

Muslim Women: From Polling Booths to Parliament

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Executive Summary

This report addresses an important aspect of Muslim women's civic participation, namely their involvement in the political process. Civic minded people engage in the political process in many different ways, but voter turnout rates, party nomination to contest elections and success at the polls are the focus of this study.

Muslim voter turnout rates are quite low. They abstain from voting for many of the same reasons as the other Canadians, but some unique factors distinguish them from the rest: a distinctive demographic profile, high geographical mobility, lack of social capital and, to a small extent, a perceived inconsistency between religious beliefs and participation in a secular democratic process.

Only 42 per cent of the eligible voters are estimated to have cast ballot in the 2000 federal election. The apathy was more evident at the provincial polls, with only 40 per cent voting, and at the municipal level -- where decisions concerning their children's schools and neighbourhoods are made, just over one-quarter (28 per cent) exercised the franchise.

Muslims are the least likely of the faith communities to vote. They are one-third less likely to vote than the Hindus and Sikhs, with whom they share some key demographic characteristics, and about 40 per cent less likely than the Jewish community which has the highest voter turnout rate. Low turnout rates largely offset the political advantage Muslim women and men have in terms of votes.

However, Muslims are a diverse community, and their participation in the Canadian political system is affected by various factors such as experience of democratic institutions in their native countries and awareness of the importance of the ballot in influencing decision-making. Arab Muslims are the most active, while the South Asians are the least involved.

Muslim women are less likely to vote than men. Only 39 per cent are estimated to have cast ballot in the 2000 federal election, lower than the 45 per cent Muslim male turnout rate. The relative lack of interest by women is a projection of their roles in religious and many community organizations which typically treat them as a special case rather than equal partners in community building. There are stirrings of change, but gender roles based on customs and traditions of the immigrants rather than Islam are still the norm.

Defying the decline in the overall voter turnout rate, more Muslim women cast ballot in 2004 than in the previous election. This increase was small but significant because it was achieved in spite of a high proportion of newcomers among them, who are typically less involved, and the lack of attention paid to Muslim female voters by both the community and politicians. Some 43 per cent of them voted, up from 39 per cent in the previous federal election in 2000.

However, women did not keep pace with the male voter turnout rate which increased to 50 per cent in 2004 from 44 per cent in 2000. Most of the increased activity -- campaign for voter registration, calls for exercising the franchise, and information about candidates and their parties -- centred on the mosques, which segregate women. Most of the political candidates wooing Muslim voters tried to reach them at the Friday congregational worship to take advantage of the large gathering, when

the congregation is almost all male and the few women who are there are segregated and not able to interact with the political candidates.

While a Muslim man was elected to a provincial legislature in the mid-1970s, a woman's nomination to run for election in 1993 marked a milestone in Muslim women's entry into politics. The increase in the number of Muslim female candidates to four in 2004 at the federal level reflected a number of things, including increased activity of Muslim women in party politics; rise of Muslim women to prominence in public life for their stand on issues of concern to all Canadians; demonstrated ability to articulate and represent the views and aspirations of the wider electorate; and attempts by the political parties to attract the support of the growing Muslim electorate. Some of them had to overcome opposition from within the community.

Fatima Houda-Pépin was the trail-blazer. First elected to the Québec National Assembly in 1995, she is serving her third consecutive term, and is the only Muslim woman among six men serving in various provincial legislatures. For nearly a decade, she was the only elected Muslim female until the election of Yasmin Ratansi in 2004 to the federal parliament.

Muslim women contesting elections run as Canadians in spite of some media outlets' portrayal of them as Muslims running to promote Muslim causes. From an election strategy point of view, no candidate running as a Muslim can hope to win, as there is no riding among the 308 federal constituencies where Muslim voters can elect a candidate on their own although there are several where their vote is very important.

Rather, they are politicians who identify themselves with Islam, as do politicians of the other faiths. This is evident in the range of views that they hold on social, economic and political issues. At the national level, they have represented the centrist and left-of-the-centre parties -- Liberal, NDP and Bloc Québécois (BQ).

In spite of the popular notion that Muslims are social conservatives, no Muslim female politician has ever represented the Conservative party or its forerunners in the federal elections. On the other hand, the NDP, which is on the farthest left of the centre among the major parties, has attracted more Muslim female candidates, nominating three of the four Muslim women who ran in the 2004 federal election.

Acknowledgements

This report has benefited from discussions with many people. Members of the National Board of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women provided input in the development of the outline of this project. I am especially grateful to Nuzhat Jafri whose comments on an earlier draft have significantly improved the final manuscript. Jodey Michael Derouin of the Multiculturalism Program at the Department of Canadian Heritage kindly provided material, which was very helpful in deriving the estimates presented in this report. Finally, Andreea Muscurel's help with formatting this report with a very tight deadline is gratefully acknowledged. However, none of them is responsible for the interpretation and views expressed.

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Muslim Women: From Polling Booths to Parliament

[1] Introduction

Political participation is a vital indicator of a community's civic engagement. Growing concern about the 'democratic deficit' and measures being initiated to reform the process show the importance of public involvement in the political process. Characteristics of voters and non-voters are being studied to identify and understand the underlying causes of public disengagement in order to find ways to deal with them. Ethnicity and age profiles have drawn special attention. Little effort has, however, been devoted to faith communities.

Lately, the Muslim community has been conspicuous, and not just as a visible minority. In a noticeable departure from the decades of indifference, Muslim women – and men – were proactive in the last federal and Ontario and Alberta elections, running for offices, campaigning for candidates, signing up party memberships, attending and, if issues of concern to them were not raised, organizing town hall meetings with candidates, even inviting them to the mosques – something rarely, if at all, done before. These activities did not go unnoticed. Media paid unprecedented attention, reflected on their potential influence and whether they would endorse one political party or make their choices as individuals based on candidates' merits.

Little that has been written about their involvement is anecdotal or pertains to only a segment of this diverse community, which may not necessarily be representative of the whole group. If there is a lack of information about the community as whole, even less is known or written about Muslim women's activities. This report aims to fill this gap in our knowledge of the political influence and exercise of that influence by this rapidly growing segment of the Canadian society. Its primary purpose is to provide metrics of Muslim female participation in the electoral process and explain the factors influencing their involvement.

This report approaches Muslim female interest in Canadian politics from two angles. The first strand relates to their use of the franchise. Participation by the rank and file is an indication of the community's engagement in the electoral process, and a reflection of its collective sense of civic responsibility. This is represented in this report by the degree to which Muslim women exercise their right to vote.

The second strand deals with their participation in party politics. As voter turnout reflects on the community so participation in party politics is largely an indicator of the individual effort. Party politics includes numerous activities, but holding a senior position in party organization, being elected as a delegate to the party convention or winning the nomination to represent it in the election for a seat in the parliament are usually regarded as the ultimate tests of the depth of involvement. Although there are a dozen or so political parties with some advocating a single issue, involvement in the major parties carries more weight in terms of influencing decision-making at the national or provincial levels, although this is not to suggest that supporters and workers of smaller parties are any less committed to serving the country.

Information presented in this report is up-to-date, and in order to provide a meaningful assessment of the evolution of their involvement it covers a decade from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s, encompassing three elections. Progress is traced in

terms of the number of Muslim candidates in the federal and provincial elections, number of candidates endorsed by the major political parties, and the number of seats won.

Unique factors governing Muslim female participation in the electoral process are then analyzed. While factors such as lack of trust in political institutions and politicians, perception of the meaninglessness of the process, a sense that their vote does not matter and the public apathy are shared by almost all non-voters in the country, unique factors in the case of Muslim women are identified. They include peculiar demographics, high geographical mobility, lack of social capital and a perception of inconsistency between religious beliefs and participation in a secular system.

[2] Metrics of Muslim women's political engagement

Most of the available information is compiled primarily for the purpose of political analysis. Electoral agencies focus exclusively on the general elections and by-elections and much of the work of the polling firms is geared towards predicting and analyzing the voting patterns. Although general elections are key they are only one of the many activities in which people engage. It is a formal obligation requiring politicians to seek mandate from the electorate at regular intervals, but many informal types of political activities go on in-between. Civic-minded people express their opinion throughout the year on matters of concern to them, by talking to their political representatives, writing op-ed pieces, doing commentaries on the airwaves, signing petitions, taking part in marches and demonstrations like the civil society protests against the economic globalization, and organizing or taking part in boycotts of products, programs, processes and politicians.

Whether engagement in these activities is a substitute for or supplement to participation in the general elections is arguable. Nonetheless, such informal expressions of political involvement are an important yardstick of the people's interest and appear to have grown in importance in free, democratic societies over the years. Muslim women's involvement in related activities was the subject of a recent report prepared by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women.¹ The present paper focuses on participation in general elections at the three levels of representative government, federal, provincial and municipal or local.

The primary purpose is to compile baseline information on Muslim female voter turnout and their performance as candidates for political offices. This includes number of Muslim female candidates contesting federal and provincial elections, their involvement in the major political parties, their performance at the polls and the number of Muslim female parliamentarians in the national and provincial legislatures.

Electoral agencies compile statistics on these indicators, but ethnic or religious affiliation of the electorate is not provided. Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the voters are usually obtained from exit polls, opinion polls, surveys and follow-up studies after the elections. Religious affiliation of the electorate has received the least attention, and except for limited information from surveys and advocacy groups, which typically overstate the participation, it remains an uncharted territory as far as the Muslims are concerned.

These limitations notwithstanding, there are sufficient statistics to derive reasonably accurate metrics of the Muslim female involvement in politics. Estimates of the participation of Muslim community as a whole, prepared by the present author, have already met the scrutiny of knowledgeable people, and are commonly accepted and used by community organizations and the media as the most reliable estimates of Muslim participation in politics. More detailed information that has become available since then provides further evidence of the soundness of the methods used to derive these figures. The estimates pertaining to Muslim women and men, provided below, take advantage of the existing estimates and build upon them, using more recent information from the 2001 census, and a number of surveys done to analyze the engagement of visible minorities and recent immigrants in the country's social, cultural and political life.

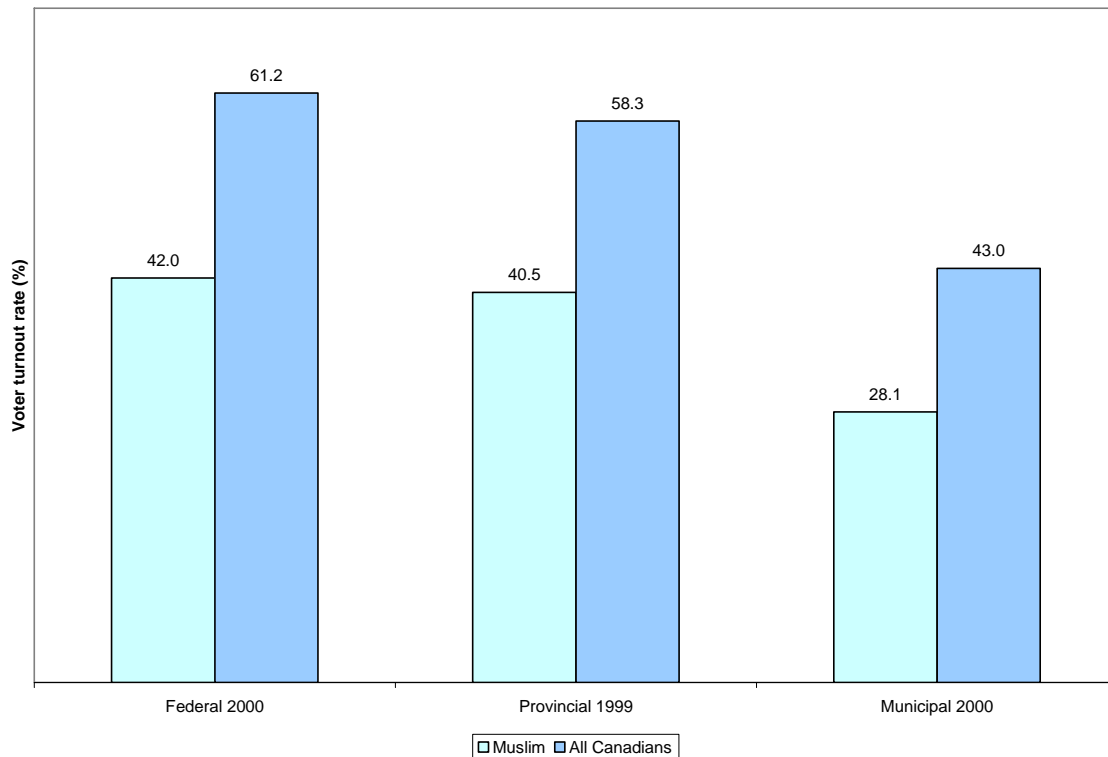
[2.1] Voter turnout rates in the 2000 election

Muslims have been involved in electoral politics as individuals for three decades, but as a community they have been indifferent, until recently. Young Muslim women and men do not vote because they behave like other young Canadians, and older Muslims abstain because they do not behave like older Canadians. Number of eligible Muslim females and males staying away from the polls far exceeds those who cast ballot, and the gap is striking at the local election level. Only 42 per cent of the Muslim Canadians are estimated to have cast ballot in the 2000 federal election.ⁱⁱ The apathy was more apparent at the provincial polls, with only 40 per cent voting, and at the municipal level -- where decisions affecting their children's schools and their neighbourhoods are made, just over one-quarter (28 per cent) exercised the franchise (Figure 1).

Compared to all Canadians, Muslims are only two-thirds as likely to cast ballot as an average Canadian female or male. If 61 per cent national voter turnout rate is a cause for concern for the 'democratic' deficit, 42 per cent Muslim voter turnout rate must be alarming.

Anecdotal information corroborates the low propensity of Muslims to vote. A well-known Muslim politician, with a long history of holding elective offices and of involvement in the community, running in the last municipal election in Ontario indicated that only one-tenth of the Muslim women and men took advantage of advance polling in his constituency in contrast to 25 per cent to 40 per cent of the other communities. In that election, it was generally expected that Muslim turnout would be high at advance polling because the actual election date fell in *Ramadan* (the month of fasting) when they would be busy in the evening, the usual time for working people to vote, breaking the fast and worshipping. Given that Muslim voter turnout was very low at advance polling and the actual polling day fell in *Ramadan*, it is not far fetched to conclude that their overall turnout rate was low. This politician's observation was shared by a number of other Muslim candidates who ran in the Ontario provincial election. Further, the Muslim media suggested that low voter turnout was not limited to a few ridings; it was a fairly general occurrence. An editorial entitled "Too many *Insha-Allahs*" decried the low voter turnout, deploring the casual manner in which some Muslims use the expression *insh'Allah*ⁱⁱⁱ to absolve themselves of the responsibility for not keeping their word.

Figure 1: Voter turnout rates, Muslim and all Canadians, federal, provincial and municipal elections, 2000 or earlier years



Source: Muslim voter turnout rates are the author's estimates based on Statistics Canada, *Ethnic Diversity Survey, Catalogue no. 89-593-XIE* and special tabulations, and Jon H. Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc, *Explaining Voter Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters*, March 2003, <http://www.election.ca>. Sources of other data are as follows: federal, <http://www.election.ca>; provincial, <http://electionsontario.on.ca>; and municipal, *The Globe and Mail*, 13 October, 2003. These rates pertain to the federal election of 2000, provincial election of 1999 and Ontario municipal election of 2000.

Note: Voter turnout rates for provincial and municipal elections pertain to Ontario, where 61 per cent of the Muslim Canadians live.

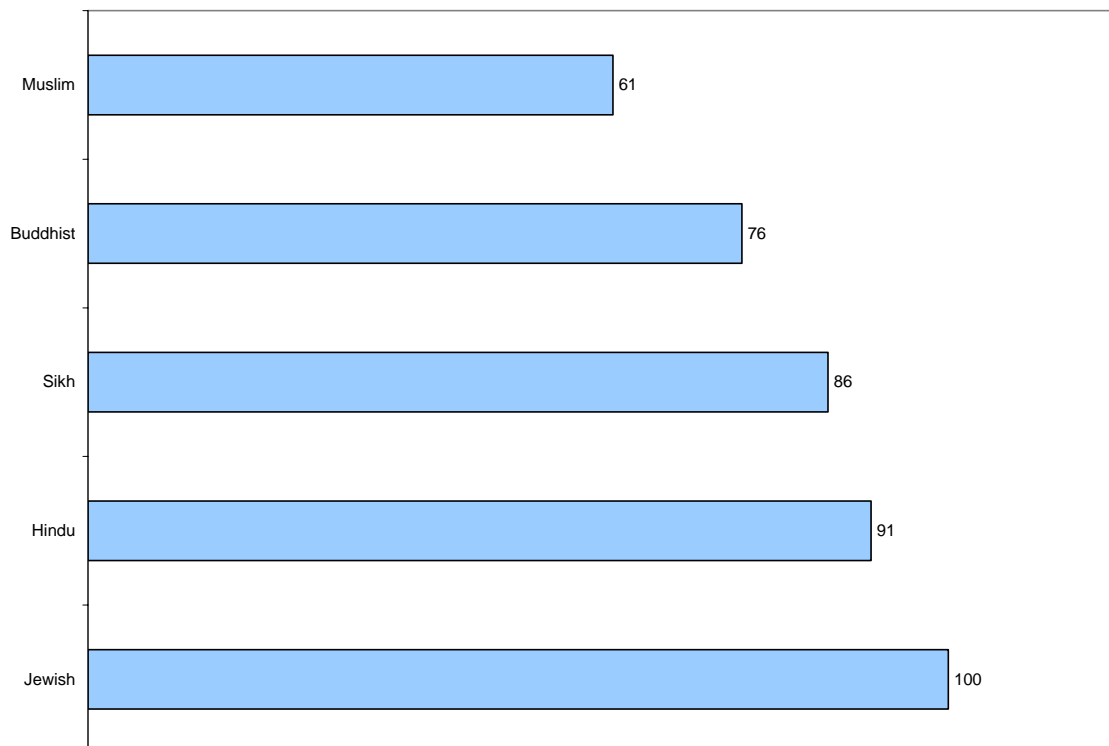
Muslim female voter turnout could be reasonably assumed to be lower than the men's because preparation of meals for breaking the fast in the evening and preparing for the start of the fast the next morning is typically a women's duty. Some of them could not vote during the day because they were either working at full-time jobs outside the home or looking after the children.

[2.1.1] Muslims are the least likely to vote among faith communities

Comparisons with the Canadian electorate as a whole provides glimpses into the wide disparity between their commitments to the political process, but the two groups are demographically so different that little can be inferred about differences in their behaviour. For example, is the Muslim voter turnout low because they have a more cynical view of the political institutions than all Canadians or simply because they have a larger concentration of young voters who are less inclined to be involved?

In order to identify the unique factors accounting for the lack of Muslim female involvement in the electoral process, comparisons must be made with communities that have more or less similar demographic profiles. This is done in Figure 2, which shows voter turnout of Muslims relative to other non-Christian faith communities. The findings reveal that Muslim women and men not only have much lower propensity to vote than the Canadian electorate overall but they are also the least likely of the non-Christian faith communities to cast ballot. Compared to the Hindu and Sikh electorate, who are similar to a large segment of the Muslim population with respect to demographics, population size, cultural background and social norms, period of stay in Canada, used as an indication of familiarity with country's institutions -- they are nearly one-third less likely to vote in the federal election. They lag further behind the Jewish community which is over 60 per cent more likely to vote than Muslims. It means that most, if not all, of the political advantage that Muslim women and men have over other communities in terms of votes is lost because of the low turnout rate.

Figure 2: Voter turnout: non-Christian faith communities, 2000, index with Jewish turnout set=100



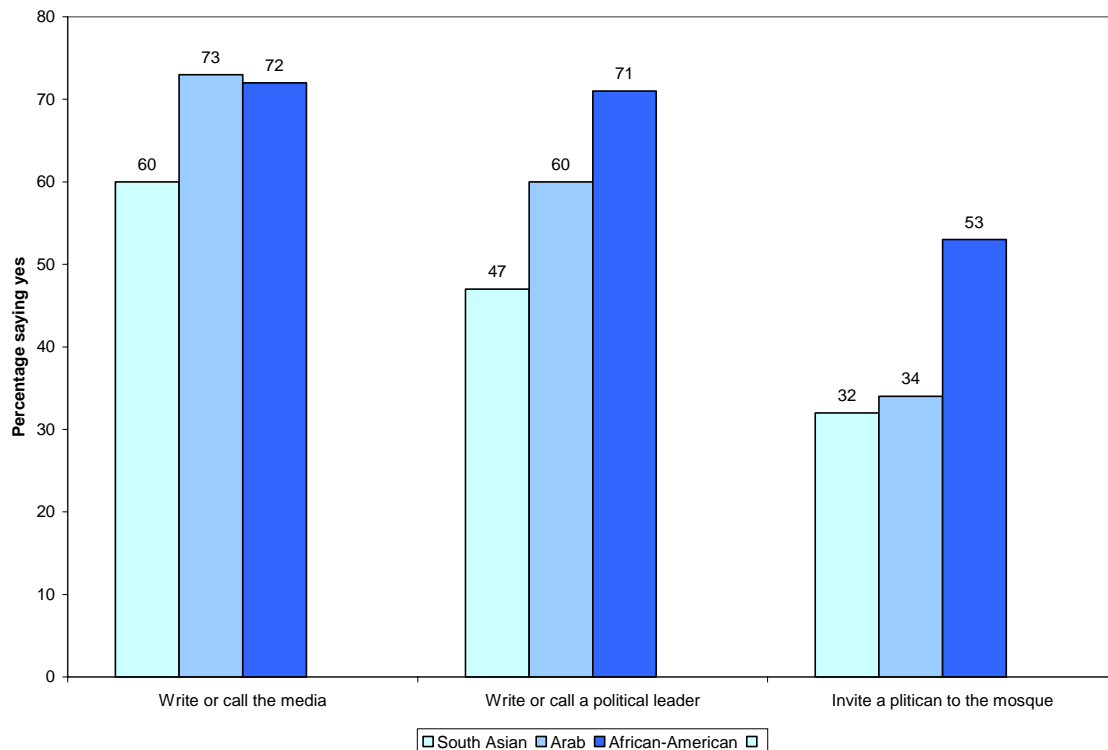
Source: Author's computations, based on data from Statistics Canada, *Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2003*.

[2.1.2] Arab Muslims are more active than South Asians

Diversity of cultures and social norms, differences in their exposure to democratic institutions and electoral politics in their native countries, and divergent views on political issues in Canada mean that Muslims are not a homogeneous group. Among the large communities, Arab Muslims are more active, and the evidence suggests that the South Asians are the least involved in the electoral process. A study of the

role of the mosque as a socializing agent in the lives of American Muslims, which is also representative of the situation in Canada, showed that the places of worship where congregants were largely South Asian were less likely to invite a politician to the mosque, and contact a politician or the media to express opinion about issues of concern than the mosques where the Arabs preponderated. No such data are available for Canada, but Muslims are generally agreed that Muslim communities of Calgary, Edmonton and London are far more active in the political process than most other cities, and all of them are prominently Arab communities. While some researchers have argued that the participation in such political activities is either in lieu of or does not bear any significant relationship to voting, the recent findings in Canada show that voting in the general elections goes hand in hand with such activities. By extension, this suggests that Arab Muslims are more likely to vote than the South Asian Muslims.

Figure 3: South Asian Muslims least likely to engage in political participation



Source: Council on American-Islamic Relations, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait*, April 2001, p. 41.

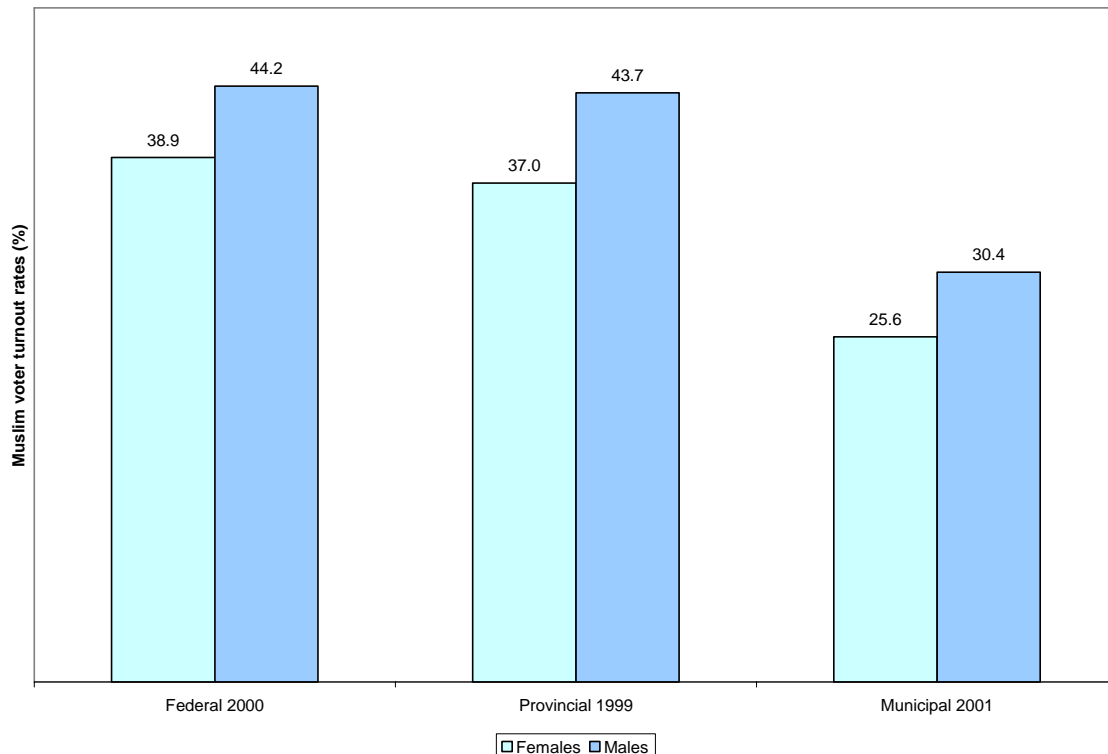
[2.1.3] Muslim women less likely to vote than males

Muslim women are less likely to vote than men. Only 39 per cent of them are estimated to have cast ballot in the 2000 federal election, much lower than the 45 per cent Muslim male turnout rate. This estimate compares well with the only other estimate available, which was made by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW). Delegates at its 2003 annual general meeting were surveyed to gather baseline data and information on Muslim female civic participation in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the 2003 forum on “Engaging Muslim Women in Civic

and Social Change.” Less than one-half or 46 per cent of the respondents had taken part in the previous federal, provincial or local elections or engaged in related activities. CMCC’s estimate was higher because it covered more activities than just voting and it pertained to a segment of the population that is more educated, active and conscious of its civic responsibility as compared with the Muslim female population overall.

Low level of political participation among Muslim women, as compared with men, is a projection of their roles in community organizations. There are few opportunities for them in positions of responsibility in Muslim institutions. Mosques – the only well established institution, hardly allows them any significant role. In the administrative hierarchies of religious organizations and institutions, they are treated as a special case rather than equal partners in community building, and are relegated to auxiliaries and women’s and hospitality committees. An illustration of the influence of cultural norms on some women’s voting propensity is provided by a discussion in a Saudi Arabian newspaper – where the women are barred from voting -- of the problems associated with women voting.^{iv} There are stirrings of change in the Canadian Muslim religious institutions, but gender roles based on customs and traditions of immigrant congregants and worship leaders (including imams) rather than Islam are still the norm.

Figure 4: Muslim voter turnout rates, by gender, federal, provincial and municipal elections, 2000 or earlier years



Source: Muslim voter turnout rates are the author's estimates based on Statistics Canada, *Ethnic Diversity Survey, Catalogue no. 89-593-XIE* and special tabulations, and Jon H. Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc, *Explaining Voter Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters*, <http://www.electioncanada.ca>. Sources of other data are: federal, <http://www.electioncanada.ca>; provincial, <http://electionsontario.on.ca>; and

municipal, *The Globe and Mail*, 13 October, 2003. These rates pertain to the federal election of 2000, provincial election of 1999 and Ontario municipal election of 2000.

Note: Voter turnout rates for provincial and municipal elections pertain to Ontario, where 61 per cent of the Muslim Canadians live.

There are other restraining factors as well. Some women who would like to cast ballot or engage in political and civic activities are dependent on male family members for a ride to the polling station. Women with young children need to make arrangements for baby sitters.

[2.1.4] Muslim female voter turnout up in 2004 but still below the national average

Defying the decline in the overall voter turnout, more Muslim women cast ballot in the 2004 federal general election than the previous election four years earlier. The increase was small but significant because it was achieved in spite of a large number of newcomers among them, who are less likely to vote, and relatively little attention paid to Muslim female voters by both the community and politicians, who were wooing Muslim voters. Some 43 per cent of them voted, up from 39 per cent in the previous federal election in 2000. However, it did not keep pace with the male voter turnout rate which went up to 50 per cent from 44 per cent in 2000.

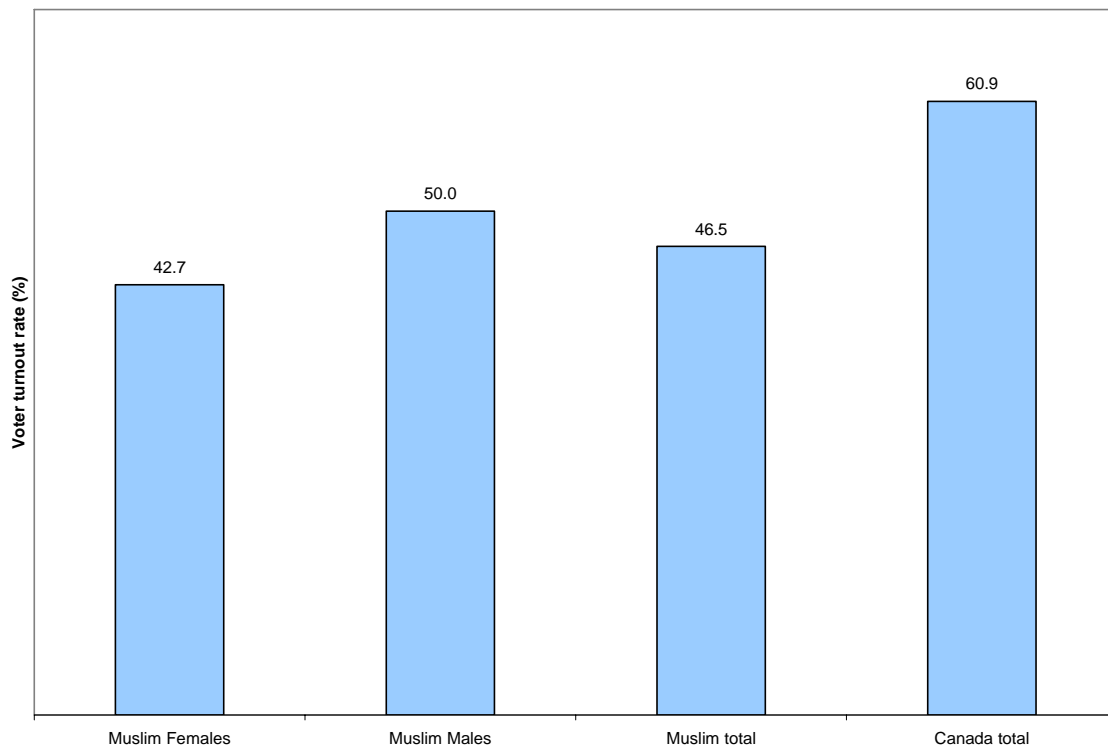
After decades of wavering and inaction, Muslims as a community finally came to the realization that participation in the electoral process was the only effective way to sensitize the public and politicians to their issues, advance them on the public policy agenda and influence decision making. This recognition came about as a result of a number of factors and was recently bolstered by the realization of their potential strength, in spite of a relatively small population. Shortly before the 2003 Ontario election, a newspaper report noted that Muslim women and men could influence the outcome of as many as 12 per cent of the seats in the Ontario legislature as they had been decided in the previous election by a narrow margin, although they comprised only three per cent of the provincial population.^v Buoyed by their potential influence and success of Muslim politicians at the polls that year,^{vi} community organizations took the initiative to mobilize Muslim electorate for the federal election in 2004.^{vii} A few of the religious leaders, who had been under pressure to update their sermons written decades ago for different generations, in foreign countries, succumbed to the demand, and told their congregations that voting was not only their right and civic duty as citizens but also a religious duty.^{viii} This may not have convinced the hard-core non-voters to vote, but it did serve to offset the false belief, held by some, that voting in a secular democracy was inconsistent with their religion.

Most of this attention was directed at the male voters because the places where these activities were centred are less accessible to women. The campaign for voter registration, calls to voters to cast ballot, and information about candidates and their parties centred on the mosques, which are not women-friendly. For the organizers, the choice of mosques was a trade-off. It is the only developed Muslim institution in the country and thus offered access to as many people as possible, and it was also the best place to connect with hard core non-voters because those who see an inconsistency between religious beliefs and participation in secular democracy are likely to form or reinforce these ideas here. Segregation of women in the mosques meant that women were left out.

Most of the political candidates who wooed Muslim voters visited mosques at the time of the Friday worship in order to take advantage of the large congregation. This, too, worked against the women because most mosques discourage their attendance at that congregation and the women who do try are crowded out by men. The few women who might be there would be secluded and therefore would not interact with the political candidates.

Although Muslim female and male turnout rates increased in 2004 in contrast to a decline in the national rate they still remained well below the national average of 60.9 per cent in 2004. The reasons are discussed in Section 3.

Figure 5: Voter turnout rates, Muslims by gender and Canada total, 2004 federal election



Source: Rates for Muslims are the author's estimates; total for Canada are from <http://www.electioncanada.ca>.

Note: Voter turnout rates for Canada are not available by gender.

[2.2] Involvement in party politics

Muslim men have been engaged in party politics for at least three decades. Larry Shaben was first elected to the Alberta legislature in the 1970s and served in the provincial cabinet first in the energy and then economic development portfolios.

But Muslim women became involved in party politics much later, and have become increasingly engaged very recently. It is not uncommon to see them attending or organizing fundraisers for candidates, attending social gatherings of the political parties such as Christmas and similar events, serving in party organizations at the

constituency level, etc. Hard data on such activities are cumbersome to compile. However, the intensity of a community's engagement in party politics can be gauged by the number of candidates a party nominates for election. Winning nomination is a function of many factors but standing in the constituency and loyalty to the party count a lot. The following discussion is confined to the major political parties because winning their nomination is a better measure of a community's involvement in the mainstream political life of the country. The findings are summarized in Table 1, which shows statistics on nominations at the federal and provincial levels.

[2.2.1] Involvement in party politics

While Muslim men have been involved in party politics since the mid-1970s, socio-economic and cultural factors held women back. Early Muslim female immigrants were either too busy nurturing families and at the same time playing the role of social and cultural institutions in the early years when the Muslim community had none. Others worked outside the home to advance their corporate careers or out of necessity to supplement their spouse's income. Attitudes that many of the early immigrants brought from their native countries -- mostly ruled by dictators, kings and autocrats, with some of them barring women from any political activity including the right to vote -- looked down upon politics, politicians and political institutions. If some women were interested, they would encounter resistance from family and friends. Over the years, more Muslim women have entered business or set up professional practices and have found the independence and means to pursue interest in politics. Major political parties have also become less reticent towards new communities. However, it was not until two decades after the first Muslim male was elected in 1975 that a Muslim woman won the nomination of her party to run in the federal election. Liberal party's nomination of a Muslim woman in the 1993 general election marked a milestone in Muslim women's entry in politics, even though the nomination was for a riding which was held by a high profile and very popular incumbent of the NDP and where she could only be expected to put up a good fight, in spite of the rising tide of the Liberal party popularity and their landslide victory at the polls that year.^{ix} There was no increase in the number of Muslim female nominees in the next two federal general elections in 1997 and 2000.

Over the years, women candidates seeking party nominations was still a rarity but no longer a novelty. Mobina Jaffer in British Columbia, Fatima Huda-Pépin and Fatima El-Amroui in Québec and Fatima Kazimeh in Ontario had all established the credentials of Muslim women as legitimate candidates who could speak for and represent all Canadians. They all won their party's nomination for the federal or provincial election. They demonstrated that they were politicians to be reckoned with. In 1995, an important milestone was reached, when Fatima Huda-Pépin had the distinction of becoming the first Muslim woman to sit in the legislature. She won election to the Quebec National Assembly and is currently serving her third consecutive terms.

With the ice broken and possibilities demonstrated, more women followed suit. Increase in 2004 at the federal level reflected a number of things, including increased activity of Muslim women in party politics; rise of Muslim women to prominence in public life for their stand on issues of concern to all Canadians; demonstrated ability to articulate the views and aspirations of the wider electorate; and the political parties' attempt to attract the support of the growing Muslim electorate by nominating Muslim candidates. Some of them had to overcome opposition from within the community and resisted enormous pressure from right-

wing Muslims to dissociate themselves from their party's stand on certain issues. One of them was not welcome at her local mosque when she refused to yield to the pressure.

At the provincial level, they have been much less active in terms of winning party nominations (Table 1). The sudden increase that occurred in 2004 at the federal level was absent in provincial party politics.

Table 1: Muslim women in federal and provincial party politics, 1995-2004

Federal election	1997	2000	2004
<i>Involvement in federal party politics</i>			
Number of total Muslim candidates	9	10	17
Number of Muslim female candidates	1	1	4
Number nominated by major parties	1	1	4
- Bloc Quebecois	0	1	0
- Liberal	1	0	1
- New Democratic Party (NDP)	0	0	3
- Progressive Conservative (PC)	0	0	-
- Reform/Canadian Alliance	0	0	-
- Conservative Party	-	-	0
Other parties	0	0	-
Number of Muslim women elected	0	0	1
Provincial election*	1995	1999	2003
<i>Involvement in provincial party politics</i>			
Number of Muslim female candidates	1	2	1
Number nominated by three main parties	1	2	1
- Liberal	1	2	1
- New Democratic Party (NDP)	0	0	0
- Progressive Conservative (PC)	0	0	0
Other parties	0	0	0
Number of Muslim women elected to Provincial legislatures	1	1	1

Source: Author's compilation from the archives of the federal and provincial election agencies and legislative assemblies.

* Dates for provincial elections vary from province to province. For convenience, Ontario election dates have been adopted as the headings.

- means not applicable.

[2.2.2] Party affiliation

It is important to note that Muslim women who contest elections do so as Canadians in spite of some media outlets' portrayal of them as Muslims running to promote Muslim causes. From a strategy point of view, any attempt to rely primarily on the support of Muslim electorate makes no sense whatsoever. While there are ridings in which some faith communities, notably the Jewish, Hindus and Sikhs, have a decisive vote, there is no riding in the country where Muslim voters can elect a candidate on their own although there are several where their vote is very important and can swing the outcome.

Rather, they are politicians who identify themselves with Islam, as do politicians of the other faiths. This is evident in the range of views they hold on social, economic, and political issues. At the national level, they have represented the centrist and left-of-the-centre parties -- Liberal, NDP and Bloc Québécois (BQ). A recent illustration was the differences in their positions on extending the Charter rights to homosexuals.

In spite of the popular notion that Muslims are social conservatives, no Muslim female politician has ever represented the Conservative party or its forerunners, Reform party and Canadian Alliance, in the federal elections. In its effort to make its image as an intolerant party palatable west of Alberta, it was able to recruit a few Muslim candidates in the 1997 federal general election in Ontario in 1997 and in Quebec in 2004 but it has failed to recruit or attract Muslim women. On the other hand, the NDP, which is on the farthest left of the centre among the major parties, has attracted more Muslim candidates; three of the four Muslim women who ran in the 2004 federal election represented the NDP (Table 1).

[2.2.3] Muslim women in parliament

Fatima Houda-Pépin became the first Muslim woman to take a seat in a legislature in Canada. First elected in 1995 to the Québec National Assembly, as a Liberal, she was re-elected twice and is serving her third term. Her election inspired a number of Muslim women and men in Quebec and elsewhere to get involved in provincial and federal politics. She is the only Muslim woman in a provincial legislature among six men. For nearly a decade, she was the only elected Muslim woman until Yasmin Ratansi, a veteran Liberal party worker in her riding, was elected in 2004 from Ontario.

[3] Why Muslim female voter turnout rates are low

Muslim women abstain from voting for many of the same reasons as the rest of the Canadian electorate, i.e. negative attitudes towards the performance of the politicians and political institutions, feeling that political participation is meaningless because it would not change anything, and public apathy. The intensity of such feelings is likely to be higher among Muslim women than their non-Muslim peers, but the real story is unique factors.

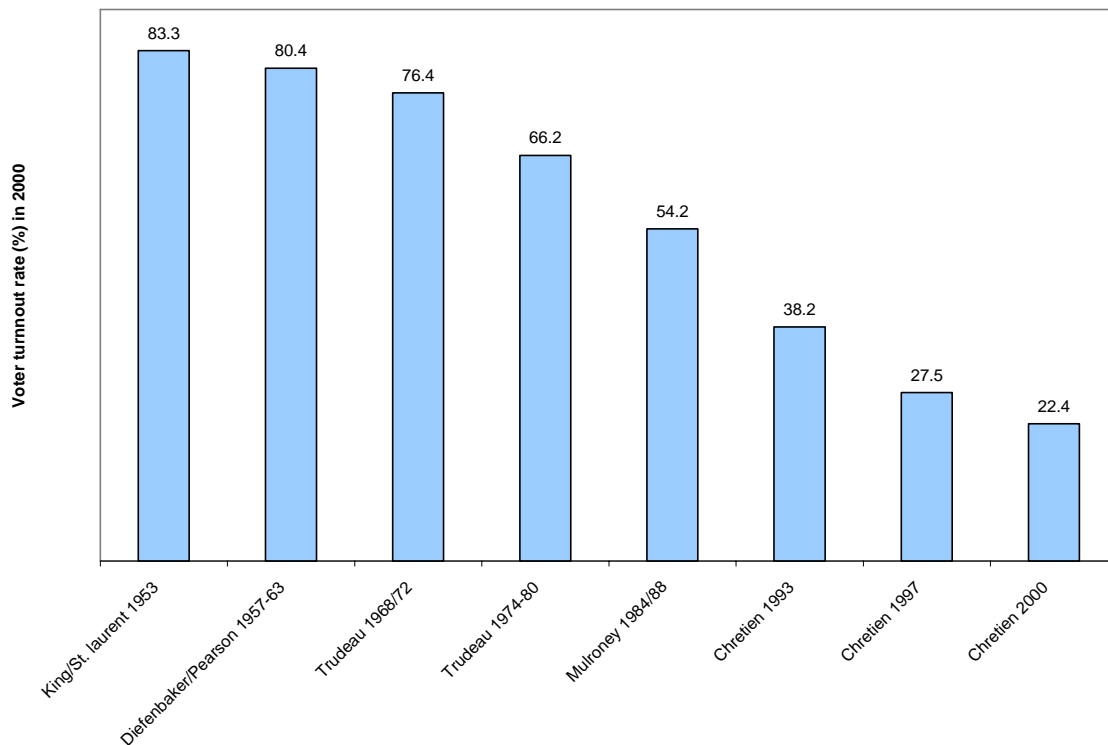
[3.1] Unique demographic profile

Muslims women have a distinctive demographic profile, with a large component of age groups that are least likely to vote. Age has been found to be a strong

determinant of whether a person will vote or not, although it is only a statistical construct and does not add to our understanding of the voter behaviour. After analyzing the attributes of non-voters in the 2000 federal election in some detail, a study commissioned by Elections Canada correctly predicted, on the basis of voting patterns of the young electorate and age composition of the eligible voters, the decline in voter turnout rate in the 2004 federal election.^x

Although the study did not specifically deal with Muslims or any other faith community, its findings provide useful insights into the voting behaviour of young Muslim females in the past and glimpses of what may be expected in the future, in the absence of action by the community. The study's key point is summarized here. Eligible voters of all ages in the 2000 federal elections were grouped according to the election year when they first became eligible to vote and their turnout rates in the 2000 federal election were computed. Figure 6 summarizes the results. According to the findings, 83 per cent of the Canadians who first became eligible to vote in 1953 – the McKenzie King/Louis St. Laurent era – are estimated to have voted in the 2000 election, whereas only 54 per cent of those entering the electorate in the Mulroney years did so and there were further declines in the turnout rates of subsequent new generations of the electorate. In other words, each new generation of electorate from the time of McKenzie King to Jean Chrétien -- has shown progressively more indifference to voting. This trend is said to have continued in 2004 although no solid data are available to support this contention.

Figure 6: Continuous decline in young voter turnout rate since McKenzie King/St. Laurent Era, 1953 to 2000



Source: Adapted from Pammatt and LeDuc, Tables 13 and 14.

This finding underlay special efforts made by Elections Canada to attract young people to polls, such as holding focus group discussions of young people, advertisements targeting them and post cards sent to the young people who turned 18 years of age in 2004 reminding them of their eligibility to vote. One-tenth of all Muslim females of voting age entered the electorate for the first time in 2004, more than the corresponding figure for all females in the country. A very large proportion of these young women was born in Canada and their decision was influenced by the same factors as that of their non-Muslim peers as well as discussions at home of the issues and the political system. Special effort made by the community to mobilize Muslim voters did not connect with this segment of the population because most mosques are not women-friendly and women, in particular the young women, do not frequent them.

A similar proportion of young Muslim females will become eligible to vote for the first time in 2008 if the present minority government served out the full term. Increasing the civic participation of young Muslim females will be a particularly challenging task, as one in five Muslim women would be new to the electoral process, having become eligible in 2004 or entering the electorate for the first time in 2008.^{xi} They will require special attention to be lured to polling booths and ways will have to be found to connect with them in places where they gather.

[3.2.] High geographical mobility

A second significant feature, which is closely related to the first, is that the young people tend to be very mobile, as they move from one city to another to pursue higher studies, take up new jobs or form families. Therefore, they are less likely to vote and even less likely to be registered under the correct address at the election time. One-fifth to one-fourth of the Muslim women in the fifteen ridings with the highest Muslim concentration had moved between the 2000 and 2004 elections.^{xii} Mobility patterns of previous years suggest that one-half or more will have changed their address either to a different riding or within the same riding.

[3.3] Lack of social capital

Third, a lack of social capital is often related to low levels of participation in civic life. Social capital is active participation in community life as well as attitude of support for the greater good of the community. Participation in the electoral process cannot be isolated from other social and cultural participatory activities, which build up social cohesion and community spirit. Membership in a variety of organizations such as professional organizations, neighbourhood groups, charitable organizations, cultural associations, etc. encourages civic participation.

Organization of Muslim community life revolves around religious institutions. Lack of non-religious institutions forces people to fall back on the religious organizations. Development of social, cultural and other institutions has been awfully slow for a community that represents the principal non-Christian faith in the country and remains in a nascent phase. Whatever social, cultural, and political activity occurs is typically within the context of or with reference to the religion. Muslims engage in group activities of a religious nature more than any other faith community of a similar size.^{xiii} Frequent mingling of the same circle of people, in the same setting to discuss the same subject and listen to the same speakers reinforces each others' views, leaving little room for new ideas and thoughts to emerge.

An illustration of this was provided by two studies, one in Canada and the other in the United States. An American study of the socializing role played by the mosque found that while 91 per cent of the Muslim places of worship stressed the importance of *dawah* (disseminating Islamic teachings) and 64 per cent would visit a school or church to talk about Islam, only 28 per cent were likely to participate in an interfaith social service project.^{xiv} A more recent Canadian survey showed that Muslims were 30 per cent less likely to be a member of a non-religious organization such as a hobby club, a community organization and a cultural group or engage in such activities than, for example, the Hindus, and 40 per cent less likely than the Jewish who have the highest voter turnout rate in the country.

Religious institutions are partly too busy providing basic religious functions to act as socializing agents which they were throughout the Muslim history, particularly when Muslims settled in non-Muslim societies, and partly because of the cultures of immigrant Muslims that frown upon suggestions of holding any activity in the mosque that is not strictly religious. Some community organizations formed since the mid-1990s, have achieved a measure of success in softening these attitudes. The increase in voter turnout among Muslim women and men in 2004 can be credited to the pressure of community organizations on the Muslim clergy and administrations to open up mosques to a broader range of services to the community, including voter registration.

[3.4] Misconception about religion and secular democracy

Finally, perceived inconsistency between religious beliefs and participation in secular democracy accounts for some Muslim women and men abstaining from voting. This is not as significant an issue in Canada as in the United States but it needs to be addressed.^{xv} Just before the 2003 Ontario election, the two leading Muslim religious leaders in Canada, Dr. Gamal Soleiman of the Ottawa mosque – the largest in Ottawa -- and Sayyid Mohammed Rizvi, resident *alim* (religious scholar) at the Jaafri Islamic centre -- the largest Muslim congregation in Toronto -- issued unequivocal statements telling Muslims that it was their religious duty to vote. Subsequently other imams and worship leaders in the mosques with a standing in the community followed suit. However, some of the community leaders do not seem to be convinced and hedge their statements, leading sceptics to take these conditional statements as an affirmation of their belief that taking part in a secular democracy is un-Islamic or will interfere with their primary duty, which is to establish Islam.^{xvi}

[4] Concluding remarks

This report showed that Muslim women and men are the least likely of the faith communities to exercise their ballot. In spite of some progress in 2004, their voter turnout rate remains very low. Their unique demography and high geographical mobility present significant challenges. By the next federal election, one in five Muslim female voters will be new to the electoral process, becoming eligible to vote for the first time or having joined the electorate in 2004. Getting them to register and attracting them to the polls will be a challenge. Given the difficulty of connecting with them in the mosques, other venues of reaching them will have to be found to reach them.

Reasons for abstaining from voting are varied and numerous. Muslims share some of them with the other Canadians and some are unique to them. It means that while general steps taken by the election agencies to attract young people to vote help, there is a need for community-specific solutions. In the absence of sufficient information, the relative importance of general and community-specific factors could not be analyzed. This is the next step to pursue.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Canadian Council of Muslim Women, *CCMW Civic Participation Survey Results*, 2004.
- ⁱⁱ This is the generally accepted estimate of Muslim voter turnout rate in the 2000 federal general election, and has been cited in the media. See, for example, Chip Martin, "Canadian Muslims set target", *London Free Press*, June 5, 2004. For detailed discussion of Muslim participation and comparison with other faith communities, see Daood Hamdani, "Political Awakening among Muslim Canadians", forthcoming.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Muneeb Nasir, Too many *Insha-Allahs*, October 30, 2003, <http://www.iqra.ca>.
- ^{iv} An illustration of the cultural influence on the decision of some newcomer Muslim women of certain national backgrounds whether to vote or not is the discussion in a Saudi Arabian newspaper on how women can participate in voting, e.g. should there be separate polling station for them or should women and men vote at the same polling stations but at different designated hours. See Raid Qusti, "Why Women's Voting is Complicated", *Arab News*, December 1, 2004.
- ^v Bob Harvey, "Muslim politicians, voters to be factor in Ontario election", *The Ottawa Citizen*, p. A9, September 29, 2003.
- ^{vi} Two Muslim men were elected to the Ontario legislature in 2003. It was 16 years after the first Muslim was elected in 1987, who lost his bid for re-election in 1990.
- ^{vii} Many social and community organizations engaged in the activity. The Canadian Islamic Congress took the lead with the release of a report, evaluating the performance of the sitting members of parliament and identifying the ridings where Muslim vote could influence the outcome. See *Towards Informed and Committed Voting*, April 2004, <http://www.canadianislamiccongress.ca>. Council on American-Islamic Relations, Canada followed with a guide on voting. See *A Guide to Voting*, <http://www.caircan.ca>.
- ^{viii} Dr. Gamal Solaiman, imam of the Ottawa mosque was quoted as saying, "Voting is a religious duty which has been neglected by many Muslims in this country", Canadian Islamic Congress, Media Communiqué, Septemebr 15, 2003. Maulana Mohammed Rizvi, imam and resident scholar, Jaafri Islamic Centre, Toronto was equally unequivocal.
- ^{ix} Mobina Jaffer ran for the Federal Liberal party in 1993 and 1997 but lost. She was subsequently appointed to the senate.
- ^x Jon H. Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc, *Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-voters*, March 2003, <http://www.elections.ca>
- ^{xi} Author's estimate based on 2001 census data and projections of population.
- ^{xii} Author's calculations from the 2001 census data.
- ^{xiii} Derek Janhevic and Humera Ibrahim, "Muslims in Canada: An Illustrative and Demographic Profile", *Our Diverse Cities*, Spring 2004, Tables 6 and 7.
- ^{xiv} CAIR, op. cit.
- ^{xv} Samory Rashid provides a good explanation of this argument in his "Blacks and the Islamic Revival in the U.S.A.", *Hamdard Islamicus*, XXVI, 1, January-March 2003, pp. 45-61.

^{xvi} In a lengthy interview, long on sophistry and short on clarity, Jamal Badawi, who holds positions in several Muslim organizations in Canada, proposed ranking countries according to their 'Islamicness' in order to determine how much Muslims can get involved in their political systems, and cautioned that by participating in secular democracies they might be ignoring their primary duty which is to establish the Islamic way of life. "An interview with Jamal Badawi on Muslim participation in North American politics", with Itrath Syed and Samana Sidique on RadiolIslam.com, 2003.

About the author

Daood Hamdani is a pioneer in the study of Muslim Canadians and one of the most influential writers on the subject. He is the author of numerous articles in professional journals, including the critically acclaimed entry in the encyclopaedia of Muslim minorities and Islam. His work has been translated into several languages, including French, Spanish, Arabic and Farsi, and is cited in doctoral dissertations; in legal briefs and submissions to the commissions of inquiry; by policymakers and the media.

An economist by training, his main interest is the study of knowledge and information as the strategic agents of change. Author of numerous articles and recognized as one of the world's foremost experts on innovation measurement, he has served as an advisor to the U.S. National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C. and has given guest seminars at universities and government agencies in Europe and North and South America.

He is an honorary citizen of the state of Tennessee, USA, and recipient of several other recognitions.