CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Muslins in Western Politics

West European countries, Canada, and the United States are host to numerous minorities. These groups identify themselves by their religion, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, immigrant, and most are socio-economically and politically disadvantaged. As such, minority groups pressure their governments to accommodate their particular needs. Yet responses of Western democracies to minority demands vary significantly. Some countries, like Britain, take a universalist approach and strive to accommodate minority needs. Others, such as France, pursue an assimilationist strategy and do not grant group rights. What is more puzzling is that government responsiveness to minority interests varies significantly even within countries. This presents an intriguing research problem; what explains the variation in government responsiveness to minority demands? In this book, I explore this puzzle by analyzing the factors that influence local government responsiveness to Muslim demands in London.

Currently, there are eight Muslims in the House of Commons (three of whom are women), thirteen in the House of Lords (five of whom are women), and two in the European Parliament representing Britain.¹ More strikingly, since 1980, the number of ethnic minority city councillors in Britain increased by more than 700%.² There are approximately 146 Muslim councillors (thirty-six of whom are women) in London. Yet the number of Muslim councillors and government responsiveness to minority needs vary drastically across local councils. The aim of this book is to explore which factors facilitate or hinder effective Muslim political representation in Britain, and how representation styles of

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¹ During the electoral period under research in this book (1998–2010), there were four Muslims in the House of Commons, nine in the House of Lords (four of whom are women), and two in the European Parliament representing Britain. Muslim members of the House of Commons, as of January 2010, were: Sadiq Khan, Muhammad Sarwar, Khalid Mahmood, and Shahid Malik. Muslim members of the House of Lords, as of January 2010, were: Nazir Ahmed, Waheed Alli, Kishwer Falkner, Pola Manzila Uddin, Adam Hafejee Patel, Amirali Alibhai Bhatai, Mohamed Iltaf Sheikh, Sayeeda Warsi, and Haleh Afshar. Muslim members of the European Parliament from United Kingdom, as of January 2010, were: Syed Kamall and Sajjad Haider Karim.

² Le Lohé in Sagg ar (1998) reports the number of ethnic minority councillors in London boroughs increased from 35 in 1978 to 213 in 1994.
Muslim elected officials shape these factors. To this end, I study the political incorporation, party fragmentation, experiences and perceptions of Muslim councillors in London as well as their impact on government responsiveness to minority needs. In particular, I investigate whether the increasing number of Muslim councillors in Britain leads to substantive representation of Muslim interests. Based on the existing literature on minority representation, I propose the contingency theory of descriptive representation. The contingency theory of descriptive representation posits that descriptive representation is a necessary yet not a sufficient condition for substantive representation of minority interests. I theorize that descriptive representation of minorities leads to improved government responsiveness to minority interests contingent on the percentage of minority representatives, the level of their party fragmentation and political incorporation, and the electoral competitiveness of the district. I use multivariate regression analysis to test the effects of these four explanatory variables.

Furthermore, I evaluate the specific process of their interaction through case-study analyses of the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Newham, and Hackney, while also investigating the role of representational styles of Muslim councillors on their political effectiveness. The findings of this study confirm the contingency theory of descriptive representation and suggest that, (a) Muslim identity has become strong and politicized in Britain and shapes political behavior; (b) identity based on faith impacts day to day practices, which are governed by legislation (i.e. halal food provision at hospitals, schools and other public agencies, accommodation of Islamic practices in public schools, Islamic dress code or provision of prayer time and space); (c) despite substantial in-group diversity, British Muslims share common concerns and needs; (d) Muslim elected officials are likely to advocate for the accommodation of unique demands and needs of the community and to mediate when conflicts arise with local and national governments; (e) local government responsiveness to Muslim interests is likely to be higher in boroughs with higher proportion of Muslim councillors who are less fragmented along party lines and more politically incorporated.

Although Muslims in the West is a flourishing research area, there are few rigorous studies on the political representation of Muslims in Western Europe. Moreover, most studies focus on ethnicity rather than the sociopolitical Muslim identity. Hence, this book is the first to investigate the dynamics of effective Muslim political representation in a liberal democracy. I define effective political representation as high levels of congruence between policy preferences of voters and elected officials. These research questions are significant for a number of reasons. First, there are approximately 16 million Muslims