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Muslim's win in Minn. seen as step for community

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By **Andrea Stone, USA TODAY**

WASHINGTON — The Minnesota Democrat who is likely to become the first Muslim elected to Congress says he wants to "promote the idea that America needs friends around the world, not more enemies."

Keith Ellison, an African-American state legislator from Minneapolis, won Tuesday's Democratic primary to replace Rep. Martin Olav Sabo. The son of Norwegian immigrants is retiring after 28 years in the House of Representatives. Ellison beat three other Democrats, including Sabo's former chief of staff and ex-party chairman, Mike Erlandson.

Although Ellison will face Republican business consultant Alan Fine in November, his election is all but guaranteed, says University of Minnesota political scientist Larry Jacobs. In 2004, 71% of the district's voters backed Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. Minnesota's most ethnically diverse district is home to veiled Somali women, Russian Jewish immigrants and Hmong refugees, belying the state's image as a homogeneous Scandinavian enclave.

Ellison's victory marks a turning point for American Muslims, according to community leaders such as Ali Khan of the American Muslim Council.

"It says, 'Look, you are part of America,' " says Khan, who notes that until recently the diverse community was "not very organized" or interested in electoral politics.

Estimates of the number of U.S. Muslims vary between 2 million and 6 million. The Council on American-Islamic Relations says about a third are black and another third are from South Asia. One in four are of Arab descent and the rest from Africa and elsewhere.

Ellison, 43, was raised Catholic in Detroit and converted to Islam as a 19-year-old student at Wayne State University before moving to Minnesota for law school.

Islam "makes a lot of sense to me. It works for me," Ellison said in a phone interview Wednesday.

A criminal defense lawyer, he called for an immediate troop withdrawal from Iraq, universal health care and the impeachment of President Bush. Such stands and his passionate oratory recall Paul Wellstone, the Minnesota senator killed in a plane crash in 2002, says Jacobs, although he calls Ellison "pragmatic and someone who can work with others. He won't be what people expect."

Ellison says he never brought up his religion or his race — he would be Minnesota's first black member of Congress — during the campaign. Voters did, however, ask about his position, as a Muslim, on Israel, the separation of church and state, abortion rights and gay rights. He says he supports them all.

Ellison had a tougher time explaining revelations about late campaign-finance reports, unpaid parking tickets and a suspended driver's license. More controversial were his ties to Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. Ellison worked with his group as an organizer of 1995's Million Man March.

Ellison is "a uniquely polarizing figure the likes of which we've never seen in this state," Minnesota GOP spokesman Mark Drake says.

Jacobs says the Democrat ran an effective grass-roots effort of direct mail and door-knocking but at times, "It had the smell of a campaign about to collapse."

Ellison, a married father of four, responded by visiting synagogues and apologizing for past statements. He said he never met Farrakhan and repudiated his own defense of the Muslim leader, who has been accused of anti-Semitism by the Anti-Defamation League.

"I take responsibility for the mistakes I made," Ellison says.

The Democrat's apology convinced a Minneapolis Jewish newspaper, which endorsed him.

Pollster John Zogby, a Lebanese-American, says Ellison's victory is a win for an eclectic group that ranges from Pakistani immigrants to native-born blacks.

"American Muslims are now a political constituency," he says, "not just simply a growing group."

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