



POLICY BRIEF

The role of Islam in European populism: How refugee flows and fear of Muslims drive right-wing support

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Anti-Muslim sentiment is driving Western democratic politics away from economic concerns, in favor of issues related to culture and identity.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today, fear of and opposition to Islam or Muslims provides a connective thread uniting otherwise disparate political parties. In Europe, nearly every major right-wing populist party emphasizes cultural and religious objections to Muslim immigration. The bigger issue is that the immigrants in question are Muslim, not that they are immigrants. Importantly, anti-Muslim sentiment also affects Muslims who are *already* citizens. The ongoing debate then is less about immigration and more about integration.

This paper argues that anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiment should be considered as defining features of right-wing populism. Moreover, the extent to which a given populist party—which might otherwise be ambiguously positioned on a left-right spectrum—can be considered right-wing is closely related to its positions on Islam-related questions. This is particularly relevant for parties that have not

always been characterized as “right-wing,” such as Italy’s Five Star Movement, which, after vacillating on refugees and immigration, has increasingly highlighted its anti-Islam bona fides.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is fueled by perceptions—some of which are supported by survey data—that Muslims are less assimilated, particularly when it comes to prevailing norms around secularism and the private nature of religious practice. These markers of Muslim religiosity include workplace prayer accommodations, abstention from alcohol, discomfort with gender mixing, conservative dress, and demands for halal meat options. Observed by significant numbers of Muslims, these are all practices that reflect “private” faith commitments that are at the same time either publicly observable or have public and legal implications.

DEMOCRACY & DISORDER

THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN EUROPEAN POPULISM: HOW REFUGEE FLOWS AND FEAR OF MUSLIMS DRIVE RIGHT-WING SUPPORT

It would be a mistake to view the debate over Islam and Muslims as only that. The increased salience of anti-Muslim attitudes signals a deeper shift in the party system away from economic cleavages toward “cultural” ones. Increasingly, attitudes toward Muslims become a powerful proxy for a long list of primarily cultural issues and grievances, including gender equality, gay rights, sexual freedom, the role of the European Union, secularism, the decline of Christianity, race, and demographic concerns. Demographic fears—even if they don’t correspond to reality—are difficult to ignore in democracies, where the changing ethnic or religious composition of the population can shape and even determine whether a party can win on the local or national level.

In established democracies, we might expect party systems to be resistant to change, with shifts happening along the margins without altering the basic structure of electoral competition. This makes the current shifts in party alignment and agenda-setting more striking. If party realignments are rare, occurring perhaps only once every few generations, then this suggests that the emerging party system may become entrenched for the foreseeable future, just as previous economic “left-right” divides dominated for much of the 19th and 20th centuries.

If there is a cultural divide—and one that is likely to persist—then there are two basic directions to go in response: either some form of top-down, state-

driven forced integration; or an effort to accept and accommodate at least some cultural and religious difference. Instead of imposing the responsibility to adapt solely on Muslim citizens or immigrants, both “sides” would need to make compromises.

INTRODUCTION

Despite Muslims comprising only 1 to 8 percent of the population in various Western democracies—the average is around 4.9 percent¹—their very presence has become one of the defining issues of the populist era, dividing left and right in stark fashion.

To view this primarily in demographic terms, however, may be to miss the point. The United States has one of the smallest Muslim populations among the major Western democracies, but anti-Islam sentiment, at least during the Donald Trump presidency, has become a routine feature of political life.² In the United States, few things predict partisan affiliation more than attitudes toward Muslims and Islam. This was not always the case, but it is now. According to polling by Shibley Telhami, favorable views toward Islam actually increased significantly during the 2016 presidential campaign, but this increase came entirely from Democrats and independents. By June 2016, 64 percent of Democrats held favorable attitudes toward Islam, compared to only 24 percent of Republicans.³

FIGURE 1. AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD MUSLIMS AND ISLAM

American Attitudes Toward Muslims and Islam

Some Highlights

ATTITUDES TOWARD MUSLIMS

What is your attitude about each of the following? **The Muslim People**

TOTAL	REPUBLICANS	DEMOCRATS	INDEPENDENTS
FAVORABLE	FAVORABLE	FAVORABLE	FAVORABLE
62% June 2016	42% June 2016	79% June 2016	60% June 2016
58% May 2016	43% May 2016	72% May 2016	53% May 2016
53% November 2015	41% November 2015	67% November 2015	43% November 2015

ATTITUDES TOWARD ISLAM

What is your attitude about each of the following? **The Muslim Religion**

TOTAL	REPUBLICANS	DEMOCRATS	INDEPENDENTS
FAVORABLE	FAVORABLE	FAVORABLE	FAVORABLE
44% June 2016	24% June 2016	64% June 2016	38% June 2016
42% May 2016	24% May 2016	59% May 2016	34% May 2016
37% November 2015	26% November 2015	51% November 2015	28% November 2015

WESTERN AND ISLAMIC COMPATIBILITY

Are Islamic and Western religious and social traditions compatible with each other?

TOTAL	REPUBLICANS	DEMOCRATS	INDEPENDENTS
COMPATIBLE	COMPATIBLE	COMPATIBLE	COMPATIBLE
64% June 2016	42% June 2016	82% June 2016	71% June 2016
61% May 2016	44% May 2016	77% May 2016	56% May 2016
57% November 2015	41% November 2015	71% November 2015	62% November 2015

ABOUT THE SURVEY

Survey dates:
 May 20-31, 2016
 June 24-30, 2016

Principal investigator:
 Shibley Telhami

BROOKINGS

DEMOCRACY & DISORDER

THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN EUROPEAN POPULISM: HOW REFUGEE FLOWS AND FEAR OF MUSLIMS DRIVE RIGHT-WING SUPPORT

Meanwhile, Hungary has some of the lowest numbers of Muslims (around 0.4 percent) in the West,⁴ and despite European Union pleas took in zero refugees under the resettlement quota program, earning it the moniker “fortress Hungary.”⁵ One might think, then, that this would neutralize the “Muslim problem,” if not initially then at least after the fears around the 2015 refugee crisis subsided. Perhaps counter-intuitively, however, having no refugees and very few Muslims does not necessarily make Muslims—or more specifically the fear of Muslims—a less salient electoral issue.⁶ Since Hungary is a member of the European Union, attitudes of Hungarians will also be shaped by their perception of changes—magnified by social media—taking place beyond their own national borders but within the supranational “borders” of the European Union.

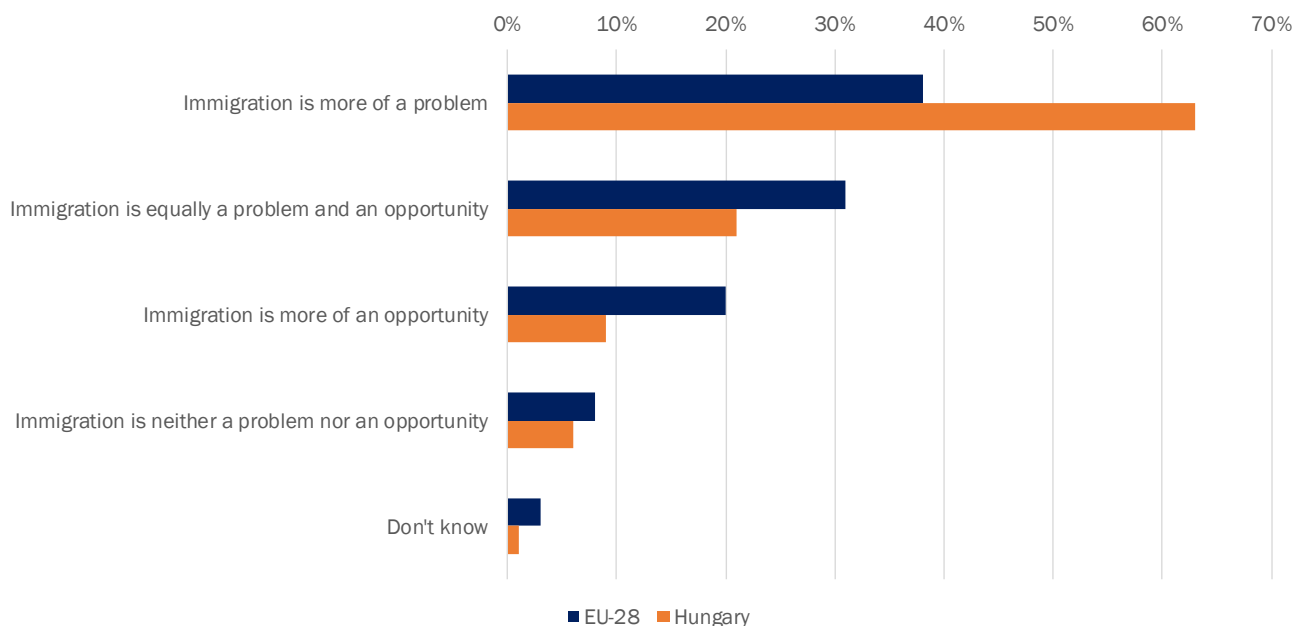
The question of refugees—i.e., *Muslim* refugees—was a central campaign issue in the 2018 Hungarian elections, and it was arguably even decisive, with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of the

Fidesz party using it to not just solidify his base but also to expand his support, gaining half a million new voters since the last election.⁷ Peter Kreko and Zolt Enyedi write, “Baldly put, the central Fidesz claim was that Brussels and [George] Soros were scheming to flood Europe with Muslim migrants, and that a Fidesz loss would mean the doom of white, Christian Hungary.”⁸ To be sure, Hungary has historically served as a symbolic front line between Christianity and Islam, which contextualizes part of the country’s sensitivity to the presence of Muslim refugees. This is a constant mobilizational resource that politicians draw on, something that Fidesz has done successfully. The refugee question was similarly central in Czech Republic President Miloš Zeman’s 2018 re-election bid.⁹

Hungary is an extreme case in terms of the intensity of anti-Muslim feeling, as the 2018 Eurobarometer poll finds.¹⁰ Nevertheless, across Europe, the place of Muslim minorities and the role of Islam in public life has become a primary electoral cleavage—in some cases *the* primary cleavage.

FIGURE 2. HUNGARIAN AND EU ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION

Generally speaking, do you think immigration from outside the EU is more of a problem or more of an opportunity for [our country] today?



Source: “Special Eurobarometer 469: Integration of Immigrants in the European Union,” (Brussels: European Commission, 2018), <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2169>.

The numerous parties grouped together as “right-wing populists” differ considerably on any number of issues, with some like France’s National Front trying to outflank the left on welfare benefits, while others like Italy’s Northern League (now the League) have described themselves as “libertarian but also socialist.”¹¹ Some are avowedly secular, where others preach an explicitly Catholic nationalism. Others such as the Danish People’s Party support gay marriage while Austria’s Freedom Party has styled itself as a defender of traditional values. In the 1980s and 1990s, some were even pro-immigration and open markets.¹² However, today, it is a fear of and opposition to Islam or Muslims that provides a connective thread uniting otherwise disparate political parties and movements. In Europe, nearly every major right-wing populist party emphasizes cultural and religious objections to specifically Muslim immigration as well as to demographic increases in the proportion of Muslim citizens more generally. This reflects an important shift that has taken place over the past decade. As recently as the 2000s, Italy’s Northern League, for example, was still preoccupied with cultural and linguistic differences between northerners and southerners and rising immigration from Eastern Europe.¹³

Despite the growing centrality of anti-Muslim attitudes in populist rhetoric and policy, academic research continues to lag behind. For example, in one major 2017 study of populism, Muslims are only mentioned once in passing and are generally assumed as a subset of religious minorities or immigrants.¹⁴ Yet cultural and religious differences aside, a growing number of Muslims in Europe are not, in fact, immigrants but were born in the countries in question. This, in turn, recasts the fundamental question from one of immigration to one of integration. A narrow focus on immigration also misses important developments in right-wing populism—developments that are recent in their intensity due to the failures of the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war, and the refugee crisis that war provoked. In short, the bigger issue is that the immigrants in question are Muslim, not that they are immigrants.

This paper argues that anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Islam sentiment, which are interrelated in important ways but are not necessarily the same, should be considered as defining features of right-wing populism today. Moreover, the extent to which a given populist party—which might otherwise be ambiguously positioned on a traditional left-right spectrum—can be considered right-wing is closely related to its positions on Islam-related questions. This is particularly relevant for parties that haven’t always been characterized as “right-wing populist,” such as Italy’s Five Star Movement, which, after vacillating on refugees and immigration, has increasingly solidified its anti-Islam bona fides.¹⁵

At the same time, it would be a mistake to view the debate over Islam and Muslims as only that. To reduce this to a question of Islamophobia is to elide how Islamophobia signals a deeper shift in the party system away from economic cleavages toward “cultural” ones. As I will outline here, this shift, if understood in the context of when and how party systems change, may prove to be a lasting one. With this in mind, Muslims aren’t just people who happen to be Muslims. They are, in effect, a “metaphor,” to use the French scholar Olivier Roy’s term, becoming a proxy of sorts through which the West works out its place and identity in a rapidly changing environment.¹⁶ Indeed, the relationship between right-wing populism, Muslims, and Islam’s role in public life ties together a complex constellation of attitudes and even policy positions.

Viewed this way, attitudes toward Muslims—including what can sometimes seem like an obsession with them—become a powerful marker for a long list of primarily cultural issues and grievances. These include gender equality, gay rights, sexual freedom, secularism, the nation-state, the state’s role in regulating religion, the decline of Christianity, race, as well as demographic concerns. Demographic fears (even if they don’t correspond to reality) are difficult to avoid in any society, but they’re almost impossible to ignore in democracies, where the changing ethnic or religious composition of the

population can shape and even determine whether a party can win on the local, regional, or national levels.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is driven in part by perceptions—some of which are supported by survey research—that Muslims are less assimilated, particularly when it comes to prevailing norms around secularism and the increasingly private nature of religious practice. These markers of Muslim religiosity, discussed at greater length later in the paper, include workplace prayer accommodations, abstention from alcohol, discomfort with gender mixing, conservative dress, and demands for halal meat options. Observed by significant numbers of Muslims, these are all practices that reflect “private” faith commitments that are at the same time either publicly observable or have public or legal implications, or both.

Even in generally tolerant societies, such differences will inevitably raise questions around the limits of “liberal” tolerance, especially when the development of liberal norms has been inextricably linked to the decline—sometimes dramatic—of both public and private religiosity in much of Europe. In European countries, cultural and religious differences interact in complex ways with, and exacerbate, problems of socio-economic inclusion. For example, in the United Kingdom, Muslim women are around 70 percent more likely to be unemployed than their white Christian counterparts.¹⁷ In France, if women wear the headscarf—which many of them consider part of their personal and private relationship to God—it becomes more difficult, if not impossible, to secure employment in state institutions, due to legal prohibitions on “conspicuous religious symbols.”¹⁸

What is anti-Muslim sentiment?

A word on definitions: I prefer to use “anti-Muslim sentiment” here over Islamophobia, since it is theoretically possible, although not necessarily likely, that someone can be anti-Islam without being anti-Muslim. I define *anti-Muslim sentiment* as a broad but identifiable phenomenon, encompassing

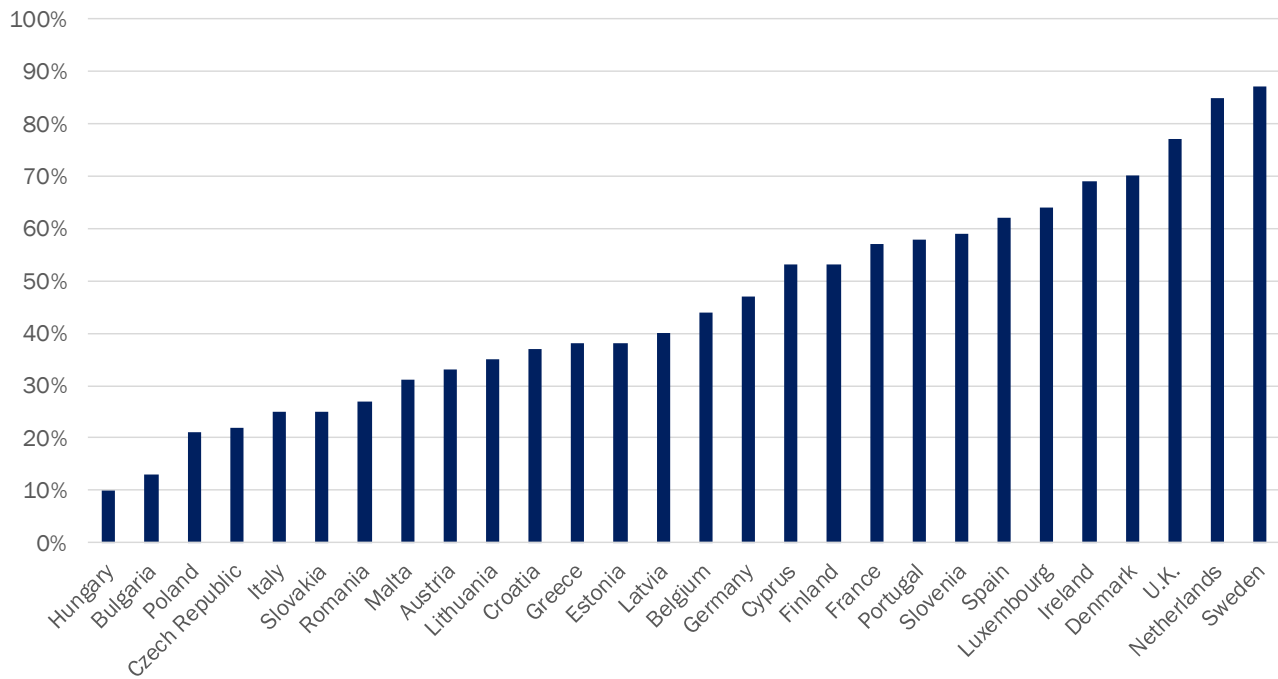
feelings of animus against both recent Muslim immigrants to Europe as well as European citizens of the Muslim faith whose families have known no other home for generations. In the minds of today’s populist right, Muslims—regardless of their country of origin or date of immigration—share more in common with each another than with non-Muslim Europeans and thus are viewed as both a challenge and a threat to narrowly defined “values.”¹⁹

In a phenomenon Rashid Dar and I have previously called “Westernism,” Islam’s doctrines are seen to threaten “our” values and civilization.²⁰ This view is apparent in the more secular countries of Western Europe, where the gap in religious observance between non-Muslim and Muslim citizens is especially noticeable.²¹ But it is also apparent in countries like Poland or Hungary, which, while ostensibly more Christian, have still experienced enough secularization to produce insecurity over the status of Christianity as well as over a mythologized “Hungarian-ness” that has been historically constructed in opposition to Islam since the period of Ottoman Muslim rule.

WHY NOW?

We can expect that in nearly every European country, fear of Muslims—particularly in light of the September 11 attacks, homegrown terrorism, and refugee spillover from civil wars in the Middle East—will figure *to some degree*. Relatedly, the Muslim share of the overall population—either on the national or supranational level, or both—will figure in any explanation of the rising fortunes of right-wing populist parties. However, Muslim share of the population, itself, is a far from straightforward variable since it interacts with various other factors: A larger Muslim share empowers far-right parties, and stronger right-wing parties are then able to increasingly “inject” Islam’s role into public debates, which in turn increases its salience to voters. As it becomes more salient to voters, mainstream parties come under pressure to address rather than dismiss it, which makes it more salient, and so on.

FIGURE 3. SHARE OF EU CITIZENS TOTALLY COMFORTABLE WITH HAVING AN IMMIGRANT AS A FRIEND



Source: “Special Eurobarometer 469: Integration of Immigrants in the European Union,” (Brussels: European Commission, 2018), <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2169>.

While understanding the exact interplay between Muslim population share and other variables can be challenging, there is little doubt that it matters. It is only a question of how much. Eric Kaufmann, whose calculations in a recent study drew on various data sources, found a 78 percent correlation “between projected Muslim share in 2030, a measure of both the level and rate of change of the Muslim population, and the best national result each country’s populist right has attained.”²²

Importantly, Kaufmann finds that Muslim share of the population has a substantial effect on attitudes toward immigration. In Ireland and Finland, two of the Western European countries with the lowest Muslim population shares, so-called authoritarians—those who prioritize “safe and secure surroundings” over other values—have very similar attitudes toward immigrants as the rest of the population. In countries where the Muslim share is higher, exceeding 4 percent of the

population, “authoritarians” are significantly more likely to be anti-immigrant than the rest of the population.

THE POWER OF CULTURE

Opposition to Muslim immigration (or, for that matter, opposition to Muslims who are already citizens) is often lumped in under “anti-immigration,” but it is the *Muslim* part in opposing Muslim immigration that is critical in ways that we are just beginning to understand. Previous waves of Eastern European immigration in the 1990s and 2000s had only limited effects on the electoral fortunes of populist parties. As one study argues: “Attempts by [Dutch politician Geert] Wilders to make political capital out of anti-Polish stances ... have been less successful than his anti-Islamic and anti-Syrian rhetoric, which finds a sympathetic audience amongst the 50 percent of Netherlanders who see non-Western migrants as a threat to their way of life.”²³

Anti-Muslim sentiment is driven by culturalist objections and arguments, particularly in countries like France, the Netherlands, and Sweden that have become more and more homogeneously secular in recent decades, and where Muslim immigrants and second-generation citizens express levels of religious observance that serve as a stark contrast with what was presumed to be a shared consensus. (According to the Pew Research Center, only 10 percent of Danes attend weekly services and 9 percent consider religion “very important” in their lives. In Sweden the comparable figures are 6 and 10 percent respectively.²⁴) This contrast in religiosity is often used, both implicitly and explicitly, to justify anti-Muslim positions and policies. For example, according to a 2018 survey, 63 percent of French respondents with a favorable view of the National Front believe Islam is “fundamentally incompatible with their culture and values” (compared to only 28 percent of those with an unfavorable view of the National Front).²⁵ In the Netherlands, the comparable numbers are 66 and 35 percent respectively. In other words, one of the easiest ways to tell if someone supports a right-wing populist party is to ask him or her questions about Islam.

Gender equality, sexual freedom, and gay rights have become a primary battleground in the effort to define cultural and national identity and not necessarily in the ways we might expect. In Western European countries (unlike the United States²⁶), debates around these issues do not generally fall along partisan lines. Initially, it was mainstream and leftist parties that highlighted instances of female genital mutilation and forced marriage. Yet, more recently, right-wing populists have become some of the more outspoken advocates of women’s rights, gay rights, liberal family laws, and so-called Enlightenment values more broadly.²⁷ Tjitske Akkerman and Anniken Hagelund write that “radical-right populist parties have discovered that women’s rights are an important issue.”²⁸ The word “discovered” is worth noting, as it suggests the temptation to co-opt liberal values in the service of

attacking Muslims and Islam. An appeal to liberal values—part of a broadly shared secularism that cuts across partisan lines—is likely to be more effective than strictly racist or nativist rhetoric. And indeed it has been. (In countries with hate speech laws, it also offers a safer course of action).²⁹

Cultural and social liberalism was once the domain of the left and center-left, but today these parties have found themselves on the defensive, torn between their commitment to gender equality, on one hand, and sympathy toward multiculturalism and group identities, on the other. Akkerman and Hagelund outline the basic thrust of this underappreciated shift:

The gender critique raised by feminists and others has offered the radical right a new arsenal of issues and rhetoric with which to fight immigration and defend a unitary national culture. The result is, in the Netherlands and Norway at least, a radical right defending liberal values—human rights, liberty, individualism and gender equality—against immigrant cultures represented as collectivist, authoritarian, patriarchal and honor-bound.³⁰

This presents a paradox: Some parties that are generally described as “illiberal” are, or at least see themselves as, defenders of liberalism. Or to put it differently, their insistence on liberal values leads them to adopt illiberal positions—a sort of *illiberal liberalism*.

These dynamics are in stark contrast to the United States, where challenges to gender equality, sexual freedom, and gay marriage tend to emanate from the right, rather than from minority groups, Muslim or otherwise. In countries like the Netherlands and Norway, however, any comparable Christian conservative constituency has grown so weak that it is no longer seen as a threat to a generally accepted liberal consensus. Instead, Muslims have filled that gap in the public imagination.

HOW MUSLIM IMMIGRATION CHANGES PARTY SYSTEMS

As mentioned earlier, it is not enough to say that the electoral salience of Islam-related issues is a “natural” outcome of demographic change—and therefore inevitable. The relationship between the number of Muslim immigrants or Muslim citizens and anti-Muslim sentiment is complex, particularly outside of Western Europe. In the cases of Hungary and Poland, the number of Muslims is miniscule, with the latter’s share at less than 0.1 percent. However, this may be too limited a way of looking at the demographic picture. **The growing proportion of Muslims in the European Union writ large is a relevant consideration here—if we look at Europe as a collection of nation-states that react to and learn from each other. In other words, even if Poland has almost no Muslims, the fact that it is a member of the European Union and accordingly faces pressure to meet refugee quotas will play some role in fueling anti-Muslim sentiment.** These diffusion effects are likely to be amplified where right-wing populist parties (like other ideological families) pay attention to and develop close relationships with their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. The demographic factor, however, is necessary but ultimately insufficient. How much these issues matter, in practical everyday terms, depends in large part on *how parties mobilize around the issue*.

In established democracies, we might expect that party systems will be resistant to change, with shifts happening along the margins without altering the basic structure of political and electoral competition. This makes the current, and rather major, shifts in party alignment and agenda setting—away from “traditional” economic and class issues toward cultural ones—all the more striking. What we see today in much of Europe represents a break in historical patterns of party competition. **If party realignments are rare, occurring perhaps only once every few generations, then this suggests that the emerging party system may become**

entrenched for the foreseeable future, just as previous economic “left-right” divides dominated for much of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Carles Boix defines a “party system” as “the national profile, in terms of number, size, and ideological preferences, of parties.”³¹ As the United States, Britain, France, and other early democracies developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, parties gradually cohered, adopting defined programs and developing mass cadres of members and supporters. Party systems are products of a country’s particular history. Over time, they become resilient and self-sustaining.

The economic dimension of party competition in Western Europe became institutionalized—or, in the terminology of Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan, “frozen”—in the form of parties that self-defined according to economic concerns, in particular the distribution of capital and the state’s role in economic production.³² Yet just because party systems freeze doesn’t mean they stay frozen forever. The literature on party alignment suggests that “parties themselves ... are the main drivers behind party system change and stability.”³³ As Adam Przeworski and John Sprague note regarding the rise of socialist parties in Western Europe: “Class is salient in any society, if, when, and only to the extent to which it is important to political parties which mobilize workers.”³⁴

Parties decide which issues to prioritize in order to distinguish themselves from the competition. It is this process—parties interacting with the electorate and, of course, each other—that over time produces the party system. Again, party systems like electoral systems are unlikely to change dramatically, notwithstanding major internal or external shocks. Today, the countries in question are experiencing major internal or external shocks, or both.

How parties interact

Most (but not necessarily all) right-wing populist parties were founded as *niche parties*, a term used by Bonnie Meguid to describe “single-issue” or limited agenda parties, whose *raison d’être* is to elevate an issue of importance that has been insufficiently addressed by mainstream parties. Niche parties, she writes, “eschew the comprehensive policy platforms common to their mainstream party peers, instead adopting positions only on a restricted set of issues. ... [They] rely on the salience and attractiveness of their *one* policy stance for voter support.”³⁵

Mainstream parties generally have one of two choices when dealing with a newly introduced niche issue. They can opt for a *dismissive strategy* and treat it as insignificant, thus lowering (or at least hoping to lower) its salience in the minds of voters. Conversely, the mainstream party can try to attract supporters of the niche party or niche issue by “acknowledging [its] legitimacy ... and [signaling] its prioritization of that policy dimension.” Such an accommodative strategy can “[undermine] the distinctiveness of the new party’s issue position.”³⁶ Both approaches have their pitfalls. There is evidence that the “accommodationist” approach can be electorally effective,³⁷ but in terms of substantive outcomes, the results are more mixed, potentially exacerbating anti-Muslim sentiment. First, accommodation raises the salience of the niche issue—in this case, that Muslims are a problem to be solved—both to voters and other parties. Second, it provides incentives to the niche party to emphasize its distinctiveness on its niche issue. This may include moving further rightward to ensure that voters still see it as the issue’s most credible proponent.

In some sense, years or decades later, some parties have in fits and starts shifted from niche agendas to national agendas. But even where they haven’t, the niche label may no longer be appropriate. As we have seen, the “niche” issue is not niche in any meaningful sense. These intensified anti-Islam orientations of populist parties aren’t just important (and quite worrying) in their own right; they color and shape a

wide-ranging agenda, from anti-EU attitudes to the relationship between the state and religion, to fears around Christianity’s decline and major demographic shifts. And this agenda can’t be dismissed as mere rhetoric and rallying the base. In 2018, Austria’s government—which includes the far-right Freedom Party—proposed banning headscarves for girls under 10 years old in school and passed a bill authorizing the confiscation of asylum seekers’ phones.³⁸ Meanwhile, to much international criticism, Denmark passed legislation requiring children in so-called “ghettos”—low-income, mainly Muslim immigrant communities—to undergo mandatory instruction in Danish values.³⁹

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RESPONSES

Anti-Muslim sentiment, particularly when it takes legislative form, matters because it strikes at the set of values that the United States and European nations claim to share. Populist parties simultaneously fuel such sentiment and benefit from it being fueled.

Viewing Muslims as a problem in and of themselves but also as a proxy for broader cultural questions is the thread that ties together right-wing populist parties that, besides being somewhere on the farther right, can often be quite different from each other. Not surprisingly, parties that are naturally suspicious of Muslims are unlikely to be interested in public diplomacy and other kinds of engagement with Arab and Muslim publics abroad, instead seeing authoritarian regimes as the best way to maintain order. Such a hands-off approach also means more of a vacuum of European (and Western) leadership when it comes to supporting reconstruction, providing foreign aid, and aiding civil society organizations in post-conflict environments.⁴⁰

Recognizing the centrality of anti-Muslim sentiment to sometimes seemingly separate questions of secularism, national sovereignty, European unity, and the role of the state is itself an important step. This recognition, however, does not mean that critics and opponents can merely continue to condemn right-wing populists as anti-democratic or dangerous—this

hasn't seemed to work—but to think more carefully about the long-term effects of cultural change.

Treating anti-Muslim sentiment as just the latest iteration of racism—and accordingly as just the latest struggle in the service of equality—misses the explicitly cultural and religious elements of the current crisis. As we have seen, Muslims in Europe, on average, demonstrate significantly higher levels of religious observance. (In France, for example, 54 percent of Muslims say religion is “very important” in their lives compared to only 11 percent of the overall population.⁴¹) Some of this *private* observance takes a public form, whether it be a growing demand for halal food accommodations, women wearing the headscarf, or exemptions for attending prayer. None of these suggest unusually conservative practices as much as they suggest practices well within the Islamic mainstream. **In short, there is a tension and perhaps even a clash, and the starting point for effective responses must be an acknowledgment that culture rather than class is driving the most challenging political divides in European societies.**

Far from an aberration, the sources driving the populist upsurge—fear over cultural and ethnic identity and what it might mean to lose it—may intensify in the coming decades. According to projections from the Pew Research Center, Muslims are likely to reach 11 percent of Europe's population by 2050 if “medium” levels of migration hold.⁴² Even with the strictest immigration restrictions—in other words an almost impossible scenario of zero net immigration—Muslims would represent 7.5 percent of Europe's population by 2050, a 53 percent increase over current figures. In other words, even if populist parties get exactly what they want, they will still have ample opportunity to benefit from the fear of cultural and demographic change.

Policy responses

If there is a cultural divide, then there are two basic directions to go in response: either some form of top-down, state-driven, forced integration, along the lines of what some populist parties propose

(although it is unclear whether they would truly want to see their own proposals succeed, since this would undermine their very *raison d'être*); or an effort to accept and accommodate at least *some* cultural and religious difference. Instead of imposing the responsibility to adapt solely on Muslim citizens or immigrants, both “sides” would need to make compromises. On the part of the state and broader society, this would include broadening narrow conceptions of secularism, making them more flexible to adapt to changing cultural and demographic contexts. No country's conception of itself is static, so the refrain that “majorities should not have to change” does not hold up to scrutiny. Majorities are always changing and adapting when it comes to cultural norms. The countries in question were once less secular, and some of them deeply religious, until relatively recently. They changed.

If we take a party-driven approach seriously, then there is also the possibility that left and mainstream parties could try to re-establish the primacy of economic cleavages through their own version of populism, but an inclusive one, where in the “us versus them,” Muslims are included in the former.⁴³

At the same time, critics of populist parties should be careful not to dismiss concerns over immigration out of hand. Reducing immigration levels, on its own, is not an anti-Muslim position, and it may help to make clearer distinctions between immigrants (Muslims or otherwise) and Muslims who are *already* citizens in a given country and are therefore legally as French, Dutch, or Swedish as any of their non-Muslim neighbors. All citizens have responsibilities to make a good faith effort to accommodate themselves to existing laws and social norms. But if Muslim citizens must do so, it also means that majorities have a responsibility to make their own accommodations, especially when it comes to the religious freedom and private religious practices of Muslim citizens—even if that private practice has public implications.

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- 5 “EU to sue Poland, Hungary and Czechs for refusing refugee quotas,” *BBC News*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42270239>.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Torrey Taussig and an external peer reviewer for their feedback and suggestions, which helped me refine the ideas in this paper. I am grateful to Elicora Katz for her research support. I would also like to thank Bruce Jones and Torrey for leading the broader project and for having me as a part of it. Many thanks are due to Anthony Yazaki and Anna Newby for facilitating the paper's publication as well as their help with the layout and graphics.

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