Donald Trump and the Dynamics of American Public Opinion about Racial Profiling

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In the early morning hours on June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen killed dozens of patrons in a horrific mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Mateen was a U.S.-born citizen of immigrant parents from Afghanistan, and during the attack he pledged allegiance to the international terrorist group Islamic State. The reaction of presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald J. Trump was to reiterate his previously declared concerns about Muslims entering the United States.

Not only did Trump promise to suspend immigration from parts of the world tied to terrorism against the United States, he also charged that Muslim Americans were complicit, maintaining, "They know what is going on. They know that he was bad. They knew the people in San Bernardino were bad. But you know what, they didn't turn them in and we had death and destruction." Trump continued, "people who know what was going on, they knew exactly, but they used the excuse of racial profiling for not reporting it. Which was probably an excuse given to them by their lawyer so they don't get in trouble." A few days later, he called for increased surveillance of American mosques, saying, "We have to maybe check, respectfully, the mosques and we have to check other places because this is a problem that, if we don't solve it, it's going to eat our country alive."

Trump's remarks were criticized for lumping together all Muslims, immigrants and citizens, mainstream and radicalized. In its coverage of the speech, the *New York Times* wrote, "he was wagering that voters are stirred more by their fears of Islamic terrorism than any concerns they may have about his flouting traditions of tolerance and respect for religious diversity." Observers wonder whether Trump is making an effective bet about Americans' views. Many elected Republicans have distanced themselves from their candidate's remarks, but what about the American public overall? As a political scientist who studies public opinion about policies related to the nation's changing ethnic composition, I have given careful thought to this issue.

Views about Racial Profiling in the Wake of Terrorism

Although it is too early to know for sure how Trump's reaction to the Orlando mass murder are resonating with the electorate, research I conducted a few years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks sheds some light on public views. In a nationally representative survey conducted in 2004, I asked some respondents, "Since September 11th, some law enforcement agencies have stopped and searched people who are Arab or of Middle Eastern descent to see if they may be involved in potential terrorist activities. Do you approve or disapprove of this kind of profiling?" I also asked half of the respondents, "If there were another terrorist attack in the U.S. with Arab or Middle-Eastern suspects, would you support or oppose allowing the government to hold Arabs who are U.S. citizens in camps until it can be determined whether they have links to terrorist organizations?" The other half was asked the same question but with "Arab immigrants" replacing "Arabs who are U.S. citizens." It is important to note that my questions asked about people who are Arab or Middle Eastern while Donald Trump's comments are targeted at Muslims. Although these groups are not synonymous, many Americans arguably have trouble distinguishing among them. Indeed, surveys show that many Americans even confuse Sikhs with Arabs and Muslims.

Overall, my study revealed broad support – from 66% of respondents – for increased searches of people who are Arab and Middle Eastern. In addition, in 2004 roughly one third of Americans supported placing such people in camps until their innocence could be determined. Specifically, 34% supported interning Arab and Middle Eastern *immigrants*, while almost as many respondents, some 29.5%, supported interning U.S. citizens from Arab or Middle Eastern backgrounds.

- Most of the support for profiling and internment came from whites, Republicans, and people without a college degree.

- Support also came from people who feared they or someone they know might be a victim of a terrorist attack, and from white Americans who believed that whites are discriminated against.

- Support for harsh measures was especially strong – at 75% – from respondents who thought that in order to be a "true American" someone must be Christian, white, and born in the United States. To be sure, only about 6% of respondents strongly endorsed such a restrictive view of what it takes to be a true American. But a larger group of respondents, about one quarter of them, said it was *somewhat* important for "true Americans" to be white, Christian, and native born. Just over half of that larger group supported the idea of interning U.S. citizens of Arab or Middle Eastern origin.

Clashing Visions of America

These findings are particularly relevant for the current U.S. election. Exit polls from the 2016 Republican primaries show that Donald Trump has done especially well among whites without college degrees and who feel that they are being left behind. Trump's call to "make America great again" harkens back to a mythical past that disaffected whites yearn for. Current surveys show that many Trump supporters, like many of my respondents, believe that whites are getting the short end of the stick and resist defining American identity as inclusive of people who are non-whites, non-Christians, and not from European backgrounds. Put simply, my findings suggest that the groups most attracted to Trump throughout the primaries resemble groups that were particularly likely to support ethnic profiling back in 2004.

In the 2016 presidential contest, all groups in the U.S. electorate will have their say. How much of the electorate that turns out will welcome Trump's rejection of pluralism and inclusivity in the name of national security? Or will his calls boost the ranks of voters who take a more inclusive view of American identity? We won't know the answer until November.

Read more in Deborah Schildkraut, "The Dynamics of Public Opinion on Ethnic Profiling after 9/11: Results from a Survey Experiment." *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (2009); *Americanism in the Twenty-First Century: Public Opinion in the Age of Immigration* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); and "Will Donald Trump's Call to Profile Muslims Offend Voters?," *The Conversation*, June 22, 2016. www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org
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