The 2004 Presidential Elections:
What Should American Muslims Do?

Dr. M.A. Muqtedar Khan
Fellow, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding

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The American Muslim community has traveled far on the path of democratization.[1] During the 2000 presidential elections the community was still debating the Islamic permissibility of participation in the American political system. While Muslim political activists were expounding the virtues of voting – particularly block voting – the intellectuals were busy establishing the compatibility of Islam and democracy and convincing Muslims that it was not only in their interest to exercise their franchise but that it was also a good Islamic practice to participate in the *shura* (deliberations) that determined who and how this country was governed.[2] Fortunately, this no longer appears to be an issue today.

American Muslims recognize the validity of the democratic process and are eager to participate in it to shape the political environment in which they live.[3] Recent surveys on political attitudes within the community have clearly indicated that American Muslims will participate quite vigorously in the coming presidential elections and will also engage the political process at multiple levels. For example, a recent study of Detroit Muslims showed that over 93% of those surveyed were determined to vote.[4] A survey by the Washington DC based Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) found that 93% of its respondents were registered to vote; of them, 92% were determined to vote.[5]

The present election has, however, raised another important debate within the Muslim community: whether American Muslims should formally endorse a candidate or not. The issue is a very important one; arguably, it is a *constitutive* issue and the manner in which it will ultimately be resolved will have a long-term impact on the identity, interests and politics of American Muslims.[6]

As the elections approach, community leaders are confused over this issue. Most recognize that there are advantages to using the block vote as a political weapon, but many also recognize that picking the wrong candidate (if their choice is defeated) may backfire and further undermine the community's interests. They are also wary of criticism from those who were opposed to their choice in 2000 and fear vocal rebellion from ordinary Muslims if they endorse a candidate without fully understanding the community's orientation.

The issue of an official endorsement necessarily raises several other key issues that are driving the community's development and internal politics. The most important issue is one of political unity - whether the community, in spite of ethnic and doctrinal diversity, is sufficiently united politically to warrant a single endorsement. In the 2000 election cycle, African American Muslims were particularly upset that American Muslim organizations (namely those generally

Dr. Muqtedar Khan is a Fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. He is also Director of International Studies and Chair of the Political Science Department at Adrian College and a Visiting Fellow of the Brookings Institution. He is the author of *American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom* (Amana, 2002) and *Jihad for Jerusalem* (Praeger, 2004).

instituted by the immigrant majority) had endorsed the Republican candidate without regard to their opinion and interests. They were also justifiably angry that such organizations assumed that they could dictate the agenda of *all* American Muslims and expect others to follow suit even if consulted.

In the past two years, it has become readily apparent that there is not only ethnic but also political and interpretive diversity in the community. In the past, this author has described the American Muslim community as *a community of communities* – a description valid now more than ever before. There has been a surge of alternatives to the standard orthodoxy emerging within the community. Liberal Muslims are becoming increasingly vocal and are taking leadership positions within mainstream organizations. They are giving birth to new institutions that also seek to interpret Islam differently. Most importantly, alternative voices are gaining greater currency within the community and in mainstream American culture.

The emergence of such voices is causing immigrant leaders to be a bit more hesitant in their belief that they can speak for the entire community. In the past, the American Muslim Alliance (AMA) took the leadership role in the political process. It continues to mobilize the community, but is less presumptuous in its posture. Similarly, the Los Angeles based Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) engages primarily in policy, rather than political issues. It devotes its energies toward a grassroots campaign against terrorism, but it is also a member of a newly established coalition of national Muslim organizations, the American Muslim Taskforce (AMT). It remains to be seen what MPAC will do if the majority of Muslim organizations in the taskforce decide to endorse a candidate.

Likewise, CAIR has not overtly endorsed a candidate, but has resorted to an alternate means of endorsement via the use of surveys. Its recent survey of CAIR's membership is a de facto negative endorsement of the incumbent, George W. Bush. The survey suggests that only 2-3% of CAIR members will vote for Bush, while over 50% will vote for Democratic nominee John Kerry. The rest are either undecided or leaning towards Ralph Nader (26%). The

release of this data is essentially a proclamation that CAIR members who had overwhelmingly voted for Bush in 2000 (72%) are now determined to vote him out. The survey provides CAIR a safe and clever way of indirectly endorsing a candidate.

The leaders of the national Muslim organizations, whether through AMT or otherwise, need to exercise caution in their endorsements, if and when they decide to make them. While it appears obvious that a significant majority of Muslims will vote for John Kerry, it is yet unclear whether the community will categorically support any endorsement by AMT. An examination of the pros and cons of block voting for this election is essential and warranted.

The Advantages of Block Voting

1.   In a close election, a community can play a decisive role in determining the outcome. The American system is based on the principle of "winner take all" and hence, newly emerging voting blocks can make a significant difference and exert influence beyond their small numbers by voting as a block.

2.   In close elections, voting blocks can actually coerce political parties to change their electoral platforms. The US today is deeply divided - nearly equally - along party lines. Vacillating voting blocks can elicit more concessions from the party they have traditionally supported or gain new concessions from the other party. In this election, it seems that the American Jewish community has already gained favors from both parties. Republicans have continued to support Israel, despite stiff international condemnation of the Jewish state, while John Kerry is trying hard to look more pro-Israeli than Bush. The Republicans are trying to court a majority of the American Jewish vote in their favor for the first time, while the Democrats are trying to retain it. Traditionally, the American Jewish vote has gone about 80% Democrat and 20% Republican - a reversal of this tendency is greatly coveted by the current administration.

3.   If the politics of block voting were correctly applied, it could help unite the community. American Muslim politics are

distinctly compartmentalized. There are many Muslim groups that lobby for their former home nations, such as the Palestinian lobby and the Pakistani lobby. These groups have not only succeeded in mobilizing segments of the American Muslim community in pursuit of ethno-nationalistic political interests, they have also commanded a disproportionate share of the community's financial and other resources. Unless the interests of all such groups can be aligned, the effective exercise of block voting is not possible. It appears as though leaders of American Muslim organizations are more interested in projecting to the mainstream media and the two political parties the potential of a Muslim Vote rather than its actual execution. Such action is dangerous because it runs the risk of exposure. If the Muslim elite can unite on a common platform and work toward consensus building, such union may have both tactical and strategic benefits for the community. The American Muslim Task Force believes that this may be accomplished through its civil rights agenda; however, there is no indication of a consensus on the support and/or prioritization of this issue by the community's various constituencies (e.g., Indian Muslim Council, etc.).

4. Block voting gives American Muslim organizations and leaders greater access to, and influence in, mainstream politics. Politicians and the media will seek them out if they think these organizations and leaders are capable of manipulating and delivering the Muslim Vote.

5. One symbolic advantage of block voting is recognition that the community as a whole is an important political player. It provides greater awareness of their leaders, organizations and issues. Sometimes, media attention of certain issues can be harmful, while on other occasions, it can be salutary. American Muslims achieved this in 2000; its necessity in 2004 is debatable.

The Dangers of Block Voting

While the advantages of block voting have been pervasively discussed within the community, especially given its prominence as an issue in the 2000 elections, the negative aspects of block voting are less studied and comprehended.

1. The biggest danger of block voting is the likelihood of endorsing the eventual loser. In American elections the probability of doing so is 50%. By officially endorsing a single party or candidate, the community effectively alienates itself from the other party or candidate and in a way declares its opposition openly. In the event the endorsed candidate is defeated, the community will then be vulnerable to reprisals or isolation from government access. If, for example, American Muslims officially endorse John Kerry, vote for him in huge percentages (92-93% as CAIR's membership survey indicates) and George W. Bush still wins, the community could face further difficulties, given current administration attitudes toward American Muslims.

2. Think long-term. Will the political parties develop deeper relationships with a community that oscillates its support? Trust in politics is a rare commodity, but also a very important asset. The community must learn to develop long-term and meaningful relationships with the two parties. Coercion and threats of mass exodus are not always beneficial strategies. Recent months have seen two parallel developments: (i) American Muslim leaders' rhetoric about the existence of a Muslim Vote and (ii) its potential use against George W. Bush. Muslim leaders use the potential of a Muslim Vote to intimidate politicians. These leaders also like to talk about how there are 6-8 million Muslims in America. According to studies conducted by Aslam Abdullah, the editor of *Minaret Magazine,* there are only 2.7 to 3.0 million total potential Muslim voters.[7] In addition, the Bush administration's unwillingness to do anything on the Palestinian issue until the elections are over – except protect Israel from international condemnations and sanctions – has become copiously noticeable. The impetus for such a posture may be due to a realization that since American Muslims are not going to support the Bush-Cheney ticket, the Republicans may as well solicit - or manipulate - the American Jewish vote by appearing to be extremely pro-Israel. Block voting also allows the political parties to manipulate communities. It is tragic that the Palestine issue divides the Muslim and Jewish communities into adversaries even though the two communities have identical interests on most domestic issues, such as

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defending America's secular ethos by protecting it from the rise of Christian fundamentalism and strengthening the welfare state and the civil rights environment.

3.   An additional risk for American Muslims if their leadership insists on block vote politics is the possibility of (a) exposing the absence of political unity within the community and (b) actually exciting existing minor fissures into becoming major cleavages.[8] The marginalization of African American Muslims through the endorsement of George W. Bush in 2000 likely led to the establishment of Muslim Alliance of North America (MANA), an organization that seeks to represent indigenous Muslim interests. The creation of MANA serves as an expression of a vote of no-confidence by indigenous Muslims in the legitimacy of the national organizations established and managed primarily by immigrant Muslims.[9]

4.   American Muslims must recognize that the overall philosophies and political agendas of the two parties are pretty stable and enduring. Republicans stand for reducing taxes for the rich, smaller government and pushing religiously motivated political goals – such as opposing abortion; whereas Democrats generally pursue social liberalization and a stronger welfare state. If American Muslim values are stable then they too must have a long-term relationship with one party. Or there must be Muslim factions aligned with each party. The entire Muslim community cannot be Republican in one election and Democrat in another. It is difficult to imagine that American Muslim values and philosophical assumptions change so dramatically every four years.   The disparity between consistent values and mercurial electoral practice must not hinge on only one or two issues; the American Muslim community cannot sustain itself as a political force if it can be swayed by policy shifts on a mere handful of areas of focus. A major political shift occurring once in a few decades may be understandable, if prompted by extraordinary events such as the passing of the Patriot Act, which practically eliminated the Bill of Rights for Muslims.   That American Muslims might allow block voting to become their staple strategy is, however, a cause for concern.

5.   Excessive pontification about the power and impact of the Muslim Vote on American politics and policies may cause more anger, resentment and distrust within the general American population. Block voting is comprehended to be a Machiavellian strategy that enables political groups to exercise far more influence than their size and contribution. Many American Muslim leaders have over the years expressed their negative impression about America, its culture, its politics and its society. Recent surveys of Muslim attitudes towards American society are full of sanctimonious condemnation of American culture and society.[10] Condemnation of America and manipulation of its politics could actually engender widespread Islamophobia.

6.   The issue of an endorsement also presupposes the ability of the national organizations to set the agenda of all American Muslims. Many American Muslims are very distrustful of the national leadership. Jamshed Bokhari, a Muslim political commentator associated with the conservative Muslim American Society (MAS) has penned a less than flattering opinion of Muslim leadership, writing:

"If there were any subject upon which the members of the American Muslim 'leadership' can be said to be complete and inarguable experts, a field in which they would reign unchallenged – even to the point of being solicited to produce academic treatises – it would be 'How To Make Yourself Politically Irrelevant.' Admittedly, the charge is a bit harsh, but it is, unfortunately, an accurate assessment." [11]

Jawad Ali, associated with the progressive Muslimwakeup.com writes of the American Muslim Political Coordinating Committee (AMPCC) and the new avatar American Muslim Taskforce (AMT),

"However, new name or not, traditional US Muslim leaders still seem to be asleep at the wheel, denying any change in direction and ignoring trends among their rank and file."[12]

Whether leaning to the political left or right, the American Muslim leadership does not seem to inspire much confidence in its flock. While Bokhari's assessment may appear too harsh, it reflects an underlying frustration many

American Muslims feel about their leaders' tendencies to make decisions without consultation. Bokhari is also frustrated at the lack of political influence of the community itself and chooses to unleash his angst upon the leaders. If the community and its leaders are so out of synch, block voting could cause more internal harm than good. Jawad Ali, however, is somewhat hopeful, adding, "The traditional Muslim leadership is starting to wake up to which way the wind is blowing … some of them are even rushing to adopt the 'Progressive' label." His reference is to MPAC.

7.   American Muslims have learned many lessons from their past experience at block voting. They endorsed George W. Bush and played a decisive role among key constituencies in Florida, but with little in exchange for the effort. Ultimately, President Bush decided to push aside the community and play it politically safe. The attacks of September 11th understandably "changed everything," (notwithstanding the President's maintenance of a conservative economic policy), but in the process, rendered useless the efficacy of a block vote where the beneficiary would not stand by his supporters in moments

Policy Recommendations for the Muslim Community

1.   The American Muslim Community as a community should abstain from endorsing any candidate or any party. Individual organizations and associations can and should be encouraged to pick sides as long as there are some prominent organizations that may go the other way. Placing all eggs in one proverbial basket is always risky and injudicious.

2.   The community must recognize that it is not united and may never be. American Muslims should leverage their internal diversity. To put it plain and simple, they must work to develop close and influential relationships with both parties. This is neither Machiavellian nor in any way immoral. It is basically a safe and cautious way to hedge all bets. They should not be dependent on one party, or one individual to safeguard their interests. Close relations with both parties will ensure that American Muslim interests are served regardless of election outcomes.

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of dire need. President Bush's attitude toward Muslims is proof of the shallow impact of block voting.[13]

8.   Block voting is a reflection of a superficial, instrumental understanding of, and attitude toward, democracy. Participation in democratic processes should not be viewed as a partisan engagement in a zero-sum game. Thinking such as, "If we have more influence, then Jews will have less, and US policies instead of being unjust in favor of Israel, can now be "just" and in favor of Palestine," are narrow, bigoted and strategically counter productive. If American Muslims seek to become a community of the noble, who seek to enjoin good and forbid evil, then they must rise above partisanship and pursue politics from the perspective of realizing the moral good of all people. American Muslim participation should be a public good that benefits all — this nation, its people, and all those whom Americans can help. But of course, American Muslims can also choose to become a selfish group that seeks to milk all opportunities and pursue only parochial objectives. Given the character of the community and the vast majority of its members, the latter is, fortunately, an unlikely scenario.

3.   African American Muslims have special relations with the Democratic Party. The community must help and encourage them to develop and nourish this relationship further. Muslim organizations had developed links with the Republicans during the 2000 campaign. Others in the community must renew and strengthen those links. It should avoid ridiculing or condemning those Muslims who may choose to work with the Bush campaign or the Republican Party. Pure selflessness is a rarity. The influence gained by Republican Muslims, even if acquired through selfish pursuits, can be helpful to the community. Surely there will also be those who will campaign against Bush for selfish purposes, using the cover of the community's mood to advance their standing in the community while pursuing self-serving politics; such behavior is a sine qua non in politics. Communities that can balance self-interests with public interests well, do well; others will suffer. Muslims must avoid perceiving motivations as being solely self-centered or solely divine, with no accommodation for a middle ground.

4.   American Muslims must stop obsessing over policy outcomes and start focusing on the process itself. There are no quick fixes; thus, the community must engage the process as deeply and completely as possible. This can only be

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achieved by maximizing the community's political contributions to both candidates between now and November so that both parties know they can always rely on American Muslim financial support. Despite much rhetoric, American Muslims have proven to be very miserly when it comes to spending money to realize their political goals. Contributions to Congressional candidates in 2000 are a prime example. Both Arab American and American Muslim PACs combined to give only $113,881, whereas the pro-Israeli PACS donated $2,044,606,[14] constituting a 1:18 disparity. It is beyond debate that significant financial contribution translates into greater political influence.

5.   Avoid third parties. They are a waste of time, money and votes. Some Muslims argue that the main parties have similar platforms (especially those who think that Palestine is the only issue for American Muslims) and therefore they must vote, as a form of protest, for third-party candidates such as Ralph Nader.[15] In the American political system, this is a waste of resources and has no bearing on policy. During the party nomination battles, it is sensible to support candidates such as Dennis Kucinich — this helps to expand the electoral platform of the eventual winner — but in the Presidential race, third-party candidates can hurt. In 2004, every vote for Ralph Nader will be a vote for George W. Bush. That Republicans are working hard and spending their own money to get Nader on the ballot in some key battleground states affirms this probability. Muslims who vote for Nader will be voting for Bush; the fact that they are not directly voting for him or contributing to his campaign is immaterial.

Final Thoughts

Participation in the American democratic process is a form of *ibadah* (worship) as well as *dawah* (dialogue) for American Muslims. By engaging in the affairs of our times they become part of the *shura (*deliberations) that shapes our present and future. By taking positions that are informed by a desire to enjoin good and forbid evil and by advocating *maslaha* (public interest) they are also partaking in a constructive *dawah* (dialogue) with mainstream America. In pluralist societies, where people of many faiths have agreed to live together in harmony, the Islamic thing to do is to pursue universal values and universal public goods. In addition, it is important to remember that this game is not a single iteration model. There will be many more elections to come and American Muslims must not act as if this is the only shot they have at making a difference. American Muslims are here to stay; the impact of their presence must be slow, steady and continuous.[16]

American Muslims must stop having an instrumental relationship with the American system. It is time the community went far beyond one or two defining issues and started integrating with the challenges that America faces at large. It must allow community members to find causes that they care for and let them vote their conscience. Block voting is antithetical to the spirit of democracy; it involves an undemocratic imposition of an agenda determined by the elite on all members of the community. If American Muslims are to find an authentic expression of their citizenship, they must follow their conscience and vote for a better America based on self-interest and personal judgment.

[1] I am grateful to Farid Senzai of Oxford University and a Fellow at ISPU, Mir Ali Raza of William Paterson University, and Dilnawaz Siddiqui of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, Kamran Bokhari of Stratfor.com and Zahid Bukhari of ICNA and Saeed Khan of ISPU for their insights in preparing this Policy Brief. While the document has definitely benefited from their suggestions, for its weaknesses and for its politics, I take full responsibility. I also want to use this opportunity to congratulate ISPU for helping expand the American discourse and for providing a platform for multiple voices.

[2] Muslim scholars also got into the debate; while some like Jamaal Badawi hedged around the issue a bit, others like Sheikh Taha Jaber Al-Alwani came out strongly in favor of participation. See Jamaal Badawi's position stated in an interview to Sound Vision on the World Wide Web: http://www.soundvision.com/Info/politics/badawi.asp. See Sheikh Taha Jaber Al-Alwani, "The Participation of Muslims in the American Political System," on the World Wide Web: http://www.islamonline.net/english/Politics/2000/1/Article7.shtml.   For debates on the subject see M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Refuting the Isolationist Arguments," American Muslim Quarterly, 2, 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 60-69. Also see M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "How can Muslims Impact American Politics," IslamOnline.Com, November 04, 2000, on the World Wide Web: http://www.islamonline.net/english/Politics/2000/1/Article3.shtml. Also see Mahdi Muhammad, "Refutation of Dr. Khan's article: "How Can Muslims Impact American Politics," on the World Wide Web: http://brothermahdi.tripod.com/khan.html.

[3] See reports by CNN and MSNBC. "American Muslims Seek Electoral Clout," CNN (February, 4, 2004); http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/02/04/elec04.muslim.voters.ap/ and also see Kari Huus, "Getting Out the Muslim Vote," MSNBC (February 02, 2004); http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4137092/.

[4] See Ihsan Bagby, "*A Portrait of Detroit Mosques: Muslim Views on Policy, Politics and Religion* (Clinton, MI: Institute of Social Policy and Understanding, 2004). Available at http://www.ispu.us/reports/the_detroit_mosque_study.html

[5] See CAIR-Net Survey of American Muslim Political Attitudes (Washington DC: CAIR, June 2004); http://www.cair-net.org/downloads/june2004-voter-survey-results.pdf.

[6] See Muqtedar Khan, "Putting the American in American Muslims," The New York Times, September 7, 2003; http://www.ijtihad.org/NYTimes1.htm.

[7] See Aslam Abdullah, "Muslim Votes and 2004 Elections," http://americanmuslimvoters.com/articles/muslimvotes.html.

[8] For an excellent analysis of the diversity within the American Muslim Community vis-à-vis political participation see Aminah Beverly McCloud, "Muslims in American: Identity and Participation," (Chicago: International Strategy and Policy Institute, 1999). On the World Wide Web: http://www.ispi-usa.org/policy/policy5.html. For an analysis of how identity politics in the American Muslim Community shapes political participation, see M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "Collective Action and Collective Identity: The Case of Muslims in America", in Amber Haque (ed.), Muslim Issues in North America, (Washington DC: Amana Publications, August, 1999).

[9] See M. A. Muqtedar Khan, American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2002).

[10] For example see M. Amir Ali, "American Political Scene and Muslim Americans" (Chicago: The Institute of Islamic Education and Information, 2000); http://www.iiie.net/Articles/AmerPolScene.html. Notice the use of the term Muslim Americans and not American Muslims. This is often indicative of negative attitudes towards America.

[11] Jamshed Bokhari, "How to Make yourself Politically Irrelevant" http://www.masnet.org/views.asp?id=871.

[12] See Jawad Ali, The Failure of Muslim Leadership in North America," muslimwakeup.com, June 26, 2004; http://www.muslimwakeup.com/mainarchive/000909.php.

[13] For a more detailed reflection on the decision to endorse Bush see M. A. Muqtedar Khan, "By George! Was Endorsing Bush a Mistake?" The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, July 2001, p. 67; on the World Wide Web: http://www.wrmea.com/archives/july01/index.htm.

[14] Hugh S. Galford, "Pro-Israel and Arab/Muslim-American PAC Contributions to 2000 Congressional Candidates," The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, May/June 2001, pp. 49-54; On the World Wide Web: http://www.wrmea.com/archives/may-june01/0105048.html.

[15] The CAIR Survey suggested that nearly 26% of their members preferred Ralph Nader. I hope this preference does not translate into wasted votes.

[16] I also encourage readers to read similar and well articulated arguments by Dr. Hajjaj, President of the American Islamic Information Center. See Anwar Hajjaj, "Why Muslims Should Vote and be Involved Politically," IslamOnline.com; http://www.islamonline.net/english/Politics/2000/1/Article4.shtml.

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is an independent and nonprofit organization committed to solving critical social problems in the United States through education, research, training, and policy analysis. ISPU provides cutting-edge analysis and policy solutions through publications, public events, media commentary, and community outreach. Major areas of focus include domestic politics, social policy, the economy, health, education, the environment, and foreign policy. Since our inception in 2002, ISPU's research has worked to increase understanding of key public policy issues and how they impact various communities in the United States.

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Institute for Social Policy and Understanding
43151 Dalcoma Road, Suite 6
Clinton Township, Michigan 48038