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Opinion: We believe what we want to believe

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THE RECORD

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A RECENT POLL from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press finds an increasing number of Americans believe President Barack Obama is Muslim. Forget why this should matter. Pundits and pollsters are worriedly concluding that Americans are dumb. Perhaps more astounding than the 18 percent who think Obama is Muslim is that 40 percent don't even try to answer the question.

"Wow!" is the first response of many. But a more thoughtful response is to wonder what this really means. In two polls I conducted for the University of Iowa in 2008, more people didn't know Sen. John McCain's religion than Obama's. This suggests the unwillingness or inability of people to correctly identify a politician's religion may not be unique to Obama. It may not even tell us anything about what they really think of the president and his religion.

A second, surprising response, echoed over blogs and in academic circles, is that the number of people identifying Obama as Muslim is increasing even though his personal life is better documented. In October 2008, Pew found 12 percent thought Obama Muslim, while the Iowa Poll found 8 percent during the same period. Two years later, the number purporting to believe Obama is Muslim has climbed dramatically.

Do people know less?

So do people simply know less than they did two years ago? I suspect not. Instead, we are seeing an effect political psychologists call "motivated reasoning." It goes like this: I like someone. I learn something I don't like about the person. I like the person even more.

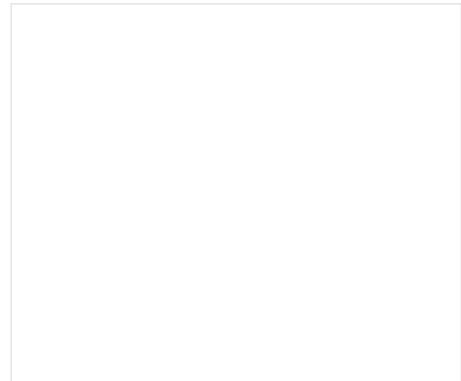
This flies in the face of people as rational. But our feelings are complicated, and we tend to hold on to them even in the face of contradictory information. We ignore new "facts" or discount their source in an effort to maintain our existing evaluation. Research, including a paper colleagues and I have published in the August 2010 journal Political Psychology, shows this effect to be pretty strong, though not unlimited. After all, we do change our minds about people from time to time.

How does this relate to perceptions of Obama's religion? Such processes can work with those we like or dislike. The Pew data finds Republicans and conservatives – groups who don't like him – have shown the greatest increase in the belief that Obama is Muslim.

One reason for their dislike would be the belief Obama is not mainstream, i.e., he is a Muslim. Despite much available information to the contrary, those who dislike Obama not only ignore this information but actively counter it with other "negatives." In doing so, the idea that he is Muslim becomes a reality for some who dislike him anyway, even more so when they must defend their existing dislike to a pollster.

Resistant to the new

Are we impervious to data? To some degree we all are from time to time. We like to



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hold on to our cherished beliefs even if new data suggests we shouldn't. But our research also shows that given enough data, most people do adjust their preferences to (better) reflect reality, although this process can be slow. Some people never refashion their beliefs.

But why do more people believe Obama to be Muslim? One reason undoubtedly is due to the increased numbers who negatively evaluate his policies. The president's actions have replaced the public's assumptions about how he should or will act.

More negative evaluations lead to more people working to maintain those evaluations by believing "facts" that are not true, even if the truth is available.

Of course, there are public anti-Obama voices who continue to press the idea that Obama is Muslim, thus feeding misinformation into the process as well.

For some, believing Obama is Muslim may be due to a lack of political awareness. For many, it more likely results from opposition to Obama himself – people who don't like him resist actual data to maintain previously held beliefs. Opponents ascribe negative attributes to the president and allow emotional preferences to override objective facts.

What we are seeing results from people's stubbornness, not stupidity. We don't change our minds very easily, even if the data say we should.



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