

Arab American Political Participation
With a Focus upon Gender
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I am going to present some findings from the Detroit Arab American Study. This is the most comprehensive, in depth public opinion type study ever done of Arab Americans. We interviewed 1016 persons from the three-county Detroit area. We also did a companion study of 508 people from the general population, asking most of the same questions. Respondents were chosen by scientific sampling techniques. The interviews averaged 80 minutes and were done by trained bilingual interviewers. Many of the questions were drawn from the classics of social research, but others were created to tap unique issues relevant to the community. The Russell Sage Foundation funded the project and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation provided supplementary support. There are seven researchers on the team, myself being one. The DAAS is now in the public domain and is available through the Institute of Social Research. I invite anyone to use it.

There are certain things that a survey can do and certain things it cannot do. It has two particular advantages. First, it has the advantage of breadth. It covers the whole community, not just that part the researcher knows best. Second, it can free us from our preconceptions. When I was a struggling graduate student and having a difficult time with a paper, my professor gave me wise advice: "Let the data speak to you." Numbers do not tell everything, but they tell us something that we cannot learn otherwise. And sometimes they get us away from something we *know* to be true but are not quite sure why we know it except that everybody *says* it is true.

Let me start by asking you to think about the anticipated participation patterns in two very different Arab American communities. The first is primarily an immigrant community with 78% of its adults born overseas. 86% do not speak English in the home and 63% get their news from overseas via satellite dishes. A full half think an Arab or Muslim accused of terrorism could not receive a fair trial in the U.S. Would such a community even participate in American politics?

Now consider a second community. 78% are citizens, 86% say they feel at home in America, 91% say they are proud to be America, and 86% say they have confidence in the local police. Will they not be at the front of very parade?

Of course, the question is a trick. These are not two communities at all but one, reflecting data from the study. If the responses to these questions seem to defy simple answers, then indeed, they defy simple answers.

I have been asked to focus my talk upon gender differences. The approach in my *written* paper is much broader than gender, focusing upon participation patterns in their various dimensions. Anyone who wants the full paper can contact me via email.

The way political scientists analyze public opinion data is to begin with what we know about those people *not* in the study. In other words, what is the national pattern and especially what is the *theory* behind what we have found in the past and expect to find in this case?

What we know about participation in general is that certain types of participation, such as voting, are **linked to position in society**. Those who are educated, wealthy, or

own property are more likely to vote. Level of information is also a major factor, and being a male seems to play a role. Other types of participation, such as involvement in community groups, are not nearly so dependent upon those factors. To an extent, these two types of participation operate independently. Writing to your representative and getting involved in the PTA require very different skills and very different orientations to the political system. *Here is the research question:* What is the pattern of participation in the Arab American community, what drives participation, and do different patterns of participation overlap or operate separately?

A second thing we know is that in an immigrant community **the congregation plays a key role**. Churches and mosques are really religio-ethnic groups, typically drawing from sub-elements of the community. As such they help people engage American society but also empower them to resist those elements of society that treat them unfairly. Research in the Black community is particularly helpful in this regard. The Black community is similar to Arab Americans in that both are somewhat marginalized and both share a strong sense of group identity. The Black churches have traditionally done two things for their members. First, they encouraged positive engagement with society, telling people to vote and organize and participate. Second, they created an “oppositional consciousness,” telling people that their community is treated unfairly and they should try to change that situation. *The research question:* does this same pattern prevail in the Arab American community?

The third thing we know is that **participation patterns by gender** have their own dynamic. Burns et al did the definitive study of this and I have followed their key bit of advice. They said we should not think of men and women as categories but should reconceptualize the question. Male and female participation patterns are not homogeneous but represent two bell shaped curves whose means do not overlap. In other words, there are a range of male participation patterns and a range of female participation patterns, with men generally more involved than women, but with both exhibiting high and low patterns. We have been told that Arabs have a patriarchal society in which women are inhibited in their pursuit of the public arena. Our president has told us that the American armies in Iraq and Afghanistan are acting partially to promote women’s rights. *Here is the research question:* Do Arab American gender patterns follow the national pattern or is there a distinct “Arab” pattern?

What did I find? There are four major findings.

First, Arab Americans have a definite participation deficit compared with the general population. The first two columns of Table 1 show this. Whether it is voting, following the news, having a party preference, or being involved in the PTA, Arabs are less engaged than the general public.

Second, when we look at how different types of participation are related, we see confirmation of the national pattern of a disconnect. In Table 2, voting is highly correlated with signing a petition, sending money to a political cause, or writing to an official. There is also a class interest pattern. We asked whether respondents were involved in any ‘business or professional group.’ That could involve everything from shopkeepers to attorneys to import-export firms. Whatever it means, it empowers and changes other relationships. Those active in such associations are active at high levels in almost every other area.

Look now at Table 3, looking at the political act of voting and the locally-oriented act of being involved in the PTA. Here the expected pattern appears very clearly. Income, education and business ownership correlate highly with whether one voted, but much less with PTA involvement. In three areas (information, own a business, trust people) the pattern runs in the same direction for both men and women. But these traits are much stronger in pushing voting than in pushing PTA involvement. Being married, living in the Dearborn “enclave” (where 2/3 of all Muslims live, and few Christians), and being female sustain PTA activities. Clearly these two types of activities call upon different resources and different types of people.

Third, what role does religious activity play in political involvement? There is a term that academics use called social capital. It involves those things that make us stronger citizens. It involves self-confidence, trust in society, commitment, engagement. It has two dimensions, which Putnam calls bonding and bridging. Bonding pulls together homogeneous populations around their shared identity. Bridging pulls together diverse populations in common purposes. If bonding leads to bridging, then society benefits. But what Putnam calls “the dark side of social capital” occurs when bonding becomes less integrative than separatist. *Here is the research question*: does religious involvement lead to wider social engagement or to separatism?

Table 4 offers some answers, with comparison to the general population. Clearly, religious institutions push individuals into the political and public arena. Religiously active individuals are more involved overall and more likely to be participants in the political arena. They are more likely to feel a part of the country and to affirm what is often called the “civic religion,” the belief that this is a land that should generate pride. They are also more likely to have doubts about the fairness of the legal system, to resist any restrictions on civil liberties, and to feel that there is a hostile environment in which Arab Americans are not fully respected. These numbers show in combination that Arab religious organizations tend to generate social capital that involves *both* bonding and bridging. To a lesser extent they promote both an oppositional consciousness and support for the civic religion. In other words, Arabs fit the pattern very nicely.

Finally, what do we find about gender? Table 1, columns 4 and 5, shows that men and women are remarkably similar in many ways. I call this *A Pattern of Minimal Differences*. They are similar in whether they are citizens, are fluent in English, watch television news, read an Arabic newspaper, perceive that the media is unfriendly, and follow the war on terror. They are equally likely to feel at home in America, to identify with the country, and to feel this is a land of equal opportunity. They have similar partisan identifications and similar ideological orientations. In an unpublished analysis of gender experiences and perspective in the aftermath of September 11, I found a remarkable absence of differences in this significant area. Men and women were within a few percentage points of each other in terms of whether they had a bad experience after September 11 (15%) or whether they had a supportive experience (34%). Regarding the “security mom” hypothesis, that women were more worried about safety than men, there is some support, but mixed. Women were 7% more likely to say September 11 had shaken their sense of security and 11% more likely to say the Iraq War had shaken their sense of security. Still, men and women were nearly identical in their willingness to compromise on civil liberties to enhance security. Women and men both have high levels

of confidence in local institutions such as the police, the schools and the legal system, and were equally trusting of people in general.

Just for your interest, on cultural issues, women and men were again very similar. Women were 19% more likely to say that premarital sex was never justified (59% to 78%) and slightly more likely to say that women should dress modestly, but were otherwise similar to men on topics including gambling, abortion and alcohol use.

The big gender divergence, and it is big, involves those resources that drive participation. Women are 30% less likely to work outside of the home, and 9% less likely to have a college degree. They are in serious deficit in media consumption. They are significantly less likely to read a daily newspaper or get news from the internet. They were 27% less likely to know the name of Attorney General Ashcroft and 16% less likely to know the majority party. To be honest, these findings are not surprising. Burns et al found that men were 14% more likely to know the name of their Senator than women. While we should not over generalize, the expectation that men are more likely than women to have a public life appears to have support in this data.

But the question remains: What drives participation by gender? Table 5 shows what drives men and women into the voting booth. Let me give you some missing numbers to write onto that table.

	M	F
Education	.318	.324
Income	.410	.259
Read newspapers	.331	.329
Identify major party	.222	.240
Working	.082	.064
English fluency	.264	.362

The patterns are remarkably similar and track national trends. Being possessed of critical political resources--education, income, information—pushes involvement. All patterns are highly significant at the .000 level *except* work outside the home, which is not significant for either gender. Male voting appears to be more influenced by income level, female voting more by English fluency, but otherwise these are similar stories. Anyone looking for an “Arab effect” in this data will have to look long and hard to find it. Arab Americans are different from the general population in their statistical means, just as men are different from women in *their* statistical means. But by and large, what drives anyone away from those means, into higher participation rates or into lower participation rates, is very similar for all population groups analyzed in this paper.

If you are looking for a headline to summarize these finding, I suggest the following: Arab-Americans: History different, situation different, participation patterns boringly normal.

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