Electoral Systems and the Legislative Representation of Muslim Ethnic Minority Women in the West, 2000–2010

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Despite growing interest from practitioners, politicians and the media, the political representation of Muslim ethnic minority women in the West has received scant scholarly attention. I address this gap with new data on the representation of Muslim ethnic minority women and men in 20 national legislatures from 2000 to 2010. Results reveal that Muslim ethnic minority women are increasingly elected in countries with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, whereas Muslim ethnic minority men have been elected across a range of electoral systems. The benefits of PR electoral systems to ‘women’ apply to ethnic minority women from Muslim backgrounds.

Keywords: Electoral systems, Ethnic minority women, Muslim women, National legislatures, Proportional representation, Western Muslims

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Muslims have faced increasing distrust and suspicion from the Western societies in which they live. Across the West, Muslims, along with members of ethnic minority groups perceived to be Muslim, have suffered verbal harassment, physical attacks, increased police scrutiny and a range of state actions limiting their freedoms of movement and religious expression. In Western countries, ethnic minority groups with ties to Islam have distinct ethnicities, national origins, cultural traditions and religious identities but are nevertheless bound together by a common experience of stigmatisation or ‘othering’ that some scholars have come to describe as ‘racialisation’ or ‘ethnicisation’ (Roy, 2004; Zibouh, 2013). Some communities have responded to growing stigmatisation with increased civil and political participation. However, the political
under-representation of Muslim ethnic minorities remains the norm across the West (Klausen, 2005; Sinno, 2009).  

Rising Islamophobia—fear and hatred of Muslims—has been fuelled, in part, by the perceived incongruence between Islam and Western secular values, especially with regard to gender ideology (Allen, 2005; Cesari, 2005). The stigmatisation of Muslims must be understood as intersecting with gender: Muslim women are frequently stereotyped in the West as victims who are confined, disfigured and even murdered by Muslim men in the name of culture (Razack, 2004; Dhamoon, 2009). Just one manifestation of the conflict over Muslim women’s bodies and rights has been intensifying battles over headscarves and face veils. Indeed, national restrictions on Muslim women’s religious dress have been proposed by politicians in almost every Western country (Hughes and Tienes, 2012). The rise of public policies targeting Muslim women raises an important question about their political representation: to what extent are Muslim ethnic minority women included in national legislative politics across the West?  

ELECTING MUSLIM ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN TO NATIONAL LEGISLATURES MAY HAVE PROFOUN D EFFECTS. GENDER, ETHNICITY AND RELIGION ARE THOUGHT TO INFLUENCE THE POLITICAL INTERESTS AND PRIORITIES OF POLITICIANS AND ULTIMATELY HOW THEY LEGISLATE (E.G. Young, 1990; Phillips, 1995). IN EUROPE, MUSLIM WOMEN HOLD DISTINCT POLITICAL VIEWS, PARTICULARLY WHEN ISSUES INVOLVE GENDER AND/OR ISLAM (Klausen, 2005), RENDERING THE EXCLUSIVE REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN BY OTHER GROUPS AS PROBLEMATIC. BUT EVEN IF ELECTING REPRESENTATIVES OF PARTICULAR GROUPS DOES NOT AFFECT WHICH LAWS ARE PROPOSED OR PASSED, INCLUDING MARGINALISED GROUPS IN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS MAY REDUCE POLITICAL ALIENATION, CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIAL STABILITY, AFFECT HOW SOCIETIES PERCEIVE GROUP MEMBERS, AND INFLUENCE HOW GROUP MEMBERS SEE THEMSELVES (Hughes, 2013). IN SUM, INCLUDING MUSLIM ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN IN VISIBLE POSITIONS OF POWER COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE.  


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1In this article, I use the term ‘Muslim ethnic minorities’ to describe ethnic minority individuals who practise Islam, identify as Muslim, have at least one parent who is Muslim by faith and/or belong to a group that is traditionally Muslim (e.g. Kurds, Moroccans, Turks). See ‘Data and methods’ for more on this decision and its implications.
(e.g. Black, 2000; Smooth, 2008) or occasionally takes a global approach (e.g. Hughes, 2011). Feminist research that investigates Muslim women’s political identities and experiences rarely focuses on electoral politics (e.g. Moallem, 2008). Consequently, we know little about Muslim ethnic minority women’s legislative representation in the West or the factors that influence their political success (but see Belli, 2013; Celis et al., 2014; see also Mügge, forthcoming in this issue; Murray, forthcoming in this issue).

One factor that might matter is a country’s electoral system. That women gain political office in higher numbers in countries with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems is one of the most consistent and well-documented findings in cross-national research on women in politics (Paxton and Hughes, forthcoming). But, PR systems may not benefit all marginalised groups equally (Gay, 2001; Ruedin, 2009; Bochsler, 2010). Geographically concentrated minority groups, in particular, may benefit from First Past the Post (FPTP) and other single-member district systems, provided that district boundaries are not drawn in ways that carve up neighbourhoods where groups live. Yet, how electoral systems shape the election of ethnic minority women has been evaluated empirically only rarely and has never been investigated for a similar population of ethnic minority women across countries.

In this article, I suggest that intersectionality shapes electoral system effects on the political representation of Muslim ethnic minorities in Western countries. Specifically, electoral system differences interact with racialised and gendered attitudes towards Muslims systematically, generating predictable electoral outcomes. I am not the first to propose that the turbulent political context surrounding Muslims could fuel increased political participation and representation of Muslims, at least in Western countries with substantial Muslim ethnic minority populations (e.g. Afshar et al., 2006). But I argue for the first time that whether Muslim ethnic minority women are elected may largely depend on the type of electoral system that is in place. To investigate the intersectional effects of electoral systems on Muslim ethnic minority representation in the West, I collected data on national legislators across 20 Western countries from 2000 to 2010. I consider growth in the representation of these men and women over time, accounting for differences in population size.

To be clear, I do not address whether Muslim ethnic minority representatives ‘stand for’ or ‘act for’ Muslims (but see Murray, forthcoming in this issue). I make no assertions that the legislators studied here even claim to represent Muslims. Instead, my goal is to understand how the highly charged political context surrounding Muslims could impact the election of Muslim ethnic minorities in gendered ways. Before turning to the analysis, I briefly introduce Muslim minority groups across the West and theorise how the political context during the last few decades might shape Muslim women’s representation across different electoral systems.
2. Muslim populations in Western countries

More than a third of the world’s Muslims are now living as minorities, many in Western countries (Roy, 2004). Table 1 summarises the Muslim population size by country, along with dominant nationality groups, if any. Although estimates of Muslim population size are imprecise and highly contested, sources tend to agree that Muslim ethnic minority populations are the largest (relative to the country’s population) in France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany and Belgium. Alternatively, in Ireland, Finland, Portugal and New Zealand, Muslims make up less than 1% of the population. Muslims living in the West are also a diverse collective, representing disparate communities that encompass a wide range of ethnicities, languages, cultures and norms.

Table 1 Size of Muslim population, per cent Muslim and dominant nationality groups in 20 Western countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Population (in millions)</th>
<th>Per cent of population</th>
<th>Dominant groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>Algerian, Moroccan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>Turkish, Moroccan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>Iranian, Iraqi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>Moroccan, Turkish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>Turkish, Bosnian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>Turkish, Slavic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>Pakistani, Bangladeshi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>Moroccan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>Moroccan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Please contact author for a full list of sources.

2Because measures of Muslim population size are not available for all countries and years in this analysis, I rely on a combination of official sources and estimates from human rights organisations to estimate the size of the Muslim population in each country. Using Kettani’s (2010) estimates of Muslim population size from the end of the study period (2010) does not affect the substantive findings reported here.
Despite broad differences across countries, communities and social groups, Muslims living in the West face numerous common political obstacles (Sinno, 2009). For example, in several countries, sizeable segments of the Muslim population lack citizenship and voting rights. For example, nearly one-third of French Muslims are non-citizens, and the figure is twice that in Germany (Jackson and Doerschler, 2012). Those that do have voting rights often do not vote together as a bloc (Roy, 2004; Klausen, 2005). Furthermore, outside political parties, Muslims living in the West also tend to lack national-level organisation (Roy, 2004; Fetzer and Soper, 2005; Pfaff and Gill, 2006; Jackson and Doerschler, 2012).

Muslims living in the West are politically under-represented in national politics. One study estimates that as of 2006, Muslims held 64 parliamentary seats (less than 1%) in 21 Western countries where Muslims made up at least 0.5% of the population (Sinno, 2009). Yet, Muslim political participation and representation are on the rise. Research suggests that growing Islamophobia has fostered solidarity and spurred political action (e.g. Afshar et al., 2006). Averages also belie significant political successes by Muslims in some Western countries. In the Netherlands and Sweden, for example, Muslims have arrived in the country, obtained citizenship and won election to national office within a decade (Klausen, 2005). Next, I consider how a political climate increasingly hostile to Muslims might advantage women Muslim ethnic minorities over men.

3. Theorising the political success of women with Muslim backgrounds

3.1 Gender and fear of violence by Muslim extremists

Erik Bleich (2009) argues that much of the government response to Muslims across the West over the last decade can be understood as a response to the perceived connection between Islam and violence. Poll data suggest a broad association between Muslims and violence. For instance, a 2005 Pew survey spanning 17 countries found that roughly half of respondents reported believing that some religions are prone to violence and, of those, respondents overwhelmingly reported Islam was the most violent of world religions (cited in Bleich, 2009). Even in Western countries where tolerance of Muslims is relatively high, some still see Muslims as a threat to public order (Edgell and Tranby, 2010).

The perceived connection between Islam and violence is strongly gendered. Westerners are generally more fearful of Muslim men than Muslim women. For instance, in one poll, 31% of Americans said they would feel nervous if they noticed a Muslim man on their aeroplane flight, whereas only 18% would feel the same about a Muslim woman (Saad, 2006). Immigration policies also suggest that fear of Muslims is largely fear of Muslim men. After November 2001, for
example, the USA enforced a 20-day waiting period for all men aged 18–45 arriving from a Muslim-majority country (Cesari, 2005). And in Germany, a registration and screening procedure was instituted that targeted Muslim men (Cesari, 2005). Given that voters may be more fearful of Muslim men, party gatekeepers in some Western countries may favour women group representatives. That is, parties may expect a broader range of voters to be willing to vote for Muslim ethnic minority women than comparable men.

3.2 Veiled victim or empowered Westerner? Muslim ethnic minority women as symbols

Political support for Muslim ethnic minority women is also shaped by attitudes towards Muslim women. To be clear, that fears about terrorism and violent Muslims largely involve men does not mean that Muslim women escape negative consequences of Islamophobia (Allen, 2005). Muslim women who veil are visible symbols of Islam, making them easy targets. In addition to facing verbal abuse and physical violence, veiled Muslim women living in the West have been fired from jobs; prevented from playing sports; turned away from courtrooms, banks, stores and other businesses; and refused public assistance. A veiled Muslim woman is a powerful and threatening symbol in Western countries.

Yet, Muslim women themselves are often not viewed in the West as powerful. Muslim women’s struggles for rights are often overshadowed in the media by suggestions that Muslim women are passive victims of Islam or of Muslim men (Roald, 2001). In the UK, for example, the British National Party (BNP) widely distributed a leaflet in 2001 and 2002 defining Islam as an acronym, where the ‘M’ stood for ‘Molestation of women’ (Allen, 2005). Muslim men are accused of forcing their wives, sisters and children to veil or to marry against their will, and if women refuse to comply, they may be victimised by ‘honour killings’ or ‘honour crimes’ (Razack, 2004; Pfaff and Gill, 2006; Bleich, 2009). Moreover, veiling is also often seen as victimising girls and women, forced upon them by male family members or husbands.

Western stereotypes have further dichotomised Muslims as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (Maira, 2009). For women, the model minority Muslim is seen as ‘modern, secular, progressive and a contributor to the economy,’ in part signified by her choice not to don the hijab (Dhamoon, 2009, p. 137). Electing such model minority Muslim women may send a powerful message that the victimised Muslim woman can be

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3A Muslim, by definition, is a person who practises Islam. Thus, terms like ‘secular Muslim’ or ‘non-practising Muslim’ can seem contradictory and even illogical. However, in Western countries, some individuals use these terms to describe themselves. For some, being ‘Muslim’ is not solely about faith and religious practice, but is intertwined with culture, ethnicity, nationality and heritage. Some scholars draw parallels to those from Catholic or Jewish faiths, who use labels associated with religion even though they do not believe or practise (Klausen, 2005).
emancipated in the progressive, egalitarian West—a message some political parties may be eager to send (see also Murray, forthcoming in this issue). Women politicians from Muslim backgrounds may also be recruited to save other Muslim women. For example, in 2008, Italy’s centre-right People of Freedom Party recruited Muslim women’s rights activist Souad Sbai to run for office. Sbai, who served in the Italian Chamber of Deputies until 2013, was a well-publicised sponsor of Italy’s anti-burqa legislation, arguing that the law was necessary to prevent Italy’s Muslim women being forced to cover their faces against their will. The election of Sbai and those like her also demonstrate that in a climate where women’s rights and bodies are part of political debates, women with connections to Islam may be successful in gaining representation even on the right side of the political spectrum.

Still, institutional differences across countries likely shape if Muslim ethnic minorities reach national elected office, and if so, whether men or women are represented.

3.3 The mediating role of electoral systems

Muslim ethnic minority women’s political representation may vary by electoral system for numerous reasons. First and foremost, PR electoral systems may be more favourable to Muslim ethnic minority women because they are women. Research on women’s political representation has long established that women fare better in PR systems (Paxton and Hughes, forthcoming). PR systems are associated with larger district magnitudes and more centralised nomination procedures, thought to benefit women. Political parties in PR electoral systems also face competitive pressures to include women candidates to compete for women’s votes. These same mechanisms may benefit Muslim ethnic minority women.

Yet, research on the effects of electoral systems on minority representation is more ambivalent about the benefits of PR electoral systems (Ruedin, 2009; Bochsler, 2010). One reason is that the multi-member districts associated with PR systems may dilute the voting power of spatially concentrated minority groups, preventing the election of minority representatives (Gay, 2001). Small minority groups may find it difficult to achieve the minimum number of votes for representation in PR systems (Bochsler, 2010). Thus, despite claims that PR systems benefit minority groups (Reynolds et al., 2005), recent cross-national empirical research has not supported these claims (Ruedin, 2009).

If PR increases the political representation of women but not minority groups, what will be the outcome for minority women? When analysing the outcomes of minority women, scholars emphasise that factors such as gender, ethnicity and religion intersect to shape women’s political fortunes (e.g. Hughes, 2011, 2013). Knowing how electoral systems affect women and minorities is not enough; we must focus on minority women as a group. Yet, most of what we know about the
The election of minority women comes from the USA and Canada, countries with single-member district electoral systems (e.g. Black, 2000; Smooth, 2008). Other studies consider the election of ethnic minority women only in PR systems (e.g. Celis et al., 2014). The only research to study minority women’s representation across a larger number of countries finds that PR electoral systems do not benefit minority women (Hughes, 2011) or may even be detrimental to their election (Holmsten et al., 2010).

In this article, I argue that politicians with Muslim backgrounds may rise to power in countries with a range of electoral systems. However, I suggest that the rising Islamophobia and stigmatisation of Muslims living in the West will interact with electoral systems in gendered ways. In particular, I expect Muslim ethnic minority men will be elected most often in plurality-majority electoral systems, frequently in districts with concentrated Muslim ethnic minority populations. In such areas, lower levels of support for women leaders from conservative or orthodox Muslim voters, whether real or only perceived, could enhance the political opportunities of Muslim ethnic minority men relative to women from the same groups.

Alternatively, I anticipate that Muslim ethnic minority women will have greater political success in PR systems. In such systems, parties hope to create lists of candidates with broad appeal. Running Muslim ethnic minority women may allow parties to draw in Muslim minority supporters while not alienating majority voters fearful of militant Muslim men. Dhamoon’s (2009) model minority Muslim—secular and uncovered—may make a particularly attractive candidate to certain parties and voters. For instance, as Celis et al. (2014, p. 49) find in Belgium, parties assume that Muslim ethnic minority women are less threatening than men from the same groups, who are stereotyped as ‘criminals’ and ‘oppressors.’

The larger number of parties more common in PR systems may also fuel the election of Muslim ethnic minority women. Centre-right parties may recruit ‘secular Muslim’ or ‘culturally Muslim’ women to run, some of whom may be openly critical of Islam. Simultaneously, leftist parties may counter anti-Muslim politics by standing for Muslim integration and including Muslim ethnic minority candidates on party lists. Empowering women politicians who fit the ‘good Muslim’ mould may be particularly useful for demonstrating the possibilities of Muslim integration while also appealing to women more generally. In contrast, in plurality-majority systems, the number of effective political parties tends to be fewer, making this process less likely or slower to develop.

Before moving on, it is important to recognise that the size of the Muslim population in Western countries is likely to matter. In countries with small and heterogeneous Muslim populations, Muslims may simply be excluded from political representation altogether. But countries with significant numbers of Muslims have two incentives for Muslim inclusion: to reduce or minimise the radicalisation of Muslims who lack basic representation and to win the votes of Muslim citizens. In
short, countries with non-trivial numbers of Muslims are more likely to at least consider trying to incorporate Muslim ethnic minorities into the political system.

4. Data and methods

I analyse patterns in Muslim political representation across 20 Western countries between 2000 and 2010. The full sample includes all countries in the UN category ‘Western European and Others’ with at least 1 million population as of 2000, plus all of Australasia and North America. I started the analysis in 2000, before (or shortly after) the first Muslim ethnic minority women were elected in the vast majority of sampled countries.

I collected data on the sex, ethnic background and religion of national legislators in the lower legislative house of each country. The primary source of data was parliamentary websites and the Euro-Islam research network (Euro-Islam Info, 2010). When necessary, I also used country-specific and regional sources, including human rights reports, news and published scholarship spanning a wide range of disciplines (contact author for a full list of sources).

Consistent with previous research on Muslim politicians in the West (Klausen, 2005; Sinno, 2009; Euro-Islam Info, 2010; Zibouh, 2013), I cast a wide net to identify ‘Muslim ethnic minority legislators.’ I include ethnic minorities who believe in and practice Islam, have at least one Muslim parent, and/or belong to a group that is traditionally Muslim (e.g. Kurds, Moroccans, Turks). The religiosity of ‘Muslim ethnic minority legislators’ varies dramatically from devout Muslims; to those who identify as ‘non-practising,’ ‘culturally Muslim’ or ‘secular Muslim’; to atheists. The route to election for all of these groups—and what happens when they arrive in office—is shaped by some connection to Islam. Sinno (2009, p. 70) summarises as follows:

Even those who define themselves as ‘culturally Muslim’ or even as ‘secular Muslim’ find themselves dealing with “Muslim” issues and being considered a ‘Muslim’ by their own political parties when they wish to appear diverse, by minority constituents who feel connected to them or who do not trust them, by jealous rivals wishing to discredit them, by the media when they need ‘Muslim’ voices, and by civil society’s organizations.

Excluding legislators who have openly renounced any and all personal associations with Islam does not alter my substantive conclusions.

Take, for example, Maryam Yazdanfar, an Iranian-born MP from Sweden. Although Yazdanfar does not see herself as a Muslim, she was taken in for questioning in an airport during a 2002 trip from Florida to El Salvador, an experience she found humiliating (http://www.aip.nu/). After being elected to the Riksdagen in 2006, she fought against advanced registration in air travel in the EU, describing her actions as a political stand against Islamophobia.
Indeed, even for politicians who resist public attention to their faith or the religion of their parents, perceptions about their connections to Islam shape how they are treated by political parties, the media and voters.

To facilitate comparisons across country, time and groups, I calculate four measures: (i) number of Muslim ethnic minority legislators, a count of legislators elected across the sample in each year by sex; (ii) Muslim ethnic minority legislator-years, a sum of all legislator-years of representation by country and sex; (iii) the legislature-to-population ratio, each group’s share of seats in the national legislature divided by their population share (calculated for Muslim ethnic minority women, Muslim ethnic minority men and all other women); and (iv) women’s share of group seats, the number of women legislators divided by all legislators elected from her group (calculated for Muslim ethnic minority women and all other women).

Because countries with very small Muslim populations can exceed proportional representation by electing a single legislator, I exclude countries with less than 1% Muslims (Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Portugal and the USA) when working with population-adjusted measures.

I code electoral system type from International IDEA’s Handbook on Electoral System Design (Reynolds et al., 2005). I classify countries as PR (list PR or STV), Mixed-PR (Mixed Member Proportional) or Plurality-Majority (First Past the Post, Alternative Vote and Two-Round System). Italy switched from Mixed-PR to PR in 2005; all other countries maintain the same classification throughout the study period. In auxiliary analyses, I also considered potential influences of legislative gender quotas, district magnitude and the effective number of political parties, using data on the latter two from the beginning of the study period (Carey and Hix, 2008); notable results are discussed below.

I employ four stages of descriptive analyses. I first consider the growth of Muslim ethnic minority representatives by sex across all Western countries over time. Second, I evaluate how Muslim ethnic minority women and men are represented in each of the study countries. Third, I compare the political representation of Muslim ethnic minority women with men from the same groups and with other women, evaluating average differences across electoral systems. Fourth, I look for differences in the growth of Muslim ethnic minority women’s legislative representation between 2000 and 2010 by electoral system.

5. Results

I begin by evaluating the overall pattern of Muslim ethnic minority representation by sex across the first decade of the twenty-first century. Figure 1 displays the number of Muslim ethnic minority women and men who were elected to national legislators across 20 Western countries between 2000 and 2010. The growth is steep; from just 12 legislators in 2000, the number of Muslim ethnic minority legislators more than quadruples to 53 legislators in 2010, with the largest single-
year gains in 2003 and 2010. The overall pattern of growth in Figure 1 reveals substantial changes in Muslim ethnic minority representation.

The sharp growth in Muslim ethnic minority representation applies to women and men. However, women appear to have made significant legislative gains earlier than men. Unlike Muslim ethnic minority men, whose numbers increased minimally between 2001 and 2004, women more than doubled their numbers during the same period. Between 2004 and 2006, the tables turned. The legislative representation of Muslim ethnic minority women levelled off, whereas the representation of Muslim men more than doubled. Then, men’s gains levelled off, allowing Muslim ethnic minority women to catch up. In 2010, roughly equal numbers of men and women from Muslim backgrounds served in Western national legislatures. But this regional summary masks substantial variation across countries.

Country-level variation in the political representation of Muslim ethnic minority women and men is summarised in Figure 2. The left panel (A) displays the total number of legislator-years that Muslim ethnic minority men and women served across the countries that elected them. Countries are organised by electoral system and—within each system—from the highest numbers of Muslim ethnic minority women on the left to the lowest on the right. The right panel (B) presents a slightly different picture, adjusting for cross-country differences in the size of the Muslim population and the size of the national legislature. For each country year, I calculate each group’s legislature-to-population ratio and then take the average of this ratio over the period of study. Countries in Panel B appear in the same order as Panel A, excluding those with less than 1% Muslim ethnic minorities in the population.

Figure 2 shows that representation of Muslim ethnic minorities in the West varies dramatically. Setting aside legislator sex for the moment reveals that levels
Figure 2. Muslim ethnic minority representation in Western national legislatures, 2000–2010.
Note: Panel A: Five countries are excluded because they elected no Muslim ethnic minorities to the lower or single house of the national legislature over the time period: Ireland (PR), Portugal (PR), Spain (PR), Switzerland (PR) and France (Plurality-Majority). Panel B: The Legislature-to-Population-Ratio is calculated as each group’s per cent of legislative seats divided by their per cent of the population. Five countries are excluded from Panel B for population, including Finland (PR), Ireland (PR), Portugal (PR), New Zealand (Mixed-PR) and the USA (Plurality-Majority). Three additional countries are not shown because they elected no Muslim ethnic minorities: Spain (PR), Switzerland (PR) and France (SMD). Panel A and B: Italy enters the figure in 2006, when the country implemented a PR system and first elected Muslim ethnic minorities.
of Muslim ethnic minority representation are highest in the Netherlands (69 legislator-years), Germany (51), Belgium (50), Sweden (47) and the UK (35). At the other end of the spectrum, France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland are excluded from the figure for failing to elect any Muslim ethnic minority legislators. Representation is influenced by Muslim population size. Indeed, except for France, Switzerland and Austria, the countries with few or no representatives tend to have small Muslim population shares (see Table 1). Adjusting for population share (Panel B) changes the picture slightly: although the Netherlands and Belgium remain leaders in Muslim ethnic minority representation, Sweden and Germany fall in the rankings, whereas Norway and Denmark improve.

Figure 2 also displays stark differences in the election of Muslim ethnic minority women and men. On the one hand, in countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Norway, Muslim ethnic minority women outnumber men. Women’s success relative to men is most pronounced in the Netherlands and Belgium, countries with sizeable North African and Turkish ethnic minority populations. On the other hand, in places like Greece and Australia, women with ties to Islam did not win a single seat in the national legislature over the decade (but men did). Looking across all countries in both figures, Muslim ethnic minority women also appear to be concentrated in fewer countries, whereas Muslim ethnic minority men are more evenly spread out. Indeed, the total number of legislator-years by country varies less for Muslim ethnic minority men ($\sigma = 10$) than women ($\sigma = 16$).

Both panels of Figure 2 also provide initial evidence that PR systems are more beneficial to Muslim ethnic minority women than are plurality-majority systems. Between 2000 and 2010, Muslim ethnic minority women rack up a combined 145 legislator-years of representation across the nine PR systems (17 per country, on average). Alternatively, of the four countries with plurality-majority systems that elected any Muslim ethnic minority legislators over the same time period, only the UK and Canada elected any women, totalling only 10 years (3 per country, on average). But, not every country with a PR system elected sizeable numbers of Muslim ethnic minority women; Greece certainly is an exception to the rule. Still, the overall patterns thus far suggest that PR systems may benefit Muslim ethnic minorities, particularly women.

6Muslim ethnic minority women’s political inclusion and success may vary within country by group. For instance, Mügge (forthcoming in this issue) finds that among all candidates between 1986 and 2012, Turkish-Dutch women were better represented relative to men from their group than Moroccan-Dutch women.

7Greece’s exceptionalism could be rooted in the unique features of its Muslim population. Specifically, the Muslim ethnic minorities elected to the Greek parliament are overwhelmingly from Western Thrace, a region of Greece that was under Ottoman control until 1913. Greece therefore has an ‘indigenous’ Turkish-Muslim population that is unlike Turkish Muslims elsewhere in the West.
I investigated the benefits of PR for Muslim ethnic minority women as illustrated in Figure 3, which sharpens group comparisons across electoral systems. Panel A summarises women’s share of group seats in PR, Mixed-PR and plurality-majority systems for both Muslim ethnic minorities and other groups. In PR systems, Muslim ethnic minority women hold nearly 50% of their groups’ seats, on average; in Mixed-PR the share is almost half that at 28%; and in plurality-majority systems, the share is even lower at 9%. The corresponding statistics for women from other groups are useful as a reference point. It is clear that PR systems improve women’s representation relative to men from their groups, in general. But, the average difference between PR and plurality-majority systems is larger for women from Muslim ethnic minorities (40%) than for women from other groups (12%).

Panel B of Figure 3 facilitates a comparison between Muslim ethnic minority women legislators and their population share, rather than with men from their groups. These results are important for putting Panel A in context. Even in PR systems, Muslim ethnic minority women are substantially under-represented relative to their population share. In PR systems, Muslim ethnic minority women are only 34% of the way towards representation in proportion to their population share, on average; in the same countries, women from other groups are farther along—reaching 63% towards proportional representation. Still, the gap is the largest in plurality-majority systems. In plurality-majority systems, Muslim ethnic minority women are only 6% of the way towards proportional representation. Even though PR systems may not be a magic bullet, Muslim ethnic minority women are better represented in PR than in plurality-majority systems by just about every metric.

Figure 4 returns to look at change over time by mapping the average legislature-to-population ratio for Muslim ethnic minority women by electoral system type for all countries with at least 1% Muslim ethnic minorities in the population. Growth in PR systems started early, jumping from just 0.13 to 0.37 in the first 3 years of the study period. In contrast, Muslim ethnic minority women in plurality-majority systems did not experience a real uptick until 2010, when all three of the UK’s Muslim women legislators were first elected. Perhaps, the late bump for plurality-majority systems signals greater changes to come, an intuition supported by France, where the first Muslim ethnic minority women (and men) were elected to the National Assembly in 2012 (see also Murray, forthcoming in this issue).

Finally, in auxiliary analysis, I briefly investigated three reasons why PR systems might benefit Muslim ethnic minority women: gender quotas, district magnitude and the effective number of political parties. First, even though the presence of a PR system may ease the adoption of legislative gender quotas, I found no evidence that such laws are driving the results here. Muslim ethnic minority MPs were elected in only one country with a national gender quota: Belgium (see also Celis et al., 2014). Second, I considered the role that district magnitude might play. Muslim
Figure 3. The Legislative outcomes of Muslim minority women relative to other groups by electoral system, 2000–2010.

Note: Panel A: Five countries are excluded from the calculations because they elected no Muslim ethnic minorities to the lower or single house of the national legislature over the time period: Ireland (PR), Portugal (PR), Spain (PR), Switzerland (PR) and France (Plurality-Majority). Panel B: The Legislature-to-Population Ratio is calculated as each group's per cent of legislative seats divided by the per cent of the population. Five countries are excluded for population, including Finland (PR), Ireland (PR), Portugal (PR), New Zealand (Mixed-PR) and the USA (Plurality-Majority).
ethnic minority women are best represented in the Netherlands, which has the highest district magnitude in the study. But setting aside the Netherlands, there appears to be no systematic relationship between district magnitude and Muslim ethnic minority women’s legislative representation among countries with PR. That is, the chief difference is between countries with single-member and multi-member districts. Third, I examined whether the proliferation of political parties under PR could help to explain the results. Indeed, I find that the effective number of political parties correlates strongly with Muslim ethnic minority women’s average legislator-to-population ratio ($r = 0.79$) but not men’s ($r = 0.17$), a relationship that remains even among only countries with PR electoral systems. In short, a larger number of effective political parties appear to benefit Muslim ethnic minority women but not men.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study is the first intersectional empirical analysis of the national legislative representation of Muslim ethnic minority women across Western countries. Results show that the legislative representation of Muslim ethnic minorities has grown...
rather dramatically in the West—increasing by almost fivefold between 2000 and 2010. Muslim ethnic minority women have had the greatest success in the Netherlands, Belgium and to some extent in Sweden and Norway. These four countries all have sizeable immigrant Muslim populations, and they all have PR electoral systems. Although scholars of gender and politics may not be surprised that PR systems are aiding women’s election, this is the first study to show that PR systems may fuel the election of at least some minority women.

Why are Muslim ethnic minority women more often elected in PR electoral systems compared with plurality-majority systems? One explanation is that list-balancing mechanisms in PR systems benefit ethnic minority women. As Celis and colleagues (2014, p. 47) point out in their study of Belgium and the Netherlands, young ethnic minority women are selected because their profile ‘complements those of incumbent candidates, who are often senior white men.’ But, I suggest that in the case of Muslim ethnic minorities, selectorates may also take into account the perceived electability of men and women with connections to Islam. In PR systems, as parties recruit candidates and try to build party lists with broad appeal, highly gendered anti-Muslim sentiments may make women the more attractive option. In contrast, when finding and running candidates in districts with large Muslim ethnic minority populations, selectorates may make different strategic calculations—that women are riskier candidates than men. It may also be that in PR systems, Muslim ethnic minority women are electable across a broader range of political parties than are men from the same groups. Thus, as the number of parties increases, political opportunities for Muslim ethnic minority women also increase.

PR systems do not necessarily disadvantage Muslim ethnic minority men. Muslim minority men have been elected across a range of electoral systems, including under PR (for example, in Greece, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden). But, plurality-majority systems may be particularly disadvantageous for Muslim ethnic minority women. Between 2000 and 2010, women from minority groups were being elected in plurality-majority systems (Hughes, 2011), but Muslim ethnic minority women were rarely among them. Overall, the effects of electoral systems on the political representation of Muslim ethnic minorities are intersectional: we must account for ethnicity, religion and gender simultaneously.

The research takes only a first step towards understanding the complex dynamics that likely affect the political representation of women and men from Muslim ethnic minority groups. I leave the door open to numerous directions for future exploration, including factors related to institutions and rules (e.g. preferential voting), ethnic groups (e.g. levels of political mobilisation), public opinion (e.g. changing attitudes towards Muslims) and party characteristics and dynamics (e.g. candidate selection procedures), all of which could influence the electoral outcomes of Muslim ethnic minorities in potentially gendered ways. Future research
should also explore the ways in which gender, ethnicity and religion intersect with other meaningful differences; existing research suggests age may be a particularly fruitful area for further study (Celis et al., 2014; Evans, forthcoming in this issue; Randall, forthcoming in this issue).

This article’s results also raise important questions about the substantive representation of Muslims. What do the increasing numbers of national legislators with Muslim backgrounds mean for public policies and broader attitudes towards Muslims? A few of the women in this study came to power as spokeswomen against what they saw as unfavourable treatment of women within Islam or Muslim-majority cultures. These women did not identify themselves as Muslims at the time of the election and have supported policies like anti-veiling legislation that most Muslim women oppose. Building on Murray (forthcoming in this issue), future cross-national research should systematically investigate the political positions and activities of Muslim ethnic minority women, the extent to which they ‘act for’ Muslims or Muslim women, and how these women are viewed by Muslim voters.

Finally, these results underscore the importance of interrogating within-group differences. In the aggregate, it appears that PR systems benefit Muslim ethnic minority groups. Closer analysis reveals PR systems benefit Muslim ethnic minority women, in particular. As research on the political representation of women and ethnic minorities continues to flourish, scholars should consider whether looking at ‘women’ or ‘ethnic minorities’ as a single group is masking differences in effects.

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