

POLITICS: THE VOTERS;

Influx of Immigrants Is Changing Electorate

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Body

When the Michigan Democratic Party held its convention in September, Marianne Yared McGuire, an Arab-American, was not shy about using her ethnicity to persuade some party leaders to back her bid for a nomination to the State Board of Education. "I told them they needed an Arab-American on the ticket to get Arab-Americans to go out and vote Democratic," she said.

Hers was a classic argument in American ethnic politics, but it reflected a new reality: the increasing diversity of the electorate created by rising immigration rates and relatively high birth rates for immigrants.

Since the 1992 election, the Immigration and Naturalization Service says, more than 2.3 million immigrants have been naturalized, the largest number of new citizens over a four-year Presidential election cycle since 1924. With naturalization comes the right to vote, and many new citizens are old enough to vote.

These demographic changes are forcing politicians on all levels to adjust their calculations. Now they must court both votes and contributions from emerging blocs of ethnic citizens, many of them swing voters in crucial states: Asian-Americans in California, Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, Russian and Caribbean immigrants in New York and Arab-Americans here in Michigan.

Gone are the days when Walter F. Mondale returned donations made by Arab-Americans to his 1984 Presidential campaign or when Michael S. Dukakis told a group of Arab-Americans in 1988 that he did not want their Presidential endorsement.

"I wouldn't say we are considered a critical group yet," said James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute. "But they're starting to view us as a legitimate vote group to pay attention to."

So far, according to strategists for both parties, the Clinton campaign has made an all-out effort to woo new ethnic voters, establishing and financing ethnic outreach programs by the Democratic National Committee and at the White House. In contrast, the Dole campaign has been less enthusiastic in courting Arab-Americans and other ethnic groups.

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"Arab-Americans are getting as much attention as any other ethnic group," said George R. Salim, a Palestinian-American lawyer in Washington who works with the Dole campaign. "But from the point of view of those of us who have been involved in Republican politics for a long time, no ethnic group is getting enough attention."

While they fret that the Dole campaign has not made any serious overtures to Arab-Americans, some Republican strategists note that Arab-Americans, like Asian and Hispanic Americans, are a diverse group, divided by nationality, religion and class. Keeping them unified behind any one party will be difficult.

But the Republican Party may end up attracting the large numbers of Arab-Americans who are socially conservative and ripe for a so-called family values message. Large numbers of Arab-Americans are also business executives who could easily be tempted by the Republicans position of less taxes and less regulation.

While their numbers remain small -- only about 200,000 to 250,000 in total population in Michigan -- their tradition as swing voters makes Arab-Americans a prototype that explains why many politicians are paying so much attention to ethnic voters. In a nationwide survey conducted this month by the Arab American Institute, of 400 Arab-American registered voters, 42 percent identified themselves as Republicans; 36.5 percent as Democrats, and 21.4 percent as either independents or as registered with a third party.

But party affiliation seems to mean very little. In 1988, Arab-Americans in Michigan strongly supported the Rev. Jesse Jackson, a liberal Democrat, in the state caucuses. Two years later, they strongly backed John Engler, a conservative Republican, in the Governor's race.

In her race for the school board, Ms. McGuire, a liberal union advocate who was once married to a non-Arab American, is hoping to draw heavily from Arab-Americans. But Arab-Americans here have also supported conservative Republican candidates: Spencer Abraham, the first Arab-American Senator from Michigan, and Suzanne Sareini, the only Arab-American member of the Dearborn City Council.

"There is no party loyalty," said Abdul Mackie, president of Arab American Republicans of Michigan.

Perhaps because American politicians have historically treated them as pariahs, many Arab-Americans respond as much to candidates who offer the trappings of inclusion -- making appearances at Arab-American functions, placing campaign advertisements in Arab-language newspapers, seeking advice of Arab-Americans -- as to those who are sympathetic to their views on issues like education, crime, and, of course, the Middle East.

"Governor Engler was down in the community all the time," said Mohammed Okdie, an organizer with the American Federation of Teachers. "It was a big deal."

The Clinton campaign and the White House have been following that model.

On Monday, a group of Palestinian-Americans was briefed on a conference call by Richard LeBaron, a National Security Council staff member, on the breakdown in talks in the Middle East. Last month, after contentious talks in Washington between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader, and King Hussein of Jordan, another group of Arab-Americans were briefed by the National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake.

Tipper Gore, the Vice President's wife, appeared at the Arab American Chamber of Commerce dinner in Detroit. And Arab-American leaders have been invited to the White House to meet with the President three times. "There have been more meetings with the President of the United States in the last two years than there were with Jim Blanchard, the Governor of this state in eight years," Mr. Okdie said. "To me, that's serious wooing."

It has apparently paid off. In the Arab American Institute survey, 43.4 percent backed Mr. Clinton, while 29.6 percent favored Mr. Dole. The poll had a margin of error of plus or minus five percentage points.

In addition, a group of Arab-American business executives raised about \$750,000 at a Cleveland fund-raising event last spring attended by the President. Organizers of another event scheduled for last month in Dearborn say they were confident of raising a similar amount, but the event was canceled when the featured guest, Vice President Al Gore, stayed in Washington to attend the Middle East summit talks.

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The courting has caused heady feelings among some Arab-American Democrats who, in their most fanciful moments, envision their people becoming a force within the Party akin to blacks and labor. "We've become recognized, but we're not key stakeholders in the Party at this point," said Samir W. Mashni, a Palestinian-American lawyer in Dearborn active in the Democratic Party. "But that's the goal."

Graphic

Photo: Marianne Yared McGuire, an Arab-American running for the Michigan Board of Education. (Peter Yates for The New York Times)

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