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## Religious behavior and European veil bans

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### ABSTRACT

Do societal religious practices affect European policies towards Muslim veils? We argue that public religious behavior has a substantial effect on European countries' and regions' decisions regarding whether or not to ban the wearing of the veil in public spaces. Using data from the European Social Survey, we find that countries with higher levels of religious attendance are substantially *less* likely to enact veil bans than those where religious attendance is less common. We augment these findings with data from Switzerland, where variation across subnational units parallels the patterns witnessed in Europe more broadly: aggregate religious attendance decreases the likelihood of both voting on veil bans and actually enacting them. In environments characterized by a salient secular-religious divide, high levels of religious attendance lead to greater support for the public expression of religion – even for religious outgroups – and this support is often channeled into more accommodating policies towards religious expression.

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## Introduction

In May 2019, the Austrian government passed a law prohibiting the wearing of headscarves in kindergartens. The right-wing populist Freedom Party, the force behind the legislation, proclaimed<sup>1</sup>: “With this, we are sending out a significant signal for more freedom in our schools and against political Islam as well as against the instrumentalization of young people.” However, this is far from a recent phenomenon. As far back as 2004, France banned the wearing of veils for religious reasons in public as part of a legislative offensive on visible religious symbols in schools. In 2010, French President Sarkozy defended additional legislation outlawing burqas as “a violation of ‘the French [R]epublic’s idea of women’s dignity’” (Ware 2014, 234). Others voiced security concerns: in 2016, former Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga argued, “Anybody could be under a veil or under a burqa,” she said. “You could carry a rocket launcher under your veil” (Martyn-Hempill 2016). In March 2021, in the midst of state mandates to wear face coverings to protect against COVID-19, the majority of Swiss voted to ban the wearing of niqabs and burqas throughout Switzerland. In fact, 14 of the 45 European countries, many of which are historic bastions of civil liberties, such as the Netherlands and Germany, ban female veiling in a range of public spaces. At the same time, countries

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with less pristine track records of protecting religious freedom – such as Armenia – and with considerably larger Muslim populations – such as the United Kingdom – often lack any such legislation.

The phenomenon of European bans on female Muslim veiling defies simple explanation (Brems 2014). Ferrari and Pastorelli, for example, in their documentation of European veil bans find neither a consensus over type of ban nor even justification for it at the country-level (Ferrari and Pastorelli 2016). There is not a one-to-one link between socioeconomic factors and countries' decisions to enact a ban; neither Muslim population nor GDP per capita perfectly predicts the pattern; for instance, there are bans in Bosnia–Herzegovina, Denmark, and Spain, but no bans in Hungary or Slovakia. Nor do veil bans fit the general pattern of state-led religious repression; for instance, Austria has veil bans, but neighboring Poland does not. Finally, while the frequency of veil bans appears to correspond with the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, the relationship is less straightforward empirically; Austria and Germany have veil bans, but Poland and Hungary do not. We argue that *religion*, often overlooked as a determinant of secular institutional outcomes (Grzymala-Busse 2012), has a significant effect on the presence or absence of veil bans. In environments characterized by a salient secular-religious divide, high levels of religious attendance lead to greater support for the public expression of religion – even for religious outgroups – and this support is often channeled into more accommodating policies towards religious expression.

Veil bans have been explored primarily within the context of state integration of religious minorities (Klausen 2005a; Lépinard 2015) despite lying at the intersection of individual-level religious identity, attitudes, and behavior. Similarly, when addressed within the right-wing populism literature, veil bans or bans on minority religious practices are often treated simply as a natural byproduct of right-wing populist success Lettinga and Saharso (2012). Moreover, religious repression in general and veil bans specifically are nearly always studied at the national or cross-national levels, ignoring the critical individual and local levels where popular movements that seek to erect barriers to religious practice start (Brems, 2014; O'Neill et al. 2015; Sarkissian 2015).

We argue that a key component of understanding the phenomenon of veil bans is missed by not incorporating societal religious *behaviors* alongside state-level variables. We build on the significant scholarship tying religious behavior and political attitudes together to explain why some European countries regulate the Muslim veil while others do not (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2014; Djupe and Calfano 2013). We argue that rather than interpreting state regulation of Muslim veiling as an extension of anti-Muslim attitudes, the decision to regulate veiling generally reflects pro-secularization attitudes rather than inter-denominational disputes. The paper is structured as follows: We first provide an overview of veil bans across Europe between 2004 and 2018, the final year for which we have cross-national data on religious behavior. We then use measures of aggregate religious behaviors to examine the role of public opinion in the enactment of veil bans across the region. We finally extend this analysis to a case study of Switzerland,<sup>2</sup> chosen for its religious pluralism and decentralized federal structure, as well as unique panel data which allow for more fine-grained testing of these hypotheses. We find that at national and sub-national levels, veil bans do not positively

correlate with high levels of religious practice; rather, they are *less* likely to occur where people attend church more frequently.

## The veil and Europe

Conflicts between Muslim practices and the state in Europe are a largely modern phenomenon. In general, the vast majority of Europe's Muslim populations are twentieth-century developments resulting from colonial and historical alliances, in addition to the aftermath of World War II. Most European countries faced post-war labor shortages and Muslim workers from Turkey, Syria, Tunisia, Algeria, and elsewhere rushed to fill the void (Laurence 2011). Starting in the 2010s, the refugee crisis abruptly funneled millions more Muslims into Europe, often to places that had never experienced such religious diversity. Across Europe, the integration of Muslim populations has proven challenging (Dancygier 2017; Adida et al. 2016). In July 2013, after police carried out an identity check on a Muslim woman wearing a full veil, riots broke out in Muslim French suburbs for two days (Chrisafis 2013). Muslim veiling practices have become a lightning rod for issues of integration and discrimination on the battlefield of national policies of secularism.

Initially, bans on Muslim religious practices were framed as a battle between modern European secular values and “old-fashioned” Muslim ones (Fetzer and Soper 2005). Casanova (2007, 66) argues that:

the problems posed by the incorporation of Muslim immigrants [became] consciously or unconsciously associated with seemingly related and vexatious issues concerning the role of religion in the public sphere, which European societies assumed they had already solved according to the liberal, secular norm of privatization of religion.

Regarding veils, Behiery (2013, 413) similarly claims, “[t]he Muslim veil has constituted a symbol to denote Muslim religious fanaticism and misogyny, in contrast to Western freedom, feminism and democracy.” In other words, the Muslim veil is often framed as a threat to Western culture. Saiya and Manchanda (2020) find, however, that despite the security premise for banning facial coverings, “states that enforce veil bans are indeed statistically much more likely to experience more and more lethal Islamist terrorist attacks than countries where such laws do not exist” (Saiya and Manchanda 2020, 1781).

Additional literature focuses more specifically on the conflict between secular values and overt religiosity from migrant populations (Klausen 2005b; Barras 2013; Adida et al. 2016; Scott 2009), religious freedom and human rights (Edmunds 2012), or the role that national political culture plays in explaining variation in veil bans (Behiery 2013; Helbling 2014). Similarly, (Fox and Tabory 2008, 18) find that “*anti-religious secular ideologies* are also a potential source of discrimination,” concerning discrimination against Jewish practices. Baehr and Gordon (2013, 1. p. 249) argue that opposition to the burqa in Europe, but not the United States, is based on the extent to which social theorists have created a culture where “the provocative display of religious symbols in public” is acceptable (Baehr and Gordon 2013, 249). A rare example of work that examines individual-level religiosity and attitudes towards the veil is Van Der Noll, Rohmann, and Saroglou (2018), which finds that societal religiosity, measured by belief in God, corresponds with greater acceptance for the public wearing of religious symbols.

A large body of literature makes clear the connections between religiosity and political attitudes (Sobolewska et al. 2015; Gaskins 2019; Wald, Silverman, and Fridy 2005). The positive link between religious attendance and civic participation is well-established (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Campbell 2013) and political participation in the American (Wald, Silverman, and Fridy 2005) and European contexts (Sobolewska et al. 2015). Literature on religious tolerance underlines a connection between orthodox beliefs and intolerance towards other religious groups Jelen and Wilcox (1990) and McCleary and Barro (2006). Steiber (1980) demonstrates that while “Church activity exhibits mixed effects across categories of religious preference,” in contrast, “personal piety has a uniformly negative impact on tolerance” (Steiber 1980, 811). Similarly, Karpov (2002) finds that religious participation had no direct effect on tolerance, but that theocratic orientations do. Other scholarship addressing the relationship between religious practices and attitudes suggests that religious practices are associated with discomfort (Putnam and Campbell 2010), prejudice (Scheepers et al. 2002; Golebiowska 2004), and even support for violence towards other religions (Ginges, Hansen, and Norenzayan 2009). A final body of literature addresses the relationship between individual religious behavior and institutional regulation of religion, such as research that demonstrates that state-level religious regulation tends to dampen religious behavior, especially minority religious behavior (Fox and Tabory 2008; Gill 2008; McCleary and Barro 2006). We fill a void in the literature by disaggregating religiosity by type and focusing on religious behavior in the form of attendance, which we argue offers different insights into individual attitudes than prayer or beliefs. How does this relationship extend to environments where the stakes of interreligious competition are lower, including those where fewer citizens identify as religious, where religion and state are more separated, or where the public expression of religion is subject to government regulation?

We theorize that in the context of veil bans, a secular-religious cleavage may provide more insight than a Christian-Muslim cleavage. In this case, the relevant religious divide is not so much between competing religious groups as it is between religious and non-religious individuals (Layman 2001; Foner and Alba 2008; Van der Noll and Saroglou 2015). Carol, Helbling, and Michalowski (2015) find that religious natives are more approving of out-group rights than non-religious natives. Similarly, Saroglou, Corneille, and Van Cappellen (2009) find that among survey respondents in Belgium, anti-religious attitudes are correlated with negative attitudes towards the Muslim veil, while higher levels of spirituality are correlated with positive attitudes towards the veil. In secularized environments, religious people might sympathize with religious minorities’<sup>3</sup> desires to display or practice their faiths openly, even if they do not hold particularly positive views towards those groups themselves.<sup>4</sup> In a survey of Swiss respondents, Helbling (2014, 249) demonstrates that religious people are neither more nor less opposed to headscarves than nonreligious people: “while they [religious people] are opposed to ‘other cultures’, they accept ‘other religious practices’ in a secular society in which all religious groups constitute minorities.”

In numerous contexts, scholars have cast doubt upon the assumption that religiosity (presumably, in these settings, *Christian* religiosity) will invariably lead to negative attitudes towards the veil (Saroglou, Lamkaddem, and Van Pachterbeke 2009; Helbling and Traunmüller 2016) or other minority religious practices (Fox and Topor 2021). Building on this literature, we argue that among domestic Christian populations, a solidarity

mechanism is at work that motivates these populations to resist regulations on religious behavior, even if the specific regulations only directly affect Muslims. Consequently, Christians who engage in religious practices more frequently will be more supportive of Muslim religious practices and less in favor of the regulation of religion in the public sphere. We argue that when (publicly) religious people see restrictions being placed on the religious expression of minority groups, they are more likely to sympathize with the restricted group than are less religious people. We propose that this logic can also apply to the aggregate policy level. In places where more people participate in communal religious practice, governments are less likely to restrict other types of public religious expression, such as wearing veils.

We suspect that the religiosity of domestic populations translates into political outcomes regarding veil policy. Following Grzymala-Busse (2015), we do not assume that religiosity alone is sufficient to ensure that religious institutions will determine policy; it is likely, however, that where the population is more religiously observant, governments will be less likely to enact veil bans. Depending on the prevalence of public religious practice, veil bans receive more support or face steeper opposition, even from non-Muslims. For our purposes, a measure of religious attendance is the most suitable indicator among many subdimensions of “religiosity,” as it is much more *public* and communal than other religious behaviors or attitudes, and thus more analogous to public displays of religion like Islamic veils.

Consequently, we hypothesize that countries with higher levels of religious attendance will be less likely to ban veils than those with lower levels of attendance.

### **Alternative hypotheses**

Besides religious behavior, we acknowledge that other mechanisms may be at work and control for them in our models. More specifically, patterns of private religious practice may also affect state policy. Additional scholarship suggests that attendance and prayer may have different relationships with political behavior. McCleary and Barro (2006), in a study across 68 cases, find that “[g]reater religious pluralism raises attendance at formal services but has no significant effects on religious beliefs or self-identification as religious” (McCleary and Barro 2006, 149). O’Neill et al. (2015) find that in Quebec, women’s attitudes towards the wearing of a veil by Muslim women are unaffected by their personal religiosity (O’Neill et al. 2015). Saroglou, Corneille, and Van Cappellen (2009) find that while anti-religious thinking is positively correlated with anti-veiling attitudes, spirituality “predicted more tolerance of this symbol in the public domain, and both religious and spiritual majority members tended to hold positive representations of the veil as a religious/spiritual symbol” (Saroglou, Lamkaddem, and Van Pachterbeke 2009, 427). Therefore, while we employ religious attendance as a public religious practice, similar to veiling, we interpret prayer as an internal religious practice that corresponds more to private beliefs and therefore include it as a control.

Additionally, a country’s religious composition could play a role in whether or not it regulates the Muslim veil. Among Christian faiths, some scholars argue that Catholics demonstrate more religious tolerance than Protestants or Orthodox Christians (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011). Scholars have also explored the relationships between affiliation, religiosity, religious ideology, and attitudes towards immigrants (Bleich 1998;

Carol, Helbling, and Michalowski 2015; Bohman and Hjern 2014). Bohman and Hjern (2014) find that religious individuals are less opposed to immigrants than are non-religious individuals and that Protestants are more tolerant than Catholics. The distribution of affiliation across cases, therefore, may also influence whether or not a state enacts a veil ban.

The significant institutional role that the constitutional provision of separation of church and state plays in determining attitudes towards religious minority practices has been well-established (Fetzer and Soper 2005; Laurence 2011; Helbling 2014). This may contribute to an environment where the public display of religious symbols is more tolerated than in others. In places like France, high levels of secularism may serve as a mechanism driving or justifying anti-Muslim sentiment (Adida et al. 2016); for more religious people, this force might not be present. In fact, some authors (Carol, Helbling, and Michalowski 2015, 647) have argued that in the increasingly secular countries of (Western) Europe, religious Christians<sup>5</sup> may even view Muslims as potential allies “in order to strengthen the position of religion” and consequently may be *more* supportive of Muslim religious rights compared to their non-religious counterparts. It may therefore be the case that countries that regulate religion more will be more likely to ban veils than countries that regulate religion less.

### Switzerland and the veil

What, however, happens to our predictions when nationality is held constant and veil bans are explored at the subnational level? As discussed above, much of the literature on veil bans understandably focuses on cross-national comparisons. In practice, however, veil ban initiatives frequently start at the local level before gaining national political traction. This is the case in Switzerland, where ground-level support for a ban on veils increased until the local ban enacted in the canton of Ticino in 2016 became a federal ban in 2021. Therefore, a subnational analysis is not only relevant but potentially illuminating. Switzerland presents an ideal case study to test these hypotheses at the subnational level because of its unique federal structure, variation in populist electoral success, and its subnational variation in religious policy. These features allow us to hold national-level indicators constant, while focusing on variation in aggregate behaviors and subnational outcomes.

Switzerland’s 26 cantons, many of which roughly adhere to sixteenth-century boundaries, are still significantly differentiated along religious and linguistic lines – which frequently overlap – such as the Italian Catholic canton Ticino or the German Protestant canton Zürich (Steinberg 2015). Although the Swiss constitution provides a guarantee for freedom of religion, at the canton level, “there is great variance in the level of separation between church and state, in the extent of religious liberties, and in the dominant branch of Christianity from canton to canton” (Dodd 2015, 4).

The Swiss case is therefore an ideal case with which to explore how subnational bans on veils can provide a path to national bans. The level of autonomy afforded to each canton with respect to religion-state issues in some ways resembles variation across countries, but the national culture of Switzerland as well as its federal institutions is able to be held constant. We can therefore examine the effects of canton-level differences in factors like levels of religious practice or support for right-wing populist parties. The



latter is particularly interesting in the Swiss case: the Swiss People's Party (SVP) has enjoyed considerable electoral success for two decades, but cantons differ widely in their enthusiasm for the SVP. Since the party has taken a strong stand on the issue of headscarves and veils, it is possible that support for the party will be closely linked to veil bans.

In 2016, Ticino became the first canton to ban the wearing of headscarves in public. Soon after, St. Gallen followed (Helbling 2014). Four additional cantons held votes on whether to ban the veil but were unable to clear the necessary threshold to legalize a ban. By 2021, the ban on the wearing of niqabs and burqas became a national one. The subnational variation in the enactment of veil bans in Switzerland offers unusual potential to reveal what factors can contribute to forming a critical mass across diverse populations to support veil bans. We use a similar approach to Helbling and Traunmüller (2016) in leveraging variation of religious characteristics of cantons to explain attitudes towards Islam; however, where they explore anti-Muslim sentiment from a church-state institutionalist perspective, we look at aggregate religious behavior (Helbling and Traunmüller 2016). Where they found that in cantons with high support of religion, citizens saw Muslims as *more* of a threat, we suggest that public religious *behavior* may actually have a mitigating effect, and predict that cantons with higher levels of religious attendance will be less likely to ban veils.

## Data and methods

To test the hypotheses described above, we use data from two sources. The first source, the European Social Survey (ESS), is time series cross-sectional data collected over multiple waves and allows us to examine cross-national changes across Europe over time. These data provide broader coverage at the national level. The second source, the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), is panel data that provides us with more fine-grained data at the individual level. We combine these data with canton-level indicators of veil bans and votes as well as other canton-level factors to explore the attitudinal and demographic determinants of such outcomes. In both the cross-national and within-country tests, we use panel data for the purposes of comparing not only across countries but also variation over *time*: it is useful to examine not only *which* places chose to ban veils, but also *when* they chose to do so.

### Cross-national tests

Our dependent variable measures the presence of a national ban, whether in all public spaces or in select public settings like public schools. The data for this variable come from the Open Society Foundation (<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>). Country-years are coded as 1 if a ban of either kind is present and 0 otherwise. Expanding upon the Open Society Foundation's report<sup>6</sup> on veil bans in EU countries, we added the remaining non-EU European countries using newspaper reports to form a new dataset which we have supplemented with aggregated individual-level data from the European Social Survey. Of the 29 countries included in this study, 13 enacted some sort of ban on veiling by 2018. We follow Ferrari and Pastorelli (2016) in exploring veil bans through the lens of bans on all forms of Islamic head coverings, including burqas,



hijabs, and niqabs. While there are obvious limitations to this approach, it allows for a broader comparison on state regulations on religious behavior in the public sphere.

Our primary independent variables are country-year aggregates of religious variables from the ESS data. For each country-year combination, we calculate the percent of the sample<sup>7</sup> who attend religious services weekly, pray daily, and identify as Christians, non-Christians, or something else. As control variables, we also calculate average responses to a number of questions regarding cultural and political attitudes. These questions include opposition to immigration from outside Europe,<sup>8</sup> belief that immigration makes one's country better, belief that immigration is good for culture, and perceptions of the likelihood of a terrorist attack. Non-attitudinal national-level controls include (logged) GDP per capita and level of democracy as measured by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Polyarchy index (Coppedge 2017). An alternative hypothesis regarding state regulation of religion is measured using Fox's Religion and State dataset (Fox 2017) which creates an aggregate measure of 52 aspects of government regulation of religion.

### **Statistical tests**

Our baseline models use random-effects panel logistic regression<sup>9</sup>; when possible, we include fixed-effects specifications as robustness checks, though this is not always an option given the time-invariance of the dependent variable within some countries as well as the slow-moving nature of most of the other variables. All independent variables are lagged by one year.

### **Cross-national results**

Table 1 reports coefficient estimates from our first set of models. Models 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 use random effects specifications, while models 2 and 8 use fixed effects. Models 1 and 2 are simple bivariate regressions of national-level veil bans on average religious attendance not including any controls; model 3 controls for levels of daily prayer, logged GDP per capita, and level of democracy (Polyarchy); model 4 adds the percent of the population that identifies as Christian and the percent that identifies as non-Christian. Model 5 adds Catholic affiliation and no religious affiliation, while model 6 includes state regulation of religion. Models 7 and 8 provide an alternative specification of the attendance variable, calculating the average frequency of attendance using the question's original 1–7 scale at the country-year level to ensure that our findings are not simply driven by our choice of measurement strategy for the attendance variable.

In general, a clear pattern stands out: countries with higher levels of religious attendance are considerably *less* likely to enact veil bans than countries where fewer people attend religious services. The size of this effect varies depending on the specification, but in each model, the coefficient on the attendance variable is large and statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level or better. Strikingly, this effect persists even when using a fixed effects specification, which reduces the number of countries in the sample from 29 to 10 and poses an especially hard test of the hypothesis by controlling for any time-invariant country characteristics and identifying the effect of religious attendance solely based on its over-time variation within each country.

**Table 1.** Predictors of national-level bans.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	(RE)	(FE)	(RE)	(RE)	(RE)	(RE)	(RE)	(FE)
Pct. attend weekly	-27.01** (12.06)	-55.10*** (20.44)	-78.15*** (27.78)	-78.49** (34.76)	-79.99** (35.51)	-98.57** (41.14)		
Pct. pray daily			25.18 (19.54)	51.26* (26.64)	39.61 (29.23)	59.68** (29.61)		
Log GDP PC			28.87*** (3.82)	44.72*** (6.42)	39.45*** (7.04)	35.41*** (7.05)		
Polyarchy			-47.23** (20.36)	-95.19*** (29.70)	-86.24*** (31.03)	-78.76*** (27.12)		
Pct. Christian				-33.69*** (11.31)	-27.29** (13.50)	-31.00 (19.07)		
Pct. non-Christian				85.61*** (26.99)	81.14*** (25.90)	57.32* (29.58)		
Pct. Catholic					0.07 (0.10)	0.32*** (0.11)		
Pct. no religion					0.32** (0.14)	0.21 (0.20)		
Rel. regulation						2.59*** (0.77)		
Avg. attendance							-5.39** (2.21)	-9.84*** (3.00)
Observations	434	156	434	434	434	434	434	156
Number of groups	29	10	29	29	29	29	29	10

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

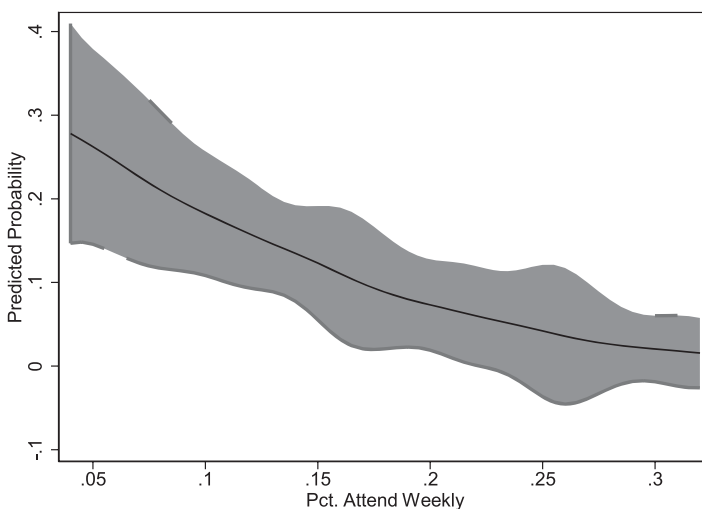
\* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Prayer is not significantly associated with a ban on veils until model 6 (which includes the measure of religious regulation), at which point prayer becomes highly and significantly correlated with a ban on veils. This suggests that, as predicted, religious attendance and prayer do not measure religiosity in the same way. For instance, in relatively secular societies, religious attendance may also indicate an individual's openness to religion practiced in the public sphere, while prayer may be more heavily associated with religious orthodoxy and intolerance towards the practice of minority religions in the public sphere.

Figure 1 depicts the substantive size<sup>10</sup> of this effect. As this figure demonstrates, the effect of average levels of religious attendance is considerable. While the predicted probability of a country possessing a national-level ban is 26% among countries in the 10th percentile of religious attendance,<sup>11</sup> this probability drops to only 5% among countries in the 90th percentile of attendance. Thus, the effect of religious attendance on the likelihood of veil bans is not only statistically significant but also quite large in size.

### **Alternative explanations**

Demographic factors partially explain variation in the prevalence of veil bans. In countries where a larger share of the population identifies as Christian, veil bans are less likely to be enacted (though this effect is not always statistically significant), while countries with larger numbers of people affiliated with non-Christian religions are more likely to ban veils (Table 1). Depending on the specification, countries with larger Catholic populations may be more likely to enact veil bans, but the effect is small and inconsistent. Countries with higher proportions of Muslims<sup>12</sup> and larger migrant populations<sup>13</sup> have a higher likelihood of enacting bans (Table 2). Thus, accounts of countries banning veils because of the presence of relatively sizeable Muslim and/or migrant populations receive support in these data. The hypothesis that



**Figure 1.** Predicted probabilities of national bans by average religious attendance (10<sup>th</sup>–90<sup>th</sup> percentiles).

**Table 2.** Predictors of national-level bans (alternative explanations).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Pct. attends weekly	-72.13** (34.65)	-98.81** (41.54)	-71.51** (28.82)	-83.88** (36.15)	-75.34** (31.75)	-86.90*** (26.03)	-119.09*** (42.55)
General satisfaction	-4.64*** (1.46)						
Worry about violent crime		11.53 (12.34)					
Subjective happiness			-12.02*** (3.19)				
Left-right scale				-5.20 (3.51)			
Trust politicians					-4.51*** (1.50)		
Pct. Muslim						1.07*** (0.25)	
Pct. migrant							0.64*** (0.22)
Observations	432	302	434	434	434	434	367
Number of groups	29	26	29	29	29	29	29

Controls: Pct. Pray Daily, Log GDP Per Capita, Polyarchy, Pct. Christian, Pct. Non-Christian Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

state regulation of religion plays a significant role in predicting bans on veils appears to carry weight as predicted (model 6 in Table 1). Table A8 in the Appendix uses Fox's data to consider alternative religious repression indicators (for both religious majorities and minorities) as dependent variables; our results are robust to using these measures instead of the veil ban measure as well.

Other political explanations yield mixed results. For instance, countries with populations skeptical of the European Union are no more likely to enact veil bans than countries with more EU-friendly populations. However, two (semi-) political alternative hypotheses receive considerable support. First, countries in which citizens are more satisfied in general<sup>14</sup> are considerably less likely to enact veil bans.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the average level of trust in politicians was closely (negatively) associated with veil bans. This variable does not directly capture support for right-wing populist *parties*, but it is consistent with conventional understandings of populist *attitudes*. Respondents' average placements on the left-right scale do not exhibit an association with the likelihood of a veil ban, as would be predicted by theories linking these bans with the rise of right-wing parties and politicians. Thus, while political ideologies in the form of left-right identification and EU attitudes do not seem to affect the likelihood of veil bans, disaffection is an important factor. The disaffection with both politicians and life conditions in general that are often claimed to lend themselves to populist appeals do seem to hold some explanatory power with respect to veil bans.

Tables 2 and 3 also examine some additional alternative explanations. These models<sup>16</sup> control for a variety of attitudinal variables that might independently affect the likelihood of veil bans and/or condition the effect of religious attendance. Models 1–3 in Table 3 include several measures of attitudes towards immigration, which is often cited as an explanation for countries' decisions to enact veil bans. Generally, the models support such explanations: countries where more citizens oppose immigration from outside Europe and where fewer citizens believe that immigration makes their country better or that immigration is good for culture are more likely to institute veil bans than countries with more favorable public opinion towards immigration. Interestingly, security concerns do not appear to play much of a role: neither perceptions of the likelihood of

**Table 3.** Predictors of national-level bans (additional alternative explanations).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Pct. attend weekly	-88.85** (42.27)	-62.33** (29.21)	-127.74*** (37.98)	-89.74** (35.13)	-65.30** (27.70)
Oppose immigration from outside Europe	10.50** (4.81)				
Immigration makes country better		-4.50** (1.85)			
Immigration good for culture			-7.49*** (1.61)		
Terrorist attack likely				5.49 (3.88)	
Pro-EU attitudes					-0.53 (1.59)
Observations	434	434	434	294	390
Number of groups	29	29	29	25	29

Controls: Pct. Pray Daily, Log GDP Per Capita, Polyarchy, Pct. Christian, Pct. Non-Christian Standard errors in parentheses.  
\* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

a terrorist attack nor worries about violent crime are associated with a higher likelihood of enacting veil bans.

As a final robustness check, we consider whether differing levels of gender equality affect the observed relationship between the frequency of religious attendance and the occurrence of veil bans.<sup>17</sup> In order to do so, we employ four separate gender equality variables from the Varieties of Democracy Project (women's civil society participation, women's political empowerment, women's civil liberties, and women's political participation). Table A9 in the Appendix presents the results. Women's civil society participation has a modest, but significant negative effect on the prevalence of veil bans, but the effect of religious attendance remains of similar size and statistical significance. The other gender equality variables demonstrate no effect on the likelihood of veil bans, and the general trend with respect to religious attendance remains.

Our prediction about the explanatory power of religious attendance retains consistent support across all of our model specifications. The coefficient estimates on the religious attendance variable remain large and statistically significant after controlling for these possible alternative explanations, which could plausibly account for an otherwise spurious relationship between religious attendance and veil bans.

### **Within-country tests: Switzerland**

To supplement our cross-national tests, we leverage over-time variation across Swiss cantons. As described above, Switzerland's unique federal structure provides an opportunity to compare subnational units while holding constant national variables that might otherwise serve as obstacles to inference. Until 2021, the Swiss federal government left the decision of whether or not to allow public veiling to individual cantons, which creates variation across regions that can serve as a means of testing possible explanations at a much finer-grained level than the cross-national test allows.

### **Variables**

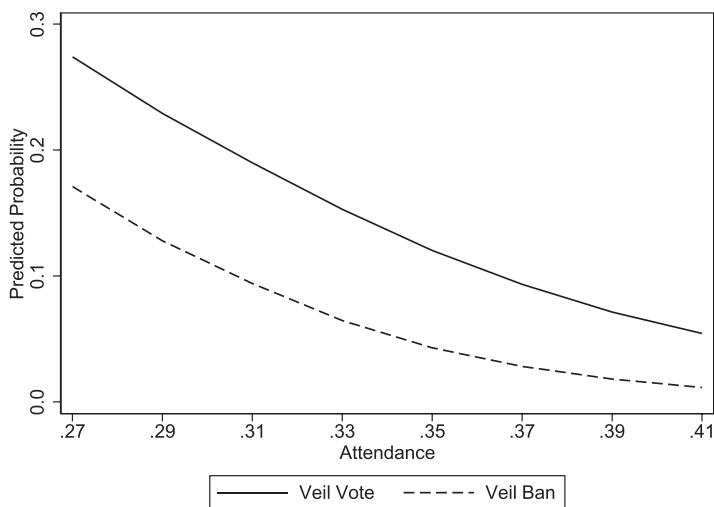
Veil bans in Swiss cantons were identified through Swiss newspapers and were defined as any legislation prohibiting any form of veiling in a public space. The year that the veil legislation was passed was coded as the year of the ban. The source for the public opinion data used in our within-country statistical tests is the *Swiss Household Panel* (SHP), a panel survey conducted annually since 1999 (Tillmann 2016). This survey provides several distinct advantages for analyzing the determinants of public opinion on a variety of issues, including attitudes towards Islam. The survey has sampled thousands of Swiss households each year; it has achieved wide representation of the general public and has sustained high response rates since its inception. Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this article, its 2017 sample includes over 1,400 respondents who completed every wave of the survey.<sup>18</sup> The data from the SHP cover the years between 1999 and 2017. Because of changes in question lists over time, when necessary, we have "carried forward" values for some items, filling in missing values with the most recent non-missing response from that individual. The frequency of interviews in this study minimizes the issues presented by missing values.

Our primary explanatory variable measures religious attendance. This question asks respondents how often they participate in religious services. Nine responses were available, though we collapse categories 2–4 into one group as these categories generally represented occasional attendance for specific reasons (“only for family ceremonies,” “only for religious celebrations,” and “religious celebrations and family events”). We then rescale this measure to range (theoretically) from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation. Our control variables include the percent of respondents in the canton-year who identified as Catholic, the percent who identified as having no religion, income levels, and education levels, all calculated from the SHP. We also include “Attitude towards Islam,” a question that asks respondents to place their attitude towards Islam on a scale of 0–10. We aggregate these responses by estimating mean values at the canton-year level, interpolating when necessary as described above.

As with the cross-national analysis, our dependent variables are binary, so we use panel logistic regression models to estimate the effects of our independent variables of interest. Our baseline models use random effects due to the slow-moving nature of most of our variables. When possible, we include canton fixed effects as robustness checks, but the time-invariance of some of our variables (sometimes due to missing data) requires us to exclude them from the fixed-effects models. All independent variables are lagged by one year.

Table 4 displays the results of a series of panel regressions using the Swiss data. Models 1–3 use “Veil Vote”<sup>19</sup> as the dependent variable; models 4–6 use “Veil Ban.” Models 2 and 5 use fixed effects, while the others use random effects.

These models illustrate a consistent finding: cantons with higher levels of religious attendance are considerably *less* likely to both hold votes on banning veils and to actually enact veil bans themselves. For each of these outcomes, the effect of religious attendance is substantial and highly statistically significant. These results are even robust to the inclusion of canton fixed effects, relying entirely on within-canton variation and



**Figure 2.** Predicted probabilities of veil votes/bans by average religious attendance (10th–90th percentiles).



**Table 4.** Predictors of canton-level veil votes and bans.

	(1) Vote (RE)	(2) Vote (FE)	(3) Vote (RE)	(4) Ban (RE)	(5) Ban (FE)	(6) Ban (RE)
Attendance	-104.23*** (22.68)	-140.80*** (31.87)	-78.52** (35.98)	-102.44*** (27.82)	-141.67*** (44.82)	-141.98** (57.32)
Percent Catholic			-2.48 (3.33)			0.11 (6.73)
Percent no religion			-22.68** (11.38)			-50.61 (35.22)
Income			0.00** (0.00)			0.00 (0.00)
Education			-1.65 (5.26)			9.76 (11.07)
SVP percent			0.07 (0.10)			-0.16 (0.22)
Prayer			-74.40*** (25.50)			-57.32 (46.10)
Constant	27.69*** (6.78)		37.21*** (12.40)	23.00*** (7.97)		39.59** (17.10)
Observations	338	169	338	338	91	338
Number of groups	26	13	26	26	7	26

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

holding constant any time-invariant canton-level variables. The magnitude of these effects is also sizeable: [Figure 2](#) displays the predicted probabilities of veil votes and bans across the observed range of *Attendance*. As this figure demonstrates, canton-level differences in religious attendance predict large disparities in the likelihood of both votes and bans. Cantons in the 10th percentile of attendance have around a 17% chance of enacting a veil ban and a 27% chance of having held a vote on the matter; those in the 90th percentile of attendance have almost no probability of either votes or bans. These results strongly suggest that, contrary to the religious-favoritism argument, more religiously observant regions are *not* more likely to restrict Muslim religious dress; in contrast, the exact opposite trend is present.

None of the other baseline covariates exhibits a consistent significant effect between the two outcomes. Compared to other areas, cantons with higher shares of religiously unaffiliated residents and cantons where residents pray privately more often are less likely to hold votes on banning veils, while wealthier cantons are somewhat more likely to do so. However, none of these variables has a significant effect on the likelihood of actually *banning* veils. Interestingly, neither SVP vote share nor average attitude toward Islam emerges as a significant predictor of either outcome. Thus, two popular candidates for explanations of veil bans – support for right-wing populist parties and expressed opposition to Islam as a religion – do a relatively poor job of explaining canton-level policies and practices.

[Table 5](#) considers some alternative hypotheses. Models 1 and 2 consider the effect of canton-level ideology measured by respondents' average self-placement on the standard left-right scale in the SHP. For this variable, there is modest evidence of an association with holding veil votes ( $p < 0.1$ ), but no relationship with actual veil bans appears to be present. Using the percent of the canton population that is foreign-born<sup>20</sup> shows a strong relationship with both votes and bans: regions where a larger proportion of the population was born outside of Switzerland are significantly more likely to hold votes and enact bans. Using the percent of the population that is Muslim rather than the percent that is foreign-born yields a strong relationship with veil votes, but no detectable relationship with bans. Thus, in the Swiss case, demographic explanations (particularly, the size of the foreign-born population) receive more support than ideological ones. Importantly, the coefficient on *Attendance* remains large and statistically significant in each of these models, suggesting that the relationship between religious practice and

**Table 5.** Alternative explanations for Swiss veil bans/votes.

	(1) Vote	(2) Ban	(3) Vote	(4) Ban	(5) Vote	(6) Ban
Attendance	-135.26*** (29.62)	-109.22*** (36.17)	-103.97*** (33.11)	-122.78** (47.70)	-114.89*** (31.62)	-167.84*** (55.39)
Average left-right	41.65* (22.29)	0.30 (27.88)				
Pct. foreign born			0.78*** (0.17)	0.56** (0.28)		
Pct. Muslim					1.81** (0.81)	-1.04 (1.50)
Observations	338	338	234	234	208	208
Number of groups	26	26	26	26	26	26

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.1$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

veil votes/bans is not simply due to left-right ideology or exposure to foreign-born and/or Muslim populations.

Our findings regarding the link between religious attendance and veil votes/bans closely align with our cross-national results. Across a wide variety of specifications, including a number of important covariates as well as canton fixed effects, aggregate levels of religious attendance are robustly associated with a decreased likelihood of both holding votes on the issue of veil bans and actually enacting such bans at the canton level.

What, however, is the significance of a “no ban” finding, either cross-nationally or within the Swiss context? Do countries or regions simply choose not to ban the veil because the Muslim population is so small it has never been considered? Or was a ban on Muslim veiling never passed because the solidarity mechanism among Christians intervened? We do not argue that these two explanations are mutually exclusive, simply that the solidarity mechanism is at work in many cases.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, there are countries with high attendance and small Muslim populations with no Muslim ban and countries with low attendance and larger Muslim populations and a ban on Muslim veiling. But there are also countries in the middle, such as Finland, with both low attendance and a small number of Muslims and no ban. An illustrative American example is the attempt in 2010 to pass legislation outlawing *Shar'ia* from Oklahoma state courts, despite the negligible size of the Muslim population in that state. The scope of this project unfortunately limits us to a cross-national analysis of successfully passed veil bans, not veil ban initiatives. However, as this study has shown, veil bans reflect the politicization of a country's Muslim population, as well as its size.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the link between religious behaviors and the enactment of Islamic veil bans in Europe. Using statistical tests at both the cross-national level across Europe and at the canton level within Switzerland, we find that aggregate religious attendance – often presumed to be a potential source of religious intolerance or chauvinism – is robustly associated with a *lower* likelihood of veil bans. Countries and regions with the highest levels of religious attendance almost never ban the wearing of the veil, and it is in the *least* publicly religiously-observant areas where such bans are most common.

This article makes several contributions to the study of religion and politics. First, it demonstrates that levels of religious practice can promote institutional outcomes that are more favorable to the rights and interests of religious minorities. In other words, more religiously-observant areas do not necessarily enact policies that privilege only the dominant religious group; rather, these areas may be less likely to repress religion across the board. These findings build on existing scholarship Van Der Noll, Rohmann, and Saroglou (2018) and Saroglou, Corneille, and Van Cappellen (2009) that frames tension over the public display of religion as between the religious and non-religious as opposed to inter-denominational. Second, it provides examples of environments in which religious practices are not simply channeled through conservative attitudes and preferences. Even when accounting for attitudes towards immigration, Islam, or regional and security issues, religious attendance is associated with a lower likelihood of banning veils.

Third, it highlights the potential influence of aggregate attitudes and behaviors as determinants of institutional outcomes. While much of the political science literature is rigidly divided into behavioral or institutional camps, this study underscores the importance of interactions between behaviors and institutions.

Finally, the finding that attendance is significantly negatively correlated with veil bans lends credence to arguments in the literature that frame the challenges of integrating Muslim populations in Europe in terms of a battle between European secularism and religion (Casanova 2007; Klausen 2005b; Barras 2013; Fox and Topor 2021). Scholarship such as Kuru (2009), which underscores the relationship between the regulation of religion in the public sphere and the evolution of state secularism, provides an institutional justification for our findings. More specifically, it may not only be religious Muslims who feel under attack by the state; rather than viewing veil bans as a conflict between Islam and the state, the real conflict may be between religious Europeans, Christian and Muslim alike, and a secular state, with the goal of protecting their rights to practice their religion in the public sphere.

Future studies should expand upon the limitations of this article in several ways. First, while we have attempted to account for alternative explanations as much as possible, we cannot state with certainty that religious attendance has a causal effect on countries' or regions' choice of whether or not to ban the veil. While the diversity in ballot measures and electoral processes precludes a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between domestic religious attendance and party ballot measures to ban veils, the scholarship would be greatly enriched by an exploration of right-wing populist electoral success and veil bans. Future studies should expand upon our analysis by investigating this potential causal relationship more precisely. Furthermore, future research should further unpack the mechanisms behind this relationship. While we have demonstrated that there is a robust relationship between religious practice and veil (non-)bans, our evidence for the exact channels through which this relationship operates is largely speculative. A better understanding of these mechanisms will provide a clearer picture of how this relationship works, where else (if anywhere) it is likely to be present, and when and how the theoretical propositions in this study can be extended to other issue areas.

## Notes

1. URL: [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20190508\\_OTS0165/fpoe-moelzer-zu-kopftuchverbot-wir-setzen-damit-ein-wesentliches-signal-gegen-den-politischen-islam](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20190508_OTS0165/fpoe-moelzer-zu-kopftuchverbot-wir-setzen-damit-ein-wesentliches-signal-gegen-den-politischen-islam)
2. See Giraudy (2019) for a discussion of the advantages of supplementing cross-national data with evidence from subnational units within a single country.
3. It is also possible that attitudes towards these symbols might depend on whether the target group is a minority (Bilodeau et al. 2018).
4. Of course, it is possible that religiosity (in one form or another) will also lead to greater tolerance towards members of other groups under some circumstances; Doebler (2014) finds this to be the case for several dimensions of personal religiosity (though not all features of religiosity) in Europe.
5. Importantly, as Carol, Helbling, and Michalowski (2015) note, this type of reasoning requires that Christians not view Muslims as a potential *replacement* in their societies;

power relations must be configured such that Muslims could not plausibly deny rights to Christians even if they wished to do so.

6. URL: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/fact-sheets/restrictions-muslim-women-s-dress-28-eu-member-states>.
7. When necessary, variables are filled in from their most recent nonmissing value; in practice, this typically means simply carrying forward an average value for one year.
8. Studies of European public opinion have demonstrated a relationship between religious attitudes and immigration attitudes (Bansak et al. 2016; Karyotis and Patrikios 2010) and attitudes towards European integration (Hobolt et al. 2011; Azrout and Wojcieszak 2017).
9. As a robustness check, we also test the theory using survival analysis under the framework of a Cox Proportional Hazards model. Results are robust to this specification; see Figure A2 in the Appendix.
10. These estimates are based on model 6 in Table 1, which includes our full set of control variables.
11. The 10th percentile corresponds to 4% of the population attending weekly (Denmark is in this range for most years), while the 90th percentile corresponds to about 32% weekly attendance (such as Italy in recent years).
12. These figures are taken from the *Association of Religion Data Archives* (<http://www.thearda.com/>) and carried forward as necessary.
13. These data are taken from United Nations figures.
14. This index of “General Satisfaction” is derived from a factor analysis of three ESS variables: life satisfaction, economic satisfaction, and government satisfaction.
15. As Table 2 demonstrates, using average levels of self-reported happiness leads to similar results.
16. All of the models in Tables 2 and 3 include the set of controls from model 4 in Table 1; the coefficient estimates for these variables are available in the Appendix.
17. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this possibility to us.
18. Sampling information for the SHP is available at [https://forscenter.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/shp\\_user-guide-w19.pdf](https://forscenter.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/shp_user-guide-w19.pdf).
19. This variable indicates whether or not a canton held a vote on banning the veil.
20. The canton-level measures of foreign-born and Muslim population shares are taken from the Swiss Federal Statistics Bureau.
21. Indeed, there appears to be at least some relationship between Muslim population share and the likelihood of veil bans in both of our datasets; importantly, however, controlling for Muslim population share does not meaningfully affect our findings regarding attendance.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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