

Resisting Trump is motivating Muslim voters

by [Aysha Khan](#) in the [April 13, 2016](#) issue

Salim Jaffer moved to the United States when he was 14 years old. His family, along with the rest of the Indian community, had been expelled from Uganda in 1972 under the violent dictator Idi Amin and came to America.

But he said he's never felt in danger until this year.

"Donald Trump thinks we should stop immigration of Muslims coming into this country," said Jaffer, a gastroenterologist living in Lansing, Michigan. "Ted Cruz, he wants to see if 'sand glows' in Syria."

That's why Jaffer participated in his first-ever presidential primary on March 8, casting his vote for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. And it's the reason he, a doctor who had only superficially followed politics for most of his life, submitted paperwork to register a new nonprofit organization aimed at getting midwestern Muslims to vote in November.

"From a Muslim standpoint, we've got to make sure we get somebody who is sympathetic to our cause and understands the sociology, the theology, the anthropology, and the history of Islam," he said.

Muslim groups are launching voter registration drives in a push to ensure that the Islamophobic rhetoric of the election campaign is rejected at the polls.

"Anti-Muslim rhetoric is motivating Muslim Americans across the country to engage in the political process like never before," said Rep. Keith Ellison (D., Minn.), the first Muslim elected to Congress. "This is true in Minnesota, as well as in swing states like Virginia and Florida where Muslim Americans will play a critical role on Election Day."

Almost three-quarters of Muslim voters plan to vote in state primaries this year, according to data from the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

"If you as a political candidate choose to spew hatred, bigotry, and to vilify Muslim Americans, you do so at your own political risk," said Altaf Husain, vice president of

the Islamic Society of North America. “We will use every democratic means and political strategy to ensure your candidacy never succeeds.”

CAIR and more than a dozen affiliated Muslim groups announced a national drive to register 20,000 voters. The US Council of Muslim Organizations is also striving to register 1 million voters.

Mosques in Virginia and Georgia have been educating members on how to vote in their primaries. Imams are underscoring the importance of voting during their Friday sermons.

“There’s a lot in the balance this election cycle for American Muslims, not just the general issues around the economy and health care,” said Dawud Walid, who heads CAIR’s Michigan chapter. “We’re urging people to exercise their right to vote in particular if they don’t want to see a president who is making statements that Muslims aren’t welcome in the U.S.”

In March, Trump said Islam had a “tremendous hatred” of the West. In December, he called for a “total and complete” shutdown of Muslim immigration to the United States. He has claimed that American Muslims celebrated September 11 and said Muslims should have to carry a special ID.

[According to news reports, after the March 22 attack in Brussels killing more than 30 people and injuring hundreds, claimed by the group that calls itself the Islamic State, Trump said, “We cannot allow these people to come into the country.” Cruz called for a halt to immigrants who come from countries where al-Qaeda and IS operate, and added, “We need to empower law enforcement to patrol and secure Muslim neighborhoods before they become radicalized.”]

“We used to find this kind of Islamophobia lurking on anonymous blogs or Islamophobic websites,” said Omid Safi, who directs Duke University’s Islamic Studies Center. “Then we saw them move over to Fox News, and now being amplified from the mouths of people running for the highest office in the land.”

About a quarter of Muslim voters CAIR surveyed on Super Tuesday named such Islamophobia their top concern going into the primaries. In 2014, it ranked third. For many, that rising fear now comes coupled with the realization that Trump could be sitting in the Oval Office come January.

Voter advocacy is particularly important in immigrant communities, where people may not understand how and why to perform their civic rights, said Thasin Sardar, former president of Michigan's Islamic Society of Greater Lansing, who voted for Bernie Sanders.

The society is gearing up to join the US Council of Muslim Organizations voter registration drive now that the state's primary elections, which Trump and Sanders won, are over.

It wasn't so long ago that the majority of U.S. Muslim voters actively supported the Republican Party. Many identified with the party's social conservatism that stood against same-sex marriage and abortion rights. More than three-quarters of U.S. Muslim voters cast ballots for George W. Bush. Even today, CAIR estimates that 18 percent of Muslim voters will be supporting Republican candidates, and up to 11 percent favor Trump. These Muslims, such as first-time voter Syed Hussain of Maryland, say they are more concerned about economic issues than Islamophobia. Still, he's expressed unease over Trump's comments about banning Muslim immigration.

"But at least he's honest, and I think he won't be able to do it," he said.

Though they have previously supported Republicans, many Muslim Americans felt betrayed by the conservative backlash against Middle Eastern and South Asian communities after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, as well as by the Patriot Act.

"The narrative in the Muslim community changed to think about issues affecting them in a way we've never seen before," said Tanzila Ahmed, a Los Angeles-based political activist.

Now about 67 percent of Muslim American voters say they are supporting Democratic candidates in the upcoming presidential elections, according to data from CAIR.

Younger and more liberal Muslim voters are overwhelmingly in favor of Sanders, who has campaigned strategically with Muslim and Arab communities by visiting mosques, giving an hour-long speech against Islamophobia, and airing Arabic-language ads in the cities with the highest Arab concentration. Older Muslims dislike Clinton's pro-Israel stance but have put their weight behind the Democratic Party's

establishment candidate.

Civic leaders are harnessing this energy to mobilize voters.

Teams in Los Angeles, San Diego, New York City, San Francisco, and dozens of other cities are organizing electoral engagement on the ground. Organizing platform MPower Change's new campaign urges supporters to pledge "to make sure that this election will no longer be about us, without us," through media and voter engagement. A new video series from Emerge USA pushes Muslim communities to vote at a rate 10 percent above the state average.

"Turn your centers, Islamic centers, mosques into registration centers for voters, into polling stations during the election time," Nihad Awad of CAIR said on stage at a major Islamic conference in Chicago. "We have to register every single Muslim to vote in 2016." —Religion News Service

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