

Arab American voters could play important role in key swing states

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There are large communities in Michigan and Minnesota.

In the hotly contested 2020 presidential election, Arab Americans could play an important role in two swing states where they make up large communities.

While there is a lack of reliable polling data on Arab Americans, the numbers of Arab Americans in the battleground states of Michigan -- 200,000 -- and Minnesota - over 100,000 -- are high enough that they have become a powerful voting bloc that experts say is likely to benefit Joe Biden.

"I think it's safe to say that in this election cycle, the level of interest and the level of participation in the community is going to be, in my opinion, near 100 percent," said Kassem Dakhllallah, an Arab American lawyer who lives in a suburb of Detroit. "I think a lot of people are excited to just get [Trump] out of office."

Abdalla M. Battah, associate professor of political science at Minnesota State University and an expert in Middle Eastern politics, told ABC News he thinks a lot of the enthusiasm is tied to Trump's stance toward Arab Americans during his first term.

"Trump, the first time, was given the benefit of doubt by the 26% of Arab Americans who voted for him; however, he did not moderate his rhetoric or jettison his racist ideas. This will benefit Biden," he said.

On Wednesday, Biden participated in a virtual "Muslims Making Change: National Honors" event and pledged to end the president's Muslim ban on "day one."

"Muslim American voices matter to our community and to our country," he said. "I know you haven't always gotten the respect or representation you deserve. We've seen what happens when a president fans the flames -- hate crimes on the march, more kids bullied in school, the rise of anti-Muslim bigotry. This is not who we are."

Endeavors such as 'Yalla Vote!', a national initiative of the Arab American Institute to register Arab Americans to vote, and National Arab American Voter Registration Day, when, in early October, local community groups held in-person events and virtual panels to encourage Arab Americans to participate in the electoral process, have mobilized the community.

Although some Arab Americans did vote for Trump in 2016, some of the president's pro-Israel policies, with the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, in particular, have to a large extent eroded support, according to Youssef Chouhoud, Christopher Newport

University professor of political science.

"Conservatively, I am comfortable saying that a majority of Arab Americans will vote for Biden, although by how large a percentage is difficult to say," he said.

A 2019 American Community Survey, an annual survey of the population by the Census Bureau, estimated there were over 2 million Arab Americans in the country. However, the nonprofit Arab American Institute estimates that 3.7 million is a more accurate number.

In Michigan, the large majority of the 200,000 Arab Americans live in the Detroit area and in the largely Arab American city of Dearborn, in Wayne County. A Democratic statewide win depends on a massive majority from Wayne County, according to the Arab American Institute. In 2016, Trump won Michigan by fewer than 11,000 votes out of nearly 4.8 million.

In Minnesota, the Census Bureau estimates the statewide Arab American population is close to 108,553. The North Star state has been increasingly seen as a potential swing state following Trump's narrow loss there in 2016 to Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, who won Minnesota by about 44,500 votes or 1.5%.

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Of course, there is no monolithic Arab American political voting bloc in the U.S.

Arab American communities are focused on various social and economic issues that affect them, Devin Bathish, executive director of the Arab American Heritage Council in Flint, Michigan, told ABC News. They are concerned with health care, social security, education and the economy.

For some, he says, issues of surveillance, discrimination and racism loom particularly large. Others tend to be "one-issue people," with foreign policy related to one's ancestral homeland playing an important part in who they support for office.

"The Arab-American community is very diverse," said Amer Zahr, an adjunct professor at University of Detroit Mercy School of Law and formerly a national surrogate for Bernie Sanders 2020, during an interview with Michigan Radio. "We should be careful not to conflate the terms 'Arab' and 'Muslim.' Half of the Arab American community in America is Christian. And remember, most Muslims in America are not Arab."

Many of the traditionalist values espoused by Republicans, that is a "conservative understanding of social issues," are shared by conservative Arab Americans, whether they are Christian or Muslim, Waleed F. Mahdi, assistant professor of US-Arab cultural politics international at the University of Oklahoma, told ABC news. In fact, particularly among those who are Muslim, two major social issues -- abortion and gay marriage -- are especially relevant to their political leanings.

"The Democrats are completely for those. Therefore, freedom to practice any kind of marriage that you want, for the woman to have the pro-choice... those are against our Muslim beliefs," said Trump supporter Abdullatif Aljahmi, a tax preparer from Dearborn, Michigan.

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But the attacks on 9/11, and the subsequent backlash experienced by the Arab American community, with "racialized forms of exclusion, and justice...years of racial profiling, and sometimes institutionalized laws like [Trump's] Muslim ban," has eroded support for the GOP, said Mahdi, and has led to a "recalibration" of Arab Americans' priorities. Many are demanding acknowledgment of the fact that they are first and foremost American citizens.

Trump's "systematic ways of excluding many voices in these communities," has reinforced the "constant sense of alienation that many Arab Americans feel," and has further exacerbated the community's dissociation with the Republican party, according to Mahdi.

The president has a history of inflammatory comments and actions against Muslims. In his first week in office, he instituted a ban on visitors from predominantly Muslim countries. Although at first blocked by a federal court, an amended version of the ban was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2018. During a NBC interview in 2015, he said he would "implement" a database to track Muslims, and in January 2020, he also retweeted a doctored picture of Democrats Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi wearing traditional Muslim attire and standing before Iranian flag.

Some Arab Americans have been turned off from the GOP in recent decades, and many have embraced one of the most left-leaning political figures there is.

Prior to Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) dropping out of the 2016 presidential race, he had won the support of several Arab American organizations, including American Arab and Muslim Political Action Committee, Arab American Political Action Committee and a coalition of Palestinian-American organizations.

Many Arab American voters supported his candidacy, attracted not only to his populist message, but also, in part, because of his sympathetic view of the Palestinian cause and his promise, if elected, to pressure Israel to cease settlement expansions in the West Bank, according to Bathish.

Sanders spoke of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in a non-"derogatory, stereotypical, or racist" fashion, but rather "in a way that was humane. I think it motivated a lot of people to come out and support Bernie," he said.

In 2016, Sanders won the city of Dearborn, with its population of about 40% Arab American residents, by 20 points over Hillary Clinton, giving his 2016 campaign a second life. And although it is hard to accurately assess the specific impact of Arab American voters on

Sanders' primary victory in Michigan, Isra Daraiseh, of the National Network of Arab American Communities, believes that the Arab American voting bloc was a deciding factor," with the turnout "extremely high."

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Battah, the Minnesota State University professor, said he believes that Biden's message will resonate, "if only because of the widespread resentment in the community regarding Trump's policies at home and abroad. Trump's racism and Islamophobia are at the heart of his strategy to win."

The Biden campaign has introduced a plan for the Arab American community, in which he recognizes the contributions of Arab Americans, commits to fight "anti-Arab bigotry," and to include Arab Americans in his administration.

Still, "don't be surprised to see Arab Americans come out and express their support for Trump," Mahdi said.

Those who do, he said, are likely to back the president because of their commitment to conservative social values and, for more well-to-do families, because they believe the economy will fare better under Republicans and that they will benefit from lower taxes.

Dima Atiya, a Michigan native who is Arab American, told ABC News that while she sees more enthusiasm from the Arab American community for getting Trump out of office this election cycle, she hopes all Arab Americans will make their voices heard.

"I really just hope that people turn out to vote. I think that Arab Americans don't realize that there's a lot of us, and we have a powerful voice if we're willing to use it."