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Islam, religiosity, and immigrant political action in Western Europe



Aida Just ^{a,*}, Maria Elena Sandovici ^b, Ola Listhaug ^c

^a Political Science Department, Bilkent University, Turkey

^b Political Science Department, Lamar University, United States

^c Department of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Norway

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ABSTRACT

The issues of migration and immigrant political integration in western democracies have become increasingly intertwined with debates on religion, particularly Islam. To date, however, we have surprisingly little systematic research on how religious beliefs are related to immigrants' political engagement. In this study, we argue that religion has a capacity to mobilize immigrants politically but the strength of this relationship depends on immigrant generation, religiosity, and the type of religion. Using survey data collected as part of the *European Social Survey* (ESS) 2002–2010 in 18 West European democracies, our analyses reveal that religion is indeed linked to political engagement of immigrants in a complex way: while belonging to a religion is generally associated with less political participation, exposure to religious institutions appears to have the opposite effect. Moreover, we find that, compared to foreign-born Muslims, second-generation Muslim immigrants are not only more religious and more politically dissatisfied with their host countries, but also that religiosity is more strongly linked to their political engagement. This relationship, however, is limited to uninstitutionalized political action.

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Introduction

International migration has altered the social make up of western democracies. Many European countries, such as Austria, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Ireland, Germany, and Sweden, now record proportions of foreign-born residents as high as or even higher than in traditional immigration countries, like the United States (Lemaitre and Thoreau, 2006). While some foreigners arrive from the EU member states, others come from increasingly more distant and diverse countries, contributing to the growing cultural and religious diversity of immigrant receiving nations (Castles and Miller, 2009). One consequence of international migration over the last few decades is that Muslims have become the largest religious group beside Christians among immigrants in Europe. According to 2010 Pew Research Center estimates, Europe (excluding Turkey) is now home to 44.1 million Muslims (about 6% of the total population), up from 29.6 million in 1990 (Pew Research Center, 2011, p. 121).¹

The growing share of immigrants with distinct religious beliefs has upended many comfortable and well-worn practices and ways of thinking in western democracies, and has challenged governments to contend with the practicalities of accepting and integrating immigrants. Tensions have arisen over such issues as the place of religion in the public sphere of society, the rights and obligations of immigrants, their commitment to democratic governance and gender equality, as well as links to religious extremist and terrorist organizations. These issues have taken on increased significance over time, as religiosity

* Corresponding author. Fax: +90 312 290 2742.

E-mail address: aidap@bilkent.edu.tr (A. Just).

¹ In comparison, North America hosts 3.5 million Muslims (or 1% of its total population) (Pew Research Center, 2011, p. 140).

among Muslims in Western democracies has been found to be resilient across generations, with some second-generation immigrants embracing their religious identities even stronger than their foreign-born parents (Voas and Fleischmann, 2012). Moreover, a number of recent events – for example, the 2006 protests against the Danish cartoons, mass rallies in support of women's right to wear veils in public, lobbying for building new mosques, and even the 2005 London bombings, to name a few² – all suggest that religious beliefs may play a role in motivating political action among newcomers in many contemporary democracies.

Although immigrant political engagement in Europe has become the focus of growing scholarly literature in recent years, in large part because of the availability of the *European Social Survey* data since 2002 (e.g. Just and Anderson, 2012; de Rooij, 2012; Alesina and Giuliano, 2011; Wright and Bloemraad, 2012; Aleksynska, 2011; Voicu and Șerban, 2012), there is surprisingly little systematic research on the role that religion plays in shaping immigrant political behavior. Specifically, while some scholars take into account respondents' belonging to some religious denominations (e.g. Alesina and Giuliano, 2011; Aleksynska, 2011; Voicu and Șerban, 2012),³ no studies to our knowledge simultaneously analyze the consequences of religion in a form of religious beliefs, religiosity, and exposure to religious institutions in shaping immigrant political participation in Europe. Moreover, scholars usually focus either on foreigners (e.g., Just and Anderson, 2012; Aleksynska, 2011; de Rooij, 2012), or second-generation immigrants (e.g., Alesina and Giuliano, 2011; Fleischmann et al., 2011), but rarely both,⁴ preventing us from systematic comparisons across immigrant generations. As a consequence, we do not know with much certainty whether believers among immigrants in Europe engage in politics more or less than secular immigrants do, whether this is equally true across immigrant generations and religious groups, and whether these differences – if they in fact exist – are affected by the nature and intensity of religious beliefs, exposure to religious institutions, immigrant experiences with their host and origin countries, or by something else entirely.

Below, we address these questions by examining the role of religion, particularly Islam, in motivating political participation among immigrants in West European democracies. We argue that religion has the capacity to mobilize immigrants politically but the strength of this relationship depends on immigrant generation, religiosity, and the type of religion. We test our arguments using cross-national and individual-level data collected as part of the *European Social Survey* (ESS) 2002–2010 in 18 West European democracies. Our analyses reveal that religion is indeed linked to political participation of immigrants in a complex way: while belonging to a religion is generally associated with less political participation, exposure to religious institutions has the opposite effect. Moreover, we find that, compared to foreign-born Muslims, second-generation Muslim immigrants are not only more religious and more dissatisfied with their host countries, but also that religiosity helps to activate their political engagement. This relationship, however, is limited to uninstitutionalized forms of political action.

Our study contributes to scholarly literature in several ways. First, on a theoretical level, we highlight the complex yet important role that religion plays in shaping immigrants' political engagement in contemporary democracies. In doing so, we seek to contribute to a relatively slim body of cross-national research on when and how religion matters in politics (Bellin, 2008; Wald and Wilcox, 2006; Grzymala-Busse, 2012). Second, we go beyond extant studies by systematically analyzing the consequences of religion in the form of individuals' religiosity, exposure to religious institutions, and religion type, and test their consequences on political engagement among first- and second-generation immigrants. Third, by distinguishing theoretically and empirically between different kinds of political acts, we extend the scholarly focus beyond electoral participation – a type of political action most immigrants are not entitled to – and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of immigrant political engagement. Finally, our analysis goes beyond existing studies, which tend to focus on one or a small number of countries or cities, and puts existing arguments to a more demanding empirical test against a varied and extensive sample of European states with diverse immigrant groups and sizable Muslim populations.

Our paper proceeds as follows: in the next sections, we formulate and develop our argument; we then describe our data and measures, present analyses and results, and finally conclude by discussing the implications of our findings and offering suggestions for further research.

² We do not claim that these events are in any way representative of Muslim political participation or that some acts, such as protests against the Danish cartoons, were exclusive to or more prominent in West European democracies than elsewhere in the world. Instead, our only intention here is to highlight some of the more publicized events where immigrants' political engagement appears to be linked to religious beliefs, suggesting that the relationship between religion and immigrant political activism deserves a closer investigation.

³ For example, in analyzing political participation among second-generation immigrants, Alesina and Giuliano (2011) control for being a Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox, but do not account for Muslims or individuals belonging to other faiths. Instead, the authors combine non-religious and other believers into a single category and treat them as a reference group for the three Christian denominations. In a study of immigrant engagement in voluntary associations, Voicu and Șerban (2012) similarly identify Protestants and Catholics, while treating all other respondents (both secular individuals and respondents belonging to other religions, including Muslims) as a reference category.

⁴ Voicu and Șerban (2012) is one such exception, as their study identifies first- and second-generation immigrants, and analyzes them along with natives. However, the focus of their study is limited to engagement in voluntary associations, and it is unclear to what extent their findings generalize to a wider range of political activities. Moreover, while their empirical models account for differences in the levels of participation of first- and second-generation immigrants in comparison to natives, they do not systematically analyze variation in the slopes of their independent variables across immigrant generations. As a consequence, we do not know, for example, whether religion is more strongly linked to political participation among second-generation immigrants as opposed to foreign-born.

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