

Arab Americans and U.S. Elections 2008

Our Voice. Our Future.



(Note: The above graphic is from the Arab American Institute's election 2008 campaign)

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Arab Americans and the Middle East Policy in the 2008 U.S. Elections

Dr. James Zogby, President of the Arab American Institute

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MODERATOR: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. We have with us today at the Foreign Press Center Dr. James Zogby, who is the founder of the Arab American Institute, which has led Arab American efforts to secure political empowerment in the United States through voter registration, education, and mobilization.

Dr. Zogby is a lecturer and scholar on Mid East issues, U.S.-Arab relations, and the history of the Arab American community. He is also a writer, columnist, and has appeared on numerous television programs. He's here today to talk about Arab Americans and the Middle East policy debate and the 2008 elections.



Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Zogby.

DR. ZOGBY: Thank you. I want to begin with just a few opening comments about the various subsets of the topic, Arab Americans, the policy debate, and the 2008 elections.

First, let me start on Arab Americans. We've been polling on the Arab American community now for many, many years and we have found certain trend lines developing that have become interesting for us to observe at this point, because they are, in large measure, a result of the Middle East policy debate, although not exclusively the policy debate. There are some domestic concerns that have to be factored in.

But for example, in all the years that we polled in the 1990s, we got the normal party breakout that you would expect in the country as a whole. The country has, for the longest time, slightly leaned Democratic, but despite their ultimate voting pattern, party ID historically has been slightly Democratic, sometimes 36/33, sometimes 38/35, but always a slight edge that way. Same numbers among Arab Americans, as you would expect, because so many of the Arab American community are born here. Almost 75 percent are born here and therefore, not unlike the rest of the country, have behavioral patterns and attitudes on most issues that reflect the normal American consensus that you would get.

So in the 90s, we got a 38/36 split leaning Democratic. By 2002, that began to open up to a 39/31 Democratic edge and in the most recent poll that we did earlier this year, it's now a 39/26 edge. And when asked in the generic, would you vote for president right now, unnamed, the Democrat or the Republican, 36 said, without a name, they would vote for the Democrat and 14 percent only said that they would vote for the Republican. That enormous gap that has opened up has largely been due to a number of foreign policy issues that -- and some -- as I said, some domestic that have become defining issues for this community.

Now that in itself is also interesting because the community is an emergent community. It's about 3.5 million countable Arab Americans. They -- when I began doing this work some 30 years ago, there was an amorphousness to the community. They had a variety of self-definitions. Some went by Lebanese American or Syrian American and some used no ethnic identifier at all. Increasingly, that has changed and there are certain sensibilities, certain appeal of certain issues that have begun to shape a community.

One of them is the discrimination issue and the defamation in the media, which I think is itself interesting to note. When you have a situation like, for example, the Dubai Ports and the way Dubai Ports was talked about and the people who we observed in leadership roles around the country, third generation Lebanese Maronite chair of the Republican Party of a New England state or members of Congress who were, again, third generation Lebanese Christians taking the lead, taking positions, in other words, you wouldn't get from Lebanese Christians in Lebanon. Outrage among third generation, again Lebanese Christians, about defamation of Saudi images on television, something you wouldn't find in Lebanon, the same kind of outrage.

There's sort of a communal sense that has emerged that this discrimination isn't acceptable, that the image of the Arab is one that ought to be treated more respectfully and even among Christians, a sense that Islam ought to be treated better. We find, for example, that about 20-some percent, 21 percent of Arab Americans said that they had actually been discriminated against since 9/11, but two-thirds were afraid that discrimination would be in their future or in their children's future if current trends remained. And when you get a number that large, two-thirds, it means that that sense of there not being fair play toward Arabs and Muslims is one that is permeated into the larger community. So that is one issue, the discrimination and/or defamation that's very big.

But also, the issues that involve Lebanon, issues that involve Palestine, issues that involve the war in Iraq have also become major issues. When, for example, we would ask the question in our normal polling, how important is or should Palestinians have an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza and we would get a 49/25 yes response and then later, during the Clinton years, it went up to 60 percent yes and 25 percent no, that was the public as a whole.

But among Arab Americans, the number would be 95 percent yes. And on issues involving Lebanon, you also get a 90-plus percent. On issues involving opposition to the Iraq war, you would get an 80 percent yes. When numbers are that high, that means that it is a consensus across the board. Every single cross-tab group you can look at is most probably -- if a number is in the 70 range or above, that means that almost every single

cross-tab group is going to be in the positive on that issue and probably in a significant majority, not just a positive.

So the foreign policy questions and the discrimination questions combined produce a kind of a consensus set of issues among people in the community and that has not been helpful to the Republican side of the community and that is what accounts for the gap. It's the policies pursued by this Administration post-9/11, both foreign and domestic, that have opened up this gap and taken the toll on Republican voters. And we saw that in the elections in 2004, we saw it again in the elections in 2006, and if all holds as we're seeing play out right now, we would most probably see it play out in 2008.

Let me just give you some numbers there too. George Bush won the Arab American vote in 2000, the first election, but not by the margins that people suggested. There were some press conferences here in town, "80 percent," they'd say. And the group that did that actually sent out a blast fax and an email to their members and I remember one person in my office, our press person, actually got 11 faxes sent to her to fill out. Their members -- maybe 80 percent of their members said it. She wasn't even Muslim, although it was a Muslim group and it wasn't a poll. I mean, we do polling and we search for the most precise responses to the questions that we get. And what we've found was that George Bush, in fact, as I said, did win. The margin was about 30 -- 44 for George Bush and about 36, as I recall, for Al Gore, not an overwhelming, but still a victory.

Now what happened to the rest of the votes was interesting, because it was almost 14 percent that year -- more than 13 percent, almost 14 for Ralph Nader. Now where did that come from? Well, in the polling that we did, what we found was that the party ID among the 75 percent or so of Arab Americans who were born here is pretty strong. The swing vote group is the 25 or so percent that are from overseas, that are immigrant, and therefore don't have a history, I mean, of growing up in a party and feeling strong ID, "I'm a Democrat because my dad was a Democrat," or "My mom was a Republican and I feel strongly toward that."

The immigrant community feels less attached to party, more attached to issues, less attached to the broader framework of questions that define the parties and more attached to some of the particular community-based concerns that would affect them. And so what happens is that -- what you would normally expect, in other words, is that the strong Democrats vote Democratic and the strong Republicans vote Republican. In 2000, that did happen and the swing vote did go towards George Bush, but some Democrats who couldn't vote for Al Gore, just simply couldn't bring themselves to vote for Al Gore for many reasons also could not vote for the Republican. It was simply just not something that they could do, so what they ended up doing was voting for Ralph Nader and that accounted for a very high Nader vote.

Similarly, in 2004, we had the reverse. We had John Kerry getting a huge 63 percent of the Arab American vote. George Bush only got 28 percent. Nader again got a very large vote that again was, in this case, Republicans who couldn't vote for George Bush who were so angry at his policies, but also could not bring themselves to voting for John Kerry. And so they voted for, instead, the alternative that they saw, which was Ralph Nader; that Ralph Nader was "right" on all of those issues didn't hurt. The fact that he was of Arab descent and has begun, in recent years, to talk about that a lot more than he ever did before also helped.

And what we're seeing play out in 2008 and the most -- the last polling that we did is that the trend line continues with Arab Americans leaning strongly in a Democratic direction and away from the Republican. It will be, I believe, dependent upon, ultimately, where the two parties come out in their nominee and what the two parties are saying and whether there's a third party alternative available as to how this ultimately shakes out.

Let me say something about the Middle East policy debate, though, as I now switch gears. It's not doing well. I think there's a debate on Iraq, to be sure, and as far as a substantive debate, that's it. And even on the Iraq debate, I think that you -- what you find in a primary election is that the candidates usually compete for the bottom, the base vote, and that does not always lend itself toward real substance. And so as you find Democrats moving more and more in the direction of get out, get out, get out and Republicans more and more in the direction of stay in, stay in, stay in, someplace lost in the middle is the nuance in Iraq of what really has to be done to make it work.

And I think that what we're finding is Republicans sounding more and more -- I've used the term, Bush on steroids or Cheney on -- without nuance, but they're sounding more hard line than the Administration. And Democrats, on the other hand, competing right now with Dennis Kucinich for the most dramatic policy in terms of -- even those who have staked a more middle ground position formally will not acknowledge that middle ground position in debates and find it difficult to do so because of the base and the concern that the base has.

If you look at the positions, for example of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, both of them are very clearly moving in the direction of something like an updated version of the Iraq Study Group. They want to have a reduced American presence, they want to have a more internationalized peacekeeping and political role for the United Nations, and what Obama, I think, correctly looks at is a need for a regional compact group that would provide for Iran, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia to play a role in helping to help mediate or sit at a table where they can provide some kind of balance for each other's interests and help the Iraqi parties move toward political reconciliation. But that's not something that gets talked about in a TV debate or in most public appearances because frankly, there's no votes in nuance. There's votes in applause lines, not votes in nuance.

On the Republican side as well, the candidates have not been as forthcoming in terms of writing detailed policy papers. The only ones that have written very detailed policy papers -- I think you really don't want to look at Rudolph Giuliani's policy paper in foreign policy -- in *Foreign Affairs* magazine. It's scary, a little bit, in terms of what he's talking about doing in the Middle East. But with that, you will still get, with the exception of Ron Paul who says, "Get them all out and they don't belong there," you're not going to get anything more substantive in the Republican debate about Iraq.

On the Arab-Israeli conflict, I think it gets a little interesting here because here, you really can find some nuance and you have to look for a nuance to understand where the differences are. Interestingly enough, no one on the Republican side, with the exception of Ron Paul, is supporting the President's position on -- even under the President's position on working for two states in an Arab-Israeli -- solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Mike Huckabee, the other day on Late Edition, said he saw no reason why Israel should be encouraged to give up the West Bank; there's plenty of other Arab land available and they ought to find some place else for Palestinians to have their state. Similarly, Giuliani has said there's no difference between Hamas and Abu Mazen and so he saw no need for peace talks because he didn't think there was a peace partner. Most of the other candidates haven't spoken on the Arab-Israeli conflict at all. And so it's difficult to lay out their positions.

We've actually done, on our website, a collection of pretty much everything the candidates have said and find it rather shocking that an issue that has consumed so much time and energy has gotten so little attention, other than the kind of -- either the kind of very hawkish comments that Rudolph Giuliani has uttered or, again, an appeal for the base vote, which in the Republican Party is the Christian right, which is, I'm a strong defender of Israel; it's God's people and we will do nothing to forsake Israel.

On the Democratic side, you do get a little more in the way of nuance. And we had recently our national conference in Michigan and all of the candidates sent us videos or made direct appearances. And I've written about that in my column. What we got from Dennis Kucinich, of course, was a very thoughtful and a very elaborate presentation on the Arab-Israeli peace process. Bill Richardson came and addressed as well in some -- at some length the failure of the Administration to be more aggressive and its neglect for many years the need for a two-state solution, the need for pushing negotiations until completion and his commitment that it would happen.

Barack Obama, in a very short statement that was sent by video, made pretty much the very same comments of criticism of the Administration, a commitment to two states and that he would get it done during his Administration and a belief that negotiations had to be pursued and pursued aggressively and a commitment that he would be directly involved in that.

A little less in the way of commitment from John Edwards and not a whole lot of anything really from Mrs. Clinton. Her comments were the vaguest, actually, of all in that regard and I think somewhat disappointing to some of our people. Chris Dodd has been supportive, although he didn't make a statement at that time and has not issued a formal position, but has appeared on television supporting the Annapolis process and encouraging two states, et cetera. And Joe Biden pretty much the same. So from the Democrats, a bit of nuance and a bit of sort of supporting the outcome, criticizing the President for his neglect of the process and promising personal engagement of their own.

How will all this factor out in the 2008 election? I think as I said, it would be very hard, given the field that's there for Republicans to regain the ground that they lost over the last eight years, in part, because I don't see anyone right now on the Republican horizon with the exception of Ron Paul, who's too marginal a character in the Republican Party to, I think, win that nomination.

I don't see anyone there who can pick up the kind of support that George Bush had won in 2000. And because the debate has become so polarized with Democrats, in fact, on their side of the polarity in this bipolar debate, reflecting a little bit more of the issues that Arab-Americans care about. I mean, just look at the rhetoric on Islam, for example. And

understand, again, almost three-quarters of Arab Americans are Christian. And yet, when you ask the question how important is the -- how Islam is treated by the President or the -- by the government for your vote, it's an important issue for Arab Americans. I mean, again, something you wouldn't get in the Arab world among Christians necessarily. You'll get it among Arab Americans here. And they feel when they hear a candidate talk about Islam and Islam fascism, et cetera, there's an interesting sensibility among Arab Americans, whether Christian or Muslim, that says to them, this doesn't smell right, I don't like this, and I'm not going to support this.

And so when you hear the political discourse coming on the Republican side, it -- Arab Americans turn it off and they say, that doesn't smell right to me, I don't like what this looks like. On the other hand, you don't get that and Giuliani's been quick to point out, no democratic candidate will talk about Islamic Fascism. And who else are they but Islamic terrorists. He points it out. Arab Americans note that and take a -- I think a more favorable view of, again, the more nuanced discussion that takes place on the Democratic side.

And so I would expect numbers not unlike the numbers that John Kerry got in the 2008 election among Arab Americans. Will it make a difference? It depends on who the ultimate nominees are. But I would think in states like Michigan and Ohio and Pennsylvania and Florida, yes, it'll make a difference. These are states where Arab Americans can be the margin of victory in an election.

Will these issues factor large in the national debate? I think, clearly, Iraq will. I think how we relate to the Arab and Muslim world in the broadest sense will. Tragically, I don't think the Arab-Israeli peace process will. I think that the President has -- if nothing else with Annapolis, he's kind of taken the issue off the table. The one thing that Democrats would attack is his neglect. They'll still say he neglected it for seven years. But now he is "engaged." And whether the engagement is adequate or it comes to a conclusion will not be of interest, I think, because it's too complicated a question to put on a bumper sticker. He wasn't engaged for seven years. He got engaged, but he didn't make anything happen. You're not going to win any votes with that.

And frankly, the Jewish American vote and the Arab American vote, which would be the two groups most decide -- who would most decide their vote on an issue like this, their votes are largely decided. Jewish Americans are going to largely vote Democratic. Arab Americans are, for many reasons, going to largely vote Democratic. And so why complicate the picture with an issue that is not going to be understood in most of the country. The President is getting, I think, somewhat undeserved credit for a historic breakthrough, but it will play out that way. And if the media is compliant, as it has been and projecting it as a historic breakthrough, it's enough, as I said, to take it off the table as an issue that will be hotly debated between now and then.

The one thing that I would close with is depending upon who the nominees are and maybe even despite who the nominees are, there'll most probably be a third and maybe fourth party ticket, third or fourth depending upon who the nominees are. I would not be at all surprised, if Hillary Clinton and Rudolph are the nominees, that you do definitely have a third and maybe even fourth party candidate.

I think that Barack Obama and John McCain, for example, would make it less likely that you'll have four. You'd probably still have a third. And even if Mike Huckabee were the nominee on the Republican side, that might take the edge off of the religious right getting into the game. But there are groups that will find the choices critical to their decision as to whether or not they'd push for a third party. There is the religious right and the social values issues that, while not in and of themselves determinant on the Republican side, are big enough that if they find a candidate that they simply can't identify with, there's going to be pressure for another force.

There is also a big center in the policy debate in this country on broader social and political issues. And if that center doesn't find a champion, then it's something also to look out for. And so a Mike Bloomberg ticket is something to watch for. There'll almost certainly be a candidate from the left; if not Nader, someone else on the Green Party. There'll be a Libertarian candidate. There always is. That's another 1 percent of the vote.

But whether or not there's something more substantial, someone who represents, for example, the burgeoning movement that Ron Paul has brought together, which -- should not be dismissed. This is the Pat Buchanan pitchfork brigade from '88. The Libertarian and angry crew of conservatives are out there. What Ron Paul doesn't do is combine it with the nativist appeal that a Tom Tancredo does. But that group is out there and to be mobilized. I would think that the only candidate that would make a difference for Arab Americans would be a centrist candidate, someone like a Mike Bloomberg, depending upon who his vice presidential choice were. That could drain some votes off as well. But I'll stop there and we'll take whatever questions you might have.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Joyce Karam with *Al Hayat* newspaper. Good to see you. I'm wondering if you're doing any polls on the election or how is it viewed in the Arab world itself? Do they know there is two parties? And I mean, how much do they know of the candidates from your travel or if you're going there?

DR. ZOGBY: You know what I'm going to do for you? We're going in the field in just two weeks. And I think I'll throw in a couple questions. We're doing six Arab countries. I think I'll do something just to see what we get back. I think that would be very interesting. I would tell you that there is a general sense of the process, although they're certainly -- look, I mean, most Americans don't have a clue how an Iowa caucus works, don't know why it starts in Iowa in the first place. And therefore, I wouldn't expect people in the Arab world to understand that -- sort of the details of the thing. Do they know an election is there? Yes, they do. Do they understand the variety of issues in the election? The answer is no, they don't.

And so, I mean, there is still a sense that the 2004 election was a ratification of George Bush's Iraqi policy. It was not. I think that one of the problems that not only Arabs have, but the rest of the world has, is understanding how complex the decision-making process is that ultimately results in people choosing who they're going to vote for or not vote for and how somebody wins an election. You don't win it on ideas only; you win it on a whole range of issues.

And George Bush, probably more than anything else, won that election because, though he was the patrician, he came off as the regular guy. And though John Kerry's roots were more humble, he was portrayed as the patrician. And some voters out in the farm belt in Iowa's image was either John Kerry windsurfing or John Kerry stiff, erect and Boston accent and George Bush, white sleeves rolled up -- shirt sleeves rolled, leaning over a podium, saying Laura and I are really happy to be here with you. We really want your support. We need it, you know, and they said, "God, he's a guy just like me." And that won it for him, I think, in many places of the country more than even the issues that were at stake.

I mean, I think what Arabs don't understand is that most Americans' critical issues are who's going to win the Friday night football game, whether their kids get a -- you know, get home safe from their Saturday night movie date and whether my healthcare is paid and whether I'm going to keep my job next year and be able to afford that extra something that we want to get for Christmas. And so I think I'll ask some questions, just to get a sense of what they do know and we'll let you know.

QUESTION: My second part was your last poll or the one before, I'm not sure if I'm following right, but Giuliani was running high up among Arab Americans.

DR. ZOGBY: Yeah. And it's logically so because this was early in the process. His positions have not been staked out clearly. And Arab American Republicans saw him as the hero of 9/11. And let's face it, I mean, the work that he did in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the image that was created was very compelling. And so among Arab Americans, Republicans -- and there are Arab American Republicans, just like there are Arab American Democrats, they are real Republicans, they're do or die Republicans. They're Ronald Reagan Republicans.

And there's those -- on the Democratic side who are do or die Democrats. I -- you know, I call myself a diaper Dem. I mean, I was born Democratic, I walked the precincts with my mom when I was seven. There are people on the Republican side like that, too. So if Giuliani is the nominee, he'll get 20-something percent of the Arab American vote, no matter what he says or does because they are -- there are people in the community who are Republican who feel that the Republican philosophy -- lower taxes, strong national security, et cetera -- are the issues that they care most about. That's logical in every community.

We are polling Arab Americans later this month, right before -- we'll probably come out with some results on this right before the caucuses, the Iowa caucuses. So we'll have some numbers then.

Yeah.

QUESTION: Hi.

MODERATOR: Hi, New York.

QUESTION: Hello, my name is Vivian Salama. I'm a freelance correspondent based here in New York. We have been hearing a lot about the Israel lobby in recent years, obviously, and I was wondering, even though there is no officially registered lobby, there

is certainly lobby -- Arab lobby efforts going on. And I was wondering if you could sort of discuss the status of that a little bit.

DR. ZOGBY: Well, thank you for that. It's a very complicated question. And I can even make simple questions complicated, but this one is a complicated one, so I'll even be more complicated.

There are many Arab lobbies. Each Arab government hires lobbyists to do their work for them. And we Arab Americans are not an Arab lobby. I think that the thing in the Jewish community that's interesting is that the Jewish community is supportive of Israel and the Israeli Government works very closely with elements in the American Jewish community around a convergence of ideas and issues and interests, and that has created the sense of an Israel lobby.

When I addressed the Arab League foreign ministers -- I remember they invited me to come and speak to them at a summit in Cairo in September of 2002, the year anniversary of 9/11 to give them an update on what was happening in America. I did, and I told them where I thought we were going and what I did, and I concluded at one point by saying -- I said, look, after 9/11 we faced challenges as a community and they were very serious challenges. I mean, my life was threatened. The most recent threat against my life and people in my office is coming to trial next week. There are four people so far who have been charged; three have been sent to prison and this one. This was not an easy time. And the defamation was real and the cases that we were dealing with across the country were real. We could have faced a nightmare. And thank God the President helped; he did. Giuliani helped; he did. People spoke out against this early on and made a difference.

But the burden of the work fell on us and we had to do it. But at the same time that we were doing this and defending ourselves, Saudi Arabia was under attack and Syria was under attack and Lebanon was under attack and Palestine was under attack and Islam in general was under attack. And we couldn't not defend everybody all at the same time. And you all -- I said to them -- did nothing to defend yourself. I kept hearing about an Arab League initiative, I kept hearing about a Gulf initiative to defend their culture and their heritage and their religion. Nothing happened. So don't ask us to pick up the ball for you when you're not doing anything to help yourself. And when you hire a high-priced lobbyist in Washington to do ads in newspapers and think that's doing something to clear up your image problems, you know, that's doing -- the only thing -- one thing that's doing is sort of a siphoning off some of your money and sending it here to a lobbyist who gets rich off of you. It doesn't do anything to improve your image and our polling shows that oftentimes those ads end up reinforcing the negatives; i.e., Arabs with too much money not doing anything to -- but spend money and -- to try to clean up their image. I mean, it doesn't work.

So they have lobbyists for themselves, but they really don't use them and do them well. We are not in that sense an Arab lobby. I'm an American and we're an American lobby, if anything at all. We want American policy to be right. We want American policy to live up to its values. We want America to promote peace and justice and human rights in the region. We're not advocates for any particular country.

Now, having said that, I also will say that there's some developments in the Jewish community that need to be paid attention to. They've created kind of a smoke and mirrors operation that would have most people believe that the Jewish community as such is part of the Israel lobby (inaudible). That's not true. That's just not true. There are many Israel lobbies today here in Washington. Some support peace and some support the Israeli Government whatever it does. I actually believe that the trend line in the Jewish community from the polling we've done and from speaking engagements I've been doing around the country, in the Jewish community, most American Jews are on the side of peace and not on the side of supporting the Israeli Government with whatever it does. Most American Jews want settlements stopped. Most American Jews want a Palestinian state. Most American Jews want the Bush Administration to be balanced in how it deals with both Israelis and Palestinians. That is not what the "Israel lobby" wants.

And on the question of money, which is again another one of the big myths that the Israel lobby controls all of this money, there's a lot of money that comes from the Jewish community that goes into politics. That's true. Most of it has nothing to do with Israel. I mean, when Steven Spielberg makes big contributions or when Barbra Streisand makes contributions or when the whole Hollywood crowd gets into the game, et cetera, it's not Israel. There are other issues that are involved here. And I think that needs to be understood.

But so that the myth of the Israel lobby that they've been very successfully able to cultivate is that they represent the whole Jewish community, they represent all of this Jewish money and involvement in politics, and they're all united around one position, that's not true. On the other hand, the reality about Arab Americans is that we are emerging as a political group, we are doing a lot of work, but our focus has always been on America. Three-quarters of our community is born here and therefore serves in the military and therefore has interests that are American interests. We're not waiting to ascend; that is, "to go back home." When I want to go back home, it's to Utica, New York. I'm an American. I'm not living in exile. And there's a difference here than in even how we see ourselves and define ourselves, for the most part, as Americans.

And I'll just end it there. More than you bargained for, I bet.

QUESTION: Good morning, Jim. Ron Baygents with *Kuwait News Agency*. I'm working on an analysis -- this is sort of a narrow-focused question. I'm talking to several people. I did want to get your input. And as you say, stepping back from the Arab American and just speaking as an American political analyst, some people in the Middle East, from what they see over here, the question is this: They see that Hillary -- that Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama appear to be the frontrunners, and then they say this is a woman, this is a minority, Americans have never elected a woman or a minority as the president. And so if one of these people is nominated, is this likely to somehow help the Republican white -- the inevitable Republican white male? And can you, like, tell us why that either has traction or just is not the case? Because some of the people in the Arab world just fundamentally wonder about this question.

DR. ZOGBY: Yeah, and I think it's an important one and we won't know the answer until the end of the process because the polling isn't going to be indicative of anything. People lie like crazy in these polls. Will it make a difference to you if the candidate an African American? No, not at all; 97 percent say not at all. You know, look at what

happened in Virginia when Doug Wilder ran. He was up double digits in the polls. He ended up winning by the narrowest of margins. And Harold Ford in Tennessee, the same thing.

There's racism. It is pervasive. It is a defining issue in American life. It's not going away anytime soon. And similarly on the issue of gender, I think that it is real. It's something we're not going to see pass away anytime soon. The question is, I think, that is being defined in this contest is does -- has Hillary Clinton been able to project herself as strong enough to overcome the gender bias. And similarly, has Barack Obama been able to project himself as broad in vision enough and understanding enough of the lives of farmers in Iowa and, you know, and rural folks in New Hampshire to be able to escape race bias.

My sense in both cases is most probably yes. And those people whose biases are still so deep that they will not be able to listen to Barack Obama but just see black, and those people who will not be able to listen to Hillary Clinton and just see woman, they're probably not going to vote for a Democrat ever anyway, no matter what. And so there's probably not a whole lot of loss there.

On the other hand, I think maybe the more interesting and problematic issue is the Romney Mormon question, which is, in all the polling we do, that's one where people tell you the truth. Fifty percent say they'd never vote for a Mormon. And what the hell does that mean and where does that come from? Do those 50 percent even know what a Mormon is? Or what -- you know, what is the issue there that makes the fear of Mormonism so great? And we will have to -- that's one that we'll find out, and I think we'll find out pretty soon. I think he'll do well still in Iowa and I think he'll do well in New Hampshire, but we'll begin to see as the campaign moves to the rest of the country how well he does.

But I really think that the Hillary Clinton and the Barack Obama issues are real, as you suggest, but are transcendable by both candidates.

Let me make just one other observation about that. Evidence that it is transcendable and that the candidates in their life story and the way they project themselves are able to do that is that Obama's bigger problem is in some instances convincing some African Americans that he's black enough, that his story is really their story. That's a real issue that he's confronting. He's also having to confront among a larger group in the African American community the fact that he can win. And I believe -- my sense is -- that if he does win even the first state, you're going to see a real shift among African Americans who will say he can win, he can overcome this issue.

Hillary Clinton's problem is somewhat similar to that, and that is that some of the most virulent opponents of Hillary Clinton are women who don't like the fact that she is, in fact, as tough and strong as she is and who find her -- I mean, like that woman in Ohio who asked John McCain the question about her. That's an attitude that you will find among a lot of women. And so I think evidence of the fact that they transcend some of the bias is the fact that they get a different kind of bias coming back at them: He's not black enough or she's not enough of a woman. And so I -- just on that, let me say I think that it's an issue, something to watch out for.

But I do agree with Barack Obama that if he wins, the message it sends to America and the message it sends to the world is a dramatically different one than we've ever -- not only is he, you know, the first African American, but at a critical time in our history when we've needed to project a different image to the world. You want to project a different image to the world? Send Barack Obama to the White House and, you know, put that face on Mount Rushmore and you make a very different statement about who we are as a people. And I think that's a compelling part of his story that I think is going to work as much for him as among some it might work against them. Okay?

QUESTION: Aziz Fahmi from *Saudi TV*. How much do you think Iraq will play a factor in the upcoming elections?

DR. ZOGBY: Well, it certainly is going to depend on where we are as we move forward with it. I think that, for example, we're seeing stories right now of the surge working and therefore Democrats backpedaling. I don't think that's the case. I mean, I think that to the same extent that it's working, it make some Democrats more emboldened to say, well, then get them out, it's not working and the money is still being spent and the risk is still there and the political issues aren't being solved, and so it still is a problem.

If, of course, violence heats up again, and that could just as easily happen as not happen, I would suspect that it will become even a more intense debate. I think that you will see after the nominees are chosen the -- somewhat more nuance on both sides of the discussion. The real Obama or Clinton or whoever position, something more like an Iraq Study Group type of approach, will be more forthcoming.

And I think on the Republican side they're kind of locked in having to see victory, et cetera. But if the violence becomes a pronounced factor again, then I would not be surprised if you see the Republicans beginning to have to back away from that. So it's kind of off the table now as it was. It's a different issue than it was. But I don't think you're going to see Democrats saying let's stay and I don't think you're going to see Republicans necessarily saying let's leave. But you know, it depends a little bit on where it goes.

MODERATOR: Thank you, Dr. Zogby. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. That is the time we have allotted for today. Thank you for attending. We hope to see you at the Foreign Press Center very soon once again.

DR. ZOGBY: And if you have any questions, you know -- I think you know how to e-mail me at my office or look at our website, aaiusa.org. We have, as I said, all the candidates' positions up and it's kind of interesting to look at. Thanks.

29 October 2007

Arab Americans Learn Importance of Political Involvement

Conference trains Arab Americans to mobilize for 2008 campaigns



Democratic presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich addresses Arab-American voters in Dearborn, Michigan, October 28. (© AP Images)

By Michelle Austein
USINFO Staff Writer

Dearborn, Michigan -- Hundreds of Arab Americans from across the United States gathered in a city with one of the largest concentrations of Arab Americans in the country to learn how they can make an impact in the 2008 U.S. elections.

Participants in the Arab American Institute's (AAI) National Leadership Conference October 25-28 in Dearborn, Michigan, met with political leaders and learned some of the skills to support and run political campaigns.

Community and political leaders, both Arab and non-Arab, offered advice to those interested in making a difference in their communities. They stressed the importance of participating in local politics by showing up for school board and town hall meetings, getting involved with a political party or running for office.

"If you want to keep the country the kind of country you want it to be ... you need to be involved in politics, support candidates and run for offices," Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean, a former presidential candidate, told the participants.

Arab-American political candidates for all levels of office came to the conference to network and learn from those who already have won campaigns. Helping these candidates is an "opportunity to show that we support them regardless of party," said Rebecca Abou-Chedid, AAI's national political director.

CULTURE MUST BE APPLIED, NOT JUST APPRECIATED, SUNUNU SAYS

Senator John E. Sununu, a Republican from New Hampshire and a Lebanese American, told the candidates "it really isn't enough to appreciate the background, the heritage, the culture that we share. You've really got to apply it every day, especially when you are in office."

"You have to focus on the ways our community can bring a different perspective, different values, to the issues you will be asked to deal with every single day," he said. "You really can't let up."



Democratic presidential candidate Bill Richardson addresses Arab-American voters in Dearborn, Michigan, October 28. (© AP Images)

Sununu told those working on campaigns that they play an important role by providing candidates with the information and education necessary to do their jobs.

That role is important "if we are going to be strong and successful as a community and really make a difference on issues," Sununu said. "Not just at the local level or the state level or the national level, but on a global level as well."

Conference sessions taught Arab-American activists about crafting a political message, running effective voter-registration drives, targeting voters, making telephone calls to prospective voters and supporters, and "the kind of unglamorous but nitty-gritty work of daily politics," said Abou-Chedid.

Although these jobs might seem tedious, learning these skills sends a national message that the Arab-American community is serious about political involvement, Abou-Chedid said.

"It is important to gather as a national group because you exchange stories, you exchange experiences," Abou-Chedid said. "It is always neat to have someone from western Pennsylvania tell a story to someone in southern California about what they are doing and the person goes back to California and applies it at home."

The conference was also an opportunity for Arab-American voters to discuss and debate issues that are important to them, such as Middle East peace, the economy, civil liberties and immigration.

Participants heard directly from many of the presidential candidates: Democratic candidates Mike Gravel, Dennis Kucinich and Bill Richardson, and Republican candidate Ron Paul spoke at the conference. Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, Barack Obama addressed the conference via video messages.

Sarah Alfaham, a 21-year-old student at the University of Toledo, attended the conference because she was curious about the political process. The conference "showed me how important it is to be involved in politics no matter what."

Being involved in the political process at any level was a theme stressed throughout the weekend. "The opportunities for any group that gets involved [in politics] are enormous," AAI President James Zogby told participants. "You have to take advantage of it."

By taking a role in the political process, Zogby said, "you can change America."



Arab-American Voters Say Iraq Top Issue in 2008 Campaign

By Mohamed Elshinnawi
Washington, DC
23 July 2007

A recent nationwide poll of Arab-American opinion on the current U.S. presidential campaign indicates the Iraq war will be an important issue in determining how Arab Americans will vote in the 2008 presidential election.

Arab-American voters trend very closely to other Americans on domestic issues such as the economy, health care and education. But the opinion survey by Zogby International (an independent U.S. polling firm) found that for a majority of Arab Americans, the war in Iraq is the most important issue in the 2008 presidential campaign.

James Zogby, the brother of pollster John, is president of the Arab American Institute, which commissioned the survey released June 29th. He says that when asked to name the top two issues in this election, 61 percent of Arab Americans say it is the Iraq war, 31 percent say jobs and the economy.



Arab-Americans are mobilizing their voting power to have their impact on 2008 elections



Dr. Zogby, President of the Arab American Institute finds that Arab-Americans will vote based on candidate's position with regard to Iraq

"The reason why I think the Arab American numbers on Iraq are so high," Zogby says, "is because they seem to have a stronger personal connection. It might also lead us to see why Arab Americans have a different attitude toward when the U.S. should leave Iraq. While many Americans now are in favor of a phased withdrawal — in the last Los Angeles Times poll, 43 percent say phased withdrawal within a year — for Arab Americans (responding to the Zogby poll), 53 percent say a phased withdrawal."

The poll also shows 39 percent of Arab Americans identify themselves as Democrats, 26 percent as Republicans and 28 percent as independents. While the campaign is still at an early stage and the field of candidates is still crowded, Zogby says four Democrats receive double-digit support from Democratic and independent Arab-American voters:

"(Illinois) Senator Obama is the top choice with 37 percent, 33 percent say Mrs. (Hillary) Clinton (a Senator from New York), 12 percent say (former Senator John) Edwards and 10 percent say (New Mexico governor) Bill Richardson. On the Republican side, (former New York City mayor Rudolph) Giuliani is in first place, (Arizona Senator John McCain) followed by (Massachusetts governor Mitt) Romney, again that is pretty much what we see in the national polls."

But when asked if they are more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate, the Republican candidate, an independent candidate, or if it would depend on the candidate's views, 46 percent of the Arab American voters surveyed said it would depend on the candidate and his or her stands on the issues, not their party affiliation.

Almost two-thirds of Arab American voters say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who promises to take an active role in the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. But Zogby doubts that Arab Americans will unite as a bloc behind a single candidate.

"People will vote as they see their interest," he says. "There are Republicans who will always be Republicans and Democrats who will always be Democrats." But Zogby says there will be variations, "and I think that the variation line will continue as we have been seeing it, leaning (toward) the Democratic camp."

Zogby believes all the presidential candidates will have to take clear stands on issues like the Iraq war and the Israel-Palestine conflict if they expect to win a share of the Arab-American vote: an important prize, he notes, in several key battleground states.

"In Michigan it can be as high as 7 percent of the vote, which is very significant," he says. In so-called battleground states (Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida), whose voters are more closely divided between parties, Zogby says in previous years, the Arab-American vote has amounted to a little over 2 percent of the vote. "These are very close

contested states, (and) the attention that the community gets in those states is indicative of how important it is."

The Zogby International poll also reveals that nearly eight in ten Arab Americans give a negative rating to President Bush's overall performance in office. The president polled best among a subgroup of Arab-American voters who identified themselves as Republicans. But even among this group, the Zogby poll found only a minority — 41 percent — approves of the President's performance.