

Are Muslims Conservatives?

by
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Republican George W. Bush was elected President of the United States of America because of the Muslim vote.

George Bush and Karl Rove's decision to reach out to the Muslim voter provided that narrow margin of victory in the key state of Florida. There are roughly six million Muslim-Americans. Although hard data on their voting habits is hard to come by because national polling groups do not include "Muslim" as a full-fledged religious category, it is estimated that more than 80 percent of Muslims who went to the polls in November 2000 cast votes for George W. Bush.

In Florida, 55,000 Muslim votes were cast, and exit polls showed Bush received 88 percent to Democrat Al Gore's 4 percent and Green Party candidate Ralph Nader's 8 percent. Florida Muslims gave Bush a net vote of 47,850 – more than 50 times greater than his winning margin of 930 in the state.

The American Muslim community has been both ignored and misrepresented by the establishment press. For starters, Muslims and Arabs are not one and the same. There are six million Muslims in the United States:

American converts, and those from Pakistan, India, Iran, Africa, and the Middle East. Approximately one out of every six American Muslims is an Arab. And Arab-Americans are not all Muslims. Of the three million Arab-Americans, two million are Christians, and one million are Muslims.

Bush may have won the presidency with the Muslim vote, but it also holds several lessons for the Republican Party and the Conservative movement.

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First, the Muslim community is naturally conservative. It is not an ethnic voting bloc, but a faith-based community. Polling reveals that Muslims are pro-life: 61 percent would ban abortion except to save the life of the mother, and 84 percent would support parental notification on abortion. In addition, 84 percent of Muslims support school choice,

while 75 percent support the death penalty. Muslims also support prayer in school.

Second, Muslims have the economic demographics of Republicans. They have a median family income of more than \$69,000. Muslim immigrants didn't walk across the border penniless – they flew into airports, largely to attend American

universities. Fully a quarter of American Muslims are self-employed small businessmen – more than two times the national average. Abolishing the death tax is an important issue.

Socially and economically conservative, Muslims look in profile like members of the Christian coalition or religiously active Catholics. And their voting patterns have been similar. Southern white evangelical Christians were the backbone of the Democrat party for 100 years. Northern Republicans were contemptuous of their faith and their religiosity (read H.L. Mencken’s “Sahara of the Bozart”). Over time – a long period of time – evangelicals were driven out of the Democrat party by the aggressive secular left. But it took Ronald Reagan to reach out to Christian Conservatives when he told the Religious Roundtable in Texas, “I know you cannot endorse me, but I endorse you and everything you do.”

In much of the northeast, anti-Christian bigotry is still socially acceptable. The Democrat party’s fundraising letters are filled with attacks on Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

Religiously active Catholics who attend Mass each week shifted to the Republican Party and gave Bush a strong 55 percent in 2000.

Muslims voted 2-to-1 for George H. W. Bush in 1992, then in 1996 voted 2-to-1 for Bill Clinton. George W. Bush’s strong showing with 80 percent of the Muslim vote in 2000 was the result of a candidate and his party reaching out to Muslim Americans as fellow men and women of faith.

People around the globe have noticed that George W. Bush always speaks of believers who attend “church, synagogue or mosque.” He was the first American president to use the word “mosque” in an inaugural address. The Republican Party invited Talat Othman, the chairman of the Islamic Institute, to give the first Muslim prayer at a national party

convention. The Democrats had to scramble to invite a Muslim to speak to their convention two weeks later.

How did the Republican Party learn to improve their Muslim outreach and turn a 2-to-1 Clinton vote in 1996 into an 80 percent Bush vote in 2000? Much of the credit goes to Khaled Saffuri, the founding president of the Islamic Institute. (I was on the founding board of directors).

The institute is similar to the Acton Institute, led by Father Robert Sirico, that published papers arguing that capitalism, property rights, and limited government and Catholicism were not in conflict as the left-wing theologians were arguing. Toward Tradition, led by Rabbi Daniel Lapin, is a similar foundation that makes the case that Judaism is not liberalism. The Islamic Institute’s first paper outlined the Koran’s position in favor of property rights and economic liberty.

Khaled Saffuri organized a series of meetings with National Muslim leaders and Republican Party leaders. Former GOP chairman Jim Nicholson promised to put an end to some Republicans’ “insensitive” comments such as those uttered by a Senator who called Muslims “rag heads,” and a House candidate who referred to Palestinians as “pond scum.” Apologies were

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made. Saffuri brought national Muslim leaders to meet with George W. Bush in Austin and organized a Bush visit to an Islamic Center in Michigan.

Saffuri also gained Republican support for the national campaign to have a postage stamp honoring Eid, the Muslim feast. Then-Governor Bush, House Speaker Denny Hastert (R-IL), Chairman Jim Nicholson and National Republican Campaign Committee (NRCC) Chairman Tom Davis (R-VA) wrote letters in support of the Eid stamp that was authorized and issued last September.

Khaled Saffuri brought the most important issue for the Muslim community – the misuse of “secret evidence” – to the attention of Bush and the Republican leadership. Conservative hero Bob Barr of Georgia and NRCC’s Tom Davis became lead co-sponsors of House legislation to repeal a Clinton law allowing “secret evidence” to be used in immigration cases. One man was held in prison for three years based on secret evidence that turned out to be a claim by his former wife (who was in a custody battle with him) that he planned to kill former Attorney General Janet Reno. The wife had pulled a similar stunt on a previous husband.

Republicans were appalled to learn that the Clinton secret evidence law had been slipped into a 1996 immigration bill and repeatedly misused against Muslims. Illinois Republican Henry Hyde led the fight to pass the repealer out of the House Judiciary committee.

When George W. Bush condemned the use of secret evidence in the second nationally

televised debate with Al Gore, Muslim groups across the country decided to endorse Bush. Eight national Muslim groups endorsed Bush on October 23, 2000, and 85 percent of Muslim voters said they were aware of the leadership’s endorsement. Senator John Ashcroft committed to ending the use of secret evidence and supported such legislation before he was appointed Attorney General.

It is important to note that American Muslims did not vote for Bush because the Democrats nominated Connecticut

Senator Joe Lieberman, an observant Jew, as their vice presidential candidate. Muslim leaders before and after Lieberman’s nomination cite him as one of the most Muslim-friendly Senators. They praised his strong faith and co-sponsorship of a resolution condemning anti-Muslim bigotry in America.

NRCC chairman Tom Davis says that “Muslims

are basically pro-life and have Conservative values, and the Republican Party is their natural home.” President Bush started the Muslim outreach campaign, but there is a way to go. One national Republican leader repeatedly turned down invitations to speak at a mosque until someone pointed out there were 50 mosques and Islamic centers in his area. Another GOP leader confused Muslims with followers of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. (The two are different religions. Islam has a billion adherents worldwide, and the Nation of Islam was established in Chicago sometime last century).

The aggressive nature of the secular left has created a more ecumenical right over the past 20 years. Evangelical Protestants have joined Roman Catholics at the ramparts of the pro-life

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movement. Orthodox Jews have joined with Catholics and evangelicals to fight for school choice. Now the American Muslim community has been driven away by Democrats and welcomed into the Republican Party. The secular left has once again strengthened the right. The big tent is getting more diverse – and bigger.

Bush demonstrated that a Conservative can speak with respect, seriousness, and compassion to immigrants and minorities – that we earn their votes, not by moving left and offering patronage and welfare, but by campaigning for lower taxes, reforming social security, strengthening families, and respecting people of faith – all faiths.

President Bush will not allow Republicans to repeat with Muslims and Hispanics the costly damage protestant Republicans did to their party when they were bigoted toward Catholic immigrants more than 100 years ago. Catholics should be a cornerstone of the GOP coalition, but because of that history, the GOP didn't carry a majority of the Catholic vote for Congress until 1994.

Democrats look at the Bush Republican Party's success in speaking to Muslim Americans and see their hopes dashed for a future Democrat majority based on "demographic destiny" as the number of immigrants and immigrant children become voters. (The Senate Democrats know Bush is succeeding. They responded to Bush's successes by holding a hastily called meeting of 20 Senators and 15 Muslim leaders on October 10 that lasted one and a half hours. This wholly partisan meeting took place during the supposed period of non-partisanship).

President Bush's leadership on this issue is important to the Republican Party. Since September 11, it has been important to the nation and the world. When President Bush visited a mosque and spoke out against hate crimes against Muslims, Arabs and Sikhs, those crimes fell by half. He has forcefully made the case that we are at war with murderers and their allies, and not a billion people and 57 nations. President Bush's calm moral leadership stands in stark contrast to Franklin D. Roosevelt's and Earl Warren's shameful

decision to send 120,000 Americans into camps during World War II.

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President Bush's success in reaching out to win Muslim votes without pandering or sacrificing any point of principle is a model for how the Republican Party and the Conservative movement can reach out to other

immigrant groups – Hispanics, Indian Americans, and others.

Those who come to America are making a conscious decision to live in a society that protects property, limits government, and protects an individual's ability to practice his or her own faith. They are natural Conservatives, and a competent Conservative movement will reach out to them with confidence that the traditional values of America – liberty and limited government – are as attractive to new Americans they were to America when it was new.

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