27 February 2024 / The protest vote against Biden

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

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SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Alright, Michigan’s primary is today. And Michigan’s got a lot of Muslims and Arab-Americans. And a lot of them are re-considering their support of President Joe Biden in light of the Israel-Hamas war.

*<CLIP> CBS DETROIT: HUWAIDA ARRAF, PALESTINIAN AMERICAN PROTESTER: We will not cast a vote for the person who greenlighted the genocide of our people.*

SEAN: We reached out to an Arab-American activist to take the temperature and he had something surprising to say:

ABED AYOUB (national director, Arab-American anti-Discrimination Committee): So they are looking at alternatives, and they are hearing alternatives.

SEAN: That’s not surprising. Alternatives. Maybe Jill Stein? Maybe Little RFK? Maybe not voting at all…  
  
ABED: And there are those in the community that are seriously listening and engaging, with the Trump team, in an effort to win over Arab and Muslim support. So don't be surprised if those efforts actually do work while the Biden administration continues to take our votes for granted.

SEAN: Biden’s not gonna lose the primary. But coming up on *Today, Explained* we’re gonna ask what Michigan might tell us about the general.

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[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram, joined by Abed Ayoub. Who’s the national director of the ADC – the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. He and his organization are trying to get Arab and Muslim-Americans to register protest votes against Biden’s Israel policies in Michigan’s primary today.  
  
ABED: The community in Michigan is very diverse. It is the largest Muslim, community, but also the highest concentrated Arab American community. So you have a number of Arab Muslims as well as South Asian Muslim, Black Muslim communities out there. But the Arab community is one that's the most concentrated in Dearborn, in the areas right outside of Dearborn.   
  
SEAN: We asked him to tell us about how these communities are thinking about their votes in today’s primary, but also the general election later this year. And as a flag: Abed used the g-word a lot in our conversation. And devout listeners of *Today, Explained* know that while a lot of people believe this is a genocide, the International Court of Justice said Israel needs to prevent a genocide, but has not yet said Israel is indeed doing a genocide. Okay. That said, here’s Abed:

ABED: Right now, Arab and Muslim American voters are frustrated. They're not happy with the Biden administration, and they're certainly not happy with the ongoing genocide and the lack of commitment by the Biden administration to end it. So they are looking at alternatives, and they are hearing alternatives. And included in the alternatives is outreach from the Trump campaign. And there are those in the community that are seriously listening and engaging, with the Trump team, in an effort to win over Arab and Muslim support. So don't be surprised if those efforts actually do work while the Biden administration continues to take our votes for granted.

SEAN: We’ll get to the Trump stuff in a minute, but first we asked about something called the “uncommitted campaign.”

ABED: A lot of the work around the primary is focused on the uncommitted campaign. So in Michigan and in a few other states, it's unique where you have the option of voting uncommitted. So if you are voting on a Democratic primary and you don't like the options that are there, including Joe Biden, you would vote uncommitted. That's saying, I don't approve of any of the candidates you have. I'm not committing to any of them. So that's the organizing happening now on the Democratic side in Michigan.

*<CLIP> CONGRESSWOMAN RASHIDA TLAIB: This is the way you can raise our voices. Right now, we feel completely neglected and just unseen by our government. If you want us to be louder, then come here and vote uncommitted.*

ABED: We're seeing it all over the news, national news, because Michigan is going to set the tone for Arab voters across the country and Muslim voters across the country. And it's going to send a message to the Biden administration, to the Biden campaign that their handling of Gaza, their handling of the genocide is not a, you know, something that's gaining approval within the Democratic base. And the mistake people are making in Michigan is looking at this only as an Arab or Muslim issue.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS, SHAQUILLE BREWSTER: Evan McKenzie is a union organizer and Starbucks worker in Madison, Wisconsin who cast his very first presidential ballot for Joe Biden.*

*SHAQUILLE BREWSTER (on tape): Do you plan on voting for him this time around?*

*EVAN MCKENZIE: Uh, no. He is allowing this war to happen and is funding this war.*

ABED: If you've spent any time in southeast Michigan, and in Dearborn and Detroit, you know where our allies stand, you know where our neighbors stand. The people we went to high school with, our allies, our neighbors, the people we do business with, the people we grew up with, the people we go to, our churches and mosques with. They’re our neighborhoods, right? They’re, they’re our community. And that includes black, Hispanic, white, Albanian, Bengali. You go down the list. You know, last night I received a text message from, friends of mine that are from Vietnam. And, you know, seven or eight of them were were telling me that they voted uncommitted, you know, in solidarity with Gaza and what's happening. So this is not only isolated to Arab or Muslim voters in Michigan. This is a problem within the Democratic base across southeast Michigan. And at the same time, you have the Trump administration pushing their Arab American outreach.

SEAN: Really, Donald Trump is pushing Arab American outreach?

ABED: Donald Trump is doing Arab American outreach, Muslim American outreach.

SEAN: <laughs>

ABED: Don't sleep on it because, you know, <laughs> it's people want to laugh, right? That's our first reaction. But it's working. If you understand our community, you understand how to deal with our community, understand that, you know, be direct, be open, be straightforward. No bullshit. Republicans are good at that. They're better at that than Democrats. And I think that’s a key distinction between the way Biden’s doing outreach and Trump is doing outreach.

SEAN: I'm sure this community famously remembers his Muslim ban and his deeply pro-Israel stance.

ABED: You could take the Muslim ban. You could take his pro-Israel stance. Here's the community's perspective again, not mine. That's a disclaimer. We've lived through it.

*<CLIP> KHALID TURAANI, ABANDON BIDEN: We will make sure that we will punish Joe Biden by making him one term president. If Trump becomes president, you know, I'm sure America will survive the Trump just like it survived him first time. It will survive Trump once again.*

ABED: We we fought back for those four years. We pushed back and we found ways to fight back against his policies. But the one thing we didn't have was a genocide. With the Muslim ban and the Arab ban, it's not like it's gone away. Sure, Biden signed the executive order, but you still have people waiting months, years to get their visas. The people that were impacted by the Muslim ban, their cases weren't reopened, their visas weren't reissued. So it's like we're still stuck in the same position. You know, it was all smoke and mirrors. There wasn't really anything done by the Biden administration to fix the problems of the Muslim ban. So you do have, you know, a contingency within the Arab community and the Muslim community that's willing to say, you know what? We'll, we'll speak to him. And if he does the right moves and the campaign, the Trump campaign does the right things. We don't mind voting for him.

SEAN: I appreciate what you're saying about the Muslim ban.

ABED: Yeah.

SEAN: But Joe Biden purports to, you know, want a two state solution. He's sent representatives to Michigan to speak with the Muslim community there. He says he wants fewer deaths. He says he wants Israel to minimize civilian casualties. Donald Trump, on the other hand, though he didn't preside over a war of this scale, moved the US embassy to Jerusalem in a very symbolic show of support for Israel's claim to that part of this region. Do Muslim-Americans really believe they could get a better deal from Donald Trump?

ABED: This notion or belief that, ‘Oh, I'm going to promise’ … a two state based on what? A two state based on which borders? A two state based on current settlement expansion, a two state based on a Gaza that's that's, that's lock locked in and has no freedom of movement? Or a two state based on the West Bank that's been eaten up by settlements and settlers supporting violence? This is what the community says—this myth of a two state solution is not working. These are Bill Clinton talking points. These are from the 90s and 80s. These, these are not flying in the community. And that's the disconnect with Joe Biden and the Democratic Party.

SEAN: I'm just wondering, the thing I'm stuck on is how Donald Trump presents a better alternative for Muslim American voters when this is Donald Trump of ‘shithole countries,’ Donald Trump of the Muslim ban, Donald Trump of ‘I was 100% right about Muslims cheering about the 9/11 attacks.’ How does anyone believe he cares about Palestinians dying in Gaza?

ABED: Is Donald Trump a better option than Joe Biden? I personally don't think so, but there are others in the community that are looking at the failure of Biden and saying, you know what? With everything else Donald Trump had, maybe a lot of it was just words. But at the same time, we did not see a genocide happen. We did not see a genocide occur. And that to them, you know, those, those, those dead family members, those dead bodies, those images we're seeing, that's enough. That's enough for them to say, give me a few bad tweets and a few mean words and let my family members live.

SEAN: I mean, I guess I'm wondering how many people out there do you really think we're talking about here? Who who might not just vote, you know, uncommitted or vote for a third party candidate like Jill Stein or Robert Kennedy, but would actually not vote for Biden and instead vote for Donald Trump?

ABED: I think with the uncommitted campaign, you know, there is going to be a high turnout. There's going to be a high number of folks, you know, selecting uncommitted. But even from that campaign, you're going to have a breakout where you're probably going to have some individuals from the uncommitted campaign, a pocket of them, you know, go on and still continue to support Biden in the general election, but a majority of them are going to say, what is our what's our alternative? Are we just going to sit out the presidential election? From that pocket, you're going to have a smaller group that's going to say, you know what? We're going to engage with the Trump campaign to see what we could do. So there's a number of scenarios which could play out.

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SEAN: Abed Ayoub. He’s the director of ADC National. That’s the American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee. When we’re back we’re gonna ask a guy who’s been following Michigan politics for decades how much this campaign we just heard about might make or break Joe Biden.

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[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. We’ve been talking about Michigan politics. And when you wanna talk about Michigan politics, you wanna talk to Bill.

BILL BALLENGER (Michigan political commentator): Bill Ballenger, publisher of the Ballengerreport.com. It is a weekly blog and a little extra on Michigan politics, not national politics, although we allude to things that are going on nationally is basically kind of a Bible of Michigan politics and government.

SEAN: Bill’s been at it a long, long time.

BILL: Before that, I published a hardcopy subscription by Snail Mail publication for 27 years called Inside Michigan Politics. That's kind of what I'm best known for, but I sold that back in 2013. And since then I've concentrated on this and then a podcast. I had a radio talk show I had. I do a lot of public speaking around the state, the various, trade groups, associations, political action committees, unions, banks, you name it.

SEAN: We asked him to further explain the “uncommitted” vote in Michigan, on this, their primary day.

BILL: Let's put it this way. It could be embarrassing for the president. If there is a huge uncommitted vote in Michigan, even though he is almost certain to win by a handsome margin over uncommitted, maybe the uncommitted vote will be unexpectedly large.

SEAN: Let’s dial it back to that word you used “uncommitted.” What's the meaning of that very simple sounding word?

BILL: Yeah, it sounds very innocuous, but it is not innocuous. In fact, there is an effort by Congresswoman Rashida Talib from Detroit, who is the only Palestinian American in the U.S. House of Representatives to have voters vote uncommitted rather than for Joe Biden. And she's doing that because she's protesting the president's policy on what's happening in Gaza.

SEAN: Has uncommitted been around on the Michigan ballot for some time now? Or did Rashida Talib put it on there for Joe Biden?

BILL: No, it was on in 2008. It's been around for a long time. I mean, I myself have voted uncommitted in presidential primaries. So in in 2008, the Hillary Clinton was the only campaign running in Michigan. Barack Obama did not even run in Michigan himself. He said, I'm not even going to compete in Michigan.

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BILL: But, in the last few weeks before the primary in 2008, which was very early, The Obama campaign mounted a huge effort, with all the national Obama campaign machinery behind it to get people in Michigan to vote uncommitted rather than vote for Hillary Clinton. And amazingly, he got almost 40% of the vote uncommitted in 2008, got almost 40% of the vote. And everybody in the Democratic Party knew if you were voting uncommitted, you were really surreptitiously voting for Barack Obama. When the dust cleared later in the spring and the Democratic National Committee sorted out this mess in Michigan, she barely got more than he did, even though he never ran as a candidate in Michigan, and it helped him get the nomination for president.

<SCORING OUT> For Chick

SEAN: Of course, the next time Hillary Clinton is up for election in Michigan. Trump won the state in 2016, I think 47.5 to Hillary Clinton's 47.27. And then in 2020, Joe Biden takes the state 50.62 to Trump's 47.84. So the outcome in Michigan this year will be pretty pivotal to either party to either candidate. Do we know how much success Rashida Tlaib is having here with voters in the state?

BILL: We don't know right now how much success she's having. you know, if the Biden administration, let's say, as they've started to do, show more support for the idea of a ceasefire in Gaza and getting Netanyahu and Israel to back off. You know, that could take some air out of the balloon to get people to vote uncommitted. They could say, well, hey, we're getting what we want anyway. We kind of threatened the president with uncommitted. And now maybe the Arab American community has sent out the word. Hey, you know, the president is backing away from his pro-Israel stance. And so, you know, maybe we don't need to embarrass him by getting out voting uncommitted. We don't know if that's happened, because here we are today, Election Day, and the results are going to be coming in tonight and tomorrow. And we're just going to have to wait and find out what happened. Remember, there is early voting in Michigan. There's absentee voting that's gotten much bigger as a percentage of the total vote in the last few years than it ever was before. So Election day turnout is a much smaller percentage, although it's still the largest percentage of all the people voting than it used to be.

SEAN: Hm. Well, you know, obviously we're talking about Michigan here because there is a significant Arab-American vote in Michigan. The Arab-American Institute, which is an advocacy group, says that since the start of the Israel-Hamas conflict Arab American support for Joe Biden has dropped from like 59% in 2020 to something like 17% now. Have you seen anything similar to that in Michigan? Do you have a sense of how the vote has maybe shifted?

BILL: There's no question that's probably true. And it is almost unprecedented that one particular ethnic group or racial group would see support drops so dramatically leading up to a presidential primary. I never recall this ever happening in Michigan. So it is significant. But let's take the Arab American population in context. So the question is how important if you got every Arab American in Dearborn, every single one to vote uncommitted, how much of an impact on the total vote is that really going to be in a state like Michigan with 10 million people? And you really have very few Arab Americans throughout Michigan. Keep that in mind.

SEAN: Do you think other Michiganders are maybe likely to join Arab-Americans who are refusing to vote for Biden?

BILL: Oh, I think it's possible there are people outside the Arab American community who object to what's going on in Gaza right now and don't like what Netanyahu in Israel is doing. Yes, but they're not that many, and they're not that many who are so motivated in their anger against Biden that they would vote uncommitted in a Democratic primary. So again, I just think the impact of Tlaib’s effort is going to be less than she hopes for.

SEAN: President Biden paid a visit to Michigan earlier this month and has dispatched, you know, some of his top aides to visit as well. Yet recent polls show him behind Donald Trump, including one that has him trailing, you know, 45 to 41 with something like 14% undecided. It still feels like there's a race here. But how much do you attribute him being down to this Muslim-American organizing effort against him?

BILL: Not that much, in my opinion, but his diminution of support in the Arab American community kind of parallels the decline in his support from Democrats generally, particularly young Democrats in Michigan and nationally, for that matter.

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BILL: But I don't think that makes the difference between victory and defeat, for Biden right now. But look, if Michigan's vote is as close as you just mentioned in 2016, Trump beat Hillary Clinton by, you know, 10,000 votes statewide in a state of 10 million people. And it was close also as a percentage in 2021, Biden won over Trump. If it gets down to something as close as the election in 2016, especially, maybe the loss of support in the Arab American community could spell the difference between victory and defeat for Biden. No wonder he's worried.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Bill Ballenger. Michigander. The Ballenger Report dot com. Last night on … lemme check my notes here … *Late Night with Seth Myers* … the President of the United States announced that there might be a ceasefire in Gaza as soon as Monday. Sounds like Hamas would have to agree to return all the remaining hostages for a six week pause in fighting for Ramadan. The Biden administration's been pushing hard for a deal and we’ll of course be curious to see how that might change people’s views of this war when they go to vote this November. We’ll let you know if we see something big. Our program today was produced by Haleema Shah, edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd. Thanks to Vox senior reporter Nicole Narea. There are many more individuals who make the show. They are: Amanda Lewellyn, Miles Bryan, Victoria Chamberlin, Jesse Alejandro Cottrell, Avishay Artsy, Hady Mawajdeh, and Rob Byers. Matthew Collette and Amina Al-Sadi edit the show most days. Noel King hosts the show half the time. And we use music by Breakmaster Cylinder, sometimes.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Before we go, a quick request: We’re moving on from Michigan and wanna talk to listeners in and around Nashville. As y’all know, the cost of housing has been surging, and many people feel that buying a house is out of reach. Research suggests that more people are choosing to move back in with Mom and Dad, or just mom, or just dad. Are you one of the people cohabitating with your parents? Or have your kids moved back in with YOU? If so how is it going? We wanna hear about it. We want to hear from you. Call us at (202) 643-0314 and be sure to leave a callback number because we wanna talk. Today, Explained is distributed by WNYC. This show is a part of Vox, which is totally free thanks in part to contributions from our listeners. Join us at vox.com/give

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[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]