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Issue Brief: Middle Eastern Americans and Party Affiliation

Key Words:

Middle Eastern American, Arab American, Party Affiliation, Political Realignment, Ethnicity.

Description:

I discuss how the term “Middle Eastern American” does not connote a singular political entity in the American political system. I also convey an underlying issue with “Middle Eastern American” as a definitive group in the American political landscape, as well as the shift in party affiliation in the early 21st century among Arab Americans.

Key Points:

- The term “Middle Eastern American” does not perpetuate a comprehensive entity within the American political landscape. The American notion of Middle-Easterners covers too broad an ethnic, religious, and geographical variance to successfully determine membership within the United States.
- Though traditionally conservative in political party views, the social stigma behind the United State’s “War on Terror” and its military endeavors in several Middle-Eastern states caused a large shift of political support among Arab Americans in the early 21st century.

- Determining precise political party affiliation among “Middle Eastern Americans” is extremely difficult, as statistical data from the U.S. Census Bureau and exit poll data does not successfully account for the massive diversity among this proposed political group.
- Arab Americans retain the highest voting percentage among any ethnic group in America.



Issue Brief:

The term “Middle Eastern American” is a vastly misleading ethno-racial description. Geographically, the term “Middle Eastern” draws on an area spanning from the Atlantic coast of North Africa to China, including more than a dozen ethnicities and equally as many religions. These defining disparities are lost in the current American political system. Despite the massive array of geographical, social, and cultural variety, the Office of Management and Budget, through the U.S. census, includes all American citizens of Middle Eastern descent as “white.” Due to this grouping, firm quantitative census data is difficult to discern, and in respect to party affiliation among “Middle Eastern Americans,” the figure becomes even further muddled. However, recent polling data has pointed towards a dramatic shift in

political affiliation in a very large “Middle Eastern American” subcategory, Arab Americans. Totalling nearly 3.5 million citizens, Arab Americans account for an overwhelming majority of “Middle Eastern Americans.” Poling data will illuminate the growing Democratic support among Arab Americans in the past decade despite historical support of more conservative political candidates. Increasingly centralized in major political swing states, the Arab American community continues to support Democratic initiatives.

Failure within the Census Bureau to successfully determine citizens of Middle Eastern descent resulted in several initiatives to attain more substantial information on the American minority. The Arab American Institute and IbopeZogby International have used polls and independent research to gain a clearer impression of the social, political and economic livelihoods of Arab Americans, revealing an overarching shift of political support to the Democratic Party and Democratic candidates. This has not always been the case. The presidential election of 2000 saw vast Arab American support of President George W. Bush. Taken shortly after the election, Zogby International issued a poll to measure candidate favorability among Arab American voters; 45% of voters responded as supporting George W. Bush, while only 38% responded as supporting Al Gore. A margin of 7% is quite significant in the broader context of Republican support, and as we see, a more conservative precedent had been present for party support during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Very important to note, though somewhat futile from a political standpoint, is the 13.5% won by Independent candidate Ralph Nader. While comparatively insignificant to the percentages awarded to Bush and Gore, this

number shows reasonable assimilation within the Arab community as Nader is of Lebanese descent. Arab Americans lend the majority of their political backing to the Democratic and Republican parties, but ethno-cultural ties, as in Nader's case, can promote strong support within the community as well.

In the 2000 presidential elections, Arab Americans voted for George W. Bush at almost a 2 to 1 rate over Al Gore. The immediate aftermath of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center brought about severe social and political dissatisfaction with the reigning Republican regime. America's foreign policy initiatives, including Bush's "War on Terror," were a strong point of dissatisfaction among the Arab American constituent. Across the United States, Arab Americans felt the harsh sting of social oppression. Violence in professional settings, educational institutions and other locations caused many Arab Americans to feel marginalized from the Republican Party they once so enthusiastically supported. In 2004, polling data articulates that Arab American citizens felt much stronger association with the Democratic Party, voting for Kerry over Bush at a 10 to 1 ratio. The social implications surrounding America's foreign policy, Bush's War on Terror, and general lack of understanding of the Arab American culture pushed the community into the waiting hands of the Democratic Party. Arab Americans share many traditional views with Republican supporters, but the social stigmas induced from America's Middle East ventures provided Arab Americans the motive to shift towards a more liberal party affiliation.

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