

Ontario imams urging Muslims to vote in federal election

Group called Canadian Muslim Vote hoping to break cycle of low turnout

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Published on: April 3, 2015

On Good Friday — one of the most-attended Friday prayer services of the year — 21 mosques around Toronto will call on their voting-age congregants to cast ballots in the upcoming federal election.

It's an initiative being coordinated by [Canadian Muslim Vote](#), a new, non-partisan group that aims to break the cycle of poor Muslim voter turnout in Canada, and is being spearheaded by a group of young professionals in the Toronto-area.

Fatima Sajan is one of them. She says it's especially important that Canadian Muslims make their voices heard in this year's election, which is scheduled to take place on Oct. 19.

The group argues that most politicians do little to engage Muslims in Canada because their low voter turnout has had little impact at the polls. "And as the public conversation increasingly excludes or marginalizes Canadian-Muslims, their turnout declines further," the group's website says.

Canada is home to some one million Muslims, yet, as a group, they have had one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the country, according to a 2007 Elections Canada working paper.

Meanwhile, Statistics Canada estimates that 1 in 10 Canadians will identify as Muslim by 2030, meaning Muslims stand to become one of the largest voting bases nationally.

Voter clout

Of course, Canadian Muslims don't vote as a united front.

According to an Ipsos Reid exit poll from the 2011 election, 12 per cent of Muslims who voted supported the Conservative party, while 46 per cent voted Liberal, and another 38 per cent voted NDP.

That doesn't bother Sajan. "Our goal is that all eligible Canadian Muslims vote, period," she says.

Nevertheless, higher Muslim voter turnout could make a significant difference not only in ridings with high Muslim populations such as Don Valley East and Mississauga Centre, but also in key ridings in Calgary and Edmonton, according to former Liberal MP Omar Alhabra.

"I lost an election by 300 votes," says Alhabra, who represented the federal riding of Mississauga-Erindale from 2006-08. "I know from experience that every vote counts."

According to Statistics Canada, Muslims comprise between 12 and 19 per cent of the populations in 19 federal ridings, 11 in Ontario, six in Quebec and two in Alberta.

Mohammed Ayub Khan, a political science researcher at McMaster University, says one of the reasons that Muslims haven't been very active at the polls historically is that they haven't felt especially connected with the issues highlighted by parties.

Another reason may be the apparent rise in Islamophobia in recent years, which has left many Muslim Canadians feeling alienated and unengaged in the political process, says University of Toronto political science professor Katherine Bullock.

For his part, Khan says this year may be different. "2015 may well serve as the watershed event in Canadian Muslim political history" because of the intense focus surrounding Bill C-51 and things like the niqab debate, he says.

"It has really galvanized the various Muslim communities to start a conversation around the issue and consider their options."

Bullock agrees, and Canadian Muslim Vote hopes to seize on that interest and expand its presence in other cities after this year's election, translating its campaign materials into different languages to reach as wide a group as possible.

Friday's launch will see imams from Ajax all the way to Kitchener touting the importance of civic engagement and calling Canada home.

Good Friday is not a religious holiday for Islam, but the fact that it is a legal holiday in Canada and elsewhere has made it one of the biggest family prayer days on the Muslim calendar.

And the fact that imams are taking up the voting challenge could have some effect.

Jane Hilderman, research director for Samara Canada, the non-partisan group that aims to improve democracy, says people often see fellow community members and leaders as more trustworthy than parties and public officials when it comes to politics.



Hearing about the importance of voting from mosque leaders directly will go a long way in creating a conversation about politics that starts well before election day and continues long after it, she suggests.

"In our minds, that would be a real win."