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“Uncommitted” : The limitations of election forecasting on minorities and the case of American Muslim voters

Nura Ahmad Sedique, Michigan State University, Department of Political Science, USA

Nura Sedique is an Assistant Professor of American Politics and Public Policy at Michigan State University. She can be reached at sediquenu@msu.edu

Abstract

Drawing on the case of American Muslim voter engagement in the 2024 election season, this essay argues that election forecasting models, particularly state-based models, should integrate minority populations into their models as crucial variables. This should be of particular significance in swing states. By including minority voter engagement and related variables such as pressing policy concerns (e.g., anti-war sentiment, racial attitudes), forecasters can better understand and predict electoral outcomes, addressing the gaps identified in traditional forecasting approaches. The recommendations help election forecasters prepare for unexpected changes, such as the American Muslim shift away from President Biden in the 2024 primary election season.

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“I would rather see my community banned, than see my community slaughtered.”

American Muslim voter Suehaila Amen’s striking statement was featured in a July 2024 *New York Times* video feature (Stockton and Semple, 2024), showcasing why she no longer supported President Biden. Suehaila’s statement alluding to tolerating Trump’s Executive Order 13769, commonly referred to as the “Muslim Ban,” over Biden’s current foreign policy stances with Israel is symbolic of the preferences of American Muslims in Michigan.ⁱ Since 2023, there has been a staggering exodus of support by Muslim voters for President Biden in the 2024 presidential primaries. In 2020, 65% of Muslims reported voting for Biden, in 2024, his support had plummeted to 18% among likely Muslim voters. In many ways, this trend offers a case of a potential shift in partisan loyalties in an era where social scientists have predicted that partisan loyalties are stable and consistent (Levendusky, 2009; Abramowitz, 2014).ⁱⁱ From Suehaila’s and other Muslim voices’ perspectives, no policy issue was more central to their voting interests than US foreign decisions that interlinked with the level of civilian casualties in Gaza, a finding corroborated by a recent poll of American Muslims highlighting that Gaza is their key policy concern for the 2024 election (ISPU, 2024). These voters blame the current Biden administration for failing to garner a solution that would diminish civilian loss in Gaza (NYTimes, 2024; Khatib et al., 2024).

As a researcher who is keenly attentive to the political behavior of Arab and Muslim communities, my in-depth interviews with Muslims during this time alerted me to the growing dissatisfaction with the Biden administration.ⁱⁱⁱ Weeks before the February 2024 Michigan primary, I spoke with colleagues specializing in American politics about whether the growing dissatisfaction of Muslim voters was something that election forecasters had carefully considered. The answer was – not really. This alluded to an assumption that Arab and Muslim voters’ dissatisfaction was too minor to influence national election outcomes. Weeks later, the role of Muslim voters in Michigan became one of the biggest headlines for the Democratic primaries this year, as 100,000 Democrats voted ‘uncommitted’, opting to send a political message instead of selecting Joe Biden as the nominee. In Dearborn and Hamtramck, two Muslim-majority cities, 60% of Democrats voted ‘uncommitted’. The movement gained national momentum, with the uncommitted movement inspiring similar campaigns in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and other key states, and approximately 800,000 Democrats nationwide voting for a version of uncommitted with their ballots (Leingang, 2024). In August 2024, 30 delegates represented the uncommitted vote at the Democratic National Convention, the largest number of unaffiliated delegates heading to the DNC since the time of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer’s Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party gained delegates at the 1964 National Convention.^{iv} Their presence and engagement became a key talking point during the 2024 DNC, with the DNC holding their first-ever panel on Palestine at the insistence of the Uncommitted delegates (Bilal, 2024).

Minority voters utilize their votes in Democratic primaries in important ways, and this trend is important to understand, as it can signal their voter preferences more meaningfully than captured within the constraints of a general election (Carrera-Smith, 2022). This essay draws attention to the case of American Muslims to exemplify why election forecasters should consider minority populations as a variable in state-level forecasting models, even when they may be a numerical minority nationwide. Given their relatively small size, American Muslims are a challenging population to build election forecasting analysis around. Muslims comprise 3 to 5% of the American electorate, so discourse on the

importance of the Muslim vote has generally been dismissed, reiterating their relatively low political power in American elections (Pew, 2017; Sediqe, 2024). If we disaggregate and consider the role of minority voters like Muslims at a state level, particularly in swing states, their relative power and influence shift and become pivotal to consider.

As Mark Blumenthal noted in the 2014 special issue of *PS* on election forecasting, “for what purpose?” Election forecasting is a vital part of understanding the American electorate (Lewis-Beck, 2005; Campbell, 2012; Blumenthal, 2014; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2014). For scholars invested in election forecasting, if the purpose is to accurately capture the dynamics of election results, particularly for presidential races, considering minority voters more carefully will become of growing importance with the shifting population and increased political acumen of minority voters. The 2024 presidential primary elections highlight the shortcomings of taking for granted minority voters and their role in shifting election outcomes.^v It heeds the call of political scientists who specialize in minority political behavior to center minority voters, given the influential role it has in American politics (McClain et al., 2016; Hutchings, 2004). Election forecasting would benefit from better recognizing the pivotal role that voters can play in swing states and considering different strategies to understand and gauge their involvement. The case of American Muslim voters in Michigan will briefly be explored to underscore the political significance of this strategy, followed by suggestions for analytical strategies to account for this within election forecasting models.

The Case of American Muslim Voters In Michigan

At the heart of the Uncommitted Movement have been Arab and Muslim organizers in Michigan. Michigan is home to a vibrant Christian and Muslim Arab community and a Muslim community inclusive of Arab, Black, and South Asian voters. While their interests may diverge, this electoral year, Arab and Muslim voter’s interests have converged given their rising concern with the civilian death toll in Gaza. Palestinian Christians are a vibrant part of American life and have expressed concerns like Palestinian Muslims. For American Muslims of other cultural backgrounds, their social ties to Palestinians, coupled with a sense of connection to Muslims transnationally, have made this issue important to them (Shryock and Lin, 2009; Sediqe, 2019).

While historically, American Muslims have relatively limited political power, the tide is shifting in the state of Michigan. Michigan is home to the first city council that is Muslim majority; the Democrats’ House Majority leader (Abraham Aiyash) is Muslim, the mayor of one of the largest tourist destinations in Michigan is Muslim (Abdullah Hammoud), and they elected the first Arab-American Muslim to U.S. Congress (Rashida Tlaib) (Sediqe, 2023). With the growing political representation in Michigan, they have become a key feature of the Democratic party and signal a stable voter base for Michigan Democrats. This is meaningful, given how important Michigan was for the Democrats in the previous election. In 2016, the Biden presidential ticket won Michigan by about 154,000 votes. There are currently an estimated 242,000 registered Muslim voters in Michigan (Emgage, 2024).

Yet, the escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza has personally impacted Muslim Americans. Michigan families like the Abu-Shaban family lost 42 family members in one single airstrike (CNN, 2023). Calls for more engaged diplomatic measures by the Biden administration have increased by citizens and

Muslim elected officials. Abdullah Hammoud, the first Muslim mayor of the city of Dearborn, home to one of the largest per-capita cities of Arabs in the country, penned in an op-ed for the New York Times, “I’m the Mayor of Dearborn, Mich., and My City Feels Betrayed”. Hammoud noted, “

“What compounds the constant fear and mourning is a visceral sense of betrayal. In the past three federal elections, Arab American voters in Michigan have become a crucial and dependable voting bloc for the Democratic Party, and we were part of the wave that delivered for Joe Biden four years ago...Until just a few months ago, I firmly believed that Joe Biden was one of the most consequential and transformative presidents..but no amount of landmark legislation can outweigh the more than 100,000 people killed, wounded or missing in Gaza. The scales of justice will not allow it.”

On the heels of Hammoud’s editorial, campaigns such as the Listen to Michigan Campaign escalated efforts to have Democrats vote uncommitted in the Democratic primaries and send a signal to Democrats to take the issue of Gaza more seriously. Their goal of having 10,000 voters vote uncommitted was exceeded, and approximately 100,000 Democrats selected the ‘uncommitted’ option in the Michigan primaries, signaling to the Democratic party their growing unhappiness.

This is a marked change for American Muslim support for President Biden. In the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), the sampled Muslims (n=592) reported having generally favorable feelings toward President Biden, with 32.43% reporting very favorable feelings and 31.76% with somewhat favorable feelings. Turning to a December 2023 nation-wide survey of American Muslims, a sample of 200 Muslims indicated that in 2020, 58% of respondents had voted for President Biden, mirroring support levels found by CMPS in 2020. This shifts for Muslims in 2023 and 2024, on the heels of the escalation of conflict in Gaza. In both the December 2023 survey and a July 2024 survey (n=150), when asked who they would vote for in the 2024 elections, 67% said they would vote for ‘someone else’ and not the Democratic party nominee.^{vi} In the open-ended answers portion of the December 2023 survey, respondents shared sentiments such as, “I’m outraged that, as an American, the taxes that I pay are being used to fund a war that I don’t support.”^{vii} This is consistent with the most recent large-scale sample of American Muslim opinion, fielded by ISPU in July 2024 (n=888).^{viii}

At present, Gaza remains the top policy issue for American Muslims. 71% of surveyed American Muslims stated that it is their key policy issue of concern in the upcoming national election (Mogahed, 2024). For minority voters, group-specific interests matter more than we may consider (Sanchez, 2008). While election forecasters emphasize the role of economics in predicting vote change, the policy priorities of minority communities with very specific socio-political histories in the United States suggest external factors that election forecasters should consider incorporating within their forecasting models. Considering minority communities beyond American Muslims, for Black voters, their dynamic history within the US has influenced their policy priorities as well (Walton, 1985). In a recent 2024 polling of policy priorities for Black voters, they note that improving education, dealing with problems related to the poor and issues around race are salient for policy issues, which is distinctive compared to the policy preferences of White voters surveyed within the same study, who did not perceive these as priorities for their electoral concerns (Cox, 2024).

How Elections Forecasters Can Account for Minority Voter's Interests

How do election forecasters resolve this challenge? Having acknowledged that minority communities with strong group interests can be a powerful voting bloc, the case of Michigan highlights how a state-level forecast may be one meaningful way to incorporate minority voters into forecast models. Centering the electoral college vote as the dependent variable of interest, the analysis of election forecasters focusing on state-level forecasts offers a meaningful type of forecasting model that could incorporate minority's approval ratings into their model (Campbell, 1992; Rosenstone, 1983; DeSart and Holbrook, 2003; Jérôme et al., 2020). Jérôme et al. (2020,77) point out that "The Electoral College makes the geographical dimension of presidential elections particularly salient for the forecasting community."

The importance of minority voters as a voting bloc that can alter electoral outcomes becomes more evident when their vote is considered within states with slim margins of victory in recent elections. Taking the battleground states in 2020 as an example, states like Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Michigan would benefit from including minority voter approval ratings in state-level forecasting models. Table one offers the 2020 margin of victory for four of the six key swing states as an example. In the case of Michigan, the margin of victory in 2020 was 154,188 votes. Considering that there are an estimated 242,000 voters who are Muslim and that 145,620 Muslims were estimated to turn out, the margin is small enough that their low approval rating for the Biden administration could influence the results. In Pennsylvania, the number of registered Muslim voters (167,618) is double the margin of victory from 2020 (81,660).

In Wisconsin, the "uninstructed delegation" (their state's iteration of the uncommitted vote) won 8.3% of the total votes (48,162 votes) – which is double the 20,682 votes that the Biden administration won Wisconsin with in 2020. In Dane County, where Madison, Wisconsin, is located, this percentage was double, with 12.5% having cast 'uninstructed' ballots. Wisconsin had 15,142 Muslim voters in 2020 and has 21,122 registered Muslim voters within the state (Nichols, 2024). In a context where the electoral college vote remains the primary dependent variable for success, forecasters would benefit from considering the number of registered voters of minority backgrounds within their analysis. This becomes most clear in the case of Georgia, where 12,670 votes determined the margin of victory and where 61,000 Muslims turned out to vote, nearly five times larger than the slim margin of victory within the state.

Table 1: 2020 Swing States and the Margin of Victory by Overall Votes and Registered Minority Votes

2020 Swing States	Margin of Victory by Votes	Number of registered Muslim voters	Muslim Turnout
Georgia	12,670 votes	79,345	61,148
Wisconsin	20,682 votes	21,122	15,142
Pennsylvania	81,660 votes	167,618	124,875
Michigan	154,188 votes	242,000	145,620

Including minority voters into election forecasting models has precedence within earlier forecasting models. Rosenstone’s (1983) forecast model for the 1960 presidential vote included the Roman Catholic population at the state level because of the prominence of John F. Kennedy’s identity as a Roman Catholic. JFK’s identity as a Roman Catholic became salient in the electoral campaign given the anti-Catholic sentiment that pervaded the discourse in that time period (Carty, 2001). Estimations indicate that 80% Roman Catholics voted for JFK, underscoring the importance of Rosenstone’s forecast model (Schneider, 2005).

In addition, Rosenstone’s (1983) forecasts for 1952 and 1968 elections included a variable accounting for the “mismanagement of war”, accounting for the anti-war sentiment prevalent in those periods as well. Recent polling of Muslims in key swing states (Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Georgia) identify that the key policy affecting their vote is the administration’s handling of the war in Gaza (ISPU 2024). In 2020, the key policy issues for American Muslims were healthcare (19% reported this as the key issue) while in 2024, 71% of American Muslims report that Gaza is their key policy priority.^{ix} With the 2024 elections, state-level models would be strengthened by including the percentage of American Muslims in key swing states, as well as their current opinions on US support for the military conflict in Gaza. Additionally, given the anti-war social movement’s heightened engagement this past year, with approximately 16,435 protests nationwide involving 1.62 million, the anti-war protests have included voters across cross-cutting cleavages and ethno-racial backgrounds (Harvard Crowd Counting Consortium). A variable comparable to Rosenstone’s (1983) “mismanagement of war” would be useful to include from all registered voters for 2024, measuring the general American public’s support for continuing to fund military weapons to Israel.

Moreover, Campbell’s (1992) inclusion of regional variables in state-level models captures shifting racial attitudes and their impact on candidates running for office, and his inclusion of regional-specific variables to specific states offers additional precedence and examples of how forecasters may consider minority voters’ interests in specific state-level models.^x This draws to a larger question of when specific variables should be included in forecasting models (Campbell, 1992). In analyzing the discourse surrounding election forecasting, pre-eminent Black politics expert Hanes Walton alluded to the temporal phenomena of considering when race matters for elections (Walton et al, 2010). In Walton’s analysis, the variable was of greater significance when a Black candidate was running for office (e.g., Shirley Chisolm in 1972, Barack Obama in 2008), as is the current case with Kamala Harris as the first Black and Indian American

presidential candidate for the Democratic Party. These strategies underscore how state-level models can consider the key policy preferences of minority voters in swing states and should also consider related policies (e.g. racial attitudes when the candidate is from a non-white background) in forecasting models when specific policy issues or candidates make them more salient.

Conclusion

Election forecasting is a unique space where public discourse and academic discourse converge. In the case of American Muslims, there has been meaningful public discourse surrounding their influence in electoral outcomes, but limited insight within academic conversations in determining their political behavior and their inclusion within forecasting models. By highlighting the shift in dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party's presidential ticket among American Muslims, I explore how policy concerns have affected their voting preferences. The intricacies of Muslim voters would be easy to ignore if the impacts were not so consequential. As the case of Michigan shows, a small minority can still strategically organize power and impact election results. In this case, it can cost the presidential election and challenge election forecasting if ignored in states where they have an influence.

As researchers of election forecasting move forward, consideration of specialized populations needs to exist. Including minority voters in state-level analysis offers one pathway forward that can better capture these sentiments into election forecasts. In many ways, the high dissatisfaction among Arab and Muslim voters served as a canary in the coal mine, as President Biden ceased his presidential re-election campaign just months before the election. Election forecasters need to take greater heed in looking at the potential of minority voters in swing states and better understand how growing levels of distrust by segments of voting-eligible citizens can have a profound impact on voter turnout and which presidential ticket is successful. The case of Muslims offers a reflection for further consideration on how this process may unfold for other minority voting blocs.

This trend may be seen in other minority voters and could also carry a positive outcome. For example, Black American voters had a large surge in voter registration rates the summer of 2020, in response to the murder of George Floyd and national conversation elevating the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Alter, 2020). 87% of Black voters ultimately voted for President Biden, highlighting how pivotal a minority voting bloc can be, particularly in a state with such a slim margin of victory as Georgia, which has a sizeable and influential Black voter base (Eligon and Burch, 2020). This example pushes us to consider how minority voting blocs and their role should be considered beyond the case of American Muslims.

It underscores the need for more deliberative thinking by scholars invested in election forecasting to build a more curated strategy involving more community-engaged research when handling minority voters, particularly in swing states. The Democratic party's shift from incumbent President Biden to Kamala Harris at the top of the presidential ticket presents many challenges for election forecasters. In the case of minority voters, the fact that Harris is potentially the first Black and South Asian woman to run for president highlights the need to consider issues of race in current forecasting models. While the inclusion of Muslims and Arabs in state-level models like Michigan are necessary, the inclusion of Black and AAPI voter approval ratings increases in relative importance for the presidential ticket. The case of American

Muslims offers an important point to consider not just who is on the ballot but when minority voter's social movement strategies should become more serious considerations for political scientists.

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ⁱ This policy was an executive order provisionally revoking visas to people from Muslim-majority countries. As the key group targeted by these policies, Muslims were on the frontlines of the Muslim Ban protests.

ⁱⁱ This concern is reiterated by the reality that American Muslims had heavily endorsed the Republican Party up until 2001, and their partisan shift due largely to experiences of Islamophobia had shifted them to being Democrats. As a result, the shifting partisanship among American Muslims suggests that some are malleable to shift their partisan loyalties once again. One of the largest questions that loom for Muslim voters in Michigan is whether they will turn out to vote in November, and if they do – whether that vote will shift support toward nominee Donald Trump. In the announcement of Kamala Harris as the new nominee, there has not been a guaranteed return to the Democratic party. 27% of Muslim voters reported their intention to vote for a third-party candidate, and 17% reported remaining unsure of their vote, which is three times higher than the general public (6% of the general public state they are uncertain of they are voting for) (ISPU, 2024). While that is a sharp shift from the recent history of Muslim American’s political engagement with the Democratic party, it reveals how group interest can shift partisan identities swiftly and considerably.

ⁱⁱⁱ Citation to the working paper discussed here is omitted to maintain anonymity for the review process.

^{iv} The uncommitted movement leaders proudly showcase these ties. The DNC party in Mississippi at the time was racially segregated, which is what motivated the founding of the MFDP and underscored the historical significance of Hamer’s democratic delegates.

^v Some analysts would go so far as to say the Uncommitted Movement’s organizing is what led to President Biden’s announcement to withdraw his re-election campaign (000).

^{vi} A mail-to-voter survey targeting Muslim voters in Michigan, will yield a broader understanding once distributed in August 2024.

^{vii} The December 2023 was a community-based sample that recruited Muslims from Michigan and Ohio to take the survey, utilizing snowball sampling techniques. The July 2024 survey was conducted in collaboration with the Afghan-American Community Organization, and respondents were recruited as they were registering for their annual conference.

^{viii} As Dana and Lajevardi (2024) note, survey data collection on American Muslims is a challenging task with many complications that one must consider. While these sample sizes may seem small, the feasibility of reaching American Muslims nationwide contextualizes the sample sizes within these surveys.

^{ix} It may not always the case that minority voters are decisively single-issue voters, but in instances of heightened issue salience of critical policies, minority voters tend to have higher political acumen and politically mobilize (Hutchings,2021). This may also require identifying the possibility of single-issue voting of specific groups. The first step would be to identify swing states, disaggregate some of their key minority blocs, and identify their policy priorities for the election cycle.

^x While representative polling of minority voters is a challenge, strategies have emerged to manage how non-representative polling can generate accurate election forecasts. (Wang et al, 2015)