



Make Syria Great Again? A Theoretical Case for the Transnational Cultural Transmission of Trump Support among Arab Americans

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Abstract

The emergence of Donald Trump as a serious candidate in the 2016 election has prompted a torrent of political science research aimed at identifying the important attitudinal, socioeconomic, and political variables associated with support for the unconventional candidate among various segments of the American public. However, one group of voters that has not been thoroughly examined is Arab Americans, over a quarter of whom indicated support for Trump in an October 2016 pre-election poll by Zogby Analytics. I posit that part of the Arab support for Trump in 2016 is attributable to certain elements of the political leanings of Syrian Americans—and, possibly, of other Arab Americans as well—with regards to Syrian politics. Specifically, I predict support for Donald Trump to be positively associated with support for the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad among a certain demographic of Arab American immigrants. In this paper, I lay out three distinct theoretical cases for why we can expect to find such a relationship, and I present tentative empirical support that provides indirect evidence favoring the hypothesis. I conclude with recommendations for future research that would better test my hypotheses and a brief discussion about the need better to understand the connections between immigrants' political orientations linked to their countries of origin and those they form about American politics.

Introduction

Donald Trump's appeal to multitudes of American voters and his subsequent victory in the 2016 election have been the subject of a considerable amount of emergent research. Academics interested in the factors underlying Trump's appeal to the American public have identified several correlates of support for the unconventional candidate, ranging from believing that former

President Obama is Muslim (Klinkner, 2016), to level of education (Silver, 2016), to authoritarian inclination (MacWilliams, 2016). Of course, correlations need not be indicative of meaningful causal relationships, which is why researchers have tended to follow up these findings with further studies and statistical analyses that paint a more detailed and accurate picture of the drivers of Trump's appeal. One study, for example, found that the association between support for Donald Trump and level of education disappears when properly controlling for racial and immigration resentment (Tesler, 2016). The general purpose of this paper is to begin unpacking a surprising piece of the Trump-support phenomenon: the considerable levels of support enjoyed by Donald Trump among the Arab American community.

On January 31, 2017, various news outlets featured a story about a Syrian-American family whose relatives had been sent back to Syria upon their arrival at the Philadelphia International Airport. The incident was, of course, the result of President Trump's January 27th executive order (No. 13, 769, 2017), which barred the citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. An especially noteworthy detail here was that the adult members of this Syrian-American family had voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election—a piece of information that was mentioned by just about every major media outlet that featured this story. To many observers, this detail was perplexing on many levels. One is that by voting for Donald Trump, this family had essentially voted for the imposition of a travel ban that, at least, resembled the one responsible for preventing them from uniting with their family members. Furthermore, throughout his presidential campaign, Trump has made a host of controversial and provocative statements that were viewed by many observers as hostile toward Muslims and Arabs. Examples of Trump's inflammatory rhetoric include claiming that “there is no Iraq” and “there are no Iraqis” in defense of his declared sentiments that the U.S. should have seized Iraq's oil following the country's 2003 invasion, explicitly calling for a temporary ban on all Muslims entering the United States, asserting that Muslims in New Jersey celebrated the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and celebrating a repeatedly debunked story involving U.S. General John J. Pershing killing 49 Muslim insurgents in the Philippines with bullets dipped in pig's blood. Apart from this rhetoric, Trump has also demonstrated a reluctance to overtly condemn certain Arab dictators and former dictators, such as Saddam Hussein and Bashar Al-Assad, at times even praising them as being “strong leaders” and efficient at “killing terrorists.”

Despite these and other such political details surrounding the 2016 campaign, it turns out that the members of this Syrian-American family were not unique among Arab Americans in their support for Donald Trump. Data on the Arab American vote in the 2016 election—thus far limited to an October 2016 pre-election survey conducted by Zogby Analytics and reported on by the Arab American Institute—indicates that approximately 26% of Arab American voters planned on casting their ballots for the Republican nominee. While the precise

figures borne out by this pre-election poll may not be entirely reflective of the actual Arab American vote during the election, this point is of little relevance to the larger theoretical framework that this paper seeks to present regarding a specific subset of Arab American voters.

Undoubtedly, there are many pieces to the puzzle of Arab American Trump support, some of which are relatively well documented in the field of American politics, and others that are yet to be uncovered. The aim of this paper is to lay out a data-backed theoretical framework for how preferences for Donald Trump may have been culturally transmitted from some Arab Americans' countries of origin to segments of Arab American communities in the United States. Much of the existing work and subsequent commentary on Arab American voting behavior has focused on parsing the declarative issue salience and issue positions of Arab Americans while either implicitly or explicitly claiming that such issue-related attitudes motivate Arab Americans to vote in the ways that they do (e.g. Mehta, 2016; Gray, 2016). These issue-based approaches to voting behavior do not account for how voters come to hold strong, clear, and consistent issue positions in the first place—to the extent that they do so at all—and are therefore highly limited in their capacity to explain the sociopsychological processes through which voters initially become socialized into American politics (see Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009). The focus of the present paper is on these processes as they concern a specific subset of Arab American voters in the 2016 election.

In this paper, I present three distinct theoretical mechanisms through which support for Donald Trump may have been culturally transmitted from Syria to certain Arab American Assad supporters living in the United States, especially those who had yet to be socialized into American politics and, by extension, had not held strong and stable American party identities prior to the 2016 election. For positing the occurrence of this cross-cultural transmission of Trump support, I begin by using what scarce but relevant data is available on the Arab American 2016 vote to assert the existence of a positive association between support for Donald Trump and support for the Assad regime among, at the very least, Syrian Americans. Not only do the hypotheses presented provide a foundation for future research seeking to unearth and quantify potential nuances in the formation of candidate preferences among certain Arab Americans, but they can also yield significant implications for understanding the effects of immigrants' geopolitical and ethnocultural backgrounds on their candidate choices in American elections, at least prior to their adoption of crystalized American party identities.

The lack of data with which to test the different facets of the theory presented herein further highlights the need for political science to develop a more erudite understanding of how and when American presidential candidate preferences may transmit from immigrants' countries of origin to specific segments of immigrant communities and voters. Such an understanding would inevitably include an examination of how, in forming candidate preferences and

political leanings in the United States, certain blocks of immigrant voters may, for some number of generations, rely on group-specific cues of self-similarity and opinion-leadership that favor the cultural inheritance of political orientations from their countries of origin.

Arab Americans: A Brief Ethnography

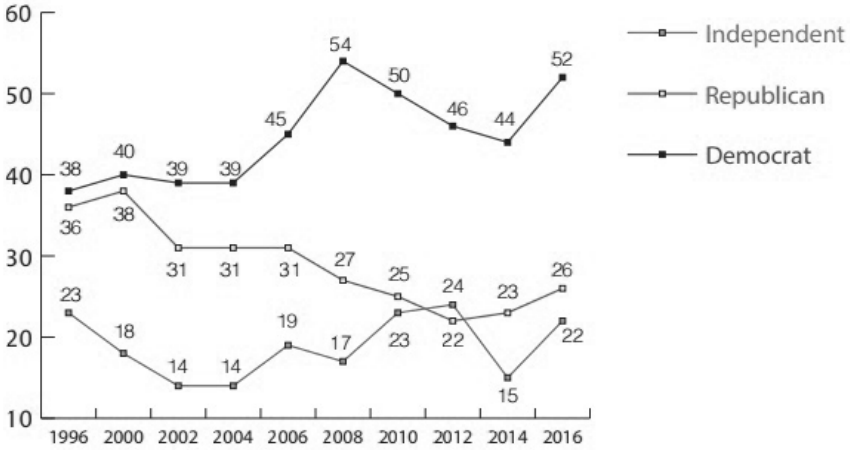
Although often overlooked in American popular discourse, the Arab American community is quite heterogeneous in ways that are plausibly relevant to the variation in its members' political orientations. This diversity includes party identification, country/region of origin, religious affiliation, and level of connectivity with the Arab community—both in the United States and in the country of origin. Recognizing this diversity is indispensable to any effort aimed at identifying the social and psychological variables at play in Arab American preferences for different political candidates.

Party identification

Party identification offers us a good starting point to unravel the story behind the Arab American 2016 vote. The unique importance of party identification in election outcomes stems from its being the single most powerful predictor of voting behavior in modern American elections (e.g. Hershey, 2015). While there is still some uncertainty about how exactly party affiliations form and why they inform voting behavior to varying degrees, it is clear that American party identification is generally stable and tends to endure shifts in parties' issue positions; it also mobilizes partisans to vote for their party's nominees and to participate in election campaigns in other ways (e.g. Dalton, 2016). Party identification also offers voters powerful and effective cues for forming issue stances, thereby allowing them to circumvent the need to become policy experts (Lupia, 1994). Put simply, partisans and party leaners tend to vote overwhelmingly along party lines (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016), which makes the distribution of any group's party affiliations crucial for understanding the story behind its voting patterns in American elections.

The previously mentioned 2016 Zogby Analytics poll found that 26% of Arab Americans continue to self-identify as Republicans despite generally trending towards the Democratic Party since 1996, as evidenced by Figure 1 from the AAI October 2016 report on the Arab American vote.

Figure 1: Arab-American Party Identification over Time



Source: Arab American Institute, 2016

While this data suggests that the percentage of Arab Americans who voted for Trump in 2016 is almost identical to the percentage of Arab Americans who identified as Republicans in 2016, party identification does not tell us everything we need to know about why a quarter of Arab Americans voted the way they did. First, of the self-identified Arab American Democrats who responded to the survey, 5% declared their intention to vote for Donald Trump, with 13% of Arab American independents doing the same. While neither figure is large, they establish that Trump’s appeal to Arab Americans is not limited to those who are Republicans. Second, as is the case with any such association between party identification and candidate choice, there is a directionality problem; the proportion of Arab Americans who support Trump because of their party affiliations versus the proportion who developed an affinity for the Republican Party because of their admiration for Trump remains opaque. For these reasons, party identification only provides a partial, non-ultimate explanation for voting behavior—one that is especially insufficient when it comes to immigrant voters, earlier generations of whom have less crystalized American party identities than the average voting population (Cain, Kiewiet, & Uhlaner, 1991).

In light of this point, a meaningful probe of the variables and processes that produced the Arab American 2016 voting outcome necessarily surpasses the mere distribution of Arab American party identification, eventually touching upon some of the unique cultural-psychological and domain-specific pathways through which Arab Americans’ party affiliations may initially take shape. Therefore, part of the idea behind this paper is to identify ways in which certain sociopolitical interconnections between Arab American voters and their countries of origin

affect the formation of their candidate preferences, which may eventually translate into more stable party affiliations that guide behavior in future elections. As stated in the introduction, this paper seeks to add to our understanding of the pieces involved in giving rise to American party identities in certain immigrant voters in the first place.

Religion

Religious background is another important line of distinction among Arab Americans that may impact their political attitudes, issue salience, issue stances, and voting behavior. To my knowledge, the most recent data available on the religious distribution of Arab Americans dates back to the 2002 Zogby International Institute survey, in which a majority (63%) of Arab Americans identified as Christians—35% Catholic, 18% Orthodox, and 10% Protestant. The poll also showed that only about 24% of Arab Americans were Muslim. While it is almost certain that these figures have changed over the past 15 years, the picture depicted here stands in sharp contrast with popular notions of the typical Arab American being Muslim.

As may be expected, the available evidence (also from the AAI report on the 2016 election) points to Trump being especially out of favor with Muslim Arab Americans, only 12% of whom declared that they intended to vote for him. However, also included in the findings released by the AAI is a substantially less predictable relationship between religious background and choice of 2016 presidential candidate: the bulk of support for Donald Trump among Arab Americans in the 2016 election came from Orthodox Christian Arab Americans. Table 1 shows Arab Americans' vote choice by religious affiliation.

Table 1: Arab-American Vote Choice by Religious Affiliation

Candidate	18–34	55+	Male	Female	Catholic	Orthodox/Protestant	Muslim
Democrat Hillary Clinton	64	45	47	69	63	42	67
Republican Donald Trump	19	31	35	15	20	48	12
Green Party Jill Stein	2	4	6	3	2	3	9
Libertarian Gary Johnson	13	2	5	4	1	3	10
Not Sure	2	19	7	9	15	4	3

Source: Arab American Institute, 2016

As we can see, the most significant religious gulf in candidate preference was not between Muslim Arab Americans and Christian Arab Americans, it was between Orthodox Christians and the rest of Arab Americans polled. In other words, Orthodox Christian Arab Americans—not Muslim Arab Americans—were outliers in their level of support for Donald Trump. This point will be crucial to establishing a correlation between Assad support and Trump support among Arab Americans in section 3 of this paper.

Country of origin

A third important domain of Arab American diversity is country of origin. There are 22 nations that formally espouse an Arab identity. These countries are spread across North Africa and Southwest Asia, with systematic cross-country variations in dialect, forms of social organization, levels and types of industrialization, religious practices, ecological environments, levels of education, socioeconomic dynamics, political culture, and so forth. The United States Census Bureau identifies Arab Americans using responses with regards to ancestry from 8 of the 22 Arab countries (Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Morocco, Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen), as well as a general “Arab/Arabic” category and “other Arab” category (Asi & Beaulieu, 2013). According to the Census Bureau, people of Lebanese, Egyptian, and Syrian ancestry constituted the majority of the roughly 1.5 million Arab Americans living in the United States between 2006 and 2010. And those of Lebanese ancestry shaped a large plurality (almost one third) of Arab Americans. Unfortunately, there seems to be a complete lack of American election data differentiating between Arab Americans based on country of origin—despite there being such data with regards to other immigrant groups from specific countries (e.g. Radzilowski & Stecula, 2010).

Hypotheses

Correlation between Assad and Trump Support among Arab Americans

The general idea behind this piece of research is to set the stage for a more thorough examination of the possible links between the preexisting political identities and attitudes of a certain subset of Arab Americans with respect to their country of origin and the ensuing political identities and attitudes they form regarding American politics. In the case of the 2016 election, such a link begins to appear more prominent if we acknowledge the likely possibility that one significant and greatly overlooked predictor of Donald Trump support among Syrian American voters, and perhaps other Arab Americans, is support for the Assad government—especially in the context of the Syrian civil war. Candidate Trump’s unique appeal to authoritarian voters (MacWilliams, 2016), his isolationist propensities, his seemingly positive attitude toward the Assad regime and sharply cynical view of Syrian rebels, as well as the Syrian and Russian regimes’ signaled

affinity for him and disdain for Hillary Clinton offer a set of plausible pathways through which Trump may have appealed to the heavily pro-Assad factions of Arab American voters. Given that there seems to be no data with which to test directly for a relationship between attitudes on the Syrian regime and voting in the 2016 election, this paper will lay out a theoretical framework, backed by indirect yet relevant data, in order to make the case that support for Assad either directly or indirectly drove support for Donald Trump among specific subgroups of Arab American voters.

Perhaps the most relevant data available to test for a relationship between Assad support and Trump support among Arab Americans is that which parses Arab Americans' 2016 candidate preferences by religious background. As previously discussed, Orthodox Christians broke very emphatically with other religious subgroups of Arab Americans—including Catholics — in that they significantly favored Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. The combination of two crucial factors likely underlies this puzzle. First, while there is little direct data, it is generally accepted that the greater part of the Christian community in Syria sides with the Assad government (Hines, 2017). If from nothing else, this can be gleaned from the fact that the overwhelming majority of Syria's highest profile Christian leaders—including the official leader of the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch of the Melkite Catholic Church, the two largest Christian denominations in Syria—continue to publicly endorse the Syrian government in its ongoing efforts to win the civil war (Hines, 2017). Second, Syria and Lebanon have long been home to the two largest Christian populations in the Arab world. The majority of Syrian Christians belong to branches of Orthodox Christianity, while most Lebanese Christians are Catholic and only about 8% of them are Orthodox (Bailey & Bailey, 2010; U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Report, 2012). This may suggest Orthodox Arab Americans are disproportionately Syrian Americans, and disproportionately Assad-supporting Syrian Americans, in comparison to Catholic Arab Americans, who probably skew toward the Lebanese sub-nationality.

Looking back at the Zogby data on Arab American votes by religious category with these points in mind, we find it to be probable that Trump was especially popular among Syrian Americans—perhaps even more popular than Hillary Clinton. These points may also lend credence to the prospect that the more pro-Assad factions of Syrian Americans were particularly more likely to support the candidacy of Donald Trump. To be clear, neither of these conclusions is confirmed on the basis of this incomplete information; they merely suggest the *likelihood* that Assad-supporting Arab Americans favored Trump more heavily than did other Arab Americans. In other words, the religious distribution of Arab Americans' 2016 candidate preferences as reported by the AAI (2016) indicates, albeit indirectly, a positive association between Assad support and Trump support among Arab Americans.

Given the likelihood of such a correlation, the question that this paper

seeks to address is why this relationship between Assad support and Trump support might exist among certain Arab Americans. To begin answering this question, we must understand that immigrants do not arrive in the United States as political blank slates. To the contrary, their political attitudes and leanings variously depend upon different aspects of their political socialization as it relates to their sending countries. Previous research has found that the nature of premigration political socialization affects postmigration political engagement, political behavior, and attitudes about national government in Mexican immigrants (Wals, 2011; Wals & Rudolph, 2018). However, the bulk of such research has focused on Latino immigrants, and none of this literature has explicitly examined the mechanisms through which the cross-cultural, transnational inheritance of American candidate preferences may occur postmigration in immigrants who remain sufficiently interconnected with their countries of origin. Having established grounds for suspecting a positive correlation between support for the Assad regime and Trump support among Arab Americans, I propose three main theoretical mechanisms through which Assad support may have either directly or indirectly driven Trump support among a particular subset of Arab Americans in 2016.

Before doing so, however, it would be useful to outline a rudimentary profile of the population to which this is most likely to apply. The importance of outlining these likely demographic features also lies in their capacity to offer future research some elementary guidelines for where to look in testing the ideas put forth in the present paper. Three key and likely features of the Arab American immigrants in question are that (1) they remain sufficiently culturally interconnected with Syria or are part of an Arab American community that is, (2) they heavily favor Assad in, at least, the context of the Syrian civil war, and (3) they had not been fully socialized into American politics prior to the 2016 election. Using these points, we can extract several additional demographic characteristics of the immigrants to whom the upcoming theoretical mechanisms most likely apply. First and foremost, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants and those of Syrian or Lebanese decent are more likely to fit this profile than are Arab Americans of other sub-nationalities. Second, they had not developed crystallized American party identities prior to the 2016 election, but were relatively politically engaged with Syrian politics. Third, they are more likely to hold religious backgrounds that, in Syria, tend to lean more heavily in favor of Assad and the Syrian regime than do Sunni Muslims, such as Shi'a/Alawite Muslims and Christians of various denominations. We can continue to telescope outwards and extract even more variables from these and other characteristics, such as elements of Syrian news and media consumption, ability to speak and understand Arabic, age of arrival in America, generation of American residence, and so forth.

Unfortunately, there is little data with respect to many of these traits; even the basic distribution of the Syrian American vote remains largely unknown. There also seems to be virtually no data establishing how most of these traits intersect and covary across the Arab immigrant population.

The Relational Pathways between Assad and Trump Support

There are several plausible pathways through which support for Bashar Al-Assad among some Arab Americans may facilitate support for Donald Trump. This section of the paper identifies and outlines three mechanisms by which Assad support may have, directly or indirectly, *driven* Trump support among particular Arab American voters in the 2016 election, thereby functioning as part of an unconventional candidate-preference formation toolkit that is both unique to certain groups of voters and mostly alien to the American politics literature. The three theoretical mechanisms I propose are (1) foreign leader endorsement, (2) Trump's untraditional stance on Syria and his generally conspiratorial and simplistic approach to American politics serving as unique cues of self-similarity some of the Arab Americans who supported him in the 2016 election, and (3) authoritarianism salience.

Foreign leader endorsement. It is well established that voters tend to rely on various heuristic shortcuts and cues that help them navigate an otherwise complex political landscape without having to become “policy encyclopedias” (Lupia, 1994). These mental shortcuts tell voters both what policy positions to take, if they take any—and which political candidates to support in any given election. In American politics, party labels are generally considered to be the primary heuristic for voters when deciding which way to vote in the general election (see Hershey & Aldrich, 2015). Party labels signal a repertoire of potentially useful information to partisans, including what issue positions a candidate is likely to hold and whose political agenda a candidate is likely to promote or stifle (Conroy-Krutz et al., 2016).

In the absence of the party-label heuristic, such as during primary elections, political endorsements often become the prime go-to for voters trying to figure out which candidate to support. Pre-Iowa endorsements from elite party figures are usually successful predictors of who becomes a party's presidential nominee (Sides & Vavreck, 2013). In other words, voters essentially tend to copy the candidate preferences of the elite members of their party. And this doesn't stop with signals from party leaders to party identifiers. The endorsements of high-profile celebrities who need not have any sort of political expertise are highly sought after by candidates and their campaigns—and, the relevant research suggests, for good reason. One study, for example, found that Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of Barack Obama in 2008 may have boosted his total vote tally in the Democratic Primaries by about 1,000,000 votes (Garthwaite & Moore, 2008).

There is, however, an important and distinct category of celebrity endorsements, the effects of which do not seem to have been thoroughly examined by researchers. Namely, the endorsements of foreign leaders. The media surrounding modern American political campaigns is replete with articles, headlines, and lists of foreign leaders who either explicitly or implicitly endorsed

American presidential candidates (e.g. Simon, 2016). And while little is known about the effects of these types of endorsements on various blocs of voters, it would be reasonable for us to suspect that their (potential) effects are pronounced most strongly amongst groups of immigrant voters whose sub-nationalities and languages are shared by the leaders making said endorsements. In short, any endorsement effects are most likely to be found among the endorser's strongest fans (see Garthwaite & Moore, 2008). And there seems to be no basis for doubting that this applies to endorsements from high-profile foreign figures as it does to endorsement from high-profile national figures.

In the course of the 2016 election, both Bashar Al-Assad and his highest-profile ally, Vladimir Putin, signaled their optimism about a potential Donald Trump presidency. While Assad declined to explicitly support Trump in an English July 2016 interview with NBC's Bill Neely, his favoritism for a Trump electoral victory was hardly a secret to anyone attentive to Syrian politics. Setting aside the Assad government's greatly hostile rhetoric on Hillary Clinton during her time as Secretary of State and as presidential candidate, Assad implicitly endorsed Trump on numerous occasions. In that same NBC interview with Neely, for example, Assad ardently defended Trump's lack of foreign policy experience (pointed out by Neely) by stating that President Obama also had little to no foreign policy experience upon taking office in 2008, and that what foreign policy experience Hillary Clinton did accumulate as Secretary of State proved her to be destructive on the world stage. Assad then repeatedly made the point to Neely that "if Trump is genuine, he is correct." If we combine these and other such statements from Assad with his declarative disdain for a Clinton presidency and with Putin's "Trump is bright and talented" comments, all but a formal endorsement of Trump emerges as the Syrian regime's position on the American 2016 election. And in this case, the endorser's strongest potential 2016 voter fans are, by definition, Assad supporters.

Unique cues of self-similarity. Another mechanism through which support for Assad and support for Trump may be associated among Arab Americans has to do with seemingly unique—or at least exceptionally rare—similarities shared by Donald Trump and ardent Assad supporters. As stated earlier, a vast body of research has shown that voters tend to rely on a variety of mental cues to assess which candidate deserves their support in a given election. One subset of such mental cues are those that allow people to gauge, often unconsciously and automatically, the self-similarity of those in their social milieu in a wide range of social contexts. These cues of self-similarity affect a substantial portion of human behavior, including to whom people attend, learn from, imitate, admire, prefer to interact with, and vote for (Henrich, 2016; Kinzler et al., 2009; Buttelmann et al., 2012; Fairlie, Hoffmann, & Oreopoulos, 2011; Boudreau, Elmendorf, & MacKenzie, 2014). Voters tend to support candidates who match them on party identification, ideology and ideological label (if they have one), sex, ethnicity, and a variety of other personal and social characteristics.

On its face, the idea that Donald Trump is similar to Assad-supporting Arab Americans in politically significant ways may seem rather bizarre. The irony, however, is that these similarities are so stark that Trump essentially *is* an Assad supporter in many respects that are of high importance to Assad supporters. That is, Trump's declarative positions on the Syrian civil war, Assad and his future, Putin, Russian interference in Syria, America's alleged role in the rise of ISIS (specifically that of the Obama Administration), and the arming of certain rebel groups, all mimic the official rhetoric from Damascus and the views of Assad's strongest supporters in unprecedented ways.

From the initial stages of his political campaign, Trump voiced his openness to supporting Assad in the Syrian civil war and his willingness to allow Putin to secure his interests in Syria. In a September 2015 Fox News interview with Bill O'Reilly, at the very opening stages of the presidential campaign, Trump stated: "I've been looking at Assad and saying maybe he's better than the people we're supposed to be backing." This expressed attitude on Assad and the rebels against whom he is fighting remained fairly consistent throughout the campaign. During the fifth Republican debate held in December 2015, for example, Trump said: "We can't be fighting Assad *and* fighting ISIS; Assad is fighting ISIS. *He's* fighting ISIS, Russia is fighting ISIS, and Iran is fighting ISIS." Trump later responded to a question asking him to justify "being okay" with Assad retaining power in Syria by saying: "We're backing people, we have no idea who they are. We call them 'the rebels' 'the patriotic rebels.' A lot of people think they're ISIS." Later in his third and final presidential debate against Hillary Clinton, Trump responded to a question about Aleppo by saying:

Take a look at Aleppo. It is so sad when you see what's happened. And a lot of this is because of Hillary Clinton, because what's happened is, by fighting Assad, who turned out to be a lot tougher than she thought . . . he's just much tougher and much smarter than her and Obama. And everyone thought he was gone two years ago, three years ago . . . because we're backing—we're backing rebels. We don't know who the rebels are. We're giving them lots of money, lots of everything. We don't know who the rebels are. And when and if—and it's not going to happen, because you have Russia and you have Iran now. But if they ever did overthrow Assad, you might end up with—as bad as Assad is, and he's a bad guy, but you may very well end up with worse than Assad. If she did nothing, we'd be in much better shape.

These are just a few of the examples in which Donald Trump matched the narrative of the Syrian regime and its most vociferous supporters regarding the Syrian civil war (e.g. Al-Baath, 2017). The similarities between the bulk of Trump's political orientations and those of Assad loyalists and Syrian nationalists are far from limited to the Republican nominee's positions on Syria and the country's civil war. As many foreign policy experts and political pundits have noted, Trump's

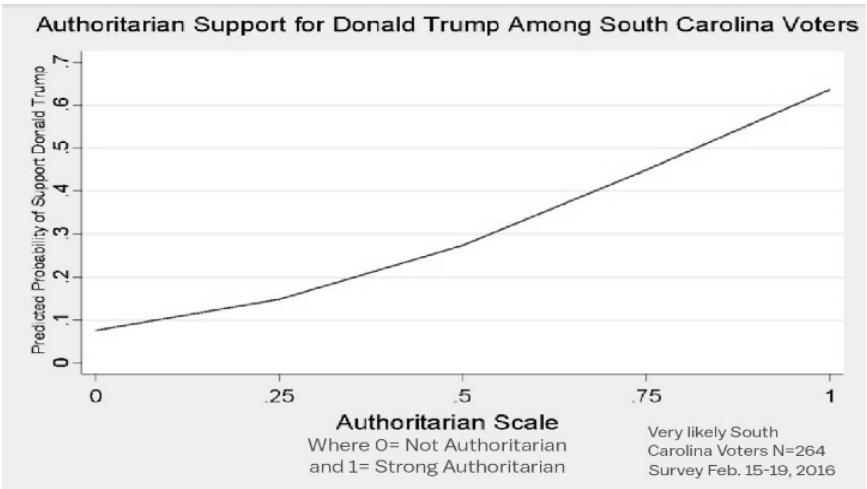
morose and suspicious outlook on the “rigged” state of American politics and the subsequent failure of American democracy largely mirrors the conspiratorial narrative long propagated by many of America’s autocratic adversaries, including Russia and Syria (see O’Connor, 2017). Such views have been characterized by some researchers as part of a larger package of anti-American sentiment that is markedly widespread in Syrian political culture (e.g. Rubin, 2007).

Until the recent arrival of Donald Trump as a serious presidential candidate, the combination of his declarative attitudes towards the Russian and Syrian regimes, Syrian rebels, America’s role in the Syrian crisis, and the general state of American democracy was almost nonexistent in American mainstream presidential politics. This nearly unprecedented attitudinal compendium parallels the political outlook of Assad supporters in unique and interesting ways, and it may well have galvanized support for the Republican nominee among certain pro-Assad blocs of Arab Americans in the 2016 election.

Authoritarianism saliance. Authoritarianism is generally conceptualized by social scientists as a kind of personality structure that is marked by a readily and automatically accessible social attitude with three main interlocking traits: moral traditionalism, outgroup hostility, and submission to authority (Altemeyer, 1981). Those high on authoritarianism tend to be predisposed for, or highly sensitive to, perceptions of moral dangers and outgroup threats; they preferentially seek comfort from “strong” leaders with traditionally masculine traits, and demonstrate especially low levels of tolerance for perceived normative deviations (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011; McCann, 1997).

The study of authoritarianism has garnered special traction in the political science literature surrounding the 2016 election for its strong correlation with support for Donald Trump – especially during the primaries, for which party label cannot function as a cue for partisans trying to decide which candidate to vote for. Data analyses conducted on voting in the Republican Primaries found that authoritarianism eclipses gender, income, age, religion and education in its ability to predict Trump support (e.g. MacWilliams, 2016). Authoritarian Republican primary voters seem to have flocked towards Trump’s candidacy, as is shown in Figure 2 for the South Carolina primaries by MacWilliams (2016) featured in *Politico*.

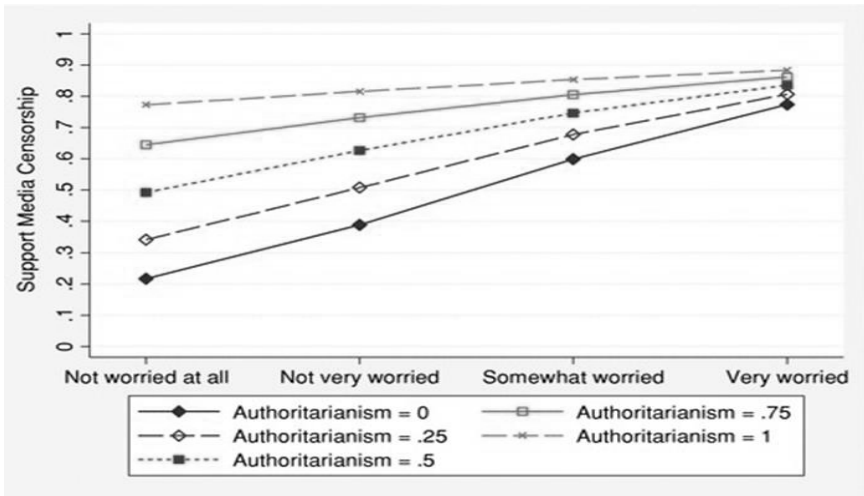
Figure 2:



Graph by Matthew MacWilliams (2016)

While there is no data from which to ascertain directly whether authoritarianism is similarly correlated with Arab American or Syrian American support for the Assad regime, there is more tangential evidence to suggest another potential point of contact between Assad and Trump support through authoritarianism. A study by Marc Hetherington and Elizabeth Suhay (2011) found that, when experiencing an increased perception of threats to the existing social order, especially in the form of terrorism, even those low on the authoritarian trait increasingly resemble authoritarians in their sociopolitical inclinations and policy preferences. In other words, non-authoritarians seem to experience a “salience” in authoritarianism when feeling that the collective with which they socially identify is confronted with an out-group threat (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011). This is exemplified in Figure 3 below showing how higher levels of threat perceptions increase support for media censorship policies in those low on authoritarianism, eventually bringing convergence on the authoritarian position of the issue.

Figure 3: Authoritarianism, Threat, & Censorship (Hetherington & Suhay 2011)



Graph by Hetherington & Suhay (2011)

This research offers us grounds to suspect that Assad-supporting Arab Americans, who perceive the relatively long-standing regime as an integral part of their sub-national identities that is currently under threat of annihilation, may be experiencing higher-than-normal levels of authoritarian inclinations during the Syrian civil war. This, in turn, may have led those who were experiencing this salience in authoritarianism—especially those whose party identities and candidate preferences were relatively more malleable—to support Trump in much the same way that authoritarians do.

To be clear, the point that I am making here does not rest on the assumption that Arab Americans who support Assad are more likely to be authoritarians than those who do not support him. As I've mentioned above, there is no data regarding an association between authoritarianism and Assad support that, in any way, mirrors the data regarding the association between authoritarianism and Trump support. What the above-mentioned study by Hetherington and Suhay (2011) does suggest is that, by virtue of the ongoing Syrian civil war and the Assad regime's constant framing of that war as a fight for the survival of the entire Syrian nation (e.g. Al-Baath, 2017), Assad supporters may be more likely to harbor and develop political preferences that are otherwise authoritarian. Harnessing this with what we know about the general preference of authoritarian voters for Trump, authoritarianism salience emerges as yet another possible point of contact between Assad support and Trump support among Arab Americans.

Discussions, Limitations, and Recommendations

Donald Trump seems to have outdone expectations among Arab American voters in the 2016 election, winning approximately 26% of their votes according to the available data. Although the statistical distribution of partisan identification among Arab Americans was mostly in line with this result, party affiliation fails to tell the full story. Two major reasons as to why this is the case are that Arab American support for Trump was not entirely confined to Republicans, and that there remains a strong directionality problem in the association between Arab American party affiliation and Trump support; some Arab Americans may have developed an affinity for the Republican Party because of their admiration for its presidential nominee.

The present paper offers a reading of the available data on Arab American candidate preferences in the 2016 election that suggests Trump may have done especially well among Arab Americans who support the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad. This reading is partially based on the fact that Orthodox Christian Arab Americans, who were significant outliers among Arab Americans in their support for Trump, likely represent a disproportionately Syrian and disproportionately pro-Assad sub-demographic of Arab Americans.

In line with the hypothesis about a correlation between Assad support and Trump support among Arab Americans in the 2016 election, I posited three main theoretical pathways through which support for Assad is likely to have, either directly or indirectly, galvanized support for Donald Trump among certain Arab American immigrants who were especially attentive to Syrian and Middle Eastern politics and who had not been fully socialized into American politics prior to the 2016 election. These mechanisms are (1) foreign leader endorsements, (2) unique cues of self-similarity grounded in Trump's unconventional rhetoric, background, and seeming political orientations regarding a number of substantial topics and political themes, and (3) authoritarianism salience.

This three-pronged theoretical framework brings into sharp focus the larger prospect of cross-cultural, transnational transmission of American presidential candidate preferences from foreign countries into the United States—a phenomenon that has largely been neglected by the political science research from the fields of American and comparative politics. This paper is the first of its kind in the sense that it seeks explicitly to highlight some of the unique, group-specific cultural-psychological mechanisms that may operate postmigration and through which a particular subset of Arab Americans may have developed a preference for Donald Trump during the 2016 election, subsequently becoming more socialized into American politics. Previous research along these lines has mostly focused on linking the political attitudes and behavior of Latino immigrants to elements of their premigration political socialization (e.g. Wals, 2011; Wals & Rudolph, 2018). While such work has yielded immensely useful and interesting findings, its purpose has not been to detail the specific sociopsychological mechanics that may

variously come into play in both guiding the process and affecting the outcome of certain immigrants' socialization into American politics.

There are two major caveats and limitations to bear in mind while digesting the ideas put forth in this paper. First, due to a substantial lack of direct data, this paper does not seek to test the major hypotheses laid out herein; this piece of research is strictly theoretical. I draw upon what little relevant data is available in constructing—but not testing—the theoretical framework outlined in the present paper. This lack of data further emphasizes the limits of our understanding of the ways in which various groups of immigrants may borrow on unique cues related to their political identities, attitudes, and predispositions as they apply to their sending countries in forming candidate preferences and subsequent party affiliations in the United States. Second, the three mechanisms proposed linking Assad support to Trump support among certain Arab Americans are not necessarily exclusive; other culturally inherited sociopolitical variables may provide similar pathways. Such variables may include Trump's peddling of the Obama birther conspiracy and signaled anti-Muslim and anti-immigration rhetoric, which seem to have won him the support of some voters (Klinkner, 2016; Klinkner, 2017) and which might be shared with certain non-Muslim Arab Americans. However, even if such variables were indeed a driving force of some Arab Americans' support for Donald Trump (there is no evidence either way), they would merely constitute an additional pathway, based on unique cues of self-similarity, for the transnational transmission of Trump support from certain Arab Americans' sending countries to their communities in the United States—assuming that some of these Arab Americans had inherited their anti-Muslim attitudes from their countries of origin.

This paper should be viewed as the introductory part of a larger research project that is still in its infancy. The ideas theorized in this paper can provide the foundation for a more extensive research program aimed at filling the ostensible gaps in our knowledge about the factors that give rise to short-term candidate preferences and, eventually, long-term party affiliations in groups of immigrant voters. Researchers interested in pursuing such a program should seek ways of testing whether the kinds of relationships described in this paper exist between Assad support and Trump support among certain subsets of Arab American voters. Specifically, factor analyses can be performed after collecting the requisite data and certain experimental designs can be introduced to empirically test for the operation of each of the three mechanisms outlined in the present paper more directly. The findings of such research could have profound implications for our understanding of how the political cultures in immigrants' countries of origin affect how immigrants form and apply American political identities, and how those practices change in second and third generations.

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