



Why the Belief That Obama Is Muslim?

People more apt to buy false claim if they focus on differences between themselves and the president, new research shows.



by [Sharon Begley](#) August 31, 2010



Silly Things We Believe About Witches, Obama, and More

[Dumb Things Americans Believe](#)

To the many theories about why so many Americans say they think President Obama is Muslim, add this one: the growing number of celebrations about being white. To take just one recent example, Glenn Beck's weekend rally in Washington, which *New York Times* op-ed columnist [Ross Douthat described](#) as "a long festival of affirmation for middle-class white Christians."

Nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public, to paraphrase [Mencken](#), but the widespread belief that Obama is Muslim has even cynics grasping for explanations. The new [NEWSWEEK Poll](#) (scroll down to Question 17) found that 24 percent of those surveyed said Obama is Muslim, something that Jonathan Alter, in our [cover story](#) this week, attributes to the fact that "more and more voters don't like him personally and so are increasingly ready to believe anything critical (and to them, being Muslim is a negative) about someone they are already inclined to resent." This "associational distortion," Jon argues, is fed by the tacit endorsement of the Republican leadership. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, for instance, said about Obama's religion, "I take the president at his word." Somehow McConnell couldn't bring himself to state the truth that the guy went to a

Christian church in Chicago, was married in a Christian ceremony, is raising his daughters as Christians, and is a practicing Christian. A spokesperson for McConnell notes that he “also said that the President’s religion is not in dispute. . . . To answer the question of why so many people are interested in his religion, maybe it’s because one (flawed) poll came out on it and the press gave it more coverage than the Moon landing.”

Associational distortion and GOP complicity are certainly part of the explanation for the belief that Obama is Muslim. So is the prevalence of something psychologists call motivated reasoning. As [I wrote last year](#), when people engage in motivated reasoning they “seek out information that confirms what they already believe,” as sociologist Steven Hoffman, visiting assistant professor at the University at Buffalo, told me then. They do not “search rationally for information that either confirms or disconfirms a particular belief.” In this Internet age, there is no shortage of sources you can find “proving” that Obama is Muslim (or that the moon landings were faked, or other false claims). “People completely ignore contrary information” and “develop elaborate rationalizations based on faulty information,” Hoffman explained.

But who does this, and why? Up until now, there has been very little research on whether, why, and how false information becomes believed. A team led by [social psychologist Spee Kosloff](#) of Michigan State University has tried to remedy that. In a commendable bit of prescience, Kosloff and his team ran three experiments on smears (unfortunately, we live in a time when “Muslim” counts as a smear in some quarters) starting a month before the 2008 presidential election and finishing a year later. The aim was to determine who is most likely to believe a smear. Their conclusion: people who focus on how the target of the smear is different from them in terms of race, social class, or ideology. (As an aside, let me note that American politics has a fine old tradition of vicious smears, going back to the 1796 pamphlets calling Alexander Hamilton a villainous brothel patron. Enemies called John Adams “hermaphroditical,” while James Madison was called a “Frenchman,” Abraham Lincoln “insane” and “a Negro,” Theodore Roosevelt “a maniac” and “an enemy of freedom,” and Franklin Roosevelt a “Bolshevik.”)

The researchers measured both explicit-conscious acceptance of a smear, and implicit-unconscious acceptance. They had volunteers (mostly white, non-Muslim college students) read a blog post arguing that Obama is Muslim or a socialist—or that John McCain is senile. The scientists also had the volunteers take an implicit association test, which measures how strongly people (often unconsciously) link one trait or thing with another, such as “white” with “rich” or, as in this case, “Obama” with “Muslim” or “turban.” The shorter the time it takes someone to react in this test, the more strongly he or she believes that the two are connected.

McCain supporters said there is a 56 percent chance that Obama is Muslim, the scientists report in [a paper](#) in the current issue of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. But when the same McCain supporters were asked to fill out a card asking for their own race, which brought the topic of race into their consciousness, that jumped to 77 percent. Just thinking about a social category that differentiated the volunteers from Obama was enough to get them to believe a falsehood. This effect occurs with age, too. Undecided voters said there is a 43 percent chance McCain is senile; when they filled out a card asking for their (usually young) age, that increased to 73 percent.

This is the first study to show that simply having people focus briefly on their own social identity, when it is different from a candidate’s—rather than having them think about a candidate’s race or age—is sufficient to get many people to believe false information about the

candidate. On that score, it is fascinating how Glenn Beck's weekend rally played up attendees' white race and embrace of Jesus, something he and other right-wing cable TV and talk-radio hosts do with regularity.

Believing smears didn't stop with religion, the scientists found. Undecided voters said there is a 25 percent chance Obama is a socialist. But that jumped to 62 percent when the idea of race was front and center in their consciousness. "Even though being a socialist has nothing to do with race," says Kosloff, "irrationally, they tied the two together."

By similar reasoning, the belief that Obama is Muslim also reflects dissatisfaction with the job he is doing as president, particularly in an economy that refuses to recover and unemployment that remains stuck above 9 percent. "When people are unsatisfied with the president—whether it's the way he's handling the economy, health care, Afghanistan—our research suggests that this only fuels their readiness to accept untrue rumors," says Kosloff. That squares with the fact that belief that Obama is Muslim has increased in inverse lockstep with his job rating.

Editors' note: This story has been updated to include additional comment from Mitch McConnell.