

# Multicultural policies do not lead to more supportive attitudes towards religious accommodation.

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All modern societies have become multicultural demographically – but what about in a societal sense? **Matthew Wright** investigates public support for religious accommodation in general, and Islam in particular. Studying three nations in two countries, Quebec, Canada, and the US, he finds that compared to other religious groups, Muslims are seen to be exceptional and less deserving of religious accommodation. This is especially so in Quebec – but only because Quebecers have a greater resistance to all forms of religious accommodation.



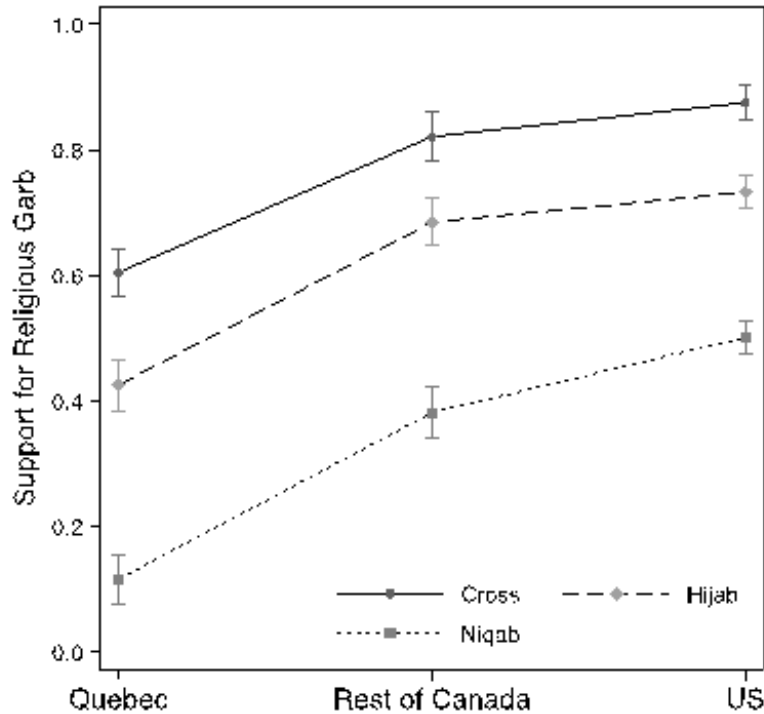
Cartoons mocking Mohammed, bans on public wearing of the burka and other restrictions on headgear, sharia law, and halal food at school lunches are issues no Western democracies were confronted with fifty years ago. Since then, all modern societies have become multicultural in the demographic sense, and many have in an expressly political sense as well; through official recognition and respect, financial support, special rights, and exemptions from general laws and customs, multiculturalism seeks to enable minority group members to live an “authentic” life within their “societal culture”. Its proponents argue that they facilitate the integration of culturally diverse immigrants and help bind them to their new country.

Critics argue that entrenching cultural differences undermines national unity and social cohesion and that group-differentiated rights are fundamentally incompatible with liberal principles of equal treatment of individuals. They take particular aim at Islam and illiberal practices regarding the treatment of women and freedom of speech. Coupled with the fact that Muslims are often racial as well as religious minorities, and an ongoing association with security threats and terrorism, they represent an especially thorny test of the tension between accommodation and assimilation.

In recent research we investigated public support for religious accommodation in general, and Islam in particular. We consider two main issues: first, to what extent does the public view *Islamic* accommodation in a negative light, compared to similar claims from other groups and indeed religious accommodation generally? Second, to what extent does multiculturalism, conceived both as contextual-level “policy fact” and individual-level “policy support” shape peoples’ willingness to support religious accommodation? To find out, we carried out a study best described as two-country/three-nation: we contrasted English and French “nations” within politically “multicultural” Canada both against each other and against the politically “assimilationist” US. Respondents were asked whether they supported limiting the wearing of religious apparel in various public settings, and whether they supported shielding religious symbols from public mockery. In each case, we randomly varied the specific religion at issue: in the case of apparel, some were asked about a “large crucifix” whereas others were prompted to consider the Muslim hijab and niqab (accompanied by a graphical depiction of the symbol in question); with respect to religious mockery, people were, again at random, asked whether newspaper stories or cartoons that mock or denigrate Mohammed/the Star of David/Jesus] should be banned.

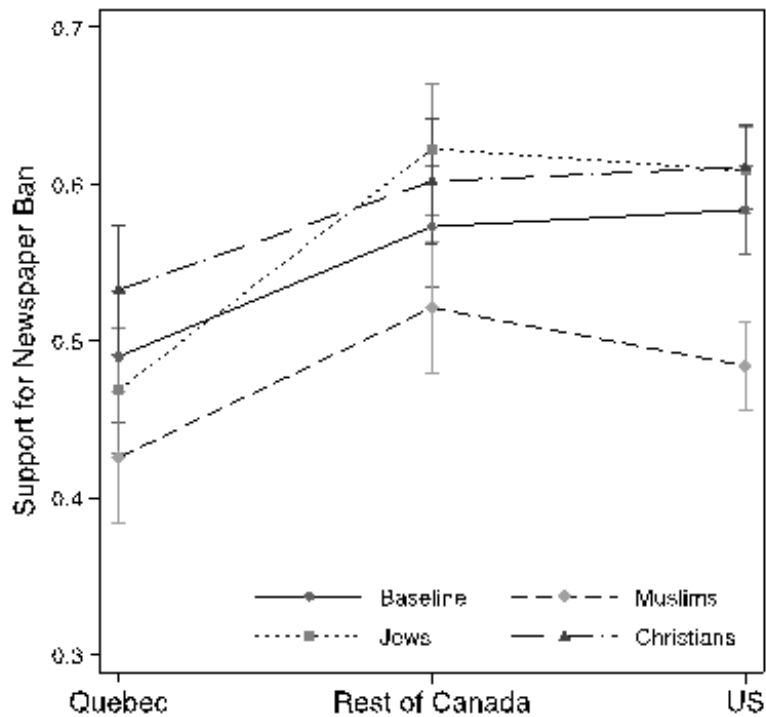
Figure 1, below, depicts response to support for the right to where religious apparel. The most striking difference is not across political contexts – Quebecers are more hostile on average, whereas there is virtually no difference between English Canada and the US – but rather across experimental manipulations: people in general support the right to wear a large crucifix in public settings, but they are much less sanguine about the *hijab*, and even less about *niqab*. It certainly seems from this that Muslims receive “exceptional” treatment, although we cannot say exactly what accounts for the difference between the two types of Muslim garb. The *niqab* may be particularly alienating, relative to the *hijab*, because it dehumanizes the female wearing it. It may also signal an adherent of fundamentalist Islam, and thus greater tension with mainstream liberal values. At this point we can only speculate.

**Figure 1 – Support for the right to wear religious apparel in Quebec, Canada and the US**



People responded to banning mockery of religious symbols by and large as they did about garb, although the difference is a bit muted. In Figure 2, below, we see support for such bans find notably less support when Mohammed is at issue than other religious symbols. Indeed, within political contexts “Muslim exceptionalism” is the only statistically significant story. And, once again, we find very little difference between “multicultural” political contexts and “assimilationist” ones; Quebecers are somewhat more hostile to *any* religious bans (especially when it comes to Muslims), but the difference between English Canada and the US is more or less insignificant.

**Figure 2 – Support for banning the mockery of religious symbols in Quebec, Canada and the US**



Taking together these comparisons and others in our study, we find strong evidence that Muslims are held up as exceptional, and concordantly less deserving of religious accommodation, than are other religious groups. The most impressive contextual boundary is not between Canada and the US, but within Canada. In general, Americans and English Canadians are more in favor of—strictly speaking, less opposed to—multicultural policies than Francophone Quebecers are. Both English-speaking samples are more willing to support religious concessions, including to Muslims. But including Christian or non-specific religious primes in the experiments indicate that the stronger antipathy to accommodating Muslims is not peculiar to Quebec. Quebecers’ greater resistance reflects their greater resistance to all forms of religious relief. What all of this suggests is that the direct impact of multiculturalism policy on support for religious accommodation is small. From the standpoint of the growing literature on this topic, the significance is that we may be ascribing more to national “policy effects” than is warranted, especially within bi- or multinational polities.

This does not mean that debates about multiculturalism are moot, or that we should simply close the book on trying to figure out how and why such policies matter to public opinion. Indeed, multiculturalism policy may have a more indirect role to play. This is indicated by the fact that *support* for multiculturalism policy is a generally strong moderator for response to the experiments, which we cannot show here for reasons of space but demonstrate in the article. In the end, however, what seems clear is that the prospects for political multiculturalism are tied closely to the political culture of the societies that adopt it, and the immigrants that seek to immigrate there.

*This article is based on the paper, ‘Multiculturalism and Muslim Accommodation Policy and Predisposition Across Three Political Contexts’ in Comparative Political Studies.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

### **Matthew Wright** – *American University*

Matthew Wright is an assistant professor in the Department of Government at American University (Washington, D.C.). In his research, he has explored numerous topics in American and European political behavior. These include the causes and implications of political identity; immigration, assimilation, and citizenship policies; the politics of ethnic diversity; national identity and patriotism; religion and politics; political culture; social capital, civic engagement, and trust; and U.S. voting behavior.



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