
Muslim and American: Transnational Ties and Participation in American Politics

Matt A. Barreto
Department of Political Science
University of Washington
&
Karam Dana
Dubai Initiative Fellow
Kennedy School of Government

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When immigrants come to the United States they typically choose ports of entry with large communities of fellow immigrants from their homeland. Jones-Correa (1998) documents that immigrants often reside in national origin communities with distinct boundaries and that their involvement in immigrant neighborhoods and associations helps provide services and information about America that are lacking elsewhere. At the same time that hometown associations and national origin groups provide opportunities for immigrants in their new homeland, they might also insulate newcomers and retard their political incorporation into America. For many years, it was thought that transnational ties blocked immigrants from becoming Americans and participating in American politics. Following news about the homeland and investing in homeland politics provided both a psychological barrier and a resource deficit to getting involved in American political processes.

However political engagement may not be a zero-sum game for immigrants in which they choose whether to engage the politics of their homeland, or the politics of their new home. Rather, continued transnational engagement through actively following news and political events in the homeland might stimulate civic engagement in America. Transnational ties may foster political interest among immigrants; however, fully participating in the homeland thousands of miles away is quite difficult. Thus the political interest could result in greater participation and engagement in America. More recent work has embraced this latter idea, that transnationalism does not prevent political incorporation into America, and may actually spur immigrants to be more active American citizens. Yet this stands in contrast to decades of literature, and especially the theoretical ideals of immigrant assimilation and

incorporation, of how immigrants eventually shed their homeland ties and become American. As the population of the United States grows increasing immigrant, and increasingly diverse, it is incumbent that scholars revisit and reassess the politics of transnationalism, as either a barrier or a booster of immigrant political participation.

Recently, scholars of Latino politics have taken up the question of transnationalism and found that involvement in homeland politics might actually spur Latino immigrants to be more active in the U.S. (Pantoja 2005). However, similar studies have yet to be completed on other immigrant and minority groups in the U.S. One of the most interesting immigrant communities in America today is Muslim Americans. Muslims are the fastest growing religious minority in the U.S. and a heavily immigrant population. Given the incredible focus on international affairs and the politics of the Middle East in America today, Muslims represent an interesting case in which their transnational ties are highlighted, yet also rejected in the “you’re either with us or against us” mentality that most Muslim Americans face. Too much interest in the politics of the Middle East is viewed suspiciously in America today. In fact, mosques with ties to groups in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan are regularly scrutinized as “un-American” and perhaps even terrorist sympathizers. But is it really the case that Muslim Americans who closely follows news and politics in their homeland are less engaged in the U.S. than those with little transnational ties? We argue that transnational ties help promote a general interest in politics, as well as a sense of civic participation that leads to increased interest in U.S. politics and participation in American political systems.

In this paper, we look to data from a recent survey of Muslim Americans to assess what impact heightened interest in Middle East politics and affairs has on Muslim Americans rates of political participation in the United States.

Transnational Ties and Host Country Politics

In her analysis of immigrant participation in America, Wong (2006) devotes an entire chapter to transnationalism. Throughout the history of immigration to America, immigrants from Europe, Asia, and Latin America have maintained strong transnational ties.

Transnational ties may start simply through a familial connection, sending money back home to relatives in the homeland, and evolve to the political domain, especially following news about the homeland. Jones-Correa (1998) explains that many immigrants sustain a “myth of return” which fosters interest and engagement with their home country. However, most immigrants do not return, and instead forge deep roots in their new host country, America. Through an extensive review of the literature on transnationalism, Wong asks, are “immigrants who engage in transnational activities more or less likely to participate in U.S. politics than their counterparts who lack transnational connections?” The answer: “this remains an open question,” (2006: 177).

The reason this is an open question is that there are two compelling theses related to transnational ties and host country participation. On the one hand, scholars have argued, and found, that immigrants engaging in home country news and politics become too focused on the homeland and lose interest in politics and affairs in America. On the other hand, involvement and interest in home country news may foster an interest in news and politics in general, especially as world events demonstrate how the politics in one’s home country are connected to politics in America. This is one reason for the new debate over transnationalism. As Pantoja explains, “at its core, the debate in the literature centers on whether transnational ties are an impediment or conduit for political engagement and

incorporation,” (2005: 139). Given the complexity and diversity of the various immigrant groups in the United States today, it is easy to understand why no clear answer has emerged.

As early as the 1940s, some scholars argued that cultural ties to the homeland discouraged civic engagement with America. Humphrey (1943) found that among Mexicans living in Detroit, ties to Mexico lead to disinterest in American society and lower levels of naturalization. In one of the earliest and most substantial empirical investigations into Mexican naturalization and participation, Garcia (1981) reports that cultural ties to Mexico did contribute to non-naturalization. Variables such as identity as a foreigner, family ties in Mexico, and association with other Mexicans were all related to low-levels of U.S. citizenship. Examining data from the 1979 Chicano Survey, Garcia found that “cultural orientations towards ‘Mexican-ness’ tend to be more associated with non-naturalized status,” (619).

A significant barrier for incorporation into the American polity is therefore a psychological one. Jones-Correa (1998) explains that many immigrants arrive to the U.S. under the assumption that they will eventually return home, what he calls the “myth of return.” Given this assumption, immigrants often settle in enclaves, associate with others from their homeland, and join hometown associations, all to further their connection with their homeland. Further, due to misinformation and myths about the American citizenship process, many immigrants with a strong connection to the homeland choose not to naturalize, and do not engage the American political system fully. Likewise, Garcia concludes, “the results here suggest that Mexican immigrants see themselves as permanent residents; yet maintained ties to Mexican culture and primary interactions with fellow Mexicans may foster a more isolated experience in the U.S.,” (622).

Other research on transnational attachment supports the thesis that external ties discourages interest in American politics. Harles (1993) states that immigrants' focus on home country affairs, and reliance on ethnic media and maintenance of distinct cultural practices greatly reduces interest in American political affairs. Likewise, Portes and Rumbaut (1996) note that older generations of European immigrants such as Italian, Norwegian, and Hungarian never embraced politics in America and instead stayed well connected to issues in their homelands.

According to Garcia, Latinos and other immigrant groups continue to maintain close ties to their country of origin, both at the individual level and community level. Both within the family, and within the Latino community at large, "language and immigrant status are two purveyors of culture and linkage to one's country of origin," (2003: 43). However a strong transnational connection no longer guarantees low rates of political engagement in America. In his research on Dominican communities in New York, Pantoja (2005) finds that transnational ties do not necessarily dampen domestic engagement. Looking specifically to political participation in America, Pantoja finds that involvement in homeland politics, and hometown associations encourages participation in U.S. politics. While previous scholars argued that an "external" or "foreign" focus would dampen immigrants interest in American civics and political affairs, Pantoja argues that the transnational political interests serve to increase interest in politics in general, and create a more engaged individual. He writes, "political participation is strongly influenced by the presence of certain psychological orientations and civic/political skills...the skills acquired through participation in transnational politics clearly carry over into U.S. politics," (2005: 137). First, through attention to transnational news and political information, immigrants learn how to better navigate the media and acquire political information. Further, through their participation in

hometown associations, immigrants learn many important civic skills related to organizing, problem solving, letter writing, and may gain access to information about opportunities for political participation in the U.S. For example, during the 2006 immigrant rights marches, many of the groups that helped organize and mobilize participants were hometown associations or transnational civic groups (Zepeda-Millán 2007). Rather than maintaining a focus only on Latin America, more than 5 million Latinos drew on their transnational ties to support participation in the largest protest march in American history (Bada et. al. 2006).

Looking at Asian Americans, Wong (2006) reports that those with transnational ties are significantly more likely to take part in non-voting participation in the U.S. For example, examining data from the PNAAPS, Wong finds that 75 percent of Chinese engaged in homeland politics also participated in the U.S. In contrast, only 33 percent of Chinese who were not at all engaged in homeland politics participated in America. Across all national origin groups from Asia, transnational ties lead to increased participation in American politics.

Thus, the research and literature on transnationalism is changing in today's immigrant America. In the past scholars routinely concluded that maintaining a transnational focus would diminish immigrant incorporation and participation in America. In the 21st century this may not be the case as immigrant communities retain a connection to their homeland, and also participate in American politics. The findings that support this new theory are limited and tend to focus heavily on Latinos, highlighting the need to expand on the analysis by Pantoja (2005) and Wong (2006).

Transnationalism and Muslim Americans

Each immigrant community in the United States has different circumstances surrounding their transnational ties, and the unique context surrounding their engagement with their homeland. Specifically, Muslim immigrants have both a home “land” and also a home “religion.” Instead of being tied only to a specific home country, Muslims view a larger connection to Islam in a transnational sense whether they are in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Indonesia, or America. Society in Islam is described and characterized as the *Ummah* (or Islamic nation). This concept transcends national borders, color and race, and assumes a level of solidarity between all Muslims of society regardless of where they live (Mandaville 2001). While not all Muslims may subscribe to this belief fully, it is an underlying tenet of Islam that is well known, and provides a basis for understanding the desire for transnational ties. The Prophet Muhammad is often cited in various *Hadiths* suggesting there are no differences between the color of individual, and the true difference between people is true faith.

Mandaville applies this theory to Muslims across the world in the 21st century. He argues that the advances in communication, information, media, and technology have made it easier and more practical for Muslims to engage politics in a truly transnational sense. While the calling and desire for transnational, or even global engagement of the Muslim world has always existed, the conveniences of the internet, and 24-hour news channels such as *al-Jazeera* provide the opportunity for Muslims in America or Europe to actively follow and participate in “Muslim” affairs back home.

As a religion, Islam downplays the role of borders, and demands that people travel for opportunity and education. With the increasing travel of Muslims all over the world, Muslim immigrants become part of the new home country, and increasingly choose non-

Muslim societies as their homeland, such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom.

The first generation of Muslims in the U.S. continued their connections to their home countries, and second and third generation Muslims continue to do so. In fact, many non-immigrant Muslims (including converts) also follow the news of the Middle East. As such, connections to Islamic world are important, specifically to the Middle East, as it is the origin of Islam and it houses the holy sites that Muslims are required to visit. It only makes sense for Muslims to follow up with the news of the region. Any Muslim, regardless of location, assumes the responsibility of caring for their fellow Muslims, corresponding to the concept of *Ummah*.

A comparable scenario is the Jewish community in the U.S. As argued frequently, the Jewish community has strong connections to Israel, and at times even sign up for its military (Goldberg 1990). These connections to Israel, however, do not necessarily mean that Jewish Americans would be any less American than non-Jewish Americans in the U.S. In fact, the Jewish community is one of the most politically active communities in America, specifically for the reason of “homeland” politics. Likewise, we argue that Muslims who maintain a high level of interest in homeland news and politics will also be active in American politics.

Similarly, Muslims today, and especially after 9/11, have become more involved in issues related to Muslim communities outside of the U.S. In part, this is a result of the serious and continued discrimination American Muslims face today. As a community, they came to realize their inclusion in the same category as other Muslims who live outside of the U.S. As a result, issues, news, and politics of Muslims who live outside of the US became of concern to Muslims inside the U.S. Their fate had become connected and transnational ties were an obvious bridge to the international Muslim world. But this bridge was not a one-

way path leading outside the U.S. Instead, transnational ties for Muslims can foster both an external and internal interest and engagement with politics.

The US provides equality to all of its citizens, including Muslims. This fact, in turn, became a mechanism by which American Muslims have been attempting to influence policy related to Muslims living outside of the US. Fixing the image of Muslims outside of the US ultimately enhanced the living conditions of Muslims who lived in the US as well. Thus transnational connections to cultural, socio-political and economic issues in non-US Muslim communities become important in the political participation of American- Muslims.

While transnational interests have been shown to have a mobilizing and also demobilizing effect on other immigrant groups, for Muslim Americans, we argue that transnational ties serve to promote interest and engagement in American politics. First, there is tremendous social pressure for Muslims to demonstrate their commitment to America. In the post 9/11 world, Muslims in America are viewed skeptically by the federal government and also their next-door neighbors. As a result, Muslim American communities have increased their symbolic and also practical allegiance to America, including civic engagement and political participation. While this might apply to all Muslims in the United States, we expect those with strong transnational ties to perhaps feel more social pressure to engage in America to offset their interest in home country politics. Second, following news and politics in the homeland might encourage participation in America for Muslim Americans more so than other immigrant groups because of the increased connection between politics in Muslim nations and America. For example, domestic news and politics in Mexico has far less an impact on day-to-day American politics than does the news and politics in Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Muslim world. As Muslim Americans follows news in their homeland, they are also following news about American

politics, especially American foreign policy. As a result of world events in the 21st century, engagement with news and politics in the Middle East has become an important component of news, debates, and politics in America. Thus, such transnational ties may uniquely position Muslims in America to engage and participate in their host country at even higher rates.

Finally, if we focus again on Islam, there are reasons to suspect that attention to “external” or homeland politics will not deter an involvement in U.S. politics. According to March (2006; 2007), Muslims residing in non-Muslim societies are encouraged to fully uphold the social contract in their host country, including taking part in the political system. Many Muslim jurists and texts clearly state that it is reasonable for Muslims to reside in non-Muslim societies so long as the non-Muslim society does not prevent the manifesting of Islam. Through an extensive review of Islamic texts, March concludes that “not only is it permitted to reside in a non-Muslim polity, but also it is permitted to do so *while being subject to and obeying non-Muslim law*,” (2007: 243). This obligation is rooted in a religious following of the spirit and letter of Islam. Among Muslims living in the U.S., but have a keen interest in homeland/Muslim politics, we should still expect them to support and affirm the American social contract, in particular through civic and political participation.

In a thorough analysis of Muslim texts, March argues that “once a Muslim has accepted the security of a non-Muslim state he is bound to follow all of its laws, including paying taxes that contribute to general social welfare. Crucially, for most scholars this is a moral duty grounded in religion, and not a mere quietest exhortation to avoid punishment or other negative consequences for the Muslim community,” (2007: 244). March points to two significant Qur’anic verses (Q. 16:91 and Q. 17:34) which spell this out quite clearly. Therefore, we expect that Muslims in America can easily navigate “between two worlds,” to

borrow a phrase from Jones-Correa. On the one hand, the Ummah teaches them that Islam is truly a transnational religion, and it is important to follow and engage Islam, even when residing in a non-Islamic state. On the other hand, the Qu'ran emphasizes the support for the non-Muslim host society, including participating fully in its political system.

Therefore, our argument rests on the notion that the Muslim more knowledgeable of Islam, the Muslim who reads the Qu'ran, the Muslim who knows the stories of the Prophets, is more likely to engage *both* transnationally, *and* domestically. In his forthcoming book, March (2008) argues that those with an in-depth knowledge, belief in, and understanding of Islam will frequently cite the story of Prophet Yusuf who served as an appointed minister to the non-Muslim Pharaoh of Egypt as support for compatibility. March cites a statement by al-Shanqiti as evidence, "there is nothing prohibited in Muslims' participating in elections run in non-Muslim countries, especially when such participation accrues benefits to Muslims or wards off harm," (2006). More than not prohibiting political incorporation, some argue that the more religious Muslims would understand they have a duty to support the political system in America, and to participate themselves in order to show care for others, as well as to help improve the position of Muslims in society (Ali 2004; Shanqiti 2006).

Data and Methodology

To assess the influence of transnational ties on the political participation of Muslim Americans, we implemented a unique public opinion survey in 2007. Scholars familiar with the study of Muslim Americans as well as racial and ethnic politics know well that very little empirical data exists regarding Muslims in America. Among the few Zogby polls that do exist, none contain the precise questions we are interested in analyzing, and other surveys fielded by the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) are not publicly available.

Thus, we fielded an original survey of Muslims Americans across six cities: Seattle, WA, Dearborn, MI, San Diego, CA, Irvine, CA, Riverside, CA and Raleigh-Durham, NC. These cities are ideal for a number of reasons. First, the Dearborn area is the single largest concentration of Arab and Muslims in America, and represents a predominantly Arab population which has been established for at least 40 years. Southern California has the third largest number of Muslim Americans (behind Dearborn and New York), and a population that is mixed across generational lines, including a significant U.S. born and African-American Muslim population. Seattle too has a considerable Muslim population (the 10th largest in the United States), and its population is quite diverse with large communities from South Asia, the Horn of Africa, and the Middle East. Finally, the Research Triangle Park community in North Carolina includes a predominantly Pakistani and Indian Muslim immigrant population, adding to the overall diversity of our sample. In addition, a sizable (U.S. born) African American Muslim population is represented in our study.

The survey was administered in an “exit poll-style” whereby research assistants¹ handed out clipboards to participants who completed the survey on their own. Participants were selected using a traditional skip pattern to randomize recruitment and could chose to answer the survey in English or in Arabic. Naturally, drawing a sample of Muslims in the United States is not easy or efficient given their relatively small population. To address this concern, the survey was implemented at randomly selected mosques and Islamic centers across the six locales. In total, respondents were interviewed at 16 different locations in the six cities. In addition, we gathered a large number of interviews outside the prayer services

¹ Research assistants were themselves Muslim, predominantly second generation, most fluent in a second language (Arabic or Urdu) and were balanced between men and women. All research assistants attending two training sessions, and participated in a pilot survey to ensure consistency and professionalism.

during Eid al Adha and Eid al Fitr². In total, 745 surveys were completed across the six locations, and the demographics of our sample closely match those reported in a recent Pew survey of Muslim Americans³ (see appendix, table 1 for sample characteristics).

Given that our sample is drawn from religious centers and places of worship, the reader may question if there is any bias, given that some Muslim Americans may never go to the mosque or attend Eid prayers. However, we are confident in our sample selection for two specific reasons. First, the main reason for concern would be that we exclude the “non-mosqued” population as well as the less religious population. Descriptive statistics of the survey data suggest this is not the case. Among our full sample, 34% state they are involved in activities at their mosque, 39% are not too involved, and 26% are *not at all* involved. Further, while exactly 50% of our sample say they follow the Qu’ran and Hadith very much in their daily life, 38% follow only somewhat, and 12% only a little. This ratio is quite consistent with the Pew survey of Muslim Americans, which was a random telephone survey. In particular, the respondents that we selected at the two Eid prayers are expectedly quite diverse on the religious spectrum. Just as the Catholic church goes from half-full to standing room only on Christmas and Easter Mass, the Islamic Eid prayers attract religious and secular Muslims, to the part-religious, part-cultural, part-family prayer service, including those who otherwise never go to Friday prayers (Ba-Yunus 2006).

² The survey was in the field from December 30, 2006 (Eid al Adha) to October 11, 2007 (Eid al Fitr). Of the 745 completed interviews, 150 were collected at Eid al Adha, 150 during January 2007, 100 during March 2007, and the final 345 during Eid al Fitr.

³ The Pew survey was conducted by telephone, and went into the field at roughly the same time as the MAPOS survey.

Variable construction

Our key independent variables measure attention to U.S. and Middle East political news and events. The variable “follow U.S. politics” ranges from 1 – 4 where 1 represents those who do not follow news about U.S. elections at all, and 4 represents those who follow very closely (see table 1 below for full range of values). Next, the variable “follow Middle East politics” is very similar to the U.S. politics question and represents our operationalization of transnational ties. This variable is also coded from 1 – 4 in the same manner as the U.S. politics variable. We also include control variables for well-known predictors of political participation including education, income, age, gender, and mosque involvement (similar to church attendance). Variables more specific to the Muslim community are Sunni faith, Other/Secular (Shi’a is the omitted category), foreign vs. native born, and citizenship status.

With respect to our dependent variable, political participation, we offer two tests of engagement with U.S. politics. First, a 4-item count variable that draws on a traditional index of non-voting activities including attending a community meeting, a rally or protest, writing a letter to public official, donation to political campaign. 37 percent of the sample reported no political activity at all, 23 percent did one act, 21 percent two acts, 12 percent 3 acts, and 7 percent did all four acts. Our second take on the dependent variable is voting in the 2006 election, constructed as a simple dichotomous variable. The second model is restricted to only U.S. citizens, and 58 percent of the citizen sample reported voting in the 2006 midterm election.

Findings

Like many other immigrant communities, Muslim Americans have a high level of transnational ties. At first glance, the descriptive data suggests Muslims may be putting more attention into homeland politics than American politics. Table 1 reports the results for engagement with politics and news in the Middle East as well as America. While 49 percent stated they followed news about current events and politics in the Middle East “very closely” just 29 percent stated that they followed news about the 2006 U.S. election “very closely.” In fact, when comparing the responses given to both questions about following politics, 43 percent followed Middle East politics *more than* U.S. elections, 47 percent followed both at the same rate, and just 10 percent followed the U.S. elections more than Middle East politics.

Table 1
How closely would you say you followed news about...

	Middle East News & Politics	News about the 2006 U.S. Election
Very closely	49%	29%
Somewhat closely	39%	42%
Not too closely	8%	19%
Not at all	3%	10%

However, attention to politics in the Middle East, even at rates higher than attention to U.S. politics, does not necessarily mean transnational ties decrease participation in America. One primary reason is the concept of *Ummah*, which may serve to encourage internationalism and transnationalism, but does not discourage or oppose involvement domestically. Rather than seeing transnational and national ties as a zero-sum tradeoff, for Muslim Americans they may compliment one another.

To assess the impact of transnational political interests on American political participation, we present results of two regression analyses. First, we examine the 4-item participation count variable which excludes voting, followed by a dichotomous variable for voting. Table 2 reports the results of both regressions. In model 1, the 4-item count variable, we find attention to news about Middle East politics increases the likelihood that Muslim Americans will participate in the U.S. This is even after we control for attention to news about U.S. politics, which also exerts a positive and significant influence on participation as expected. The reason this is important is that on its own, attention to Middle East politics could serve simply as a proxy for interest in politics. By also controlling for attention to U.S. politics, we are assessing the influence of transnational political interest, independent of the contribution of a general interest in politics. Therefore, we can confidently state that as Muslim American interest in Middle East politics and news increases, their level of participation in U.S. politics also increases. Among those who do not follow homeland politics at all, post-estimation analysis predicts 41% partake in zero acts of political participation and 22% are involved in two or more acts. In contrast, among those who follow homeland politics very closely, only 28% are predicted to do zero acts while 35% are expected to do two or more acts. The full relationship between following Middle East politics and political participation in the U.S. is depicted as predicted values in Figure 1.

In addition to the 4-item index, we also investigate the impact of transnational ties on the decision to vote in U.S. elections, reported in Model 2. With respect to voting, attention to Middle East news and politics had no statistically significant effect for Muslim Americans. While the theories suggest that transnational ties and focus can have either a negative or positive effect on participation in the U.S., we find no effect at all when it comes

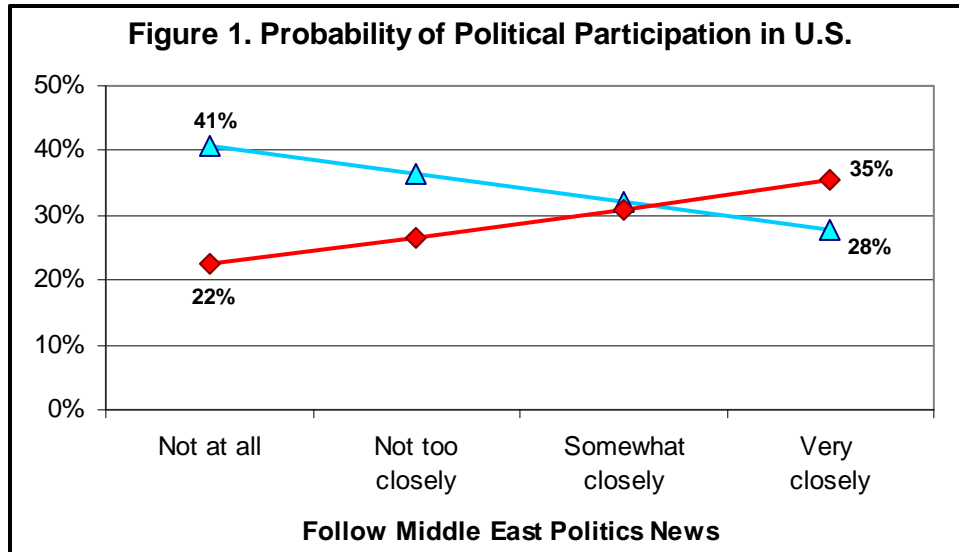
to voting. This finding is consistent with Wong (2006) who found that transnational political engagement had a “neutral” effect on Asian American registration and voting, but found a positive effect on non-voting forms of participation. Instead, the more predictable variable, attention to U.S. politics and elections was a strong predictor of voting in the 2006 election. Other variables that predicted voting among Muslims were among the tried and true: age and education, both exerting a positive influence on the likelihood to vote.

Thus, while we find that Muslim Americans have high rates of attention to homeland politics and news, this external focus does not distract nor deter from participation in American politics.

Table 2: Regression results for Muslim American Political Participation

Independent variables	4-item Particip.		Voted in 2006	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
Follow U.S. Politics News	0.210	0.045 ***	0.341	0.078 ***
Follow Middle East News	0.117	0.055 *	0.059	0.094
Sunni	-0.060	0.116	0.161	0.221
Other/Secular	0.179	0.132	-0.006	0.260
Foreign born	-0.269	0.074 ***	-0.081	0.128
Citizen	0.310	0.096 ***		
Age	0.034	0.046	0.264	0.086 **
Income	0.157	0.074 *	-0.061	0.140
Education	0.075	0.034 *	0.302	0.060 ***
Female	0.066	0.071	0.138	0.125
Mosque involvement	0.177	0.036 ***	-0.032	0.064
California	-0.141	0.118	-0.667	0.223 **
Washington	-0.087	0.116	-0.940	0.222 ***
N. Carolina	-0.440	0.126 ***	-1.006	0.234 ***
Constant	-1.598	0.269 ***	-1.880	0.442 ***
N	745		545	
Log ratio Chi2	192.0		105.9	
Adj R2	.086		0.144	

*** p < .001 ** p < .010 * p < .050



* Note: Predicted values of political participation, given changes in the independent variable, "Follow Middle East News," holding all other independent variables at their mean value

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