



# American Muslims in the 2016 Election and Beyond: *Principles and Strategies for Greater Political Engagement*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In the midst of a polarized and heated election season in 2016 in which Muslims are frequent subjects of national debate, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) set out to discover what American Muslims wanted for themselves.

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# Executive Summary

In the midst of a polarized and heated election season in 2016 in which Muslims are frequent subjects of national debate, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) set out to discover what American Muslims wanted for themselves. ISPU researchers sought to answer three key questions:

1. **Why:** What is the case for American Muslim civic and political engagement?
2. **What:** What are the main policy priorities for American Muslim communities?
3. **How:** What do American Muslim communities need to do in the short term and the long term to increase political participation?

## Methodology

This report is based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques. ISPU researchers based their analysis and recommendations on the following:

- A literature review of “Get Out The Vote” best practices
- In-depth interviews with more than 30 civic leaders
- A 2016 ISPU nationally representative poll of American Muslims
- Extensive additional qualitative feedback from our advisors, Muslim community leaders and community members

# Research Findings

The following summarizes ISPU researchers’ findings on *why* Muslims should become civically engaged, *what* their policy priorities are, and *how* leaders in this community can increase Muslim civic engagement.

## Why: What is the case for American Muslim civic and political engagement?

Eligible Muslim citizens are less likely to be registered to vote than Jews, Catholics, and Protestants (60 percent vs. at least 85 percent) (ISPU 2016). ISPU researchers set out to uncover the case for Muslim civic engagement.

### *Narrative and Representation:*

- **Representation:** If Muslims want their elected officials to consider their priorities, they need to at minimum go to the polls. As one stakeholder put it, “Politicians know who votes and who doesn’t. If you’re a voting community, they’ll come to you. If you’re not a voting community they’ll ignore you.”
- **Ending Apathy:** If Muslims don’t like the available political options, this should push people to engage more to make a change. “If you don’t like the

choices, well, the question is, what are you doing to change [them]? Are you aggregating people to push for something you want? ... Yelling about something alone is not going to move anything up the prioritization ladder.”

- **Optics:** At a time when many openly deny that Muslims can be fully American, there is no better way to disrupt this narrative than by displaying our democratic principles and political power.

### *Accountability and Responsibility:*

- **Ethical Responsibility:** Given the numerous challenges facing the nation, from the criminal justice system, education, the economy, and much more, Muslims have a moral obligation to contribute to solutions and therefore must have a voice in their political system. One interviewee reinterpreted the prophetic statement “you are all shepherds and are all responsible for your flock” to address the larger moral and ethical responsibility Muslims have within their respective societies. In line with principles of a democratic society, some stakeholders articulated the fundamental principles in Islam of promoting the public good and to speak out against injustices.

- **Practical Realities:** Elected officials affect citizens' everyday lives, from their sidewalks and schools to their civil rights and health policy. These elected officials must be called to craft responsible legislation that represents the interests of their constituents, which include Muslims, and this will happen only if Muslims participate in the political system. American Muslims must therefore view voting as not only as a civic duty, but a matter of self interest.

**What:** What are the main policy priorities for American Muslim communities?

#### *The challenge of forming an American Muslim Platform*

Muslims are the only major American faith community with no majority race, and span the socioeconomic and ideological spectra (Gallup 2009, ISPU 2016) and the educational spectrum. Given this diversity, the goal of defining the interests and policy priorities of American Muslims might seem impossible. The challenges facing Muslims in the next 10 to 20 years are to find ways to leverage this diversity as a strength. Despite this diversity, ISPU uncovered a core set of guiding principles and policy priorities.

#### *Guiding Principles*

Our research suggests leaders would do well to consider the following guiding principles when negotiating Muslim political engagement.

## **Policy Priorities**

### *Islamophobia as common concern*

Every stakeholder, regardless of political affiliation or inclination, agreed that Islamophobia and civil liberties (the protection of constitutional rights) is a main policy concern. For one stakeholder, it made sense to align Islamophobia with the struggle for freedom and justice of historically marginalized communities: "Yes, there is Islamophobia, but...this is not only a Muslim issue. This is inherent to the discrimination and racism that permeates American civic and political life. So it extends back to this legacy of slavery, the legacy of imperialism."

What clearly emerged from interviews with stakeholders is that there is no way to predict the policy priorities of American Muslims, and as one stakeholder noted, "...outside the issues of discrimination and Islamophobia there aren't, like, one or two big issues that unite all Muslims."

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## **Guiding Principles For Muslim Political Engagement**



**Diversity:** American Muslims need to take into account the vast diversity of their communities and use that as a strength, rather than a liability. By recognizing and embracing this diversity, as opposed to treating it as divisive, Muslims in America can act from a place of authority bringing an invaluable asset to the national dialogue.



**Local and Global:** By thinking and acting both locally—and globally—American Muslim communities stand a greater chance at creating positive social change. Part of this process involves creating a political culture with a distinctly internationalist perspective, in that American Muslim communities uphold a vision of a just world while being actively involved in responding to the local political, economic, and social conditions each person or community experiences.



**Priorities not Partisanship:** Several stakeholders argued for the need to stick to principles and priorities, not political parties, because it will ensure long-term strategic power for American Muslim communities. One stakeholder explained, "We should not act like an ethnic bloc, or an affinity bloc. We should act like a values-based bloc."

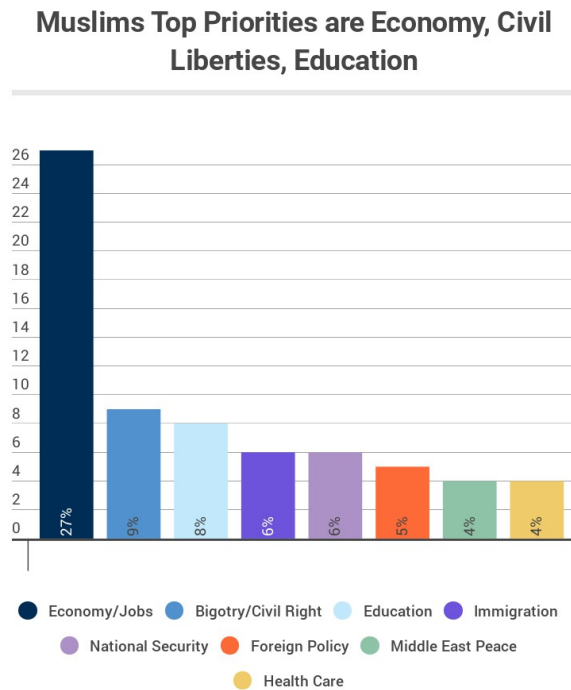


**Striving for the Common Good:** Striving for the common good and upholding the core values of Islam was a central concern for many stakeholders interviewed. It is incumbent in Islam to redress issues affecting people living the most precarious lives while activating the Islamic ethic of social justice and equity, and upholding this role of stewardship.



## The Muslim Public

ISPU's 2016 poll shows American Muslims priorities reflect those of the general public. Of Muslims polled, 20 percent stated the economy was the most important issue for the next president, 9 percent cited racism/discrimination/civil liberties, 8 percent reported education, and 7 percent said jobs. Other important issues American Muslims want the next president to address are immigration (6 percent), foreign policy (5 percent), and peace in the Middle East (4 percent).



Whoever the next president is, what do you think is the most important issue he or she must address? (Open Ended, First response shown)

**How:** What do American Muslim communities need to do in the short term and the long term to increase political participation?

### Short-Term Tactics

#### Mobilize at the Mosque

- Hold voter registration drives at the mosque.
- Increase voter registration drive efforts during Ramadan and Eid, when larger swaths of the community are present.

- Target elder members and young members of the community to run the drives, and give everyone a specific role to play.
- Invite local candidates running for office to speak at the mosque.
- Arrange buses to take Muslims and non-Muslims to the polls.
- Look beyond the mosque to other Muslim organizations, especially MSA's (college campus-based Muslim Student Associations), with these same tactics.

#### Leverage Social and Traditional Media

- Create a video of American Muslim leaders across all regions, spectrums, etc., encouraging people to vote.
- Create hashtags (#americanmuslimvoter) and use them to share positive images of American Muslims voting and participating.
- Hire people nationally who work solely on generating and maintaining a social media presence/buzz encouraging people to vote.
- Look to traditional media outlets as well: "We need to take out advertising on the Muslim network. If you look at Dish Network for example, they are now catering almost to the entire Muslim American population in terms of satellite coverage from other countries, whether it's Al Jazeera or MBC or the Pakistani Networks, the variety of languages and...we can do some advertising and campaigning there."

#### Educate

- To encourage people to vote they **need to understand how to vote**: "If you get potential voters over the hurdle of their first vote, they're much more likely to vote the next time around. *Sample ballots* could be one way to do that, in that one reason folks don't vote may be that they are afraid they'll mess up."
- They **need to know what and who they are voting for**: *Hold town halls or community forums* around single legislation, with local candidates, and providing educational materials about the issues.
- And they **need to know how the entire system works**: "Create Civics classes focused on both how laws are passed and also which jurisdiction certain issues are under, so people know who to go to when they have an issue."

## *Become Part of the Process*

- **Attend conventions—of both parties:** “[a] type of tangible and immediate benefit that we can actually bank on...is parties seeing Muslim activists. That’s humanization.”
- **Work the polls:** “people [can get] excited about the political process but if they don’t understand the process and how it works and what it means to have people assigned to a poll from the beginning of its opening to its closing, and helping to count the votes, it doesn’t mean much.”
- **Run for office—it empowers the individual and entire community:** “I’ve seen a candidate that if they are Muslim and they are running for public office they were able to naturally mobilize our community more effectively and much better in organizing canvas launches, phone bank and so many other campaign events for the candidate with having a huge turnout and a huge support from our community simply for that reason because the person running is coming from that community.”
- **Identify shared values:** Identify an existing campaign that shares your value system. Even if you don’t fully agree with what they believe, join a council race, school board race, go door to door, make telephone calls, write position papers, or help write speeches, but become a part of existing campaigns. Active involvement in local campaigns and elections builds a network of supporters and future volunteers.
- **Wear out shoe leather:** Wearing out shoe leather addresses the importance of building relationships with the local communities Muslims live in and intend to serve. Canvassing is one of the most active forms of campaigning, and it is crucial for American Muslims to do this work. As a community-building activity, canvassing influences voter turnout, builds trust with people from varying backgrounds, and reconnects Americans with their communities.

## *Long-Term Strategies*

### *For Community Leaders*

- **Build from the ground up:** Organize locally, get involved in municipal elections, build coalitions with organizational partners and other communities at the grassroots level. Identify and build relationships with key leaders within every community.

- **Create an American Muslim political culture:** It is imperative to make political activism part of American Muslim culture by learning from historical and contemporary experiences of political mobilization. Understanding the American political system can be deepened by creating inclusive opportunities for civics learning and political education either in preexisting civic organizations and/or religious institutions—primarily by studying the history of black American political engagement.
- **Invest financial resources in political activism:** Invest in organizing and mobilization efforts, political campaigning, developing civic organizations and infrastructure, and strengthening the political capacities of American Muslim communities, such as Muslims running for public offices. Creating American Muslim fundraising apparatuses serves an ancillary purpose of holding elected officials accountable.
- **Build a Council of Councils:** Build an independent movement and infrastructure that leverages the power of American Muslim civic organizations on the national stage while also harnessing multiple voices and perspectives addressing the local and regional distinctiveness of American Muslim communities. To be truly representative of the American Muslim population, it is necessary to create an independent grassroots movement and infrastructure through a democratic process to address local, state, regional, and national issues that concern Muslim communities in America. This infrastructure could be modeled after the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), for example, which was founded in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1929, and was the first nationwide Mexican-American civil-rights and multi-issue organization. LULAC was organized in response to political disenfranchisement, racial segregation, and racial discrimination.

### *For Researchers*

- **Establish a sophisticated database of potential Muslim voters:** A constantly updated list of voting-age Muslims is an invaluable tool for organizers seeking to activate and leverage this community’s influence.
- **Conduct American Muslim in-house “Get Out The Vote” studies:** A wealth of academic data show what works, on average, to get the general public to vote. A smaller but growing body of literature similarly identifies the various ways minority voters may be persuaded to head to the polls. Although campaigns

and organizers targeting American Muslim voters can draw on lessons from these two bodies of work, it is only through conducting multiple studies focused on this population that we can learn the most cost-effective strategies to reach them.”

## Getting Out the American Muslim Vote: Best Practices

While extensive research is necessary to understand what get-out-the-vote (GOTV) methods work best for American Muslim communities, we’ve pulled together findings and strategies from our literature review and expert interviews to help prepare for the 2016 election and beyond.

According to the best research, effective GOTV campaigns must be Personal, Persistent, and Paradigm shifting.

- Personal:** The personal element of these GOTV tactics is key: face-to-face canvassing and volunteer phone banking offer the most reliable tactics. Moreover, source trust plays a crucial role: canvassers and volunteers should be well trained and drawn from the local community of interest.
- Persistent:** Numerous studies find that, within election cycles, multiple contact leads to greater turnout and, across election cycles, the effects of prior mobilization efforts are maintained.
- Shift Paradigms:** Get citizens to actually think of themselves as voters—that is, change their cognitive frame.

## Which GOTV Tactics Work and Which Do Not?

What Works	What Doesn't
<b>Direct Mailings:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mailings that use “social pressure” (i.e., reminding a registered voter of their voting record or comparing it to their neighbor’s record), thanking recipients for past participation, or urging them to join an “honor roll” of voters.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nonpartisan reminders to vote (highlighting civic norms).</li> <li>Partisan mailers or those advocating for a particular issue.</li> </ul>
<b>Canvassing and Phone Banks:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Live interactions with human beings with GOTV messages delivered in an authentic manner by a volunteer (whether in-person or over the phone).</li> <li>Follow-up calls with those who, in an initial call, expressed an expectation to vote more than doubles the turnout effect of a single call when conducted by volunteers (not commercial call banks).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prerecorded calls from celebrities, politicians, or local clergy.</li> </ul>
<b>Email and Texts:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emails and texts sent by individuals who the recipient knows.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Automated emails.</li> </ul>
<b>Messaging:</b>	
Voting framed as a social norm.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arguments such as civic duty, the closeness of the race, or group solidarity.</li> </ul>

# AME Stakeholders

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## Notes

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## Notes

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RESEARCH MAKING AN IMPACT

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## About ISPU

ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan research organization specializing in addressing the most pressing challenges facing the American Muslim community and in bridging the information gap between the American Muslim community and the wider society. Through objective, empirical applied research ISPU supports the American Muslim community to develop, contribute and innovate, offering actionable recommendations to inform community change agents, the media, the general public and policy makers alike. In addition to building in-house capacity, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines, building a solid reputation as a trusted source for information for and about American Muslims.

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