The Politics of Surveillance in American Muslim Communities

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Abstract
What is the relationship between politics in the real world and the research we are able to conduct as social scientists? How does what happens in the everyday world of politics influence, constrain, or perhaps enable our research? For political scientists who specialize in regional studies and often conduct fieldwork in environments marked by civil conflict, state violence, or authoritarianism, the consensus is that the everyday political conditions occupy a crucial role in the research process. These scholars argue that the local political context must be carefully considered because of an ethical "obligation to protect research subjects and communities from repercussions" arising from participation in our research.[1] In the field of American politics, however, little attention has been directed to understanding how our surrounding political conditions may affect the research process, particularly with populations that hold vulnerable positions in the broader American social and political hierarchy. Drawing on data collected from a case study of Arab and Black American Muslim communities, I show that even in the context of non-authoritarian and putatively democratic regimes, such as the United States, everyday political conditions have profound implications for the research process. More specifically, I find that surveillance operates as a two-stage political mechanism, linking politics to the research process that unfolded in fieldwork with American Muslims. First, it disturbs the research terrain by restricting the sample of respondents who select into participation. Second, it colors the responses of participants throughout the interviews. In sum, surveillance shapes what can be learned about this population in the research process. This finding indicates that for scholars of American politics, a significant challenge moving forward, is to identify and account for the relevant political conditions shaping the study of American Muslims and other vulnerable populations.

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[1] Parkinson and Wood (2015), Lake, Majic, and Maxwell (2018)

INTRODUCTION

In the *Qualitative Transparency Deliberations Final Report*, Lake, Majic, and Maxwell (2018)

call on social scientists to be cognizant of how the status of our research participants is dynamic;

shifting with social and political circumstances.[2] If our priority is to minimize risk to research

participants, Lake et al. (2018) explain, scholars must not only account for how our research

inquiries may be received in particular political contexts but also how participation in our studies

may affect subjects who are "vulnerable and marginalized because of their position in the social

and political hierarchy."[3] While they set their gaze on research conducted within authoritarian

and repressive regimes, it is my contention that even in the context of a democratic regime, such

as the United States, the everyday political context profoundly shapes research with vulnerable

populations.

From outreach, to access, to interviewing participants, the entire research process exists

within a broader American political context shaped by policies which distribute "benefits and

burdens" across groups in asymmetrical and heterogeneous ways.[4] That groups are affected by

politics unevenly and in divergent ways, means that scholars cannot ignore how research

participants are both experiencing and responding to their surrounding political conditions.

To illustrate this point, consider how a political environment characterized by

restrictionist discourse and policies surrounding migration may inform the research process of

scholars wishing to study undocumented Asian or Latina/o immigrant communities. Likewise,

consider how historical and contemporary patterns of racialized law enforcement may influence

how Black American respondents perceive and interact with the politics of public order and

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[2] Lake, Majic, Maxwell (2018), p. 1
[3] Lake, Majic, Maxwell (2018), p. 1
[4] Michener (2019), p. 427

criminal justice. In both examples, the point of emphasis is that vulnerable populations residing in the US experience everyday politics in distinct ways and consequently, these differences in experience and status map onto research conducted with such communities.

Outside of the field of American politics, social scientists in other disciplines have documented some of the key challenges that can emerge when conducting research with vulnerable respondents. For example, scholars working with incarcerated respondents in the US have observed a "power imbalance inherent" to any interaction between the researcher and the participant.[5] Within these contexts, researchers often find that access is difficult to both obtain and navigate given the highly-regulated nature of prisons. Moreover, there are additional challenges related to the psychological well-being of respondents and lower levels of literacy which may limit or foreclose the successful implementation of some research interventions. Further, the "potential for abuse during the informed consent process [can be] immense" given that respondents may assume that participation will result in benefits.[6]

Similarly, scholars have written about the ethical considerations that should inform research with undocumented participants.[7] They explain that undocumented respondents occupy a marginalized status in the US because they are implicated in unauthorized immigration and therefore, researchers find that such respondents are not only "hard to reach" for the purpose of recruitment, but are also contending with heightened concerns related to detention, deportation, and violence.[8] What is key, scholars underscore, is that for such respondents "legal status shapes identity" in power ways: undocumented people are stigmatized for their "illegality" and that in turn, intersects with nativism, racial inequality, economic hardships, and other political

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[5] Schüklenk (2000), p. 974
[6] Rossiter, Power, Fowler, Elliott, Dawson (2018), p. 62, 63, 69
[7] Lahman, Mendoza, Schwartz (2011)
[8] Valenzuela (2002)

conditions.[9] To research undocumented populations without accounting for how they are situated in the broader American social and political hierarchy is to overlook how politics fundamentally shapes their lives.

In my research on American Muslims, I find that surveillance in the everyday, real world, shapes the research process in significant ways. Operating as a two-stage political mechanism, surveillance first constrains who researchers can access among American Muslim communities and therefore, limits who selects into participation. In this way, surveillance significantly reduces the sample size of American Muslim research respondents and consequently, bounds what can be learned about this population. Next, for those research participants who bypass or overcome surveillance as a barrier to recruitment, it exerts a second effect by coloring their responses throughout the interview segment of the research process. Surveillance structures how American Muslims experience politics in the US, such that they view themselves through the lens of the broader society that examines them. Muslims are acutely aware of surveillance directed at them, even as they understand the rationale for it, and for the most part they tend to accept it. In this way, the real world political context surrounding American Muslims is inextricably linked to the research process. Thus, I argue that in the absence of recognizing and accounting for the position of Muslims in the broader American political context, researchers risk missing something important about how this population experiences, perceives, and engages in politics.

In exploring the politics of surveillance in American Muslim communities, this article opens with an overview of the literature on surveillance; first, as a theoretical concept and second, as a feature of contemporary American politics. The following section details the research design and field site, highlighting how surveillance affected participant selection into

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[9] Menjivar (2006), Mendez-Shannon (2010)

the study. Finally, the third section draws on data gathered from fieldwork to evaluate how surveillance shapes American Muslim perceptions and experiences of politics.

OVERVIEW OF SURVEILLANCE LITERATURE

At the most fundamental level, surveillance is the act of monitoring a subject or group of subjects. As a set of practices, Lyon (2009) explains that surveillance has deep historical roots, first emerging in mundane forms, such as "parents watch[ing] over children."[10] In this general sense, it is not necessarily harmful, and may serve a protective purpose. Other scholars, like Scott (1998), trace the transformation from pre-modern to modern statehood in the ability of states to "get a handle" on their subjects, such that "illegibility" was diminished and replaced with centralized planning efforts like the creation of permanent surnames for citizens, official documentation linked to identity (e.g. marriage records), and the "imposition of a single, official language."[11] As illegibility to the state declined, so too did "our autonomy, our freedom to move about and do as we wish" because centralized state organization efforts inevitably involve surveillance.[12] To assign surnames, to track taxes, and to socialize a population effectively, the state must "know" with some degree of accuracy the population it wishes to manage.

Alongside the development of the modern state, Foucault (1995) discusses surveillance as a means of disciplining, drawing on the metaphor of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon.[13]

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[10] Lyon (2009), p. 2

[11] Scott (1998), p. 72

[12] Scott (1998), p. 72

[13] As described by Foucault, the panopticon is characterized by a "building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends to the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker, or a schoolboy." P. 200

The panopticon "reverses the principle of the dungeon" such that those who are subject to punishment are no longer hidden from the public in dark, underground cells.[14] Instead, there is "full lighting and the eye of a supervisor."[15] In making this claim, Foucault (1995) draws our attention to shifting forms of surveillance; from a practice that concealed, to one which places the surveyed in a position of hyper-visibility. In this arrangement, a central outcome is achieved: a "state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."[16] The potency of surveillance in modern political contexts lies less in the actual monitoring of subjects. Instead, it is a powerful political force because it is can be invisible, unverifiable, and yet, simultaneously, "permanent in its effects."[17]

Today, surveillance is a pervasive feature of contemporary American politics. The "War on Terror" ushered in an era of surveillance that was not only aimed at preventing terrorism from occurring in the country, but also identifying those individuals who may be ideologically sympathetic to terrorism. In targeting both attitudes and behaviors, the federal government's response after September 11, 2001 was swift. Within the first few weeks, a director for the Office of Homeland Security was appointed and the Patriot Act was passed by Congress with bipartisan support.[18] The Patriot Act specifically focused on leveraging surveillance to bolster security through several measures, such as: allowing law enforcement to utilize wire-tapping, enabling delayed notification search warrants, and providing for the oversight and inspection of bank and business records.[19]

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[14] Foucault (1995), p. 200
[15] Foucault (1995), p. 207
[16] Foucault (1995), p. 205
[17] Završnik (2015),p. 173-174, Foucault (1995), p. 205
[18] Creation of the Department of Homeland Security (2019)
[19] Lind (2015)

With the top-down surveillance emanating from government agency restructuring and the introduction of expansive legislation, the national government also sought the help of everyday Americans, thereby cultivating surveillance from below. Selod (2018) describes this as "citizen surveillance" and distinguishes it from "self-surveillance."[20] Citizen surveillance consists of everyday Americans heeding state calls to "say something" when they "see something;" while self-surveillance takes the form of initiatives such as the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program (now called Countering Islamic Extremism). By soliciting the help of American Muslims, programs like CVE, operate under the assumption that "family members, friends, or close acquaintances are most likely to observe activities or behaviors" of individuals who are "radicalized or [have] violent intent."[21] The crucial distinction is that self-surveillance is embedded within and among the populations that government institutions target with surveillance measures.

In addition to Selod's (2018) distinction between citizen and self-surveillance, scholars differentiate between "thin" and "thick" forms of surveillance.[22] The former consists of the general monitoring of people but it does not involve confinement or incarceration. The principle outcome of thin surveillance is information-gathering. By contrast, thick surveillance limits the mobility of a subject or a population and entails "confinement to delineated and often fortified spaces."[23] Historically, thick surveillance has tended to target specific subsets of people: those who are poor, those who lack access to legal documentation or citizenship, or those deemed national security threats.[24] While conceptually distinct, both forms of surveillance can operate in

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[20] Selod (2018), 75-98
[21] Selod (2018), 75-89
[22] Torpey (2007), 116-118
[23] Torpey (2007), 116-118
[24] Torpey (2007), 116-118

tandem; the political atmosphere of the US during World War II offers an illustrative example. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Proclamation no. 2537 which mandated that residents from Italy, Germany, and Japan register with the US Department of Justice and carry a "Certificate of Identification for Aliens of Enemy Nationality."[25] This mandate was aimed at identifying the number of "aliens of enemy nationality" in the country and ascertaining their location. The information gathered laid the groundwork for Executive Order 9066 which authorized the relocation of approximately 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent to internment camps, where they were required to remain for the next two and a half years.[26]

In the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks, the political context of the country echoed much of the alarm and fear prevalent during World War II. To quell anxieties over terrorism, President George W. Bush visited one of the oldest mosques in the nation and declared that the "War on Terror" was not a war with Islam or Muslims.[27] Rejecting the wave of anti-Muslim backlash which had erupted in different parts of the country, he called for the inclusion of American Muslims as full-fledged citizens of the US.[28] Even so, research indicates that post-9/11 anti-terror policies, emanating from the Bush administration, excluded and set Muslims apart for extensive surveillance. Norris (2019), for example, writes that in "numerous post-9/11 investigations, government informants targeted [Muslim] individuals with no previous terrorist plans for aggressive inducement attempts." In terrorism sting operations, government agents and informants surveilled Muslim communities and "attempted to radicalize" Muslims through pressuring or monetary incentives.[29] Further, Norris and Grol-Prokopczyk (2016) find that an

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[25] Peters and Woolley (2019)
[26] Muyskens and Steckelberg (2017)
[27] Freedman (2012)
[28] Freedman (2012)
[29] Norris (2019)

estimated 300 terrorism cases involved informants and undercover agents.[30] As a result, organizations, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), have critiqued counterterrorism measures, arguing that agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), "created terrorists out of law-abiding individuals."[31]

More than a decade later, surveillance measures targeting Muslims continued and in 2012, the Associated Press reported that the New York Police Department (NYPD) had partnered with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in order to design programs to monitor American Muslims at universities, restaurants, shopping centers, and mosques.[32] Here too, informants were utilized by the NYPD Intelligence Unit and tasked with inducing Muslims into discussing terrorism, then reporting these discussions to the NYPD along with photos from mosques and voice recordings.[33] What is crucial to observe about these thin surveillance measures is they both rely on and contribute to the characterization of American Muslims as suspicious. For instance, Norris (2019) explains that FBI surveillance practices rely on "radicalization models" which misrecognize radicalization."[34] These models "suggest that Muslims harshly criticizing US foreign policy" are potential terrorists who will transition from criticizing to terrorizing.[35] Likewise, Swenson (2011) finds that FBI counterterror training materials described American Muslims as "likely to be terrorist sympathizers," especially those who devoutly practiced Islam.[36] In this way, measures that bolster thin surveillance, such as

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[30] Norris and Grol-Prokopczyk (2016)
[31] Human Rights Watch (2014)
[32] Hawley (2012)
[33] Goldman and Apuzzo (2012)
[34] Norris (2019)
[35] Norris (2019)
[36] Swenson (2011)

"radicalization models" or "Good Muslim/Bad Muslim" dichotomies, affect how Islam and Muslims are situated in the US.

Along with thin surveillance practices, thick surveillance initiatives have been directed at American Muslims in the form of detention and incarceration. Domestically, an estimated 1,200 Muslims were detained by the FBI, at times without warrants and based on secret evidence.[37] Researchers find that the individual-level outcomes of such forms of surveillance entail psychological trauma and irreparable reputational damage, which diminish one's ability to find employment and earn a steady income, to create and sustain interpersonal relations, and to transition from detention to re-integration into broader society.[38] While at the broader, community-level, surveillance affects "community infrastructure—the relations among people in communities and the capacity of the community to be a good place to live [and] work."[39] Incarceration and detention, in particular, produce "destructive effects [which] are felt in the lives of children, as well as in family functioning, mental and physical health, labor markets, and the economic and the political infrastructure" of communities.[40]

Despite the deleterious outcomes associated with surveillance, there appears to be significant support among American non-Muslims for the surveillance of American Muslims. According to a 2017 *Democracy Fund Voter Study Group* report, more than half of Americans (55%) favor "increased surveillance of mosques and other places where Muslims gather" and (52%) favor the general "targeting [of] Muslims at airport screenings."[41] Moreover, nearly half (47%) support a "temporary ban on Muslims traveling to the United States."[42] Public policy

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[37] Chishti and Bergeron (2011)
[38] Torpey (2007)
[39] Clear (2008), p.102, 106
[40] Clear (2008), p. 102, 106
[41] Sides and Mogahed (2017)
[42] Sides and Mogahed (2017)

scholars have long argued that policies "feed back into the political system" by "altering [] the capacities, interests, and beliefs" of political elites and the public; thus, affecting political outcomes.[43] In other words, that a significant portion of the American public tends to view Muslims through the lens of surveillance is to be expected, given the proliferation of policies that are aimed at Muslims.[44] What is less understood and worthy of greater consideration among social scientists is how policies in the US "feed back into the political system" and affect our research and the vulnerable populations we wish to study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

During Fall of 2018, I received approval from my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to begin fieldwork research with American Muslim communities. I designed my study with a mixed methodological approach that consists of ethnographic interviews in three field sites, followed-up with a nationally-representative survey. My first site was Philadelphia and this article focuses exclusively on the data which I gathered from researching Arab and Black American Muslims in this location. I selected Philadelphia as my first site because it is home to a prominent and diverse population of Muslims. Historically, Philadelphia was referred to as "Muslim Town" because it was a central location for the Nation of Islam (NOI), a Black American political and religious movement. [45] By 1975, most Black American Muslims in Philadelphia transitioned away from the NOI and began to embrace more traditional forms of

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[43] Campbell (2012), p. 333
[44] For example, see the 2002 Patriot Act, the 2017 Executive Order 13779, and state-level anti-Sharia legislation.
[45] Hauslohner (2017)

Sunni Islam.[46] The city is now is home to an estimated 200,000 American Muslims and well over 60 mosques.[47]

In addition to a significant Black American Muslim population, Philadelphia is home to Arab American Muslims chiefly of Egyptian, Palestinian, and Lebanese descent.[48] Arab Muslims in Philadelphia are also primarily Sunni, though some are Shia. Arabs began settling in Philadelphia as early as 1876, mostly in South Philadelphia and South Kensington, where they worked as merchants and eventually, factory workers.[49] Today, newer generations of Arab migrants, primarily refugees from Iraq and Syria, have settled in the enclaves established by the earlier waves of Arabs.

Before beginning fieldwork in Philadelphia, I created a directory of mosques, Muslim organizations, health clinics, grocery stores, and community groups, organized by neighborhood. This first step in planning allowed me to develop an approximate sense of where the Muslim population resided. I then employed three main approaches for recruitment of research participants. First, I conducted extensive outreach in-person, by phone, and through email correspondence to introduce myself and my research project. Then, I circulated information about my study to local contacts, both Muslim and non-Muslim, with the goal of accessing Muslims who are situated in different social networks. After implementing these two initial steps in outreach and completing several pilot interviews, I relied on a snowball sampling approach to continue recruiting research participants.[50] My objective in taking this tripartite

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[46] Fishman and Belen Soage (2013), Hauslohner (2017)
[47] Saffron (2018)
[48] Vitiello (2014)
[49] Vitiello (2014)
[50] The snowball sampling method is typically an effective approach for research with vulnerable populations. Cohen and Arieli (2011) explain that the marginal status of vulnerable groups renders them "hard to reach" for researchers. Snowball sampling facilitates access by increasing "the likelihood of trusting the researcher by introduction through a trusted social network."

approach was to ensure that I would gather a sample of respondents which would offer a range of perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences. In sum, I completed over 69 interviews at the Philadelphia field site.

FINDINGS: SURVEILLANCE STAGE I

As an American Muslim social scientist and a resident of Philadelphia, I was positioned advantageously going into my fieldwork. I attended local mosques as a part of my own spiritual practice and organically developed relationships with fellow local Muslims. Still, when I began outreach, I did not readily access many Muslims beyond my own personal network. More often than not, individuals declined to participate and expressed apprehension at the prospect of discussing their political viewpoints and participation. I therefore turned to the help of local Muslim organizations and community leaders who served as intermediaries between myself and prospective participants. In the process of doing so, I found that I needed to not only establish my academic credentials as a scholar affiliated with a research university, but also as a Muslim.

The former was relatively straightforward; I presented documentation from my IRB application, my advisor's contact information, and a copy of my curriculum vitae. In the case of the latter, however, I found that I needed to build my credibility as a Muslim. In this regard, community organizations and leaders often inquired about which mosques I attended, my religious practice, and whether I subscribed to a particular Islamic school of thought. When I responded to such inquiries about my faith, community contacts often explained that it was important for them to try to confirm the veracity of my background story. Equally as important, I needed to address concerns about my motivations for researching Muslims. During outreach and recruitment, I found myself responding to questions about my aims for researching Muslims,

how I planned on gathering data, why I was gathering data, to whom I would be sharing my findings, and my prior record of research. In some cases, respondents explained their apprehension in terms of direct experiences with surveillance. For example, some interviewees described post-9/11 home visits and questioning by law enforcement, while others directly asked if I was an informant or an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). That similar conversations continued throughout the research process signaled that trust would not be readily attainable and would require ongoing credibility-building.[51]

Reflecting on my experiences in the field, I recognize that it is not unusual for scholars to need to establish credibility with community gatekeepers and overcome an initial screening process to access members of the communities they wish to study. After all, the research guides that I studied prior to beginning fieldwork noted that ethnographic research methods often require the formation of "connections and relationships" with central community figures in order to facilitate outreach and access.[52] What is striking, however, is that my own background as a practicing American Muslim was not always inadequate to ensure access to local Muslim communities. Rather, I found that my background revealed some opportunities for learning while foreclosing others, an insight that remains underemphasized in political science research.[53]

Like my research participants, I attend some of the same mosques and community gatherings, I fast with the local community during Ramadan, I bear a traditional Muslim name, and I experience everyday life as an American Muslim. These commonalities certainly aided me in engaging research participants and building rapport over time. Nevertheless, even as a

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[51] Fujii (2012) eloquently describes the process of credibility-building.
[52] McAreavey and Chaitali (2013)
[53] This insight is based on conversations with Dr. Michael Jones-Correa, also see: Herr and Anderson (2005) and Collins (1986).

researcher who enjoyed some semblance of an "insider status" with local Muslims, surveillance emerged as an important factor during outreach and stymied entry to the broader community. Situated in a political context marked by multiple forms of surveillance, both within and beyond their communities, for many American Muslims, the perceived risks associated with participation in a study that explored their political attitudes, behavior, and group identity were prohibitively high and thus, precluded participation.

Despite conducting extensive outreach, my data was ultimately limited by the fact that only a subset of the American Muslim community was willing to overlook potential risks and participate in interviews. In structuring who I could access, as well as precluding and eliminating from my sample those individuals who were most concerned about potential risks, surveillance operated as a political mechanism. At bottom, surveillance is deeply embedded in the political context surrounding American Muslims and it produces a selection bias that is difficult to overcome, irrespective of whether a researcher employs quantitative or qualitative methods. Beyond limiting access and recruitment of American Muslim research participants, surveillance exerts a second influence: it configures their experiences and perceptions of politics.

FINDINGS: SURVEILLANCE STAGE II

Throughout fieldwork, I interviewed Muslims of heterogeneous educational, economic, gendered, age, immigration, and racial backgrounds. Despite this variation, a set of common themes persistently emerged throughout my interviews which illustrate how surveillance colors politics among American Muslims. Going into each interview, I relied on a battery of more than two dozen, open-ended questions to discuss with each research participant. Although the questions covered a range of different topics, from religiosity to partisanship, the foremost theme

that emerged from the interview data was an acute awareness among American Muslims of being watched and scrutinized. At different points throughout the interviews and in response to different queries, all of the research participants referenced "the image" or perception of Muslims in the US.

According to the participants, Muslims are widely perceived in negative and narrow ways; most often as "terrorists," "foreigners," and "radicals." For instance, when asked about the recent announcement of the School District of Philadelphia to recognize Muslim holidays, respondents welcomed the decision and tied its importance to alleviating some of the negative effects of "the image" of Muslims on everyday life for the community.[54] One respondent who I met through a Center City charity organization stressed the importance of recognizing Muslim holidays for young American Muslims:

Khalila, Black American Muslim Woman:

"Our children feel different, like they're not a part of the accepted group. There's this disconnect between how they are seen and who [they] are because you have American-born Muslims who are not immigrants. There are a lot of Black and White American Muslims. But Muslims are seen as immigrants and…as terrorists. And Muslims are none of those things."

Similarly, when participants were asked about their experiences living in the US, they often linked their perceptions of belonging and the US as their home to "the image" of Muslims. Malik, who I met in the Northern Liberties neighborhood offered this response:

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[54] The names of all participants and the locations mentioned throughout this study have been altered to protect confidentiality.

Malik, Arab American Muslim Man:

"Yes, I have to say it [the US] is home. But given my background, I am an Arab American with a Muslim name, there are times when I feel foreign. When I see people demonstrating against Islam or defaming Muslims, it does not feel like home. When Muslims are seen as separate and distinct, it does not feel like home."

What these statements illustrate is a discernment among American Muslims that they, as a group, are surveyed by other Americans. Over and over throughout the interviews, the respondents described how American non-Muslims see Muslims in consistent ways; referencing prominent stereotypes of their community. This is related to the second core theme which appeared throughout the interviews: American Muslim self-perceptions are incongruent with common perceptions of their community. In fact, the interviewees frequently emphasized that American Muslims are "normal," "hard-working," law-abiding, and most importantly, "American." Consider the responses from Sarah in West Philadelphia, Musa in Brewerytown, and Jamil, a military veteran, I interviewed in Fishtown:

Sarah, Arab American Muslim Woman:

"We are your neighbors, your doctors, your teachers, your friends, your colleagues. We share the same morals and values and hopes and wishes for the country. And at the end of the day, we just want to be seen as human. Differences in faith are not at the core of what we are as a human race. And really, our similarities are far more than our differences."

Musa, Black American Muslim Man:

"Most Muslims in America think like most Americans in general. They want romantic love, they want to be successful financially, they want education, they want their children to do well. All the aspirations America offers; this is what they want. Most people who immigrated to America, came here for financial reasons. They don't want to Islamicize America or take it over. We watch football, I follow the playoffs, I do all the things Americans do but I also have this attachment to Islam and my way of life."

Jamil, Arab American Muslim Man:

"There's a verse in the Quran that contradicts the narrative that people have of Islam. [It goes like this] to you, your religion and to me, mine. We are not trying to convert or hurt people. A lot of people think that Islam does not belong in a modern, developed country. They think that Muslims are radical[s] and are trying to change people. That is wrong. I think it is important [to point this out] because the image of Muslims is that we are the 3 B's: bombers, belly-dancers, [and] barbarians."

More than addressing biased characterizations and perceptions of their faith community, these responses, are reflective of an effort by American Muslims to defend their belonging in the US. They do so by outlining the ways in which they are American: they watch football, they're productive and contributing members of society, they cherish freedom of religion, and perhaps most importantly, they self-identify as American. In making a case for their belonging, I find that American Muslims turn to civic engagement and volunteer work. Interviewees described efforts to open their communities and share their faith with fellow Americans in multiple ways, such as hosting Ramadan interfaith gatherings at their mosques, organizing annual Thanksgiving food

drives, and volunteering to speak about Islam at local schools. Recurrently, these forms of community engagement were described as opportunities to contribute and set examples for younger Muslims in the community, but the consistent emphasis was on encouraging dialogue with non-Muslims. For instance, Rahim, a barbershop owner who I interviewed in West Philadelphia said the following:

> Rahim, Black American Muslim Man:
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> "If they [other Americans] gave us a chance, we could talk about what we have in common. In terms of our faith, our values, how we want to live in America, how we love this country. Just sit down and listen to Muslims. We are family people, we are religious people, we are service-oriented. We are normal Americans. Some people might look at us and not understand us. I remember people used to say 'you must be thirsty in Ramadan.' [But] the fact that they [other Americans] talked to me, allowed us to talk about Ramadan and why Muslims fast."

Sahar, a high school teacher from Manayunk echoed the same sentiments as Rahim:

> Sahar, Arab American Muslim Woman:
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> "You know, we're all really one, one community [Muslim and Non-Muslims]. We want the same things. We want security, we want success, we want to thrive, we want you to thrive, and we want to thrive with you. Not in competition. But in tandem, together. This is why I ran for school board. I care about not just my kids but all the kids in the community. And hatred is just so toxic. It corrodes and erodes the foundation on which this country was founded."

Even as American Muslims seek inclusion of their faith, they do so within a broader political environment marked by surveillance and concerns over the prevention of terrorism. This context influences their political attitudes in remarkable ways. Consider, for example, how differently participants responded to questions of religious accommodation depending on whether they assumed or perceived a link to national security. When asked about Muslim prayer or fasting in predominately non-Muslim settings (e.g., the workplace, school), the vast majority of the interviewees described their general support for the accommodation of religion. For example, Eliya a lawyer from Old City and Amal, a restaurant owner from South Philadelphia, stated the following:

> Eliya, Black American Muslim Woman:
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> "It [religious accommodation] contributes to a sense of belonging. It is as simple as having a multi-purpose room that is available for folks to pray. It is a reasonable accommodation. Observing prayer at work takes about the same amount of time as using the restroom. It is not a time grab."

> Amal, Arab American Muslim Woman:
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> "Just to be allowed to pray is important. It's the same thing for women who are nursing, you need to be allowed a quiet, private place to do something that is a big part of your life."

As a follow-up question, participants were asked whether other religious practices, such as face veiling in photo identification cards, should be accommodated. Rather than framing their answers in terms of religious freedom or accommodation, the interviewees instead emphasized

the urgency and importance of national security and public safety. Consider the explanations from Yasmine, Zayn, and Mahmood:

Yasmine, Arab American Muslim Woman:

"We should have significant liberties but you have to do a test where you balance all the important factors, like the need for security and identification. I don't think that religion trumps everything under the sun."

Zayn, Black American Muslim Man:

"We live in a society where trust is important and people being able to recognize each other is important. The thing is, I and most people actually are not skilled enough to be able to identify and recognize someone only by looking at their eyes. This is what we see when Muslim sisters wear the niqab. Facial recognition is valued in the US. I may be in the minority but I will be honest, Muslims are not trusted in the US. I would rather accommodate safety and security."

Mahmoud, Arab American Muslim Man:

"Just practically speaking, what is the point of identification cards if you are wearing a niqab? I also know from being an attorney that there are issues with people testifying in court while having their faces covered. As an attorney, when I cross-examine someone in front of a jury and judge, your credibility is not just in your answers. It is in your face, your expressions, how your entire body is responding. There are legitimate interests in seeing people's faces beyond bigotry or denying religious rights. There are practical interests like safety, worthy of being discussed and addressed."

A significantly smaller number of participants took the position of balancing religious freedom and accommodations without foregoing the security needs of the nation. Here too, the responses frequently referenced terrorism, violence, and the necessity of facial recognition:

Eliya, Black American Muslim Woman:

"I sit in a middle place. The middle place for me is I understand why there could be an aversion to the niqab. Is it truly an identifying document, if there is no facial recognition and the basis of the identification is facial recognition? But I also understand and have a particular sensitivity to the idea that if this [wearing a niqab] is how I present to the world, you wouldn't encounter me in any other way. If I'm observing the niqab, you only see me in the niqab. So, if that's the case, why wouldn't there just be liberty extended?"

Andre, Black American Muslim Man:

"The purpose of a photo identification card is to have facial recognition. Unfortunately, there have been terrorist attacks here and elsewhere. But there has to be reasonable accommodations, where we don't sacrifice people's safety and don't disrespect people's religion."

Farah, Arab American Muslim Woman:

"I believe women have the right to wear the niqab or veil. But if you have security or other issues, you have to balance individual rights with the rights of society. That doesn't mean you should ban it or no one should wear it. For national security, you are obligated as a citizen to comply with the rules. I truly believe Islam has a balance between

individual rights and the rights of society. Sometimes society's rights are more important."

These responses are insightful, in part, because they reveal some of the political attitudes held by American Muslims on issues like freedom of religion, accommodation of religious diversity, and the salience of national security. What's more, however, is that these remarks demonstrate that most of the respondents understand the rationale for surveillance and for the most part, they tend to accept it; even if doing so means circumscribing some forms of religious practice. Out of all the interviews, a total of only three participants expressed perspectives which emphasized religious accommodations or critiqued surveillance. For example, Zareena an architect I interviewed in the Point Breeze area, raised concern over the practice of state-enforced identification:

> Zareena, Arab American Muslim Woman:
>
> "Why do we need to have photo records of people? We normalize it but it is actually disturbing that we need to have everyone be so easily recognized. My fingerprints, our cameras… we're being watched constantly. That stuff is disturbing to me. And it's a basic part of how we live now."

William, an Imam I interviewed in Germantown, and Suleiman, a filmmaker from Old City, offered alternative approaches for identifying people while also conveying support for face veiling:

William, Black American Muslim Man:

"I can tell you a story from experience. In Philadelphia, a woman wearing a niqab was pulled over by the local police. She showed them her identification card and she was wearing her veil in the car, but in her photo, she wasn't. The police needed to identify her but they didn't know how to, so they called our mosque and asked for advice. We suggested that they deploy a female police officer to the scene since that would allow the niqabi sister to show her face to the female police officer. Yes, this took more time and work for police but they need to build trust and relationships with us."

Suleiman, Arab American Muslim Man:

"Women who wear the veil in the US, especially the ones who wear niqabs are incredibly courageous. It's brave. As far as identification is concerned, I do believe that women in the niqab should take their photos in their niqabs. A woman who wears a niqab for religious reasons should be allowed to be covered in her photo."

Collectively, these snapshots from conversations that unfolded during my fieldwork point to the importance of accounting for the interconnection between politics and research. There is a dialectic between research as a practice and political context as a factor that fundamentally structures how vulnerable populations perceive and experience politics in the US. Turning to the final section of this paper, I discuss the implications of surveillance as a political mechanism shaping research with Muslims and other vulnerable groups.

DISCUSSION

Surveillance in the United States is ubiquitous. At the time of writing this paper, US Customs and Border Protection agents deemed an incoming Harvard undergraduate student inadmissible to the country after detaining him and searching his social media accounts.[55] This incident, involving a Muslim student, is illustrative of a blurring of the distinction between state and non-state surveillance, as well as the asymmetrical ways in which politics and policies affect different groups of people.

Among the political conditions that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations in the US, surveillance is a salient factor shaping the everyday lives of American Muslims as well as a number of other groups, including: undocumented immigrants, incarcerated populations, political asylees, and gang members. Therefore, in conducting research with such difficult to reach populations, I identify two primary implications for researchers.

The first implication is that there is a pressing need for innovation in designing research which focuses on vulnerable populations. By recognizing the particular political conditions which configure the everyday lives of the populations we wish to study, we are better positioned to design projects which can facilitate greater access and incorporate proper contextualization of data that is gathered. Consequently, this allows for the development of more robust theories, capable of explaining not only how politics shapes the experiences of such groups but also, how these groups are responding to their political circumstances.

One recent example of innovative research with vulnerable groups is the Portals for Research Project, which examines how low-income, communities of color "experience the police and state authority more broadly."[56] With the objective of identifying the principal causes of

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[55] Paul and Svrluga (2019)
[56] see: https://veslaweaver.com/

inequality as it relates to mass incarceration, the project design recognizes that these communities may be reluctant to participate in research, given the prevalence of surveillance and incarceration in their everyday lives. As such, local community members are integrated into the research design as key collaborators. They conduct outreach with prospective participants and staff the Portals where data is gathered. [57] Once recruited, participants are "connected by life-size video" and provided a prompt to engage in open-ended conversations, reflecting on their experiences and perceptions with the politics of law enforcement and public order.[58]

With this approach, the Portals for Research Project captures a broad range of views from a vulnerable population which may otherwise be highly difficult to access.[59] What's more, the everyday political conditions of racial inequality, poverty, and policing, which informed the research design, are also carried into subsequent analysis where the data is contextualized for theory-building. In addition to innovative approaches to research, the second key implication for scholars is that reflexivity about our positioning, as well as that of the populations we wish to study, can significantly advance data collection and analysis.

For instance, in *Latino Mass Mobilization: Immigration, Racialization, and Activism*, Zepeda-Millán (2017) investigates the relationships between Latino identity, political engagement, and anti-immigrant policies. Focusing on the 2006 immigrant rights movement, he begins by situating movement activists in a political atmosphere marked by extensive nativism. Part and parcel to taking this approach was his consideration of his social and political positioning, the positioning of the people he wanted to study, and how collectively these statuses would interplay and shape the research process. Movement activists were not easy to reach, in

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[57] https://www.portalspolicingproject.com/the-idea
[58] https://www.portalspolicingproject.com/the-idea
[59] https://www.portalspolicingproject.com/the-idea

part because many were related to undocumented people or were undocumented themselves. Moreover, some activists and organizations were also skeptical and suspicious of researchers.[60]

To overcome these challenges, Zepeda-Millán utilized multiple approaches for establishing trust and credibility, from disclosing his activist background, to emphasizing his Mexican heritage and Spanish language skills.[61] After completing 131 semi-structured interviews, he turned to data analyses and theory-building. Some of the most prominent social movement theories contend that successful mobilization and movement-building require "a supportive electoral base, influential elite allies, and established social movement organizations."[62] However, from surveying the surrounding political context, Zepeda-Millán knew that many of these core ingredients were absent leading up to the 2006 movement. This, coupled with his extensive data collection, paved the way for him to identify racialized legislation, in particular H.R. 4437, as the crucial catalyst for mass mobilization.[63] The nativism and anti-Latino racism both embedded in and surrounding the policy, he explains, "triggered a sense of racial group consciousness and linked fate," which subsequently made Latinos "more receptive to calls for large-scale collective action."[64] By accounting for the local political context in research design, data collection, and analysis, Zepeda-Millán (2017) ultimately was able to build on and extend the existing literature on social movements in fundamental ways. Such approaches to research with vulnerable populations indicate promising future directions for addressing how politics in the everyday world influences the work that we do as social scientists.

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[60] Zepeda-Millán (2017), p. 227-228
[61] Zepeda-Millán (2017), p. 228
[62] Zepeda-Millán (2017), p. 43
[63] Zepeda-Millán (2017), p. 194
[64] Zepeda-Millán (2017), p.196

CONCLUSION

The case of American Muslims is instructive not only for future research concerning Muslims but also for other populations. For social scientists conducting research with vulnerable groups in the US, the challenge we face is twofold: first, it is imperative that we acknowledge the importance of our own political context, in designing research, gathering and evaluating data, and developing theories. Second, by accounting for how politics in the real world influences our research process, we are then positioned to identify and account for the specific political mechanisms which structure how vulnerable groups experience American politics. In the absence of doing so, I argue that researchers risk missing something important about how vulnerable groups situated in democratic regimes experience politics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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