

Muslims and American Politics

Almost every day pundits inform us about the voting intentions and habits of various groups in elections in the United States. Almost by decimal points they have identified the intentions of blacks, Jews, evangelicals, Presbyterians, seniors, gays, and others. Now, a new survey in January 2016 by the Pew Research Center has informed about the electoral intentions of Muslims in the U.S. as well as about attitudes by Americans towards Muslims.

The Pew survey, by chance, provides a useful opportunity to comment on the assertions made on February 3, 2016 by President Barack Obama in his first visit to a mosque in the United States. In his speech at the 47 year-old Islamic Society of Baltimore Mosque, the President after praising Muslim achievements in various activities in American life, exhorted his immediate audience but in essence the American people as a whole to do the right thing, and endorse religious pluralism.

Without mentioning the names of any current presidential candidates, and really referring only to their remarks about Muslims, Obama declared "We have to reject a politics that seeks to manipulate prejudice or bias, and targets people because of religion." No one can object to this as a general, non-political prescription pertinent to all religious faiths and beliefs, nor to Obama's admonition to condemn hateful inexcusable rhetoric and not be bystanders to bigotry.

Yet, even if Obama did not seem to imply that Islam is immune from criticism, or that Islamic extremists have little to do with violence and terrorism, he might have clarified the difference between objective appraisal and criticism of certain aspects of Islam and what has been termed "Islamophobia."

This distinction is important in view of the findings of the Pew survey that shows a division in the American public on attitudes, whether caution or bluntness, about Islam and Muslim behavior. Half of Americans think the next president should be careful not to criticize Islam as a whole when speaking of Islamic extremists, while 40 per cent think the president should speak bluntly about Islamic extremists even if the statements are critical of Islam as a whole.

The two main political parties, as well as various American groups and segments of the population, differ on the issue. Blunt talk about Muslims is preferred by two-thirds of Republican, by those who lean toward the Republican Party, and by 70 per cent of conservatives, while 70 per cent of Democrats and Independents who lean Democratic, and 80 per cent of liberals, say the next president should speak carefully. Among the American population, black Protestants, secular individuals, post-graduates, and those under 30, believe the president should be careful. About 60 per cent of white evangelicals call for bluntness, and Catholics and mainline Protestants are evenly divided.

In his Baltimore speech, Obama assured his Muslim audience "You fit in here (America). Right here," and declared that only a small fraction of Muslims are propagating a perverted form of Islam. The figures, that can support or disapprove his argument, show that 77 Muslims have been charged in the U.S. with links to terrorist groups and 22 have been convicted.

The Pew study shows that the opinion of many Americans on whether Muslims are indeed part of the American fabric differs from that of Obama. About half of the public believes that at least "some" U.S. Muslims are anti-American, including 14 per cent who think that about half the U.S. Muslim population is anti-American. There is a partisan division on these issues. More than half of Democrats think that "just a few" U.S. Muslims are anti-American, while a third of Republicans think that at least half of Muslims are anti-American.

An earlier Pew study in December 2015 found that 46 per cent of Americans think that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence, and a similar number is “very concerned” about the rise of Islamic extremism in the U.S. About 14 per cent think that some religious teachings encourage violence, and that Islam in particular does this. This perception differs sharply from Obama’s declaration that “in this (Baltimore) mosque and across the country and around the world Muslim leaders are roundly and repeatedly and consistently condemning terrorism.”

In view of these perceptions it is not surprising to learn, in a survey of 2,000 registered Muslim voters in six large states, of the intentions of the 73 per cent of Muslims who say they plan to vote in the current 2016 presidential primaries. In the 2012 election more than 75 per cent of Muslims voted for Obama. In 2016, about 67 per cent plan to vote Democratic, 15 per cent to vote Republican, 2 per cent Liberal, and 5 per cent for other groups.

In general Muslims have indicated their present personal preferences though these may change: 52 per cent for Hillary Clinton, 22 per cent for Bernie Sanders, 7 per cent for Donald Trump (because of his business background and his properties in Middle East countries), and 2 per cent for Ted Cruz.

This preference for Democrats may relate to the fact that, after Islamist massacres in Paris and elsewhere, Democratic politicians including President Obama, with rare exceptions do not refer to the events as the actions of “Islamist terrorists,” but blandly as “violent extremism.” It neglects the reality that, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali has remarked, the U.S. has “to engage with the ideology of Islamist extremism.”

Another finding of the survey is the great difference between Muslims and the rest of the U.S. population on what they consider the most important issues. Among Muslims they rank as

follows: Islamophobia 30 per cent, the economy 24 per cent, health care 14 per cent, and foreign policy 6 per cent. This priority, so different from the agenda in the presidential primary debates, in which foreign policy has been prominent, is understandable in view of the Muslim disquiet about some political rhetorical excesses that candidates have made about Muslims. Nevertheless, the priority given to "Islamophobia" implies that criticism of Muslim beliefs, say regarding sharia law and its customs, is to be equated to animosity or discrimination against Muslims.

The presidential candidates should take note of the findings of the Pew survey. Muslim voting may only be about one per cent of the total vote, but they may be important, and perhaps, decisive in swing states such as evenly divided Florida with its 29 electoral votes, Ohio, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.