

President Obama and the Influence of Anti-Muslim Sentiments in the 2010 Midterm Elections

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Abstract:

Despite the visibility of Islamic issues after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, attitudes about Muslims did not affect Americans' partisan evaluations before the 2008 election. There are two main reasons, however, to suspect that anti-Muslim sentiments significantly influenced Americans' midterm preferences in 2010 after being unrelated to their vote choices in both the 2004 and 2006 congressional elections. First, Republican efforts to cultivate the Ground Zero Mosque Controversy as a campaign issue in the summer and fall of 2010 may have activated such Islamophobic sentiments. Second, the unusually large effects of anti-Muslim predispositions on opposition to Obama documented in earlier research may have spilled over into voting behavior. After showing that attitudes about Muslims were significantly associated with 2010 vote preferences, I present the following evidence in support of that spillover hypothesis: (1) Attitudes about Muslims were implicated in 2010 vote intentions before the Ground Zero Mosque dominated the headlines; (2) mass evaluations of President Obama almost completely mediated the significant effects of attitudes about Muslims in four different 2010 surveys; and (3) experimentally connecting president Obama to candidates for congress significantly enhanced the relationship between anti-Muslim sentiments and midterm vote preferences.

Feelings towards Muslims helped shape the popular political discourse in the months preceding the 2010 midterm elections. Indeed, the controversy sparked by the prospect of building an Islamic Cultural Center just blocks away from where the World Trade Center once stood dominated the headlines throughout the month of August. Reaction to this so called “Ground Zero Mosque” was the most reported on news story in America the week of August 16 and ruled the blogosphere for three straight weeks that month.¹ Media coverage of what the Project for Excellence in Journalism termed “anti-Muslim sentiments” would later peak in September 2010. The continuing coverage of the Lower Manhattan Islamic Cultural Center, combined with a Florida pastor’s plan to publically burn the Koran, accounted for over 20 percent of televised and print news during the second week of that month (Project for the Excellence in Journalism 2010). The American public was following the influx of attention to Islamic issues too. A plurality of respondents in a late August poll picked the Ground Zero Mosque as the news story they had been following most closely (Pew Research Center 2010).

Some politicians also cultivated the issue’s importance in the upcoming midterm elections. John Coryn (R-Texas), the chairman of the GOP Senatorial Campaign Committee, criticized President Obama and other Democrats’ support for *the right* to build the mosque, adding, “The American people will render their verdict.”² Republican strategists echoed those sentiments and were eager to use the Mosque as another piece of evidence in support of their narrative that the president and his party were out of touch with mainstream American values. Or, as one GOP practitioner put it back in August 2010, “President Obama has now ensured that

¹ This is based on content analyses performed by the Project for Excellence in Journalism of both traditional and online news sources. For the former, see their weekly News Coverage Indexes: http://www.journalism.org/news_index/99; for the latter see their weekly New Media Indexes: http://www.journalism.org/news_index/100

² Quoted in: Lengell, Sean, “GOP Pounces on Obama for Mosque Remarks,” *Washington Times*, August 15, 2010.

Democrats on the campaign trail will be answering for his remarks [in support of the mosque] all this week and possibly into the fall. Candidates will be calling on their opponents to condemn the president's remarks and expressing their frustration over the decision through various forms of earned media".³ With a large majority of Americans opposing the Lower Manhattan Islamic Cultural Center,⁴ several Republican campaigns did in fact denounce both the mosque and Democrats' refusals to be equally condemnatory of its construction (Cohen 2010; Hulse 2010; Tumulty 2010; D'Aprile 2010; McQuillen 2010).

Those anti-mosque campaign appeals could have prompted voters to utilize their feelings towards Muslims more heavily in 2010 voting behavior than they otherwise would have. The psychological theory of priming, for example, posits that the more attention campaigns and the media pay to a particular aspect of political life the more citizens will rely on that consideration in their political evaluations (see Kinder 2003 for a review; though see Lenz 2009 for an alternative account). Even more relevant for our purposes, the expansive literature on racial priming persuasively shows that subtle campaign appeals to anti-black sentiments help white Americans bring their racial predispositions to bear on support for Republican presidential candidates (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Valentino 1999; Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002). We might expect the mosque controversy to have analogously activated anti-Muslim attitudes in support of GOP congressional candidates. If so, the upshot of such priming would be a greater role for religious intolerance in Americans' 2010 voting behavior.

At the same time, however, the rise in prominence of Islamic issues in the 2010 campaign may have been a more of a consequence than a cause of the growing influence of anti-Muslim

³ Quoted in: Condon, Stephanie, "Ground Zero Mosque Becomes a Campaign Issue," *cbsnews.com*, August 16, 2010.

⁴ Polls conducted in August 2010 by CNN/ORC, NBC/WSJ and Time, all suggested that over 60 percent of Americans opposed building the Lower Manhattan Islamic Cultural Center.

sentiments in mass political decision making. After having only modest correlations with partisan evaluations throughout George W. Bush's presidency (Kalkan, Laymen, and Ulsaner 2009; Tesler and Sears 2010; see results below too), attitudes about Muslims were one of the most powerful predictors of support for Barack Obama in the 2008 election, even after controlling for anti-black predispositions (Tesler and Sears 2010). Kam and Kinder (2011) go even further in demonstrating that the strong influence of anti-Muslim attitudes in opposition to Obama's presidential candidacy mediated the broader effects of ethnocentrism—a general tendency to partition the world into ingroups and outgroups, which these authors argue was activated by Obama's candidacy in part because of mistaken beliefs about his religious affiliation. It appears from these prior results, then, that Obama was not just evaluated as an African-American in 2008, but as someone whose name, foreign upbringing, and imagined Muslim faith marks him as distinctly “other” to many Americans.

We hypothesized elsewhere that the newfound role for attitudes about Muslims in public opinion and voting behavior following the 2008 election could lead to a surge in anti-Islamic campaign appeals during Obama's presidency (Tesler and Sears 2010, 141). The logic being that such appeals to religious intolerance should be more politically relevant and resonant with a president who strongly evokes anti-Muslim predispositions in the White House. Moreover, since the American people consistently evaluate Muslims much less favorably than other racial, religious, and ethnic groups (Kalkan et al., 2009; Tesler and Sears 2010; Sides and Gross 2007; see results below too), anti-Muslim appeals against Obama and his party should be more palatable than appeals to racial antagonisms, which are oftentimes criticized and thought to be correspondingly ineffective for violating strong societal norms of race equality (Mendelberg 2001, 2008; though see Huber and Lapinsky 2006). The public's staunch opposition to the

Ground Zero Mosque, along with some politicians' explicit attempts to mobilize it against Obama and congressional candidates for electoral gain, seemed to prove that point.

The influence of anti-Muslim sentiments in mass assessments of Barack Obama could also explain any significant relationships produced between religious intolerance and congressional voting in the 2010 elections. Our previous work, for instance, uncovered clear evidence of a *spillover of racialization* from Barack Obama to political evaluations connected to first his candidacy and then his presidency (Tesler and Sears 2010; Tesler 2011). That is, racial attitudes became an increasingly powerful predictor of mass assessments of John McCain as his campaign against Obama intensified in the fall of 2008 (Tesler and Sears 2010, figure 4.2). The impact of racial resentment on white Americans' opinions about health care and taxes also grew considerably after Barack Obama's positions on these issues received heavy scrutiny in 2008 and 2009 (Tesler and Sears 2010; Tesler 2011); and finally, racial predispositions were significantly stronger predictors of public opinion about policies attributed to President Obama than they were in a set of survey experiments framing the exact same policies as President Clinton's former proposals (Knowles, Lowery and Schamberg 2010; Tesler 2011).

Most importantly for our present purposes, such spillover effects from Obama to related political evaluations were not merely limited to the impact of white Americans' racial attitudes. Much like the increased effects of racial resentment on opposition to governmental health insurance, the relationship between attitudes about Muslims and support health care opinions also grew substantially after Obama's position was subjected to such intense media scrutiny (Tesler and Sears 2010, 156). We described that increased overtime effect as the *spillover of otherization* because attitudes about Muslims are primarily a function of affect towards a band of

cultural outgroups commonly thought of by the American mainstream as “the other” (Kalkan et al. 2009).⁵

Party-line voting for congress in the 2010 midterm elections should have also been ripe for this spillover phenomenon. Mass assessments of the incumbent president powerfully shape vote choice for the House of Representatives (Tuftes 1975,1978; Kernel 1977; Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson 2002; Jacobson 2004). For, as Erikson et al (2002, 279) state, “Approval of the president serves to predict congressional outcomes because *Approval* is a general proxy for the performance aspect of voters’ partisan evaluations, including economic perceptions.” We might therefore expect the unusually large and independent influence of anti-Muslim sentiments on the public’s assessments of Barack Obama to spill over into their partisan preferences for congressional candidates in 2010. The upshot of which would be a significantly stronger relationship between religious intolerance and congressional vote choice in 2010 than in prior midterm elections.

Hypotheses

Those earlier studies inform a number of testable hypotheses about the relationship between anti-Muslim sentiments and Americans’ 2010 voting behavior. First, as mentioned above and empirically shown below, attitudes about Muslims did not significantly affect Americans’ partisan preferences before Barack Obama won his party’s presidential nomination. The null hypothesis, therefore, is that attitudes about Muslims remained a non-significant determinant of Americans’ 2010 congressional vote preferences (H0).

There are two main reasons, however, to suspect that anti-Muslim sentiments significantly predicted Republican vote choice in the 2010 midterms. The first posits that the

⁵ These groups, according to Kalkan et al. (2009), include gays and lesbians, atheists, welfare recipients, and illegal immigrants.

Ground Zero Mosque controversy, as politicized by Republican critiques of Obama and Democratic congressional candidates for not outright opposing its construction, activated attitudes about Muslims in Americans' party-line voting for congress. That is, anti-Muslim sentiments were *primed* by media and campaign content in the months preceding the election. I refer to that contention as the Muslim priming hypothesis.

In contrast with that priming explanation, the spillover of otherization hypothesis contends that attitudes about Muslims would have affected 2010 vote choice regardless of whether the Ground Zero Mosque controversy politicized Islamic issues. More specifically, anti-Muslim sentiments were all but predestined to predict voting behavior in 2010 because these attitudes are such strong determinants of mass assessments of Barack Obama, and presidential evaluations factor so heavily into Americans' midterm vote preferences. Despite those differing explanations, though, both the priming and the spillover hypotheses suggest that attitudes about Muslims should have been significant predictors of Americans' vote choices in the 2010 midterm elections (H1).

The spillover of otherization, however, puts forth additional hypotheses that help distinguish Obama's role in activating anti-Muslim sentiments from how the Ground Zero Mosque controversy may have primed Islamophobic attitudes during the 2010 campaign. As just mentioned, the spillover and priming hypotheses differ in that the former maintains that the sustained attention to the Lower Manhattan Islamic Cultural Center activated anti-Muslim predispositions in congressional vote choice. On the other hand, the later hypothesis maintains that anti-Muslim sentiments were almost sure to have affected midterm preferences regardless of whether the media covered Islamic issues in the summer and fall of 2010 because the incumbent president strongly evokes such attitudes. The spillover of otherization, therefore, expects

attitudes about Muslims to have significantly predicted 2010 vote intentions *before* the events of the summer and fall could have primed their influence (H2).

To reiterate, the central causal claim put forth by the spillover of otherization hypothesis is that attitudes about Muslims influenced vote choice in 2010 because they are a powerful determinant of mass assessment of Obama (Tesler and Sears 2010; Kam and Kinder 2011), and evaluations of the incumbent president in turn factor heavily into midterm voting behavior. If that hypothesized pathway is correct, then we would expect evaluations of President Obama to mediate the effects of anti-Muslim sentiments in 2010 vote preferences. In other words, any significant relationships between attitudes towards Muslims and midterm vote choice should disappear after controlling for evaluations of President Obama (H3).

Finally, if the effects of attitudes about Muslim in the 2010 elections were in fact caused by Obama, then we might expect efforts aimed at connecting Democratic candidates to the president to further increase the influence of religious intolerance on midterm vote preferences. That is, experimentally associating President Obama with Democratic candidates for congress should have significantly enhanced the relationship between attitudes about Muslims and candidate preferences (H4).

Method

Data

This study utilizes both observational data and an original survey experiment to test those hypotheses. The cross-sectional surveys are partitioned into pre-Obama (before 2008) and post-Obama (after 2008) time periods to determine how the influence of attitudes towards Muslims may have changed over time.⁶ An exhaustive search uncovered three publically available

⁶ Data from 2008 is not utilized since voting for the House of Representatives in that election would have likely been influenced by Obama's candidacy.

datasets from the pre-Obama era that contain respondents' assessments of Muslims and their congressional vote preferences in the same surveys. These surveys include: (1) the 2004 American National Election Study (ANES), (2) the 2006 ANES Pilot Study, and (3) a March 2007 Pew Poll that had a 2006 congressional vote report item.⁷ There were also three publically available datasets from 2010 that contained similar measures of attitudes towards Muslims and congressional preferences: (1) The 2008-2009-2010 ANES Panel Study, (2) an August 2010 survey conducted for Time Magazine,⁸ and (3) an NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll from August 2010.⁹ In addition, I fielded two more nationally representative surveys in October 2010, each of which contained 1000 respondents and both of which were conducted by the internet polling firm YouGov-Polimetrix. These two surveys are pooled together to enhance the efficiency of estimates. All results are also weighted to the general population to help facilitate comparisons across the different sampling designs and interviewing modes used in these surveys.

That observational data, however, cannot tell us for certain whether any increased influence of anti-Muslim predispositions was *caused* by the incumbent president evoking such ethnocentric attitudes or another factor like sustained media and campaign attention to the Ground Zero Mosque controversy in the months preceding the midterm elections.¹⁰ So with that in mind, I randomly assigned respondents from one of the abovementioned YouGov-Polimetrix

⁷ Survey by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. Methodology: Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International, March 21 - March 25, 2007 and based on 1,503 telephone interviews, one half of whom received the Muslim favorability question. Sample: national adult. Dataset accessed from the Roper Center's data archive.

⁸ Survey by Time. Methodology: Conducted by Abt SRBI, August 16 - August 17, 2010 and based on 1,002 telephone interviews. Sample: national adult. Dataset accessed from the Roper Center's data archive.

⁹ Survey by NBC News, Wall Street Journal. Methodology: Conducted by Hart and McInturff Research Companies, August 26 - August 30, 2010 and based on 1,000 telephone interviews, one half of whom received the Muslim favorability question. Sample: national adult. The sample included 200 respondents who use a cell phone only. Dataset accessed from the Roper Center's data archive.

¹⁰ Nor can it rule out other potential explanations such as sampling and mode differences between some of the pre-Obama and post-Obama surveys.

surveys to two different survey forms. After first inquiring about how they intended to vote for Congress,¹¹ half of my participants were asked (1) whether they wanted the newly elected Congress to be more or less supportive of Obama’s legislative agenda; (2) they were then told that Obama had been campaigning for Democratic candidates and asked if an endorsement from the president would make them more or less likely to support the Democratic candidate in their district. Shortly thereafter, these same individuals were asked how favorably they felt toward the two major party congressional candidates in their district. The remaining half of the sample, meanwhile, was just asked the candidate favorability items without being primed with questions designed to tie Democrats running for congress to Obama. This design provides the study’s most direct causal test of the spillover of otherization by determining whether experimentally connecting Democratic candidates to Obama significantly increased the influence of anti-Muslim sentiments on midterm preferences.

Attitudes towards Muslims

The analyses below employ two primary measures of attitudes towards Muslims. The first measures affect with a thermometer rating of how warm or cold respondents feel towards Muslims (see appendix for variable coding). The second asks individuals to rate groups on favorability scales ranging from “very favorable” to “very unfavorable”. While the different measurements utilized complicate comparisons across surveys, both thermometer and favorability ratings of Muslims have similar origins in feelings towards other religious and cultural outgroups (Kalkan et al. 2009). The favorability and affect measures also both indicate that Americans evaluate Muslims much less favorably than other religious, racial, and ethnic

¹¹ Ideally, the experimental manipulation would have taken place prior to assessing 2010 vote intention. That design would have enabled vote intention instead of candidate favorability ratings to be the dependent variable. My survey experiment, however, was fielded as part of a YouGov cooperative—one that mandated vote intention be assessed prior to individual investigators’ content.

groups who are more familiar to them. Figure 1, for instance, shows that survey respondents consistently rated Muslims between 15 to 20 percentage points lower on average than whites, blacks, Catholics, Hispanics, Asians and Jews between 2004 and 2010.

Those lower evaluations of Muslims should mitigate some of the prevalent concerns about using self-reported thermometer and favorability ratings of racial, religious and ethnic groups as a measure of outgroup antagonisms. Americans have become sensitive to expressing negative opinions about most of these groups. As a result, a “norm of evenhandedness” in surveys has developed whereby Americans are reluctant to deviate in their evaluations of different racial and ethnic groups (Schuman et al. 1997; Huddy and Feldman 2009). Such pressure from societal norms to default to similar assessments of both ingroups and outgroups is thought to mask Americans’ racial and ethnocentric predispositions and subsequently diminish the actual relationship between outgroup antagonisms and political evaluations (Sears and Savalei 2009). It appears from Figure 1, though, that the norm of evenhandedness has not yet been extended to Americans’ evaluations of Muslims. We should be more confident, then, that the results presented below are not substantially underestimating the “true” associations between anti-Muslim sentiments and congressional vote preferences.

Control Variables

A long line of social science research treats attitudes towards specific racial, religious and ethnic groups as a subset of the larger suspicion of people defined as the “other” or as outgroups (Sumner 1906; Adorno et al. 1950; Duckitt 1992; Kinder and Kam 2009). In keeping with that line of research, anti-black and anti-Muslim predispositions are significantly correlated (Tesler and Sears 2010). Moreover, attitudes towards both of those groups mediated the unusually large influence of white ethnocentrism on 2008 vote choice (Kam and Kinder 2011). It is imperative,

then, to distinguish how Obama's background activated attitudes about Muslims from how it may have enhanced the impact of racial attitudes on midterm vote choice. Indeed, recall that the spillover of otherization hypothesis is informed by prior results showing that Obama's presence in political controversies created a spillover of racialization effect. I control for Kinder and Sanders' (1996) racial resentment scale, therefore, to assess the influence of anti-Muslim sentiments on midterm vote preferences above and beyond the effects of anti-black predispositions. The analyses also include controls for party identification, ideological self-placement, and race.

Attitudes Towards Muslims and House Vote Preferences 2004-2006

Despite the visibility of Islamic issues after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the Bush administrations forceful response to them, attitudes about Muslims did not factor heavily into Americans' partisan evaluations before the 2008 election. Anti-Muslim sentiments, for instance, were not a significant, independent predictor of party identification, presidential vote choice in the 2004 election, or George W. Bush's approval ratings during that pre-Obama time period (Kalkan et al. 2009; Tesler and Sears 2010; although see Sides and Gross 2007 for significant relationships with policy preferences).

Consistent with those earlier null findings, Table 1 shows that attitudes towards Muslims were not related to Americans' vote choices in either the 2004 or the 2006 congressional elections. After controlling for partisan, ideological and racial resentment, the coefficients in the first two columns of the table indicate that moving from the least to the most favorable assessment of Muslims increased the Democrats' House vote share by only 8 percentage points in the 2004 ANES and just 3 percentage points in the 2006 ANES Pilot Study.¹² Moreover, the third column in the display suggests that rating Muslims favorably may not have even been

¹² These predicted probabilities were calculated by setting the other covariates to their sample means.

positively associated with Democratic vote preference in the 2006 midterms. All told, then, these three surveys confirm what prior research would have already lead us to believe—feelings about Muslims did not affect Americans’ votes for national office before the 2008 election.

Attitudes Towards Muslims and House Vote Preferences in 2010

As discussed above, however, there are two main reasons to suspect that attitudes about Muslims significantly influenced midterm vote preferences in 2010. First, the Muslim priming hypothesis posits that Republican efforts to cultivate the Ground Zero Mosque controversy as a campaign issue activated anti-Muslim sentiments in midterm vote preferences. Second, the spillover of otherization contends that religious intolerance should have predicted voting behavior in 2010 because the incumbent president powerfully evokes such anti-Muslim predispositions.

The results presented in Figure 2 generally support those contentions. That display plots the relationship between attitudes about Muslims and midterm preferences in the four 2010 surveys referenced above with partisanship, ideology, and race held constant. All else being equal, Figure 2 shows that moving from a very negative to very positive assessment of Muslims increased support for Democrats from as little as 20 percentage points in the NBC/WSJ Poll to as much as 44 percentage points in the July 2010 wave of the 2008-2009-2010 ANES Panel Study. And averaging across the four different surveys, a change from the least to the most favorable impression of Muslims was associated with about a 30 percentage point increase in support for House Democrats after controlling for party identification, ideological self-placement and race.

These significant effects were not simply an artifact of conflating anti-Muslim with anti-black predispositions, either. The dashed lines in the bottom two panels of Figure 2 illustrate the relationship between attitudes towards Muslims and 2010 midterm preferences after controlling

for both the base model variables and racial resentment. To be sure, the dashed lines indicate that accounting for the correlation between anti-black and anti-Muslim predispositions diminished the relationship between midterm vote preferences and attitudes about Muslims. More importantly, though, controlling for racial resentment does not alter the main conclusion that attitudes toward Muslims were a substantively important predictor of midterm vote preferences in 2010. Indeed, a change from the lowest to the highest appraisal of Muslims was still associated with a 25 percentage point increase in Democratic support in the pooled YouGov surveys and a 35 percentage point increases in the July wave of the ANES Panel after controlling for both the base model variables and racial resentment.

The fourth and final graph in Figure 2 also begins to shed some light on why attitudes about Muslims were significantly related to midterm vote preferences in 2010. Those results from the July 2010 wave of the ANES Panel Study suggest that anti-Muslim sentiments would have likely eroded support for Democratic congressional candidates regardless of whether the Ground Zero Mosque controversy politicized Islamic issues in the late summer and early fall of 2010. Indeed, that survey was completed on July 7, *well before* the Lower Manhattan Cultural Center began to receive media and campaign scrutiny. Those ANES results, which employ a measure of affect towards Muslims from the May 2009 wave, also mitigate concerns that the significant correlations between anti-Muslim sentiments and vote intention were produced by respondents changing their underlying attitudes in accordance with their midterm preferences (e.g. Lenz 2009).

To be sure, the results in Figure 2 cannot tell us whether the Ground Zero Mosque controversy made attitudes about Muslims an even more important determinant of midterm vote preferences than they otherwise would have been. Nor can they tell us precisely why these

sentiments were significantly linked to partisan preferences after never influencing them prior to the 2008 election. Nevertheless, all of the findings presented thus far are consistent with the spillover of otherization's contention that anti-Muslim sentiments influenced midterm vote preferences in 2010 because the incumbent president strongly evokes such Islamophobic attitudes.

Empirical Tests of the Spillover of Otherization Hypothesis

Obama as a Mediator of Anti-Muslim Sentiments

This section goes beyond those Figure 2 results by providing more direct tests of President Obama's causal role in activating anti-Muslim sentiments. Our first empirical test determines if, as the spillover of otherization's third hypothesis suggests, mass assessments of the president mediated the relationship between attitudes about Muslims and midterm vote preferences. Mediation occurs when an explanatory variable's influence (in this, case attitudes about Muslims) on a dependent variable (midterm vote preferences) is transmitted through an intervening variable (hypothesized here to be evaluations of President Obama) (Baron and Kenny 1986). Thus, if the mediational pathway specified by the spillover of otherization is correct, then the significant relationships between attitudes about Muslims and midterm vote preferences should become negligible after controlling for public assessments of the president.

Consistent with that expectation, the results presented in Figure 3 show that the relationship between attitudes toward Muslims and midterm vote preference were almost entirely mediated by evaluations of President Obama. The solid lines in the display depict the bivariate associations between positive assessments of Muslims and support for congressional Democrats in the four 2010 surveys referenced above. These strong bivariate correlations between Muslim favorability and Democratic vote preference presented in Figure 3 are not at all surprising since

we saw back in Figure 2 that attitudes about Muslims were significant predictors of midterms vote preferences even after controlling for partisan, ideological, and racial predispositions. Yet, unlike those earlier results, the dashed lines in Figure 3 indicate that including just one additional variable in multivariate regression models with attitudes about Muslims—a single item measure of presidential evaluations—dramatically diminished their association with House vote preferences in 2010. In fact, the large bivariate effects of Muslim favorability on Democratic vote preferences were reduced to nearly zero in the Time, NBC/WSJ, and ANES surveys after accounting for the substantial relationship between anti-Muslim sentiments and opposition to Obama’s presidency.

Taken together, then, the results in Figure 3 suggest that the significant effects of attitudes about Muslims in the 2010 election were indirect, mediated by their more direct effect on mass assessments of President Obama. That mediation, of course, is highly consistent with the spillover of otherization’s central causal claim that attitudes about Muslims influenced midterm vote preferences in 2010 because the incumbent president strongly evokes such sentiments.

Experimentally Testing the Spillover of Otherization Hypothesis

While those results in Figure 3 are highly consistent with the contention that Obama had a direct role in activating the influence of attitudes about Muslims on 2010 voting, such mediational analyses always run the risk of overstating the causal effects of intervening variables (Green, Ha and Bulluck 2010). It is important to augment those results, then, with an experimental test of the spillover of otherization in order to further interrogate Obama’s causal role in activating Muslim sentiments. As discussed above, this experiment connected candidates for congress to President Obama by telling one half of the survey respondents that Obama had

been campaigning for many Democrats and asking if an endorsement of Obama would make them more or less likely to support their district's Democratic candidate for the House of Representatives. The spillover mechanism's fourth and final hypothesis is that attitudes about Muslims should have been a more powerful predictor of candidate evaluations for respondents who were randomly assigned to receive this experimental manipulation than they should have been for the remainder of the sample in the baseline group.

This hypothesis test, however, is complicated by the fact that many respondents probably did not need the Obama experiment to connect the president—and their attitudes towards Muslims as a consequence—to their candidate evaluations. We saw above, for instance, that attitudes towards Muslims were a significant predictor of midterm vote preferences in surveys from the summer and fall 2010 in which respondents did not receive any experimental manipulations designed to further connect Obama to Democratic candidates for congress. That baseline effect of anti-Muslim sentiments could have created a ceiling effect that limited the influence of the Obama experimental condition. As a result, any significant differences in the effects of anti-Muslim sentiments on candidate evaluations yielded between the two conditions are likely conservative estimates of Obama's causal potential in activating such Islamophobic attitudes.¹³

That being said, attitudes about Muslims still had a significantly stronger relationship with candidate evaluations in the Obama condition than they had in the baseline group. The

¹³ The fact that congressional vote intention was assessed before both the experimental manipulation and the candidate evaluation items may also introduce a conservative bias into the results since survey respondents are shown to rationalize their voting behavior with their candidate evaluations (Rahn, Krosnick and Breuning 1994). In addition, Muslim favorability was a slightly stronger correlate of Democratic vote intentions in the baseline condition than it was in the Obama condition ($r = .44$ to $r = .38$), which could make it harder to yield a significantly stronger effect on candidate evaluations for respondents in the Obama group.

OLS coefficients on Muslim favorability presented in the first column of Figure 1 indicate that moving from the least to the most favorable assessment of Muslims increased Democratic minus Republican candidate evaluations by about 8 percent of the relative evaluation scale's range in the baseline condition after controlling for party identification, ideological self-placement, and race. In contrast with that modest effect, the interaction term, Muslim Favorability*Obama Prime, discloses that this same movement of negative to positive attitudes about Muslims was associated with a 23 percent increase in Democratic minus Republican candidate evaluations—a statistically significant difference in effects between conditions ($p = .01$). Likewise the third column of the table shows that moving from a very unfavorable to a very favorable impression of Muslims increased support for the Democratic candidate in one's district by about 15 percent of the favorability scale's range for respondents in the baseline condition and 32 percent for those who received the Obama prime—a difference in effects between conditions that was also statistically significant ($p = .02$).

It is important to note that the un-weighted coefficients in Table 1 suggest a smaller effect of the Obama experiment on both relative and actual Democratic candidate favorability ratings than the weighted results in columns 1 and 3. Nevertheless, the interaction terms for Muslim favorability in those columns still show that the relationships between these attitudes and candidate evaluations were significantly stronger in the Obama condition than they were in the baseline group ($p < .10$, $p < .05$ respectively). All told, then, the experimental results presented in Table 2 indicate that connecting political evaluations to President Obama can activate the influence of attitudes towards Muslims in mass opinion.

Summary and Conclusion

Attitudes about Muslims, as shown above, were a substantively important predictor of Americans' midterm vote preferences in 2010 after neither affecting their 2004 nor their 2006 congressional elections. Both the mediational results in Figure 3 and the experimental findings in Table 2 further indicate that these novel effects in 2010 were driven in large part by an incumbent president who strongly evokes anti-Muslim sentiments. While none of the evidence presented supported the Muslim priming hypothesis, we still cannot rule out the possibility that the influence of attitudes about Muslims were further enhanced by the Ground Zero Mosque controversy. Nor can we empirically confirm or exclude the possibility that Republican efforts to make the mosque a campaign issue were a consequence of the newfound role for attitudes about Muslims in mass political decision making brought about by the election of Barack Obama.

At the same time, though, the evidence suggests that the president's background would have made attitudes about Muslims a significant determinant of midterm vote preferences regardless of whether the Lower Manhattan Islamic Cultural Center had ever become a campaign issue in the summer and fall of the election year. Indeed, anti-Muslim sentiments were a strong predictor of vote intentions before the issue received campaign attention in August 2010 (panel 4 of Figure 2), and evaluations of President Obama completely mediated that significant relationship in the July 2010 ANES (panel 4 of Figure 3).

The spillover of anti-Muslim sentiments from Americans' assessments of Obama to their 2010 midterm vote preferences documented in this study could have some important implications for American politics during his presidency. Prior research suggests that Obama's racial background may be increasingly polarizing the larger American political landscape by

both racial attitudes and race (Tesler and Sears 2010; Knowles, Lowery and Schamburg 2010 ; Tesler 2011). The spillover of otherization into midterm vote preferences also implies a greater role for anti-Muslim sentiments in American politics during Obama's presidency above and beyond such racial polarization. It appears, then, that the election of an African-American president who is also perceived by many Americans as the "other" could both usher in a new contemporary high point for the influence of race in American politics *and* divide the country by ethnocentric attitudes like anti-Muslim sentiments that had never influenced partisan preferences beforehand.

To be sure, more work is needed to determine just how far this new influence of anti-Muslim sentiments on mass political decision making extends, as well as whether it will become a more permanent fixture of the partisan landscape that lasts beyond Obama's presidency. For the time being, though, we will likely continue to see appeals to anti-Muslim sentiments both because Muslims are evaluated much less favorably than other groups and because these appeals should be more relevant now that Islamophobic sentiments factor into mass political behavior. The inherently divisive nature that accompanies the influence of ethnocentric attitudes such as anti-black and anti-Muslim predispositions is also likely to continue contributing to the especially rancorous atmosphere that surrounded the first two years of Obama's presidency.

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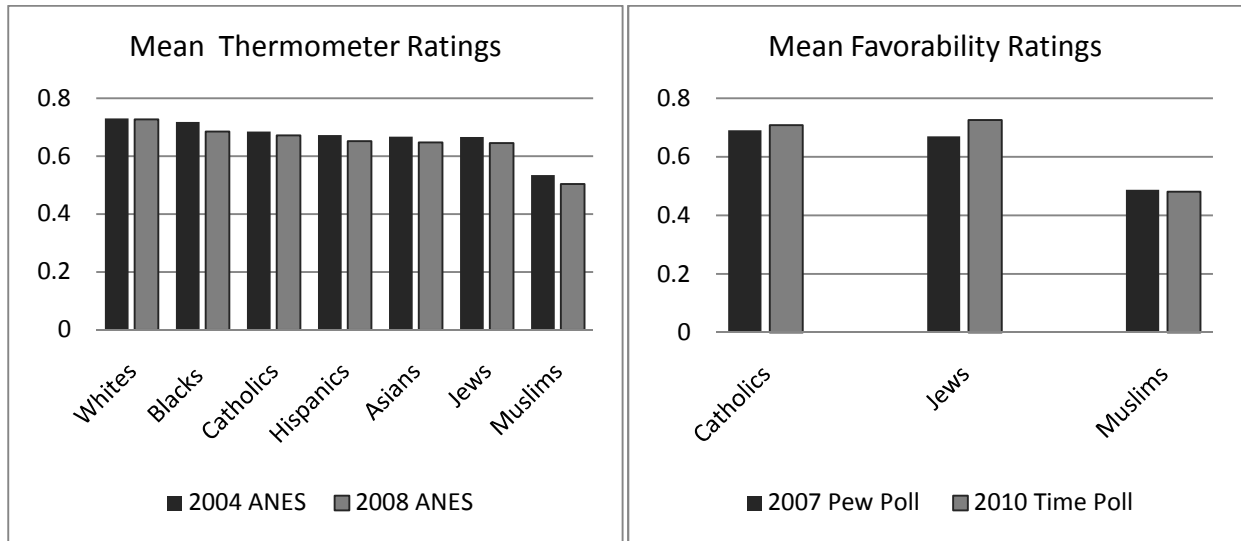


Figure 1: Mean Thermometer and Favorability Ratings of Racial, Religious, and Ethnic Groups. Note: Ratings are recoded from 0-1, with 0 representing the most negative assessment and 1 being the positive rating.

Table 1 (Logistic Regression): Predictors of Democratic Vote Choice for the House of Representatives

	2004 ANES	2006 ANES Pilot	2006 Pew
Muslim Affect	.326 (.588)	.107 (.744)	
Muslim Favorability			-.229 (.616)
Democrat	1.30 (.300)	2.49 (.579)	3.10 (.560)
Republican	-1.78 (.280)	-1.83 (.373)	-1.92 (.390)
Liberal	.388 (.358)	1.02 (.568)	1.15 (.611)
Conservative	-.459 (.260)	-.780 (.387)	-1.65 (.391)
Black	1.29 (.526)	.102 (.742)	2.75 (.977)
Racial Resentment	-2.47 (.552)	-1.67 (.733)	
Constant	1.67 (.565)	1.72 (.713)	.537 (.424)
Observations	695	394	461

Note: The dependent variables are coded as dummies, taking on values of 1 (Democratic vote) and 0 (Republican vote). All variables are coded from 0 to 1, with 1 being the highest value. Regression analyses utilize post-stratification weights with robust standard errors presented in parentheses. *Source:* 2004 ANES; 2006 ANES Pilot Study; March 2007 Pew Poll.

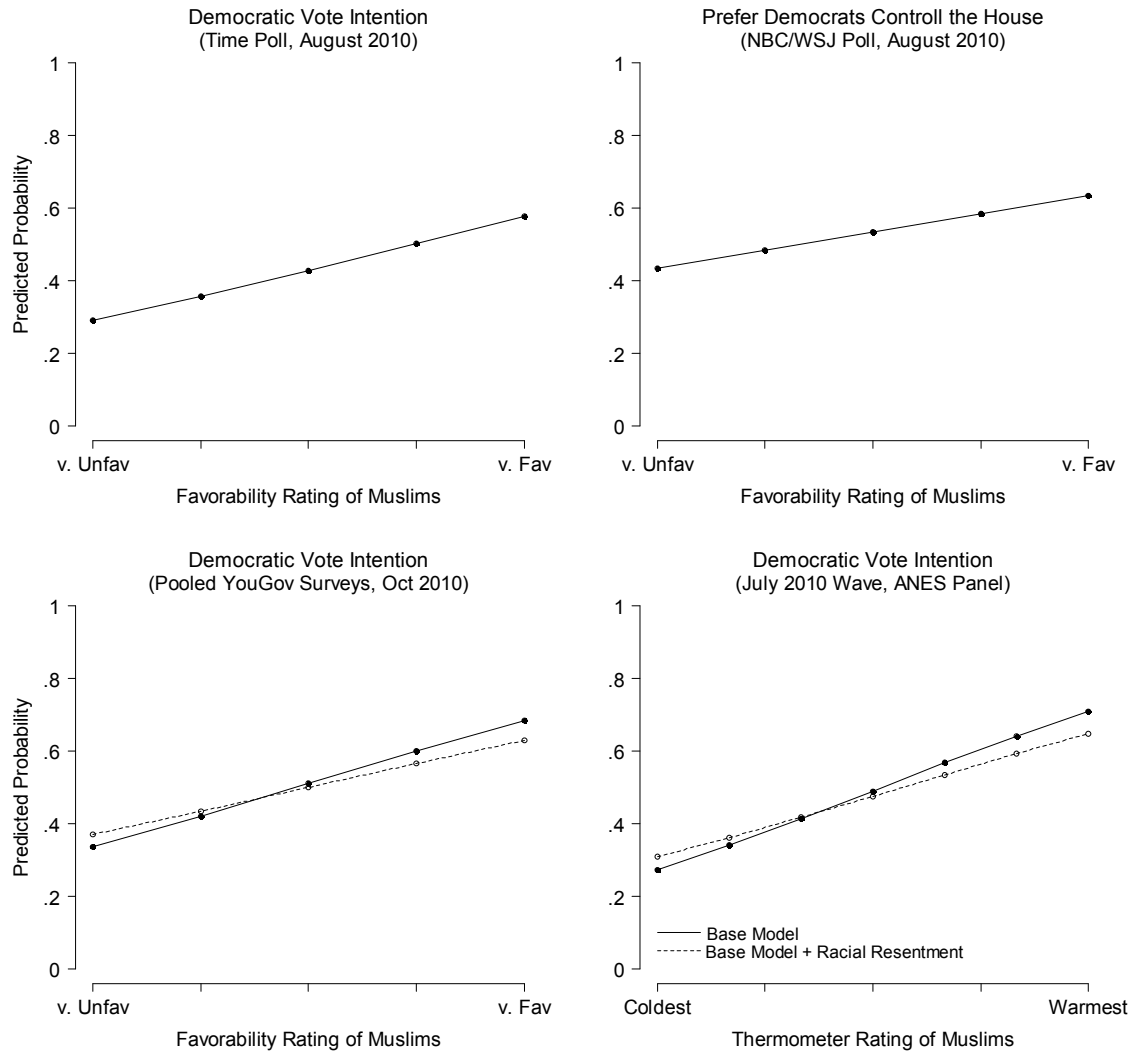


Figure 1: Democratic Vote Preference as a Function of Attitudes Towards Muslims. Note: Predicted probabilities are based on logistic regression coefficients in Table A1 of the appendix. Probabilities in the base model were calculated by setting indicator variables for Democrat, Republican, liberal, conservative and black to their sample means. Probabilities in the base + racial resentment model were calculated by setting these same variables and racial resentment to their sample means.

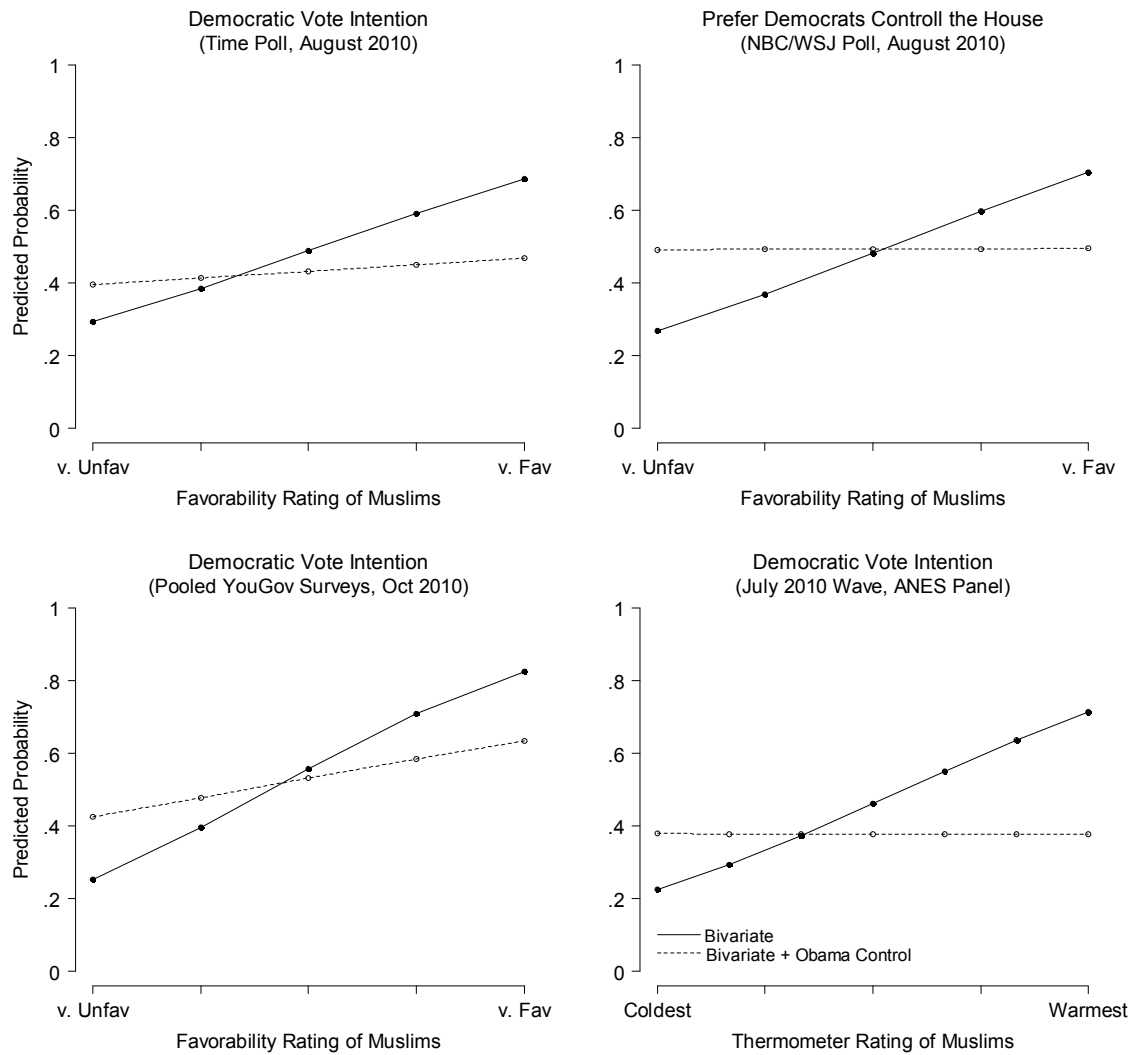


Figure 2: Democratic Vote Preference as a Function of Attitudes Towards Muslims with and without Obama as a Mediator. Note: Predicted probabilities are based on logistic regression coefficients in Table A2 of the appendix. Probabilities in the dashed lines were calculated by setting evaluations of Obama to their sample means.

Table 2: (OLS) Predictors of Congressional Candidate Favorability Ratings

	<u>Dem-Rep Candidate Ratings</u>		<u>Dem Candidate Ratings</u>	
	Weighted	Unweighted	Weighted	Unweighted
Muslim Favorability	.076 (.043)	.110 (.036)	.145 (.048)	.174 (.043)
Muslim Favorability* Obama Prime	.156 (.060)	.084 (.051)	.170 (.073)	.123 (.062)
Democrat	.159 (.025)	.164 (.022)	.221 (.030)	.231 (.027)
Democrat*Obama Prime	-.041 (.036)	-.004 (.031)	-.061 (.043)	-.043 (.038)
Republican	-.118 (.026)	-.124 (.024)	-.094 (.032)	-.097 (.030)
Republican*Obama Prime	-.012 (.038)	.003 (.036)	.005 (.048)	.036 (.044)
Liberal	.080 (.026)	.056 (.024)	.041 (.029)	.029 (.030)
Liberal* Obama Prime	.016 (.039)	.037 (.035)	.035 (.043)	.042 (.043)
Conservative	-.186 (.026)	-.205 (.023)	-.160 (.032)	-.165 (.029)
Conservative*Obama Prime	-.017 (.091)	.065 (.033)	.013 (.047)	.009 (.041)
Black	.022 (.034)	.025 (.029)	.020 (.038)	.021 (.036)
Black*Obama Prime	.022 (.048)	.033 (.040)	.021 (.057)	.046 (.049)
Obama Prime	-.093 (.031)	-.078 (.030)	-.088 (.040)	-.068 (.037)
Constant	.478 (.031)	.471 (.021)	.417 (.025)	.393 (.025)
Observations	975	975	980	980

Note: Dependent variables are Democratic-Republican congressional candidate favorability ratings, recoded from 0 (rate Republican candidate very favorable and Democrat very unfavorable) to 1 (rate Democratic candidate very favorable and Republican very unfavorable), and a five category favorability rating recoded from 0 (rate Democratic candidate very unfavorable) to 1 (very favorable). All variables are coded from 0 to 1, with 1 taking on the highest value. Weighted analyses use robust standard errors. *Source:* YouGov-Polimetrix Survey, October 2010.

Appendix

Explanatory Variables

Black: An indicator variable taking on a value of 1 (identify as African-American) or 0 (non-black).

Conservative: An indicator variable taking on a value of 1 (identify as conservative or somewhat conservative) or 0 (all other responses).

Democrat: An indicator variable taking on a value of 1 (identify as a Democrat) or 0 (all other responses).

Liberal: An indicator variable taking on a value of 1 (identify as liberal or somewhat liberal) or 0 (all other responses).

Muslim Affect (ANES): A 101 category thermometer rating of Muslims recoded from 0 (coldest) to 1 (warmest). Don't knows are coded as .5

Muslim Affect (ANES Panel): A seven category thermometer rating of Muslims recoded from 0 (coldest) to 1 (warmest). Don't knows are coded as .5

Muslim Favorability (NBC, Pew, Time): A four category variable recoded from 0 (very unfavorable) to 1 (very favorable). Don't knows are coded as .5.

Muslim Favorability (YouGov/PMX): A five category variable recoded from 0 (very unfavorable) to 1 (very favorable). Don't knows are coded as .5.

Obama Approval (Time): A two category variable recoded from 0 (disapprove) to 1 (approve). Don't knows are coded as .5.

Obama Approval (YouGov): A four category variable recoded from 0 (strongly disapprove) to 1 (strongly approve). Don't knows are coded as .5.

Obama Favorability (NBC/WSJ): A five category variable recoded from 0 (very negative) to 1 (very positive). Don't knows are coded as .5.

Obama Likability (ANES Panel): A seven category variable recoded from 0 (extreme dislike) to 1 (extreme like). Don't knows are coded as .5.

Racial Resentment (ANES/ANES Panel): An additive index recoded from 0 (least resentful) to 1 (most resentful): The scale was constructed from how strongly respondents agreed or disagreed with the following assertions: 1) Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors. 2) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class. 3) Over the past few years, blacks have gotten

less than they deserve. 4) It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

Racial Resentment (YouGov/PMX): An additive index recoded from 0 (least resentful) to 1 (most resentful): The scale was constructed from how strongly respondents agreed or disagreed with the following assertions: 1) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class. 2) It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

Republican: An indicator variable taking on a value of 1 (identify as a Republican) or 0 (all other responses).

Dependent Variables

Democratic Candidate Favorability: A five category variable recoded from 0 (very unfavorable) to 1 (very favorable). Don't know responses were coded as .5.

Democratic – Republican Candidate Favorability: A ten category scale measuring the difference between evaluations of Democratic and Republican candidates for the House (1-5 rating scales for each item). The scale is recoded from 0 (rate Republican candidate very favorable and Democrat very unfavorable) to 1 (rate Democratic candidate very favorable and Republican very unfavorable). Don't know responses were coded as .5 for both items.

Democratic Vote Preference: An indicator variable taking on a value of 0 (prefer Republican House Candidate) or 1 (prefer Democratic House Candidate).

Table A1 (Logistic Regression): Predictors of Democratic Vote Preferences for the House of Representatives.

	Time Poll	NBC/WSJ	YouGov [1]	YouGov [2]	ANES [1]	ANES[2]
Muslim Favorability/Affect	1.20 (.470)	.817 (.584)	1.45 (.437)	1.06 (.500)	1.87 (.717)	1.41 (.810)
Democrat	2.95 (.366)	3.13 (.552)	2.30 (.302)	2.32 (.311)	2.20 (.374)	2.25 (.393)
Republican	-2.73 (.620)	-2.19 (.412)	-1.76 (.428)	-1.87 (.448)	-2.67 (.467)	-2.46 (.483)
Liberal	3.23 (.547)	.662 (.418)	.841 (.359)	.593 (.380)	1.68 (.431)	1.56 (.438)
Conservative	-1.48 (.392)	-1.15 (.354)	-1.41 (.257)	-1.10 (.290)	-1.37 (.403)	-1.19 (.419)
Black	.263 (.746)	2.17 (.674)	.232 (.652)	.344 (.632)	3.23 (1.14)	2.40 (1.15)
Racial Resentment				-3.04 (.542)		-2.43 (.787)
Constant	-2.24 (.425)	-.465 (.419)	-.578 (.315)	1.36 (.425)	-1.11 (.421)	.405 (.662)
Observations	715	418	1432	1420	917	872

Note: The dependent variables are coded as dummies, taking on values of 1 (Democratic preferences) (Republican preferences). All variables are coded from 0 to 1, with 1 being the highest value. Regression analyses utilize post-stratification weights with robust standard errors presented in parentheses. *Source:* Time Poll, August 2010; NBC/WSJ August 2010; YouGov-Polimetrix pooled Oct 2010 surveys; July 2010 wave of the 2008-2009-2010 ANES Panel.

Table A2 (Logistic Regression): Predictors of Democratic Vote Preferences for the House of Representatives.

	Time Poll	NBC/WSJ	YouGov	ANES
<u>Bivariate</u>				
Muslim Favorability/Affect	1.67 (.282)	1.87 (.364)	2.63 (.403)	2.15 (.402)
Constant	-.886 (.170)	-1.01 (.230)	-1.08 (.181)	-1.23 (.192)
Observations	715	418	1432	917
<u>Multivariate</u>				
Muslim Favorability/Affect	.303 (.414)	.012 (.557)	.852 (.637)	-.007 (.672)
Obama Evaluations	3.86 (.310)	4.99 (.464)	5.40 (.351)	7.89 (.351)
Constant	-2.18 (.248)	-2.58 (.361)	-2.53 (.248)	-4.80 (.548)
Observations	715	418	1431	917

Note: The dependent variables are coded as dummies, taking on values of 1 (Democratic preferences) (Republican preferences). All variables are coded from 0 to 1, with 1 being the highest value. Regression analyses utilize post-stratification weights with robust standard errors presented in parentheses. *Source:* Time, August 2010; NBC/WSJ August 2010; YouGov-Polimetrix pooled Oct 2010 surveys; July 2010 wave of the 2008-2009-2010 ANES Panel.