

Minnesota's uncommitted vote spells trouble for Biden's re-election bid



Minneapolis, March 6 (RHC)-- The concept behind the Michigan protest was simple: Cast a vote for the “uncommitted” option in the Democratic primary, instead of supporting United States President Joe Biden. But the backlash at the ballot box has since become a national movement, with key races in the Super Tuesday primaries revealing strong showings for “uncommitted” voters in other states too.

The idea, activists say, is to send a message that Democratic voters will not tolerate Biden's unequivocal support for Israel's war in Gaza. And that message appears to be gaining steam.

Last week, over 101,000 Michigan residents cast "uncommitted" ballots in the Democratic primary, for around 13 percent of the vote. This week, on Super Tuesday, Minnesota saw nearly 19 percent of its primary votes go to the "uncommitted" category — an even higher ratio of voters, despite the last-minute nature of the state's protest.

That comes on top of similar efforts in Super Tuesday states like North Carolina and Massachusetts to rebuke Biden at the ballot box. The results mean that 11 Minnesota delegates, alongside two from Michigan, will represent the protest at the Democratic National Convention in August.

But the numbers alone do not tell the whole story, according to Arshad Hasan, a Democratic strategist. He explained that the best indicator of the movement's growing power is in the type of voters who selected "uncommitted."

They large comprise a broad coalition of both Arab and Muslim Americans – overlapping but diverse groups – as well as other racial minorities and progressives. "The issue is all of these people comprise the activist class within the Democratic Party," Hasan told Al Jazeera. That "class" acts as a driving force to motivate others to vote: "Those activists are needed to mobilise all of their networks and their communities."

"It matters that this is actually an organised movement in some states and not just random," he said. "That means these are people who move people. And Biden needs people who move people among his base."

Biden is facing tough reelection prospects: A March poll from the New York Times and Siena College found the Democratic president trailing his Republican adversary Donald Trump, 43 to 48 percent.

Experts say he needs every vote he can muster in key battlegrounds like Michigan and Minnesota, where races can come down to narrow margins.

That makes Super Tuesday's results all the more striking. Asma Mohammed, the lead organiser for the "uncommitted" campaign in Minnesota, said the effort surpassed expectations despite few resources and a limited time frame. She told Al Jazeera the effort had just \$20,000 to reach voters. "We had eight days and a few really passionate people," she explained. "And I think a few passionate people made a lot of difference."

While organizers had set their sights on attracting 5,000 "uncommitted" votes, they received nine times that number: Over 45,000 voters cast uncommitted ballots on Tuesday.

Smaller margins have decided recent presidential races in states like Michigan and Minnesota. Under different circumstances, Mohammed added, those voters could be mobilised in Biden's favour.

But Mohammed said she refuses to back a president who supports Israel's war, which has elicited fears of genocide and famine in the Gaza Strip. More than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed so far, though Biden has downplayed those numbers. "As someone who has organized Democrats for the better part of my adult life, it makes my job harder when the president uses genocidal rhetoric," she said.

Mohammed said she too was buoyed by the diversity of voters backing the protest vote. The number of "uncommitted" voters in Minnesota far outpaced the proportion of Muslim residents in the state — which hovers around one percent.

The largest number of "uncommitted" votes came from the Minneapolis area, which has a large Somali American population. But Mohammed pointed out that predominantly white areas also expressed robust support for the "uncommitted" movement.

Northern St Louis County, for instance, is 92 percent white and saw 15 percent of Democratic primary votes go to “uncommitted.” “This is a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural, multifaith coalition of people who are saying: ‘We do not want to be funding a genocide,’” Mohammed said. “And we want our president to listen now.”

The Super Tuesday results were applauded in the nearby state of Michigan, another key battleground in the presidential race. The state is often credited as the birthplace of the 2024 protest vote.

Abdullah Hammoud, the mayor of Dearborn, Michigan, celebrated the Super Tuesday tallies on social media. “The pro peace/pro justice/pro democracy movement is growing and making waves,” he wrote. He pointed not only to the Minnesota results but also to high margins in states like North Carolina, where 12 percent of voters selected “no preference”. Massachusetts, meanwhile, had more than nine percent of its Democratic primary voters pick “uncommitted”.

But many in Michigan were hesitant to pin their hopes on outside races. February’s Michigan primary, they argued, offered a unique opportunity, given the state’s large Arab and Muslim populations and strong history of political organising.

Speaking during an online forum shortly after Michigan’s vote, former congressional staffer Abbas Alawieh warned against the narrative that a lacklustre performance in future races might discredit the “uncommitted” movement. “We need to keep the focus on Michigan, because the effort here was unique and because Michigan is a key state that Biden needs to continue paying attention to,” Alawieh said.

A leader in the Listen to Michigan movement — one of the organisations behind the state’s “uncommitted” vote — he predicted members of the media would say, “This uncommitted thing picked up steam in Michigan but then lost steam in Minnesota and lost steam in Washington.”

But the Super Tuesday races quickly dispelled fears that the “uncommitted” movement would fall into irrelevancy. Hassan Abdel Salam, a professor who studies Islamic law and human rights at the University of Minnesota, attended an election-night watch party in Minneapolis, one of the state’s largest cities. A supporter of the “uncommitted” cause, he described the mood as “electric”.

“It definitely exceeded my expectations, despite the fact that I’ve been working on this,” Abdel Salam said. “I didn’t know that we would be able to basically cut into the Democratic base in such a significant way.”

Abdel Salam is also among the leaders of the Abandon Biden campaign, a movement that goes one step further than the “uncommitted” protest. Its members not only refuse to support Biden in the primaries but also in the general elections. He told Al Jazeera that the group’s leaders were still discussing who to endorse in the general election, but it would almost certainly be a third-party candidate.

Minnesota labour organiser and “uncommitted” voter Ben Caswell, meanwhile, said that Biden still had a path to earn back his vote, provided he change his approach to Israel’s war. “My vote’s still winnable. I think Trump’s an actual worst-case scenario for the country,” he told Al Jazeera.

“Biden, if he was not supporting a genocide right now, I think that it would be a pretty easy sell for me to vote for him. I just have lost so much faith in him and in the Democratic Party,” Caswell continued. “I think there are a lot of winnable votes if he changes course, and I hope to God that he does.”

Hasan, the Democratic strategist, agrees that Biden can still bring back some of the supporters he lost to the “uncommitted” movement. But that support hinges on a complete ceasefire in Gaza.

Speaking to the New York Times following the Super Tuesday primaries, Biden campaign spokesman Lauren Hitt sought to reassure voters in Minnesota and elsewhere. Biden, she said, “shares the goal for an end to the violence and a just, lasting peace in the Middle East. He’s working tirelessly to that end.”

Hasan believes Biden still has a path to victory, even if he does alienate swathes of voters with his Israel policy. But he warned that the Democratic Party needed to acknowledge the shifting political landscape that the “uncommitted” campaign brought to light.

“The dynamic here is something that maybe Democratic politicians aren’t used to,” he said. “They’re maybe not used to seeing Palestinians, Arab Americans and the base of the progressive Democratic Party that support them ... [be] really well organised and politically powerful.”

“These are expressions of political power.”

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