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THE FIRST MUSLIM PRESIDENT?
CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE BELIEF THAT BARACK OBAMA IS A MUSLIM

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ABSTRACT: This paper uses data from the 2008 ANES panel study to explore the surprisingly widespread belief that Barack Obama is a Muslim. I examine two main causal mechanisms: anti-Obama predispositions caused by Republican Party ID and implicit racial bias, which would have created a good pre-existing "fit" for belief in the Muslim rumor, and lack of political knowledge, which would have increased the Muslim rumor's plausibility. I find that both mechanisms were prevalent and interacted with each other. I find evidence that belief in the Muslim rumor affected the voting patterns of Independents and to some extent Democrats, but not Republicans.

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Introduction

In the November wave of the 2008 ANES panel study, 528 out of 2664 respondents stated that Barack Obama's religious belief was "Muslim." After applying the survey's weighting scheme and calculating confidence intervals, we can infer from the ANES that between about 21% and 27% of Americans believed or suspected Obama was a Muslim at the time of the 2008 election.[1] This was not a politically innocent mistake on the part of quarter of the population. Since 2007, rumors had been circulating that the presidential hopeful was a Muslim; additional embellishments included the claims that he had attended a radical *madrassa* in Indonesia as a child, that he had been sworn in to his Senate seat on the Koran rather than the Bible, and that he had adopted a Christian disguise to improve his electoral prospects. These rumors were obviously designed to damage Obama. While the United States was far from consumed with anti-Muslim hatred in 2008, the 9/11 attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had nonetheless created a distinct stigma around Muslims of violence, fanaticism, authoritarianism, and irreconcilable difference with the American religious mainstream.

Two questions naturally arise from the staggering fact that so many citizens apparently believed this rumor, despite the efforts of the Obama campaign to present the overwhelming counter-evidence that he was a mainstream Christian. First, *why* did so many believe it? Second, what were the electoral consequences? The two questions are intimately related: if those who believed the rumor were unlikely to vote for Obama anyway, then we would expect the electoral consequences to be minimal. If, however, potential supporters of Obama were likely to hear and believe the rumor, it could have cost him important marginal support.

In this paper I will explore these questions using data from the 2008 ANES panel study. The theoretical starting points for this paper are two very different—but not incompatible—models of belief in destructive rumors. The first model, derived from Kuklinski et al's work on "misinformation" and research in psychology and folklore studies, suggests that people believe rumors when they fit with their pre-existing beliefs and preferences. The second model, derived from work in political science on the prevalence of political ignorance, suggests that people believe rumors when they lack the political knowledge to render them implausible. I will use the ANES data to test hypotheses arising from these models, and also their further implications for voting behavior—the first model suggests the rumor would have an impact on individuals' likelihood of voting but not on how they would vote, while the second suggests the rumor could change their choice of candidate.

This research has implications that go beyond the rumor that Barack Obama is a Muslim. False, damaging political rumors are an important part of political discourse (and this is not a recent development in American political life). From the claim that Sarah Palin was not the true mother of her youngest child to Palin's own claim that healthcare reform would give rise to the rule of "death panels," even very outlandish rumors can enjoy substantial followings. How worried should we be about the prevalence of destructive rumors? What impact do they have on political behavior? And is it possible to educate them away?

[1] See table 2.1 in appendix 2.

Two models of belief in false and destructive rumors

Model 1: Belief in rumors fits with existing beliefs

DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) summarize a long line of empirical research, dating back to the 1940s, that repeatedly finds people believing rumors that are consistent with their currently-held attitudes. Some straightforward examples are that rumors about one racial minority receiving unfair advantages tend to be believed by those who already harbor negative attitudes toward that minority, while rumors about government hoarding and corruption are believed by those who dislike the government in question. Political science research on misinformation has produced similar conclusions. Kuklinski et al (2000) find that individuals confidently hold incorrect beliefs about issues that are consistent with their broader opinions on those issues, for example subjects who felt negatively about government welfare programs consistently over-estimated how many Americans receive welfare and how much they receive, and expressed great confidence in the accuracy of these over-estimates. Kull et al (2003) similarly find that individual beliefs in the truth of claims about Saddam Hussein possessing weapons of mass destruction are strongly related to support for the Iraq war and for President Bush. In both studies (as Kuklinski et al emphasize in particular) endogeneity is a major problem; it is very difficult to assess the extent to which misperception causes the attitudes to which it is related, as opposed to being caused by them.

Fine and Turner (2001) posit that individuals believe rumors that support their existing beliefs, especially beliefs they cannot express openly due to social constraints:

> We search for images or stories that confirm our beliefs, and often we can be loose about the standards of evidence that we demand. As folklorist Alan Dundes has argued, persuasively we believe, by transforming unacceptable impulses into a narrative that is claimed to have actually happened, we are able to express the inexpressible. This is what legend and rumor are all about. (p. 17)

If this is true, we can for example recast the rumors about Obama's Muslim religion or missing birth certificate as a narrative of his unfitness to be President. The true source of his unfitness in the minds of those who believe these rumors may actually be his race, but this is an unspeakable idea in today's America.

If this model of rumor is correct, then we should expect the effect of rumor on political action to be delimited in a very specific way. Since rumors conform to previously held beliefs, they do not change the minds of individuals on major issues. People should, after adopting rumors as true, continue to behave in some ways as they did before, since the rumor will only have confirmed prior beliefs that were motivating their actions. However rumors, by creating "legitimate" narratives for beliefs which were previously seen as "illegitimate" in some way, may in turn legitimize actions that have also been illegitimate. Much social scientific work on rumor has examined its role in outbreaks of collective violence; while rumor may not change the already-present level of hatred between two groups, it may

certainly permit new repertoires of collective action. Horowitz (2001), summarizing previous research on the role of rumor in riots,[2] argues:

> Rumors form an essential part of the riot process. They justify the violence that is about to occur. Their severity is often an indicator of the severity of the impending violence. Rumors narrow the options that seem available to those who join crowds and commit them to a line of action. They mobilize ordinary people to do what they would not ordinarily do. They shift the balance in a crowd toward those proposing the most extreme action. They project onto the future victims of violence the very impulses entertained by those who will victimize them. They confirm the strength and danger presented by the target group, thus facilitating violence born of fear. Rumors, then, are not stray tales. They perform functions for the group and for individuals in it. (pp. 74-5)

Another way that rumors might affect behavior is by extending the scope of relevance of previously held beliefs to new areas of behavior. Folklorists working in African American communities in the 1980s and 1990s reported on a rumor that the Ku Klux Klan owned Kentucky Fried Chicken and was introducing ingredients that would sterilize black males. (Fine and Turner 2001, pp. 85-91) While we can imagine that it might have been believed only by those already prone to conspiracy theories about white efforts to eradicate the black population, this particular rumor certainly might have had new behavioral consequences for those who believed it, prompting them to avoid Kentucky Fried Chicken if they had eaten it previously. Thus, while not changing anyone's mind about the broader political issue (white threat to blacks), the rumor may have changed behavior.

Political rumors, under this model, should not substantially affect *voting* patterns. Voting one way or the other is not an illegitimate act that needs a rumor to justify it, nor is it an apolitical act that requires rumor to make it relevant to political beliefs. It is the ultimate legitimate political act in a democracy. This, importantly, is a different behavioral conclusion from what Kuklinski et al infer from their own work. Noting that "misinformed" beliefs are likely to be systematically wrong while "uninformed" beliefs will be randomly wrong, the authors argue that "If these (misinformed) beliefs affect people's preferences, then the distribution of collective opinion will differ from what it would be if citizens possessed the facts." However, this is a big *if*: the authors demonstrate that under the misinformation model the causal arrow runs in the other direction, and people's preferences affect their beliefs. Of course, it is likely that beliefs and preferences both affect each other and the authors admit that it is

[2] It is important to note that nearly all research on this subject posits that rumors are necessary conditions for riots. According to Allport's (1954) seminal study of prejudice, "We may state as a dependable law that no riot or lynching ever occurs without the aid of rumor." (p. 63) Other major works in this vein include Rosenthal (1971), Knopf (1975), Langlois (1983), and Brass (1997). Cohn's (1967) work on the role of the forged Protocols of the Elders of Zion in justifying pogroms and genocide is also closely related to this research agenda. While all this scholarship may establish rumors as necessary conditions for riots and some other forms of collective violence, they leave unexplored the question of when rumors do not lead to riots. Allport and Postman (1947) catalogue hundreds of Anti-Semitic rumors that were rife throughout the north-eastern United States, yet this period saw almost no acts of Anti-Semitic violence in America. Allport's "rumor clinic," on the other hand, failed to register less-widespread rumors about Jehovah's Witnesses acting as a Nazi Fifth Column, which actually did cause riots. Thus the causal power of rumors in collective violence has not been satisfactorily explored.

impossible to separate the two effects with the available data. Nonetheless, it should logically follow that as any effect of existing preferences on new beliefs gets stronger, the effect of those beliefs on voting patterns should get weaker.

Model 2: Belief in rumors is caused by lack of knowledge

An alternative way of explaining belief in false and destructive rumors is to subsume them under the category of political ignorance—that is, those who are commonly uninformed are more likely to believe them. This is intuitively appealing given the long-standing and extensive research agenda in political science documenting widespread voter ignorance on political issues and the workings of government (for a brief summary, see the beginning of Bartels 1996). If large numbers of Americans do not have the informational resources to supply them with the names of their own congressional representatives, then they may also lack the information to dislodge a false rumor about a candidate that they pick up from conversation or from a mass email.

There are also more theoretically sophisticated reasons to believe that lack of political knowledge may be the primary cause of belief in destructive rumors. Toward the end of his influential essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Richard Hofstadter posited that "paranoids"—individuals who believe in conspiracy theories about subversives destroying America from within—are people who have failed to develop "an intuitive sense of how things do not happen."[3] Believing a rumor that Obama could be a Muslim or was not born in the United States requires a believer not only to ignore or be unaware of the overwhelming counter-evidence, but also to lack the knowledge about *why* such scenarios are so implausible. The massive cover-ups involved required for a public figure to maintain a secret religious identity or in falsify birth records make these rumors fantastically unbelievable to most citizens with a well-developed understanding of the political process. Belief in outlandish rumors, then, should correlate with deficiencies in other forms of political knowledge that would equip the hearer of rumors to reject them.

It would follow from this model that destructive rumors can have negative electoral effects. Since political ignorance is well distributed across the political spectrum, this means that potential supporters of Obama may have been susceptible to damaging rumors about him and may have stopped supporting him as a result. This seems to be the causal model underlying the response of Democratic political strategists to rumors about Obama. The Obama campaign clearly saw the Muslim rumor, the Kenyan birth rumor and many others as potentially damaging. In 2008 the campaign set up a website, fightthesmears.com, specifically to counter many false rumors (this website is still viewable as of April 2010). The website encourages Obama supporters to use evidence supplied by the website to persuade

[3] The full quote is "L.B. Namier once said that 'the crowning attainment of historical study' is to achieve 'an intuitive sense of how things do not happen.' It is precisely this kind of awareness that the paranoid fails to develop." (Hofstadter 1964, p. 40) Hoftsadter's explanation of recurring paranoia in American history has enjoyed enormous popular as well as scholarly currency, and has recently attained the status of liberal cliché in media coverage of the Tea Party movement. In a September 2009 blog post, *Reason* magazine editor Matt Welch catalogued numerous invocations of Hofstadter in connection with the Tea Party from the previous month (see http://reason.com/blog/2009/09/09/baffled-and-battered-msm-ralli last accessed 04/07/2010.)

other people not to believe destructive rumors.[4] This suggests the campaign believed that potential supporters could be negatively persuaded by the Muslim rumor, and also that belief in the Muslim rumor could be corrected by supplying the right facts.

The possibility of the correction of rumors, both at the individual and the aggregate level, is an important implication of this model that also distinguishes it from the first model.[5] Knowledge is presumably cumulative, and the more that citizens acquire, the less likely they should be to believe the Muslim rumor. The more time that Obama is exposed to the public, the more likely it is that any citizen will have acquired facts that would cause them to reject the rumor.

It is important to stress that these two models are not mutually exclusive. It is quite likely that the first model explains the behavior of some individuals while the second model explains the behavior of others, and that both models describe separate mechanisms that may interact in a single individual. Kuklinski et al (2000) explicitly make a distinction between the "misinformed" and the "uninformed" and suggest that these different types of incorrectness will have different behavioral consequences. The ANES data on the Obama Muslim rumor gives us a relatively rare real world opportunity to examine the relative extent to which each model operates within the population, and how the different mechanisms they describe interact with and constrain each other.

Hypotheses about causes of belief in the Muslim rumor

Drawing on the two explanatory frameworks discussed above, I derive three hypotheses on the likelihood of voters to believe that Obama is a Muslim:

Hypothesis 1: Voters with stronger identification with the Republican Party will be more likely to believe the rumor that Obama is a Muslim. This follows from the first model that belief in rumors will fit with pre-existing beliefs. Party identity was, unsurprisingly, perhaps the most important determinant of attitudes towards Barack Obama at the 2008 election. A simple bivariate regression using ANES data shows that a one pro-Republican point shift on a seven point scale of party identity produces a .54 point jump on a seven point scale of dislike of Barack Obama. This variable alone explains substantial variance in dislike of Obama, registering an R^2 value of .34 in the bivariate model. No other variable comes close to this level of explanatory power. The added advantage of using party ID is that a copious amount of scholarship beginning with *The American Voter* has shown that for individuals party ID is relatively stable over time. This reduces the probability that the causal arrow would run in the opposite direction, i.e. that voters would assume a greater Republican Party identity *because of* belief in the Muslim rumor.

[4] For example, in the section on the Muslim rumor, the campaign advises that "Barack Obama is a committed Christian. He was sworn into the Senate on his family Bible. He has regularly attended church with his wife and daughters for years. But shameful, shadowy attackers have been lying about Barack's religion, claiming he is a Muslim instead of a committed Christian. When people fabricate stories about someone's faith to denigrate them politically, that's an attack on people of all faiths. Make sure everyone you know is aware of this deception." It provides links to media stories debunking the Muslim rumor from factcheck.org, *Newsweek* and the *Boston Globe*. (http://fightthesmears.com/articles/3/baracksfaith.html last accessed 04/07/2010.)

[5] See Nyhan and Reifler (2010) on the great difficulty of correcting confidently held misinformation.

This makes party ID a preferable variable to the more direct measure of dislike of Barack Obama, which would be much more susceptible to changes caused by a respondent's belief in the Muslim rumor.

Hypothesis 2: Voters who are less favorable towards African Americans will be more likely to believe the Muslim rumor. This hypothesis teases out another aspect of the first model: that rumors provide a legitimate form of expression for beliefs that are otherwise considered unacceptable. In 2008 it is taboo to oppose a candidate because of his race, but given more widespread (though far from universal) antipathy toward Muslims, opposing a candidate because of his allegedly Muslim background may act as a socially acceptable alternative. As an example of the comparative acceptability of anti-Muslim feeling, about 18% of ANES respondents said they disliked Muslims in response to the feeling thermometer question, while about 17% said they liked Muslims. In response to the black feeling thermometer question, on the other hand, just over 2% of respondents said they disliked blacks. In order to test this hypothesis, then, we will need a measure of favorability toward African Americans that does not directly question the respondent about it. Two secondary hypotheses arise from hypothesis 2:

> →*Hypothesis 2.1*: The posited effect of disfavor toward African Americans should be more pronounced among those who are less favorable towards Muslims, as they would be more likely to use the Muslim rumor to express their disfavor of a black candidate.
>
> →*Hypothesis 2.2*: The posited effect of disfavor toward African Americans should be more pronounced among Democrats and Independents than among Republicans. Because Republicans should share with their fellow identifiers beliefs and positions that already predispose them against Obama, the effect of any race variable is likely to be muted. Race, however, may play a stronger role in dividing the Democrats and Independents who believe the rumor from those who do not.

Hypothesis 3: Voters with less measurable political knowledge will be more likely to believe the Muslim rumor. This straightforwardly follows from the second model that ignorance of political processes will be the most important determinant of belief in destructive rumors.

Hypothesis 4: Aggregate belief in the Muslim rumor should decrease over time, but those predisposed to dislike Obama by party identity or racial animosity will be less likely to abandon belief in the rumor. This hypothesis is derived from both models—one the one hand a model suggesting that lack of knowledge is the problem should allow for the problem to diminish as common knowledge about Obama gradually accumulates in the population, but on the other hand, as per the misinformation model, those who already dislike Obama for other reasons should be most resistant to correction.

Testing strategy

Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3

To test the above hypotheses I use the 2008 ANES panel study. The ANES asked respondents about Obama's religion in both September and November 2008 as part of a battery of political knowledge

questions which also included questions about which states each candidate represents in the Senate and what their jobs had been prior to entering the Senate. Hypotheses 1 and 2 suggest that belief in the Muslim rumor should be determined by factors—racial bias and party identification—separate from simple ignorance. We can test the relative effects of these factors by including them in a regression analysis along with a measure of political knowledge, but to ensure that they are having the effects *on destructive rumor belief* that the theoretical model specifies we must also test to see whether they register any effect on respondents' abilities to answer neutral, politically innocent questions about the candidates. As we should expect answers to these questions to be entirely determined by respondents' levels of political knowledge, we can only confidently say that we have discovered evidence for effects of party identity and racial animosity on the Muslim rumor belief if they register significant effects for respondents' belief in the rumor but not for respondents' ability to answer politically neutral questions.

The dependent variable for the Muslim rumor is the "candidate's religion" political knowledge question from the November wave of the 2008 ANES panel study, which asked "What is Barack Obama's religion? Is he Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or not religious?" I made this into a binary variable by assigning all those who answered "Muslim" 1 and the rest 0. To create two binary dependent variables for politically neutral knowledge of candidates I took questions from the same battery about where each candidate represents the Senate and what their jobs were before they entered the Senate. If a respondent got either of these questions wrong for each candidate they were assigned a 1, while respondents who got both questions correct were assigned a 0.

The independent variables are party identification, political knowledge and racial bias. Party identification is measured in the ANES by a standard seven point Likert scale, with 0 as "strong Democrat" and 6 as "strong Republican." Political knowledge is measured by aggregating the correct answers to three standard questions asked in the ANES about the workings of government: for how many years is a US representative elected? For how many years is a US senator elected? And what percentage of votes is required to override the presidential veto in the house and the senate?[6] Respondents received a score from 0 to 3 depending on how many questions they answered correctly.

The measure of racial bias requires more explanation. In this paper I am using the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP) employed by the ANES panel study. The AMP is a relatively new tool designed to overcome the social desirability effects inherent in asking respondents directly about their feelings on socially sensitive issues. The propensity of survey respondents to alter their responses on questions about race to conform to what they believe an interviewer will want to hear has been well-documented in political science (see for example Davis and Silver 2003). The AMP measures implicit attitudes by taking advantage of the tendency of individuals to misattribute the sources of their own affective reactions (see Payne et al 2005 for a theoretical explanation). In the ANES respondents were shown a series of Chinese pictographs, which to most respondents are purely abstract patterns, and were asked to evaluate these symbols as either pleasant or unpleasant. Prior to each pictograph respondents were shown a picture of either a black or white human face, but were told to disregard these pictures. The

[6] These questions and answers are taken from the February wave of the panel study, because this was the only point at which the section of the sample that was asked about Obama's religion was asked these questions.

AMP purports to measure implicit racial attitudes that would show up in respondents' evaluations of pictographs; those who feel more negatively towards blacks, for instance, would be more likely to evaluate a pictograph that appears after a black face as "unpleasant."

Each respondent evaluated 48 pictographs, 24 of which appeared after black faces and 24 of which appeared after white faces. Each positive evaluation receives a 1, each negative evaluation a 0. The total score is calculated by subtracting the "black" score from the "white" score. A respondent evaluating all post-white pictographs as positive and all post-black pictographs would receive a score of 24, while a respondent doing the opposite would receive a score of -24. Thus the overall AMP score increases with white racial bias.

Hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2

Testing these hypotheses requires us to repeat the regression analysis above on samples divided by feelings towards Muslims and party identification. Hypothesis 2.1 posits that respondents who are less favorable towards Muslims should be more likely to express belief in the Muslim rumor based on their racial attitudes. Feelings towards Muslims are measured in the ANES by a straightforward seven point Likert scale, with 1 being "very favorable" and 7 "very unfavorable." I will split the above regression analysis into three samples: those who expressed favorable feelings, those who expressed neutral feelings (the majority of respondents) and those who expressed unfavorable feelings. If hypothesis 2.1 is correct we should expect to see any effect of racial attitudes on belief in the rumor increase among those who feel less favorable toward Muslims.

Similarly, to test the posited modifying effect of party identification on the effect of racial attitudes, I will split the sample into Democrats, Independents and Republicans. If hypothesis 2.2 is correct, we should expect to see a stronger effect of racial attitudes among Democrats and Independents than among Republicans, whose negative feelings towards Obama are over-determined by other factors.

Hypothesis 4

Testing hypothesis 4 requires ascertaining whether aggregate belief in the Obama Muslim rumor declines over time, and whether belief previously-existing negative predispositions is more resistant to change than belief driven by ignorance. The data I use here is a series of four Pew surveys conducted in March, July, September and October of 2008 that asked about Obama's religion. Unlike the ANES surveys, the Pew surveys had two "don't know" options. Comparing changes in the "Christian," "Muslim," and "don't know" categories over the four surveys should help us determine whether correct knowledge about Obama's religion was accumulating and changing aggregate responses.

Results

The first logit analysis tests hypotheses 1, 2 and 3. It provides broad support for all three hypotheses. The effects of all three variables are significant at a *p*-value of .005 or below. While increased political knowledge also has a strong, significant effect on the effect of getting the politically neutral questions

correct, the party ID and AMP variables have no significant effect on these, in accordance with the expectations of hypotheses 1 and 2. Clearly, the effects of party ID and racial attitudes are related to specific mechanisms affecting belief in the Muslim rumor.

[Table 1 about here]

The effect of political knowledge appears to be the most important factor in rumor belief. A change from the minimum score of 0 to the maximum score of 4 reduces the probability that a respondent will believe the Muslim rumor by .347. A change of one standard deviation in the knowledge score (from -0.5 to +0.5 from the mean) reduces the probability of believing the rumor by .110. This suggests that, in accordance with hypothesis 3 and model 2, knowledge does play an extremely important role in belief in rumors, just as it does in the mastery of other forms of political knowledge. The knowledge coefficient is actually larger for the Muslim rumor question than it is for the politically neutral questions about the candidates. People cannot simply believe what they want to believe—the greater their overall political knowledge, the more likely they are to reject implausible rumors, even if they accord with their pre-existing beliefs.

However, there is also strong evidence for the claims posited in the first model. A change from strong Democratic to strong Republican identity increases the probability of believing the rumor by .195, while a change from complete black bias to complete white bias in the AMP score increases the probability by .256. The party identification effect should probably be considered stronger because its effects are stronger in the middle of the distribution; a one standard deviation change (from +0.5 to -0.5 from the mean) reduces the probability of rumor belief by .073 for party identification and .052 for the AMP. This suggests that Republican Party ID and white bias both create a predisposition for individuals to believe the Obama rumor, in line with the expectations of the first theoretical model. In any given individual, however, these factors will probably not be as important as their level of political knowledge in determining whether they are likely to believe the Muslim rumor.

The second set of logit results shows the effects of the three independent variables on belief in the Muslim rumor split up by respondents' stated feelings about Muslims. This tests hypothesis 2.1, that we should expect to see a stronger effect of white bias on belief in the Muslim rumor among respondents who feel less favorably toward Muslims. This is a subtle implication of the first theoretical model, which suggests that individuals use destructive rumors to express otherwise taboo feelings; we should only expect respondents who feel negatively towards Muslims to be using the Muslim rumor as a "cover story" for their negative feelings towards a candidate because of his race.

[Table 2 about here]

The results here conform only partly to theoretical expectations. As predicted by the hypothesis, those who profess favorable feelings toward Muslims do not register a significant white bias effect in their belief in the Obama rumor. However, nor do those who claim to feel *unfavorable* toward Muslims. The only group for which white bias is significant is those who profess to feel neutral toward Muslims. The effect is noticeably large in this group; a change from the minimum to the maximum white bias AMP score increases the probability of believing the rumor by .366, while a one standard deviation change

around the mean increases the probability by .75. This is much larger and more significant than the effect of party ID for this group, and about three-quarters of the size of the political knowledge effect.

This suggests that the relationship between feelings about Muslims, feelings about blacks and the belief in the Obama Muslim rumor may be different from what was posited in the first theoretical model. It seems that those who are happy to tell an interviewer that they feel unfavorable towards Muslims are not the same ones using this more socially acceptable prejudice as cover for their taboo misgivings about a black candidate. Instead, implicit anti-black prejudice seems to increase belief in the Muslim rumor among those respondents (the majority of the sample) who express more "politically correct" feelings toward Muslims in the form of neutrality. One possible explanation is that those who dislike Muslims have clearer ideas about who Muslims are than those who profess neutrality. The neutral answer is the most likely answer for those who only have a vague understanding of what Islam is, and possibly see it in ethnic terms, as a heritable identity, rather than a matter of religious choice. For these respondents, "Muslim" may be a cipher for Obama's whole package of identity—his skin color, his Arab-sounding name and his Kenyan paternity.

The third set of logit results provides evidence for hypothesis 2.2, that the effect of implicit racial prejudice on rumor belief is likely to be stronger within the Democratic and Independent samples than within the Republican sample.

[Table 3 about here]

Implicit prejudice as measured by the AMP is not at all significant for determining belief in the Obama Muslim rumor in the Republican sample. This, I suggest is because all self-identifying Republicans are likely to share some beliefs that would predispose them to dislike Obama, which according to the first theoretical model should make all Republicans more likely to believe he is a Muslim. This means that any difference between racially prejudiced and racially liberal Republicans is likely to be muted because of the effect of other shared anti-Obama predispositions, such as dislike of his liberal economic agenda. For Republicans, the similarity in political predispositions means that variance in political knowledge is the main factor left in explaining variance in belief in the rumor. For Democrats and especially Independents, however, the effect is significant. It is about twice as large for Independents as for Democrats, with a one standard deviation change in AMP around the mean changing the probability of rumor belief by .095 for Independents and .047 for Democrats.

The difference here between the three groups—a relatively large white bias effect on rumor belief for Independents, a more modest effect for Democrats and no effect for Republicans—may reflect the extent to which feelings about race divided each of the three groups over Obama. Since 1948 there has been a well-documented battle within the Democratic Party between race liberals and race conservatives, and while race liberals have decisively won the internal power struggle there is still a racially conservative rump of Democrat identifiers who may have had serious misgivings about Obama as a candidate. Republicans, on the other hand, were fairly firmly united against Obama regardless of their feelings about race. It is easy to imagine that the greatest divide might have been among Independents, who are more likely to lack coherent ideologies and party heuristics that would have

helped them form an opinion of Obama one way or the other. For these voters, feelings about race may have played a much stronger role in candidate decision. This, according to the first theoretical model, would translate into a much greater role for racial feelings in determining whether a respondent would believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim.

Table 4 below presents evidence examining the first part of hypothesis 4, that belief in the Obama Muslim rumor should decline in the aggregate over time as knowledge about Obama accumulates in the population (this follows from the second theoretical model). It is important to note that this evidence comes from a series of Pew polls that did not use the same respondents, thus this shows longitudinal change at the aggregate rather than the individual level. It is equally important to note that unlike the ANES panel study, the Pew surveys included a "don't know" response.

[Table 4 about here]

The most striking thing about this data is that the proportion of the population answering "Muslim" remained extremely stable at around 12 or 13 percent. This is only about half the size of the proportion of ANES respondents who chose "Muslim" from the menu offered to them, suggesting that many ANES respondents were uncertain about Obama's religion and probably would have taken the "don't know" response had they been given the chance. This by no means invalidates the inferences I have drawn from the ANES results—the fact that respondents effectively said that Obama was *more likely* to be Muslim than Christian is still very important information worthy of exploring, and it fits within the theoretical frameworks outlined above. The Pew data, however, enables us to make some more fine-grained inferences.

The 12 to 13 percent of Pew respondents who answered "Muslim" is probably representative of a "hard core" of rumor believers—in Kuklinski et al's terms, the confidently "misinformed" rather than the "uninformed" who would have taken one of the "don't know" options. In accordance with the expectations of the first theoretical model, the beliefs of this group should be much more determined by factors such as party identity and racial attitudes, and these beliefs should (as the data shows) be stable over time.

The various "don't know" respondents, on the other hand, should be more individually susceptible to correction in accordance with the expectations of the second theoretical model, and in their aggregate numbers should be less stable over time. The Pew data provides mixed evidence of this. The number of respondents in the "don't know, haven't heard enough" category did decline between March and October (the decline was particularly sharp between March and September, from about 25% to about 15%, but did go up again to 20% in October). Thus the number of respondents who feel they have insufficient knowledge to answer the question declined significantly in accordance with the first theoretical model. However, the number of respondents in the "don't know, have heard different things" category rose during the same period, almost in inverse proportion from 8% to 13% and peaking at 18% in September. At the same time there was a slight (but fluctuating) increase in the number of respondents who answered "Christian." These results may indicate that while some of the decline in the "don't know, haven't heard enough" category was due to people learning that Obama was a Christian,

more of it was due to an increase in the "don't know, have heard different things" category. This suggests that more exposure over time to "the facts" does not automatically correct misperceptions, but often moves individuals from one category of uncertainty to another. In blunt terms, they go from being ignorant to being confused; they have heard the correct story but do not have the factual background to be able to evaluate which story is correct. Thus the effect of the society-wide accumulation of corrective information, in this case about Obama's religion, is likely to be limited. To return to a point I made in explaining the second theoretical model, part of the importance of political knowledge is not just gathering specific pieces of information, but having the deep background knowledge to evaluate the relative plausibility of competing stories.

Theoretical expectations about the effect of the Muslim rumor on voting behavior

We have seen that there is evidence broadly supporting both theoretical models for rumor belief. This shows that they are not incompatible, and different types of rumor-believers exist, broadly corresponding to Kuklinski et al's categories of the "misinformed," who confidently hold wrong beliefs based on their fit with pre-existing beliefs, and the "uninformed," who are less certain about their wrong beliefs, which they hold because of lack of information and deeper knowledge to evaluate information.

Based on the evidence for each of the theoretical models, we can pose the following hypotheses about the effect of belief in the Muslim rumor on voting behavior:

Hypothesis 5: Among the categories of party identification, the strongest effect of the Muslim rumor on voting behavior should be among Independents. We should expect to see little or no effect of the rumor on Republican voters because they were so unlikely to vote for Obama anyway. The effect on Democrats should have been muted by the fact that they would be more likely to uninformed rather than misinformed, and thus their Democratic ideological predispositions might have prevailed at the ballot box over doubts they might have had about Obama's religion.

Hypothesis 6: We should expect to see the strongest effect of the Obama rumor on those with the lowest levels of political knowledge. These voters, who believed the rumor out of ignorance or confusion rather than ideological predisposition, should have been the ones who were most likely to *change* their votes on the basis of the Muslim rumor.

Hypothesis 7: In accordance with the expectations of the first theoretical model, belief in the Muslim rumor should have mobilized Obama's opponents and demobilized his potential supporters (even if it did not make them vote for McCain). Thus we should expect to see that Republicans who believed the Muslim rumor should have been more likely to vote, while Democrats who believed it should have been less likely to vote.

Testing these hypotheses will involve another series of logit analyses. To test the first two I will use respondent vote choice as a binary dependent variable; respondents who voted for Obama are assigned

a 1 and those who voted for McCain or another candidate are assigned a 0. To test the third hypothesis I will use whether or not the respondent voted as the binary dependent variable. All three models will involve the now familiar independent variables of party identification, political knowledge and binary belief in that Obama is a Muslim.

Results

Table 5 below broadly verifies hypothesis 5. It shows the effect of belief in the Muslim rumor on the probability of voting for Obama, controlling for implicit racial attitudes via the AMP.

[Table 5 about here]

As predicted, belief in the Obama Muslim rumor has no effect on the Republican probability of voting for Obama (though the AMP does). For Independents and Democrats, however, it has effects significant at the .001 level. Also as predicted, the effect was strongest for Independents. An Independent who did not believe the rumor had a higher probability of voting for Obama of .289, even controlling for racial attitudes. For Democrats, the probability difference was a more modest but still important .132. The magnitudes of these effects suggest that belief in the rumor had a behavioral effect that was separable from racial attitudes, though these obviously affect rumor belief. As the model implicitly controlled for party identification, this suggests a major causal role for rumor belief caused by lack of knowledge, which we will directly examine in the next model.

Table 6 below provides mixed evidence for hypothesis 6, which predicts that belief in the Muslim rumor should have a stronger effect on the vote choice of less knowledgeable voters.

[Table 6 about here]

The size of the coefficient and predicted effect of belief in the Muslim rumor on voting decreases steadily as political knowledge increases, in line with the expectations of the second theoretical model. The results also bear out the theoretical expectation that the effect is not significant at canonical levels for voters with the higher political knowledge scores of 2 and 3, while it is significant for voters with a lower political knowledge score of 1. However, it is also not significant for voters with the lowest political knowledge score of 0, for whom we certainly would expect it to be a significant factor. It is possible that this insignificance is an artifact of the relatively small number of respondents (166) falling into this category.

Table 7, finally, shows very ambiguous results for hypothesis 7. Under this hypothesis, belief in the Muslim rumor should make Democrats more likely to vote and Republicans less likely, with no theoretical expectation about any effect on Independents. I have controlled for levels of political knowledge, given the findings of the widely used “resource model” of political participation which might suggest that lower political knowledge would itself make voting less likely.

[Table 7 about here]

As predicted by the hypothesis, belief in the Muslim rumor has a large and significant negative effect for Democrats. A Democrat who believes the rumor will be less likely to vote with a probability of .22. Unexpectedly, however, belief in the rumor also makes Republicans less likely to vote. The effect is about half the size of what it is for Democrats, but this still completely contrary to the expectations of the first theoretical model, especially as we have controlled for low political knowledge, which might make both groups less likely to vote. Interestingly, belief in the Muslim rumor makes Independents *more* likely to vote with a probability of .144 (significant at the .05 level). It seems likely, in accordance with the hypothesis, that those rumor-believing Independent votes went to McCain (though there is no way of directly knowing from this data) but this leaves unexplained why belief in the Obama Muslim rumor failed to mobilize Republicans, even while it seemed to demobilize Democrats. It is important to note here that 85% of ANES panel respondents voted, compared to 61% of the general population, and this lack of representativeness might distort the findings somewhat. However, we would expect to find this distortion in the weakening of the significance of effects, not (as in the case of Republicans) a reversal of their direction.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper has examined the causal extent and interaction of two mechanisms that determine individual beliefs in destructive rumors. Each mechanism, we have seen, has distinct, separable effects on rumor belief. Beliefs caused by the different mechanisms also have traceably different behavioral consequences. However, they do not operate in isolation, but rather act as constraints on each other. Republican Party identification may predispose individuals to believe the rumor because it fits with their dislike of Obama, but there is only significant evidence for this at the lower end of the political knowledge scale. Better-informed individuals are unlikely to believe the rumor no matter how much they want to. On the other hand, while lack of political information is probably the most important determinant of any individual's belief in the Muslim rumor, this lack of knowledge had a much stronger effect on less-informed Republicans and Independents than on less-informed Democrats, who were counterbalanced by positive dispositions toward Obama that limited their belief in negative rumors about him (see table 3).

The results confirm that implicit attitude toward race was a significant factor in determining the likelihood of belief in the rumor. It is unclear whether this is because religious animosity provided a socially acceptable "cover story" for racial animosity, or because respondents tended to conflate the two. In any case, the Muslim rumor appears to have laid bare the extent to which implicit feelings about race divided Democrats and Independents (though apparently not Republicans) during the 2008 campaign.

Even with all the available data, it is difficult to make an overall judgment of how much the Muslim rumor affected the election. The data does suggest that at least some of the liberal concern about rampant misinformation spreading in the right-wing "echo chambers" of Fox News and the blogosphere is misplaced. As table 5 and also table 2.4 show, Republicans were unlikely to vote for Obama whether

they believed the rumor or not. Furthermore, belief in the rumor did not make them any more likely to vote. However, the rumor may have had marginally important effects on Democrats and Independents. Table 5 and table 2.5 show that belief in the rumor substantially affected the vote choices of Independents, while it had a much smaller but still significant effect on the vote choices of Democrats. Both groups still voted for Obama (Democrats at about 90%, Independents at about 55%) but combined with the apparent demobilization effect that rumor belief had on Democrats, the prevalence of the rumor could have been costly had the election been closer.

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Appendix 1: results

Table 1: Logit results for likelihood of incorrect responses to three political knowledge questions, November wave of ANES 2008 panel study

	Is Barack Obama a Muslim? (*N* = 1818)	Which state is Obama from / What was his job before entering the Senate? (*N* = 1808)	Which state is McCain from / What was his job before entering the Senate? (*N* = 1812)
Party ID coefficient	.210	.054	-.049
Party ID Δ MIN→MAX	.195	.046	-.067
Party ID Δ +/- σ/2	.073	.017	.026
Party ID P>|t|	.000	.317	.264
AMP coefficient	.035	.010	.002
AMP Δ MIN→MAX	.256	.067	.026
AMP Δ +/- σ/2	.052	.013	.005
AMP P>|t|	.004	.412	.797
Knowledge coefficient	-.729	-.611	-.549
Know. Δ MIN→MAX	-.347	-.269	-.366
Know. Δ +/- σ/2	-.110	-.085	-.125
Knowledge P>|t|	.000	.000	.000

Table 2: Logit results for likelihood of answering that Obama is a Muslim, split by respondent feelings towards Muslims

	Feel favorable toward Muslims (*N* = 157)	Feel neutral toward Muslims (*N* = 589)	Feel unfavorable toward Muslims (*N* = 309)
Party ID coefficient	.603	.150	.179
Party ID Δ MIN→MAX	.350	.146	.175
Party ID Δ +/- σ/2	.099	.053	.069
Party ID P>|t|	.000	.036	.036
AMP coefficient	.022	.048	.016
AMP Δ MIN→MAX	.074	.366	.129
AMP Δ +/- σ/2	.013	.075	.027
AMP P>|t|	.645	.004	.380
Knowledge coefficient	-.907	-.626	-.826
Know. Δ MIN→MAX	-.248	-.300	-.428
Know. Δ +/- σ/2	-.065	-.100	-.129
Knowledge P>|t|	.000	.000	.000

Table 3: Logit results for likelihood of answering that Obama is a Muslim, split by party identification

	Democrats (*N* = 548)	Independents (*N* = 419)	Republicans (*N* = 511)
AMP coefficient	.048	.084	.007
AMP Δ MIN→MAX	.272	.547	.075
AMP Δ +/- σ/2	.047	.095	.014
AMP P>|t|	.024	.003	.653
Knowledge coefficient	-.552	-1.049	-.598
Know. Δ MIN→MAX	-.181	-.471	-.378
Know. Δ +/- σ/2	-.060	-.136	-.118
Knowledge P>|t|	.014	.000	.000

Table 4: Answers to question about Obama's religion from four 2008 Pew surveys.

Response	% March (95% conf. int.)		% July[7] (95% conf. int.)	% September (95% conf. int.)		%October (95% conf. int.)	
	Reg. to vote	Whole	Registered voters only	Reg. to vote	Whole	Reg. to vote	Whole
Christian[8]	51 (48-55)	47 (44-50)	58 (55—60)	53 (50-56)	48 (44-51)	54 (51-57)	51 (48-54)
Jewish	0 (0-0)	0 (0-0)	1 (0—1)	1 (0-1)	1 (0-2)	1 (0-1)	0 (0-1)
Muslim	11 (9-13)	12 (10-14)	12 (10—13)	13 (11-15)	12 (10-14)	12 (10-14)	12 (10-14)
Something else	1 (0-2)	1 (0-2)	2 (1—2)	4 (3-5)	4 (2-5)	1 (1-2)	1 (1-2)
Don't know, heard different things	8 (6-10)	9 (7-11)	10 (8—11)	16 (13-18)	18 (16-21)	14 (11-16)	13 (11-15)
Don't know, don't know enough	25 (22-28)	26 (24-29)	16 (13—18)	12 (10-15)	15 (13-17)	16 (13-18)	20 (17-22)
Refused	2 (1-4)	3 (2-5)	3 (2—4)	1 (0-2)	2 (1-2)	2 (1-3)	3 (2-4)

[7] In July, the question was only asked to registered voters.
[8] Included volunteered responses naming a Christian denomination.

Table 5: Effect of belief in the Muslim rumor on probability of voting for Obama, split by party identification

	Democrats (*N* = 981)	Independents (*N* = 578)	Republicans (*N* = 835)
Rumor belief coefficient	-1.420	-1.220	-.153
Rum. Bel. Δ MIN→MAX	-.132	-.289	-.007
Rum. Bel. Δ +/- σ/2	-.026	-.114	-.003
Rum. Bel. P>|t|	.001	.001	.771
AMP coefficient	-.160	-.140	-.132
AMP Δ MIN→MAX	-.852	-.922	-.701
AMP Δ +/- σ/2	-.084	-.264	-.055
AMP P>|t|	.000	.000	.000

Table 6: Effect of belief in the Muslim rumor on probability of voting for Obama, split by level of political knowledge

	Political knowledge = 0 (*N* = 166)	Political knowledge = 1 (*N* = 408)	Political knowledge = 2 (*N* = 345)	Political knowledge = 3 (*N* = 283)
Rumor belief coeff.	-1.299	-1.147	-.908	-.544
R. Bel. Δ MIN→MAX	-.313	-.250	-.187	-.131
Rum. Bel. Δ +/- σ/2	-.142	-.116	-.073	-.039
Rum. Bel. P>|t|	.149	.060	.147	.544
Party ID coefficient	-.648	-1.204	-.994	-1.708
PID Δ MIN→MAX	-.749	-.941	-.898	-.988
Party ID Δ +/- σ/2	-.366	-.589	-.498	-.761
Party ID P>|t|	.000	.000	.000	.000
AMP coefficient	-.081	-.237	-.127	-.366
AMP Δ MIN→MAX	-.736	-.993	-.901	-.999
AMP Δ +/- σ/2	-.207	-.520	-.262	-.639
AMP P>|t|	.122	.000	.000	.000

Table 7: Logit results for effect of belief in the Muslim rumor on likelihood of voting, split by party identification

	Democrats (*N* = 548)	Independents (*N* = 419)	Republicans (*N* = 511)
Rumor belief coefficient	-2.006	.899	-.954
Rum. Bel. Δ MIN→MAX	-.220	.144	-.107
Rum. Bel. Δ +/- σ/2	-.039	.067	-.040
Rum. Bel. P>|t|	.001	.050	.050
Knowledge coefficient	.188	.532	.091
Knowl. Δ MIN→MAX	.032	.303	.026
Knowledge Δ +/- σ/2	.011	.095	.008
Knowledge P>|t|	.506	.016	.743

Appendix 2: Descriptive statistics

Table 2.1: Answers to Obama religion question in November wave of ANES panel study, with weights applied

What is Barack Obama's religion? (November 2008)	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	95 % CONF. INT. (based on Taylor series)
Christian	1807	68.30	65.75—70.84
Jewish	14	0.51	-0.03—0.99
Muslim	645	24.37	21.02—26.71
Buddhist	39	1.49	0.65—2.31
Not religious	141	5.33	4.05—6.60

Table 2.2: Answers to Obama religion question, by party identity

Party ID	Christian	Muslim	Totals	Christian/Muslim answer ratio
Strong Democrat	594	77	671	7.71
Weak Democrat	286	62	348	4.61
Independent Democrat	209	27	236	7.74
Independent--Independent	165	68	233	2.42
Independent Republican	160	48	208	3.33
Weak Republican	245	87	232	2.81
Strong Republican	340	159	499	2.13
Totals	1999	528	2427	3.78

Table 2.2: Answers to Obama religion question, by party political knowledge levels

Political knowledge scale	Christian	Muslim	Totals	Christian/Muslim answer ratio
0 (lowest)	102	58	160	1.76
1	234	78	312	3.00
2	263	49	312	5.37
3 (highest)	238	17	455	14.00
Totals	837	202	1239	4.14

Table 2.3: Cross-tab of belief in the Muslim rumor and vote choice, Democrats

Democrats	Voted for Obama	Voted for McCain	Totals
Believed Obama was a Muslim	79	30	109
Did not believe Obama was a Muslim	781	57	860
Totals	860	70	947

Table 2.4: Cross-tab of belief in the Muslim rumor and vote choice, Republicans

Republicans	Voted for Obama	Voted for McCain	Totals
Believed Obama was a Muslim	8	204	212
Did not believe Obama was a Muslim	62	547	609
Totals	70	751	821

Table 2.5: Cross-tab of belief in the Muslim rumor and vote choice, Independents

Independents	Voted for Obama	Voted for McCain	Totals
Believed Obama was a Muslim	27	63	90
Did not believe Obama was a Muslim	274	181	455
Totals	301	244	545

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