THE BACKLASH THEORY:
A REASON FOR POLITICAL CONCERN OR FAKE NEWS?

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ABSTRACT

The contested backlash phenomenon assumes that changes to the status quo in favor of minorities will be met with resistance and resentment from majority groups. However, previous research has yielded ambiguous results. This has resulted in a continuous confusion regarding if, when and how backlashes occur. This thesis will attempt to enhance the understanding of this phenomenon through the use of a survey experiment. The experiment tests whether it is possible to detect a backlash in public opinion through the use of a treatment text. The text presents a fictive Supreme Court decision that approves outdoor broadcasting of the Islamic call to prayer in the US. The experiment tests whether this will create an increase in resentment directed towards Muslim Americans. The experiment tests a number of hypotheses regarding when and where backlash might occur and could not find any support of the backlash hypothesis. The results instead indicated that the treatment induced a decrease in the level of resentment reported by the respondents. These unexpected results have a number of possible explanations, ranging from social desirability bias to the possibility of a legitimizing effect stemming from the treatment. The findings are in line with a growing number of researches that have failed to statistically find any proof of the backlash theory.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Political science is filled with phenomena that have been contested by researchers for decades, if not centuries. These phenomena have been defined, redefined, proven, disproven, and measured time and time again, and the academic community cannot seem to agree over the nature, components or definitions that constitute it. Then, there are phenomena that have stood more or less undisputed, implying some silent agreement over what it refers to and how it works. Backlash was, and to some extent, still is one of these phenomena. In the social sciences it occurs in a wide range of political settings ranging from “the global warming backlash” to “the Obama backlash”, “the antigay backlash” and “backlashes against globalization” (Thomas 2008). Backlashes are seemingly occurring very frequently and in relation to most politically salient issues.

Despite this being a concept that is academically well established, it has started to receive criticism during the last few decades for being used carelessly and has been wrongfully “taken for granted”. More specifically, the backlash concept has for a long time been used descriptively without being problematized. By extension, this has led to it lacking any proper definition, operationalization or systematic testing (Bishin et al 2016 and Thomas 2008). This means that, for a long time, the concept of backlash was used without any deeper concerns of what is was, under what circumstances it was triggered, what different shapes it could take and how to assess and measure for existence. During the last decades the research field have expanded its theoretical and empirical understanding of the phenomenon, but there are still many puzzle pieces left to unravel.

This thesis will focus on one specific type of backlash; namely backlash in public opinion. This would entail an increase in negative attitudes as a result of some event in relation to a salient issue. This is a type of backlash that is often incorporated as an important aspect of a larger backlash – meaning that it is often assumed as being one type of backlash that occurs alongside other types, for example backlash in policies, media coverage, voting behavior or connected to outright violence towards specific groups. Over the years, some researchers have started to question the nature of public opinion backlash. The question arose: does public opinion actually change as a result of specific political events? However, previous research has presented ambiguous claims, where some firmly believe in the existence of the backlash phenomenon, while others find no opinion effects at all. There are even those that have detected an increase in positive attitudes at times where backlash would have been expected (e.g. Bishin et al 2016, Flores and Barclay 2016, Guess and Coppock 2016, Somin 2009, Klarman 2005). These inconsistent results are the foundation for this thesis.

This thesis will look closer at the above-mentioned discrepancy that exists between the theoretical assumption of the public opinion backlash, and the lack of empirical evidence to support it. It will focus on the backlash narrative that is most common within the backlash
research field; namely a conservative backlash directed towards some minority group as they receive increased rights or influence in society. This will be studied through the use of a survey experiment conducted through the crowdsourcing platform Mechanical Turk. The experiment will attempt to trigger a backlash through the exposure of a fictive article where it is stated that the Supreme Court of the US has allowed Mosques to conduct outdoor broadcasting of the Islamic call to prayer in all states of the US. Since this fictive ruling would have been in favor of American Muslims rights the article is used as a trigger that would impact on the attitudes expressed towards this religious minority. If the article would induce an increase in negative attitudes, this would be consistent with a backlash. Muslims in the US have often been in a negative light by the media and parts of the elite and their beliefs are perceived by many Americans as incompatible with American values and their way of life. This is also accompanied with instances of discrimination and increased scrutiny (Calfano et al 2019). These aspects suggest that this is a controversial religious minority in the US and that an increase of their rights might very well appear threatening to some groups. This in turn would imply that it could act as a fertile ground for potentially detecting a backlash. This experiment will hopefully contribute to the academic discussion regarding the merit of the backlash narrative, minority rights studies as well as the general understanding of public opinion effects.

1.2. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate merits of the backlash theory by testing whether or not it is possible to statistically measure and detect changes in public opinion consistent with a backlash. This is a question of interest both internally to the field of political science, but also to political actors in general. The former is due to its potential to further our understanding about the nature of backlashes and public opinion effects through empirical testing. The latter is connected to the potential possibility for backlashes to alter political reality. If political actors assume that certain political decisions or events might trigger the public opinion to turn hostile, it might discourage political leaders, media-actors or social movements from advocating or supporting that issue. It could potentially even send signals to politicians to support or pass legislation in the opposite direction to gain more support and please large sections of their electorate. Simply put, if political or societal events have the perceived ability to create adverse reactions in public opinion, this might change the general direction of politics. This thesis hopes to contribute to the understanding of if and when backlashes occur as well as the empirical understanding regarding how we might measure and track the existence of backlashes in public opinion. This thesis will thus investigate the following overarching research question:

- To what extent is it possible to detect the presence of backlash against Muslims within public opinion?
1.3. THESIS OUTLINE

This thesis will start by presenting previous literature within the field of backlash research. This will be followed by some literature connected to public opinion research and analyze what it might tell us in terms of where backlash would be more probable to occur. Then there will be a section where the case setting will be explained. This section will outline the perceptions and positions of Muslims in the US and the choice of call to prayer as the event as well as the potential effect of a Supreme Court ruling. Next section presents the five hypotheses that will be tested, followed by a methods section that will present the experiment and operationalize the variables. The following section is the analysis, where the results from the backlash-tests and some descriptive statistics will be presented. The final sections of the thesis are a discussion and a conclusions-section, where the results are concretized, deliberated and analyzed. It will also offer some potential areas for future research.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 BACKLASH RESEARCH

Backlash has been a concept that has been present in academia for decades. However, it has for a long time been used merely descriptive rather than as a phenomenon worth studying by itself. The term was arguably popularized around the 1990s and from there on out we have seen an increase in the amount of research looking at backlash in a more substantial way (Thomas 2008). It has been studied by researchers from various fields ranging from political science to sociology, law and communications. The concept has however been criticized for being under-theorized and that this has made it difficult to assess when, how and if backlashes occur. Thus, an important first step is to assess how backlash has been defined and understood in previous research.

2.1.1. DEFINING (OPINION) BACKLASH

Backlash is commonly understood as a phenomenon that takes place between different groups in society. These groups in turn are assumed to have varying characteristics and degrees of power. The backlashing actor is often assumed to be a group that holds a larger degree of power compared to the group against whom the backlash is directed. The backlash is often assumed to be triggered by the weaker group seeking increased power or influence, and that this appears threatening to the more powerful group. Mansbrigde and Shames (2008) assumes this definition in their article “Towards a Theory of Backlash: Dynamic Resistance and the Central Role of
Power”. This article is arguably one of the most elaborate attempts to theoretically define the backlash phenomenon. They imagine power in a broad sense as “power as capacity”. This means power as preferences and interest that have the ability to cause outcomes. When a group that is disadvantaged by the current social order attempts to enact change, this effectively also challenges the existing power structure. When the current power structure is threatened, the power of powerful groups might be threatened with it. Thus, backlash is understood as the resistance to change by powerful groups triggered by a (real or imagined) loss of power. This definition of backlash is commonly reoccurring in previous research. Within this definition, a common focus is to study backlashes against minority groups such as ethnic or religious minorities (e.g. Lipset 1968, Lipset and Raab 1971, Klarmann 1994, Aoki 1996, Voss and Miller 2001, Klarmann 2005, Luders 2005, Martin 2009, Rhodes 2010), the LGBT-community (Sachter 2009, Cummings and NeJaime 2010, Haider-Markel 2010, Bishin et al 2016, Flores and Barclay 2016) as well as women and the feminist movements (Faludi 1991, Hawkesworth 1999, Sanbonmatsu 2008, Greenhouse and Siegel 2011, Jordan 2016, Seymour 2018).

However, the theoretical framework forwarded by Mansbridge and Shames (2008) assumes that the backlash reaction needs to contain some sort of coercive power. This can take different shapes, from more subtle actions such as ridicule or censure, to more outrageous ones involving physical violence. Either way, it assumes the presence of action. When action is a prerequisite for the definition of backlash, it excludes the effects on public opinion. Bishin et al (2016) acknowledges this existing confusion between different utilizations and definitions among backlash research. They identify the need for proper definition and operationalization of the backlash concept to crystallize what is being studied in order to be able to detect whether or not a backlash has taken place. In order to be specific, they present a definition that is specifically connected to the topic of their article, opinion backlash. They define opinion backlash as: “a large, negative and enduring shift in opinion against a policy or group that occurs in response to some event that threatens the status quo” and that this might be detectable through changes a number of aspects of public opinion, such as “policy position, the intensity of feeling about an issue, or the attitudes expressed towards members of the group” (Bishin et al, 2016, 626). The three characteristics outlined in their definition, large, negative and enduring, is argued to all play important roles in the way they implicate policies. The reaction needs to be sufficiently large and negative enough to gain the attention from policy makers. Furthermore, as picking sides in a controversial issue comes with the risk of creating discontent from voters on the opposite side, policy makers might be reluctant to change their positions, if they do not believe that the change is going to endure for long enough for them to ripe electoral benefits (ibid. 627).

| 2.1.2. BACKLASH TYPES AND THEIR INTERCONNECTEDNESS |

As mentioned above, backlash is assumed to involve different types of reactions, ranging from subtle changes in opinion to outright violence. This raises the question of whether we can study these different types as separate from each other. In other words, is it possible to study opinion
backlash as a distinct phenomenon, or does this separation mean that we are missing valuable information? Previous research has generally studies backlash as taking place on three different “levels”. The first level is backlashes that takes place in the general public. Here we find researchers that focus on the same type of backlash that is the focus of this thesis, namely public opinion backlashes (e.g., Pinkleton 1998, Meirick 2005, Sanbonmatsu 2008, Schacter 2009, Bartels and Johnston 2012, Bishin et al 2016, Flores and Barclay 2016) or those focusing on changes in voting behavior or public political initiatives (e.g., Voss and Miller 2001, Cummings and NeJaime 2010, Somin 2009). The next level is the political level, where researchers study backlash in terms of political content (Burgoon 2009, Burgoon 2013, Eskridge 2013) changes in legislation (e.g. Hawkesworth 1999, Haider-Markel 2010, Lesinska 2014, Seymour 2018) or in the political-party landscape (Rhodes 2010, Moore 2018). Finally, some researchers also choose to look at backlashes taking place of a discursive level, meaning that they study changes in for example political rhetoric and media coverage in relation to a specific topic (e.g. Faludi 1991, Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010).

Subsequently, some researchers started to look closer into the potential relationships that might exist between these different backlash types. There are some researchers that view backlash as a path dependent, nearly causal process where backlash in one “sector” spills over to the next (Lesinska 2014). However, when researchers have tried to study different types of backlash separately in order to examine how they develop individually, they have reached different conclusions. What have been found in these studies is that different backlashes develop separately from each other. This means that backlashes in one sector is not connected to backlashes occurring in other sectors. They therefore reach the conclusion that backlash can and should be studied as a disaggregated concept (Schacter 2009, Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010).

**2.2. OPINION BACKLASH – THEORIES OF CHANGE AND STABILITY**

As stated before, researchers have tried, with mixed results, to detect the presence of backlash in public opinion. However, even at times when researchers expect there to be an opinion backlash, it has been difficult to find clear patterns as to why backlash does or does not occur in a certain situation. This section will outline some of the explanations offered by research to answer when and amongst whom backlash is expected to take place.

**2.2.1. EXPLANATIONS CONNECTED TO POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE**

One strand of research assumes that the explanation might be connected to political knowledge. This was presented as the “political ignorance hypothesis” in an article by Somin (2009) where he established this as the most likely variable to explain why the Kelo court ruling regarding
expropriation rights induced a backlash. Since the ruling just reaffirmed existing legislation the ruling did not present any changes to the status quo and thus should not have produced a backlash. The hypothesis stated that, due to the limited public knowledge about the topic, the attention brought on by the ruling is what triggered the backlash.

The importance of political knowledge, or “awareness”, is also emphasized by the influential model presented by Zaller (1992) and his Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model. The model describes attitude change as a complex function the ability of individuals to receive and accept information. These abilities are in turn a function of the individual’s political awareness and how the new information relates to pre-existent beliefs. Individuals with high political awareness are more likely to receive political messages, but less likely to accept them if they are incongruent with their pre-existent beliefs. On the other hand, individuals with low political awareness are more likely to accept new political information but are less likely to receive them in the first place. Individuals in-between the aware, and unaware are the ones that are most likely to both receive and accept new information. And, when new information is absorbable, the prediction is attitude change in line with the messages that are forwarded by the elite. When the elite expresses a consensus in regard to some issue, no one would have any basis for rejection, and if the elite is conflicted over an issue, it expected to create a polarization effect. The polarization effect predicts that highly aware individuals will accept information in line with their political predisposition, while rejecting other information. In turn, politically unaware individuals will be exposed to some information from different “camps” and what information they internalize will be less selective (ibid.).

Bishin et al (2016) uses these arguments forwarded by Zaller (amongst other similar researchers) to form what they call the “opinion stability perspective”. They write that this perspective assumes that backlashes would be rare and assume that those with weak party attachments and low levels of “political sophistication” are those that would be most likely to lash back, since they are more likely to internalize new information (ibid 629). Guess and Coppock (2016), however, seems to come to a different conclusion. While they do not explicitly reject the view forwarded by Bishin et al, they write that, in a survey context, the confrontation with information that contrasts that of the respondent might lead them to “bring counter arguments to mind, creating a mix of considerations more hostile to that perspective” if they possess higher political awareness (ibid 2). These two contrasting arguments have been assumed as circumstances where backlash potentially would take place.

2.2.2. EXPLANATIONS CONNECTED TO THE “STATE” OF THE (PUBLIC) OPINION

Some researchers view the mere state of the previous (public) opinion as the explanatory variable. The view is often that backlashes takes place when change going “too far too fast” as compared to the state of public opinion (Mansbridge and Shames 2008, Klarman 2005). Bishin et al (2016) suggests a similar line of thinking in their “popular opinion hypothesis”. They write that those who already feels threatened by and hold negative attitudes towards a specific societal group will be the ones lashing back against them when they gain more power and rights.
This line of reasoning is also supported by the John Q. Public (JQP) model presented by Lodge and Taber (2007) and Kim, Taber, and Lodge (2010). They view individual reaction to new information as a function of what emotional associations that have been connected to that topic beforehand. The model, that claims to be inspired by research on social and cognitive psychology assumes that opinions is formed in a nearly automatic and unconscious manner. Every socio-political group, issue or individual is associated with a network of attitudes, beliefs and emotions. Over time, some of these socio-political concepts might become positively or negatively charged due to repeated co-activation of specific concepts and emotions, referred to as “hot-cognitions”. Individuals are assumed to react to new information based on these affective tags from their memory. When faced with a situation where the individual is to evaluate some policy/group/actor, the feelings associated with one’s history of previous evaluations which will render an automatic feeling of whether the evaluated object is “good” or “bad”. Information obtained at an earlier stage is assumed to have higher affective value, than information obtained at a later stage, even though that information might be easier to remember. When presented new political information, these hot cognitions guides responses and opinions through spontaneously formed summary evaluations then help people make decisions. The reaction to new information, such as a political decision, is thus inevitably linked to what previous associations – and opinions – one has formed. This means that backlash should occur if new political information is linked to negatively charged cognitions, which would guide the individual to view the topic as “bad” based on earlier evaluations (Guess and Coppock 2018).

2.2.3. EXPLANATIONS CONNECTED TO “EXPOSURE”

Research on backlashes against minorities have at times assumed that backlashes occurs as a result of how much, and in what way a majority group is “exposed” to a minority. One strand of research in this regard has looked closer at what has been referred to as the “white backlash hypothesis”. This hypothesis assumes that it is the mere number of individuals from a specific minority group in some specific setting that might trigger a backlash. Voss and Miller (2001) for example test this hypothesis in the context of African American population density and whether it is linked to an increase in “white conservatism”.

Another example of research along this line of thinking is the theory forwarded by Allport (1959) and his “contact theory”. This theory, which is also one of the more influential theories explaining anti-immigration attitudes, subscribes that inter-ethnic relations should fulfill a number of conditions in order to reduce prejudices and negative attitudes. They should be “personal, informal, on the basis of equal status, pursuing common goals without competition […] and be supported by authorities” (Zorlu, 2016, 16). When inter-ethnic relations fail to fulfill these conditions – such as impersonal formal relations or relations that are not supported by the authorities – they should yield more negative attitudes. In a backlash context, one could
theorize that individuals with relations that do not meet these conditions would also be more likely and thus should these individuals be the ones more likely to lash back.

2.2.4. DEMOGRAPHICAL EXPLANATIONS

In their paper on opinion change, Bartels and Jackman (2013) utilize Bayesian learning theory (e.g. Achen 1992) combined with Mannheims’ (1952) theory of political change in order to develop an updated version of the familiar Age-Period-Cohort (APC) framework. They explore the weight of age/generational belonging as an explanation to political opinions. They contrast four models. 1) attitudes are assumed to be a function of all relevant political events experienced throughout life, 2) recent events are assumed to have a larger impact than those experienced in the distant past, and 3) events during formative years (adolescence/early adulthood) have a larger impact compared to more recent ones. Their tests find support for the first and third model, while little evidence for the second model. Political attitudes are seen as a function of variables indexing each respondents age, year of observation (period) and year of birth (cohort). This implies that that experiences that occurs during specific formative periods in an individual’s life will potentially have an important effect on their subsequent political opinions later in life, and, by consequence, the way they react to political events. In a backlash scenario, this could imply that a backlash would be more likely to occur amongst individuals who experienced political events that negatively impacted their view against the specific group, issue, policy or politician during a formative period. Specifically, those occurring during their younger years/adolescence.

2.3. THEORETICAL APPLICATION AND HYPOTHESES

The outline of previous research has shown that researchers has offered various definitions and explanations to what backlash is and how it works. It is thus important to clearly state where this thesis places itself within this myriad of previous research. This section will thus outline what definitions and theoretical understandings of backlash that will be adopted. It will also present the case-setting that backlash will be tested upon and motivate why it is a suitable fit. Finally, this section will present and motivate what hypotheses that will be tested.

2.3.1. THEORETICAL APPLICATION

This thesis will assume a definition of backlash most closely associated with the one offered by Bishin et al (2016). In general, this thesis assumes that backlash equals “a large, negative and enduring shift in opinion against a policy or group that occurs in response to some event that threatens the status quo” measured in terms of changes in “policy position, the intensity of feeling about an issue, or the attitudes expressed towards members of the group” (ibid. 626-
This definition is specifically adopted to study and measure opinion backlashes, which makes it a suitable fit for the focus of this thesis. It also sets up clear and reasonable criteria for what a backlash is and how this might be detected and measured. This thesis will however, similarly to the article by Bishin et al, only be able to measure backlash according to the first two components – namely whether we can detect a shift that is large and negative. Whether or not the shift is enduring, is neither possible nor likely to measure within the scope of this thesis. Because of the experimental nature of this thesis, it will only collect data during one occasion for every respondent, making it impossible to track changes over time. To, for example, re-contact respondents to see whether any potential shifts in opinion might last over time would be too time consuming for the scope of this thesis and would also risk jeopardizing the anonymity of the respondents by asking them to leave contact information. Since the treatment used in the experiment would contain an “article” that is constructed by the author, and not a real news article, it is not likely that it would trigger any long-term effects on public opinion. Any shift in opinion is likely to take place as the respondent conducts the survey but is not expected to last over time since the respondents are likely to realize over time that the treatment article does not correspond to any real-life event. Furthermore, it would not be desirable to create long-term political changes in opinions from conducting a thesis-experiment, and if that had been the goal it would have been questionable from an ethical standpoint.

Deriving from the original definition by Bishin et al (2015), this thesis will study whether it is possible to detect backlash in the form of large and negative shifts in opinion following some event that changes status quo. The shifts will be assumed to go in the opposite direction than that suggested by the treatment, meaning that an article containing positive information regarding minority rights will lead to a negative reaction. When it comes to the criteria regarding that the reaction needs to be “large”, a clear question arises: how large would be considered to be large enough? This is never defined in the article by Bishin et al. Since they did not find any empirical evidence of any negative reactions at all, they never had to address whether their findings would be considered large enough. They just state that the shift must be large enough to yield support from “intense groups” or the general public.

This thesis will also assume the collegial utilization of backlash as a negative reaction by some societal group directed towards some less powerful minority group as they advance their rights, influence or power. The backlash is assumed to be driven by the fact that this political advance would be seen as threatening to the backlashing group. The backlash is seen as a part of attempt or desire to maintain existing power arrangements in the light of political changes to the status quo (e.g. Mansbridge and Shames 2008, Sanbonmatsu 2008, Bishin et al 2016). While changing opinions in themselves might not have a direct impact on the direction of politics, they may influence its direction if they would be turned into political action – for example by affecting the way individuals vote.
To conclude; the understanding of backlash that this thesis will utilize is that backlash is consistent with the appearance of large and negative changes in attitudes in the general public or some relevant subgroup. The changes will take place following some event that changes the status quo in favor for some minority group. The effect is assumed to take the opposite direction than what is suggested by the treatment and can be measured through changing opinions regarding policy positions, attitudes of- or intensity of feeling towards the minority group in question.

2.3.2. MUSLIMS IN THE US AND THE ISLAMIC CALL TO PRAYER

As briefly mentioned above, this thesis will place its focus on a potential backlash against Muslim Americans. To my knowledge, this religious minority is relatively under-researched in a backlash context. As mentioned above, backlash is assumed to take place when less powerful minorities try to advance their power or position in society, and this advancement changes the status quo. A question that has to be answered is thus whether Muslim Americans can be regarded as a less powerful, or marginalized group in the American society. This section will outline research and findings regarding the perception and position of American Muslims today, and argue why this case could create a setting in which it should be possible to detect a backlash.

Over the last decades Muslim Americans have received an increasing amount of attention, both politically and in the media. And, one key event that set this debate in motion was the 9/11 attacks and its subsequent “war on terrorism”. However, Muslims have inhabited the North American continent for centuries, which means that researchers have studied the experiences and perceptions of Muslim Americans long before this event. However, it is important to note that some of the work does not separate Muslims from Arabs, despite the fact that not all Muslims are Arabs and vice versa. Scholarly work in the 1990s and early 2000s have documented how Muslims at this time faced both discrimination and excessive scrutiny, but to a lesser extent than compared to later decades (e.g. Suleiman 1999, Wing 2000, Calfano et al 2019). A theoretical contribution that was both influential and controversial was the hypothesis forwarded by Huntington (1993) by the name of “the clash of civilizations”. He argues that the world is divided into seven or eight “civilizations”, or “cultural entities”, separated by a number of factors where religion is one of the most important ones. He predicts that it is along the lines of these civilizations where we will find the primary sources of conflict in the future. He writes about “western civilization”, where the US is included, and the “Islamic civilization” as two distinct entities, and that the Islamic civilization will have the hardest time (along with Confucian, Hindu and Buddhist civilizations) to “join” the West (ibid, 45). This generated a narrative where Islam, and the Muslims who follow it, are inherently incompatible with the US and the Western civilization – making Muslims a distinct “other” in the US society.

After 9/11 Muslims in the US started to receive an increasing amount of attention. The media increased their coverage about Muslims, and the content did to some degree reflect a more
diverse portrayal of Muslims as compared to the stereotypical descriptions used before the attacks (Nacos and Torres-Reyna 2007 referred to by Calfano et al 2019). However, they also resorted to narratives, not unlike those presented by Huntington, where Muslims were portrayed as potential threats to democratic societies (Calfano 2019). The media coverage revealed a pattern that “[...] feed orientalism and a culture of fear of Islam [...]” (Powell, 2011, 105)

Given these narratives it comes to little surprise that, despite the fact that prejudices against most minorities has gone down over the last couple of decades, Muslims have been shown to be an exception (Kalkman et al 2009). When people were asked the question of whether they think that some specific group agrees with their vision of the American society, Muslims scored lower than most other ethnic minorities (such as African-American, Jews and Asian-Americans) and similarly to atheists and LGBT people (Edgell et al, 2006). And, Muslims are also rated more negatively than most other groups when it comes to conceptions of trustworthiness and perceptions of violence (Sides and Gross 2007 referred to by Kalkman et al 2009).

Since the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the situation has arguably deteriorated for the worse. During the election campaign Trump utilized a harsh rhetoric towards Muslims, which he soon turned into political action with his 2017 “Muslim ban”. This “Muslim ban” entailed the banning of individuals from a specific set of Muslim-majority countries from entering the US.

It has been argued that the election of Donald Trump poses “the strongest threat to Muslim welfare – and challenge to the health of Muslim identity – in the U.S. since the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks” (Calfano 2018, 478) Or perhaps even a larger threat than compared to the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Especially since then president George W. Bush provided a more diverse rhetoric that did not solely contain negative statements about Muslims (ibid.). Trump alone did however not resort to this type of rhetoric and there are examples from other high positioned republicans, as well as democrats who have argued that Islam is not compatible with the US constitution or calls for increased surveillance of Muslim-dense neighborhoods (ibid.). And this type of rhetoric and policy decisions may very well have an effect on the lived experiences of Muslims. For example, a study conducted by Pew Research Centre in the spring of 2019 pointed out that 82% of the respondents think that Muslims are subjected to some discrimination, while around 57% view them as being subjected to a lot of discrimination (Masci 2019). Put together, the Muslim Americans can arguably be viewed as “among the most delegitimized groups from both a political and social standpoint” (Calfano, 2019, 479).

This brief overview paints a picture of Muslims in the US as a minority group that is portrayed in a negative light, both amongst the elite and by the media. They are also negatively perceived by many individuals and have been described as a group that is not trustworthy and that they stand at odds with American values and their way of life. This underlying sentiment has also resulted in negative policy action and unfavorable treatment that is viewed by many as discrimination. From a backlash perspective, this points to the fact that the case Muslim Americans may very well present a plausible ground for detecting a backlash as they are arguably a minority group in society that has less power and status as compared to other groups. Since Islam, and the Muslims that follow it, have been argued to stand at odds with important
aspects of American values and regulations, it is reasonable to assume that an increase in Muslim power or influence would appear as threatening to some groups in the American society.

A second important case characteristic to review is to define the nature of the event that “changes the status quo”. Previous theory has offered a wide variety of potential triggers that have all received their fair share of praise and critique. One frequently recurring trigger, which will also be the focus of this thesis, is the Supreme Court ruling. Supreme Court rulings have been the focus of many previous researchers, and the focus have often been on controversial landmark rulings such as rulings in favor of same-sex marriage, inter-racial marriage and abortion rights (e.g. Klaman 1994, Klarman 2005, Schacter 2009, Greenhouse and Siegel 2011, Bishin et al 2015, Flores and Barclay 2016, Somin 2009). It has been assumed that Supreme Court rulings have a particular ability to cause backlashes. When the Supreme Court takes part in controversial rulings, they raise salience over the issue at hand, and since the rulings is not state bound, it changes the pace and direction of change as compared to the process of going through the political system. Since the court system does not have the same democratic element that the political system with its popularly elected representatives have, it has been argued that Supreme Court rulings might incite anger or feelings of “outside interference” and “judicial activism” as its rulings becomes nationally implemented (Klarman 2005). Thus, the rulings have the ability to enact change both fast and effectively in ways that are not always in line with public opinion. As with much of the backlash narratives, this line of reasoning has met some relevant critiques. Among these are those claiming that Supreme Court decisions where one might anticipate a backlash sometimes does not produce one. And, that the effect on public opinion might in some cases even slightly positive (e.g. Schacter 2009, Flores and Barclay 2016). However, since this theoretical assumption has had a highly influential position, the Supreme Court narrative is still worth testing as a plausible backlash trigger.

After choosing a Supreme Court ruling as an appropriate “status quo change”, we have to define the nature of this fictive ruling. The chosen ruling must have the ability to alter the status quo and must increase the power, rights or influence of the minority group in a way that appears threatening to other groups in society. With some inspiration drawn from a recent debate in Sweden, the event of choice will be the approval of “adhan” (call to prayer) from loudspeakers in mosques, which became a hot topic during the spring of 2018. A similar debate took place in the city of Hamtramck, Michigan where a small mosque requested the municipality to allow them to broadcast the adhan out loud. The community, with significant numbers of both Christian and Muslim inhabitants, had previously not had any issues living side by side, not even in the wake of 9/11. But, when this policy was requested, it stirred up tensions and anti-Islamic sentiments directed towards the Muslim population. The New York Times reported that the non-Muslim population argued that they did not want to hear the adhan message that frequently, that Muslims was getting “special rights” that Christians did not enjoy, and that the whole conflict was the Muslims fault. They argued that “[w]e all lived in peace and had no problems. You moved too fast.” (Leland, 2004, A20). The request was eventually passed and met with mixed reactions – where some wanted to challenge the decision with political or
judicial means (ibid). While often masked by arguments of sound level, there are some research that point towards the fact that it actually tends to bottom in an attempt to control public space and shape proper behavior or forms of expression (Weiner, 2014). A political or legal decision regarding the approval of mosques to broadcast adhan by loudspeakers should arguably pose as a treatment that should have the possibility to trigger a potential backlash effect, since it would be a policy that would favor or enhance the position/rights of Muslims. It would simultaneously have the potential to act as a change to the status quo and would, as proven in the case of Hamtramck, have the potential to act as threatening to some groups – which would in turn act as a fertile ground to detect a potential backlash.

2.3.3. HYPOTHESES

In light of the previous research and theoretical application outlined above, this section will outline the hypotheses that will be tested in this thesis. The first hypothesis will focus on whether backlash is possible to detect on an aggregated level. While this hypothesis is not directly connected to any of the theory-groupings outlined in section 3.1, its aim is to test whether it is possible to locate a backlash in the public on a general level. This hypothesis is however supported by the backlash definition presented by Bishin et al (2016), where they imagined a large backlash as being large enough to yield support from “intense groups” or the general public. Detecting a backlash on this aggregated level would thus serve as an indication that the backlash would be regarded as “large”.

• **H1: Backlash against Muslims will be possible to detect on an aggregated level**

The second hypothesis is related to the level of political awareness that an individual possesses. It becomes apparent in section 3.1.1 that previous research has interpreted the model by Zaller (1992) in two conflicting directions. One direction claims that individuals with lower political awareness would be more inclined to backlash (Bishin et al 2016) while others take the position that individuals with high political awareness would be more prone to lash back (Guess and Coppock, 2018). In order to see which one, if any, of these conflicting approaches that might bear any truth they will be tested separately. Hypothesis two will thus be divided into two conflicting sub hypotheses, H2a and H2b. They read as following:

• **H2a. Backlash against Muslims will be possible to detect amongst individuals with high political awareness.**

• **H2b. Backlash against Muslims will be possible to detect amongst individuals with low political awareness**

The third hypothesis will test whether it is possible to detect a backlash amongst groups that are negatively predisposed and feels more “threatened” by the group beforehand. This group
does, of course, already hold negative attitudes towards the group to some extent. The test will instead look at whether the group will express more negative attitudes as a result of being exposed to the treatment text. This would be consistent with a backlash. In this thesis, the group that will be assumed as negatively predisposed is respondents that voted for Donald Trump in the presidential election. Previous research has determined that there is a strong correlation between levels of resentment against Muslim Americans and voting for Donald Trump (Lajevardi and Oskoii 2018). Thus, there is empirical evidence that suggests that this might act as a suitable group for testing whether negative predisposition leads individuals to lash back.

- **H3. Backlash against Muslims will be possible to detect amongst Trump voters**

The fourth hypothesis looks at whether backlash can be related to the nature of the respondents inter-group relations. Theory suggests that exposure to minority groups might trigger negative attitudes if the exposure does not consist of relationships that are personal and informal as well as non-competitive and on a basis of pursuing common goals. This means that for example work relations or exposure in public spaces are not assumed to have a positive effect on attitudes towards other groups due to their formal and impersonal nature. However, a private friendship between members, and non-members of the minority group should fulfill most of the criteria that is listed for yielding more positive intergroup attitudes. And, reversely, individuals that lack these types of private personal relationships are not assumed to obtain the same positive attitude effects. Subsequently, hypothesis number four reads:

- **H4. Backlash against Muslims will be possible to detect amongst individuals that do not have any personal friends that are Muslims.**

The fifth, and final hypothesis is linked to the group of theories that believes that age, and generational belonging affects opinions and attitudes throughout life. More specifically, it tells us that experiences that occurs during specific formative periods during an individual’s life would continue to have an effect on their attitudes and opinions later in life. In a backlash setting, this means that individuals that experienced some negative event related to Muslim-American relationships would have an effect on the way they react and feel about Muslims today. One such event that affected American-Muslim relations is the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Thus, the theory tells us that individuals that were in a “formative period” when the attacks took place would be more likely to express negative attitudes towards Muslims. Subsequently, one might argue that they could be to backlash if that specific minority were to gain more power or influence in society. Bartels and Jackman (2014) concludes in their article that the “peak period of sensitivity”, in other words the key formative period, is between the ages of 7 to 17. Thus, the fifth and final hypothesis of this thesis reads:

- **H5. Backlash against Muslims will be possible to detect amongst individuals that were between the ages of 7 and 17 when the 9/11 attacks took place**
3. METHOD

The following section will present the survey experiment conducted in this thesis. It will begin by a general presentation of the experiment followed by a more detailed account of its components. It will outline the manipulation that was used, and how the dependent variable was measured. This will be followed by a section where the main variables associated with each of the five hypotheses will be described and operationalized. And, finally the thesis will outline how the experiment was conducted practically alongside some considerations regarding its strengths and weaknesses. Outside of the variables outlined in this section there was a number of control questions that were also asked. These were gathered in order to do controls and make balance tests. They consisted of common control questions such as gender, race/ethnicity, income, education level etc. A presentation of the survey and all its questions can be found in appendix 1.

3.1. THE SURVEY EXPERIMENT

This thesis ultimately wants to determine whether or not it is possible to detect public opinion backlashes. As outlined above, theory tells us that opinion backlash is assumed to be triggered by political changes in favor of some minority, that changes the status quo. How, then, could one measure this in practice? Previous research often had a tendency to focus on events that in hindsight had proven to be highly controversial. This means that much of the research have been conducted many years after the event of interest. This has also often meant that they have had to rely on panel data that had rarely been collected immediately adjacent to the actual event. This opens up for questions regarding whether any effects on public opinion can be directly related to that specific event, or to some other social or political change that happened to occur during the same time-period. In other words, the causal link between the event and the outcome becomes questionable. Since the backlash theory does speak for a clear link between the event and its subsequent reaction, this of course becomes problematic. In an attempt to overcome these difficulties, this thesis will conduct a survey experiment.

The survey respondents will be requested to answer a number of questions related to the five hypotheses above, as well as a number of control questions. All respondents will receive identical surveys in every sense other than that one group will receive a manipulation (or treatment) meant to act as a trigger for backlash. The other group will receive no such manipulation. Whether a respondent receives a manipulation or not will be allotted through random assignment. This means that there will be a treatment group, and a control group, where the latter will act as a baseline for comparison. After receiving the manipulation, the respondent will be asked a number of questions that aims to measure their attitudes in regard to American Muslims. This section of questions will be the last section of the survey. The control will also answer these questions as a final section of their survey but will receive no treatment beforehand. The aim is to see whether the manipulation will cause a larger number of negative
attitudes towards American Muslims, as compared to those that receive no treatment. If that would be the case this would be interpreted as a backlash. The survey will be conducted over the internet, and the respondents will have a maximum amount of one hour to complete the survey, otherwise it shuts down and they will not be able to open it up again. This means that it is not likely that the respondent will have time to be influenced by other events in-between the time of the manipulation and the time of attitude-measurement. Compared to previous backlash research, this approach hopefully will bridge the time-gap issue that have been present in some of the literature.

Another strength with this approach is its ability to exclude the presence of confounding variables. If the manipulation is assigned to respondents at random, this means that any confounding variables that might otherwise skew the results can be assumed to be random as well. This means that that there should not be any systematic differences between the groups, which makes it easier to detect and draw conclusions about the effects of the manipulation (Morton and Williams 2010). This in turn makes it easier to make causal claims. Because of the more or less causal nature of the backlash theory, this becomes important when trying to make claims about whether or not the backlash theory has merit or not.

3.1.1. THE TREATMENT VARIABLE

This section will present the treatment variable (manipulation), that has been used in this thesis. The manipulation variable used in survey experiments often consists of changes in terms of what questions or information the respondents are provided with (Morton and Williams 2010). This thesis will impose the manipulation of information. More specifically, the treatment will consist of a binary variable that, when activated, will expose the respondents to a text which the other group of respondents will not be subjected to. The group that does not receive the text will act as a baseline group for comparison (ibid 45). The manipulation consists of a made-up article that explains the verdict of a Supreme Court ruling. The text reads:

“In a landmark decision for religious freedom, the supreme court declared that a Texas law prohibiting Islamic call to prayers is unconstitutional. The case arose after an Islamic center petitioned the local city hall asking for the right to broadcast the call to prayer using outdoor loudspeakers. After being initially rejected the Center decided to overturn the decision claiming that this violated their religious rights under the first amendment, where it is stated that the “congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. When the case eventually made its way up to the supreme court the previous ruling was overturned and also overturned similar laws in two other states. The court established that it was unconstitutional to ban the broadcasting itself as long as it does not disrupt public order. The ruling is viewed as a landmark decision for religious freedom and Muslim American rights in the US.”

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The text thus reveals that the Court has established the right for Mosques in the US to broadcast call to prayer through outdoor loudspeakers. It also explains how the ruling overturned existing legislation in a number of states since these laws violated the first amendment which protects the free exercise of religion. This fictive “news article” is supposed to act as the as a “change to the status quo” in favor for the minority group of Muslim Americans. This type of treatment should, according to backlash theory, have the ability to create a backlash amongst the treated respondents.

A problem that might arise when assigning this type of treatment is that the respondents might simply not read the treatment text. This means that some of the individuals from the treatment group might, in fact, stay untreated. In order to test how many from the treatment group that actually became treated, the treatment was accompanied with three control questions. These questions asked simple questions about the content of the text and gave five response options. While this does not force the respondents to comply with the treatment, it will provide an overview of who, and how many of the respondents that actually have been treated. This is important both in the spirit of transparency, but it also allows the researcher to be able to statistically handle this error or do some control-tests.

The use of a fictive ruling as the focus of the manipulation article is a question that also should be addressed. One might argue that using a made-up manipulation could lead to a situation where the information does not appear believable to the respondents. And, since it would theoretically be possible to use a “real life” political or judicial event while measuring attitudes before and after the decision has been taken (e.g. Bishin et al 2016) – why not take this road? One reason is because it is very complicated to do practically. It means that some important political event has to take place during the time period when the thesis is being written. And the author would have to anticipate when this event will take place and what the outcome of it will be in order to construct a suitable experiment. This makes the use of real-life events very difficult to practically carry out. Secondly, one could argue that there are some advantages with using a made-up treatment, compared to a real-life event. If one would use a real-life event as the treatment, it is not likely that respondents first encounter with information about this the ruling would be connected to the time of the experiment. Especially if the event is of controversial nature, it is likely that it will be subjected to media attention even before the policy decision or judicial ruling takes place. This means that at least some of the respondents might already have “lashed back” at an earlier point in time. Trying to measure the difference between treated and non-treated respondents thus becomes difficult because some may have been “treated” at an earlier point in time or through some other source. In an attempt to overcome the potential issue of sounding believable, the treatment text was adapted to fit the type of language that has been used in other news articles that have reported about Supreme Court rulings. Call to prayers have not previously been a hot topic in general in the US, except locally in some cases in relation to some local Mosque. This means that there is little debate that might have influenced the respondents beforehand. The specific event of a Supreme Court ruling establishing the right to broadcast the call to prayer nationwide is an event that has not previously taken place and thus all respondents should be un-treated going into this experiment.
The dependent variable is meant to measure the respondent’s attitudes towards Muslim Americans. In order to measure this multi-faceted variable, this thesis will utilize the “Muslim American resentment scale” (MAR) developed by Lajevardi (2017). This scale consists of nine separate statements that account for different critiques about Muslim Americans in the US. The questions that were asked were:

1) “Most Muslim Americans integrate successfully into American culture”,
2) “Muslim Americans sometimes do not have the best interests of Americans at heart”,
3) “Muslim Americans living in the US should be subject to more surveillance than others”
4) “Muslim Americans, in general, tend to be more violent than other people”
5) “Most Muslim Americans reject jihad and violence”
6) “Most Muslim Americans lack basic English language skills”
7) “Most Muslim Americans are not terrorists”
8) “Wearing headscarves should be banned in all public places”
9) “Muslim Americans do a good job of speaking out against Islamic terrorism” (ibid 131).

This scale has later been utilized as a measure of “old fashioned racism” against Muslim Americans in the US (see Lajevardi and Oskoii 2018) and seems to have merit as a useful tool for measuring the types of attitudes needed to detect a potential backlash.

The statements were measured using a 5 item Likert scale. The respondents could answer according to the following options: 1) Strongly agree, 2) Agree, 3) Neutral, 4) Disagree 5) Strongly disagree. These were subsequently coded so that the alternative with the most resentment was coded into the value 4, and the alternative with the least resentment was coded into a 0. Question one, five and seven were reversed in order to be coded correctly. These nine questions were subsequently turned into an index in the following way:

\[ MAR_{\text{index}} = MAR_1 + MAR_2 + MAR_3 + \ldots + MAR_9 \]

The MAR-index is thus the sum of the variables from the nine questions. This means that each respondent will be left with a MAR-index value ranging from 0, if all questions were answered using the alternative with the least resentment, and 36 if all questions were answered using the alternative with the most resentment.

However, there are some difficulties associated with trying to measure attitudes towards minorities, which needs to be addressed. When trying to measure sensitive topics there is a risk that respondents might not want to reveal their true attitudes and opinions. Even if a respondent would experience very negative opinion of for example some ethnic or religious minority, he/she would sometimes have a tendency to lie or skew their answers in order to appear more socially acceptable. This tendency is commonly referred to the social desirability bias. While
this problem might be hard to overcome altogether, there is a number of techniques that might mitigate its effects. The social desirability bias is assumed to be the strongest when data is collected through direct contact (face-to-face or through telephone) between the researcher and the respondent. When the respondent answers a written survey, like this one, the pressure to be socially desirable is assumed to lessen (Krosnick 1999). To assure individuals that their answers will be granted anonymity is also assumed to have a positive effect (Pasek and Krosnick 2010).

The specific sampling platform used in this thesis (which will be outlined in section 5.2.) granted individuals anonymity as the only way they can be identified is through a unique platform code, which itself tells the researcher nothing about the identity of the respondent. This fact combined with a statement in the survey-introduction that their answers will be handled with anonymity will hopefully make the respondents feeling more secure with answering truthfully. Since the social desirability bias is assumed to be more or less incorporated in human nature, it is difficult, if not impossible to fully avoid its biasing effects. This means that the responses could be biased in the direction of “less resentment”, which makes it additionally difficult to detect any backlash effect. It even opens up for the possibility that the treatment might have an adverse effect. This means that the bias-effect could lead to results that show that attitudes become more positive as a result of the treatment. This is something that should be considered when reviewing the results.

3.1.3. OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE HYPOTHESES

3.1.3.1. HYPOTHESIS 1.

Hypothesis 1 looks at whether it is possible to detect a backlash on the aggregate level. This practically means that it aims to look at whether it is possible to detect an increase in MAR amongst the treated individuals as compared to those that did not receive any treatment. It will not look at any specific sub-group (as the other hypotheses do), but rather if it is possible to detect amongst the treatment groups as a whole. This means that the only variables that will be necessary to use are the dependent variable (MAR), and the treatment variable which have been outlined above.

3.1.3.2. HYPOTHESIS 2.

Hypothesis 2 looks at politically aware and unaware individuals, and whether these subgroups would be more inclined to backlash. This means that we need a way to measure political awareness. Zaller (1992) measures this in terms of political knowledge. He writes that political awareness is to be measured as “a person’s summary score across a series of neutral, factual tests of public affairs knowledge [...]” (ibid. 43). This thesis will assume the same operationalization as the one proposed by Zaller.
A series of knowledge questions where created which incorporated both knowledge of current public affairs as well as more “general” political knowledge. The former drew inspiration from a recent poll conducted by Pew research center which attempted to measure the public’s awareness of current events (Pew research center 2017). Since many of these were of political nature, they could act as an inspiration to what questions to ask. Of course, some of them had to be modified in order to fit the current political landscape. It also gave some indication of the difficulty level of the questions – which helped make sure that some questions were somewhat harder than others. The more “general” political knowledge questions (i.e. those not associated with current affairs), drew inspiration from the questions used to measure political knowledge in Robinson (2019). These questions focus on topics that are more stable over time, such as the function of the state apparatus.

This created a total of eight questions (see appendix 1). These eight questions were then coded as 1 if the respondent gave a correct answer and 0 otherwise. These eight knowledge-questions were later merged into one variable as follows:

\[
\text{Political knowledge (knowindex)} = \text{know1 + know2 + \cdots + know8}
\]

The variable “political knowledge” can thus take a value between 0 and 8. 0 implies that the respondent answered all questions incorrectly, and 8 implies that the respondent answered all questions correctly. This variable was in turn used to create a binary variable called “aware”. This binary variable was coded so that respondents with 0-4 correct answers were categorized as “unaware” and coded as 0. Respondents with 5-8 correct answers were categorized as “aware” and coded as 1. This variable together with the treatment and dependent variable thus constitutes the foundation for testing hypothesis 2a and hypothesis 2b.

3.1.3.3. HYPOTHESIS 3

The third hypothesis will test whether is it possible to detect a backlash amongst groups that are negatively predisposed and feels more “threatened” by Muslim Americans beforehand. This group is assumed to already hold negative attitudes towards the target group to some extent. However, if they express an increase in negative attitudes as a result of the treatment, this will still be consistent with a backlash. The group that will be assumed as negatively predisposed is respondents that voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Previous research has determined that there is a strong correlation between levels of resentment against Muslim Americans and voting for Donald Trump (Lajevardi and Oskoii 2018). There is thus empirical evidence that suggests that this might act as a suitable group for testing whether negative predisposition leads individuals to lash back. The test will show us whether the treatment has an effect on attitudes and whether this effect indeed is stronger amongst Trump supporters.
This was measured by asking who the respondents voted for during the 2016 election, where Donald Trump ran as the candidate for the republican party and Hillary Clinton ran as a candidate for the democrats. The respondents were faced with the alternatives “Donald Trump”, “Hillary Clinton”, and a third open answer where the respondents were open to fill in if they had voted for someone outside of these two main candidates. The responses were later converted into a binary variable, where respondents that answered that they voted for Trump were coded as 1, while all other were coded as a 0. This variable, together with the treatment and dependent variable were the ones used to answer hypothesis 3.

3.1.3.4. HYPOTHESIS 4

The fourth hypothesis looks at whether individuals that do not have any private friendships with Muslims are more likely to backlash. The design of this question was important. If one were to ask the question “do you have any friends that are Muslims”, the respondent might understand where the survey is heading and adjust their answers from there. In an attempt to keep the respondent in the dark before heading into the treatment text and its subsequent MAR-questions, the question was formulated in a more vague and open manner. The question read: “Do you consider yourself having any private friendships with any individuals from the following religious groups?”. The response options that followed listed a number of religious affiliations such as “Christianity” “Judaism” “Islam” “Buddhism” and so forth and ended with an open alternative for the respondent to fill freely if they felt like there were any response that were missing. The responses were later transformed into a binary variable, where respondents that did not report having any private friendships with anyone from the Islamic faith were coded as a 1, and all other where coded as a 0. This variable, together with the treatment and dependent variable were thus used to test the fourth hypothesis.

3.1.3.5. HYPOTHESIS 5

The fifth hypothesis focuses at whether the age of the respondent might have any effect on whether or not they might lash back. More specifically, it asks whether respondents that were between the ages of 7 to 17 during the 9/11 attacks would constitute a group where it would be possible to detect a backlash. This means that it involves individuals born between the years of 1984 and 1994. This was simply measured by asking the respondent what year they were born. This was subsequent made into a binary variable where respondents born between the years 1984 and 1994 were coded as 1, while all others were coded as a 0. This variable together with the control and treatment variable constitutes the basis for answering hypothesis 5.
3.2. THE DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

This section will focus on the data collection method utilized by this thesis. It will begin with a
description of the platform that was used, and then go on to consider some strengths and
weaknesses of the method and how it impacts the validity and reliability of the thesis.

3.2.1. AMAZON MECHANICAL TURK

There are a number of practical questions that needs to be considered when gathering survey
data. First and foremost, one needs to solve the question of how to gather the data with limited
time and economic funding. All viable alternatives come with some constraints. The common
usage of students as the respondent pool is often very logistically and financially convenient.
However, relying on university students alone has been criticized for having validity issues
both internally and externally (Morton and Williams, 2010, 322-327). Trying to reach the
“general public” to answer surveys is in general very difficult and it has been stated that “the
survey and polling business is in crisis” due to its falling response rates (Tourangeau, 2017,
803). Other than that, there is also a problem of accessibility and economic constraints to come
in contact with the desired respondents.

In order to overcome some of the issues outlined above, this thesis utilized the crowd sourcing
platform “Amazon Mechanical Turk” (MTurk). One can either act as a “requester” or a
“worker”. The requester is usually a researcher or a company that sets up a “human intelligence
tasks” (HITs) for the workers to complete. These HITs can for example be a survey. The
workers can be anyone over the age of 18 with access to the internet (Mechanical Turk, 2019).
The workers voluntarily complete tasks, usually for some monetary reward. The workers are
completely anonymous to the requester, and are only identified by their unique MTurk-ID.
There are over 100,000 registered workers at MTurk, and approximately 2000 active workers
at any given moment (Difallah, Filatova and Ipeirotis, 2018). This means that the researcher
easily can come in to contact with respondents that voluntarily answers polls and surveys. The
workers can then pick and choose which HITs to participate in. The HIT can be adjusted in
order to fit the criteria set up by the researcher. In this case, the MTurk HIT provided a link
containing a script that randomly assigned the worker to either the control or treatment survey.
The HIT was adjusted to only allow workers from the US to participate. Each worker was
rewarded with $0.50 to complete the survey and, due to economical constraints, a limit of 600
responses were set. The HIT was initiated on the 8th of November and responses were gathered
over a period of four hours (approximately 2-6pm PST) before the response limit had been met.
In order to control which workers that completed the survey, the workers were asked to fill in
their unique MTurk-ID at the end of the survey. They were also given a completion code after
submitting their results. This code was to be filled in at the MTurk page.
3.2.2. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

A commonly reoccurring concern regarding survey experiments in general is that they would potentially have weak external validity. In other words, that any estimated effects would not be generalizable to the external world. Thus, what can be said about the possibility to use survey experiments as an estimator for opinion effects in relation to real political events? This question has been empirically approached in a study by Barabas and Jerit (2010). They compared the opinion-effects of two natural experiment on real political events that has been receiving media coverage to two survey experiments that delivered similar information. The goal was to compare the results yielded from these two settings, and thus estimate whether the results were different – and if so, how? Methodologically, they find that the treatment effects from survey experiments might be more observable within specific subgroups of the population, rather than the population at large. This is something that has been considered in this thesis as four out of five hypotheses are linked to theoretical assumptions about the potential of different treatment effects for different subgroups. Furthermore, they conclude that opinion shifts are measured as more substantive within survey experiments, compared to the natural experiments. This indicated that there is some discrepancy between the results obtained through survey experiments compared to the naturally occurring world. This potential amplification of opinion-effects needs to be considered when interpreting the results.

What can be said about using the internet as the “location” of a survey experiment? An advantage of using the internet is that makes it easier to engage a larger number of participants and is less dependent on spatial differences. It also enhances the possibilities of keeping respondents anonymous. Some concerns that arise when using the internet is that they are harder to coordinate, are viewed as less trustworthy and serious, and that respondents fill the survey too quickly and without thinking about their answers (Morton and Williams, 2010 307). The first two disadvantages are limited through the use of MTurk. Using an established platform like MTurk limits the issues of individuals feeling skeptical about its trustworthiness, as it has already earned a serious reputation. The platform also becomes a coordinating tool itself, as it facilitates the location of- and communication with respondents. The third issue, that respondents’ speeds through the survey, is harder to tackle since it is a matter of the human factor. A number of control questions were inserted after the treatment, as well as the befoermentioned codes at the end of the survey as an attempt to control how attentive the respondents were. But, ultimately, it is hard to completely erase this type of issue.

The demographic composition of the MTurk workers compared to the general American population will also have an effect on the generalizability of results of this thesis. So, what can be said about who the workers are? Generally, it is hard to gain a clear view of this because MTurk does not provide any information about this themselves. However, there are some researchers that have tried to outline the characteristics of the MTurk worker. Among these we have Ross et al (2010) that have studies the MTurk demographics. They write that earlier, more informal measures have established the average Mturk worker to be “stay-at home moms who want to supplement the household income; office workers Turking during their coffee breaks;
college students making a few dollars while playing a game; and recession-hit Turkers doing what they can to make ends meet” (ibid. 2870). But as they compare these findings to their own, more recent measures, they find changing trends. They find that the previously US-dominated platform is becoming more international. An especially large increase in educated young male Indian workers was established. While these findings tell us something about the workforce composition, it merely offers a snapshot analysis of that specifically time. Later studies such as Difallah, Filatova and Ipeirotis (2018) tries to paint a more comprehensive picture with their 28month long study, where they attempt to understand the dynamics of the MTurk population. They, for one, establish that the average worker is active for about 12-18 months, but that the population size remains stable over time through steady inflow of new workers. They find that the MTurk population is still predominately American (75%) and that the gender ratio among US MTurk workers are relatively balanced (55% female 45% male). They find that the average worker is somewhat younger than the population at large, and their income fall below the general US average (ibid.)

Despite the findings uncovered above, which might suggest some differences between the MTurk workers and the general American population, there are some evidence that suggests that the biasing effects of these differences are very moderate. Coppock (2019) created 15 replication experiments. The original experiments had been conducted on nationally representative samples. The replications were then conducted using MTurk, as well as three where new national representative data were gathered as well. This was used for comparing results and testing for treatment homo- or heterogeneity. The results indicated that there were strong patterns of replication across the samples and treatment effects were concluded as homogenous across samples. This pattern has also been confirmed in other studies (e.g. Mullinix et al 2015). What, then, can be concluded about the generalizability of MTurk studies? The use of convenience samples should always be handled with care and should be considered when assessing the general application of the findings. But, as has been concluded by Coppock (2019) and Mullinix et al. (2015), using convenience samples does not automatically imply that it is impossible to draw inferences about the larger population. And, the responses from MTurk users does not necessarily differ drastically from the general American population.

Replicability also corresponds to the topic of reliability, which also is of high importance in the field of methodological quality. This is heavily dependent on the overall transparence of the method of that specific thesis, but in this case, it is also dependent on the quality of the MTurk platform. Of course, the use of anonymous respondents does create a certain level of difficulty when it comes to replication. However, the above-mentioned replication experiments do suggest that using MTurk does not yield sample-specific results, but rather that they are indeed replicable across different samples. This should imply that the use of this platform does not necessarily yield any substantial reliability issues.
4. ANALYSIS

This section will begin with presenting some descriptive statistics about the sample respondents, followed with the statistical tests that have been conducted as well as their subsequent results.

4.1. THE SAMPLE RESPONDENTS

The total number of responses that were submitted were 606. This is noteworthy since the response limit were set at 600 in the MTurk platform. What this means is that 6 respondents submitted the survey through google forms but failed to register this in the MTurk program — meaning that the data was gathered but they will not receive any reward for their participation. The data showed that the respondents came from a wide variety of states. All states were represented in the sample except for Alaska, Delaware and Vermont. The state that was most common was California (14.36%), followed by Texas (7.76%), Florida (7.43%) and Illinois (4.46%). The distribution of treated and un-treated individuals can be seen in figure 1. This shows that the randomization script distributed individuals into two groups of approximately equal size, where 46.7% were treated and 53.3% were untreated. Figure 2 shows the gender distribution among the respondents. Again, we find that the distribution is quite equal, even though there are somewhat more males than females.

![Figure 1](image1.png)  ![Figure 2](image2.png)

Figure 3 shows that most respondents, around 70%, are reportedly white, followed by black at 12.5%, Hispanic at 7% and Asian American at 6%. These stats correspond quite well with official statistics about the race/ethnicity. For example, the US Census Bureau reported that whites represent 76.5% of the population, while Blacks represent 13.4%, and Asian Americans represent 5.9% (United States Census Bureau, n.d. but reads “annually updated”). There is a
disjunction when it comes to the category of Hispanics, where they reportedly represent 18.3% of the population, while only 7% of the respondents in this sample identified as Hispanic.

Figure 4 shows what religious belief the respondents identify themselves most close to. We see that over 50% (52.64%) of the respondents identify as Christians, whereas around 18% identify as either Agnostic or Atheists. Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism each represent between 1.5-3%. In the group “other” the respondents reported religions such as “Gnostic satanism”, “Wiccan” and “Polytheism”, which are all uncommon and were thus combined into one category. Compared to previous measurements of US religious affiliations we find that the Christian ratio is somewhat lower in this sample. According to the PRRI American Values Atlas (Jones and Cox, 2017) the Christians represented 69% of the American population, compared to the 50% in this sample. This might however have to do with the steady decline in the Christian faith that has been reported (Pew Research Center, 2015). The report showed that, similarly to the sample data, the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish populations are quite small, where all were measured around 1-2%. Unaffiliated (atheists and agnostics) are measured around 24% in the report, which is somewhat lower than the percentage detected in this sample.

The income- and education levels of the respondents are visualized in figure 5 and 6. The mean and median income group is the group with annual income between $41.000-$60.000. The median income in the US 2018 in general was estimated at $63.179 by the US Census Bureau (Semega et al, 2019). Due to the fact that the sample data is not measured as a continuous variable, it is hard to compare with certainty, but it might indicate that the sample respondents has a somewhat lower income than the general American. According to the sample data, more than 60% of the respondents have finished a college degree (bachelor’s degree), or higher. It also shows that less than one percent reported not having finished their high school degree. These results suggest that the sample respondents are perhaps more educated than the general population. A report from the US Census Bureau suggests that 12% of the population did not have a high school degree, and that 33% had a college degree or higher (Ryan and Bauman, 2016). These statistics clearly differ from the sample respondents.
Finally, we have two charts that portray the distribution of party affiliation as well as the type of community the respondents reportedly live in. These are portrayed in figure 7 and 8. We see that we have individuals represented in all types of communities, from rural areas to large cities. A majority, over 60% live in medium and large cities. According to the World Bank (2018), approximately 18% of the American population is estimated to live in rural areas, compared to the 12% found in the sample data. This means that the sample data contains a higher degree of urbanized individuals living in larger cities and communities. Figure 8 shows that a majority of the respondents are most closely affiliated with the democrats (44%), followed by republicans (30%) and non-partisans (25%). Comparing these statistics to a recent polling by Gallup (2019) shows that the sample data might be slightly skewed towards the democrats compared to the general population. The Gallup (2019) poll showed that the party affiliations among the American public was 30% for the republicans, 38% for independents and 31% for the democrats as of November 2019.
4.2. TESTING FOR BACKLASH

The statistical tests that has been conducted in order to test each of the five hypotheses will be outlined in the following sections along with their respective results. Worth noting is that, a standard significance level of 0.05 has been assumed throughout the analysis.

4.2.1. HYPOTHESIS 1

Hypotheses 1 is concerned with whether it is possible to detect backlash on an aggregated level. Compared to the other hypotheses tested in this thesis, this hypothesis is not focused on any specific subgroup amongst the sample respondents, but rather wants to test whether it is possible to detect by comparing all the treated and untreated respondents. Figure 9 shows a histogram over the level of Muslim American Resentment expressed by the respondents. As mentioned before, higher numbers corresponds to a higher degree of resentment. The max-value is 36 and the lowest value possible is 0. The histogram is separated into two groups, one with the respondents who were treated, and one with the respondent who were not treated.

Through visual examination it is possible to see that the two groups differ as far as the shape of the distribution goes. The distribution of the untreated respondents takes the form of the bell-shaped normal distribution. This is supported by the similarities between the mean (19.19195) and median (19). The standard deviation in this group is 2.707305 and the lowest level of resentment expressed by this group is 12 while the highest amount is 28. The distribution of the treated group is more flat and wide. The mean and median is quite similar here as well, where the former takes the value 12.888693 and the latter takes the value of 13, which also is a lot lower than the untreated group. The standard deviation is 7.133077, which also differs a lot compared to the untreated group. The lowest detected value in this group is 0 and the highest detected value is 35, which shows a lot more variability compared to the untreated group.

---

**FIGURE 9**
However, these differences does not immediately reveal whether or not a backlash has taken place. This was tested using the following regression model:

\[ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 \]

Where \( Y \) is the MAR-index, \( \beta_0 \) is the intercept and \( x_1 \) is a binary variable that takes the value 0 if the respondent is untreated and 1 if the respondent is treated. The regression will show the effect of receiving the treatment on the amount of resentment towards Muslims that the respondents expresses. A backlash would be detected if the treatment would induce an *increase* in the amount of MAR expressed by the respondents. The regression results can be found in table 1.

The regression shows a treatment coefficient of -6.305 (p-value = 0.000). This suggest that the treatment corresponds to a *decrease* in MAR of approximately 6 units. This means that no backlash has been detected and hypothesis 1 is rejected.

### TABLE 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>H1. MAR-index</th>
<th>H2. MAR-index</th>
<th>H3. MAR-index</th>
<th>H4. MAR-index</th>
<th>H5. MAR-index</th>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>(0.511)</td>
<td>(0.460)</td>
<td>(0.993)</td>
<td>(0.560)</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>politically unaware</td>
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<td>(1.097)</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>between 1984-1994</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>18.76***</td>
<td>18.88***</td>
<td>19.58***</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Standard errors in parentheses*

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
4.2.2. HYPOTHESIS 2

The second hypothesis tests whether backlash is possible to detect in subgroups of politically aware or unaware individuals. Figure 10 shows the distribution of aware and unaware individuals in the two groups not treated and treated. We can see that the distribution of aware and unaware individuals is very similar in the two groups, with approximately 64% aware and 36% unaware in each.

![Pie charts showing distribution of aware and unaware individuals in not treated and treated groups.]

FIGURE 10

The hypothesis was subsequently tested using the following regression model:

\[ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \beta_3 x_1 x_2 \]

Like before, Y is the MAR-index, \( \beta_0 \) is the intercept and \( x_1 \) is a binary variable that takes the value 0 if the respondent is untreated and 1 if the respondent is treated. \( x_2 \) is a binary variable that takes the value 1 when the respondent is aware, and 0 when the respondent is unaware. The final term is an interaction term where the effects of political awareness and treatment are interacted. The regression will show the effect of receiving the treatment and being aware, respectively unaware on the amount of resentment towards Muslims that the respondents expresses. The regression results can be found in table 1.

The regression table shows the regression for politically unaware respondents. We can see that the coefficient for being politically unaware is -0.242, but that this variable by itself is not significant (p-value = 0.678). The treatment coefficient is -8.171 (p-value = 0.000). The interaction coefficient, which shows the estimated distance between the aware and unaware individuals in terms of their MAR-index score is 5.088 (p-value = 0.000). To estimate the total effect on MAR we have to combine the treatment coefficient and the interaction coefficient.
This gives us a joint effect of -3.083. This means that the effect of receiving treatment when politically unaware is that it decreases the MAR-index score with approximately 3 units. Reversely, the treatment coefficient also tells us the effect of treatment on politically aware individuals. We can see that the joint effect of being aware whilst receiving treatment is -8.171. This means that the MAR-index score decreases with approximately 8 units.

The regression shows that neither aware nor unaware individuals backlash when being exposed to treatment. Both hypothesis 2a and 2b are rejected. It does however show that the two groups are affected differently by the treatment exposure, and that the MAR score decreases less for people that are unaware, compared to those that are aware.

4.2.3. HYPOTHESIS 3

The third hypothesis tests at the effect of whether it is possible to detect a backlash amongst individuals that are assumed to be negatively predisposed to American Muslims. In this case, negatively predisposed are operationalized as Trump voters. Figure 11 shows the response distribution to the question “who did you vote for in the 2016 election?” amongst all the respondents. We can see that Clinton voters represented the largest group of respondents at around 38.5%. And, around 35.5% reported that they voted for Trump. These are thus our sample group. Furthermore, we can see that the treatment and control group each have an approximately equal distribution of Trump voters.

The hypothesis was subsequently tested using the following regression model:

\[ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_4 x_3 + \beta_5 x_1 x_3 \]

Like before, \( Y \) is the MAR-index, \( \beta_0 \) is the intercept and \( x_1 \) is a binary variable that takes the value 0 if the respondent is untreated and 1 if the respondent is treated. \( x_3 \) is a binary variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent is a Trump voter, and 0 otherwise. The final term is an
interaction term where the effects of being a Trump voter (thus being negatively predisposed in this case) is interacted with the treatment. The regression results can be found in table 1.

The coefficient for the treatment variable is -8.735678 (p-value = 0.000), which is also the estimated treatment effect on non-Trump voters. The variable for voting for Trump is 1.15993 (p-value = 0.026). The interaction term shows a strongly positive coefficient at 7.030452 (p-value = 0.000). This suggests that Trump-voters on average express more resentment than non-Trump voters. But, when adding the coefficients from the treatment and the interaction, we get the joint effect of -1.705235. This means that the overall effect of receiving the treatment and being a Trump-voter still leads to a decrease in the amount of resentment the respondents report. Subsequently, hypothesis 3 is rejected.

4.2.4. HYPOTHESIS 4

The fourth hypothesis wants to test if individuals without any personal friendships with Muslims are more prone to backlash. The percentage of the sample respondent in the treatment and control group that answered than they do respectively do not have any private friendships with Muslims can be seen in figure 13. Around 18% in both groups responded that they did have private friendships with Muslims, while around 82% responded that they did not.

![Graph of friendship distribution](image)

**FIGURE 13**

The hypothesis was tested using the following regression model:

$$ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_6 x_4 + \beta_7 x_1 x_4 $$
Y is the MAR-index, $\beta_0$ is the intercept and $x_1$ is a binary variable that takes the value 0 if the respondent is untreated and 1 if the respondent is treated. $x_4$ is a binary variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent answered that they do not have any private friendships with anyone of the Islamic faith, and 0 otherwise. The final term is an interaction term where the effects of not having any private friendships with Muslims is interacted with the treatment variable.

The regression results can be found in table 1. The treatment coefficient is estimated as -8.973347 (p-value = 0.000). This also tells us about the effect of treatment on individuals with Muslim friends. The coefficient for not having Muslim friendships is estimated as 0.3822055 but is not significant by itself (p-value = 0.613). The interaction coefficient is estimated as 3.27239 (p-value = 0.003). This suggests that respondents without Muslim friends is estimated to be expressing 3 units more resentment on average than those with Muslim friends. However, as we have seen in the previous tests, when adding the two coefficients to see the joint effect, we get the estimated value of -5.799957. This also means that the joint effect of the treatment and lacking private Muslim friendships is a decrease in the expressed resentment. Thus, we can reject the fourth hypothesis as well.

4.2.5. HYPOTHESIS 5

The fifth, and final hypothesis tests whether it is possible to detect a backlash amongst individuals that were between the ages of 7 to 17 during the 9/11 attacks. This means that we are looking at respondents born between 1984 and 1994. The general age distribution among the respondents can be seen in figure 14. The age distribution looks quite similar between the two groups. The mean for the control group is 1980.307 and the median is 1983. The mean for the treatment group 1981.579 and the median is 1984. This suggests that the two groups are quite similar in their distributions. We can also see that we have a large variety of ages represented in the sample. The highest frequency of respondents seems to be approximately around the 1990s. Worth noting is that this variable, compared to all other variables measured in this survey, had an open answer where the respondents were urged to type in their birthyear with a four-digit response. This led to a 9-unit data loss due to individuals answering incorrectly. Thus, the number of observations in this case is 597.
The hypothesis was tested using the following regression model:

\[ Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_3 x_5 + \beta_9 x_1 x_5 \]

Where, as always, \( Y \) is the MAR-index, \( \beta_0 \) is the intercept and \( x_1 \) is a binary variable that takes the value 0 if the respondent is untreated and 1 if the respondent is treated. \( x_5 \) is a binary variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent is born between the years of 1984 and 1994, and 0 otherwise. The final term is an interaction term where the effects of being between the ages of 7 and 17 during the 9/11 attacks is interacted with the treatment variable.

The regression results can be found in table 1. The treatment variable was estimated as -6.777136 (p-value = 0.000). This also represents the effect of treatment on individuals born before 1984 or after 1994. The year-variable was estimated as -0.9395526 but was not significant by itself (p-value = 0.115). The interaction variable was estimated as 1.149175 but was not significant either (p-value = 0.186). The lack of significance in these results could act as a basis for hypothesis-rejection in its own right. But we can also note that if we would have added the two coefficients, as we have before, we would yet again have found ourselves with a declining level of resentment. In conclusion, the fifth hypothesis is also rejected.
5. DISCUSSION

This thesis set out to take a closer look at the backlash theory. The aim was to test “to what extent is it possible to detect the presence of backlash against Muslims within public opinion?”. This question was later broken into five hypotheses that theorized around the possibility of detecting any presence of backlash either on an aggregated level, or in some distinct sub-group. So, what has this thesis revealed about the prominence of backlash within public opinion? The test results revealed that these questions could be all be answered with the same answer; it is not possible to detect any presence of a backlash. Not in the general public, nor in any of its hypothesized subgroups. This means that this thesis does not find any support for the backlash hypothesis. The lack of evidence in favor of the backlash is in line with previous studies that have tried to measure the existence of backlash such as Bishin et al (2016), Coppock and Guess (2018) and Flores and Barclay (2016).

What is more remarkable about the findings in this thesis is that all tests but one showed results of high significance in the opposite direction than the one advocated by the backlash theory. In other words, they showed that respondents that were exposed to the treatment article exhibited less resentment compared to the control group. In some cases, the positive effect of treatment was shown to be quite strong. On the aggregated level, the resentment exhibited by the treated respondents on average decreased by around 6 units on a 36-unit scale. Among the subgroup of individuals without Muslim friends, the resentment decreased with about 5.8 units, and among those with Muslim friends it decreased with almost 9 units. Among “politically unaware” individuals it decreased with around 3 units, and among “politically aware” individuals it decreased with over 8 units. The smallest decrease was detected among Trump-voters, where it only decreased with about 1.7 units on average, while the effect on non-Trump voters equaled a decrease with 8.7 units on average. The only group that did not show any significant difference was the subgroup connected to age.

Even though the overall effects in all groups indicated a decreasing resentment, there are some interaction effects that are worth noting. Hypothesis 2a and 2b were founded in the contradictory claims found in previous research regarding whether high or low political awareness would lead respondents to backlash. Thus, both these claims were tested. And, while both groups on average experienced a decreasing resentment scale as a result of the treatment, the decrease was smaller in the “unaware” group. Hypothesis 3 looked at Trump-voters as the potential backlashers. The results showed that, despite the overall decrease, Trump-voters exhibited less decrease than those that did not vote for Trump. The results indicated that the difference in decrease would be as large as 7 units on average between the two groups. And, when comparing the groups in Hypothesis 4, we find that despite the general decrease in resentment, the group without any private friendships with Muslims differed greatly from those who did have friendships. The results indicated that the decrease was approximately 5 units smaller on average among the group that did not have Muslim friends.
What can we learn from these findings? Regarding the interaction effects one could argue that, while these results in no way confirm a backlash, they do indicate that these groups differ in the way they respond to news about changes to the status quo in favor of the Muslim minority in the US. More specifically, these hypothesized groups do respond less positively than their comparison groups. Thus, there might be some merit in treating these groups as different when it comes to the way they respond to this type of event. The fact that these interaction effects in a way behaves in the same way as suggested by the hypotheses gives some merit to the theoretical assumptions from where these hypotheses stem.

But, how should we interpret the absence of a backlash effect and the presence of a positive treatment effect? It would be easy to argue that the backlash theory does not have merit, and that is simply does not occur in the “real world” in any measurable manner. However, there are other potential explanations that should be considered before jumping into this type of conclusion.

First, we need to consider potential errors that could have occurred if the respondents that were exposed to the treatment did not actually receive the treatment message. In other words, possibility that respondents skipped past the treatment and did not read the text. If this is the case, this might have influenced the results. In order to rule out this possibility, we should consider the three simple control questions about the content that were asked immediately after the text. If the respondents answered all these questions correctly, they could be considered treated. Otherwise they could be considered not treated despite being exposed to the treatment.

![Figure 15](image)

**FIGURE 15**

In figure 15 we can see that approximately 25% (72 respondents) failed to answer all these three questions correctly, thus assumed untreated. As a control test, these 72 observations were
dropped, and the regressions were run again. This control is conducted in order to assess what effect these respondents had on the regression outcomes. The results can be found in appendix 2. The results show that, when the 72 non-treated respondents are excluded from the sample the decrease in resentment becomes even larger when it comes to hypothesis one through four. Hypothesis five is still not significant, and the p-value even increased for the interaction variable. This means that the only effect the non-treated respondents had on the regression outcome was that they limited the decreasing effects. Thus, these respondents do not themselves explain the decrease.

On a similar note, one might argue that the presence of Muslims in the sample data might have had a positive effect on the outcome. The percentage of Muslims in the sample is very small, approximately 1.65%, which equals ten respondents. It is highly unlikely that such a small percentage of the respondents would distort the outcomes in any significant way. However, in order to officially rule out any distorting effects from these observations, a control test was run (see appendix 3). In this test, the same regressions were run but the ten Muslim respondents were dropped. The results show little difference compared to the regressions that included these observations. This shows that these observations did not have any large effects on the outcomes.

After ruling out these possibilities, we need to address another, more probable explanation to decreasing resentment. Namely, the beforementioned social desirability bias. Asking respondents to answer questions about their opinions about ethnic or religious minorities are commonly assumed as high risk topics for this biasing effect. This is because most people are aware that holding prejudices and expressing resentment towards minorities are commonly frowned upon. Because of this, individuals sometimes tend to skew their answers in line with the socially desirable answer and hide their true preferences from others (or even from themselves). Actually, determining the potential effects of social desirability bias is very hard, if not impossible to do in retrospect. If respondents do not want to reveal their true preferences, there is no way to obtain this information from some other way. Of course, there are techniques to measure this effect in general, but it often involves the use of specific questioning techniques or laboratory equipment neither of which has been or will be used in this thesis. One might argue that, since both the control and treatment group were asked the same MAR questions, the distortion should have taken place in both groups. This would mean that social desirability bias would not be the sole explanation to a distortion this large. On the other hand, only the treatment group were exposed to the treatment text, and it is not unreasonable to assume that the treatment could have an biasing effect as well. This would in turn imply that the bias effect could have been larger in the treatment group. Ultimately, it is hard to determine if, and how much the results were skewed by social desirability bias, but it is likely to have had some effect on the unexpected results found in this thesis.

Furthermore, one could argue that there is a possibility that the treatment could have had an effect other than social desirability bias. Simply that the content of text presented to the respondents made them less resentful towards Muslims. The text has two aspects worth discussing. The first aspect that might have affected the outcome is the possibility that the topic of “allowing outdoor broadcasting of the Muslim call to prayer” is something that Americans
in general view in a positive light. This means that reading about this actually made them more positive towards Muslims. This topic was also touched upon in the “theoretical applications” section and is arguably an explanation that quite unlikely. First of all, research reported that Muslims in general are viewed less favorable than other religious minorities, which in itself speaks against a positive reaction to outdoor prayer broadcasting (Kalkman et al 2009). We have also seen that, in the few instances that Islamic call to prayer have been allowed, this has already been met with resistance and discontent (e.g. Leland 2004). Thus, this aspect of the text content is unlikely to be the reason why respondents reported decreasing resentment. The second aspect has to do with the texts focus on a Supreme Court decision. Previous research has assumed that if controversial issues are brought to the Supreme Court this has a high potential for producing a backlash (e.g. Klarman 2005). However, as briefly mentioned before, there are other branches of research that claims otherwise. There are researchers that Supreme Court decisions might have a positive or legitimizing effect because of people’s respect of the rule of law. There are even some articles that have found evidence of effects resembling the legitimacy model (e.g. Flores and Barclay 2016, Haider-Markel and Allen 2006). Thus, the decreasing resentment might be a sign that these types of changes to the status quo do not induce a backlash among the public, but rather acts as a legitimizing force that steers the public in line with the Courts ruling. The question is, however, whether it is reasonable to assume that the potential legitimizing effect alone is large enough to produce the strong results found in this thesis. If so, perhaps one could argue for a joint effect of the legitimization effect along with the social desirability effect as a potential explanatory duo.

One final aspect that should be addressed is the potential argument that backlashes do occur, but that the theory needs to be adjusted to fit the contemporary political landscape. Most backlash research has assumed that the backlash is a conservative force and that it is directed towards more liberal political advances in favor of ethnic or religious minorities, the LGBT community or women. Some examples of literature even define backlash as a phenomenon specifically connected to the right wing of the political spectra (e.g. Lipset 1971). However, the society has become more tolerant and prejudices against most minorities have decreased over the last couple of decades (Kalkman et al 2009). This could perhaps be an indicator that if backlashes do occur, they are less likely to be occurring against some of the groups that traditional backlash research has been focused on. Or, at least it might make it increasingly harder to actually detect its presence. If we would abandon the ideological ownership of the backlash concept and assumes that backlash as a political phenomenon could occur amongst all political alignments – one could perhaps argue in favor of a change of focus among the research field. Given the political gains for conservative and right-wing actors over the last couple of years, perhaps the research field would benefit from opening up for the possibility that more liberal actors could lash back against conservative advances as well? This would open up a new dimension to the backlash research that has yet to be explored.
Public opinion plays an important role in a democratic society. The opinions of the public shapes what representatives, policies and values that takes place in the parliament and government. This makes it important to understand how public opinion is shaped and influenced, both from an academic point of view and for political actors in practice. The backlash theory assumes that changes to the status quo that favors some minority risks inducing a large negative shift in opinion in the opposite direction. This means that policy makers and advocates risks losing support from large sections of the electorate if they push for controversial changes within this domain. The theory also assumes that minorities themselves risks being met with increased prejudice and resentment if their power and rights increase too rapidly. Assuming that there is any merit to the backlash theory could thus have implications for the pace and direction of political decision-making and minority-right advocacy.

The survey experiment conducted in this thesis set out to test the merits of the backlash theory on the case of Muslim Americans. Throughout the tests it was apparent that no backlash-effect could be found in the general public or in any of its hypothesized subgroups. Instead, what was found was that, the treatment led the respondents to express significantly less resentment towards Muslim Americans. These unexpected results have many possible explanations. It is possible that the decrease in expressed resentment is a result of the distorting effects of social desirability bias. It is also possible that the Supreme Court ruling in the treatment had a legitimizing effect which made respondents more positive towards Muslim Americans. Or, perhaps the strongly decreasing resentment is a result of these joint effect of these two potential explanations.

The consistent lack of empirical findings raises large questions about the merit of the backlash theory. However, more research will be needed before we can either rule out the backlash narrative altogether. Because of the question marks raised about the potentially distorting effects of Supreme Court-focused treatment, future research could advantageously look closer at whether the same type of results could be found across different types of institutions. What are the effects of legislative action or citizens initiatives for example? Or would we see the same pattern of decreasing resentment under these arrangements as well? Given the changes we have seen in the political landscape over the last couple of years, one interesting avenue for future research would be to drop the ideological ownership of the backlash concept. If researchers would start treating backlash as a political phenomenon rather than a conservative phenomenon, it would open up for studies regarding whether e.g. liberal actors can backlash against conservative advances as well. It would require some revisions to some aspects of the backlash theory, but it would also open up for a more multi-facetted understanding of backlash as a potential public opinion phenomenon that have previously been overlooked.
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Appendix 1.

The survey questionnaire:
Public opinion survey

Welcome to this opinion survey about political and social attitudes. The survey will take about 4-7 minutes to complete. Your answers will be handled with anonymity and you will be compensated for your time.

*Required

What is your gender? *

- Male
- Female
- Other

What is your race/ethnicity? *

- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian American
- Middle eastern
- Other: __________

What year were you born? (Four digit response) *

Your answer
What is the highest level of education that you have accomplished? *
- Below high school level
- High school degree
- Some college but no degree
- College degree
- University degree or higher

What is the annual income of your household? *
- Under $20,000 per year
- Between $20,000-$40,000 per year
- Between $41,000-$60,000 per year
- Between $61,000-$80,000 per year
- Between $81,000-$100,000 per year
- Between $101,000-$120,000 per year
- Over $120,000 per year

What state do you currently live in? *
- Choose

What type of community do you live in? *
- Large city (population over 500,000)
- Medium city (population between 100,000-500,000)
- Small city (population below 100,000)
- Rural area

Generally speaking, do you consider yourself as a republican, democrat or independent? *
- Republican
- Democrat
- Independent
- Other:
Who did you vote for in the 2016 presidential election?

- Donald Trump
- Hillary Clinton
- Did not vote
- Other: [text box]

Public opinion survey

*Required

In the following section you will be required to answer a number of questions relating to current political events and the function of the state. Please answer to the best of your abilities. If you do not know the answer you are welcome to select the response "Don’t know".

Who is the current secretary of state? *

- Mike Pompeo
- John J Sullivan
- Rex Tillerson
- William Barr
- Don’t know

Who is the current President of France? *

- Françoise Hollande
- Nicolas Sarkozy
- Justin Trudeau
- Emmanuel Macron
- Don’t know
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whose responsibility is it to nominate judges to the Federal Courts? *</td>
<td>The House of Representatives, The Senate, The President, The Supreme Court, Don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who conducted the justice department's investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 election? *</td>
<td>James Comey, Sean Spicer, Sally Yates, Robert Mueller, Don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many conservative republicans in the House of Representatives are members of which of the following groups? *</td>
<td>The Tuesday Group, The Lincoln Group, The Freedom Caucus, The Blue Dogs, Don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the main duty of the US Congress? *</td>
<td>To write laws, To administer the President's policies, To supervise the states' governments, To execute legislation, Don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Which of the following countries is in the process of leaving the European Union? *

- Greece
- Germany
- Hungary
- The United Kingdom
- Don’t know

Do you happen to know the name of the current speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives? *

- Paul Ryan
- Nancy Pelosi
- Jason Chaffetz
- Mitch McConnell
- Don’t know

Next page
Do you consider yourself having any private friendships with any individuals from the following religious groups? *

☐ Christianity
☐ Judaism
☐ Islam
☐ Buddhism
☐ Hinduism
☐ Agnosticism
☐ Atheism
☐ Other:

Note: this treatment text was only exposed to the treatment group
Public opinion survey

*Required

You will now be asked a few questions about the text.

**What event was the focus of the text?**
- A Supreme Court decision
- A climate strike
- The trade war with China
- The 2020 presidential election
- Don’t know

**What minority was the focus of the text?**
- Evangelical Christians
- Jews
- Muslims
- Hindus
- Buddhists
- Don’t know

**What religious activity was the focus of this article?**
- Halal meat
- Call to prayer
- Circumcision
- Wearing hijab
- Don’t know

Note: these three questions were only asked to the treatment group
Public opinion survey

*Required
To what degree do you agree with the following statements?

**Most Muslim Americans integrate successfully into American culture** *
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

**Muslim Americans sometimes do not have the best interests of Americans at heart** *
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

**Muslims living in the US should be subject to more surveillance than others** *
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Muslim Americans, in general, tend to be more violent than others *      | ○ Strongly agree  
○ Agree  
○ Neutral  
○ Disagree  
○ Strongly disagree |
| Most Muslim Americans lack basic English language skills *               | ○ Strongly agree  
○ Agree  
○ Neutral  
○ Disagree  
○ Strongly Disagree |
| Most Muslim Americans rejects jihad and violence *                       | ○ Strongly agree  
○ Agree  
○ Neutral  
○ Disagree  
○ Strongly disagree |
| Wearing headscarves should be banned in all public places *              | ○ Strongly agree  
○ Agree  
○ Neutral  
○ Disagree  
○ Strongly disagree |
Most Muslim Americans are not terrorists

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Muslim Americans do a good job of speaking out against Islamic terrorism

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Public opinion survey

*Required

To obtain your reward, please answer this final question:

What is your M-turk ID? *

Your answer

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.
Note: CC123CC was the completion code for treatment survey. The completion code was TT123RR.

## Appendix 2

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<th>VARIABLES</th>
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Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
## Appendix 3

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*Standard errors in parentheses*

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