

**US presidential election 2024**

## **Arab-American voters on the fence over Kamala Harris**

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White House's position on Israel's war in Gaza has made many voters wary of the Democratic presidential nominee

**James Politi** in Dearborn, Michigan 4 HOURS AGO

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Fatima was reserving judgment on Kamala Harris as she sat on a bench in a small square in the centre of Dearborn, a city with a large Arab-American community in the political battleground of Michigan.

The 24-year-old, who declined to give her surname, voted for Joe Biden in 2020 but was distraught at the heavy Palestinian death toll in Gaza and the recent Israeli strikes on Lebanon, and is unsure whether she will support the Democrats in November's [presidential election](#).

Fatima said [Harris](#) may “possibly” be better than Biden, who many in Dearborn see as being too supportive of Israel’s conduct in Gaza, but it will depend on what occurs in the coming weeks. “If we can give the Palestinians hope or relief, that’s the only reason I would vote for her,” she said.

Since launching her White House campaign against Donald Trump on July 21 after Biden dropped out of the race, Harris has [energised big portions of the Democratic base](#) that will be critical to securing her victory in the presidential election, from young voters, to women, and people of colour.

But for those who see the war in Gaza as the defining issue of the campaign — and many are concentrated in south-eastern Michigan where mistrust of the Democratic party now runs deep — there is wariness of the party’s new nominee.

“Most of our community leans towards the Democratic party but most of them are feeling like they don’t want to vote,” said Abir, an older woman outside a local Dearborn grocery store who regrets voting for Biden in 2020 and has “no idea” what she will do in November.

“I was just going to stay on the side and watch — unless [Harris] makes her stance clear on the issue that this thing needs to stop,” she said.

Although Harris has not endorsed any shift from Biden’s policy towards Israel, she has sought to distance herself from Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister. She did not attend his joint address to Congress in Washington last month and met him separately from Biden. Afterwards, she said her commitment to Israel’s security was “unwavering”, but she would not “remain silent” in the face of Palestinian suffering.

Jim Zogby, founder of advocacy group the Arab American Institute, said Harris had from the beginning of the conflict made more of an effort to “communicate” with the Arab community. He predicted “she’s going to win back a lot of the folks who were hesitant or turned off by the administration” but added “she has to sustain” her position.



Voting in Michigan. The battleground state has a large Arab-American community © Jim West/Alamy

Calibrating her message on the Middle East is likely to be the biggest foreign policy challenge of Harris’s campaign. On Wednesday, after arriving at a Detroit airport for a large campaign rally, Harris had what her aides described as a “brief engagement” with activists, who had led more than 100,000 people in the state to vote “uncommitted” in the Democratic party primary rather than for Biden earlier in the year in a backlash against the White House.

Layla Elabed, one of the leaders of the movement, became emotional as she told Harris they wanted to support her, but needed a policy in Gaza that would “save lives right now”, including an arms embargo on Israel.

But while the activists came away with the impression that Harris was open to discussing an end of weapons transfers to Israel, Phil Gordon, her national security adviser, disabused them on Thursday morning.

He wrote on X: “She will always ensure Israel is able to defend itself against Iran and Iran-backed terrorist groups. She does not support an arms embargo on Israel. She

will continue to work to protect civilians in Gaza and to uphold international humanitarian law.”



Protesters outside an event that Joe Biden attended in Detroit, Michigan, in May. Many in Dearborn view the US president as being too supportive of Israel's conduct in Gaza © Jeff Kowalsky/AFP/Getty Images

Moreover, during the Detroit rally, Harris was repeatedly interrupted by protesters who were chanting “Kamala Kamala, you can’t hide, we won’t vote for genocide”.

She initially responded with: “I’m here because we believe in democracy. Everyone’s voice matters.” But she subsequently told them: “You know what? If you want Donald Trump to win, then say that. Otherwise, I’m speaking.” The vast majority of the crowd cheered her on.

After the event, protester Zainab Hakim, 21, said Harris had been “so disrespectful”. “I hear that rhetoric a lot — ‘you’re Brown, you’re Muslim, you’re Palestinian, do you think your life is going to be any better under Trump,’” she said.

“[But] for my Palestinian friends, if their relatives and their people are being massacred under Biden and maybe under Kamala, that’s not better for them,” she added.

On Friday in Arizona, after being heckled again, Harris said: “I have been clear. Now is the time to get a ceasefire deal and get the hostage deal done. Now is the time.”

The mathematical reality is that any defections from the traditional Democratic base

could help Trump and make the difference in very evenly balanced battleground states including Michigan.

But for most voters, Gaza is not the only issue in the election. If Harris performs strongly enough among other Democratic, independent and swing voters, she may be able to afford some losses because of the conflict in the Middle East. Projecting toughness against the protesters could help her fend off criticism from the right that she is too liberal.

What happens diplomatically in the Middle East could also be important to her prospects of defeating Trump. Washington, along with Egypt and Qatar, is trying to help broker a [ceasefire agreement](#) that would halt the hostilities between Israel and Hamas and lead to the release of hostages being held in Gaza and Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

Kyle Kondik of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics said: "I think she is trying to make critics of the administration's policy on Israel and Gaza feel heard but she also does not seem inclined to push for what some of the activists want, namely, an embargo on us arms sales to Israel."

"Perhaps the simple fact that she is not Biden will make at least some of these Biden critics more receptive to her," he added.



Mahde Kazan: 'I have to watch the debates and see which [candidate] makes more sense' © James Politi/FT

However, Mahde Kazan, who manages an ice cream shop in Dearborn, is on the fence.

A former Trump voter who also voted for Barack Obama in the past, he is leaning Republican again but sees Harris as “fit for the position” of president too. “I have to watch the debates and see which makes more sense,” he said.

And Harris’s silence on the Middle East and foreign policy more generally on the campaign trail leaves a question mark for some in Dearborn.

“We don’t know anything about her,” said Dow, a 72-year-old engineering professor who remains undecided about who he will vote for. “What will she think of Gaza? What will she think about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, what will she think of the relationship with China, and the whole economic situation? She has to tell the public.”

But Fatima is clear that even though she is not sure about Harris she would never vote for Trump. “I know he’s against the ceasefire, and I know the hate crime would be worse as well,” she said.

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