

# The Limits of Desire: Policy Making and Public Opinion toward the Integration of Muslims in the United Kingdom and France.

## Abstract

In the study of politics, we are increasingly coming to understand certain relationships between public opinion and policy making as engaged in a responsive or thermostatic feedback loop. Recent research concerning public opinion toward immigration and the integration of minority in-groups in Western Europe has found that as publics become increasingly negative or concerned about these groups, so public policy toward them has become more restrictive. Using a comparative approach, this research makes a further contribution to this developing understanding by inspecting the relationship between public opinion and policy making toward Muslim immigration and integration. By collecting new data and updating previous research, this paper inspects this relationship over the last twenty years in two countries with very different immigration approaches – France and the United Kingdom. We find that while public opinion and policy making toward Muslims seem to be engaged in a strong feedback loop in France, the picture in the United Kingdom is not so clear. We conclude that public opinion and policy making are interlocked in a looped process in France, but that in the United Kingdom public opinion on Muslims is largely pinned to exogenous events, and that government policy making is entirely disengaged from both public opinion and shock events. The reason as to why this thermostatic model of opinion and policy seems to exist in France but not in the United Kingdom remains unclear, but indicates a certain degree of disconnect between British political elites and public opinion and related events.

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## *Introduction*

In the study of politics, we are increasingly coming to understand relationships between public opinion and policy making as engaged in a responsive or thermostatic feedback loop (Green & Jennings 2012; Franklin & Wlezien 1997; Hobolt & Klemmensen 2005; Jennings 2009; Johnson et al. 2005; Page & Shapiro 1992; Wlezien 1995). Recent research concerning public opinion toward minority in-groups has found that as publics become increasingly negative or concerned about these groups, so public policy toward them has become more restrictive (Ford et al. 2015; Jennings 2009). To date, no research has been able to investigate whether this thermostatic link exists between public opinion and policy making toward Muslim immigration and integration. Though in general prejudice toward minority groups appears to be declining (Ford 2008; Kalkan et al. 2009), attitudes toward Muslims stand out as an exception to this rule (Croucher 2013). Indeed, Modood (2003) argues that there is an ‘anti-Muslim wind’ blowing through Europe. This is all concerning given that biases against outgroup members has been shown to lead to negative behaviour toward them (cf. Gonsalkorale et al. 2009). Given we believe that thermostatic, responsive feedback loops do exist between public attitudes toward in-groups and policy making, if attitudes toward Muslims are indeed worsening then we must investigate whether such worsening attitudes are being reciprocated by more restrictive policy making by political elites. Is there a thermostatic link between increasingly negative public attitudes toward Muslims and increasingly negative policy making? Do policy makers respond to this facet of public opinion in the same way that other research on other topics has shown? Furthermore, can we observe this process in action in two very different contexts of citizenship and social integration?

By producing a Stimson (1991) policy mood measure of public opinion from survey marginals, and by updating previously collected data on policy positions on Muslim rights and integration, we inspect the extent to which a thermostatic link is observable between public opinion and policy making toward Muslims in France and the United Kingdom over the last two decades. France offers us a context traditionally viewed as very restrictive toward outgroups, while the United Kingdom has very much been considered a more open, multicultural approach in recent years (Koenig 2015; Koopmans et al. 2005; Modood 1994). Both countries also of course have sizable resident Muslim populations (Fetzer & Soper 2003), and have experienced high rates of Muslim immigration recently (Croucher 2013). These two countries therefore constitute two excellent similar-in-context but different-in-approach case studies. Our research finds that our two contexts are actually despite their similarities rather different. In France we see policy and mood seemingly connected in a thermostatic feedback loop. In the United Kingdom however, this process does not appear to be in action. We conclude that while public opinion and policy making

are interlocked in a looped process in France, in the United Kingdom public opinion on Muslims is largely pinned to events, and that government policy making is entirely disengaged from both public opinion and events. The reason as to why this thermostatic model of opinion and policy seems to exist in France but not in the United Kingdom remains unclear.

### *Public Opinion and Policy Making*

The argument that policy making is in fact engaged in a responsive feedback loop with public opinion is steadily gaining traction. Authors have identified elite level policy making responding to changes in public mood from across Europe on a range of issues. In a classic study, Page and Shaprio (1992) find public opinion driving policy agendas in the United States of America over a fifty year period. More recently, Ford et al. (2015) found government policy to be reacting to increasingly negative public opinion toward immigration in the United Kingdom over the past thirty-five years by becoming increasingly restrictive (where politically possible). In a large scale study across a wide range of policy areas, Hobolt and Klemmensen (2005) also find policy making changing alongside changes in public moods in the United Kingdom and Denmark, and conclude that the mechanism appears to be linked to a fear of 'electoral sanction' on the part of political parties. Indeed, responsive theory can be traced right back to Downs (1957), who argued that parties (in majoritarian systems) would always seek to converge on the expressed preferences of the 'median voter'.

Responsive governance theories come from the same class as work which views the public as a 'thermostat', responding themselves to government policy making to express desires for 'more' or 'less' of what is being delivered. The logic follows that then governments in turn respond by changing the direction of their policy making. Wlezien (1995) articulated this process most astutely in his study which investigated developing public preferences to governmental spending. This work introduced the reader to a 'thermostatic model of responsiveness', where public opinion changes in response to public policy - which then in turn reacts to move more or less in the original direction, depending on the direction of public opinion. We can speak of this as an error correction model. Following from this, Franklin and Wlezien (1997) investigated this same link between changing public policy on European Unification and public opinion. They found a "close tracking of policy output by public opinion", indicating that European publics were able to follow policy developments accurately and express their preferences accordingly (Ibid, p.360). Jennings (2009, p.865) also found public opinion responding in a thermostatic manner to government policy on asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, arguing "that there is a positive, sustained long- run

relationship between public opinion about the issue of asylum and administration of the asylum system by the British government”.

### *Public Opinion on Muslims*

To date, no comprehensive assessment of public opinion toward Muslims in either the United Kingdom nor France has been conducted. While we have snapshots of how publics are reacting to increasing Muslim immigration into Western Europe over recent years, we have yet to see a long term assessment of public opinion toward the immigration and integration of Muslims in either of our two countries in the same way that we have for both asylum seekers (Jennings 2009) and immigrants in general (Ford et al. 2015) in the United Kingdom. This constitutes an important gap in our knowledge. The gap becomes more apparent when we consider that we know while prejudice is in decline in the United Kingdom for example (Ford 2008), negative sentiments toward outgroups are often dependent on which *specific types of outgroups* in question (Ford 2011). Therefore, we cannot assume from a reduction in prejudice against one (or aggregate) in-group will mean a reciprocal reduction in prejudice against any other. Since there has been no systematic and longitudinal assessment of public opinion toward Muslims in Western Europe, we have no understanding of the link between this and policy making on the immigration and integration of Muslims. We know that anti-Muslim prejudice is widespread (Strabac & Listhaug 2008), and that public preferences after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States shifted significantly in the more restrictive direction (Fetzer & Soper 2003), and again in the wake of the July 7<sup>th</sup> attacks in London in 2005 (Brighton 2007). We also know that many political elites across the European political landscape have been taking a very public and overtly negative approach toward Islam since those attacks (Croucher 2013).

### *Policy Making on Islam*

In their wide ranging and inclusive research, Cinalli and Giugni (2013) found some Western European states taking more restrictive approaches towards Islam, while others becoming more open and tolerant. Their research noted that the United Kingdom had been moving toward increasingly multiculturalist, open territory in terms of the provision of cultural and individual rights for its Muslim population. They found little movement in France however, claiming that policy making on Muslim integration and rights had shifted very little over recent years, remaining fairly restrictive and closed. When we consider the situation in France, where the wearing of certain Islamic clothing is banned from public places such as schools and beaches, and compare it to the United Kingdom where there is active enforcement of laws which stop any form of suppression

or discrimination based on religious differences, we can easily see this divergence. These two countries, with similar histories of immigration and Muslim settlement, have been on markedly different paths. This growing difference, despite great shared history and similar contexts of immigration and Muslim population, makes these two countries an ideal arena to investigate the interaction between policy making and public opinion.

Returning to our assessment of the growing literature on responsive and thermostatic models of governance and public opinion, we sought to enquire as to whether the changing policy positions in the United Kingdom and France are linked to public opinion on Muslims. We wanted to answer the question: are public opinion and policy making toward Muslim immigration and integration engaged in a developing, thermostatic process? Given that we know the extent to which there are clear thermostatic models of responsiveness operating in other, very similar fields to the immigration and integration of Muslims, we hypothesise that we will find similar processes operating in this circumstance. Put differently, given that we have seen evidence of public opinion and government policy working in a thermostatic, responsive nature on other topics, we expect to see it operating in our context too.

### *Approach*

First, we build a comprehensive analysis of public opinion toward Muslims immigration and integration in France and the United Kingdom over the last two decades. We do so by collecting survey marginals from cross-national and national surveys asking respondents their views about Muslims, Muslim integration, and Islam<sup>1</sup>. Marginals are calculated as the percentage of negative responses versus the total percentage of negative and positive responses. We then input these marginals into Stimson's dyadic ratios calculator, so named WCalc, which is able to aggregate only partially overlapping survey information into a single measurement of public opinion over time (Stimson 1991). It does so by extracting the underlying movement of opinion through a process similar to a factor analysis<sup>2</sup>. Marginals are only collected from questions that are repeated at least twice over the last sixteen years for the United Kingdom (1999-2015) and twenty years for France (1995-2015)<sup>3</sup>. This produces a robust measurement of negative public opinion toward Muslims in France and the United Kingdom since just before the turn of the millennia.

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<sup>1</sup> The cross-national surveys included are as follows: European Values Study (1999-2010), Transatlantic Trends (2002-2008), PEW Research Centre Surveys (2004-2008), and the LIVEWHAT Project Survey (2015). At the national level, in France we included four waves of the Panel Électorale Français (1995-2012) while in Britain we included one wave of the British Election Study (2010) and three waves of the British Social Attitudes survey (2003-2013).

<sup>2</sup> For full methodology, see the Appendix to Stimson's 1991 book.

<sup>3</sup> The discrepancy in dates here is due to a lack of data at the national level for the United Kingdom. Further, due to a general lack of data points, we are forced to adapt a slightly liberal approach to the assessing which items are the

We then move to update a section of the Eurislam<sup>4</sup> project to bring in line with the end of our study period – 2015. In this proceed we extended data collection on policy positions toward the citizenship and personal rights of Muslims and Muslim immigrants. Policy indicators included information on citizenship acquisition, restrictions on Islamic practises, the number of Mosques and Islamic schools across the country, and many others<sup>5</sup>. In all, 38 indicators were collected, which covered both individual and cultural rights. Individual rights refer specifically to rights related to the access to the in-group national community and the rights that they enjoy. This is focused on due to the frequent immigrant background of Muslims in Western Europe. Cultural rights are also understood as group rights: analysing cultural restraints and the general openness of the host country to Islamic practices. -1 indicates a restrictive position, while 1 indicates a fully open position. The aggregate position of all 38 policy areas (split into individual and cultural dimensions which creates a quadrant plot) were calculated by the project in the years 1980, 1990, 2002, and 2008. We present and discuss these policy positions plus our added 2015 data point. We finish by comparing developments in policy making in both countries with public opinion to establish whether a thermostatic model of responsive government is in action.

### *Results*

Figures 1 and 2 show public opinion toward Muslim immigration and integration in France and the United Kingdom. We can see two very different trend lines. In France, attitudes begin low in the early nineties, but then rise to a peak in 1997 before falling once again. However, there is a sharp ascent in negativity toward Muslims in France in the mid 2000s. Once again though these attitudes decrease to a study-level low of around 42 just after 2010. The final upward movement unto 2015 would seem to reflect rising tensions surrounding the refugee crisis and events leading up to the terrorist attacks in Paris in that year. In the United Kingdom, mood appears much more stable but there is a sustained rise in anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the (shortened) study period. Inspecting the scales, we can see that generally speaking anti-Muslim attitudes here seem lower than in France. The three peaks come just after three incidences of great tension – the

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‘same question’ over time. Whereas Stimson (1991) argues that a strict approach is preferential (where anything more than a slight, substantive change to question wording should be treated as a separate variable), we have had to loosen the bands to treat questions as the same item despite changes to scales (for example from 0 to 10 and 0 to 100) and question set ups.

<sup>4</sup> The Eurislam project investigated how ‘different traditions of national identity, citizenship, and church-state relations affected European immigration countries’ incorporation of Islam, and what are the consequences of these approaches for patterns of cultural distance and interaction between Muslim immigrants and their descendants, and the receiving society’. It covered ten countries, and was completed in 2015 and their full dataset has been released online. Full information on the project and its completed dataset can be found here:

<http://www.eurislam.eu/page=site.home>

<sup>5</sup> More information on this work package can be found here: <http://www.eurislam.eu/page=site.workpackage/id=1>

September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001, the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, and the refugee crisis from 2011 onwards. What this figure does show is that while prejudice may be declining in the United Kingdom (Ford 2008), negative sentiments toward Muslims *are* an exception to this rule and are in fact steadily increasing.

[INSERT FIGURES 1 & 2]

Figure 3 shows the policy position change over time according to the EURISLAM project and our 2015 update of this data. We provide a brief description here, but the original release provides a much more detailed account (Carol et al. 2009). We see again two very different pictures between our two case studies. In the United Kingdom, we begin in 1980 in what we call as a ‘Universalist’ policy position. In this context, we understand universalism as a system of strong individual rights, but weak cultural (or group) rights. It is not the most restrictive position (assimilationist). What begins from 1980 through until 2002 is a rapid march toward multiculturalism in UK policy toward Muslims. Here, by multiculturalism we mean a fully open and inclusive strategy, constituting a “clear model of full inclusion in terms of both institutions and discourse” (Cinalli & Giugni 2013). This expanding multiculturalist process is well documented in the literature. This movement is abruptly halted by 2008, but not before the United Kingdom had moved well into multiculturalist territory, where it remained also in 2015 according to our updating of this data. Here we echo arguments made by Meer & Modood (2009) that there has been no ‘retreat’ of Multiculturalism, but more a steadying of an already entrenched position.

[INSERT FIGURE 3]

France however shows comparatively very little movement, and indeed remains in the same square on our graph throughout the entire period. France remains on universalist policy ground throughout the thirty-five years, indicating only small changes in overall policy position. There is a slight drift toward multiculturalism between 1980 and 2008, but then a sharp turn down toward a more assimilationist approach by 2015 according to our update. Substantively, this means that we have two very different policy contexts between our two countries. While both nations start in clear universalist territory, the United Kingdom moved rapidly over to the multiculturalist approach by 2015, whereas France moves little if only slightly toward assimilationist ground.

*Relationship Between Mood and Policy*

If we understand policy making and public opinion as engaged in a deliberative process, then perhaps we can look at the evidence here in the French case as a good example. During the period of very little policy change in France, anti-Muslim mood climbs no higher than 60 according to the mood measure, and enjoys a period of relatively high positivity in the early 2000s. Indeed, this rise in the late 90s can certainly be attributed to a series of Paris bombings by the Armed Islamic Group. In the years after these attacks however, mood returns to a low point. However, even the slightest movement toward a more multicultural approach between 2002 and 2008 coincides with the tallest spike in French anti-Muslim sentiment, passing 65 by the middle of the decade. Over these years, French policy toward Muslims became notably more open in terms of cultural rights and Islamic practises – for example the allowance of Islamic burials was formally passed into law, and many more mosques were approved and built during this time period, which included minarets (14). This period of (slowly) increasing state-level tolerance toward Muslims however is met with steadily rising anti-Muslim public opinion. If we understand this in terms of the thermostatic framework, this would suggest that the French public became increasingly concerned with the more multicultural approach being adopted by successive French government. True to the thermostatic model, it then appears that post-2008 the French system went through a process of ‘error correction’, with policy taking a sharp restrictive turn by 2015. There was a tightening of rules regarding Islamic dress and practise in public places, including of course the highly controversial ‘banning’ of the burqa from all public places in 2010 (which has since been followed by the 2016 ‘Burkini ban’ in some localities). This period of increasing restriction is met by a significant drop in anti-Muslim mood, which actually reaches its lowest point by 2011. These observations indicate that not only did the French public respond to increasing openness in government policy with a discernible expressed desire for ‘less’, but that government policy reacted to this expressed desire altered policy toward a more restrictive direction, which was in turn reciprocated by a decline in anti-Muslim public mood. What we have here seems to be an example of the thermostatic model of representative democracy in action.

In the United Kingdom however, the picture is much different. We have an obvious trend in policy making – shifting from universalist to multicultural – and an obvious, steady climb in anti-Muslim public opinion. As described above, there are three peaks in anti-Muslim mood across our study period which correlate closely with two major Islamist terror attacks and the ongoing refugee crisis. These peaks create a ‘ratchet effect’ on the troughs in mood. In terms of policy, over the period from 1980 to 2002 both individual and cultural rights become more significantly inclusive and open toward Muslims (and indeed all religious and ethnic minorities). For example, the race relations act 2000 banned discrimination based on religious grounds, and affirmed the



right to fast and prayer in the workplace and in work time. Alongside this, there was an explosion of Mosque building and opening of Islamic schools. So, by the height of ‘multiculturalism’ in 2008 anti-Muslim public opinion was well into a steep rise, according to the data. However, despite this rise in negativity, policy in the United Kingdom stuck in the multiculturalist direction over successive governments and has not been reversed since (though it has remained largely static since 2002). This indicates that public opinion does not really have much of an influence on policy making toward Muslim immigration and integration in the United Kingdom. While there has not been an advancement in openness and inclusivity toward Muslims in the United Kingdom since the turn of the millennia, rising anti-Muslim public opinion has not been met with more restrictive policy making.

### *Conclusion*

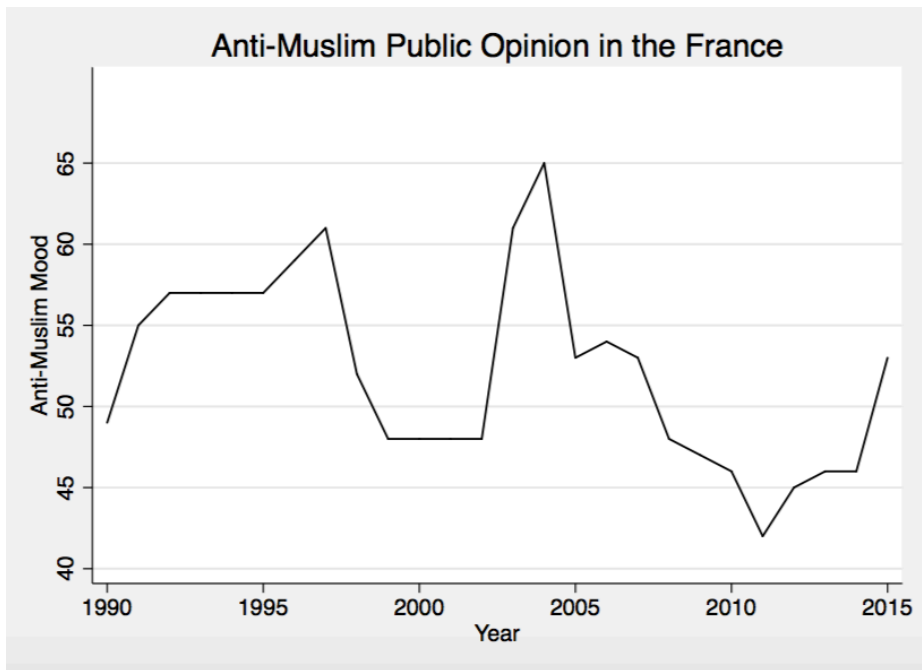
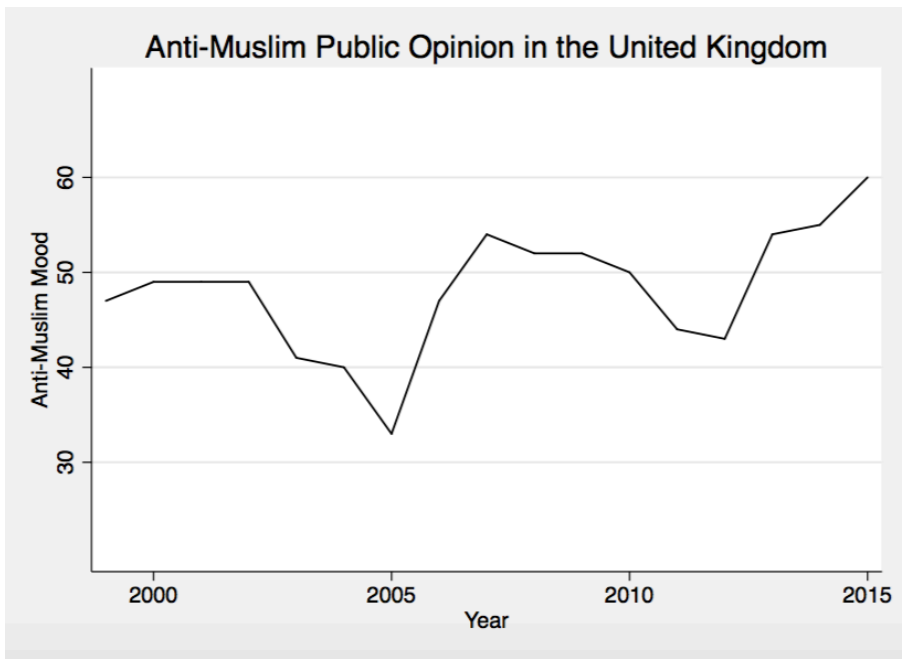
While we have a situation in France that we can describe as a thermostatic model of representative democracy, we have a situation in the United Kingdom where successive governments have pursued and maintained a multiculturalist policy direction regardless of fluctuations in anti-Muslim public opinion. Public opinion in France does appear to be connected to policy making, with the French public expressing increasingly more negative views towards Muslims and Islam until the 2010s, where a turn toward more a more assimilationist approach by the French government was met by a steep decline in negative attitudes – despite the 2011 refugee crisis and the 2015 Paris attacks. There seems to be a sense that public opinion toward Muslims in France is connected to exogenous shock events, with rises noted after the Paris bombings in the 90s and shootings in 2015. Indeed, such terrorist attacks also seem to be the primary shaping force of British public opinion toward Muslims and Islam, which saw climbs and peaks after 2001, 2005, and 2011 onward. In terms of government policy however, there has been no return to more restrictive territory as successive British governments have continued the multiculturalist march, a programme which started in the 1980s and has been relentless, surviving and adapting to all manner of pressures (Modood 2003; Meer & Modood 2009). Furthermore, it also highlights how policy making in the United Kingdom has not changed much in the face of terrorist attacks.

This forwarding and continuation of the multiculturalist approach, despite rising anti-Muslim public opinion and exogenous shock events, is of great interest. It perhaps highlights a certain degree of distance between elite level opinion and policy preferences and those of the British public, as politicians sought to press ahead at all costs with a project which was clearly threatened by shocks and public reactions to them. This is perhaps exemplified by ‘Brexit’ – the United Kingdom’s vote to leave the European Union in June 2016 – when the public took the

opposite choice from that which was campaigned for by political elites. The question therefore begs as to why we have such a divergence on the thermostatic model? For now, this question remains unanswered. Though perhaps it may have something to do with the effective presence of far right parties in our two study countries.

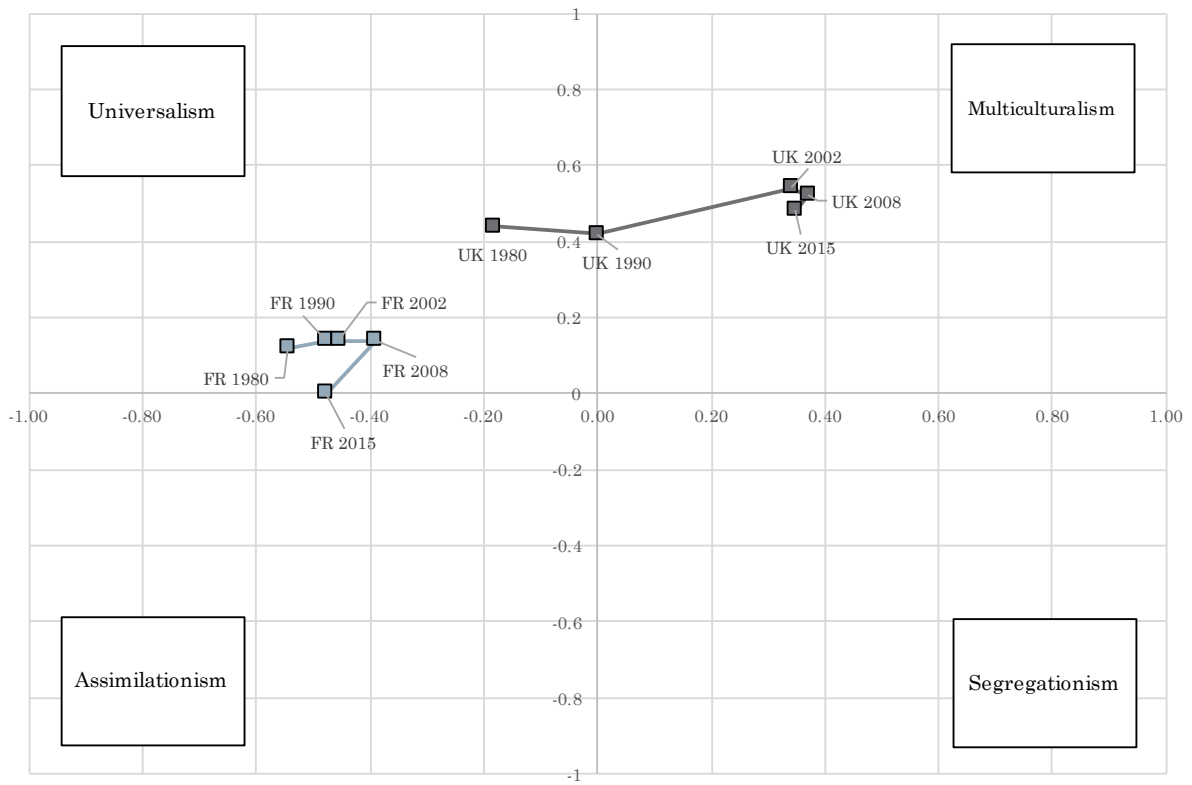
A clear breakdown of the thermostatic model in the context of the immigration, integration, and the rights of Muslims does suggest that while in some cases we can consider United Kingdom governments as a responsive agent (c.f. Ford 2015; Jennings 2009), in other instances we cannot. Further research should consider why precisely the multiculturalist project was defended and continued so vehemently by British political elites from all sides, despite shocks and changing public opinion – particularly around the 2005 London bombings. It should also consider further investigation into the apparent model of responsiveness between the French public and policy making, to see whether or not it extends to other fields.

Figures 1 and 2



**Figure 3**

Configurations of Citizenship 1980-2015



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