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Wednesday, October 29, 2008 04:43 GMT

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U.S.: Arab Americans Stoke Strong Minority Support for Obama

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WASHINGTON, Oct 28 (IPS) - With only one week left before the Nov. 4 presidential elections, Arab Americans have sharply increased their support for the Democratic candidate, Sen. Barack Obama, according to a poll released here Tuesday by the Arab American Institute (AAI).

The poll, which was conducted for AAI by Zogby International, found that Obama is leading his Republican rival, Sen. John McCain, by a three-to-one margin among Arab American voters, in both the two-way match-up and in a contest involving two minor-party candidates, including a prominent Lebanese American and past presidential candidate, consumer advocate Ralph Nader.

In a two-man contest, Obama currently leads among Arab Americans by 41 percent points -- or 64 to 23 percent. As recently as September, the margin was only 20 points, with Obama leading 55 to 35 percent.

"This is, by far, the most substantial lead any presidential candidate has ever held over his opponent among Arab American voters," said AAI president James Zogby, whose pollster brother, John, heads Zogby International. He noted that Obama holds an overwhelming lead -- well over 80 percent -- among Muslim Arab Americans and those between the ages of 18 and 29.

Obama, according to the nationwide survey of more than 500 respondents, also claims the support of a majority among Catholic and Orthodox Christian Arab Americans who together make up a majority of the 3.5 million citizens with Arab ancestry in the United States -- or slightly over one percent of the total U.S. population.

If the poll's findings hold up on election day, Arab Americans, like other ethnic minorities, will add yet another component to what is becoming a multi-ethnic and multi-racial coalition that most polls predict will deliver the White House to Obama.

Among all voters, Obama is currently running about seven percentage points ahead of McCain at slightly over 50 percent, according to recent polls. But virtually all of McCain's support lies with non-Hispanic Protestant and Catholic voters, according to the most recent survey by the Pew Centre for the People and the Press.

African Americans are expected to vote for Obama, who is biracial, in percentages exceeding 90 percent, according to Pew and other polls. Meanwhile, at least two-thirds, and according to some estimates, more than 70 percent of the country's largest and fastest-growing minority, Hispanics, have also moved into Obama's column.

Obama was also leading by a two-to-one margin among Asian-American voters, according to a poll by the National Asian American Survey released earlier this month, while three out of four Jewish Americans have also swung behind Obama, according to Gallup poll released last week, despite a heavily funded effort by the right-wing Republican Jewish coalition to persuade that community that the Democratic candidate posed a threat to continued U.S. support for Israel.

Like their Jewish-American counterparts, who make up about three percent of the electorate in most elections, Arab-American voters tend to turn out in disproportionate numbers and are also concentrated in key "swing" states that could well determine the final results.

Indeed, despite their relatively small number, Arab-American voters make up between 1.5 and two percent of the voters in four critical "swing" states -- Virginia, Ohio, Florida, and Pennsylvania. They also make up five percent of voters in Michigan which was considered a major battleground state until last month when McCain virtually conceded it to Obama.

With a population of at least 3.5 million, some two million Arab Americans are expected to vote next week.

Historically, Arab Americans have tended to vote somewhat more Democratic than Republican, although there has been considerable variation among specific sectarian groups.

The high-water mark for Republicans came in 2000. In advance of the presidential elections that year, 38 percent of Arab Americans participating in the 2000 AAI poll said they considered themselves Republican, compared to 40 percent who declared themselves Democrats.

In that election, 44 percent of Arab Americans voted for George W. Bush, while only 38 percent voted for then-Vice President Al Gore. Thirteen percent voted for Nader. Four years later and disillusioned with the Bush's "global war on terror", including the Iraq invasion, Arab American voters switched their loyalties with only 28 percent voting for Bush, while 63 percent cast their ballots for his Democratic challenger, Sen. John Kerry, and eight percent for Nader.

Party identification has also changed to the detriment of Republicans. Fifty-four percent of respondents told

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Zogby's interviewers they considered themselves Democrats -- twice as many as those who said they were Republican.

The poll found that jobs and the economy were by far the most important issue for Arab Americans, as it has been for other voters this year, with nearly 80 percent of respondents naming that issue as one of their top two concerns. Nearly 40 percent cited the Iraq war or related issues.

Among those who cited the economy, 69 percent said they favoured Obama, and 23 percent said the favoured McCain.

In a four-man race, that also included the two minor-party candidates, the poll found that Obama would receive 62 percent of the vote; McCain, 22 percent; Nader, six percent; and former Rep. Bob Barr, the Libertarian candidate, one percent.

In a teleconference with reporters, Zogby said that Sen. Obama has tried to reach out to the Arab American community and has even hired Arab staff in battleground states, notably Michigan and Ohio.

Still, the Obama campaign has had some hiccups in courting the Arab American community, particularly its Muslim members who make up roughly one-fourth of its total population. In August, its liaison to the Arab and Muslim community, Mazen Asbahi, resigned after it was disclosed that he had served on a board of a Muslim investment fund that also included a controversial imam.

His successor, Minha Husaini, was also publicly criticised by the campaign for attending a meeting in September in which two organisations, the Muslim American Society and the Council of American-Islamic Relations, which right-wing groups claim have radical agendas, also took part.

In one incident last June, two Muslim women with headscarves at an Obama rally in Detroit were barred by campaign from sitting behind the podium during a rally, apparently for fear of being photographed behind the candidate. The campaign subsequently apologised.

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