

Uncovering Bias among Legislators in Field Experiments

—

IPPSR Legislative Staff Training

Nazita Lajevardi, J.D., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Michigan State University

February 7, 2020

Representation

- ▶ Why should we be interested in it?
- ▶ How to define it?
- ▶ How to measure it?

Representation

- ▶ Why should we be interested in it?
 - ▶ How to define it?
 - ▶ How to measure it?
-
- ▶ Political scientists spend a great deal of time thinking about these questions.

Representation

Why should we be interested in it?

- ▶ Democratically elected legislators are expected to represent the interests of their constituents and advocate on their behalf.
- ▶ But, there's reason to believe that legislators may fail to represent *all* of their constituents.
- ▶ There's a great deal of scholarship that shows the descriptive and substantive underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in particular.
- ▶ Much of our research on racial and ethnic minorities in American politics investigates whether the American political system is biased against marginalized groups.

Representation

How to define 'representation'

1. Descriptive representation

- ▶ When a shared background exists between a constituent and her representative.
- ▶ Scholarship often explores how nonwhites feel about the idea that they are better served in the political process by representatives who share their background (Tate 2004; Barreto 2010; Manzano and Sanchez 2010; McConaughy et al. 2010; Schildkraut 2013; Wallace 2014).

2. Substantive representation

- ▶ Having a representative with congruent policy views acting as an advocate (e.g., roll call votes).
- ▶ One form of substantive representation that legislators can provide is meeting and addressing constituency requests (Pitkin, 1967).

Representation

How to define 'representation'

3. Descriptive representation

- ▶ When a shared background exists between a constituent and her representative.
- ▶ Scholarship often explores how nonwhites feel about the idea that they are better served in the political process by representatives who share their background (Tate 2004; Barreto 2010; Manzano and Sanchez 2010; McConaughy et al. 2010; Schildkraut 2013; Wallace 2014).

2. Substantive representation

- ▶ Having a representative with congruent policy views acting as an advocate (e.g., roll call votes).
- ▶ One form of substantive representation that legislators can provide is meeting and addressing constituency requests (Pitkin, 1967).

Representation

How to define 'representation'

3. Descriptive representation

- ▶ When a shared background exists between a constituent and her representative.
- ▶ Scholarship often explores how nonwhites feel about the idea that they are better served in the political process by representatives who share their background (Tate 2004; Barreto 2010; Manzano and Sanchez 2010; McConaughy et al. 2010; Schildkraut 2013; Wallace 2014).

2. Substantive representation

- ▶ Having a representative with congruent policy views acting as an advocate (e.g., roll call votes).
- ▶ One form of substantive representation that legislators can provide is meeting and addressing constituency requests (Pitkin, 1967).

Representation

How to measure 'representation'

- ▶ Since we know that racial, ethnic, and religious minorities are descriptively underrepresented by elected officials, we often focus our questions on measuring substantive representation.
- ▶ We ask how well members of the group we are examining are being served by their elected representatives.
- ▶ Measuring substantive representation: Study roll call votes, speeches, congressional text, twitter text, e-newsletters, press releases, transcript of town hall phone meetings, etc.
- ▶ Another way to measure ...: Audit studies for constituency services.

Representation

How to measure 'representation'

- ▶ Since we know that racial, ethnic, and religious minorities are descriptively underrepresented by elected officials, we often focus our questions on measuring substantive representation.
- ▶ We ask how well members of the group we are examining are being served by their elected representatives.
- ▶ Measuring substantive representation: Study roll call votes, speeches, congressional text, twitter text, e-newsletters, press releases, transcript of town hall phone meetings, etc.
- ▶ Another way to measure ...: Audit studies for constituency services

What are audit studies?

- ▶ Audit studies are randomized field experiments, developed first to measure labor market discrimination based on specific characteristics, such as gender, age, race, or religion.
- ▶ Audit studies are “an important and useful means of measuring discrimination in various domains.”

What are audit studies?

- ▶ Bertrand and Mullainathan's (2003) classic curriculum vitae (CV) experiment created two identical resumes stratified by low- and high-skill levels, and assigned a white-sounding name to a random half of the resumes and a black-sounding name to the other random half.
- ▶ The experiment generated striking results. Applicants with white-sounding names received 50% more callbacks than applicants with black-sounding names.
- ▶ Moreover, the return on quality of CV (i.e., reward for high-skill level) was high for whites but nonexistent for blacks.
- ▶ The randomization of race assignment across otherwise identical resumade it possible to overcome the missing counterfactual and to draw inferences on the effect of race.

Why are audit studies informative?

- ▶ Bias against voters and constituents, who the representative is elected to serve, is anti-democratic and discriminatory.
- ▶ Across a wide range of areas, audit experiments have demonstrated the existence of sizable gaps in responsiveness between whites and racialized minorities (e.g., Schulman et al. 1999; Lavergne and Mullainathan 2004; Pager, Bonikowski, and Western 2009; Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010).
- ▶ In political science, the scholarship has largely shown that minorities are often ignored and underrepresented by elected officials (Butler and Broockman 2011; Butler, Karpowitz, and Pope 2012; Broockman 2013; Butler 2014; Dis- telhorst and Hou 2014; Carnes and Holbein 2015; Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2015; White, Nathan, and Faller 2015; Einstein and Glick 2017).

Why are audit studies informative?

- ▶ Audit studies on legislators, in particular, have served as an important tool for testing political inclusion and incorporation.
- ▶ Replying to their constituents is one of the regular duties of legislators and their staff.
- ▶ When they respond to their constituents, reelection-motivated legislators communicate that they are capable of fulfilling the needs of those in their districts (Mayhew 1974).
- ▶ Those legislators who please their constituents are ultimately able to win their constituents' support, or at least temper any negative perceptions of them.

Research I will present today

- ▶ Measuring Muslim American political (under)-representation.

Research I will present today

- ▶ Measuring Muslim American political (under)-representation.
- ▶ Why Muslim Americans?

Research I will present today

- ▶ Why Muslim Americans?

- ▶ Observable signs of a Muslim American backlash in the real world.

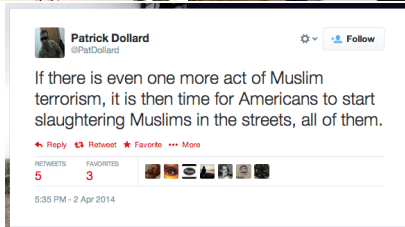
Signs of a Backlash: In the Media



Signs of a Backlash: In the Media



Signs of a Backlash: The Public's Attitudes



Signs of a Backlash: The Public's Attitudes

Survey evidence also indicates a substantial portion of Americans hold negative views of Muslim Americans (YouGov).

- ▶ 81% of all Republicans and 51% all Americans agree that there should be “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on.”

Signs of a Backlash: Rise in Anti-Muslim Incidents

- ▶ CAIR reports 3,787 bias incidents against Muslims in 2015, 4,283 incidents in 2016, and 2,599 in 2017.
- ▶ Institutionalization of Islamophobia in a number of states. Between 2013-2017:
 - ▶ 109 “anti-Islam” laws were introduced into state legislatures.
 - ▶ During that time frame, 10 states approved “anti-Islam” laws.
 - ▶ 2 states revised their textbooks in response to anti-Islam campaigns.

Signs of a Backlash: Rise in Anti-Muslim Incidents

- ▶ CAIR reports 3,787 bias incidents against Muslims in 2015, 4,283 incidents in 2016, and 2,599 in 2017.
- ▶ Institutionalization of Islamophobia in a number of states. Between 2013-2017:
 - ▶ 109 “anti-Islam” laws were introduced into state legislatures.
 - ▶ During that time frame, 10 states approved “anti-Islam” laws.
 - ▶ 2 states revised their textbooks in response to anti-Islam campaigns.

Why Muslims?

Given anecdotal signs of backlash, do Muslim Americans similarly face a backlash in terms of representation? And especially when they try to access politics? As individuals? And as a community?

Research I will present today

- ▶ Two audit studies on state legislators
 - ▶ **Study 1:** *Testing access to politics for the individual*
Field experiment on *all* state legislators from a fictional constituent (Muslim or White, with high or low education) asking for an internship application in their office.
 - ▶ Internships serve as a springboard into state legislatures providing access to politics that can even launch a person into a political career.
 - ▶ **Study 2:** *Testing access to politics for the community*

Research I will present today

- ▶ Two audit studies on state legislators
 - ▶ **Study 1:** *Testing access to politics for the individual*
 - ▶ **Study 2:** *Testing access to politics for the community*
Field experiment on *state legislators from states with large Muslim populations* from a fictional imam or pastor asking for a legislative visit to discuss how to better integrate their congregations into politics.
 - ▶ While legislators may reason away their dismissal of one lone individual constituent who contacts them with a request, members of marginalized groups are truly hindered from integrating into the political arena when their community leaders are ignored.
 - ▶ When these leaders are unable to reach representatives to discuss the pressing issues facing their members, representation opportunities are scant, i.e., the legislator has chosen not to take into account the group's preferences.

Research I will present today

- ▶ Two audit studies on state legislators
 - ▶ **Study 1:** *Testing access to politics for the individual*
 - ▶ **Study 2:** *Testing access to politics for the community*
Field experiment on *state legislators from states with large Muslim populations* from a fictional imam or pastor asking for a legislative visit to discuss how to better integrate their congregations into politics.
 - ▶ While legislators may reason away their dismissal of one lone individual constituent who contacts them with a request, members of marginalized groups are truly hindered from integrating into the political arena when their community leaders are ignored.
 - ▶ When these leaders are unable to reach representatives to discuss the pressing issues facing their members, representation opportunities are scant, i.e., the legislator has chosen not to take into account the group's preferences.
- ▶ Together: these two studies can be informative about the political incorporation of Muslim Americans.

Study 1

Study 1: Data and Methods

- ▶ I emailed 6630 state legislators at their publicly available email addresses using an audit study design in February 2015.
- ▶ To obtain the legislators' email addresses, I compiled a list from each state's Assembly and Senate website.
- ▶ Each legislator email received one of four emails (or treatments) asking for an internship application:
 1. White and low education
 2. Muslim and low education
 3. White and high education
 4. Muslim and high education
- ▶ I used a putatively White alias ("Jake Thompson") and a putatively Muslim alias ("Abdul Al-Nawad") to vary race/religion.
- ▶ Education = proxy for SES (either community college grad or Harvard grad)

Study 1: Data and Methods

- ▶ I emailed 6630 state legislators at their publicly available email addresses using an audit study design in February 2015.
- ▶ To obtain the legislators' email addresses, I compiled a list from each state's Assembly and Senate website.
- ▶ Each legislator email received one of four emails (or treatments) asking for an internship application:
 1. White and low education
 2. Muslim and low education
 3. White and high education
 4. Muslim and high education
- ▶ I used a putatively White alias ("Jake Thompson") and a putatively Muslim alias ("Abdul Al-Nawad") to vary race/religion.
- ▶ Education = proxy for SES (either community college grad or Harvard grad)

Study 1: Data and Methods

- ▶ I emailed 6630 state legislators at their publicly available email addresses using an audit study design in February 2015.
- ▶ To obtain the legislators' email addresses, I compiled a list from each state's Assembly and Senate website.
- ▶ Each legislator email received one of four emails (or treatments) asking for an internship application:
 1. White and low education
 2. Muslim and low education
 3. White and high education
 4. Muslim and high education
- ▶ I used a putatively White alias ("Jake Thompson") and a putatively Muslim alias ("Abdul Al-Nawad") to vary race/religion.
- ▶ Education = proxy for SES (either community college grad or Harvard grad)

Study 1: Data and Methods

- ▶ I emailed 6630 state legislators at their publicly available email addresses using an audit study design in February 2015.
- ▶ To obtain the legislators' email addresses, I compiled a list from each state's Assembly and Senate website.
- ▶ Each legislator email received one of four emails (or treatments) asking for an internship application:
 1. White and low education
 2. Muslim and low education
 3. White and high education
 4. Muslim and high education
- ▶ I used a putatively White alias ("Jake Thompson") and a putatively Muslim alias ("Abdul Al-Nawad") to vary race/religion.
- ▶ Education = proxy for SES (either community college grad or Harvard grad)

Study 1: Data and Methods

- ▶ I emailed 6630 state legislators at their publicly available email addresses using an audit study design in February 2015.
- ▶ To obtain the legislators' email addresses, I compiled a list from each state's Assembly and Senate website.
- ▶ Each legislator email received one of four emails (or treatments) asking for an internship application:
 1. White and low education
 2. Muslim and low education
 3. White and high education
 4. Muslim and high education
- ▶ I used a putatively White alias ("Jake Thompson") and a putatively Muslim alias ("Abdul Al-Nawad") to vary race/religion.
- ▶ Education = proxy for SES (either community college grad or Harvard grad).

Study 1 Experimental Design

Fictional alias	Block 1 republican legislators	Block 2 democratic legislators
White high education	945 legislators	718 legislators
White low education	939 legislators	723 legislators
Muslim high education	938 legislators	724 legislators
Muslim low education	939 legislators	704 legislators
<i>Total</i>	3761 legislators	2869 legislators

Study 1 Experimental Template

(ABDUL AL-NAWAD / JAKE THOMPSON)

Attn: Hiring Staff

Re: An Internship Position for Summer 2015

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is **(Abdul Al-Nawad / Jake Thompson)**. I am 22 years old and **(recently finished community college / graduated from Harvard University)** with a degree in Political Science. I was born and raised in **(legislator's state)** and I am very interested in working in your office as an intern to gain more experience in politics; as it is a career I would like to pursue in Washington in the coming years. I believe that an internship in your office would be an invaluable opportunity towards attaining that goal.

Can you please email me an application for an internship position in your local office for summer 2015?

Best regards,

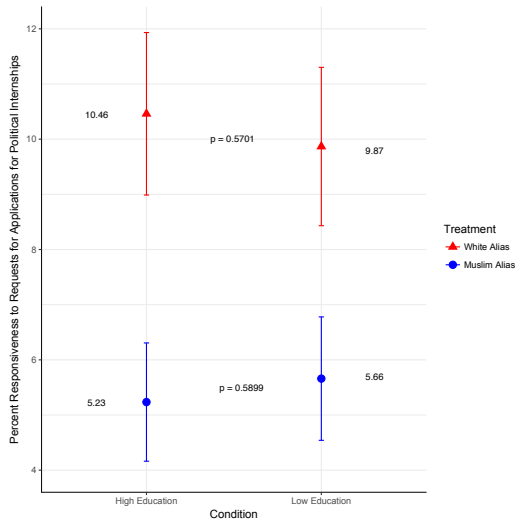
(Abdul Al-Nawad / Jake Thompson)

Results

Study 1: Aggregate responsiveness rate by race/religion alias.

Fictional alias	Response rate
White	10.16% (338/3325)
Muslim	5.44% (180/3307)
Difference	4.7%***

Study 1: Disaggregated responsiveness rate by race/religion alias and high/low education.



Study 1: Disaggregated responsiveness by race/religion alias and high/low education, taking into account legislator partisanship

Fictional alias	Republican legislators	Difference (from WH)	Democratic legislators	Difference (from WH)
White high education	10.37% (98/945)		10.58% (76/718)	
White low education	9.05% (85/939)	1.32%	10.93% (79/723)	0.34%
Muslim high education	4.79% (45/938)	5.57%***	5.80% (42/724)	4.78%***
Muslim low education	5.43% (51/939)	4.93%***	5.97% (42/704)	4.62%**

Study 1: Size of the Muslim population in the state seems to matter for responsiveness to Muslim High Education in LMP states.

Fictional alias	Legislators LMP	Difference (from White or WH)	Legislators SMP	Difference (from White or WH)
White	14.39% (80/556)		9.32% (258/2769)	
Muslim	9.90% (51/515)	4.48%**	4.62% (129/2792)	4.70***
White, high education	14.23% (39/274)		9.72% (135/1389)	
White, low education	14.53% (41/282)	0.3%	8.91% (123/1380)	0.8%
Muslim, high education	10.4% (26/250)	3.83%	4.32% (61/1412)	5.4%***
Muslim, low education	9.43% (25/265)	4.8%*	4.93% (68/1378)	4.78%***

Takeaways so far:

Takeaways so far:

- ▶ Ordinary American Muslims are unable to access a political career at the same rate as their White counterparts, regardless of their socioeconomic status.
- ▶ Muslim political integration does not increase even with upward socioeconomic mobility.
- ▶ Moreover, though Muslims strongly identify with the Democratic Party today, they do not have strong allies among Democratic representatives.
- ▶ The implications are disconcerting. Muslim voices are systematically ignored by their representatives and even by those whom they view as allies

But ...

- ▶ What's going on in large Muslim population states?
- ▶ While individuals are being denied access, is the same true for representatives of their community?
- ▶ Is “Ahmed” a clear enough signal of religion?

Study 2

Study 2: Data and Methods

- ▶ Second audit study on 1244 state legislators in 8 states with 100,000 Muslims or more (large Muslim population state in August 2015).
 - ▶ These states include: California (272,814), Florida (164,846), Illinois (359,264), Michigan (120,351), New Jersey (160,666), New York (392,953), Texas (421,972), and Virginia (213,032).
- ▶ Evaluating the ability of the Muslim leaders—rather than individuals—to procure a response from their representatives when asking for a legislative visit to discuss integrating the congregation into the district.
- ▶ Clear signal of religious identity: “Pastor John Rogers” or “Imam Yassir Siddiqui”

Study 2 Experimental Template

-
- (1) Dear Representative _____,
 - (2) My name is (**Pastor John Rogers /Imam Yassir Siddiqui**).
 - (3) I am a local (**Christian/Muslim**) leader, here in __(**insert state**)__.
 - (4) I am writing you to ask for a moment of your time and to schedule a legislative visit so that I can come discuss ways to better integrate my congregation in the district.
 - (5) Any assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated.
 - (6) Sincerely,
 - (7) (**Pastor John Rogers/Imam Yassir Siddiqui**)
-

Note: Bolded items were manipulated.

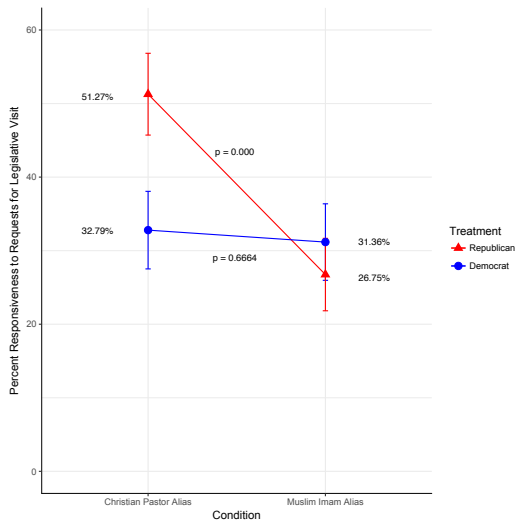
Study 2 Experimental Design

Fictional alias	Block 1 republican legislators	Block 2 democratic legislators
Christian Pastor	314 legislators	308 legislators
Muslim Imam	314 legislators	308 legislators
<i>Total</i>	628 legislators	616 legislators

Study 2: Aggregate responsiveness rate.

Fictional alias	Responsiveness
Christian Pastor	42.12% (262/622)
Muslim Imam	28.94% (180/622)
Difference	13.18%***

Study 2: Disaggregated responsiveness rate.



Study 2: Helpfulness of the legislator's response.

Fictional alias	Overall	Block 1 republican legislators	Block 2 democratic legislators
Christian Pastor	21.06% (131/622)	27.71% (87/314)	14.28% (44/308)
Muslim Imam	23.79% (148/622)	21.97% (69/314)	25.65% (79/308)

Takeaways from study 2:

Takeaways from study 2:

- ▶ Community leaders have relatively more access to legislators than individuals.
- ▶ While Muslim leaders face some discrimination by Republicans in states with large Muslim populations, Democrats in these states appear to be equally responsive to them and their Pastor counterparts.
- ▶ Interestingly, democrats provided more helpful responses to Imams than to Pastors.
- ▶ Nonetheless, Democrats aren't very responsive to either group, so on average Democrats and Republicans do not significantly differ from one another in their responsiveness to Imams.

Conclusion

Discussion and Conclusion

- ▶ Audit studies allow us to see bias/discrimination exists.
- ▶ This is important for politics and representation.
- ▶ For Muslims, in most instances, legislators' party identification largely does not matter for responsiveness to them.
- ▶ There is some hope when their community leaders reach out to Democrats in large Muslim population states.

Thank you!

More information, papers:

www.nazitalajevardi.com