



Print Media Coverage of Muslim Canadians During Recent Federal Elections



Yasmeen Abu-Laban

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Alberta

Linda Trimble

Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Alberta

Traditionally, neither political scientists nor journalists have paid much attention to religion and electoral politics in Canada. However, the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States brought religious differences to the forefront, focusing attention on Muslims. Despite the diversity of Muslims, both globally and in Canada, stereotypes that homogenize Muslims and equate Islam with extremism persist. This article analyzes English-language print media coverage of the 2000, 2004 and 2006 Canadian general elections, with attention to both the quantity and nature of coverage given to Muslim Canadians.¹ Our findings suggest that there was more coverage of Muslim Canadians during the 2004 and 2006 elections than in 2000. However, we also find that the dominant “game frame” approach to media election coverage, which treats elections as a horse race, creates few opportunities for the kind of substantive coverage that would challenge stereotypes about, and reveal the diversity of, Canadian Muslims.

Traditionally, Canadian political scientists have paid only sporadic attention to religion in electoral politics in Canada, and likewise, religious groups have not been a sustained focus of attention for the print media’s coverage of Canadian federal elections. As religious studies professor Paul Bramadat observes, “the tendency in our society is to ignore religion only until some religious individual or group behaves, well, rather badly.”²

The September 11, 2001, attack on the United States of America, though perpetrated by a handful of individuals, was an event that brought religious divisions to the

forefront, focusing attention on a large, heterogeneous and transnational religious community: Muslims. This article examines the heightened awareness of religious differences as it played out in Canadian media accounts during electoral campaigns. Specifically, we analyze English-language print media coverage of the 2000, 2004 and 2006 Canadian general elections that includes discussions of Canadian Muslims.

In addition to assessing the quantity of coverage before and after September 11, 2001, we also assess the nature of the coverage. The media form a lens through which most



Muslims pray at a Toronto mosque in memory of lives lost in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.

citizens view Canadian society and politics. More specifically, the media are instrumental in shaping, if not constructing, the beliefs people come to form about groups with whom they may infrequently interact,³ such as religious minorities like Muslims. In his analysis of the role of the U.S. media in covering the Middle East after the Iranian revolution of 1979, Edward Said critiqued what he saw as an escalating tendency to treat Muslims as homogeneous, and to equate Islam with fundamentalism and a global threat.⁴ Misleading stereotypes, frequently drawn from American global coverage, may also be found in the Canadian media's treatment of Islam and global politics. Indeed, Karim H. Karim, in his analysis, asserts an "Islamic peril" has come to replace the "Soviet threat" of the Cold War years.⁵

Our focus on three national elections centres on the quantity of coverage given to Muslim Canadians, whether this coverage treats Muslim Canadians in a homogeneous and stereotyped way

and the implications of "framing" for minorities. Media studies suggest that the dominant frame for election coverage is the "game frame," which focuses

on who's winning, who's losing, and why. As a result, rather than being driven by issues, election coverage is driven by the "horse race" aspects of the campaign.⁶ In light of the preceding discussion, we expect to find more coverage of Canadian Muslims during the 2004 and 2006 elections than in 2000. However, we also expect that the dominant game frame creates few opportunities for substantive coverage that would challenge stereotypes and reveal diversity.

Background

Muslim Canadians are a heterogeneous community, marked by generational and demographic diversity. Sustained through distinct waves of immigration dating back to the late nineteenth century,⁷ Muslim Canadians exhibit important cohort differences,⁸ belong to a variety of branches within Islam (e.g. Sunni, Shi'i, Druze, Ismaili, etc.),

and vary by country of origin, ethnicity, language and culture, along with class and gender.⁹ As illustrated in Table 1, Muslims today comprise the largest non-Christian community in Canada, standing at 2% of the Canadian population.

Since September 11, 2001, there has been a revival of essentialist arguments positing a "clash of civilizations" between Christianity and Islam. Muslim Canadians (and those perceived as Muslim) have faced an increased risk of discrimination and violence from some co-citizens.¹⁰

**Table 1
Major Religious Denominations in Canada, 2001 (as % of population)**

Christian faith communities	
Roman Catholic	43.2
Protestant	29.2
Christian Orthodox	1.6
Christian, not included elsewhere	2.6
Non-Christian faith communities	
Muslim	2.0
Jewish	1.1
Buddhist	1.0
Hindu	1.0
Sikh	0.9
No religious affiliation	
No religion	16.2

Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census: Analysis Series Religions in Canada, Catalogue No. 96F0030XIE2001015 (2003)



This article's authors examine coverage of Muslim Canadians in eight newspapers at recent federal elections. They conclude that election coverage creates few opportunities to challenge stereotypes and reveal the diversity of this heterogeneous and transnational religious community.

Since 2001, Muslim Canadian organizations and community leaders have mobilized to counter stereotypes, fear, hate crimes and racial profiling directed at Muslims generally and to attempt to broaden dialogue both among Canadian Muslims and between Muslim and non-Muslim Canadians.¹¹ In relation to Canadian elections, comparative forms and rates of participation of Muslim Canadians are difficult to establish accurately because of the relatively small numbers captured through standard survey designs. However, Hamdani estimates that voter turnout in federal elections has been lower for Muslim Canadians than that for Canadians overall, standing at only 42% in the 2000 election (compared to 61.2% of all Canadians) and improving somewhat in 2004 to 46.5% (compared to 60.9% of all Canadians).¹² Compared to their numbers in the overall population, Muslim Canadians are under-represented as elected officials.¹³

As shown in Table 2, Canadian Muslims are concentrated in certain provinces. They are most numerous in the province of Ontario, followed by

Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta. Within these provinces, Muslim Canadians are further concentrated in Toronto, followed by Montréal, Vancouver, Ottawa, Calgary and Edmonton. Combined, these six Canadian cities are home to 85.2% of the Canadian Muslim population, with Toronto alone housing 43.8% of Muslim Canadians.¹⁴

Methodology

Our selection of newspapers relates to the demographic concentration of Muslim Canadians in specific cities. Thus, in addition to addressing the two English-language "national" papers, *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, we chose the largest English-language dailies in the cities with the largest Muslim populations. These are

The Gazette [Montréal], *The Toronto Star*, *The Ottawa Citizen*, *The Calgary Herald*, *The Edmonton Journal* and *The Vancouver Sun*. Our coverage for each election runs from the day the writ was dropped, until one week after each election.¹⁵ Any story with the word Muslim or Islam (or variation of Islam) was included in the sample if the topic was the Canadian election, regardless of whether or not it identified Muslims in Canada as "Muslim Canadians." This search yielded 67 articles.

A detailed coding instrument was used to provide a systematic description of the location (in the paper) and content of these news stories. The "demographic" characteristics of each news story were classified based on the

Muslim Canadians are a heterogeneous community, marked by generational and demographic diversity.

newspaper in which it was published, the date of publication, the location in the newspaper, the type of story (e.g. news, column, editorial), and the main focus of the story. As well, each article was coded based on where it mentioned Muslims or Islam – in the headline or lead paragraph for

Table 2
Concentration of Muslim Canadian Population by Province, 2001

Canada	579,640
Ontario	352,530
Quebec	108,620
British Columbia	56,220
Alberta	49,045

Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census: Analysis Series Religions in Canada, Catalogue No. 96F0030XIE2001015 (2003)

instance – and the role of Muslims or Islam in the story (integral, important or tangential) was assessed. By applying critical discourse analysis techniques¹⁶ to the coding, we gauged whether Muslims were depicted as homogeneous, identified only as a religious group, or cast as socially conservative or extremist in orientation. Finally, we looked at the extent to which the news stories conveyed a message of inclusion of Muslim Canadians by identifying them as Canadians or

Canadian citizens, and participants in federal elections.

Amount and placement of coverage

Table 3 indicates which of the newspapers in our sample considered Muslim Canadians important to election coverage. The majority of the attention came from two newspapers, the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Star*, which accounted for almost two thirds of the

stories overall, and 94% of the articles mentioning Muslim Canadians published during the 2004 election. While the overall number of articles is not large, the pattern over time confirms our expectation that there was significantly more coverage after September 11, 2001, than before. Table 3 shows that there were only 13 stories published in 2000 (19% of the sample); this increased to 16 in 2004 (24%) and more than doubled, to 38, in 2006 (57%). However, more news stories mentioning “Muslims” do not by any means equal more substantive coverage.

As Figure 1 shows, Muslim Canadians were simply not in the election news frame in 2000; indeed, Muslims were tangential to the story in 92% of the newspaper articles – merely mentioned in passing, as one of many religious groups, in a discussion about the role of religion in politics – and were never named in the headlines. As well, Muslims were neither the focus of, nor important to, many of the 2006 news stories that mentioned them. In the 2006 election, Muslims were important or integral to 39% of the news stories,

Figure 1
Percentage of Stories Mentioning Muslims with a Substantive Focus on Muslims, by Election

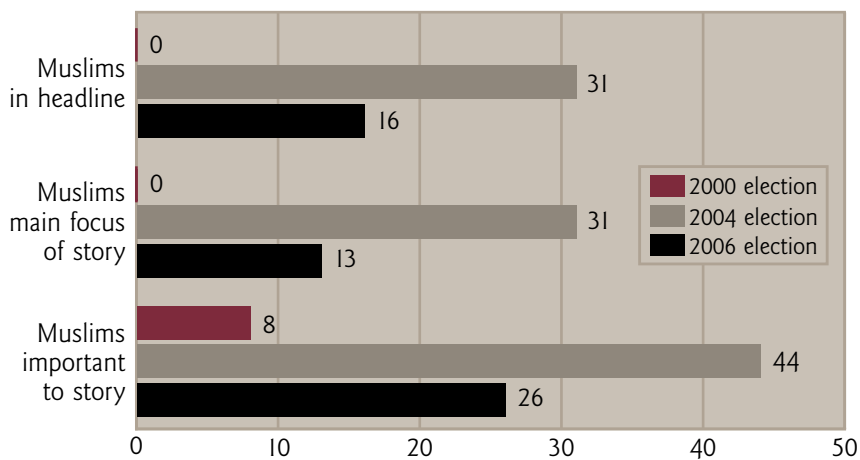


Table 3
Number (%) of Stories Mentioning Muslims by Newspaper and Election

Newspaper	2000 election n (%)	2004 election n (%)	2006 election n (%)	Row totals (%)
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	3 (23%)	9 (56%)	10 (26%)	22 (33%)
<i>Toronto Star</i>	3 (23%)	6 (38%)	12 (32%)	21 (31%)
<i>National Post</i>	7 (54%)	1 (6%)	4 (10%)	12 (18%)
<i>Ottawa Citizen</i>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (16%)	6 (9%)
<i>Edmonton Journal</i>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (8%)	3 (5%)
[Montréal] <i>Gazette</i>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	2 (3%)
<i>Vancouver Sun</i>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	1 (1%)
<i>Calgary Herald</i>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Column totals	13 (19%)	16 (24%)	38 (57%)	67 (100%)

and recognized in only 16% of the headlines. However, as Figure 1 shows, it was during the 2004 election that the newspapers provided a substantive focus on Muslims. In almost one third of the stories mentioning Muslims in 2004, they were named in the headline, a powerful signifier of their importance to the news story.¹⁷ As well, in 2004, Muslims were either the main focus, or an important focus, of the story in 75% of the coverage. This kind of placement and distribution of the coverage begs the question: why were Muslim Canadians considered by the media to be “in the game” in 2004?

Game framing of election news: When are Muslim Canadians in the game?

That the main topic of 67% of the news stories mentioning Muslims or Islam during these three elections was the electoral game, or “horse race,” is demonstrated in Table 4. A play-by-play commentary on who is ahead in the polls, or on patterns of voter support for various political parties, puts the spotlight on leaders, parties, candidates and voters. Muslim Canadians were in the frame in 2004 because they were identified as, and appealed to, as Canadians, and as voters.

Figure 2 highlights the dramatic changes in the portrayal of Muslims by election news coverage over time. In the 2000 election, very few of the stories mentioning Muslims identified them as Canadian citizens (only 15%) or discussed their role as voters (8%). In contrast, post-9/11 election coverage has described Muslims as Canadians by referring to their organizations by name or mentioning their participation in Canadian elections as voters or candidates. In particular, the 2004 coverage represents an attempt by the

Table 4
Main Topic of News Story by Election (reported as percentages of all election stories mentioning Muslims)

Main topic of story	2000 election n (%)	2004 election n (%)	2006 election n (%)	Row totals n (%)
Domestic issues	0 (0%)	2 (13%)	6 (16%)	8 (12%)
Foreign policy or security issues	1 (8%)	3 (18%)	7 (18%)	11 (16%)
The campaign game*	9 (69%)	11 (69%)	25 (66%)	45 (67%)
Other	3 (23%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (5%)

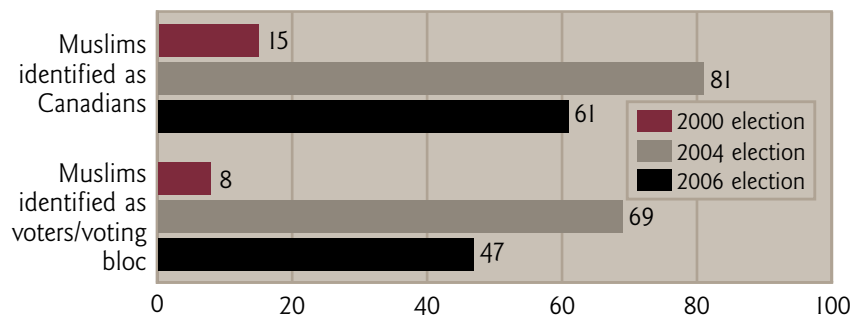
*This category includes stories focusing on polling data, voting blocs, regional distribution of party support, and/or party appeals to particular groups of voters.

Globe and Mail and the *Toronto Star*, which produced 15 of the 16 articles mentioning Muslims during the 2004 election, to make gestures of recognition towards this community. Muslims were explicitly identified as Canadian citizens by 81% of the coverage in the 2004 election. Moreover, 69% of the articles mentioning Muslims in 2004 identified them as voters, or as a voting bloc, and several of these articles suggested Muslim Canadians had the power to shape electoral outcomes in key constituencies. Headlines such as “Why Muslims should vote”¹⁸ and “Muslims urged to go to the polls”¹⁹ indicated the role of Muslim Canadian

voters was taken seriously by the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*. A news story in the *Globe and Mail* about the importance of the “immigrant vote” to the 2004 election noted the growing size of the Muslim Canadian community and quoted political scientist Henry Jacek: “I think, since 9/11, they are extraordinarily political. They are sensitive to the security measures in North America I think a lot of them are going to vote.”²⁰

While Muslim Canadians may be included in the frame as voters under particular circumstances, such as

Figure 2
Percentage of Stories Identifying Muslims as Canadians/Voters, by Election



post-9/11 appeals to the community to exercise its franchise strategically, the dominance of the game frame tends to divert attention from substantive campaign issues or policy claims. Indeed, we found that less than a third of the coverage mentioning Muslims focused on domestic or foreign policy debates (see Table 4). Consequently, the news stories mentioning Muslim Canadians afforded little opportunity to educate Canadians about the heterogeneity of this community, or to challenge negative stereotypes of Muslims.

Portrayal of Muslim Canadians in election coverage

Based on the literature about media coverage of Muslims, we examined each of the news stories for damaging mischaracterizations and stereotypes. One of the dominant misconceptions about Muslims is that they are homogeneous in their faith, ethnicity, language and culture. Table 5 indicates that this one-dimensional portrayal of Muslims was firmly embedded

in the election news stories, particularly for the 2000 election, in which every story mentioning Muslims approached them as a homogeneous group. As noted, Muslims were merely mentioned in most of these stories, as one of many religions with members whose views were relevant to the campaign. The 2004 and 2006 elections feature a very different portrayal of Muslim Canadians, as illustrated in Table 5. While the complexity and diversity of Muslim Canadians continued to be largely ignored by news reports, election news articles did not just position Muslims as a religious community, as they did in 2000. Approximately two thirds of the coverage in 2004 and 2006 characterized Muslims as voters, as members of political organizations, as candidates, or as concerned citizens.

Photo: CP/The St. John's Telegram (Keith Gosse)



A family originally from Bangladesh takes the citizenship oath at a ceremony in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Table 5
Portrayal of Muslims in Canadian Election News Stories, by Election (reported as percentages of election articles mentioning Muslims)

Portrayal of Muslims in the news story*	2000 election n (%)	2004 election n (%)	2006 election n (%)	Totals n (%)
Muslims portrayed as a homogeneous group	13 (100%)	13 (81%)	30 (79%)	56 (84%)
Muslims described only as a religious group	10 (77%)	5 (31%)	14 (37%)	29 (43%)
Muslims depicted as socially conservative	1 (8%)	1 (6%)	8 (21%)	10 (15%)
Muslims associated with extremism	3 (23%)	1 (6%)	11 (29%)	15 (22%)

*Note that these are not mutually exclusive portrayals, as Muslims may have been depicted in more than one, if not all, of these ways within a single news story.

Very few of the articles cast Muslim Canadians as socially conservative, with the highest percentage (21%) published during the 2006 election, when Muslims and other religious groups reacted to the same-sex marriage issue. However, the association of Muslims and Islam with extremism comes out sharply in 2000 and particularly 2006. While in 2004 Muslims were linked with extremism in only one article (6%), three articles (23%) associated Islam with religious fundamentalism during the 2000 election.²¹ In 2006, 11 articles, almost a third of the total number of articles mentioning Muslims, depicted them as radicals, even as terrorists. Much of this increase in 2006 came from seven articles (almost a fifth of the coverage) that focused on the false accusation

that a candidate described his nomination win as a “victory for Islam.”²² Similarly, two articles identified a political party supporter as a “suspected terrorist.”²³ More ominously, a *National*

There was very little space devoted to contesting negative portrayals and reflecting the diversity of a community with deep historical roots in Canada.

Post column declared that “radical Islamists have declared war on all secular democracies, including Canada” and thus constitute a “world-wide Islamo-fascist threat to democracy” courtesy of “a war the jihadists deliver to your doorstep.”²⁴ This example is indicative of the *National Post*’s approach to the Muslim Canadian community, as 42% of this paper’s election articles associated Muslims/Islam with extremism, compared with 9% of *Globe and Mail* stories and 14% of *Toronto Star* stories.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the 2000, 2004 and 2006 elections demonstrates that there has been an increase over time

in the amount of newspaper coverage given to Muslim Canadians during federal election campaigns, which we suggest can be related to the impact of September 11, 2001. Overall, our findings indicate that while increased media attention has afforded new recognition of Muslim Canadians as voters and candidates, the dominant game frame of election coverage presents both opportunities and constraints for portraying the complexity of Canadian Muslims. As such, while the English-language treatment of Muslim Canadians during elections, particularly the 2004 election, opened up modest opportunities to contemplate their role as voters, there was very little space devoted to contesting negative portrayals and reflecting the diversity of a community with deep historical roots in Canada. In fact, the 2006 coverage stands out for reinforcing long-standing stereotypes.

Analysts like Karim H. Karim have shown that in covering global events, the Canadian media have homogenized and stereotyped Muslims, and in the process constructed an

“Islamic peril.” As it stands, at least in the English-language Canadian electoral press coverage we addressed, the game frame presents mixed results for re-examining this misleading portrayal. Given the importance of the media in shaping the views Canadians hold of each other, the limitations of the game frame need to be considered by journalists, community activists, politicians and citizens seeking better understanding of Canadian society. ❌

NOTES

1. The authors thank M.A. student Dawn Moffat for excellent research assistance.
2. Paul Bramadat, “Re-Visioning Religion in the Contemporary Period: The United Church of Canada’s Ethnic Ministries Unit,” *Canadian Diversity* Vol. 4, No. 3 (2005), p. 59.
3. Frances Henry and Carol Tator, *Discourses of Domination: Racial Bias in the Canadian English-Language Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 5.
4. Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).
5. Karim H. Karim, *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 2003).
6. Linda Trimble and Shannon Sampert, “Who’s in the Game? The Framing of Election 2000 by *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 2004), pp. 51–71.
7. Baha Abu-Laban, *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree: The Arabs in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980), pp. 1–81.
8. Sharon McIrvine Abu-Laban, “Family and Religion among Muslim Immigrants and Their Descendants,” in Earle H. Waugh, Sharon McIrvine Abu-Laban and Regula B. Qureshi, eds., *Muslim Families in North America* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1991), pp. 6–31.

9. Sheila McDonough and Homa Hoodfar, "Muslims in Canada: From Ethnic Groups to Religious Community," in Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, eds., *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada* (Toronto: Pearson Education Canada, 2005), pp. 133–153.
10. Yasmeen Abu-Laban, "Liberalism, Multiculturalism and the Problem of Essentialism," *Citizenship Studies* Vol. 6, No. 4 (December 2002), pp. 459–482.
11. McDonough and Hoodfar, "Muslims in Canada," pp. 137–141.
12. Daood Hamdani, *Muslim Women: From Polling Booths to Parliament* (Canadian Council of Muslim Women: March 2005), pp. 1–9.
13. Hamdani, *Muslim Women*, pp. 1–11.
14. Adapted from Peter Beyer, "Appendix: Demographics of Religious Identification in Canada," in Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, eds., *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada* (Toronto: Pearson Education Canada, 2005), p. 240.
15. Specifically, utilizing the Factiva Database, our search dates for the 2000 election were from October 22 to December 4, 2000; for the 2004 election, May 23 to July 5, 2004; and for the 2006 election, November 30, 2005, to January 30, 2006. The search terms employed were "election and federal and Muslim"; "election and Muslim"; "candidate and Muslim"; "vot* and Muslim"; "election and federal and Islam*"; "election and Islam*"; "candidate and Islam*"; "vot* and Islam*".
16. Teun A. van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 6.
17. van Dijk, *Racism and the Press*, pp. 50–51.
18. *The Globe and Mail*, June 7, 2004, p. A19; column by Mohamed Elmasry, National President of the Canadian Islamic Congress.
19. *The Globe and Mail*, June 4, 2004, p. A8.
20. Gloria Galloway, "Sikhs reach beyond Liberals as political influence grows; Canadian-born children of immigrants are switching allegiance, poll suggests," *The Globe and Mail*, May 25, 2004, p. A9.
21. Two articles discussed a Liberal candidate who allegedly attended an "Islamic rally with signs reading 'Death to Israel'." This was discussed in a *National Post* editorial (November 16, 2000, p. A19) which declared, "Every party attracts its share of nuts."
22. Glen McGregor, "'Mixing of religion and democracy' stirs controversy: Group claims Liberal Toronto-area candidate said nomination was 'victory for Islam,'" *The Ottawa Citizen*, December 21, 2005, p. A5. Despite the controversy, which Omar Alghabra feared would "derail" his campaign, he was elected in Mississauga–Erindale.
23. Elizabeth Thompson, "Suspected terrorist endorses Bloc," *The Ottawa Citizen*, December 6, 2005, p. A4; also, Tu Thanh Ha, "Duceppe dances around questions," *The Globe and Mail*, January 5, 2006, p. A6.
24. Robert Fulford, "Do not disturb," *The National Post*, December 31, 2005, p. A17.