

# [***Biden has eight months to fix his Michigan problem***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BF5-VG71-JBSS-S4P4-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

February 28, 2024 Wednesday 6:26 AM GMT

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**Length:** 1449 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; If the Democratic voters of Michigan - and a handful of other swing states - are feeling uncommitted in November, [*Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) could lose reelection.

[*Tuesday's primary*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/27/politics/takeaways-michigan-democratic-republican-primaries/index.html) - in which tens of thousands of Democratic primary votes cast protest ballots over the president's support for Israel - made clear that he faces a battle for his own coalition and political base that he must win if he is to defeat likely Republican nominee [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45).

The stakes could not be higher since there's a good chance that the candidate who captures Michigan in the fall will return to the White House for a second term.

But while Biden can seek to mitigate his issues with the state's thousands of suburban Arab American voters, his chances of easing his vulnerabilities may depend on something that may be out of his power - the return of peace to the Middle East andthe end of Israel's operation in response to the Hamas terror attacks last October.

Democratic primary voters in Michigan have the option to [*mark their ballot as "uncommitted."*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/26/politics/michigan-primary-uncommitted-biden-gaza/index.html) In 2012, even President Barack Obama suffered 20,000 such defections. That was a blip in a cruise to reelection. But on Tuesday night, Biden got an unmistakable message. With 95% of the vote in, Biden had 81% of votes cast. But more than 101,000 voters had made their point by casting an uncommitted ballot.

The size of the uncommitted vote after an organized campaign by Arab American and progressive critics of Biden's Middle East policy is the most tangible sign yet of how the war in Gaza is tearing at the fabric of the Democratic Party.

Biden's campaign released a statement in the president's name late Tuesday about his Michigan victory that did not mention the uncommitted vote in the state. A few hours later, a senior campaign adviser sent an unprompted message that addressed the matter directly.

"President Biden shares the goal of many of the folks who voted uncommitted, which is an end to the violence and a just and lasting peace," a senior Biden campaign adviser said. "That is what he is working towards."

One primary in February will not dictate the results of the general election. And it's impossible to predict how Biden will fare in a rematch against Trump, who seems an even worse fit for voters of Arab descent after suggesting he'd try to reimpose his Muslim travel ban in a second term.

Trump also has his general election liabilities to worry about - and that's before any possible convictions he could face in four criminal trials. His last remaining rival, former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, won more than a quarter of the votes in Michigan. This meant that more than 294,000 Republicans there would prefer her at the top of the GOP ticket, even though the ex-president has a 100% record so far in his party's nominating contests this year in his quest to win his third straight GOP presidential nod.

The scale of Biden's headache

But on Tuesday night at least, Biden had the bigger headache.

Even largely uncontested primary elections can identify weaknesses in an incumbent president's appeal. The Michigan result will only bolster questions about the solidity of Biden's coalition and the enthusiasm of key Democratic voting blocs, including minority voters, younger voters and progressives - who are among those that have reacted most viscerally to scenes of carnage in Gaza.

In 2016, Trump's shock win by nearly 11,000 votes over Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton paved the way for the most disruptive presidency in modern American history. Four years later, Biden rebuilt the blue wall and carried Michigan by around 150,000 votes. There's every sign that the race will be closer this time, owing to Biden's unpopularity and the scrutiny afforded to incumbents. If the thousands of uncommitted voters on Tuesday don't return to Biden or stay home in November, they could have an outsize impact on the destiny of the White House.

What Democrats will see as the alarming possibility of a second Trump term should be sufficient to galvanize the Biden campaign into an intense effort to try to mitigate his liabilities exposed in a primary in which he racked up 80% of the vote.

Biden has dispatched campaign and White House aides to Michigan to try to explain his ***politics*** toward Israel. He backs the country's right to defend itself but repeatedly pushes for a temporary ceasefire to bring relief to Hamas-ruled Gaza, where more nearly 30,000 civilians have been killed in Israeli military operations, according to the Hamas-run Ministry of Health.

But a president who often stresses his capacity to understand the grief of others after a life punctuated by personal tragedies is yet to travel in person to console Arab American voters, many of whom have families caught up in the horror, and to explain his lack of success in tempering the scale of Israeli operations.

Such a visit now seems like a step the president must take sooner rather than later. And Biden is likely to lean heavily on second-term Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and her Democratic turnout machine as he seeks to heal differences with some of his party's own voters and to win over some Haley voters who disdain Trump.

"I think he does need to sit down with this community," Democratic Rep. Debbie Dingell of Michigan told CNN on Tuesday evening, adding that after watching so many Palestinians die, many of her constituents were "raw" and "hurting."

Another prominent Democrat, California Rep. Ro Khanna, also told CNN that voters in Michigan were sending the president a message that he could not afford to miss and that Democrats still needed to "understand" their coalition better.

The warning signs of an unraveling Democratic coalition pose key questions:

- Will the Democrats who showed up to cast a protest vote against the president on Tuesday be willing to return to the fold in November?

- If Biden is successful in negotiating a ceasefire, will he placate many of the voters who registered their anger on Tuesday? Or has the conflict already caused him irrevocable political damage?

- Will the unmistakable electoral price that Biden faces force the most pro-Israel US leader in decades to harden his stance against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his apparent desire to prolong the war?

- If that happens, will Arab American and progressive voters who are angry with Biden reluctantly back him against Trump?

A thorny diplomatic challenge

Biden's need to ease the domestic political blowback from his Middle East policy is clear. But the prospects for making a decisive intervention in the conflict are more cloudy. The president, for instance, made headlines when he said on Monday - on the eve of the Michigan primary - that he was optimistic a pause in the fighting, which would allow for the release of more Israeli hostages by Hamas and spare civilians, could be agreed by next week. His comments appeared to spark surprise in the Middle East despite weeks of ceasefire talks that are yet to justify the president's optimism.

After decades of sparring between Biden and Netanyahu, it now appears that the leaders' political interests are diverging. After Tuesday, the president has an even greater need for the fighting to stop soon and to produce evidence that the aspiration of a Palestinian state, shared by many American Muslims, is not a mirage.

But many analysts believe that Netanyahu, who sits atop a fragile governing coalition, has a strong political interest in extending the hostilities in order to stave off the prospect of a general election that polls suggest he would lose after the October 7 Hamas attacks - one of the worst days in Israel's history -- took place on his watch.

In some ways, Biden's reelection prospects and the chances of a lessening of the intensity of the Gaza war could be helped if Netanyahu's government falls. That, however, is something no one from the White House would dare say out loud.

"The American president can't say who he wants the prime minister of Israel to be," Biden campaign official Mitch Landrieu told CNN as the results from Michigan rolled in. The former mayor of New Orleans said Democrats in Michigan were making their views known. But he also acknowledged that the president didn't have the capacity to control everything about a "very complicated and difficult issue which we are really not driving the train on."

In that sense, the Middle East crisis and its domestic political blowback is typical of foreign crises that seriously hamper incumbents during reelection bids.

CNN's Jeff Zeleny contributed to this report.

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**Load-Date:** March 29, 2024

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