

Arab-Americans and Muslims in U.S. politics

by Michael Curtis



Michigan's Rashida Tlaib and Minnesota's Ilhan Omar both won seats in Congress

The November 4, 2018 election remains unfinished as some races remain undecided. Recounting votes is an occupational affliction in Florida. In that state Broward County, one of the largest counties, is replete with voting machines that do not count accurately, with misplaced ballots that suddenly miraculously appear, and where criminal activity over electoral behavior is never evident.

Nevertheless, even if full final accurate details are outstanding, some preliminary conclusions and thoughts about results of the election can be made. First and most important, the divided American nation has a divided government with the Democrats capturing the House of Representatives and the Republicans maintaining, even strengthening, their control of the Senate. It remains to be seen if this foretells political gridlock, more difficult government, or wastage of time on irrelevant investigations or genuine attempts at compromise.

If neither political party can claim victory some significant changes, concerning territory, women, and non-whites have taken place. The Democrats, concentrating on health issues, appear to have done well in swing districts, in wealthy suburban areas, even in territory previously Republican, as well as in urban centers and in New York state and California. Republicans, with President Donald Trump stressing immigration issues, were stronger in less populous and rural states.

The new Congress will be more female. What a dramatic change from fifty years ago when Shirley Chisholm was elected to

Congress, the first black woman, in 1968, served 1969-83, and was the first African-American woman to bid for the presidency. The first important change is that women, white as well as black, who tend to vote Democratic, will be more prominent. Before the November election, women numbered 84 in the House (61 Dem and 23 Rep) , 23 in the Senate (17 Dem, 6 Rep), and 6 Governors. In 2018 women candidates numbered 276; 237 (185 Dem, 52 Rep) for the House, 23 for Senate, 16 for Governors. Final results are not definite, but women won over 115 seats in the House, 12 in the Senate, and 9 Governorships.

The women differ ideologically, racially and religiously. A third of all the women running for House were women of color, as were 5 of the 16 gubernatorial candidates. The 34 new women so far elected to the House, are said to be more liberal than the 66 women re-elected. Also, 13 LGBTQ women ran for the House and Senate, and three for Governors. It remains to be seen whether the more numerous women, some of whom will hold prominent positions in Congress, will propose more legislation, and whether this will be on a wider range of issues.

The turnout was high, 113 million, 48% of eligible Americans voted, the highest turnout in mid term elections for at least 40 years. Higher turnout took place in areas where people have a college degree. The turnout increased among woman, Latinos, and young people. There were interesting features. For the first time an open gay man, Jared Polis became Governor of a state, Colorado. In New York City, a 29 year old woman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Democrat though self described Democratic-Socialist was elected, the youngest person to be elected to Congress.

If one discounts the case of Senator Elizabeth Warren with high cheek bones, a DNA showing she is 1/1024 or .09% Native American and perhaps with tribal ancestors 6- 10 generations ago, the first Native American woman, Sharice Davids, openly gay, member of Ho-Chunk Nation, from Kansas City was elected

to Congress. Another Native, Debra Haaland, member of Pueblo of Laguna tribe, was elected from New Mexico, beating a Latina. An African-American woman, Stacey Abrams, narrowly failed to become the first black woman to become Governor of Georgia.

In Massachusetts, the first black woman was elected to the House. More than 20 African-American women will be in the House.

Perhaps the most surprising, if largely unreported, change in the 2018 election is the political emergence of Arab-Americans and Muslims in U.S., with a record number of Arab-Americans and Muslim candidates running for office. Estimates are that there are 3.5-4.5 million Arab-Americans and 7.5 million Muslims in the country, of whom 22% are Arab, and the largest section are African-Americans and Asian. The most populated states of Arab-Americans are California, Florida, Illinois, New York, Texas and Virginia.

Until 2000 Arab-Americans were little interested in elections, but in 2000 they fielded 700 candidates in local, state, and national contests, 92 from Texas. At that time, 153 were elected, all for local offices, and none for state or federal level. With 9/11 Arab-American and Muslims were less likely to go public.

Before 2018, there were fewer than 300 Arab-Americans in political office. But in 2018 there appears to be a breakthrough. One survey holds that about 95% of eligible Muslims voted, and that 55 Muslims were elected to some form of public office.

Current estimates are that 128 Arab-Americans ran at all levels from precinct captain to Senator. 46 Arab-Americans ran for a number of positions at state and local government level. 25 Arab-Americans ran for seats in House, Senate, or Gubernatorial. They were overwhelmingly Democratic. 16 lost in

primaries, 12 were on the ballots, and 9 were elected, and another was re-elected. Most acclaimed are two Muslim Arab women: Ilhan Omar in Minnesota, daughter of Somali refugees; and Rashida Tlaib, daughter of Palestinian immigrants, in Michigan, the first Palestinian and Muslim women to be elected to Congress.

Omar, previously a member of the Minnesota state legislature, wears a hijab, the first to be worn in the House, and had often spoken polemically of "apartheid Israel." Two other Arab-America women won in Florida; Donna Shalala in the 2nd District and Debbie Mucarsel-Powell in the 26th District. who won closely by one percentage point. Various other Arab-Americans were elected and re-elected, including Ralph Abraham in Louisiana for the third time with 67% of the vote, and Chris Sununu who won his second term as Governor of New Hampshire. In Michigan, Abdul el Sayed, backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, became Governor.

There also appears to be a change in political disposition of Arab-Americans. In 2000, they voted 72% for George W, Bush, 8% for Al Gore, and 14% for Ralph Nader. In 2018, 78% voted Democratic, 17% Republican. Arab-American women are more likely to support Democrats than men are. In surveys, 46% consider themselves liberal on social issues. and 35% say they are conservative. Yet, 40% consider themselves liberal on fiscal issues compared with 43% conservative.

It is a crucial sign of changing times that more than half of Arab-Americans say they had become more interested in politics since 2016, and 55% are more actively involved in politics. Muslims, about 42%, say they are somewhat or very involved in activities at a mosque or Islamic Center. As always, the future is unpredictable.