

# Muslim voters don't show up in the exit polls—yet

November 30, 2016

WASHINGTON (RNS)—The nation knows how evangelicals, Protestants and Catholics voted on Election Day. Hard data exists on much smaller religious groups—Mormons and Jews. We even have the numbers to distinguish between the voting preferences of white and Latino Catholics.

But Muslim voters? No.

That's because—at 1 percent of the electorate—Muslim Americans barely register in the national exit polls.

## **Data on Muslims in America**

Pollsters and other students of politics say the day has not arrived when the Muslim vote makes a significant imprint on national elections. But that doesn't mean they lack meaningful statistics on how Muslims in America lean politically. Nor does it mean politicians can safely ignore this demographic.



Besheer Mohamed “The picture is mixed,” said Besheer Mohamed, a senior researcher at the Pew Research Center who specializes in religion.

“On the one hand, it seems clear that Muslims are a pretty small part of the population. On the other hand, they are concentrated in some states and metro areas that might increase their voting powers in those specific areas.”

Muslim Americans number about 3.3 million, with larger Muslim communities in New York, New Jersey, California, Florida, Michigan, Illinois and Texas, Pew reports.

### **Racially and ethnically diverse**

The racial and ethnic diversity within the community, and—although many more lean Democratic than Republican—their tendency to align with Democrats on some issues and Republicans on others lends Muslims political clout, Mohamed said. A 2011 Pew study on Muslim Americans showed they were more supportive of Barack Obama than Americans in general.

American Muslims are black, Southeast Asian, Arab and white, with no one

group accounting for more than 30 percent of all Muslims. Many are immigrants. Many are not.

Consider their views of immigration. Surveys show no “Muslim” view of the subject, Mohamed said. While a little more than half of African-American Muslims, most of whom are born in this country, say immigrants mostly benefit the nation, eight in 10 immigrant Muslims hold that view.

### **Not easy to pigeonhole**

If he had to characterize a “typical” Muslim American voter, Mohamed said, he would describe “a big-government social conservative.”

They tend to support more social services and government help for the poor. “But they also share some of evangelicals’ concerns about same-sex marriage and homosexuality being accepted by society,” he said, citing Pew studies.



Jon McHenry Jon McHenry, vice president at North Star Opinion Research, a Northern Virginia firm that advises Republican candidates, said Muslims’ influence in elections will depend in part on whether they side with the majority or minority party wherever they may vote.

“To the extent they’re in California, they could have an outsized influence if they vote Republican. If they vote Democrat, they’re yet another group that votes for Democrats in California.”

McHenry compares Muslim voters to Jewish voters, who—at about 2 percent of the U.S. population—also represent a small portion of the electorate. But in some congressional districts, they make up a significant group of voters.

And even nationally, with many Jewish communities in swing state Florida, for example, they show up on both Democrats’ and Republicans’ radar, even though about three-quarters of Jewish Americans tend to vote for Democrats.

### **Not numerous enough to register nationally**

Why aren’t Muslims showing up in the national exit polls? They haven’t crossed the pollsters’ threshold.

The National Election Pool, a consortium of six major news organizations—ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, NBC and the Associated Press—pays for national exit polls. Since 2003, the consortium has contracted with Edison Research, a New Jersey-based company, to conduct exit polls at hundreds of polling places nationwide.

Joe Lenski, Edison’s executive vice president, said 8,246 voters this year were asked about their religion, and of them, about 1 percent identified themselves as Muslim.

That translates to about 80 people, well short of the 100-person minimum the consortium told Edison it needs to release data on a voting subgroup. The margin of error for a group of less than 100 rises above plus or minus 10 percentage points—which the consortium considers too high for the statistics to be strong enough to report.

Edison has found Muslims have held steady at about 1 percent of the electorate since 2004.

When will there be enough Muslim voters to make a dent in the exit polls? Unclear, but it's not likely by the next national election.

Pew researchers project Muslims will grow to about 2.1 percent of the national population by 2050, or about 8 million people.

American Muslims still are heavily an immigrant group, and it takes some time for immigrants to gain citizenship and voting rights, McHenry said

And the rate at which the Muslim electorate grows from its current 1 percent also may depend on President-elect Donald Trump, added McHenry, whose firm worked for GOP rival Marco Rubio. Trump has called for both a ban on and "extreme vetting" of Muslims coming into the United States.

"If he has his way, it may stay at 1 percent or decline," McHenry said. "We'll see."