

Arab and Muslim leaders in Michigan cancel meeting with Biden campaign

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Detroit, January 30 (RHC)-- Arab and Muslim voters and community leaders in the U.S. state of Michigan have rejected a listening session with President Joe Biden's campaign, amid frustrations that the White House has taken their votes for granted as it continues to support the Israeli assault on Gaza.

Members of the Biden campaign reached out to local leaders in the metro Detroit area -- home to the country's largest Arabic-speaking population -- to set up a meeting with Arab and Muslim community members so they could discuss voter concerns, mainly the war in Gaza, according to organizers.

Some Arab and Muslim leaders initially hoped to use the meeting, set at an undisclosed location, for participants to voice their misgivings about the White House's support for Israel's offensive, which has been ongoing since October 7th. They were also concerned about the president's recent comments

dismissing vows by Arabs and Muslims to not vote for him.

But the plans were derailed after many members of Arab and Muslim communities hesitated or refused entirely to consider such a meeting, several Michigan residents told HuffPost.

Assad Turfe, the deputy county executive director for Wayne County — the most populous county in Michigan — told HuffPost that the campaign had reached out to him about the listening session. The meeting was supposed to bring together Biden campaign manager Julie Chávez Rodríguez and 10-15 Arab American elected officials and representatives from large community organizations, Turfe said.

Turfe said that he aimed to use the meeting to showcase the potential for significant Arab and Muslim voter turnout — and how dangerous it would be to depress those votes.

“They really and truly don’t have a grasp and understanding on the situation on the ground and the situation on the ground in the Arab American community,” said Turfe, referring to the Biden campaign. “The idea of the meeting was to lay the foundation to let them know they are in bigger trouble than the calculations that they have made.”

But when Turfe, alongside Lexi Zeidan, a Palestinian American activist, began to make calls to local leaders, members of Arab and Muslim communities made their decisions clear: They didn’t want to engage with the campaign, and they had no plans to vote for Biden.

Ultimately Turfe decided to cancel the meeting, saying it was in the “community’s best interest.”

A source familiar with the campaign’s plans told HuffPost that Rodríguez was in the area to speak with a number of leaders — including local elected officials and leaders from Michigan’s Arab and Palestinian American, Hispanic, and Black communities — and those meetings have been in the works for weeks.

These would be among several similar meetings between core constituency groups and campaign staffers in key battleground states since last fall, the source added.

For the past few months, Arab and Muslim voters across the country have voiced their frustration with the White House, pledging not to vote for Biden. Several organizers from battleground states launched their own campaign, #AbandonBiden, to urge voters to reject him.

In Michigan, those calls have manifested into anger ahead of the state primary, which is set for next month, and the November election.

In 2020, Biden won Michigan by 154,000 votes in the general election against then-President Donald Trump. Over 200,000 registered voters there are Muslim, while 300,000 trace their ancestry back to the Middle East and North Africa. Voters in largely Arab American counties went for Biden by around 70%.

But Muslim and Arab support for Biden has plummeted since then. Two-thirds of Arab and Muslim Democrats in the state said that they plan to vote against Biden, according to a poll released late last year.

Abdullah Hammoud, the mayor of Dearborn, a suburb of Detroit with one of the highest percentages of Arab Americans among U.S. cities, tweeted that he was also invited to attend the meeting.

“Community engagement is powerful when it is used to shape policies that save lives - these conversations must be had with policy-makers, not campaign staff,” he wrote. “I will not entertain conversations about elections while we watch a live-streamed genocide backed by our government.”

Members of Arab and Muslim communities said that by canceling the meeting, they hope to send a larger message to the White House. “It was an opportunity and a formal capacity to let the Democratic Party

know that what they have feared for their entire life has become a reality, which is that Arab Americans have now become both a knight and a queen in their chess game of politics,” said Zeidan.

“Biden, you’re losing Michigan whether you like it or not. And it’s because us Arab and Muslim voters have organized and mobilized to ensure that you don’t win this the state come election time in November.”

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