

Muslim voters are getting organized for the 2020 election

And they could determine the outcome.

by [Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue



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This November, Jad Salamey will vote in a presidential election for the first time—and he’s hoping to bring his entire community with him.

The 20-year-old student at Wayne State University in Detroit spends his free time phone banking, canvassing, and organizing other college students in an attempt to convince the estimated 100,000 Muslims registered to vote in Michigan to cast their ballots in the fall. Salamey and other organizers across the country say that Muslims could be a deciding factor in the 2020 election, especially in crucial swing states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia, which have large Muslim populations.

The key, however, is getting them to the polls.

“The Muslim community can be a very big voting bloc,” Salamey said. “A lot of the issues that are important to the Muslim community could be solved if they get

involved.”

One of the most effective ways, he said, is for Muslims to reach out to other Muslims.

“I’m Lebanese, so when I knock on doors and a Lebanese grandma, father, mother, sees me at the door, the first question is always, ‘Who’s your family, what’s your last name, where are you from?’” Salamey said. “And then they invite me in for some tea. I think that response is different, as opposed to someone who’s not Arab or Muslim, or someone who doesn’t speak Arabic. They do relate when they see someone like themselves.”

According to the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, which conducts research on American Muslims, 61 percent of Muslims voted in 2016, compared to 88 percent of Protestants, 87 percent of Catholics, and 86 percent of Jews. Muslims are also the least likely of the major faith groups to be registered to vote. But this year, Muslims across the United States are trying to change that by launching a variety of campaigns to reach into their own communities to register people to vote and get them to the polls.

“It’s not enough to defend the rights of Muslims,” said Robert McCaw, director of the Government Affairs Department for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the country’s largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. “We also need to ensure that they’re proactively using them, including voting in each and every election.”

While African American Muslims have long been active in US politics, over the last five years rising Islamophobia has spurred a new wave of Muslim organizing, one that also includes people from immigrant backgrounds. Ishraq Ali, organizing director for the Muslim-led social justice organization MPower Change, said the Trump administration’s 2017 Muslim ban in particular helped galvanize the community and became an entry point for broader Muslim civic engagement.

“That really put our community on notice. It got people to think that we need to build our civic power,” he said. “The Muslim ban is something that’s very visceral and easy for Muslim communities to understand, not only for the people from the directly impacted countries, but as a Muslim community feeling the language from this administration is clearly Islamophobic. Our communities are definitely saying we’re not going to be passive observers in this.”

Organizers believe Muslims could be a deciding factor in crucial swing states.

While eliminating the Muslim ban is a top priority, Ali said it's not the only issue Muslims care about. According to ISPU, Muslims rated jobs and the economy as the top concerns facing the country in 2017, followed by racism and discrimination. Muslims also care about issues that impact their local communities, Ali pointed out, such as affordable housing and funding for schools. In recent years, MPower Change has organized several campaigns to get Muslims to vote, including a National Muslim Voter Registration Day held every September and #MyMuslimVote, which provides resources for mosques and Islamic centers to run voter registration drives. The group also hosts webinars to train Muslims on how to mobilize their communities before Election Day and has worked with other national Muslim organizations, including CAIR, to put out a survey on the issues that matter most to Muslims. With the results, the groups will write an American Muslim platform that will be used to educate—and put pressure on—candidates in 2020.

Nada Al-Hanooti, executive director of the Michigan chapter of Emgage, a Muslim civic engagement organization, said that getting more Muslims to the polls this year will lead to greater political strength. “Our goal is to ultimately create such a large voting bloc that we actually have power, so much power that we have the election in our hands,” she said. Muslims have long been overlooked by politicians—and have even been considered a political liability—so this year Emgage launched Million Muslim Votes, a campaign to get 1 million Muslims across the US to pledge to vote. (McCaw of CAIR said that more than 1 million Muslims are currently registered to vote in the US.)

“These candidates, they don't prioritize us,” said Al-Hanooti. “If we can say we got 1 million out to vote, the candidates will turn their necks and say, ‘One million Muslims voted? We need to communicate with them, we need to prioritize them.’”

Grassroots organizing is also happening on the ground in key battleground states.

Michigan is one where Muslims feel they can make an outsize difference. The swing state, which Trump narrowly won in 2016, is a critical prize on the path to the White House. It's also home to perhaps the largest Muslim—and Arab—population in the US. Muzammil Ahmed, a board member for the Michigan Muslim Community Council, explained that the state is home to about 100,000 registered Muslim voters, nearly half of whom didn't show up to the polls in November 2016. Trump won the state by

11,000 votes. Muslim voters “could have tipped the election” if they had voted, Ahmed said.

According to Ahmed, MMCC and other civic engagement groups across the state are hoping to boost Muslim turnout to about 80 percent this year. MMCC is organizing voter registration drives, phone banking, and car rides to the polls; it will also send emails and text messages to residents reminding them to vote. Ahmed said the group also works with local imams and gives them talking points about the importance of voting to weave into their sermons.

But one of the biggest challenges, Al-Hanooti said, is the lack of reliable data on Muslim voters and voters of color in general. Without accurate information about who voters are, where they live, and how to contact them, it’s hard to boost turnout, she said. So another key task for Emgage this year, in addition to traditional get-out-the-vote strategies, is to gather good data on the Muslim community.

According to Emgage, Muslim turnout in Michigan has been steadily increasing over the last decade, outpacing the general population. Grassroots efforts have been aided by other factors. A growing number of mosques are becoming poll sites, which has created easier access and a new sense of pride in voting, Ahmed said. “For someone to physically walk into their own place of worship and say, ‘I’m casting my vote to decide who’s going to be the next senator, president, or representative of America,’ I think that’s a very powerful thing,” he said. In addition, the 2018 ballot featured several Muslim candidates, including Rashida Tlaib, who won a seat in the US Congress, Abdul El-Sayed, who ran but lost in the Democratic primary for governor, and Abdullah Hammoud, who won reelection to the Michigan House of Representatives. Having these candidates on the ballot helped bring Muslims to the polls, Ahmed said. And while this year won’t have as many prominent Muslims running for local office, he said he hopes 2018 patterns will continue.

In North Carolina, the grassroots organization Muslim Women For is working to mobilize Muslims in the Triangle, a region that includes Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill and is home to the largest and fastest-growing Muslim population in the state. Lela Ali, who cofounded Muslim Women For in 2016, said the nonprofit grew out of the recognition that politicians and even national Muslim groups weren’t showing up to provide the resources and tools necessary to get the 40,000 Muslims living in North Carolina politically organized.

Ahead of North Carolina's Democratic presidential primary on March 3, Muslim Women For hosted a series of events called From the Prayers to the Polls. Modeled after Souls to the Polls, when African American voters went straight from church on Sunday to the polls for early voting, Muslim Women For provided buses to take people from Friday prayer services at the Islamic Association of Raleigh and the Islamic Center of Greensboro to early voting sites. The transportation was paired with voter education. Ahead of the events, Muslim Women For canvassed the neighborhoods around the mosques; on the day of the event, they set up tables outside to provide information about voting.

Biden has no clear strategy to reach out to Muslims, many of whom backed Sanders.

"We saw that there was really a gap in the knowledge," Ali said. "People didn't know what early voting was, people didn't know how to register to vote, they didn't understand there was same-day registration with voting. There were things that, similar to other communities, people didn't think about or learn about on a regular basis. So that was a really critical piece, the education and information sharing."

Ali said about 35 people from the Islamic Association of Raleigh rode the bus, while others followed in their cars. One hundred people signed pledge cards committing to vote at a later time. One of the advantages of going to the polls as a large group, she said, was the ability to push back against voter suppression. One longtime member of the community was aggressively questioned by poll workers in an effort to discourage her from voting, Ali said, but other members of the group called a voter protection hotline so that it could be prevented from happening again. She said that even though Muslim Women For provides buses, the event isn't really about transportation—it's about community building and showing, in a highly visible way, the importance of voting. Before the November elections, she said, Muslim Women For is aiming to add Durham to the list of cities that will host From the Prayers to the Polls.

"We're going with force to the polls," Ali said. "And we're bringing our friends, we're bringing our families, we're bringing our faith leaders, we're bringing our teachers."

One reality that Muslim voting activists face is that the Muslim community in the US is diverse. There is no single template for Muslim outreach. Umer Rupani, executive director of the Georgia Muslim Voter Project, founded in 2015, said that the 200,000 Muslims in Georgia, like those across the US, represent a wide variety of races,

ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic statuses, religions, and citizenship statuses.

“We have to remember, especially for some of those who have recently immigrated, where they’re coming from,” Rupani said. “A lot of people are coming from places where participating in elections and voting the wrong way was life-threatening. On the same spectrum, you have people who have been here all their lives but have diminished trust in the American government. So we’re having to fight multiple battles on multiple fronts. That’s OK, but realizing that those are the issues we’re dealing with helps.”

The Georgia Muslim Voter Project aims to register 1,000 people to vote this year and to get 20 percent of them to the polls in November. The group relies on traditional get-out-the-vote techniques. But they also recognize that not all Muslims attend a mosque regularly, so this can’t be the only way to reach out. Every year the organization goes to an Islamic school and trains students on how to register people to vote. Then the students go back into their own communities to register their parents and neighbors. GAMVP also works on college campuses with Muslim Students’ Association chapters to bring young adults into the process.

While Rupani said that numerically Muslims in Georgia can be a decisive factor in some local races, he cautioned against viewing the Muslim community as a monolith, even in terms of political persuasion. The goal of bringing Muslims out to the polls isn’t about a particular political agenda, he said, but about reminding people that their voice matters.

“Our community is so diverse and holds so many different opinions, comes from so many walks of life, it would be an injustice for us to say that only one opinion cuts across the entire Muslim population,” he said. “So whatever the results, for our community to be successful, we want to make sure that the people who don’t think they have a voice remember and are reminded that they do.”

In addition to nonpartisan efforts to increase voter turnout in November, Muslims across the country also mobilized in support of candidates during this year’s Democratic primaries—many of them for Bernie Sanders. Nusaiba Mubarak Harmoush was hired last fall to be the Sanders campaign’s national Muslim organizer, thought to be the first position of its kind in US presidential politics. She launched the national Muslims for Bernie program, which allowed more than 2,000 active Muslim volunteers across the country to share and coordinate strategies.

Many of them canvassed mosques and halal grocery stores and restaurants. They also translated campaign literature, posters, and graphics into Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, Farsi, and other languages. Others phone banked, using what's called the Muslim Dialer, a sort of virtual phone book of Muslim voters the Sanders campaign developed. This tool—also thought to be the first of its kind in US presidential campaigns—makes it easier for Muslim volunteers to speak directly to Muslim voters.

This primary cycle marked a significant change in Muslim political participation, Mubarak Harmoush said. While Muslims, particularly those from immigrant families, previously showed their support for candidates through donations, this year was the first time she saw them contributing their time and energy to organize around a specific presidential candidate. “This election in 2020 is really historic for the Muslim community because what we're seeing is a shift in Muslim activism in American politics,” she said.

Throughout his campaign, Sanders showed unprecedented recognition of the value of Muslim voters. In addition to developing these tools and networks of Muslim volunteers, Sanders brought Muslims into high levels of his operation. He hired Faiz Shakir as his national campaign manager, the first Muslim to ever run a US presidential campaign; boasted endorsements from the first two Muslim women in Congress, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, and other prominent Muslim organizations such as Emgage PAC; and featured Muslim surrogates such as Linda Sarsour, former cochair of the Women's March, and Abdul El-Sayed, former Michigan Democratic gubernatorial candidate. Sanders—who's often affectionately called “Amo Bernie,” or “Uncle Bernie” in Arabic—was also one of two candidates to accept the invitation, extended to all Democratic candidates, to speak at last year's Islamic Society of North America conference, the largest gathering of Muslims in the US. (The other was Julian Castro.)

Other Democratic candidates made efforts to reach out to Muslims, but none to the extent of Sanders. Elizabeth Warren released a plan called “Honoring the Strength and Diversity of Muslim Communities,” which includes sections on immigration, foreign policy, child care, the ultra-millionaire tax, confronting white nationalism, and valuing the work of women of color. Meanwhile, Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee, has no clear strategy to reach out to Muslims. He has also been criticized by organizations such as South Asian Americans Leading Together for hiring an Asian American and Pacific Islander national vote director—also in charge

of Muslim outreach—who supports Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, the leader of a Hindu nationalist party that has embraced anti-Muslim politics. Biden’s campaign has since appointed a new senior adviser on Muslim engagement. (The Biden and Warren campaigns did not respond to requests for comment.)

But it’s unclear how much Sanders’s Muslim outreach strategy paid off nationally for his campaign, which he suspended in March. A CAIR survey found that 58 percent of Muslims voted for Sanders in the March 3 Super Tuesday primaries, 26 percent for Joe Biden, and 5 percent each for Elizabeth Warren and Michael Bloomberg. While Sanders easily won California—home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the US—Biden won Virginia and later Michigan, also states with sizable Muslim communities, and is poised to face Trump in the general election this November.

With Sanders now out of the race, his Muslim supporters are approaching the general election in a variety of ways. Engage PAC officially endorsed Biden in April, citing the former vice president’s opposition to Trump’s Muslim ban and his support for reforming policies related to immigration and refugees. Some Muslims for Bernie groups are putting their energy into supporting progressive Muslim candidates running for local office across the country, while others are continuing to organize around some of the specific issues Sanders called for, including Medicare for All.

As organizers look to November, they also say the 2020 elections aren’t the end goal. Instead, Ali of MPower Change said, they’re hoping to use this year as an opportunity to develop a more lasting, durable sense of civic engagement among American Muslims.

“The work doesn’t stop after Election Day,” he said. “We want to be building this political capacity and base for the long term.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Muslims at the polls.”