Chapter 4
Voices of Muslim Women Politicians in America:
The Use of Social Media Platforms to Tell Their Story

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the ways that Muslim Women politicians use social media to shape their public image. Though growing in number there is limited representation of Muslims across various political offices, and fewer women than men in elected positions. The usage of social media to create a narrative as part of running for office, reaching wider and diverse audiences, has become an important part of political campaigning in the United States. In the post 9/11 era, it is important to examine and understand how Muslim women in politics craft their own narratives that American voters identify with and support. Case studies of eight Muslim women politicians who have a large presence of social media platforms, especially Facebook, are analyzed. The authors discuss the major themes that emerge in how the women frame themselves and position their role as elected officials. The chapter focuses on U.S. elected Muslim women who were born in the Middle East, Africa, or South Asia, immigrated to the United States and have successfully been elected to public office.

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INTRODUCTION

The Muslim American community is incredibly diverse with a lengthy and varied history in the United States. The first Muslim presence traces its origins to the arrival of slave ships bringing West Africans to the Carolinas (Gomez, 1994; Kepel, 1997). Shortly after the introduction of Islam to the United States through African slaves, Muslim immigrants arrived voluntarily from several Near Eastern and Central Asian countries (Nyang, 1999). By 1914, Muslims from at least 60 different countries had arrived in America prior to the immigration restrictions placed during World War 1 (Wormser, 2002). By the time of the Cold War, the number of Muslim immigrants to the United States continued to grow, often as a result of communist takeovers of Muslim areas. In the 1940s through the 1960s, more Muslim immigrants arrived from countries such as Palestine, the former Yugoslavia, Lebanon, and Egypt (Wormser, 2002; Nyang, 1999). From the 1960s to the 1980s Muslim immigrants had mostly been students and professionals from all over the world, mostly from South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa including those forcibly displaced by war. This included large numbers of Somalian, Cambodian and Vietnamese Muslims, Iraqis, Bosnian Muslims, and Afghan refugees (Muhammad, 2001; Couglan & Owens-Manley, 2005). Ongoing global conflicts continue to fuel waves of Muslim immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Patterns of Muslim migration to the United States in recent decades reflects larger global issues. The majority of Muslims coming in the most recent waves of immigration are fleeing conflict areas. Prior waves were a mixture of Muslims seeking better economic opportunities, education, and leaving conflict zones. For the Muslim immigrant women highlighted in this chapter, we see a mixture of these reasons as to why they or their parents chose to leave their countries of origin. Their lived experiences as immigrants and refugees uniquely shape their perspective on political involvement and civil service. The mixture of refugees, immigrants, Muslim converts, and native-born Muslims contributes to a uniquely American brand of Islam shaped by interactions between Muslims from varied cultural backgrounds, converts to Islam, and unique lived experiences as religious minorities.

The Muslim population is estimated to be around 4 and half million as of the 2020 Census and the community continues to grow in both urban and rural areas. Mosques, Islamic schools, and other community centers have been formed in nearly every community with a significant Muslim population (Pew Research Center, 2017). Only around half of Muslim Americans are foreign-born. For foreign-born Muslims, around 35% are from South Asia, 25% from the Middle East or North Africa, 23% from other parts of Asia or the Pacific, 9% from sub-Saharan Africa, and 4% each from Europe and the Americas (excluding the U.S.) (Pew Research Center, 2017). Many Muslim Americans only speak English and have not traveled to