Anti-Islamic Sentiment and Media Framing during the 9/11 Decade

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Abstract

Americans' opinions of Islam were at their most favorable immediately after 9/11, when the sense of threat was highest, and grew less favorable even as the fear receded. This counterintuitive outcome apparently resulted from a bipartisan effort by government and media to avert discrimination by framing Islam in a positive way. A gradual increase in animosity thereafter was due to a shift away from this framing, especially by right-leaning talking heads. In 2006 the framing of right-leaning media shifted again, toward nativism. This analysis illustrates the influence of media framing and suggests opinion-makers should choose their frames with care.

Summary

The dramatic September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center by radical Muslim terrorists thrust the Islamic faith into the national spotlight. Many Americans who had never given Islam a second thought before 9/11 now had to figure out how to make sense of these events and relate to the faith tradition that ostensibly inspired them. Their solutions have ranged from unthinking discrimination – including 481 hate crimes against Muslims in 2002 – to ecumenical dialogue, peacemaking, and social action (Lean; Lohre). Neither of these extremes, however, typifies the response of the average American. To construct a factual narrative of how Americans' views unfolded during the 9/11 decade, we must turn to survey data that measures public opinion in the aggregate.

Careful study of survey data yields a surprising finding: animosity toward Islam since 9/11 has not been driven primarily by fear of terrorism. In fact, despite feeling intensely

threatened by Islamic fundamentalism immediately after 9/11, the public actually then expressed more favorable sentiment toward Islam and Muslim-Americans than at any time before or since. A similar spike in favorable feeling toward Muslim-Americans followed London's 7/7 bombings on July 7, 2005. Despite their fear, most Americans responded to these attacks not with prejudice, but rather with sympathy for innocent Muslims defamed by the actions of extremists and targeted by retaliatory hate crimes. Similarly, it was only after Americans' fear of terrorism subsided that they began to reassess Islam in a more negative way. If anything, fear seems inversely related to prejudice in this case. This runs directly counter to the predictions of Terror Management Theory and the experimental findings that support that theory (Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof, and Vermeulen). What explains this counterintuitive outcome?

The answer seems to lie primarily in media framing. Media coverage of Muslim Americans in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 focused heavily on critiquing stereotypes and documenting violations of Muslims' civil liberties. Aware that fear can lead to prejudice, the shapers of American public opinion self-consciously and successfully sought to counteract that tendency. Opinion-makers relaxed this impulse after the immediate sense of threat subsided, especially in right-leaning media outlets. A gradual increase of animosity toward Islam during the period from 2002 to 2010 coincided with a growth of partisan difference in assessments of the faith. In examining the drivers of shifting attitudes over the course of the following decade, we observe an apparent interactive effect between the news cycle, partisan affiliation, and lack of first-hand knowledge of the faith. This is likely because 1) Democrats and Republicans tend to patronize partisan media outlets, 2) right- and left-leaning media outlets used increasingly divergent frames to represent Islam over the course of the decade, and 3) those with the least personal knowledge of the faith are the most susceptible to these competing media representations.

Importantly, this gradual rise in animosity toward Islam has occurred despite a general increase of knowledge about Islam during the same period, which tends to foster modestly more favorable attitudes. This is because the gains due to education have been more than offset by a negative shift in the attitudes of those who say they know little about the faith. Largely neutral toward Islam in 2003, the uninformed were overwhelmingly unfavorable toward it by 2006. This suggests that media framing is extremely influential – more so, in some ways, than education – so opinion-makers should carefully weigh the social consequences of their representations. Contrary to the old adage, words can be far more damaging than sticks and stones when broadcast to millions of Americans through television, radio, or the Internet.

Related to the idea that fear of terrorism has not been the primary driver of prejudice is the fact that unfavorable media framing of Islam has not been exclusively related to terrorism and violence. Unfavorable attitudes toward Islam decoupled from the perception that Islam encourages violence in mid-2006, as right-wing media increasingly emphasized aspects of Islam thought to pose a cultural threat. A particular turning point was the February 2006 Danish cartoon controversy, in which some Muslims pitted themselves violently against free speech, one of the West's most cherished values. The same year, conservative talking heads loudly raised concerns about Muslim immigration and the threat of "Islamization" of the West. Consistent with this shift toward a focus on cultural threat,

one of the most dramatic and partisan realignments of public opinion toward Islam was in August 2010, during the controversy over the construction of the Park51 Islamic community center near 9/11's "Ground Zero." This nativistic turn was also on display in concerns about Barack Obama's religious affiliation during his 2008 candidacy and early presidency. Unfavorable attitudes toward Islam were then at their ten-year height, though the perception that Islam encourages violence was at a five-year low.

Analysis

The Perception of Threat from International Terrorism

Figure 1 shows Americans' assessments of the threat posed by "international terrorism" to the vital interests of the United States during the period from 1994-2010. As the figure shows, concern spiked immediately after the 2001 World Trade Center attack, but returned to its pre-9/11 level by 2004 and has remained basically flat ever since. (Note that the apparent decline in threat-perception in the 2004-2010 Internet surveys is mostly an artifact of the format change from telephone to Internet. In a 2004 dual-format survey, Internet respondents were slightly less likely than telephone respondents to designate terrorism a "critical" threat as opposed to an "important" one. When this bias is taken into account, the threat perception for 2006–2010 appears nearly equivalent to 1998 and 2004.)
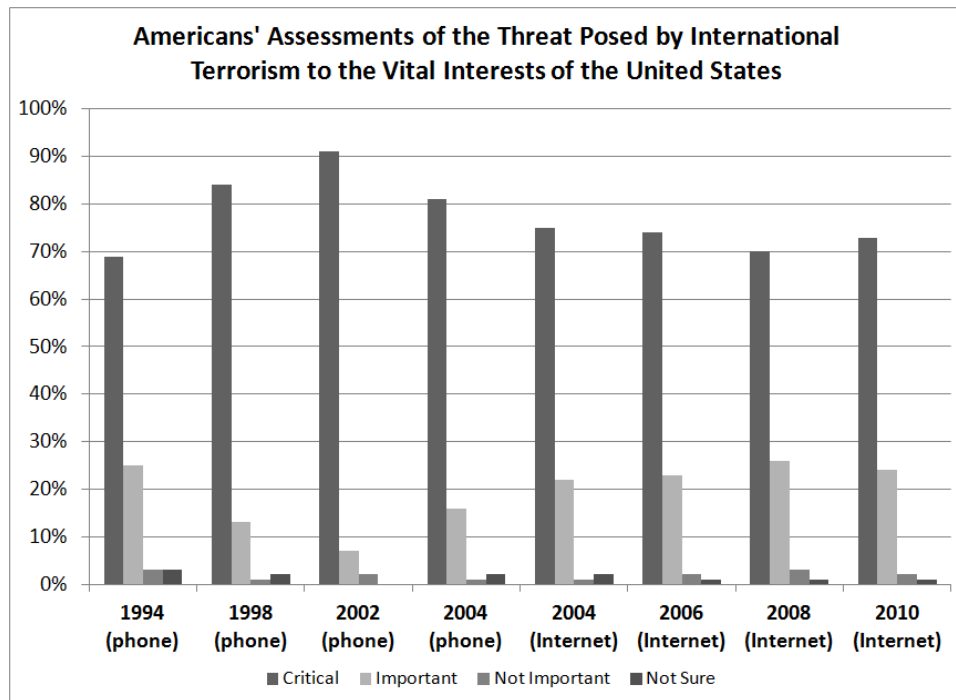

Figure 1. Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs: 6.

Incidentally, a parallel question which asked about the threat from "Islamic fundamentalism" exhibited a similar response pattern, albeit with lower numbers across the board. Data for that question, however, did show a slight increase in the perception of threat between 2004 and 2006 (Chicago Council on Global Affairs). Some responses to that

question may have had in mind cultural or political threats as well as the threat of terrorism. In any event, the basically static response pattern from 2004–2010 means that fear of terrorism has little or no explanatory power for shifting attitudes toward Islam during those years.

Public Sentiment toward Muslim-Americans after 9/11

As noted above, Terror Management Theory predicts that "exposure to terrorism news should confront receivers with thoughts about their own death, which, in turn, should increase prejudice toward outgroup members." This theory has considerable experimental support (Das et al.: 453, 54). One therefore might expect the heightened sense of threat after 9/11 to have resulted in animosity toward Muslim Americans, but what actually occurred was quite the opposite. As Figure 2 illustrates, Americans' opinions of Muslim Americans were actually substantially more favorable in the months following 9/11 than in the year prior to the event – or, for that matter, any time since.
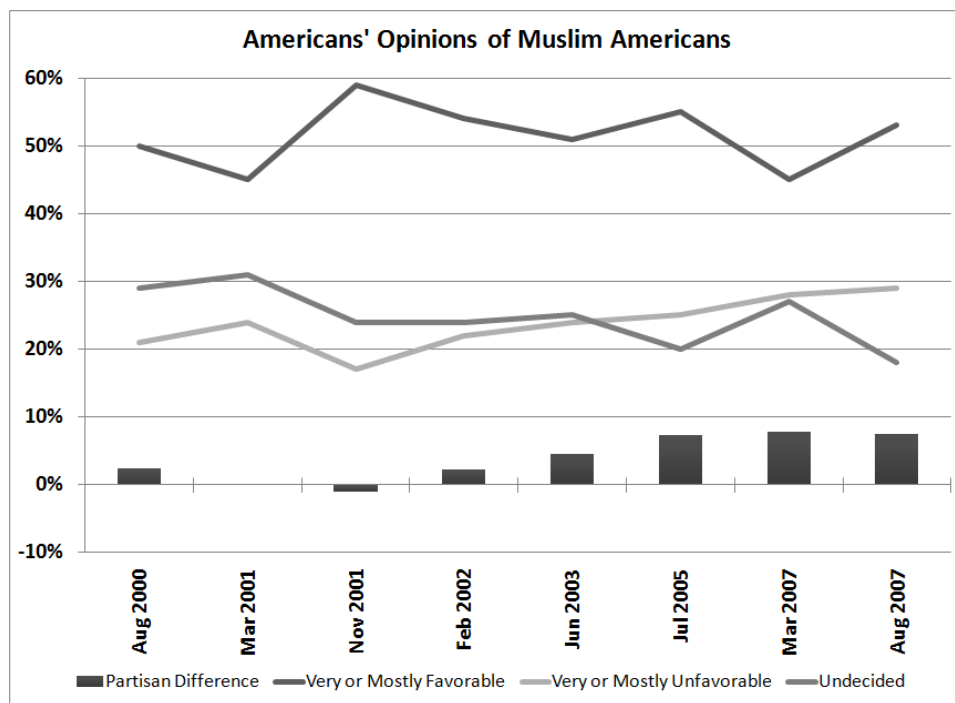

Figure 2. Source: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Surveys conducted March 5-18, 2001, February 25-March 10, 2002, July 7-17, 2005, and August 1-18, 2007; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Surveys conducted August 24-September 20, 2000; November 13-19, 2001; March 21-25, 2007. All data were retrieved from the iPOLL Databank. "Partisan Difference" is represented as a percentage of the total possible partisan spread. Positive values indicate Democrats' opinions were more favorable, while negative values indicate Republicans' opinions were more favorable.

It seems, then, that most Americans after 9/11 responded to their fear not with prejudice, but with sympathy. If anything, fear seems inversely related to prejudice in this case. This post-9/11 support for Muslim Americans is also remarkable for its bipartisanship. Republicans were in fact slightly more favorable toward Muslim Americans in November

2001 than Democrats – a state of affairs never thereafter repeated. Similarly, as Figure 3 shows, attitudes toward the Islamic faith itself were more favorable and less partisan immediately after 9/11 than for the rest of the decade.
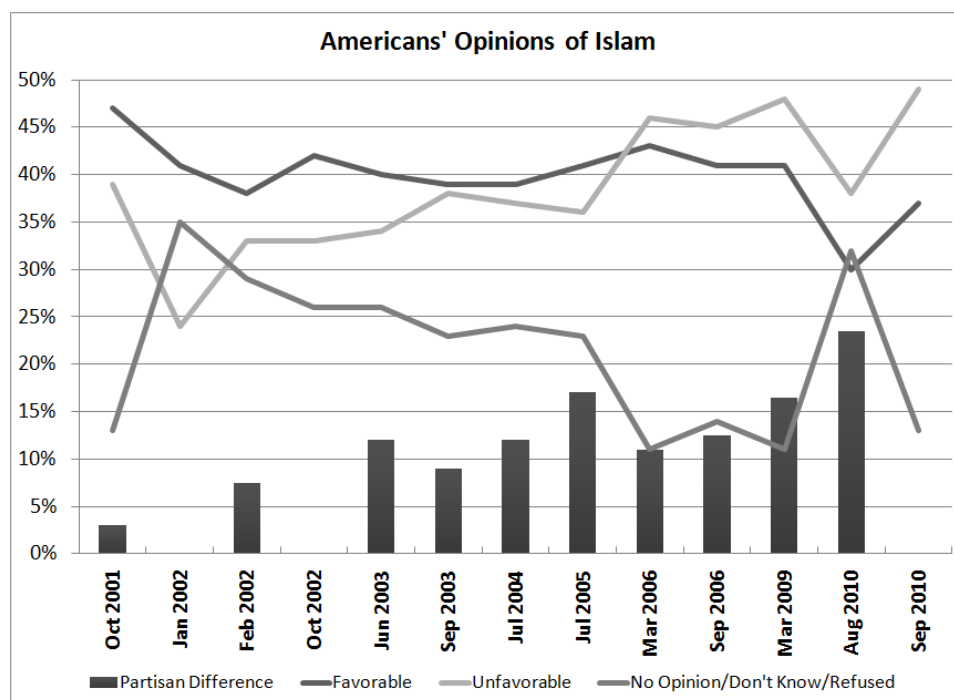

Figure 3. Source: ABC News Polls conducted October 8-9, 2001, January 2-6, 2002, September 4-7, 2003, and September 5-6, 2006; ABC News/BeliefNet Poll conducted October 11-15, 2002; ABC News/Washington Post Polls conducted March 2-5, 2006, March 26-29, 2009, and August 30-September 2, 2010; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Surveys conducted February 25-March 10, 2002, June 24-July 8, 2003, July 8-18, 2004, and July 7-17, 2005; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Survey conducted August 19-22, 2010. Data were retrieved from the iPOLL Databank. "Partisan Difference" is represented as a percentage of the total possible partisan spread. In all surveys Democrats' opinions were more favorable than Republicans'.

Just as Americans' attitudes toward Muslims changed in the opposite of the predicted direction immediately after 9/11, unfavorable attitudes surfaced even as the sense of threat from terrorism subsided. By February 2002, opinions of Muslim Americans, Muslims, and Islam began to grow more negative. The largest change came in the number of Americans who said Islam "encourages violence." From January 2002 to September 2003, this number increased from 14% to 34% (Figure 4).

The change in the number of Americans with an "unfavorable" opinion of Islam was only slightly more modest, rising from 24% to 38% (Figure 3). Fortunately, Americans were more gracious to Muslims than to the Islamic religion in the abstract, as opinions of Muslims and Muslim Americans slid only a few percentage points between 2002 and 2003 (Figures 2 and 5).
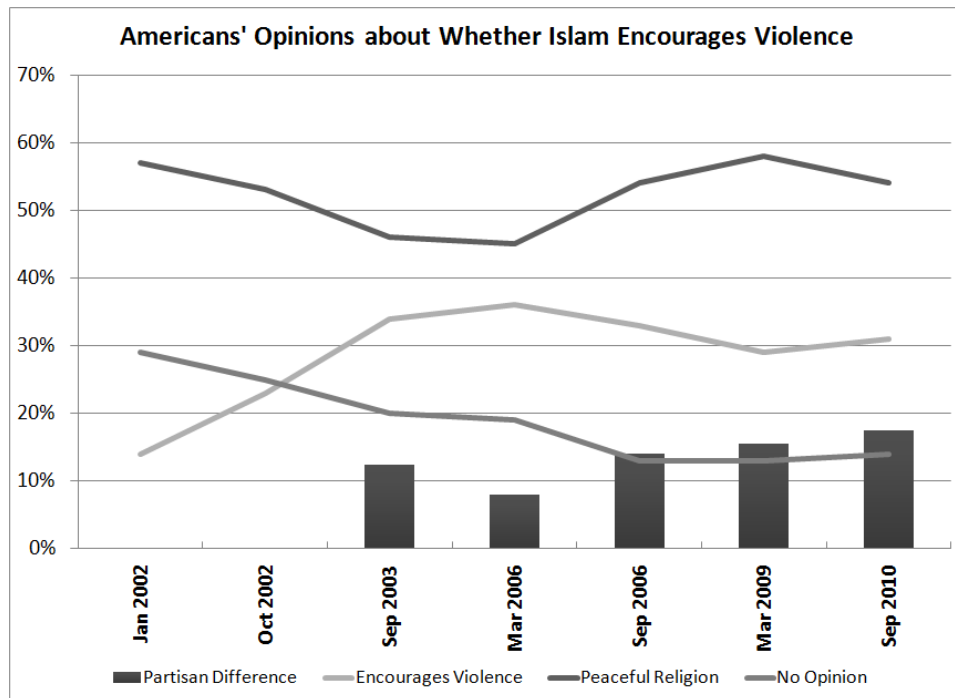
Figure 4. Source: ABC News Polls conducted January 2-6, 2002, September 4-7, 2003, and September 5-6, 2006; ABC News/BeliefNet Poll conducted October 11-15, 2002; ABC News/Washington Post Polls conducted March 2-5, 2006, March 26-29, 2009, and August 30-September 2, 2010. Data were retrieved from the iPOLL Databank. "Partisan Difference" is represented as a percentage of the total possible partisan spread. In all surveys Democrats' opinions were more favorable than Republicans'.

Another development between 2002 and 2003 was the emergence of a significant partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats in their assessments of Muslims and Islam, with Democrats becoming generally more favorable toward it and Republicans generally less favorable. This partisan separation remained at or near the same level through 2004 and early 2005 (see Figures 3 and 5). Significantly, Figures 2 and 3 show a modest increase in favorable feeling toward Islam and Muslim-Americans immediately after London's 7/7 bombings on July 7, 2005. This increase of favorability parallels the post-9/11 bump, except that this time the bump was smaller and far more partisan, with the increase occurring exclusively among Democrats.[1]

Public Opinion and Media Framing after 9/11

In a Pew Forum survey conducted August 1-18, 2007, 32% of Americans identified the media as the greatest influence on their opinions of Muslims, compared to only 18% apiece for education and personal experience, tied for second place. This is consistent with a wealth

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[1] Although the 7/7 attacks made a decidedly weaker impression on American than on British consciousness, data from Google Trends (http://www.google.com/trends/) show the event produced a more than 100% increase in Islam-related search and news traffic in the United States.

of other evidence, both anecdotal and experimental, that public opinion and prejudice are heavily influenced by media (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder; van Dijk; Hussain).
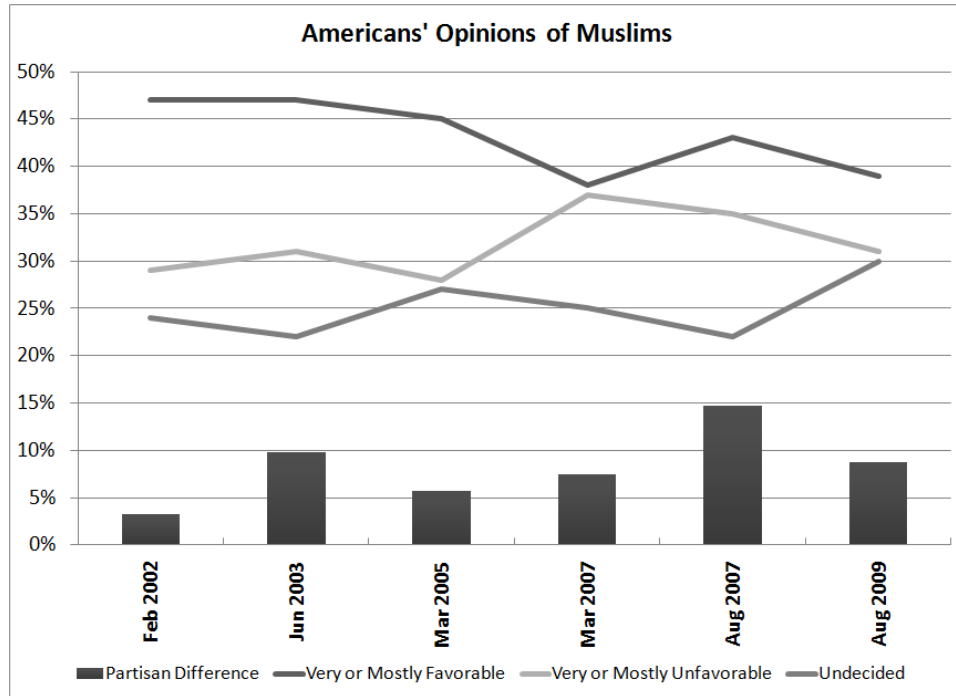

Figure 5. Source: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Surveys conducted February 25-March 10, June 24-July 8, 2003, and August 1-18, 2007; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Surveys conducted March 17-27, 2005, March 21-25, 2007, and August 11-17, 2009. Data were retrieved from the iPOLL Databank. "Partisan Difference" is represented as a percentage of the total possible partisan spread. In all surveys Democrats' opinions were more favorable than Republicans'.

Apparently, what explains the inverse correlation between prejudice and threat in the wake of 9/11 is the way Islam was framed in the media. As Muslim Americans experienced a spate of retaliatory violence and discrimination, politicians and news outlets made a concerted effort to humanize them and to counter prejudice. One study of post-9/11 media coverage of Muslim Americans found that in both right- and left-leaning media outlets, "civil rights/civil liberties issues and the violation of those rights – including physical attacks on members of these groups – were by far the most frequently addressed topics." Another rash of stories "highlighted the patriotism of American Muslims and Arabs and downplayed the stereotype that members of these groups support terrorism." Certainly there was some negative coverage of Muslim Americans as well, but it was far outweighed by the increase in favorable reporting (Nacos and Torres-Reyna: 8). Republicans may have been particularly influenced by calls from President George W. Bush and New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani to treat Muslims fairly and avoid discrimination (Nacos and Torres-Reyna: 9; Ibrahim: 117).

Opinion-makers sharply contrasted this positive portrait of moderate Muslims with a violent portrait of radical fundamentalists such as the terrorists behind 9/11. This dual-frame approach followed the lead of President Bush, who issued a statement after 9/11 that said,

"The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace. These terrorists don't represent peace. They represent evil and war." Unfortunately, this dichotomized framing often – though not always – reduced moderate Muslims to those living within the United States, while foreign Muslims were represented predominantly as violent radicals (Ibrahim: 118; Weston and Dunsky: 163-64). It led to other kinds of caricatures as well; as Tariq Ramadan has argued, Muslims do not easily fit the simplistic "good Muslim, bad Muslim" categories Westerners have sought to impose on them. Still, as a mechanism of social control, the dual-frame approach should not be underestimated. This framing created an important psychological distance in the minds of many Americans between the terrorists and their less violent co-religionists, thereby helping insulate the latter from popular outrage.

As the immediate threat of both terrorism and anti-Muslim violence subsided, opinion-makers relaxed this protective impulse and allowed themselves to question President Bush's framing. Right-wing talking heads, in particular, reacted strongly against the idea that Islam is a religion of peace, and began to identify the Islamic religion itself – and particularly the principle of *jihad* – as the cause of terrorist violence. This anti-Islamic polemic generally continued to recognize a distinction between "moderate" Muslims and violent ones, but regarded the moderates as an aberrant, Americanized minority that had deviated from Mohammed's true teachings (Cimino; Beverley; Bilici). This polemic also spilled over into the debate concerning the merits of American military intervention in the Middle East, in which the prospect of nuclear armed, pro-terrorist Islamic governments was a prominent theme (see Epstein). The President and the political left, unsurprisingly, rejected this alternative framing.[2] Nevertheless, its influence grew from 2002 to 2006, as reflected in Figures 3 and 4. During these years there was a large increase in the belief that Islam encourages violence, a corresponding increase of unfavorable views of the faith, and a growth of partisan difference in assessments of it. The partisan difference likely resulted in part from Americans' general tendency to patronize media outlets that share their own political leanings (Iyengar and Hahn). As the frames used to represent Islam in right- and left-leaning media diverged, so did the attitudes of their respective viewers. This also likely explains why the increase in support for Muslim-Americans after the 7/7 bombings was limited entirely to Democrats.

The Nativistic Turn

Another shift in the framing employed by right-leaning media came in 2006, after offensive caricatures of the prophet Mohammed published by a Danish magazine set off a spate of violent protests in the Muslim world (Ammitzbøll and Vidino). The immediate aftermath of these riots, March 2006, saw a modest increase in American belief that Islam encourages violence (Figure 4), but also a dramatic growth of unfavorable sentiment toward the faith which is not fully explainable by its heightened association with violence (Figure 3). This unfavorable feeling in fact persisted several months later, even as the association with violence declined. The decoupling of unfavorable sentiment from concerns about Islamic

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[2] Bush used the original framing as recently as 2007, and Obama continued to use it through the end of the decade (see *World Net Daily*; Egan).

violence likely reflects a shift in right-leaning discourse to a new emphasis on Islam's incompatibility with Western values. Islam – and the multiculturalist embrace of it – now represented a cultural threat to free speech and other Western democratic values.[3] In a similar vein, 2006 also saw the publication of several high-profile books about the demographic danger posed by Muslim immigration, including Bruce Bawer's *While Europe Slept* (released in February), Melanie Phillips's *Londonistan* (released in May) and Mark Steyn's *America Alone* (released in September). Muslims and the political left were portrayed as co-conspirators in a plot to Islamize America and institute sharia law (Lean).[4] The continued Iraq insurgency, which entered its bloodiest phase as Americans debated the war during midterm elections, was just icing on the cake.[5]

Unfavorable opinion of Islam continued its unprecedented rise through 2009 (Figure 3), even as Iraq achieved stability and Americans' association of Islam with violence reached a five-year low (Figure 4) (see *New York Times*). Here, again, unfavorable sentiment seems to have been connected to a sense of cultural threat, as encoded in the popular rumors that circulated during Barack Obama's presidential campaign and early presidency claiming that he was a foreign-born Muslim.[6] Even some who rejected this theory nevertheless exploited the administration's politically-correct language about Islam to portray the President as an accomplice to terrorism (Klein). As one might expect, partisan difference in opinion toward Islam was then at its highest point since 2005 (Figure 3).

Partisan difference was even stronger in August 2010, at the height of controversy over the planned construction of the Park51 community center in New York, the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque" (Figure 3). Interestingly, both favorable and unfavorable sentiment toward Islam declined sharply during this controversy as Americans moved in large numbers to the undecided category. This actually represented an increase in partisanship, however, because the people who became undecided were almost exclusively those with views atypical for their party – Democrats with an unfavorable view and Republicans with a favorable one. The partisan narratives seem to have been articulated strongly enough to dislodge these independent thinkers from their unconventional views.[7] This controversy, in fact, was the high point of partisan difference for the entire decade. It seemingly struck at the heart of the points at issue between Republicans and Democrats in their assessments of Islam during the 9/11 decade: whether Islam as a whole bears guilt for 9/11, and whether its presence in the

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[3] The cartoon controversy was associated with a sharp increase in news articles about multiculturalism and free speech, according to Google Trends (for a representative example, see Stillwell).

[4] According to Google Trends, news and search traffic for the phrases "clash of civilizations," "Islamization," and "sharia" increased in 2005 and 2006, subsided in 2007, then increased again from 2008 to 2010 (see also Right Wing Watch).

[5] According to the Iraq Body Count website (http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database), 2006 and 2007 were by far the bloodiest years of the war, numbering more than 24,000 documented civilian deaths each from violence.

[6] 18% of Americans believe the rumors, according to a recent Pew Forum Poll (see Pew Forum 2010).

[7] Data from both Google Trends and the Pew Forum show the controversy triggered a dramatic spike in media coverage of Islam (see the Pew Forum 2012).

United States threatens to co-opt and subvert America's most sacred values (Lean; see Schlesinger; Ratnesar; O'Reilly).

Information about Islam and Susceptibility to Media Framing

As Figure 6 shows, self-reported knowledge of Islam's basic teachings has gradually increased since 2002. This is significant because, as Table 1 shows, those who are well informed about Islam tend to have more favorable opinions of it than those who are uninformed. This relationship was strongest immediately after 9/11. Most of the post-9/11 outpouring of support for Islam occurred among those who claimed to have a good understanding of its beliefs and teachings. By contrast, the uninformed were fairly evenly divided in their opinions of Islam. The groundswell of support among the well-informed subsided by 2003, but this category has remained about 10% more favorable than unfavorable toward Islam from 2003 to 2009.
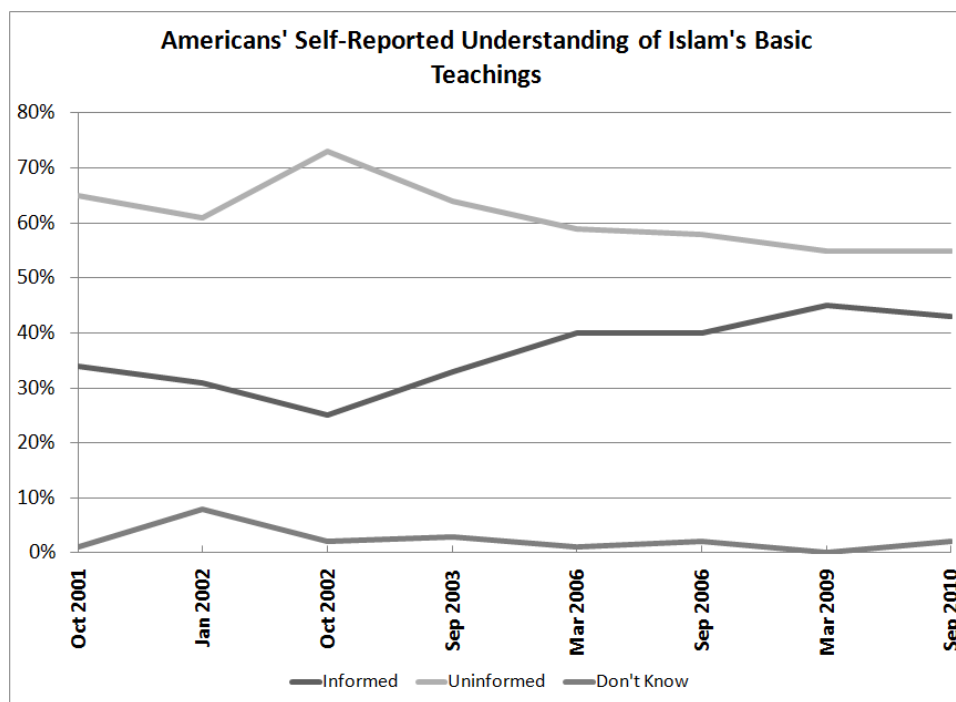

Figure 6. Source: ABC News Polls conducted October 8-9, 2001, January 2-6, 2002, September 4-7, 2003, and September 5-6, 2006; ABC News/BeliefNet Poll conducted October 11-15, 2002; ABC News/Washington Post Polls conducted March 2-5, 2006, March 26-29, 2009, August 30-September 2, 2010. Data were retrieved from the iPOLL Databank. "Partisan Difference" is represented as a percentage of the total possible partisan spread. In all surveys Democrats' opinions were more favorable than Republicans'.

Because of this correlation between knowledge and favorability, the gradual growth of knowledge about Islam should bode well for its public image. But despite this slow increase of knowledge, most Americans remain ignorant about Islam's teachings, and the uninformed have become increasingly hostile to Islam over time. They went from being fairly undecided about Islam in 2001 and 2003 to being overwhelmingly antagonistic to it in 2006 and 2009. In fact, this shift in attitudes among the uninformed accounts for nearly all the growth of

unfavorable attitudes toward Islam since 2003. It has more than canceled out the positive effects of increasing public knowledge.

Table 1. Americans' Self-Reported Understanding of Islam's Basic Teachings (columns) Cross-Tabulated with Their Opinions of Islam (rows)

2001	Yes, I Do	No, I Do Not	2003	Yes, I Do	No, I Do Not
Favorable	62%	40%	Favorable	50%	35%
Unfavorable	34%	42%	Unfavorable	40%	37%
Don't Know/ Refused	4%	18%	Don't Know/ Refused	10%	29%
2006	Yes, I Do	No, I Do Not	2009	Yes, I Do	No, I Do Not
Favorable	51%	34%	Favorable	53%	31%
Unfavorable	41%	48%	Unfavorable	43%	52%
Don't Know/ Refused	8%	18%	Don't Know/ Refused	4%	17%

Source: ABC News Polls conducted October 8-9, 2001, September 4-7, 2003, and September 5-6, 2006; ABC News/Washington Post Poll conducted March 26-29, 2009. Data were retrieved from the iPOLL Databank.

Table 2. Americans' Self-Reported Knowledge of Muslim Religion and Its Practices (columns) Cross-Tabulated with the Greatest Influence on Their Opinions of Muslims (rows)

	A great deal	Some	Not very much	Nothing at all
A personal experience	32%	22%	17%	7%
The views of your friends and family	10%	9%	4%	4%
What you have seen or read in the media	7%	22%	35%	53%
Your religious beliefs	5%	15%	11%	6%
Your education	30%	23%	17%	6%
Something else	13%	8%	12%	16%
Don't know/refused	2%	2%	5%	8%

Source: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life Survey conducted August 1-18, 2007. Data were retrieved from the iPOLL Databank.

As I argued in the previous section of this paper, a probable reason for the shift in attitudes among the uninformed is the influence of media and the increased salience of Islam in partisan politics. As Table 2 shows, those with little or no knowledge of Islam's basic teachings are unusually susceptible to the influence of media. 53% of those who said they knew "nothing at all" about Islam in an August 2007 poll reported that the greatest influence on their opinion of it had been what they saw or read in the media. Only 7% of those who knew "a great deal" said the same. Respondents who knew "a great deal" said they had been

influenced mainly by education or a personal experience – factors that are fairly insensitive to changing political climates, which helps explain the stability of opinions among members of this group.

Education about Islam undoubtedly remains an important antidote to anti-Islamic prejudice, but education alone is unlikely to offset the effects of the highly politicized portrayals of Islam in the American news media. This suggests that media has tremendous power to shape public opinion and behavior, and opinion-makers need to take extra care in selecting framing. Prejudice against Muslims will undoubtedly remain commonplace so long as Islam remains a salient issue in American partisan politics, but careful framing can go a long way to mitigate those feelings.

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