

# Arab Americans

- **Issues**
- **Attitudes**
- **Views**

Protecting Rights at Home  
And Promoting a Just Peace  
Abroad...

Until recently, the establishment of Arab Americans as an organized political constituency had been, for the most part, in a formative process. This year, however, Arab Americans have arrived as an independent-minded and highly motivated political force with a common agenda.

A Zogby International (ZI) study recently completed for the Arab American Institute (AAI) sought to explore the attitudes of Arab Americans on a range of domestic and foreign policy issues.<sup>1</sup> Before examining its findings about those issues that are of special concern to Arab Americans, it is interesting to sketch the portrait of the community's characteristics that emerge from the study's results.

## ARAB AMERICANS

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## I. DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Arab Americans are part of the American success story.

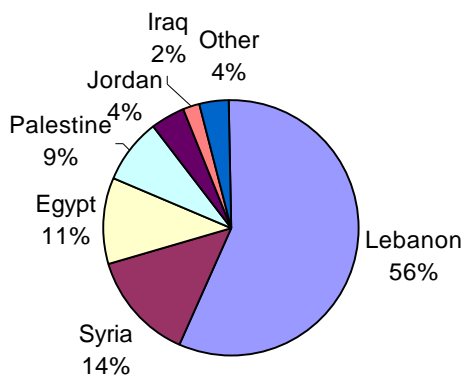
From the earliest settlements in the industrialized Northeast and Midwest to those in the Southwest and West, Americans of Arab descent have played an important part in building communities and institutions in most major cities in the United States.

Today, the more than three million Arab Americans are, according to U.S. Census figures, quite an impressive group and those surveyed in the study were representative of such success.<sup>2</sup> Thirty percent earn more than \$75,000 a year (second only to the Jewish community). The small percentage (22%) that report earning under \$25,000 is also one of the lowest of all the ethnic groups surveyed. Arab Americans also claim the highest per capita ownership of business of any ethnic group in America and have a higher ratio of advanced degrees and membership in the professions.

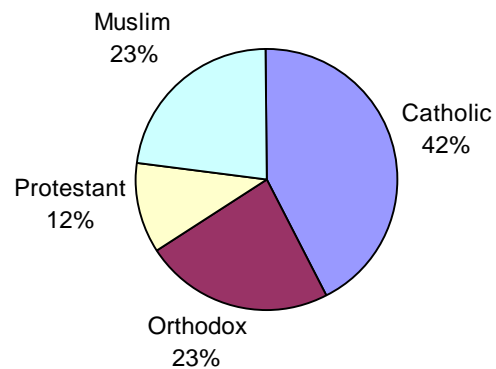
Two-thirds of those Arab Americans who were polled reported being born in the United States (this is a lower number than the actual 80% of Arab Americans who were born in the United States). And one-third of all the Arab Americans in the survey reported that they were second, third or fourth generation Arab Americans.

Other demographic information from the study:

**Country of Origin of Arab Americans**



**Religious Makeup of Arab Americans**



Other indications in the study show that Arab Americans, while maintaining a strong sense of community and ethnic ties, are also a much-assimilated group. Over 60% of those who are married chose someone from their ethnic background, and 85% prefer that when grown, their children remain living in their community. This is the highest of any group in the study.

At the same time, Arab Americans and Italian Americans reported living in the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods and having the most friendships outside of their own ethnic communities.

The Arab American community is also quite accomplished and upwardly mobile. Almost one-half of the Arab Americans in the study (48.5%) have at least a college education. Fifty-six percent report that their financial situation is better than it was four years ago and 87% (the highest of all the groups in the study) report that they have an optimistic view of the future.

As for ideological preferences, Arab Americans are difficult to pigeonhole. They are not single-issue voters, and they do not back one party exclusively, often switching from one candidate to another depending on the election. Arab Americans, whether Democrats or Republicans, make important contributions to the national election debate over a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues.

Indeed, because of the culture and values that have shaped the Arab American experience, the community has a great deal to offer in policy discussions regarding education, support for small business development, and issues that involve strengthening and protecting families and communities. There is also considerable consensus among Arab Americans on critical issues of U.S. policy in the Middle East and the world as a whole.

In 2000, the Arab American political and electoral agenda is aimed at protecting civil and constitutional rights and ensuring that the promise of freedom and equality applies to all Americans. At the same time, the community is dedicated to promoting strong ties and a just peace in the Middle East as the best way to promote U.S. interests in the entire region.

## II. POLITICAL ACTIVITY

The recent Zogby/AAI "Culture Poll" reveals that Arab Americans show some of the highest levels of political participation. According to the results, Arab Americans led many other ethnic groups in being registered to vote (88.7%). Only African Americans (90.1%) and Jewish Americans (92.3%) were registered to vote in higher numbers.

Furthermore, Arab Americans vote in greater percentages (62% in 1996) and are more politically active than average Americans. In the "Culture Poll", over ninety percent of Arab Americans indicated that they were very likely to vote in the upcoming national elections.

While Arab American voting behavior has shifted between various parties for the past couple election cycles, Arab Americans retain higher levels of political participation in relation to other ethnic groups in the following campaign activities:

### 1. Visiting a presidential candidate's web site?

Arab American	Asian American	Hispanic	Jewish American	African American	Italian American
13.1%	12.6%	12.5%	8.1%	7.7%	7.2%

2. Donated money to a presidential candidate?

<b>Arab American</b>	Jewish American	Hispanic	African American	Italian American	Asian American
16.0%	15.6%	12.8%	14.1%	11.9%	10.2%

3. Watched a presidential debate?

<b>Arab American</b>	African American	Italian American	Asian American	Hispanic	Jewish American
81.6%	78.6%	76.5%	77.2%	73.2%	70.0%

### III. DOMESTIC ISSUES

#### Abortion

Abortion has been one of the most hotly debated issues in recent decades. Arab Americans, like other Americans are divided on this issue and hold rather strong views. For example, 52 percent of Arab Americans describe themselves as pro-life (that is, they are opposed to abortion in most cases). Conversely, 45 percent identify themselves as pro-choice (that is, those who approve of the right to an abortion in most cases). While these numbers reflect a more conservative view than the population as a whole, Arab American attitudes on abortion are similar to other ethnic immigrant communities.

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
Banning partial birth abortion	52.1	41.4	6.6
Banning all abortions	53.5	42.8	3.7
Parental notification for abortions for female under 18	78.5	20.1	1.4

#### Education

Arab Americans tend to favor conservative proposals on education. 69 percent support the use of federally funded vouchers to allow parents the choice of schools to which they will send their children.

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
Provide parents with school vouchers	68.9	27.1	3.7
Restriction on teaching of evolution	35.9	58.5	5.6

Racial preferences in hiring or school admissions	21.2	75.2	3.6
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### Health Care

Arab Americans have a more liberal perspective on health care. 86 percent support using the federal budget surplus to support a federally sponsored health insurance program. 92 percent support strengthening the Medicare program. 89 percent support allowing patients to sue health insurance companies (HMOs).

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
Strengthen Social Security and Medicaid	91.8	6.3	2.0
Allow patients to sue their HMO	88.8	7.9	3.3
Use government surplus to provide health care for working poor and children	86.4	11.4	2.2

### Social Security

Plans for addressing social security concerns have received significant news coverage. As a group, Arab Americans hold strong views about social security as over eighty percent support allowing individuals to invest a portion of their social security pension in personal retirement accounts, suggesting that they agree with Governor Bush's recent proposal.

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
Strengthen Social Security and Medicaid	91.8	6.3	2.0
Allow investment of Social Security pensions in personal retirement accounts	80.9	15.2	3.9

## Crime

Arab Americans have relatively conservative views on crime. At the same time, 72 percent of Arab Americans support the use of the death penalty in cases of capital crimes. And 83 percent support treating 14 to 16 year olds as adults if they commit crimes using guns.

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
Prosecute as adults youth 14-16 who have committed a violent crime	82.8	14.0	3.2
New gun control laws	76.0	20.2	3.9
Death penalty for heinous crimes	71.7	24.1	4.2

## **V. MIDDLE EAST ISSUES**

Overall, Arab Americans hold that the Middle East, and especially the Arab-Israeli conflict, is an issue of utmost importance. Over two-thirds place it among their top five issues of concern, while 79 percent say that a candidate's position on this conflict is important for their vote. This attitude is shared by both those born in the United States (77 percent) and those who are immigrants (83 percent)— although it is more strongly felt by recent Arab American immigrants, 61 percent of whom say that the Arab-Israeli conflict is the “single most important” issue in determining their vote.

The results from the study show that despite the community's tremendous diversity in country of origin, religion and generation, Arab Americans come together on critical Middle East issues. In regards to specific issues, the table below indicates the community's agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

Table 1: Statements on Arab-Israeli conflict

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Not sure</b>
Independent Palestinian state	87.2	6.6	6.4
Clinton's handling of peace process	68.7	24.1	7.2
U.S. policy biased towards Israel	74.4	16.6	8.9
U.S. policy is evenhanded	46.9	36.6	6.5

U.S. policy shows respect to Islam	63.1	26.0	10.8
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Areas of consensus:

- 87 percent of all Arab Americans agree that there should be a Palestinian state— with a strong consensus existing among all subgroups on this issue.
- Despite misgivings about U.S. policy not being evenhanded and biased in favor of Israel, Arab Americans generally agree with President Clinton’s handling of the peace process by nearly 70 percent.

In regards to other issues also related to the Middle East, Arab Americans also hold strong opinions, with an impressive level of consensus. The table below shows their relative degree of importance of the following Middle East issues:

Table 2: Middle East issue importance

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Not Important</b>	<b>Not sure</b>
Securing the rights of Palestinians	74.1	14.3	8.6	3.0
Sovereignty of Lebanon	80.4	9.7	7.0	2.8
Normalized U.S. relations with Arab countries	83.2	8.0	7.7	1.1
Status of Jerusalem	74.0	13.9	9.3	2.7
Promote human rights in Arab world	87.3	6.4	5.3	1.0

Areas of strong consensus:

- 81 percent support the sovereignty of Lebanon— with immigrants feeling somewhat stronger about this issue than those born in the United States.
- 77 percent support securing Palestinian rights in Jerusalem— with 86 percent of immigrants and 72 percent of those born in the United States holding this view.

- 87 percent of Arab Americans support promoting human rights in Arab countries— with a strong consensus on this matter shared by all sub groups.
- 83 percent support the U.S. normalizing relations with the Arab world— with a strong consensus on this matter shared by all sub groups, especially Palestinian-Americans.

Economic sanctions on Iraq:

Only on the question of lifting economic sanctions on Iraq is there a division among various groups of Arab Americans. Overall, 54 percent support lifting these sanctions while 40 percent do not.

## **VI. OUTLOOK**

The political progress of the Arab American community over the past several elections has been remarkable. Voter registration is up, as is voter turnout. Arab Americans now participate in major fundraising for candidates and parties, further enhancing the role of the community. Furthermore, it is expected that this year, as in the past three presidential elections, over 80 Arab Americans will be elected as delegates and party leaders to both the Democratic and Republican national conventions.

Of equal importance for Arab Americans is the fact that the community is now better recognized as a political constituency. The efforts of Arab Americans over the past few elections have created an awareness of the "Arab American vote." As a result, outreach to the community is on the agenda of both major political parties. Nearly all of this year's major presidential candidates have spoken before Arab American audiences and addressed the concerns of the community.

Perhaps the factor that attests to the greatest potential of the Arab American vote however, is the strategic location of the community across the country. Indeed, the so-called "battleground states" for the 2000 presidential and congressional elections are home to the largest numbers and concentrations of Arab Americans as almost one-third of the community (more than one million) is located in this critical belt of states stretching from Illinois to New Jersey. With current polls showing a close race between Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush, Arab Americans could represent a pivotal voting bloc in several key states of the presidential election.

"If Arab Americans go to the polls in this election in Michigan, Illinois or New Jersey, which are tightly contested battles, they may provide the swing vote in these states", says John Zogby, an independent pollster, himself an Arab American.

Not to be forgotten are this year's congressional elections in which a handful of truly competitive races will likely determine what party controls the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate after November. With concentrations of Arab Americans in a number of these districts, the community is uniquely positioned to play a decisive role in the key races. Indeed, the national Arab American registered voter database shows that Arab American voters are well represented

in 55 congressional districts across the United States, making up between 1.5% and 4.5% of the total voting population.

## **VII. ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> The ZI/AAI study interviewed 501 Arab Americans during January and February of 2000. The poll's margin of error is  $\pm 4.5\%$ .

<sup>2</sup> The ZI/AAI study was part of a much larger examination of the opinions of six major U.S. ethnic groups (African American, Asian American, Hispanic, American Jews, Italian Americans and Arab Americans). Useful comparisons can be made between the attitudes and characteristics of Arab Americans and those of the other groups.