from the interviews is that religious communities are not just important for incorporation for Muslim immigrants, in many cases they are crucial. The interviews show that those who did not have access to a religious community did not incorporate as successfully as their peers.

Various scholars have cited immigrant incorporation as being a multi-faceted issue, including party affiliation, voting, decision-making, debating and day-to-day engagement, making up the whole framework (Bloemraad 2006, Barreto & Bonzonelos 2009, Ramakrishnan & Espenshade 2001). This approach was clear throughout my interviews, with there being various types of incorporation cited by each respondent. Party affiliation was something that barely came up in conversation, with decision-making, voting and debates coming up naturally far more often. Allowing interviewees to decide for themselves what constituted political engagement allowed for more to be brought into the conversation, not just voting and naturalization, but education, community engagement and protest.

As the situation for Muslim immigrants has worsened over the past years, with the fallout from 9/11 and the war on terror, ISIS, Trump's rise to Presidency and the revived interest around the Israel/Palestine issue; the social networks that arise from religious communities like mosques have become more important than ever. This echoes the concerns raised by Bayoumi, Calfano & Lajevardi - that furthering hostility towards Muslims in general, especially following 9/11 and Trump have caused difficulties in incorporation for Muslim immigrants that is unique to them (Bayoumi, 2011, Calfano & Lajevardi, 2019). This

situation has only furthered the importance of being a part of a religious community, even more so than an ethnic or nationality group, acknowledging the unique challenges of being a member of Islam beyond ethnicity and race. That's not to say that community is the only factor affecting incorporation levels, the research conducted suggests that higher faith importance is also attributed to higher incorporation levels, as is education level. Socio-economic status was not something that was attributed to higher levels of incorporation, neither was gender.

Social incorporation proved to be a key precursor and indicator of political incorporation. As described by Ramakrishnan, social incorporation, especially ties through the workplace and residential communities, plays a huge role in encouraging immigrants to both engage politically and to incorporate further into American society (Ramakrishnan, 2001). Throughout the interviews these ideas are furthered, immigrants who had stable jobs and those who attended college had higher levels and quicker incorporation than those who did not have these social contexts. This does not paint the full picture of incorporation but is an important indicator of the level at which an immigrant incorporates.

Chapter III - Conclusion

Summary of Findings

For political scientists, some of the most salient questions surrounding immigration to the United States include whether immigrants are able to incorporate politically, and what can help them to reach this point. Existing literature on this subject, reports that immigrant political incorporation can be predicted in part based on the immigrant's ability to form social networks which aid their incorporation, setting them up to engage both politically and civically in their new environment (Bloemraad, 2006). Because of the importance of social networks, I expected that to a religious immigrant group like Muslims, their religious communities (formed most often through their mosque) would play a large role in their adjustment to life in the United States. I also anticipated, however, that holding a Muslim religious identity as an immigrant would not be a solely positive experience. Based on prevalent Islamophobia, I expected that many of those I interviewed would have experienced negative associations with being a Muslim upon arriving in the United States (Calfano et al, 2021; Calfano, Lajevardi & Michelson, 2019; Bilici, 2019; Bayoumi, 2011).

Through the interviews I conducted, a pattern emerged among those that attended a Muslim religious community compared to those who did not. For those that attended Mosque or their college MSA (Muslim Student Association), their levels of political engagement were higher, even when the individual in question was not a naturalized citizen of the United States. Every interviewee who attended Muslim religious community (14/16) reported that they engaged in their community. For some this was through organization of events like fundraisers, for others this was simply being a part of a community and attending events. Only those who attended religious communities voted; and looking to more involved forms of political engagement such as financial support and campaigning actively for candidates,

these were done only by those who were highly involved socially and civically in their religious community.

Looking to other demographics to try to find a pattern, there was no clear correlation between any of the other factors and political engagement. I had initially thought that there might be a correlation between time spent in the United States and political engagement, but with some of the most involved individuals being those that had arrived in the United States in the past five years, and also those that had arrive over forty years ago, I found this to not be the case.

Perhaps the most interesting pattern I observed was among those who had come to be a part of a religious community, after initially choosing not to when they first arrived in the United States. Among this group, the consensus was that they had been less engaged and less interested in being engaged when they were 'on their own' as opposed to when they became a part of a religious community. This occurred in nearly a third of those I interviewed (32%, 5/16), and is an important factor as it helps to dispel the idea that only those inclined already to be engaged are the ones likely to attend Muslim religious community. This group all spoke to how when they were not attending a community group they felt like they did not have a place in the United States. As one interviewee, a woman from Egypt, told me, "before I attended Mosque it was this kind of strange feeling, because like I was here in the US but I didn't feel as if I really was here spiritually." Not only are the interviewees reporting that their religious community helps them engage, but this phenomenon of coming to a religious community and feeling more engaged as a result of that, helps to demonstrate the real importance of religious communities to incorporation.

Every interviewee experienced some level of conflict or backlash because of their Muslim religious identity. Some of this manifested as genuine ignorance: comments asking interviewees why they didn't drink, confusion around fasting at Ramadan and why that took

place, and the choice of women to cover up - all microaggressions that led to Muslim immigrants feeling like they had to continually justify their existence. There was also much more sinister Islamophobia. Interviewees reported that the rhetoric of media such as FOX News, which reported that Muslims were terrorists and coming to the US to convert everyone, meant that interviewees felt unwelcome here, to the point of wanting to leave. This extended into the political sphere as well: as mentioned previously President Trump was mentioned overwhelmingly in the interviews, with interviewees feeling he personally had contributed to Islamophobic rhetoric that they faced as immigrants which made their incorporation more difficult.

The central findings of this project confirm the two main trends that I had expected to find from interviewing Muslim immigrants to the United States. Using literature written about the experience of other religious immigrant groups, including Catholic immigrants from Portugal, I hypothesised that religious communities, like churches, play a large role in helping immigrants to find their place within the United States and in doing so helps them to feel at home culturally, while the religious community also provides the support to help immigrants legally (Bloemraad, 2006). The major tenets of immigrant political incorporation are varied from scholar to scholar, but generally are seen as being a combination of engagement (both political and civic), as well as legal and cultural shifts in an immigrant especially in changing of status and naturalization for an immigrant (Bloemraad, 2006; Ramakrishnan & Espenshade, 2001; Waters & Pineau, 2015).

While Muslim religious communities offer spaces for immigrants to feel welcomed and affirmed while also providing key resources for political and civic engagement, there were also negative associations with holding Muslim religious identity as an immigrant. Interviewees reported Islamophobia - both outward and through ignorance, as key issues with feeling at home in the United States. This leads to a situation where Muslim immigrants are

simultaneously incorporated by their Muslim identity through their communities, helping with engagement and adjustment to life in the United States, whilst also face discrimination due to their Muslim faith. What is clear is that there is not one impact of Muslim religious identity on the immigrant experience.

Policy Recommendations

Looking to the future, a number of policy reforms may help new immigrants, and in particular Muslim immigrants, to adjust to life in the United States more easily. The number one problem that came out of my interviews was that many interviewees felt their Muslim faith was incompatible with being American; a sentiment that grew from experiences of both ignorance and outward hostility towards Islam from Americans and media in the United States.

Combatting this level of Islamophobia is not easy, it is clearly something that is ingrained into American society at every level, from basic ignorance from many Americans all the way to mass media promoting an idea of Muslims being violent. There is not one single way to attempt to undo this ignorance, and it may take generations to fully undo. Nevertheless, the first place I would recommend starting is for children in schools to learn about Islam (and other religions present in the United States) as part of a social studies class. Learning about what Islam is and what Muslims believe while in school will help Americans to be less ignorant about religions other than their own. Doing so in an open environment can help to combat learned islamophobia early. This approach to combatting discrimination of many kinds has been proven to be effective, and similar methods in the United Kingdom of educating children about Islam has proven to have a positive impact on whole families in reducing Islamophobia, with children going home and telling their families about what they have learned, thus reducing bias even in older generations (Zaidi, 2019).

Further recommendations for combating Islamophobia are difficult, but I recommend that there are clear definitions in media like FOX News between opinion and fact, as much of the Islamophobic statements being made by media comes from opinion segments and not from the news. I would also like to see a fact-checking of this media before it is allowed to go out, to ensure that false statements about Muslims and Islam are not being made, it is hard to specifically define what this would look like; but it is clear that this media cannot go on touting inaccurate statements about Islam while many Americans view FOX News as telling the truth completely. Existing research on combating prejudice - including antisemitism and islamophobia, have confirmed that some of the most important steps include ensuring that mass-media is not purporting false images of these groups, and so ensuring that it is clear when anchors on FOX are sharing their own opinion, as opposed to 100% fact, is very important (Sayyid & Vakkil, 2011).

In terms of immigrant political incorporation, it is clear that Muslim religious communities are already doing a good job. From the interviews we can glean what resources are the most important to new immigrants, and thus encourage more religious communities to provide them. Far and away the most important thing to newer immigrants was the support their religious community provided in filing immigration paperwork and maintaining status. While it may seem odd for this to be provided by a religious community, interviewees told me they only trusted their religious community to provide this. Thus religious communities all over should be encouraged to do what they can to provide this support for immigrants.

Furthermore, interviewees also reported that the education services offered by their religious community was a huge factor in their ability to incorporate politically. Most often, this education was surrounding civic and political engagement in the United States, telling the community about opportunities to take part, the importance of voting and what their religion tells them about political engagement. This blending of both religious and political life

proved highly important for immigrants, and I highly recommend that religious communities implement this if they have not already.

Limitations to the Project

While the interviews suggest that Muslim religious communities help immigrants to incorporate into the United States, I cannot determine this to be the case for all immigrants due to the limitations of my methods. For example, my sample size is relatively small and non-randomly selected. Just 16 participants were interviewed out of a Connecticut Muslim immigrant population estimated at over 55,000 individuals. If this project could be repeated with more time and resources, then it would be interesting to see the feedback from interviewing a larger, randomly selected group of Muslim immigrants. That said, the demographics of my diverse sample capture much of the observable variability among Muslim immigrants in the US.

However, the snowball recruitment method presents additional limitations. Each person I interviewed reached out to their network to find more people willing to take part. While this approach worked well in the short time-frame of the interviewing process, it does mean that some of those interviewed are from the same social networks. This means the results may be skewed, as people in the same social network are more likely to have similar experiences of engagement and incorporation, given that I was asking about religious communities they were all a part of. Thus, if this project were to be continued or repeated, it would be apt to branch out and attempt to recruit interviewees from a wide range of different social groups, not just using the snowball method.

This research was also limited due to the likelihood that people willing to engage in research projects like this, are people already inclined to be politically engaged in their community. If someone was not willing to engage politically or civically in the United States,

then it stands to reason they would be less inclined to take part in an involved interview process such as this one, thus meaning there are likely disengaged individuals that might be missed out of research such as this because of their own unwillingness to take part.

This research was also limited by the lack of data on religious affiliation within the United States. The census does not ask a religion question, and there are few other avenues from which to take accurate data about the US population. Therefore, while it is somewhat easy to find accurate data about immigrants to the United States and their country of origin, it is significantly harder to attempt to discern religious affiliation of these immigrants. Pew offers a good resource for breakdowns of religious groups by demographic, especially their recently published (2021) breakdown of Muslims, including by socioeconomic status and country of origin, alongside an estimate of their immigrant population based on evaluations of immigrants from Muslim majority countries. This limited my ability to demonstrate the importance of this field of research in general and in particular to highlight why I chose to situate this research in Connecticut instead of broadening my interviews to the United States in general. It also limited my ability to situate this research within the already existing field of Muslim and immigration studies.

Questions for Remaining Research -

Due to the limitations of my research, there still remain a number of questions to be answered. Most saliently, it would be important to discern whether the relationship I discovered between Muslim religious community attendance and immigrant incorporation exists outside of the groups and spaces that I was able to research. As described above, this would look like a wider range of interviewees from different groups, using a more defined recruitment process rather than relying on the snowball method to scope out potential interviewees.

It would also be interesting to discover the extent to which the relationship between Muslim immigrants and religious community exists outside of Connecticut, given that all of my interviewees were located and had emigrated here, it could be the case that in states with harsher immigration laws, or stricter adherence to Judeo-Christian values in schools, such as currently in Florida, that the experience of Muslim immigrants is very different. Further research could also answer the questions how best to combat Islamophobia and Islamophobic rhetoric in the United States. This research would investigate various methods of combating this, working to discern what are the most effective methods - perhaps such as education and monitoring of media and their rhetoric.

There is still significant work to be done on this topic, and the research I have conducted barely scratches the surface of uncovering the immigrant experience of those holding Muslim religious identity; however, it is clear that there exists a relationship between incorporation and Muslim religious identity, and it is crucial this is uncovered further.

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Appendix

A:

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Rapport-Building

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself. Where are you from and what brought you to the United States?
 0. Probe: How long have you been in the US?
 1. How long in CT?

Pre-Emigration Experiences

1. Before you moved to the United States, how much did you engage politically in your home country (for instance this could involve participation in organizations, volunteering, attending meetings, contacting officials, or voting)?
2. What does it mean to you to be politically engaged in your country?

Emigration Experiences

1. What was your impression of the United States when you moved here?
2. How has the process been for you adjusting to life in the United States?
3. What obstacles have you faced to feeling at home in the US (if any)?
4. Since arriving in the US, have you been involved in civic or political participation at all? (Again, this could be attending organizational meetings, volunteering, contacting officials, and voting, among other activities.)
 0. Probe specific activities
5. Have you become a citizen of the US, or do you intend to?
 0. What contributed to your decision to naturalize (or not to naturalize)?
 1. What was the process of naturalization like for you?
6. To what extent do you feel incorporated or included in American society politically?
 0. What factors promote your feeling of inclusion?
 1. What factors keep you from feeling included?

Muslim Identity

1. Could you tell me a little bit about how you practice your faith?
 0. Do you attend mosque etc?

2. How important is your Muslim faith to you, in terms of your identity and your daily life?
3. IF Yes to attending mosque - What do you like about attending mosque here in the United States?
 0. Probe: Does mosque provide a sense of community?

Muslim Identity & Emigration

1. How does your Muslim faith or religious practice affect your ability to feel at home in the United States?
 0. Are there times where you feel others make assumptions based on your Muslim identity?
 1. IF Yes to Q.10 - could you describe this time to me?
2. Could you describe some experiences of political engagement and incorporation within your own Muslim community?

Follow-Ups

1. What could be done by US officials to make Muslim immigrants feel more welcome and included?
2. What could be done at the community level to help Muslim immigrants feel more welcome and included?
3. Do you have anything else you would like to share with me?
4. Is there anyone else you think I should speak to about these questions?

B:

Figure 1: Demographics of interviewees

Characteristic	n	%
Sex		
Male	9	56
Female	7	44
Total	16	100
Age (years)		
19-34	7	44
35-54	5	31
55 +	4	25
Total	16	100
Education		
< High School	1	6
High School	3	19
Some College	4	25
BA	3	19
Graduate	5	31
Total	16	100
Status		
Citizen	10	63
LPR	6	37
Total	16	100