

The Muslim within: Explaining puzzles of Muslim-American representation in elected office

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In this talk, I attempt to solve puzzles of Muslim-American under-representation in elected office and appointed positions. Up to two percent of the American population is Muslim or of Muslim background and Muslim Americans are, on average, more educated and affluent than other Americans. Yet, there are only two Muslim congressmen out of 535, five state legislators out of some 7,382, no governors and other state executives, and very few Federal appointed officials. There is extreme under-representation even at the lower levels of political appointments, such as congressional staffing and advisory committees, and in areas with substantial and established Muslim communities (Michigan). In contrast; Canada, the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands and other Western countries have considerable Muslim representation, sometimes above parity. I evaluate different hypotheses to explain Muslim-American under-representation in American government, including: reluctance by members of the minority to participate and compete, poor understanding of the political process, inability to gain a foothold in the two large parties, the incentives of the electoral system, the effect of the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, influence of aggressively pro-Israel and Evangelical organizations, and general hostility towards Islam and Muslims among Americans. I argue that while electoral systems and popular hostility towards Muslims alone do not explain much, the combination of large majoritarian districts with even a moderate level of popular hostility towards members of the geographically diffuse minority is sufficient to explain American Muslim underrepresentation. I trace this hostility through an analysis of survey data to religious fundamentalism (Evangelical Christians are 5 times more likely to not want to vote for a Muslim than the average American, Catholics 3 times), support for Israel, support for war in Iraq, and conservative ideology.