

THE IMAGE OF MUSLIMS IN
CANADIAN PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES, 1994-2016
SOME PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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Abstract.

Since the events of 9/11, the Government of Canada (and that of Quebec) has introduced several pieces of legislation and held many hearings on issues related to Muslims. These deliberations and discussions reveal a great deal about the presence or absence of any biases towards Muslims in the attitudes and decisions of authorities in Canada's highest administrative circles. The needed documents are publicly available online and are easily searchable with keywords. A thematic content analysis of these texts and transcripts was conducted: first, through a quantitative analysis of the occurrence of key terms; and second, through developing perceptual maps for different periods and different political parties. This allowed us to capture the possible changes in the government discourses across two decades, between 1994-2016. The data point to a few preliminary findings. First, the frequencies with which the issue of Islam/Muslims come up in the parliamentary debates and hearings are understandably affected by the nature of the major events, both locally and internationally. This resulted in several frequency peaks: 1994/95, 2001, 2007-2009, 2012, and 2015/16. Second, the events of 9/11 in the United States resulted in a peak discussion about Muslims within Canadian parliament, but it also led to a major transformation in the thinking of Canadian lawmakers about Muslim issues. Some of these transformations are: a) that this is no longer an international affairs subject that has little to do with local Canadian life; and b) the concept of religion has a significant presence in discussions about Muslims. Third, regardless of the possible changes on the ground, the notion of 'Canadian exceptionalism' – as a concept to distinguish Canada, as a successful model for integrating immigrants, from other western liberal democracies – is still very much alive in the psyche of Canadian MPs. References to this concept were most prominent in the period immediately after September 11, but they also appeared during the federal election of November 2015. In addition to this time dimension, the data also shows that Liberals have been making the most frequent references to this concept in both periods. The findings show that the positions of the various political parties towards Muslims is still in flux, unlike some European countries with relatively more solidified positions. This would call for more and continuous research to detect the possible changes over time.

The Image of Muslims In Canadian Parliamentary Debates, 1994-2016 Some Preliminary Results

CONTEXT

There has been a rising interest in studying parliamentary discussions, debates and contents. This surged interest stems partly from the interplay of parliamentary debates and public opinions in broader societies. Vanderbeck and Johnson (2011, p. 655) argue that such debates “serve as important platforms from which public opinion on key social issues is both shaped and reflected.” They also serve as “a powerful engine for recognitions and misrecognitions, for strengthening, marginalizing or disorganizing sexual/national identities and, in so doing, for conferring, limiting or withholding formal, as well as symbolic, citizenship.” Such analysis can unearth what Gaskarth (2006, p. 340) has called the “entrenched narratives stretching back many years”; in other words, meta-narratives that drive the policy decisions on many smaller issues.

In the growing academic literature that analyzes parliamentary debates, many issues have been addressed including international conflicts (see, for instance, Stavridis, 2016); sexual identities (Vanderbeck & Johnson, 2011); gender and women’s issues (Tremblay, 1998); bullying and cyberbullying (Bailey, 2014); animal anti-cruelty (Verbora, 2012); and racism and immigration (see, for instance, Rojo & van Dijk, 1997). Other studies focus on the processes through which such debates take place, such as parliamentary subgenres (e.g. Ilie, 2003a, 2003b; Pérez de Ayala, 2001), or the use of rhetorical strategies such as interruptions and politeness-related tactics (e.g. Bevitori, 2004; Cabasino, 2001; Carbó, 1992; Ilie, 2000, 2001, 2003b, 2004, 2005; Van der Valk, 2002).

However, the issue of Muslims and Muslim immigrants has not received adequate attention in this growing body of literature and even less so in Canada. The purpose of this paper is to make a small contribution to this area by analyzing the contents of the Canadian parliamentary debates involving Islam and/or Muslims. Specifically, the goals of this study are twofold: a) providing a conceptual map of the views expressed and the positions taken by Canadian Federal MPs on issues related to Islam and/or Muslims; and b) documenting the nature of such changes in MPs’ discourses during the period 1994-2016. This study could therefore be viewed as an exercise in **decoding Canada’s official political language**, through a content analysis of the parliamentary debates on Muslims. Let me elaborate on the significance of each of the three underlined elements.

Muslim immigrants and minorities living in the West have been the subject of heavy controversies since the terrorist events of 9/11. At the heart of these debates lies a perception in the western world that Muslim immigrants tend to be either unwilling or unable to integrate into their new homes. This perception emerged in response to the involvement of Muslims – some second- or third- generation immigrants – in a series of terrorist events that swept across the western liberal democracies, including 9/11 in the U.S. (2001); the assassination of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands and the Madrid train bombing (2004); the London subway bombing and social unrest in various French cities (2005); the Boston marathon bombing (2013); the attacks on Canadian parliament and two army soldiers (2014); the hostage-taking in Australia (2014); the

Charlie Hebdo shooting (2015); and the Paris multi-sited shooting (2015). In this new environment, Muslims were increasingly viewed as being inassimilable, having a tendency to violence, holding illiberal values, and acting as importers of international and regional conflicts into the receiving societies (for discussions on this, see Arat-Koc, 2006; Bird, 2005; Whitol de Wenden, 2005; Giry, 2007; Kymlicka, 2005, 2009; Modood, 2005; Poynting & Mason, 2007; Poynting & Perry, 2007; Moghissi et al., 2009; Rahnema, 2006, 2008b, 2008a; Sadeghi, 2007; Safdar et al., 2008; Saunders, 2012; Sheikh, 2007; Sirin et al., 2008; Weld, 2003). These events generated widespread anti-Muslim sentiments and influenced the immigrant-related policies in several liberal democracies in Europe (see, for instance, Baldwin, 2012; Wilders, 2011) and most recently in the U.S. with the Trump presidency. Canada's federal election in November 2015 and the shooting at a mosque in Quebec City in January 2017 also showed that Canada is not immune to the rise of similar anti-Muslim sentiments among its politicians as well as the broader population.

In liberal democracies such as Canada, elected officials play a crucial role in carrying the popular sentiments over to the policy-making and governmental circles; in such a process, Members of Parliament are particularly instrumental. A close analysis of MPs' views, narratives, and discourses, therefore, helps us understand the thinking of both the statesmen and the laymen. A study of this nature could be placed in a broader framework involving the integration of immigrants and minorities into their new countries. I have previously suggested that a more effective and accurate understanding of the extent to which an immigrant group has been integrated requires an examination of the encounters between that immigrant group and the broader society in four main domains: a) in the public institutions; b) in the economy and job market; c) in social and communal settings; and d) in the media. In my research on Muslim immigrants, I have examined two of these four domains extensively: the economic and the social/communal domains (see Kazemipur, 2014). The present study builds on my previous work by analyzing the thinking behind the relatively visible workings of the public and governmental institutions. This was accomplished through an analysis of the contents of Canadian Federal Parliamentary debates and hearings that have involved Islam and/or Muslims.

And, finally, why a need for content analysis? One of consequences of living in a globalized world, which is well-connected through communication technology, is that discourses on any issue can migrate easily and quickly across national political borders. It is, therefore, quite possible for one country to adopt a discourse that is generated in a different country – and in a very different context – based on a few superficial similarities (for a discussion of how the 'media agenda' has gained more power relative to the 'political agenda', see Noije et. al., 2008). The current global discussions on Muslims have already created general misperceptions that, when it comes to Muslims and Muslim immigrants, challenges and solutions seem fairly universal; this, in turn, justifies the borrowing of policies, solutions and responses uncritically. Another reason for closely examining parliamentary debates is that languages used in the above-mentioned discourses are heavily coded, mostly due to concerns about possible violation of a politically-correct language or out of fear of being labeled as racist or Islamophobic; hence, the dire need for de-codification of the discourses. For instance, the opposition to Muslims sometimes shows itself in the form of opposition to Multiculturalism (as argued by Kymlicka, 2005 and Kalin 2011), or concerns about cultural relativism, or disagreement with the notion of equality of all cultures (Brooks, 2005; Fatah, 2017), and so on.

The above difficulty is particularly relevant in the case of Canada for two reasons. First, there is a perception that, based on the experiences of immigrants (including Muslim immigrants), Canada has not followed the path of other immigrant-receiving countries in the West. This perception has sometimes been referred to as the notion of ‘Canadian exceptionalism’ (see Kazemipur 2014, 2017; Banting, 2017). Secondly, Canada is culturally known for its ‘political correctness’; while this cultural trait has generated a much more pleasant social environment, it sometimes makes it difficult to grasp the true meaning of a statement and the real intention of a speaker. A statement by one Canadian MP illustrates this challenge:

“I know we live in a pluralistic society and that we are so politically correct in this country that we do not want to offend those who may have other beliefs, but the vast majority of Canadians believe in the same God. We may call this higher power God or Jehovah or Allah, but he is the same God worshipped by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Why then in this tragic situation would the leadership of our nation, namely the Governor General and the Prime Minister of Canada, not even call out to this higher power to provide the help, the comfort and the hope that we could not provide for ourselves? It saddens me greatly that our nation has become so secular and so politically correct that we cannot even name the name of God publicly.”

[September 18th, 2001, House debate, Reed Elley, Canadian Alliance]

In the following section, the methodological information will be provided, followed by a discussion of the findings.

METHODOLOGY

Data

For this study, I conducted a content analysis of the text transcripts of House Debates from the Canadian Federal Parliament. The Canadian Federal Parliament transcribes and publishes parliamentary sessions into a document called a Hansard. These transcripts cover the periods from January 1994 through today and they are continuously updated (www.parl.gc.ca). For the present project, the data consisted of the House Debate transcripts for the period between January 1994 and November 2016. This was done using OpenParliament.ca, which is an open-source third-party website that pulls data from the Parliament of Canada website into an accessible search engine that uses Boolean logic.

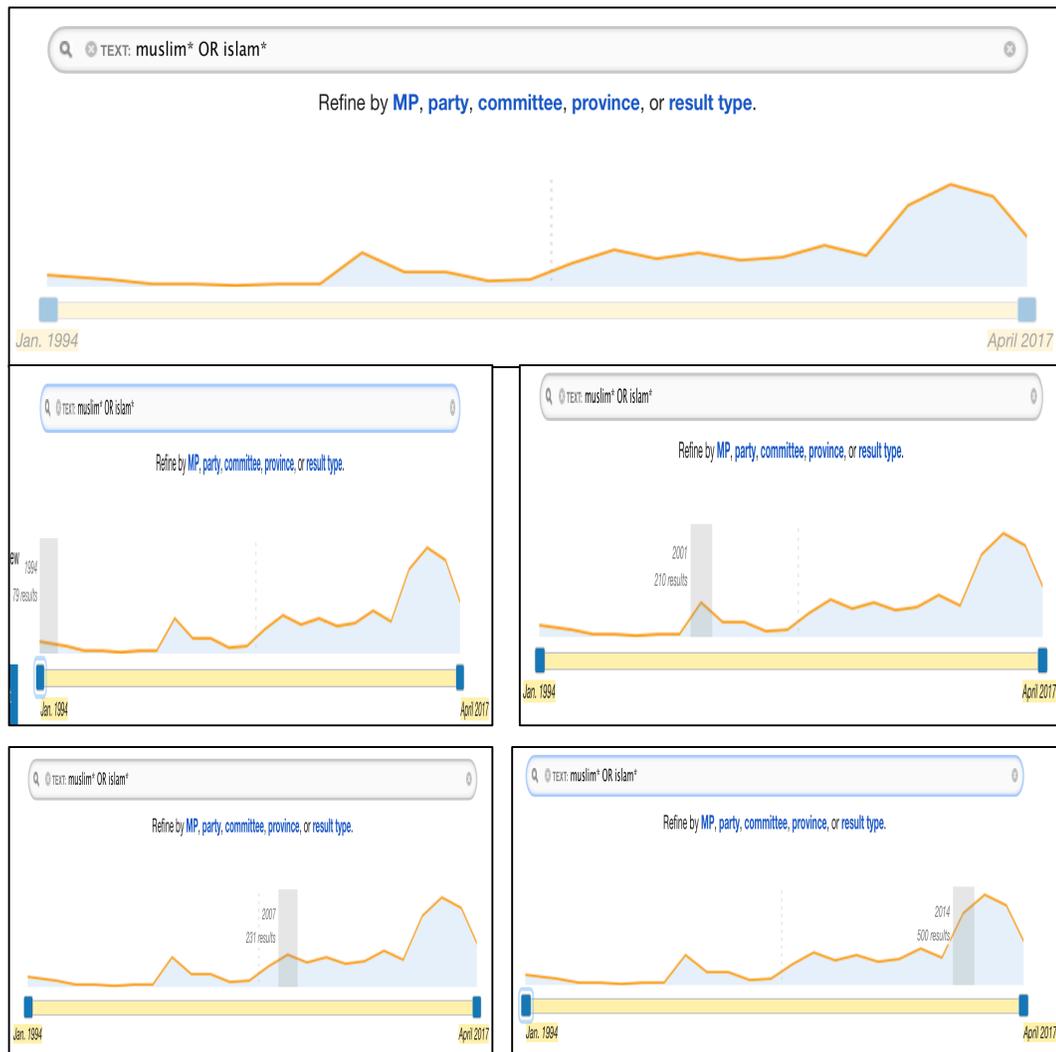
Seven predetermined themes guided initial data collection: democracy, diversity, immigrant/immigration, multiculturalism, secularism, security, and terrorism. Raw data was collected using the following Boolean logic:

- [Islam* OR Muslim*]
- [Islam* OR Muslim* AND democra*]
- [Islam* OR Muslim* AND diversity]
- [Islam* OR Muslim* AND immigr*]

- [Islam* OR Muslim* AND multicultural*]
- [Islam* OR Muslim* AND secular*]
- [Islam* OR Muslim* AND security]
- [Islam* OR Muslim* AND terror*]

For each Boolean search, the total numerical search results and search results by year were recorded into an Excel spreadsheet; this data was used to create initial stacked frequency line charts. OpenParliament.ca also creates a line graph of search results; this was copied and pasted as an image into a companion Word file for comparison. The search result frequencies for the words *Islam* and/or *Muslim* resulted in a total of 2021 cases, and pointed to five peaks in the intensity of debates involving Muslims. These five peaks included the following periods: 1994-95, 2001, 2007-2009, 2012, and 2015-16. This distribution pattern is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The frequency distribution of references to Islam/Muslim in Canadian parliamentary debates, 1994-2017



Data Analysis: Frequencies and Content

The coding of the data was conducted using Nvivo 11. In Nvivo, some of the initial codes were modified or eliminated (due to their irrelevance) and several new theme codes started to emerge. The finalized codes were further refined during second and third rounds of coding. The list of all these codes is included in Appendix 1.

Software

The coding and analysis was conducted using Nvivo 11, a qualitative and mixed-methods research software that collects and organizes data, allowing for content and frequency analysis as well as results visualization. In this software, external sources represent the individual documents or data to be analyzed; cases are best thought of as a bundle of demographic data, since more than one source may belong to a single person (e.g., MP name and party); and theme nodes are the coding categories (e.g., Canadian exceptionalism). Memos, which are linked to the theme nodes, were also used to describe, rationalize or discuss the content or possible uses for the coding content; and annotations, which are linked to the data in a source, were used to highlight or discuss specific transcript content.

Data retrieval/scraping software was used to maximize data collection. After reviewing several options, Octoparse.com was selected because of its simplicity and robustness. It is a cloud-based web crawler that extracts web-based data and exports it to CSV or XLSX formats. Data was imported into Excel for cleanup and proper formatting prior to importing into Nvivo 11.

FINDINGS

There are two components in these debates that can be used for coding: a) the different issues and concerns raised, including the values emphasized by the different parties; and b) the relative weights that are assigned to each of the raised issues, concerns, or values. For the benefit of the quantitatively-oriented readers, these two mechanisms can be viewed as similar to two dimensions in a regression model: the combination of the variables that are considered as statistically significant, versus those that are non-significant; and, the relative weights (regression coefficients) that are reported for those variables. With this point in mind, let us look at some of the themes that emerged in Canadian parliamentary debates involving Muslims during the period 1994-2016.

Muslims as a foreign policy issue and as a domestic issue

Figure 2 shows that, for Canadian MPs, the events of 9/11 in 2001 resulted in a peak in their interest in Muslims and, more importantly, a shift in the formative elements of their views. In the pre-9/11 period, the discussions were largely clustered in 1994. This is when the conflict in the former Yugoslavia had broken out with daily, violent confrontations between Serbian Orthodox Christians and Bosnian Muslims. In this period, discussions of Muslims were informed by the notion that Muslim issues were mostly international concerns that need to be handled by Canadian foreign ministry authorities and Canada's primary role was that of peace-keeper. This tendency is

which involved the phenomenon of international terrorism on the global side, and the implications of that for Canadians at the local side.

Two very distinct local elements surfaced – the security of Canadians, and the human rights of Canadian Muslims – resulting in two very distinct pathways and sets of concerns: a) concern for the security of Canadians based on a notion that Muslim refugees may carry international terrorism into Canada; and b) concerns for Canadian Muslims based on the notion that the international terrorism may result in a backlash and intolerance towards Canadian Muslims. The following excerpts provide examples of these two distinct concerns:

- A) Concern for the security of Canadians majority, out of fear that refugees may carry terrorism over into Canada

- “Therefore within that is an opportunity for west to try to get the message out to the people in the Middle East that the west has been a friend to Muslims. The west tried to defend Muslims in the former Yugoslavia. The west tried to help the Kurds in northern Iraq who were being massacred by Saddam Hussein. The west tried to be fair minded with respect to the Palestinian-Israeli situation. Canada has supported a policy of an independent Palestinian state and an independent Israeli state living side by side in peace. Canada has not tried to take sides and we have tried to be even-handed.

Unfortunately, this message does not get out to the shantytowns of the West Bank nor does it get out to the types of individuals who Osama bin Laden and people like him who they try to curry favour. It does not get through to some people in Afghanistan. Therein lies the challenge for us in the west.”

(September 24th, 2001 /House debate/Keith Martin/Canadian Alliance)

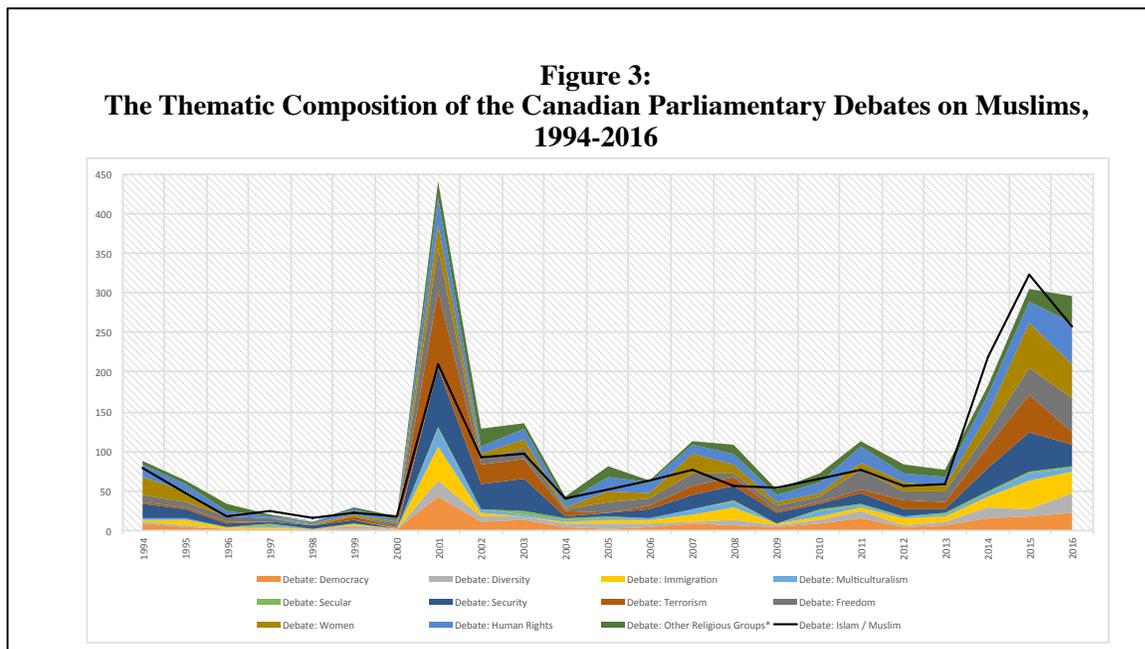
- B) Concern for Canadian Muslims: Terrorism resulting in intolerance towards Muslims

- “Our plan to fight the rise of terrorism in the world includes action to fight the rise of intolerance in our midst. Yet we are aware that because of the alleged origins of the terrorists particular attention has been drawn to Arab and Muslim communities even here in Canada. We know that some members of these communities have been singled out for hate and violence and we have been quick to denounce these actions.”...“September 11 was a chilling reminder of the consequences of hate. However there are encouraging signs as well. A recent Ipsos-Reid poll indicated that 82% of Canadians worried that Arabs and Muslims would become victims of racism and 73% felt that they had not become more suspicious of Arabs or Muslims.”

(October 2nd, 2001, House debate/Samite Bulte/Liberal)

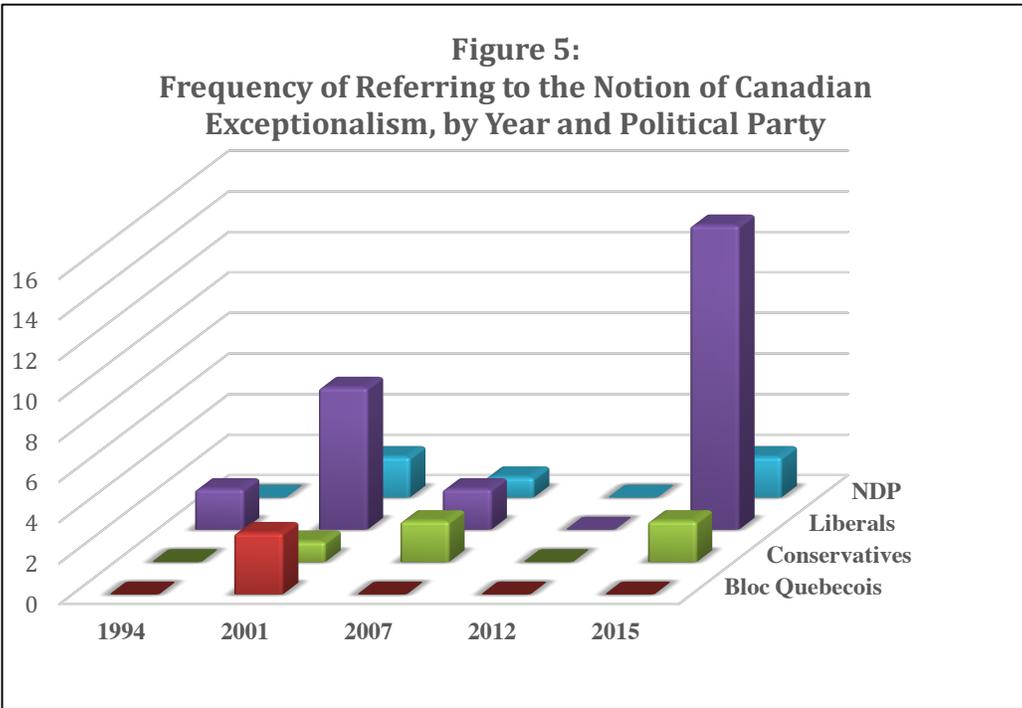
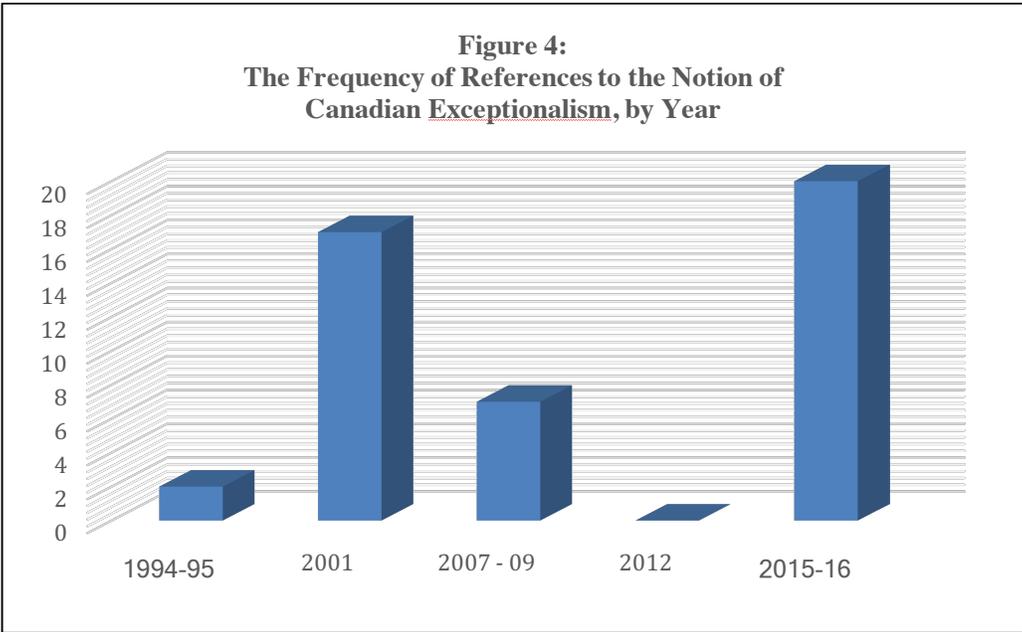
Muslims as a domestic issue: the dominant themes

This shift of focus and the increased attention to Muslims as a domestic issue involved a significant increase in the references to Islam/Muslims in these debates, in association with a few dominant themes such as: democracy, human rights, women, terrorism, diversity, multiculturalism, immigration, and so on (as illustrated in Figure 3). The detailed analysis of these themes, however, is beyond the focus of this article.



‘Canadian exceptionalism’ and ‘Muslim exceptionalism’

As Figures 4 and 5 illustrate, assumptions or narratives about Canadian exceptionalism influenced most of the parliamentary debates during the 2000s (i.e., the notion that Canada is different from other immigrant receiving countries; hence, it does not have to worry about its Muslim population). This paradigmatic environment was noticeably driven by Liberals in the post-9/11 period. For the first half of the 2010s, this argument seemed to have lost its appeal, so much so that there were virtually no references to it around 2012. However, references picked up significantly during the 2015 federal elections – primarily by Liberals, again. In contrast, the Conservatives seem to have never been too excited about this notion throughout the four highlighted periods. Also, Bloc Quebecois, which was somewhat interested in this notion and argued for it during in the post-9/11 era, seemed to have lost interest altogether in all the subsequent periods. The position of the NDP on this concept is consistent with its overall profile in that its positions do not fluctuate much with the changes in the circumstances – this is reflected in a relatively stable but limited level of support for it, while showing some modest increases in the 2015 period. The NDP position on this and other issues seems to stem from an appeal to some abstract values that should be defended regardless of circumstances; hence, the relative stability of the frequencies and the contents of the arguments on almost all issues.



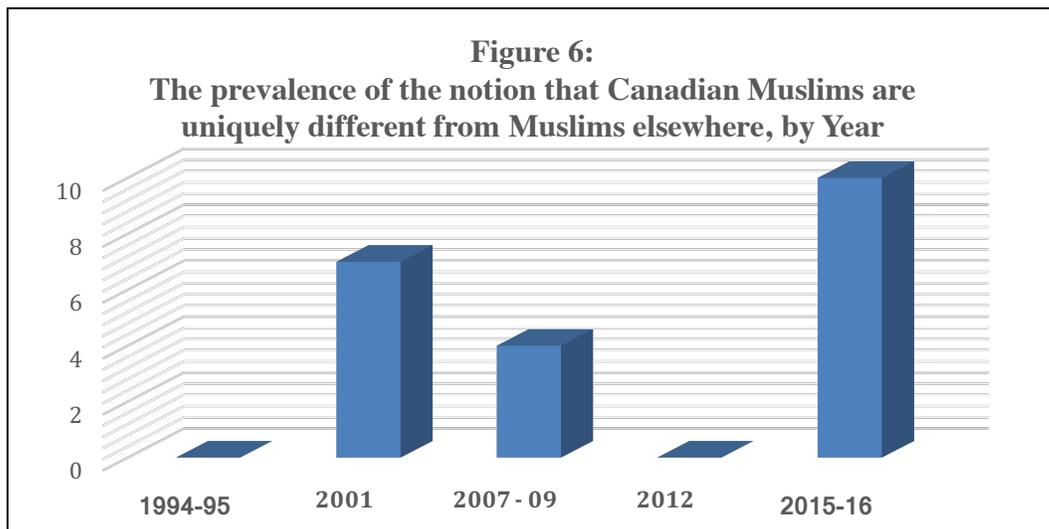
There is a parallel concept in the global debates about Muslims, which I have called the notion of ‘Muslim exceptionalism’. Based on this notion, Muslims are viewed as somehow distinct from the followers of all other religions. In the case of Muslim immigrants, this notion emphasizes the inability or unwillingness of Muslims to integrate into their new countries (see, Kazemipur, 2014, for a discussion of this concept). This concept finds its most articulate expression among the conservative and right-wing politicians in Europe, followed by certain segments of the US

population who support the Republicans. For the moment, I call this variation of the concept, a ‘negative Muslim exceptionalism’.

However, in Canada, this notion rarely makes an appearance in the parliamentary debates. One may attribute this phenomenon to the prevalence of a ‘politically-correct’ culture in Canada. Instead of that, in these debates, we see the presence of a different type of ‘Muslim exceptionalism’: one with a positive connotation where Canadian Muslims are viewed as being fundamentally different from Muslims elsewhere in their willingness to be a part of Canadian society. This argument is then used for a purpose like that of ‘Canadian exceptionalism’ in that Canada does not have to worry about its Muslim population. In other words, MP’s influenced by such a notion could discuss issues about Canadian Muslims without necessarily viewing them as a problem.

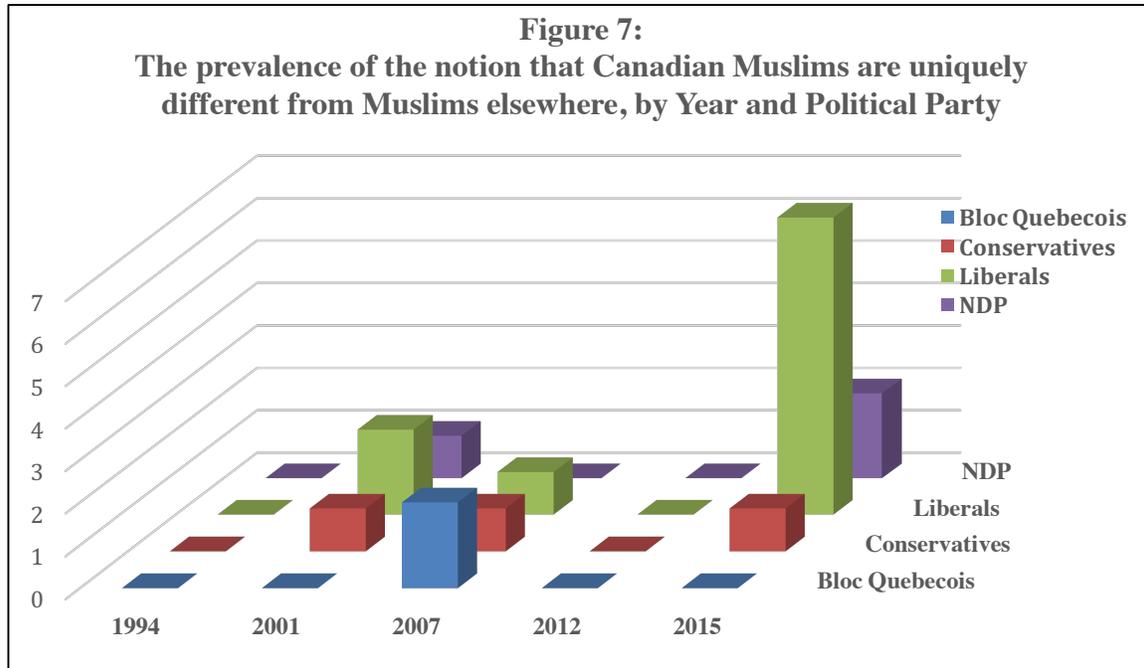
But, the relative of a ‘negative’ notion of Muslim exceptionalism does not imply an absence of such sentiments. Instead, it means that such sentiments should be captured through the ways in which the alternative variation, the ‘positive’ notion of Muslim exceptionalism, is used. Given the above, the presence or absence of a ‘negative’ Muslim exceptionalism in Canada has to be captured through the degree of support for the ‘positive’ variation of the concept; that is, if the support is lukewarm, that should be interpreted as an implicit subscription to the ‘negative’ Muslim exceptionalism and vice versa.

As Figure 6 shows, the subscription to a positive Muslim exceptionalism in Canadian parliamentary debates emerged in the post-9/11 period, remained relatively stable for that decade, and then declined in the first half of the following decade. The debates in the lead-up to the 2015 federal election, in which the Muslim-related issues played a crucial role, showed a significant surge in references to this concept.



Breaking down this surge by period and political party, as illustrated in Figure 7, shows that, both in the post-9/11 period and in 2015, Liberals have been championing this perspective. The NDP follow the same pattern, but with a significant margin difference which reflects a comparatively lower number of NDP MPs and their emphasis on defending abstract values and universal rights.

Conservatives remained largely lukewarm towards the idea – and consistently so. The Bloc Quebecois show a one-off limited interest in 2007-09 but lost that interest entirely in the following decades.



CONCLUSION

The results show that, as far as the issue of Muslims and Muslim immigrants is concerned, and unlike some European countries, the Canadian political psyche is undergoing a transformation. The main political positions are not yet solidified and the heavy weight of ‘political correctness’ has sometimes distorted the meanings and communication of MP’s words. This arguably calls for continued research and more refined research designs to capture the less visible layers and narratives that are at work.

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Appendix 1: Coding Scheme

EMERGENT THEMES

Canadian Muslims being unique-different from elsewhere
Conflict of Muslim-Canadian values
Defending Muslims by Attacking Extremists as a Minority within Muslims
 Thru Positive Essentialization of Muslims-Islam
 Thru Negative Ideologization of the Terrorists-Extremists
Attacking Muslims by Defending a Minority within Muslims
Responses to the Muslim Question -- security vs social justice
 Security Framework
 Social values -- security, peace, liberty
 Social Justice values Framework -- MC, freedom of speech, religion
Miscellaneous-to-be-coded-later
Muslims as an International - foreign policy - issue
Canadian Exceptionalism-AK

A-PRIORI THEMES-ELIMINATED

Essentialism
 Muslim Negative-Essentialism
 Muslim Balanced
Exceptionalism
 Muslim Exceptionalism
 Canadian Exceptionalism
 Combo Canadian Muslim Exceptionalism
Reductionism

A PRIORI THEMES

Democracy
 protecting democracy
 Canadian democracy
 definition of democracy
 democracy as basic right
 democracy as ethical value
 global democracy
 threats to democracy
 anti-democratic
 absence of democracy
 Muslims and democracy
 costs of democracy
 enactment of democracy
 Belief about democracy
Diversity
 diversity as value
 diversity and Muslims

diversity as societal health indicator

diversity as competency

diversity as grounded practice

diversity as societal organization

definition

diversity_state role or policy

diversity_threats to

Freedom

fundamental freedoms

political freedoms

freedom of thought

freedom of assembly

freedom of speech

freedom of conscience

freedom of expression

religious freedom

freedom as values

Canadian freedom

threats to freedoms

Freedom_state response or policy

attitudes

balancing freedom security

Muslims and freedom

defending freedoms

Freedom_personal experience

costs of freedom

freedom as fragile

erode freedoms

freedoms as inheritance

definition of freedom

freedom as goal

Human Rights

Human Rights and Muslims

Human Rights as grounded practice

Human Rights as societal health indicator

Human Rights as societal organization

Human Rights as state role or policy

Human Rights as value

Human Rights definition

Human Rights_threats to

Immigration

Immig and Muslims

Immig as grounded practice

Immig as societal health indicator

- Immig as societal organization
- Immig as value
- Immig as state role or policy
- Immig_threats to
- Immig definition
- Multiculturalism
 - Multic as state policy
 - definition
 - Multic as value
 - as measurable
 - Multic as societal organization
 - as societal health indicator
 - Multic and Muslims
 - Multic as grounded practice
 - as potential risk
 - Multic as competency
- Secularism
 - Secularism and Muslims
 - Secularism as grounded practice
 - Secularism as societal health indicator
 - Secularism as societal organization
 - Secularism as state role or policy
 - Secularism as value
 - Secularism definition
 - Secularism_threats to
- Security
 - Muslims and Security
 - Security and Canadian Exceptionalism
 - Canadian Security Frameworks
 - Security and Immigration
 - Individual or Collective Security
 - International Security
- Terrorism
 - Terrorism and Muslims
 - Terrorism as grounded practice
 - Terrorism as societal health indicator
 - Terrorism as societal organization
 - Terrorism as state role or policy
 - Terrorism as value
 - Terrorism definition
 - Terrorism_threats to
- Women
 - Women and Identity
 - Women and Muslims

Women as grounded practice
Women as competency (exceptionalism)
Women as societal organization
Women as state role or policy
Women as value
Women definition
Women_threats to