

War on terrorism erodes Bush's hold on Muslim vote: Dean and Kucinich poll strong

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The result was hardly a surprise, noted Salam Al-Marayati, director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. A 2004 presidential straw poll conducted at MPAC's annual convention showed President George W. Bush trailing four Democratic contenders, led by Howard Dean, largely because of the former Vermont governor's staunch criticism of the war in Iraq.

Dean polled 67 percent, followed by Rep. Dennis Kucinich with 17 percent, retired Gen. Wesley Clark with 8 percent, and Sen. John Kerry with 4 percent. Bush garnered a meager 2 percent of the straw ballots cast by the 800 Muslims at the late December convention held in Long Beach, California. Not even a convention appearance by the White House's Muslim liaison, Ali Tulbah, appeared to help.

Bush's dismal tally came less than four years after MPAC joined other leading American Muslim groups in issuing their first-ever presidential endorsement—for Bush. But then came the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have altered the political thinking of American Muslims.

In the current climate, "90 percent of the community is now dead set against the Republican Party, not to mention Bush," said the Los Angeles-based Al-Marayati, who backed Bill Clinton before switching parties in 2000. Even Muslim Republican activists say Bush has little hope of repeating his 2000 success among Muslims.

"I hate to say it," said Khalid Saffuri, who runs the Islamic Institute, a Republican support group in Washington, "but right now very few Muslims will vote for George Bush again, or support the Republican Party. They're that angry."

The anger stems from the prevailing Muslim perception that the Bush administration's war on terrorism has cast unwarranted suspicion on the entire

American Muslim community, and has illegally curtailed their constitutional rights. It has also led Muslim leaders to realize that they have little influence on White House policies.

That, plus concerns over recent polls showing a marked jump in the number of Americans holding negative views of Islam, has convinced some Muslim activists that the Washington-centered, top-down political approach they previously favored has gained them little.

Increasingly, they say the focus must be on building grass-roots political bases if their issues are to receive fair hearings, and their future in America to be secured. Another shift is also evident among some non-Middle East Muslims, who say that given the current situation they are no longer willing to let Arab-American Muslims keep the community's primary public focus on the Middle East, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Our leadership has been so busy defending Palestine and Iraq," said Indian-born Muktedar Khan, a political science professor at Adrian College in Michigan and a visiting scholar at Washington's Brookings Institution. "But what about civil rights here and the image of Islam here? I want it to be safe for my children above everything. Frankly, I worry more about my son getting into Harvard than about Jerusalem."

Until September 11, American Muslim political visibility, access and influence were clearly on the rise. The ascent began during the Clinton years when his administration opened the White House to Muslims who had complained about being shut out of the national discourse.

Despite Clinton's overtures, Muslims endorsed Bush in 2000 because of their affinity for conservative Republican social positions, a perceived Republican tilt toward Muslim interests stemming from oil industry ties, and because of Sen. Joseph Lieberman's presence on the Democratic ticket and the presumed pro-Israel stance implied by his Orthodox Judaism.

However, since September 11, American Muslims have been on the defensive, said Akron University's John C. Green, a leading expert on American religious political trends. The attacks also opened fault lines in the communities, as Khan made clear. Estimates of American Muslims generally fall between 3 million and 7 million, although Green said there are probably no more than 1 million Muslim registered

voters.

Whatever the total, no more than a quarter are Middle Easterners, predominantly Arabs, surveys show. A third of all American Muslims hail from South Asia, primarily India and Pakistan, and a fifth are African-American converts. The resulting ethnic, cultural and class differences have complicated Muslims' ability to achieve political cohesiveness. For example, African-American Muslims, traditionally Democratic voters, did not endorse Bush.

Green believes any Muslim shift to the Democrats will be a reluctant one. Democrats have a lot of Jewish and traditional African-American support, Green said. "Let's just say that Muslims have tensions with those groups. With Jews it's Israel and with blacks it's because [African-Americans] see Islam as a threat to Christian churches," he added.

Khan acknowledged those tensions. However, he said American Muslim dislike of Bush is so strong that he, for one, believes they must get used to working with pro-Israel Jews, and to overlooking liberal Democratic positions on abortion, gays and other social issues on which they differ. "It upsets Muslims when I put it this way, but I say we have to get into bed with Jews and gays because liberal Democrats are the most accepting of Muslims in this country, and most critical of Bush's policies," said Khan. "Our community must vote more progressive for our own well-being." -*Ira Rifkin, Religion News Service*