

# Variations of Public Opinion Towards Face Veiling: Arguments in the Swiss Debate

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## Abstract

This study focuses on public opinion towards the face veiling of Muslim women and investigates the possibility of identifying different groups of citizens supporting distinct combinations of arguments regarding face veiling criticisms. Two groups are expected to argue for or against face veiling. Also, two other groups are expected to vary depending on their idea of liberalism inherent in face-veiling arguments: a specific way of life versus respect for different ways of life. Using latent class (regression) analysis, the findings show that different groups emerged and that the political leftists were more diverse regarding argument patterns than the political rightists. Following the debate of why many political leftists have negative attitudes towards religious practices, this study does not find empirical support that anti-Muslim and anti-Islam attitudes systematically differ between the observed groups.

## Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie beschäftigt sich mit der öffentlichen Meinung zur Gesichtverschleierung von muslimischen Frauen und untersucht, ob sich verschiedene Gruppen von Bürgern:innen unterscheiden lassen, die verschiedene Kombinationen von Argumenten unterstützen. Zwei Gruppen werden erwartet, die entweder konsequent alle Argumente zugunsten einer Gesichtverschleierung unterstützen oder ablehnen. Ausserdem wird davon ausgegangen, dass zwei weitere Gruppen unterschieden werden können, die je nach ihrer Vorstellung von Liberalismus, die den Argumenten zur Gesichtverschleierung innewohnt, variieren: eine bestimmte Lebensweise oder als Respekt

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gegenüber unterschiedlichen Lebensweisen. Die Ergebnisse der latenten Klassenanalyse (Regressionsanalyse) zeigen, dass in der Tat verschiedene Gruppen unterschieden werden können und dass die politische Linke in ihren Argumentationsmustern vielfältiger ist als die politische Rechte. Im Anschluss an die Debatte, warum viele politische Linke negative Einstellungen gegenüber religiösen Praktiken haben, findet diese Studie keine empirischen Hinweise, dass sich anti-muslimische und anti-Islam Einstellungen systematisch zwischen den beobachteten Gruppen unterscheiden.

### Résumé

Cette étude se concentre sur l'opinion publique à l'égard du voilement du visage des femmes musulmanes et examine la possibilité d'identifier différents groupes de citoyens qui soutiennent des combinaisons distinctes d'arguments concernant les critiques du voilement du visage. On s'attend à ce que deux groupes se prononcent favorablement ou pas sur le port du voile. De plus, deux autres groupes sont censés varier en fonction de leur idée de libéralisme inhérent aux arguments relatifs au voilement du visage : un mode de vie spécifique contre le respect de modes de vie différents. En utilisant une analyse de classe latente (régression), les résultats montrent que différents groupes ont émergés. En outre, en ce qui concerne les modèles d'arguments, la gauche politique était plus diversifiée que la droite. Suite au débat sur les raisons pour lesquelles une grande partie de la gauche a des attitudes négatives envers les pratiques religieuses, cette étude n'a pas un appui empirique qui confirmerait que les attitudes anti-musulmanes et anti-islam diffèrent systématiquement entre les groupes observés.

### KEYWORDS

Public opinion, Direct Democracy, Islam, Switzerland

Cultural conflicts related to integrating immigrants, their religion – especially Islam – and their values have been growing in Western European societies (Roy, 2019). An interesting case is the banning of face veiling<sup>1</sup>, as it limits the freedom and rights (primarily the change of the status quo) of a foreign minority. Although it is hardly practised – according to estimations around 2010, only 0.04% of the French Muslim population (Ahmed, 2017) or around 130 Muslim women out of an estimated 350,000 Muslims in Switzerland wore the face-covering burqa (Federal Council, 2013)<sup>2</sup> – banning the veil has triggered many reactions in the media

<sup>1</sup>The term *face veil* in this article refers to both forms of complete facial veils, the *burqa*, which covers the eyes with a mesh screen, and the *niqab*, which leaves the eyes visible. The word *burqa* is often used in the public and media debate in Western countries but is avoided here due to stereotypes and predominantly negative narratives (see Almila 2018).

<sup>2</sup>In a recent study, Tunger-Zanetti and his colleagues (2021) estimated that fewer than 40 Muslim women living in Switzerland were wearing the niqab in 2020.

and induced political regulations across Europe (e.g. the ban of a full-face veil in public spaces in Austria and Denmark in 2017–2018).

Some researchers have suggested that banning face veils cannot be easily fitted within existing political divisions. Scholars studying the public debate on the veil show that the debate is multifaceted and induces ‘unholy’ actor coalitions and political regulations (cf. the comparative study in Rosenberger and Sauer, 2012). Indeed, the argument around veil banning is that the veil is incompatible with Western European culture and that it threatens the rejection of gender equality, which Norris and Inglehart (2002: 16) see as ‘the most basic cultural fault line between the West and Islam’. Furthermore, the arguments leverage liberal principles, such as self-determination and freedom of religion (for Switzerland, see Ettinger, 2018; Feddersen, 2015). This research shows that the tension between values perceived to be central to Western culture but incompatible with each other such as individual freedom (whether Muslim women voluntarily choose to wear the veil to express their faith) and gender equality (whether wearing the veil is symbolic of women’s oppression), is especially challenging for the political left.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, part of the political left joined the authoritarian right to support the face-veil ban. This includes female migrants and some feminists who radically canvass women’s freedom (e.g. Farris, 2017; Scott, 2007).

Another strand of research concerned with explaining attitudes towards the face veil and other religious practices in Islam also reveals the division of political ideology, specifically liberal values (Adelman & Verkuyten, 2020; Gustavsson et al., 2016; Helbling, 2014; Helbling & Traummüller, 2018). These scholars distinguish between two branches of liberalism rooted in political theories (see Gray, 2000; Gustavsson, 2014). The first sees liberalism as a substantive way of life pursued autonomously and based on rational self-reflection, hence rejecting choices based on faith, passion or tradition. The second conceives of liberalism as a way to reconcile many ways of life and ensure that everyone can live their chosen way of life, including through freedom of religion or expression. Accordingly, some liberals from the political left oppose face veiling because it is seen as a symbol of religious fundamentalism, which is perceived to be incompatible with the core liberal values of Western democracies, while other liberals accept or even support the face veil as a way for Muslim women to practice religious devotion.

Building on both strands of literature, this study’s aim is to disentangle public opinion towards face veiling by focusing on various arguments used in the public debate. Also, whether (if at all) different groups of citizens who support distinct argument patterns can be distinguished is explored alongside different combinations of arguments for or against face veiling. Drawing on the two branches of liberalism outlined above, four groups of citizens supporting different argument patterns were distinguished: two groups are expected to consistently argue for or against a face veil, while the two other groups are assumed to share some unease prevalent in many non-Muslim majority countries towards the face veil but nonetheless differ regarding support for arguments related to whether or not different ways of life should be respected and tolerated. Furthermore, how socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes vary among these groups is examined.

This study contributes to the current debate on why many political leftists have negative attitudes towards religious practices in general and towards the Muslim face veil in particular (e.g. Adelman & Verkuyten, 2020; Gustavsson et al., 2016; Helbling & Traummüller, 2018). It further unfolds the general attitude towards face veiling and focuses on various face veiling arguments in the public debate.<sup>4</sup> Further, this study emphasises two liberal ideas inherent in some arguments that are used to capture these abstract principles in an alternative way to what

<sup>3</sup>The reason why the political left might be more affected is not that the political right does not care *at all* about those principles but that they may simply care *less* about certain values (see also Kitschelt, 1994: 9–12).

<sup>4</sup>The only study considering distinct argument known so far by Gustavsson et al. (2016) focused only on the gender-related aspect and assumed that these arguments underlie a single latent dimension.

is used in existing studies (e.g. Gustavsson et al., 2016). Also, compared to the political right, whether the political left is more divided regarding groups supporting diverse argument patterns is assessed, which have previously been the general attitudes towards Islamic practices.

The analysis is based on survey data from Switzerland. The data provide the opportunity to study the attitudes towards face veiling among Muslim women, especially the arguments in the public debate: face veiling as not belonging to Western culture, a symbol for the oppression of women or a sign of Islamisation. Furthermore, it focuses on a setting with real political consequences, as the Swiss vote on whether to ban full facial covering, which took place in spring 2021.

## PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH ON MUSLIMS AND ISLAM

Attitudinal research on immigration, in general, and Muslims and Islam, in particular, has rarely considered the relation to political ideology (see Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014).<sup>5</sup> The prevailing idea is that the political left, also known as libertarians or liberals,<sup>6</sup> support immigration, while the political right, also known as authoritarians or conservatives, oppose immigration and, by extension, Muslims. This expectation also parallels the literature on political conflicts, which distinguishes between a socio-economic and cultural dimension and incorporates the immigration issue into the latter. Thus, leftists and winners of globalisation have favourable views on immigration, as opposed to authoritarians and losers of globalisation (Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008). However, some scholars have argued that immigration can break up ideological camps in public opinion (e.g. Tichenor, 2002) and create unusual political alliances (but see Lahav, 2004: 126–132). The concerns are border control and the integration of foreigners once they are admitted into the country.

Findings from recent research on anti-Muslim attitudes corroborate the claim that the immigration issue does not neatly fit into the classic left–right ideology and provide two central insights. First, anti-Muslim attitudes relate differently to political ideology, depending on the *object of the attitude* (Adelman & Verkuyten, 2020; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). The latter can target Muslims as a migrant group (based on ethnicity), as a religious group (Islam) and based on their religious practices (religiosity, see Helbling, 2012). Second, anti-Muslim attitudes, especially attitudes towards Islamic practices, relate differently to political ideology, depending on the prevailing *idea of liberalism* (Gustavsson et al., 2016). Research by Helbling and his colleagues, for example, suggested that conservatives dislike Muslims as an ethnic and religious group, considering them culturally backward and intolerant. Liberals, meanwhile, primarily oppose religious fundamentalism (i.e. the values and practices related to traditional religiosity both in Islam and any religion) (Helbling, 2014; Helbling & Traunmüller, 2018). Consequently, compared to conservatives, liberals are more tolerant towards Muslims as a migrant group, although parts of both groups object to religious practices, such as the wearing of a headscarf or face veil but for different reasons. Generally, conservatives (or authoritarians) tend to oppose it because it is a religious practice and symbol relevant to an *ethnic minority*, while liberals (or libertarians) tend to oppose it because it is a religious practice and symbol of *religious fundamentalists* threatening the liberal and progressive values of Western democracies.

This seemingly illiberal approach by liberals towards individuals and groups who do not share liberal values has engaged various scholars, including those handling Islamic practices

<sup>5</sup>But see political intolerance literature, e.g. Adelman and Verkuyten (2020), Crawford and Pilanski (2014) and Freitag and Rapp (2013).

<sup>6</sup>Note that the literature on anti-Muslim attitudes refers to liberals in the meaning of libertarians and not to the more classical (economic) notion of liberals as being against any form of state interventionism (Freeman, 2017).

(e.g. Gustavsson et al., 2016; Helbling, 2014; Joppke, 2010; Scott, 2007), on what liberalism exactly means (for an overview, see Freeman, 2017). This literature reveals two opposing concepts of liberalism rooted in political theories, although both focus on individual liberty (see Gustavsson, 2004; Gray, 2000; Sikka, 2019). These are liberalism as *respect for different ways of life* or as a *substantive (or best) way of life*. The origin of the first concept can be traced to the seventeenth century and the experiences of the religious wars following the reformation (Gustavsson et al. 2016). Accordingly, this concept in the tradition of Hobbes and Hume aims to determine where different ways of life can live together peacefully without preferring one particular way (Gray, 2000). In this tradition, being liberal means to tolerate the idea that every individual pursues their own way of life. Each individual is free to choose; thus, diverse and even mutually opposing lifestyles can co-exist (see also Freeman, 2017).

By contrast, the second concept of liberalism in the tradition of Locke and Kant confines tolerance to a specific way of life, an ideal to strive for. In principle, this way of life is the same for everyone and is based on autonomy and reasoned self-reflection instead of faith and tradition (Gray, 2000; Gustavsson et al., 2016). This concept of liberalism thus seeks to enforce common values based on a universal rational consensus; these values are perceived to have become part of the legal framework in Western democracies. Examples are secularism, individualism and gender equality (see Bilsky, 2009; Fernandez, 2009). This liberalism concept is evident in current public discourses that present Islam as incompatible with and threatening central liberal values. Religion is assumed to shape individuals' thinking, emotions and behaviour, and Islam, as currently practised, seems to be incompatible with the core values of enlightenment (see Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Taylor, 1994).

Indeed, different studies endorse that liberal values relate differently to anti-Muslim attitudes, depending on the kind of liberalism concept (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Gustavsson et al., 2016). For example, liberalism conceived as the best way of life assessed through universalism – defined by Saroglou et al. (2009) as social justice and equality for all people – aligns with more positive attitudes towards the Islamic veil.

Gustavsson et al. (2016) suggested that liberals who perceive reason and self-reflection as central characteristics of being a good liberal tend to have more negative attitudes towards religious practices, such as Muslim veiling, than individuals who value tolerance towards diverse lifestyles in society as a central liberal characteristic. They further showed that liberals who perceive tolerance towards diverse lifestyles in society as central characteristics of being a good liberal tend to have more positive attitudes towards religious practices, such as Muslim veiling, than individuals who perceive reason and self-reflection as central liberal characteristics.

Overall, research has shown that anti-Muslim attitudes generally receive support from different ideologies but for different reasons. Anti-Muslim attitudes also receive support from some political leftists, though only towards specific religious practices (or fundamentalist religious observance). Moreover, this opposition towards specific religious practices is rooted in a different belief: those who perceive liberalism as a substantive way of life. It is not based on prejudice towards Muslims as a migrant group but on the felt incompatibility of values (Sniderman et al., 2004).

## PUBLIC DISCOURSE RESEARCH ON ANTI-MUSLIM/ISLAM

What are the specific arguments in the veiling debate, and how are they related to the ideas of liberalism outlined above?<sup>7</sup> Research on the political discourse on Islamic practices – especially the wearing of the veil – identifies different aspects associated with identity and immigrant integration: security concern with terrorism and political Islam, gender equality and the

<sup>7</sup>The idea that references to values indirectly expressed in direct democratic decisions in arguments proposed in public debate and established by political actors has also been proposed by Milic (2010).

relation between church and state (Howard, 2012; Rosenberger & Sauer, 2012; Scott, 2007). Different arguments can be broadly distinguished (see also Nussbaum, 2012), although they are not entirely separable. One central argument in the political debate on the Muslim veiling practice is its *incompatibility with Western culture*, traditions and history (see also Robshaw, 2019).

Besides face veiling being seen as a threat to national identity and alleged cultural homogeneity (based on a common language and Christian religion) primarily voiced by the political right, there is another ‘thin’ variant of this argument related to transparency: the practice of showing one’s face when communicating – to identify the person’s identity and emotion – and thus, its importance for successful integration into democratic societies.

In a more extreme form and not directly linked to liberal ideas, this transparency argument can be expanded to an argument regarding *security*. Thus, the veiling of the face has to be opposed and ultimately banned to improve safety and fight terrorism and radicalism. Therefore, radical Islam is seen as the root of all evil that might spread through the Islamisation of Western countries.

In a less right-populist variant, political Islam is linked to religious fundamentalism, which advocates a patriarchal society and state in the name of a backward and irrational religion. The discursive transition to the *gender-related argument* occurs when Islam is seen as ‘inherently and unalterably oppressive towards women’ (Sirri, 2020: 58, own translation). Thus, the face veiling practice is seen as a patriarchal religious custom disregarded in the Western world (Okin, 1999). Consequently, Muslim women are perceived as passive victims who need to be freed from patriarchal structures to become autonomous individuals (see e.g. Gohir, 2015; Jailani, 2016; Scott, 2007).<sup>8</sup>

A final line of argument related to *individual and religious freedom* emphasises that Muslim women might voluntarily choose to wear the face veil in the act of self-determination, that is, an opportunity to express their identity through their resistance to their country of residence, or religious virtues, such as modesty (see Bilge, 2010).

Consequently, the individual’s decision to wear or not a Muslim veil should be respected regardless of the motives. On a more general level, the state should not intervene in individuals’ lives once no one suffers harm (see Freeman, 2017). This includes one’s freedom to choose how to dress. This non-interference and tolerance of diversity extend to religious freedom. Individuals should have the right to practice their religion regardless of whether the specific religious practice is professed only by a minority, as is the case with the full-face veil (see also Nussbaum, 2012).

Generally, the arguments related to freedom of expression and religion are closest to the first idea of liberalism, which promotes the coexistence of different ways of life. However, the gender-related argument is closer to the concept of liberalism in pursuing a specific way of life. Here, face veiling is perceived as odds with the core value of human equality, specifically equality between women and men. Similarly, the ‘thin’ version of the cultural incompatibility argument focuses on transparency – the necessity to see the counterpart’s face when communicating – fits this idea of liberalism. Finally, the security-related argument, together with the ‘thick’ version concerning the incompatibility of face veiling with Western culture, does not primarily focus on liberal ideas of way of life individuals should pursue but on the concerns traditionally proposed by the conservatives and the political right (e.g. law and order).

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<sup>8</sup>Opponents to a veiling ban, those who support veiling practices, have revealed the negative consequences of a veiling ban if Muslim women are, in fact, forced by male relatives to wear the veil. As such, a ban would expel Muslim women from public life and hinder their participation in society.

## VARIATIONS IN PUBLIC OPINION TOWARDS FACE VEILING

Building on the assumption that public discourse may be mirrored in public opinion (Lippman, 1991), we expect four distinct ideal groups centred around the lines of argument described below. The first group includes individuals who *consistently oppose face veiling*. These individuals are expected to consistently endorse all arguments against veiling: veiling is incompatible with Western culture and not part of religious freedom; individuals wearing the veil are a security threat and a symbol of Islamisation and oppression. Drawing further on previous research on anti-Muslim attitudes, group members are expected to be right-leaning mainly, oppose immigration generally and Islam and Muslims specifically, as they threaten their cultural homogeneity (see Sniderman & Hagendorn, 2007).

The second ideal group can be described as individuals who *consistently support face veiling*. This group is the polar opposite of the first group, with individuals expecting to consistently reject all arguments in the public debate against face veiling. These individuals are expected to reflect the position of the classical political left following traditional research on political conflicts. Based on previous research on dissenting various religious practices, cross-practice consistency is simply taken as a general like (or dislike) Muslims (e.g. Adelman & Verkuyten, 2020).<sup>9</sup>

With the first two groups representing the extreme ends of the spectrum, the next two are somewhere in the middle. Both groups oppose the political right's arguments favouring face veiling for security reasons and incompatibility with Western culture. However, they differ in which liberal idea way of life should be prioritised. The emphasis is on prioritisation because the prejudice towards the oppression of women in Islam reinforced by news coverage in Western media reaches far into the political left and feminist movements (Bilge, 2010; Sirri, 2020). Hence, both groups are expected to share some discomfort with women's roles in Islam and acknowledge the potentially negative consequences of wearing the veil for Muslim women, although to a different extent.

The third group can be described as *principled supporters of face veiling*. Individuals associated with this group are expected to prioritise liberal arguments, promoting diverse ways of life abreast. This includes religious freedom and the non-interference of the state in regulating dress codes. Similar to those who *consistently support face veiling*, they value cultural pluralism within Western societies once basic human rights are respected (see also Koopmans et al., 2005). However, individuals belonging to the fourth group, the *principled opponents of face veiling*, are expected to endorse a substantive way of life and its associated values more strongly – in this case, gender equality. However, unlike the second and third groups and following Helbling and his colleagues' (2018) findings, the members of this group are expected to have more pronounced attitudes against Islam but not necessarily attitudes against Muslims or immigrants.

Also, we expect political orientation to relate differently to these four ideal groups. For example, while right-leaning individuals likely exhibit argument patterns following those who *consistently oppose face veiling*, the political left is expected to be distributed throughout the remaining three groups. Yet, depending on how broad the political right is defined, it is plausible to occasionally identify *principled opponents of face veiling* or even *principled supporters of face veiling* among the political right. For instance, the definition might go beyond supporters of right-wing populist parties and traditional conservatives who adhere to authoritarian concerns, such as traditional forms of family or law and order, while embracing classical liberals for whom extensive property rights and economic freedom are basic (Freeman, 2017).

<sup>9</sup>A possible explanation for this consistency could be the conscious openness towards cultural differences and towards the world in general, which has been related to cosmopolitanism (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002) and might be prevalent among *consistent supporters of face veiling*.

## METHOD, DATA AND OPERATIONALISATION

To test whether different groups with distinct patterns of arguments can be identified, this study relies on latent class regression analysis, which builds on latent class analysis (LCA). LCA is a method to identify ‘hidden groups from observed data’<sup>10</sup> and thus highlights observations with similar response patterns (Oberski, 2016: 275). This method is a latent variable model comparable to factor analysis, with the difference that the latent dimension is not continuous but nominal (here, exclusive membership in a group). In the basic LCA model, the probability of belonging to any latent class before considering the responses of the manifest variables is the same for every observation. In the general latent class regression model used in this study, these prior probabilities vary as a function of independent or so-called concomitant variables (Linzer & Lewis, 2011).<sup>11</sup> This one-step approach simultaneously models class membership and multinomial logistic regression (Vermunt, 2010; but see Bolck et al., 2004 for the three-step approach).

The results discussed below are based on three latent class regression models, estimated for (1) the full sample, (2) the political leftist subsample and (3) the political rightist subsample. In the first step, different groups with distinctive patterns of arguments observable in the full sample are described, followed by considering the subsamples to test whether left-leaning citizens are more divided than right-leaning citizens for groups regarding arguments in support of a ban on face veiling. In the final step, the full regression tables are presented to identify which attitudes are more strongly related to the probability of belonging to a specific group.

The appropriate number of groups was identified as follows. After running the estimations, including concomitant variables, we inspected the Bayes information criterion (BIC), a goodness-of-fit criterion. The BIC did relatively well compared to other indicators, such as the Akaike information criteria (AIC) and the consistent AIC (cAIC), in simulations choosing the correct number of classes (Nylund et al., 2007). Due to some observations in the left and right samples, we chose a parsimonious model that included only significant control variables.<sup>12</sup>

## DATA

The analysis draws on a standardised online survey conducted by the Swiss survey institute DemoSCOPE, using the Intervista online access panel. The data were collected in March 2019. Based on quotas for age, gender and language region, the original sample comprised Swiss residents aged 16 years and above living in the German- or French-speaking parts of Switzerland, sufficiently proficient in either of the two languages.<sup>13</sup> For this study, only Swiss citizens with the right to vote were selected. The most obvious, carelessly invalid responses from the survey were removed based on response time and long-string analysis (see also Curran, 2016).<sup>14</sup> This resulted in a sample of 838 respondent representatives regarding gender (49.5% male, 50.5%

<sup>10</sup>This opposes cluster analysis, which is sensitive to outliers and requires the manifest variables to be interval scaled (see also Schreiber, 2017).

<sup>11</sup>We used the R-package ‘poLCA’ for the analysis.

<sup>12</sup>The main conclusions discussed in this study do not change if all control variables are included in the full model.

<sup>13</sup>The original survey data comprises a sample of 976 Swiss residents, which is representative regarding gender (49.6% male, 50.4% female) and language region (74.0% German-speaking and 25.6% French-speaking). Respondents were between 15 and 74 years, with an average age of 46. The sample is, however, skewed towards highly educated respondents (35% have a university degree). The sample is slightly skewed to the left concerning the left-right orientation ranging from 0 to 10 ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ).

<sup>14</sup>Observations with response times below the cut-off value of 429 seconds, i.e. one standard deviation below the mean calculated, have been dropped, thereby excluding outliers with standardised values above 2. For the long-string analysis, the longest string of identical responses within a battery of questions with reverse items was checked.



female), age (18 to 74 years with an average age of 47) and language region (73.7% German-speaking and 26.3% French-speaking, see Appendix 1 in ‘Supporting Information’).

## OPERATIONALISATION

*Debate-specific Arguments:* The survey included seven statements on wearing a burqa or a niqab related to Western culture, gender such as the oppression and self-determination of Muslim women, public security, the increasing spread of Islam, freedom of religion and non-interference of the state on matters related to dress code (see Appendix 2). Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statements based on a scale from 1 (do not agree at all) to 5 (fully agree). The statements were developed building on pro/contra arguments raised in the public debate preceding the St.Gallen referendum on the ban on face coverings, which occurred in September 2018.

*Attitudes Related to Political Orientations:* These attitudes were measured by self-placement on a left–right scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right),<sup>15</sup> which was also used to split the sample into the political left (0–3) and political right (7–10).<sup>16</sup>

*Attitudes Towards Islam and Muslims Living in Switzerland:* Building on previous research (e.g. Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Kunst et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2009; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007), we created two indices using three items to assess attitudes towards Muslims living in Switzerland (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.78) and four items for attitudes towards Islam in general (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.76). The respondents were presented with two statements with opposed wording, using a scale from 0–10, and asked with which statement they agreed more (see Appendix 2). This is a practice also used, for example, in the European Social Survey (e.g. ‘Islam respects women’ (= 0) vs. ‘Women are oppressed in Islam’ (= 10)).

*Anti-immigrant Attitudes:* These were operationalised using an index based on the mean score of three items designed according to anti-Muslim attitudes, with respondents being asked whether immigration undermines (or enriches) cultural life in Switzerland, whether it costs more than it contributes to the welfare and whether it should be more (or less) restricted (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.82).

Following previous studies on anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant attitudes (Giugni & Morariu, 2010; Helbling & Traunmüller, 2016; Stolz, 2005; Vatter et al., 2011), the control variables included in the parsimonious model were *age* (in years), *education* (mandatory school as a reference category, secondary education including advanced training and tertiary education), and *living in the French-speaking part of Switzerland* measured by a dummy (0 = German-speaking, 1 = French-speaking part of Switzerland).<sup>17</sup> In addition, we controlled for *attitudes towards gender equality*, as this aspect plays a central role in the public debate on veiling (Rosenberger & Sauer, 2012; Scott, 2007) using two indicators related to gender roles: the financial equality between genders and choosing a career over family.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Ideally, political ideology would have been measured through different items to capture mainly the cultural dimension (see Gustavsson et al., 2016; Helbling, 2004). The findings from Helbling and Traunmüller’s study (2018), however, show that the main conclusion—the political left and culturally liberal are more critical of religious groups—prevails regardless whether political ideology is measured by the simple left–right scale (ranging from 1–7) or different items capturing cultural liberalism.

<sup>16</sup>Since there are no specific expectations regarding the political middle, no separate subsample analysis was done. However, robustness tests were run choosing a broader range for the left and right subsample with values ranging between 0–4 and 6–10, respectively. The results were slightly less pronounced for the left and slightly more pronounced for the right (see Appendix 5–8).

<sup>17</sup>In addition, the impact of *gender* (0 = male, 1 = female), *closeness to Swiss People’s Party, SVP* (0 = close to other/no party, 1 = close to SVP), *religious denomination* (Christianity as reference category, other and no religious denomination) and *religiosity* (non-religious, religious and highly religious) were tested. The latter was measured with the centrality of religiosity scale by Huber and Huber (2012), which is applicable to all world religions, atheism and spirituality and is based on five dimensions related public practice, private practice, religious experience, ideology and the intellect. They were excluded from the final model because they had no effect.

<sup>18</sup>The two dummy variables (see Levonian Morgan, 1996) indicate whether a respondent fully agrees with these statements: ‘When they go out, a man and woman should share dating expenses if they both have the same income,’ and ‘A woman should not let bearing and rearing children stand in the way of a career if she wants it.’

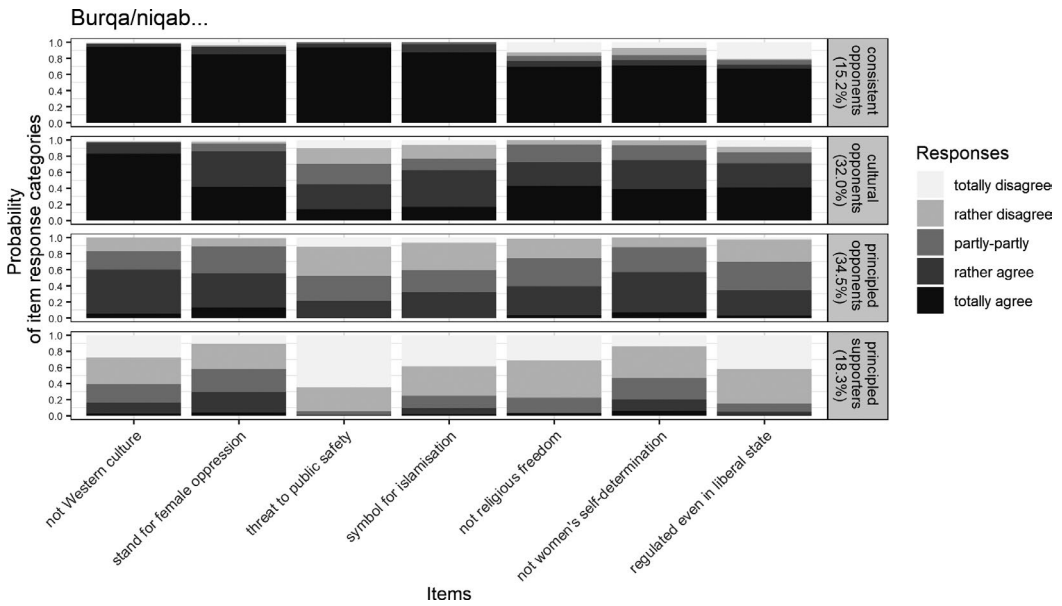


FIGURE 1 Probabilities by class from latent class analysis (full sample,  $n = 681$ )

## RESULTS

Figure 1 presents the specific patterns of arguments regarding the ban on face veiling within each group. Based on the model fit evaluation, the BIC, the four-class solution, best fits the full sample (see Appendix 3 and 4). This provides the first empirical evidence that citizens do not uniformly support or oppose distinct arguments in the public debate but rather that different groups of citizens supporting distinct patterns of arguments prevail in the Swiss population.

The first group comprises those who *consistently oppose face veiling*. It includes 15.2% of the sample. As expected, the probability of a group member fully agreeing to any anti-veiling argument is around 72%. For example, an individual belonging to this group has a probability of 98% of fully agreeing with the statements that the face veil does not belong to Western culture or that it endangers public security in Switzerland. Moreover, the findings from multinomial latent class regression in Table 1 support the expectation that having negative attitudes towards immigration, Islam and Muslims while being more on the ideological right alongside being older goes along with being more likely to *consistently oppose face veiling*.<sup>19</sup>

The second empirically observable group, the so-called *cultural opponents of face veiling*, falls in between the two theoretically expected ideal groups, those who *consistently oppose face veiling* and the *principled opponents of face veiling*. It includes around 32% of the sample. A peculiarity in this group is that the probability of individuals totally agreeing on the incompatibility of the face veil with Western culture is relatively high (83%) compared to any other anti-veiling argument. Also, the probability of agreeing with any anti-veiling argument, whether

<sup>19</sup>The strong opposition towards wearing a face veil is also evident in the voter intention not included in the latent class regression – respondents were asked about the probability that they would vote against or in favour of a national ban of the burqa and niqab in Switzerland on a scale from 0 (against a national ban) to 10 (in favour of a national ban) – is on average 9.39 (SD = 1.81, median = 10). Of course, voter intention has only to be interpreted with the caveat. Research shows that the support of initiatives decreases as the ballot approaches (Vatter et al., 2011). Besides, voter intention towards banning the face veil is only proxy for the general attitude towards face veil as individuals can disapprove face veiling bans while still opposing face veiling. For example, some opponents of the ban reveal the negative consequences of a veiling ban if Muslim women indeed are forced by male relatives: a ban expels Muslim women from public life and thus hinders their participation in society.

**TABLE 1** Latent class regression (full sample, n = 681)

<i>Ref: consistent opponents of face veiling</i>	Cultural opponents	Principled opponents	Principled supporters
Anti-Islam attitudes	-0.213 <sup>†</sup> (0.111)	-0.447 <sup>***</sup> (0.125)	-0.741 <sup>***</sup> (0.158)
Anti-Muslim attitudes	-0.344 <sup>**</sup> (0.102)	-0.399 <sup>**</sup> (0.115)	-0.701 <sup>***</sup> (0.154)
Anti-immigration attitudes	-0.195 <sup>*</sup> (0.098)	-0.477 <sup>***</sup> (0.113)	-0.835 <sup>***</sup> (0.145)
Feminist attitudes (equally share expenses)	-0.519 (0.404)	-0.752 <sup>†</sup> (0.431)	-1.172 <sup>*</sup> (0.533)
Feminist attitudes (career and family)	-0.436 (0.383)	-0.791 <sup>*</sup> (0.402)	-0.884 <sup>†</sup> (0.499)
Left-right orientation	-0.185 <sup>*</sup> (0.087)	-0.395 <sup>***</sup> (0.097)	-0.572 <sup>***</sup> (0.136)
Age	-0.025 <sup>†</sup> (0.014)	-0.067 <sup>***</sup> (0.015)	-0.083 <sup>***</sup> (0.018)
<i>Ref. low education</i>			
Medium	0.097 (0.805)	1.247 (1.375)	-1.052 (1.144)
High	0.487 (0.812)	1.325 (1.368)	-1.028 (1.133)
French-speaking Switzerland	-1.155 <sup>**</sup> (0.393)	-1.254 <sup>**</sup> (0.449)	-0.702 (0.570)

Note: Coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from the latent class regression model.

<sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$

<sup>\*</sup> $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < 0.01$ ; <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < 0.001$ .

partly or totally, is relatively high at 70%. The exceptions are arguments related to veiling as a security threat (45%) and a sign of the increasing spread of Islam in Switzerland (63%). However, individuals belonging to this group of *cultural opponents of face veiling* have significantly more positive attitudes towards Muslims and, to a smaller extent, towards immigrants in general compared to those in the group who *consistently oppose face veiling*, the reference category. By contrast, anti-Islam attitudes hardly differ between the two groups. This observation moves the *cultural opponents of face veiling* closer towards the *principled opponents of face veiling*.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, French-speaking Swiss have lower odds of ending up in the group that *culturally opposes face veiling* (and the group of *principled opponents of face veiling*). One explanation could be the familiarity of citizens living in the French-speaking part of Switzerland with the arguments of the public debate banning the veil in France since the 2000s, which might cause more elaborate and pronounced attitudes towards wearing a face veil.

The third group comes closest to the theoretically expected *principled opponents of face veiling* and contains 34.5% of the sample. Individuals belonging to this group support the anti-veiling argument in Western culture. They also have a probability of around 60% to agree with both anti-veiling arguments related to a substantive way of life, here reflected in gender-related

<sup>20</sup>Again, the voter intention to support a national ban remains high in this group, with an average 8.17 (SD = 2.50, median = 9).

arguments: the face veil stands for female oppression and is not part of the self-determination of Muslim women. However, it is also evident that individuals having a high probability of belonging to this group still lack clear views on the face veil issue. The probability of neither agreeing nor disagreeing with any of the anti-veiling statements is around 30%, which is relatively high compared with the other groups.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the theoretical expectation derived above, individuals most likely belonging to the group of *principled opponents of face veiling* have more positive attitudes towards Muslims and immigrants alongside Islam per se.

Surprisingly, the feminist attitudes' coefficient of not letting family stand in the way of career – the only substantive liberal value controlled for in the latent class regression – is negative and points in the opposite direction than expected. Individuals who totally agreed with this statement were less likely to end up in the group of *principled opponents of face veiling* than those who do not. These effects are even more pronounced for the fourth empirical group, the *principled supporters of face veiling*, at least regarding the size of the coefficients. Here, the gender-related attitudes referring to men and women sharing dating expenses are significant and again unexpectedly negative. One reason could be that the wording is not precise enough. Disagreeing with this statement could be respondents' thinking that a man should bear the costs or that every dating couple should decide for themselves (a reason for procedural liberals).

This fourth empirical group can best be described as *principled supporters of face veiling* and represents 18.3% of the sample. Three out of four individuals belonging to this group had a chance to rather or totally disagree with the statements related to the liberal ideas that different ways of life should co-exist: 'wearing a face veil does not fall under the freedom of religion' (78%) and agreed with the recoded statement that 'a liberal state may not issue dress codes, not even with regard to face veils' (85%). In addition, the probability of disagreeing that face veils are a threat to public safety is also comparably high (95%, of which 65% totally disagree).<sup>22</sup>

Overall, the more favourable attitudes towards immigrants, Muslims and Islam and leaning further to the left, the higher were the odds of ending up in the *principled supporters of face veiling* group, followed by the *principled opponents of face veiling* and *cultural opponents of face veiling*. Contrary to expectations, attitudes towards Islam as a religion and Muslims as an ethnic group do not seem to make a real difference in which group one ends.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the anti-Islam attitudes barely differ between the *consistent opponents* and *cultural opponents of face veiling* groups, but individuals in both groups have significantly more anti-Islam attitudes compared to those in the *principled opponents of the face veiling* group (results not shown). These findings thus provide further empirical evidence, though scant, that individuals generally tend to be more critical of religion than of immigrant groups (see Helbling and Traunmüller, 2018).

Finally, in the present dataset, the analysis provides no empirical support for the fourth ideal group, the individuals who *consistently support face veiling*. Together with the empirically observable group, the *cultural opponents of face veiling*, they seem to reflect the more realistic and widespread approach among Swiss citizens towards face veiling, which admittedly do not see this practice as a security threat but nonetheless reject face veiling as being part of Swiss culture and values.

To analyse whether this observation regarding face veiling is even more pronounced within the left than the right, we analysed the two subsamples (left-leaning vs. right-leaning Swiss citizens) separately. Figure 2 presents the probabilities by class for the left-leaning sample. Three

<sup>21</sup>This indecision is also evident when considering voter intention, which is on average 5.44 (SD = 2.79, median = 6). This group can only tentatively be labelled as *principally 'undecided' opponents of face veiling*.

<sup>22</sup>As with the group who *consistently oppose face veiling*, the position towards the initiative is quite settled with an average voter intention of 1.63 (SD = 2.32, median = 1).

<sup>23</sup>The correlations between the anti-Muslim and anti-Islam index are relatively high (0.61), which is also the case for the anti-immigration attitudes (anti-Muslim: 0.52 and anti-Islam: 0.56).

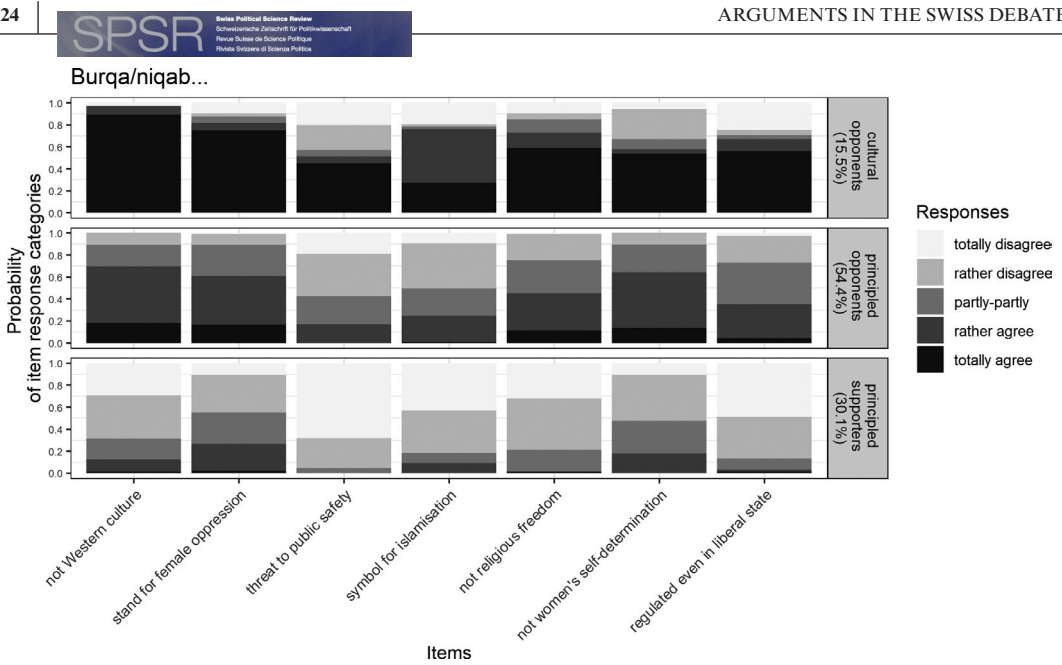


FIGURE 2 Probabilities by class from latent class analysis (left sample, N = 215)

empirically observable groups can be distinguished based on the BIC (see Appendix 3). First, 15.5% of the subsample are *cultural opponents of face veiling*, with over 90% probability to fully agree with the argument that veiling goes against the traditions of Western culture. However, the response probabilities regarding the remaining anti-veiling arguments suggest that this group is a merger of those who *consistently oppose veiling* and the *cultural opponents of face veiling* found in the full sample (see Figure 1). Based on the comparable patterns of arguments for the full sample, the second and third groups are labelled as *principled opponents of face veiling* (54.4% of the left-leaning sample) and *principled supporters of face veiling* groups (30.1%).

Table 2 summarises the results from the latent class regression obtained for the left-leaning subsample. No factor appears to explain which left-leaning citizens end up in any of the three groups. Higher education separates the *cultural opponents of face veiling* from individuals in other groups, individuals with more pro-immigrant attitudes are more likely to end up in the group of *principled supporters of face veiling*. However, contrary to the theoretical expectations, the groups do not differ regarding attitudes towards Muslims and Islam and gender equality.<sup>24</sup>

Figure 3 shows the findings for the right-leaning subsample, which contains two anti-veiling groups identified based on the model fit evaluation criteria (see Appendix 3). The first group comprises 49.8% of the subsample and is comparable to those who *consistently oppose face veiling* in the full sample, though the probability of fully agreeing with any of the anti-veiling arguments is somewhat lower, between 70 to 79% (except for the argument regarding veiling going against Western culture with 94%). Comparably, the second group resembles the *cultural opponents of the face veiling* group but now with considerably lower probabilities to rather or totally agree with the anti-veiling arguments, at around 60%, with the argument regarding veiling going against Western culture being again the exception (80%).

Turning to the explanatory factors that distinguish membership in any of the groups (see Table 3), being more anti-Muslim and anti-Islam together with being older and living in the

<sup>24</sup>On the left, voter intention in the *cultural opponents of face veiling* group is on average 7.67 (SD = 3.16, median = 10), in the *principled opponents of face veiling* group 4.96 (SD = 3.21, median = 7), and in the *principled supporters of face veiling* group 1.75 (SD = 2.68, median = 2).

TABLE 2 Latent class regression (left sample, n = 215)

<i>Ref: cultural opponents of face veiling</i>	Principled opponents	Principled supporters
Anti-Islam attitudes	-0.327 (0.367)	-0.479 (0.404)
Anti-Muslim attitudes	-0.224 (0.376)	-0.628 (0.418)
Anti-immigration attitudes	-0.522 (0.477)	-1.143* (0.526)
Feminist attitudes (equally share expenses)	-1.760 (1.128)	-2.383† (1.253)
Feminist attitudes (career and family)	-0.719 (1.286)	-1.654 (1.437)
Age	-0.038 (0.050)	-0.071 (0.052)
<i>Ref: low education</i>		
Medium	11.203*** (2.009)	12.071*** (2.083)
High	11.183*** (1.507)	12.538*** (1.606)
French-speaking Switzerland	-0.430 (1.197)	0.451 (1.354)

Note: Coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from the latent class regression model.

†p < 0.10

\*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001.

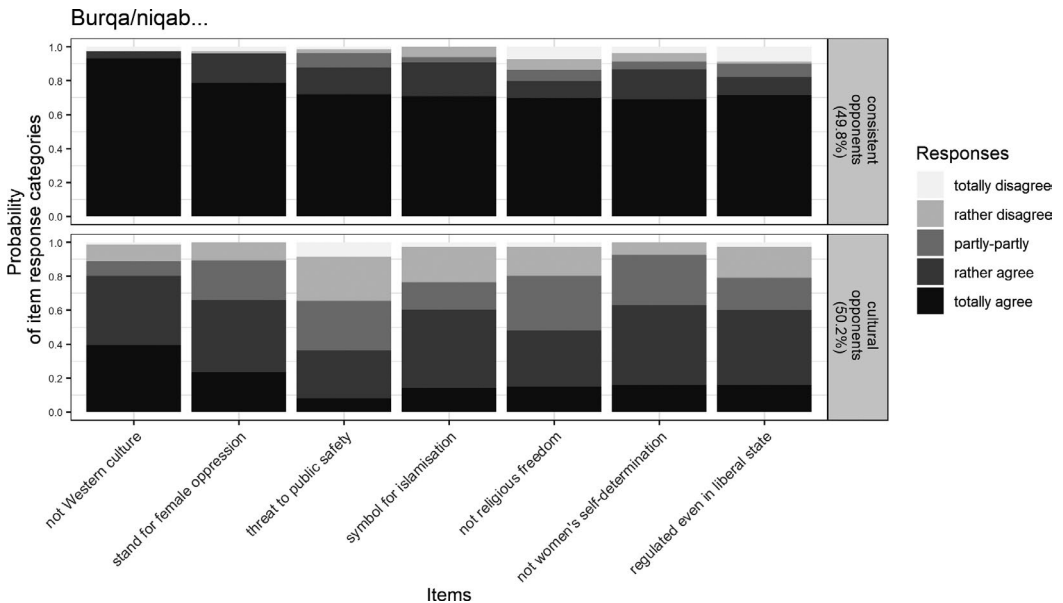


FIGURE 3 Probabilities by class from latent class analysis (right sample, N = 163)

**TABLE 3** Latent class regression (right sample, n = 163)

<i>Ref: consistent opponents of face veiling</i>	<b>Cultural opponents</b>
Anti-Islam attitudes	-0.309* (0.152)
Anti-Muslim attitudes	-0.486* (0.196)
Anti-immigration attitudes	-0.167 (0.192)
Feminist attitudes (equally share expenses)	-0.267 (0.651)
Feminist attitudes (career and family)	0.245 (0.622)
Age	-0.042* (0.021)
<i>Ref: low education</i>	
Medium	-0.631 (1.286)
High	0.038 (1.287)
French-speaking Switzerland	-1.592* (0.660)

Note: Coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from the latent class regression model.

† $p < 0.10$

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

German-speaking part of Switzerland increases the probabilities of ending up in the group that *consistently opposes face veiling* compared to the *cultural opponents of face veiling*.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The possibility of distinguishing different groups of Swiss citizens who support distinct patterns of arguments regarding face veiling used in public discourse was explored; if indeed these groups exist, we wondered whether the diversity regarding groups would be more pronounced within the political left compared to the political right. The results of the latent class regression analysis provided empirical support for two main insights. First, the political left was more diverse regarding groups supporting distinct patterns of arguments towards face veiling. Second, the findings showed that three out of the four theoretically expected groups could be empirically distinguished. Those who *consistently oppose face veiling*, a group only found in the political right sample, supported varying arguments against face veiling and seemed to be the most opposed to immigration in general and Islam and Muslims in particular compared to the other groups. The *principled opponents of face veiling* agreed as expected to a high extent with arguments that support a substantive (or best) way of life and related values, more precisely gender-related arguments that relate face veils to the oppression of women but not to women's self-determination. Finally, the *principled supporters of face veiling* most clearly agreed that

<sup>25</sup>Voter intention within the right-leaning sample is 9.11 for the *consistent opponents of face veiling* group (SD = 2.20, median = 10) and within the *cultural opponents of face veiling* 7.74 (SD = 2.62, median = 8).

veiling poses no security threat. They further agreed that wearing face veils is part of religious freedom and respects the autonomy to form and express convictions and opinions and to live accordingly. This agreement is based on arguments that most closely capture the liberal idea of tolerating many different ways of life within a society. Both groups, the principled opponents and supporters of face veiling, were not found in the political right sample. These findings so far corroborate previous research emphasising that attitudes towards face veiling and, more generally, religious practices are complex and that different concepts of liberalism require consideration (e.g. Adelman & Verkuyten, 2020; Helbling & Traunmüller, 2018; Gustavsson et al., 2016).

Instead of the theoretically expected group of those who *consistently support face veiling*, our empirical findings reveal an additional group situated between those who *consistently oppose face veiling* and *principled face veiling opponents*. The *cultural opponents of face veiling* is the only group present in both the left- and the right-leaning subsamples. Individuals belonging to this group totally agreed that veiling does not belong to Western culture.

Interestingly, this veiling argument receives broad support across the ideological spectrum. Possible explanations could be that Western democracies have become more multicultural alongside the central role of the cultural component in Swiss citizenship and national identity (see Koopmans et al., 2005). Also, this item may have been framed in too general terms and therefore not allow us to disentangle the different possible understandings of culture that the survey respondents may have had in mind: either a so-called ‘thick’ understanding of culture rooted in national culture and identity or a ‘thin’ understanding based on transparency in human interactions. Future research should further probe the argument that face veiling is incompatible with Western culture.

However, contrary to claims in existing research, this study finds no consistent empirical evidence that the anti-Islam attitudes of the *principled opponents of face veiling* and *principled supporters of face veiling* differ regarding anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant attitudes. Moreover, our findings suggest that both attitudes towards Islam and Muslims matter in determining which patterns of argument an individual supports. The more negative their attitude towards Islam and Muslims, the higher the probability is towards consistently being anti-veiling, followed by the cultural and principled opponents of face veiling, while more positive attitudes towards foreigners, Islam and Muslims seem to coincide with lower support for anti-veiling arguments. Building on the distinction between anti-Muslim and anti-Islam attitudes (Helbling, 2012), one future path could be a stronger emphasis to capture these attitudes more precisely.

A second puzzling finding relates to gender equality. The findings indicate that valuing gender equality in general higher tended to be negatively related (if at all) with the probabilities of belonging to either the *principled opponents of face veiling* or *principled supporters of face veiling* groups. As mentioned above, one reason could be that these items were not worded precisely enough to measure attitudes towards gender equality. However, aspects of gender equality related to the face veil, such as being a symbol of women’s oppression, were also central in this study to capture the liberal concept of a specific way of life in arguments. However, other values besides gender equality, such as the role of showing one’s face being part of the fundamental values of sharing life, should be considered in future studies to capture this specific concept of liberalism.

Besides, stressing more on measuring liberal values independently from the veiling arguments to better understand the relationship and to determine which carry greater value for individuals regarding attitudes towards immigration, Islam and Muslims and face veils in general would help to better understand the mechanisms behind support for specific patterns of arguments. In addition, it would increase the robustness of this study’s findings.

A central implication of this study is that it provides further empirical support to recent research (e.g. Adelman & Verkuyten, 2020; Helbling & Traunmüller, 2018), which shows that opposition towards religious practices of Muslims is more than simply xenophobia. A sizeable



part of the population perceives these practices, such as the wearing of the veil, as incompatible with substantive values, such as gender equality, considered fundamental to Western society. The findings by Sniderman et al. (2004: 47) for the Netherlands hold true for Switzerland: the conflict between national majorities and Muslim minorities is not merely based upon misunderstanding and misperception but instead seems to be a genuine conflict of values.

Some tentative conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study, i.e. that opinions on whether to support or oppose a face veil ban were not yet forged. This is particularly the case for the *principled opponents of face veiling* who, when asked directly, were undecided on whether to support or oppose a face veil ban. Research on attitudinal ambivalence shows that, here, the political elite and media play a central role (Zaller & Feldman, 1992; but also see Sniderman et al., 2004). If one specific argument is prevalent in the media, it is more probable that this value is used to form and justify an opinion.

Research explaining variations in political regulations on veiling in Europe also argues that the ‘discursive construction of social problems in public discourses’ besides the institutional context are central (Hadj-Abdou et al., 2012: 133). The arguments dominating the public debate – in particular, those representing the veil as being a threat to (Swiss) national identity and of Muslim women being victims forced to wear the veil rather than exploring liberal principles such as freedom of religion, non-interference or even wearing the veil as a form of women’s self-determination – might be decisive for a country’s overall public opinion towards the face veil ban.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in figshare at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14578347.v1> (Eugster, 2021).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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