

Policy Brief 8:

Handshaking controversies



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BACKGROUND

In the last decades we have seen a number of controversies over handshaking in European democracies that involve Muslims. Many Muslims are happy to shake hands, but some observant Muslims believe it is wrong to touch members of the opposite sex who are not relatives. The question is how handshake refusals should be handled in liberal democracies.

Abstractly formulated, the logic of conflict over gender and handshaking is strict. The traditionally observant Muslim is asked to do what their convictions condemn as wrong, shaking the hands of a member of the opposite sex. The non-Muslim majority is asked to accept what many of them condemn as wrong, treating women differently and worse.

When confronted with this conflict, public authorities in Europe have often insisted on conformity with the handshaking practice. The president of France refused citizenship to a Muslim woman who would not shake hands with a male official at a citizenship ceremony. In December 2018, Denmark passed a law requiring new citizens to shake hands at their naturalization ceremony. The Administrative Court of Baden-Württemberg rejected a citizenship application from a male Muslim, because he refused to shake hands with a female immigration official. In Switzerland, Muslim students were forced to shake hands with teachers of the opposite sex. In Norway, there was recently a similar controversy over handshake refusals in a school setting. Muslim job applicants in both the Netherlands and Sweden were turned down after handshake refusals.

THE STUDY

In a study funded by the European Research Council (ERC) and forthcoming in the *British Journal of Political Science*, a group of European and American researchers led from the University of Bergen, argues that introducing a substitute gesture of respect—putting the hand on the heart—is a viable alternative solution.

In the study, the team experimentally tests responses in a representative sample of German citizens in three common handshake-refusal situations. Half the time, the substitute gesture is introduced and half the time, it is not.

The study finds a remarkably strong and consistent effect of introducing the alternative gesture of respect: Insistence on conformity with the handshaking practice drops notably and consistently. Three quarters of respondents think Muslims should be asked to conform to the handshaking custom if they refuse to shake hands with female politicians (76 per cent), female teachers (70 per cent), and female HR managers (74 per cent). When the substitute gesture is introduced, insistence on conformity drops by 20 percentage points or more. If the gender of the politicians, teachers, and HR managers is left unspecified, only around 40 per cent of the non-Muslim public insists on conformity to the practice of handshaking after the alternative gesture of respect has been offered.

More in-depth analysis of the results shows an important limitation: The alternative gesture of respect reduces insistence on conformity in most segments of the population, but not among the least tolerant citizens and those who place themselves on the far-right politically.

SPECIFIC POLICY RECOMMENDATION

- Public authorities in Europe should not insist on handshaking. They should instead insist on gestures to signal respect. Alternative gestures of respect should be allowed.

GENERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATION

- In the foreseeable future, European societies that honor pluralism will have to live amicably with religiously grounded differences. Thanks to the ingenuity and versatility of cultural customs to signal respect, value conflicts can be open to resolution in everyday encounters without minorities or majorities having to forsake their convictions. Requiring that minorities, Muslims or others, conform should be avoided if alternative solutions acceptable to both exist or can be developed.

THE STUDY

Ivarsflaten, Elisabeth, Marc Helbling, Paul M. Sniderman, and Richard Trautmüller (forthcoming), "Value Conflicts Revisited: Muslims, Gender Equality, and Gestures of Respect." *British Journal of Political Science*.

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