

## Campaign Stops

STRONG OPINIONS ON THE 2012 ELECTION

APRIL 2, 2012, 10:04 PM

### The Muslim Swing Vote

By *FARID SENZAI*

As the 2012 presidential election picks up steam, Republican candidates find it tempting and beneficial to bash Muslims as a way to attract voters. In the wake of the 2010 midterm elections, “Americans are learning what Europeans have known for years: Islam-bashing wins votes,” the journalist Michael Scott Moore wrote that November. At the time, many of the 85 new Republican House members buoyed by the surging Tea Party movement found the political virtues of anti-Muslim rhetoric an easy way to prove their mettle to the surging conservative base.

Since then, the animosity against Muslims has only intensified. Republican presidential hopefuls Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich frequently warned that Muslims were attempting to take over the government and impose Shariah law, using “stealth Jihad,” as Gingrich put it in a speech at the American Enterprise Institute late last year.

The problem for the United States, the former speaker of the house argued, is not primarily terrorism; it is Shariah — “the heart of the enemy movement from which the terrorists spring forth.” Rick Santorum, not one to shy away from the subject, continues to conflate Muslims with radical Islamists. He has often warned audiences of the dangers of losing the war to “radical Islam,” even suggesting in a 2007 speech at the National Academic Freedom Conference that the American response to the threat should be to “educate, engage, evangelize and eradicate.”

This type of anti-Muslim rhetoric is deployed by some candidates in an apparent attempt to tap into hostility among the voters who make up the base of the party. In a sense, this approach is validated by recent polls suggesting that Republicans are more likely to have anti-Muslim sentiments. The political scientists Michael Tesler and David Sears wrote in their 2010 book, “Obama’s Race,” that feelings about Muslims are a strong predictor about feelings about Obama. They found that “general election vote choice in 2008 was more heavily influenced by feelings about Muslims than it was in either 2004 voting or in McCain-Clinton trial heats.” As we get closer to the November election, the most likely Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, will have to balance between pandering to voters on the far right of his party, some of whom are already wary of him, and more moderate voters.

While an anti-Muslim strategy may have worked in the past, it is risky because many agree that the outcome of the 2012 presidential election will probably be determined in no more than twelve states. These are the same states where minority groups, including American Muslims, are likely to play a decisive role. A report released this week by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, where I

am the director of research, suggests that this community is becoming an increasingly important player in electoral politics and might well play a surprisingly important role in this year's election.

Although it is true that American Muslims constitute a small percentage of the national population, they are concentrated in key swing states such as Michigan, Ohio, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Florida. Despite being very diverse and far from monolithic, this constituency is growing faster than any other religious community and has become increasingly visible and sophisticated in its political engagement. Republicans who found the Muslim community an easy target in the primaries may find themselves in trouble in the states that may determine the winner of the election.

Our report examined a decade's worth of data on American Muslim political attitudes and includes a case study of Florida, which remains a perennial tossup. In addition to the razor-thin margin in 2000, the state's 2004 and 2008 elections were settled by less than 2% of the vote. In 2000, a few hundred votes decided the election; an estimated 60,000 Muslims in Florida voted for Bush. Florida's Muslim population, which has been growing since the 1980s, is now estimated by some to include 124,000 registered voters. No campaigner can afford to disregard them.

The rhetorical animosity from Republican presidential candidates, coupled with the rise of Islamophobia since 9/11, has mobilized the Muslim community to engage politically. An Emerge USA poll taken during the 2010 midterm elections found that more than 60% of registered Muslim voters in Florida were likely to vote. Polls also suggest that two out of three Muslims have a strong desire for political unity and feel that they should vote as a bloc for a presidential candidate.

It seems unlikely now, but Republicans long did a good job of courting Muslim voters, including in the 2000 election when George W. Bush reached out to the community. Al Gore, on the other hand, took Muslims for granted, to his detriment. Even in the immediate aftermath of September 11th, President Bush reached out to the community and condemned attacks against Muslims, making it clear that the terrorist attacks did not represent Islam or the views of American Muslim citizens. Yet specific policies, including the passing of the Patriot Act and the decision to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, caused many Muslims to shift away from the Republican Party.

Arab-American and South Asian-American Muslims, who initially supported Bush in 2000, switched overwhelmingly to the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, in 2004. Democrats further capitalized on this support with Obama's candidacy in 2008. President Obama, for his part, has not managed to do much better in engaging the Muslim community, never finding it politically convenient to do so and consistently distancing himself.

The growing rhetorical invocation of Islam as a scare tactic to gain votes may work in some parts of the country, but candidates could pay dearly in critical battleground states. As a first step, politicians from both parties should reach out to the American Muslim community instead of ignoring, dismissing or maligning its members. Fueling animosity against Muslims as a tactic to court votes is a risky venture. The strategy is short sighted; it could easily backfire; and in a pluralistic society that prides itself on

tolerance and religious freedom, encouraging this type of animosity towards a particular group is un-American.

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