We Count: Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Voters in Virginia

BY JUSTICE FOR MUSLIMS COLLECTIVE
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WHAT’S AT STAKE

The November 2020 General Election is a critical voting year for Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian (AMEMSA) communities. Every single election year, politicians deploy Islamophobic political speech and rhetoric to further mobilize their bases and win votes. This in turn produces an escalation of hate violence targeted at Muslim communities and anyone perceived to be Muslim. In light of these political conditions, Justice For Muslims Collective (JMC) launched a nonpartisan civic engagement project to call 65,282 AMEMSA voters in Virginia by election day. Under the backdrop of a pandemic, our goal was to speak directly to our communities, gain a better understanding of the issues that are important to AMEMSA voters, and ensure that they are informed about their right to vote in light of an escalation in voter suppression and intimidation efforts across the country. Our civic engagement campaign gave us an opportunity to go beyond speaking to our activist and organizer echo chambers and hear directly from people who have never heard of us and aren't often plugged into organizing and civic engagement efforts.

JMC’S NONPARTISAN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CAMPAIGN:

JMC conducted calls for Phase 1 of our Get Out the Vote (GOTV) campaign from July 2020 - September 2020 with Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian (AMEMSA) voters in Northern Virginia. The findings in this brief are from Phase 1 of our community outreach for GOTV. We prioritized low-propensity voters, women of color aged 18-65, and working-class voters in Northern Virginia. During this period, JMC’s phone-bankers made a total of 29,642 or three multiple passes at a universe to call 11,380 voters.

During these calls, JMC conducted a short questionnaire with voters in order to gauge whether AMEMSA voters would vote in the general election and their issue priorities. Overall, 176 individuals completed the short questionnaire over the phone with our phone-banking team. While these findings cannot be generalized to the entire population of eligible or registered AMEMSA voters in Virginia, we believe this information is helpful in providing a snapshot of AMEMSA voter attitudes and issue priorities in Northern Virginia. At the end of September, JMC launched a Phase II of our GOTV campaign to call an additional 53,902 registered Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian voters. Overall, JMC’s GOTV campaign has made calls to 65,282 registered AMEMSA voters in Virginia.

65282
Number of AMEMSA Voters We Made Calls To
Get Out the Vote by Election Day

30000+
Texts sent to Get out the Count for Census & the Vote focused on AMEMSA voters in VA
COMMUNITY FINDINGS

69% OF

survey respondents (176) reported they are more motivated to vote in this election compared to previous elections. However, almost one-third of our respondents stated they either feel no change or feel less motivated to vote in this election than previous elections.

86% OF

the overwhelming majority of AMEMSA registered voters who took our survey as respondents (154) stated a strong yes (86%) to voting in November. A small minority (3%) stated a strong no to voting during this election.

80% OF

community respondents (145) stated it’s absolutely essential or very important to have a president that understands or tries to understand issues facing Muslim communities.
LEADING ISSUES

The two leading issues our survey respondents (156) wanted the next President to prioritize were:
1. Fighting racism and Islamophobia (40%)
2. Expanding access to affordable healthcare (36%)

PUBLIC HEALTH

Public Health: The top two public health issues that respondents (147) in our survey wanted addressed were:
1. Responding to COVID19 (52%)
2. Expanding access to affordable healthcare (39%)

PUBLIC SAFETY

The top 3 public safety issues that voters in our survey (144) wanted addressed were:
1. Hate crimes against people of color (38%)
2. Police accountability and reform (36%)
3. Government surveillance of mosques and Muslim communities (17%)
During conversations with our internal civic engagement team, we wanted to share our reflections and suggestions for engaging in civic engagement work focused on AMEMSA communities moving forward.

- **Building trust and connecting with more voters:** Many voters we reached out to didn’t pick up the phone. This is normal for many civic engagement GOTV campaigns where the number of people who pick up the phone is a small percentage of the number of calls made. Individuals we were able to get on the phone were willing to engage with us, but we recommend peer-to-peer texting and broader texting campaigns in order to have more meaningful engagement with voters. The fear of government retaliation and surveillance is always present, and community members often feel uncomfortable sharing political opinions with strangers.

- **Islamophobia within AMEMSA communities:** Our team of mainly Muslim phone-bankers mentioned some people were more open to talking to us if we identified as a local organization rather than a Muslim organization. Other phone-bankers mentioned being concerned about Islamophobia from non-Muslim AMEMSA voters, especially a significant number of Indian American Hindu voters in VA who are Modi supporters.

- **The need for more voter education and the construction of a shared political AMEMSA voting identity bloc that is unified around a shared vision, goals and values:** In having conversations with voters, it’s apparent that there isn’t a cohesive political vision AMEMSA voters are moving towards. A significant level of work needs to be done in order to truly build a voting electorate that feels empowered, informed, connected, and engaged in the broader process of civic engagement. Voting is one component of engaging this system; however, understanding the power of that vote beyond election day is important. For example, building the political understanding of how the political process operates and where there are leverage points allows communities to practice their political power, rather than feeling disempowered and concerned about whether their votes make a difference. Overall, building intra-community solidarity and wielding our collective power will take time.

- **Making Voting Accessible:** Accessibility is critical for our communities to make an informed and safe vote. Given the pandemic, there were limited state resources available to help bilingual and disabled voters navigate online registration systems, voting by mail applications, and early voting information. In particular working class AMEMSA voters have had difficulty receiving their ballot information given limited access to smartphones and broadband internet. In order for our elections to be free and fair, state governments must invest in language and disability accessible voting tools for our diverse communities.

- **Centering working-class Black and Brown AMEMSA low-propensity voters:** As a collective, we recommend that civic engagement efforts make a dedicated effort to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons low-propensity registered voters aren’t engaging the political system. Rather than focusing solely on mid to high-propensity voters, there is potential here to also move people towards engaging the broader political system and connecting it with base-building. We also suggest investing in prioritizing segments of AMEMSA communities like Black, women of color and youth voters.

- **Incorporating AMEMSA community members who cannot vote:** The right to vote isn’t granted to everyone in our communities. Many are disenfranchised as a result of being criminalized or not having the right to vote because they aren’t citizens. Yet, these are the margins of our communities that are heavily targeted by the state’s policies and are also often neglected in civic engagement efforts. Any meaningful AMEMSA civic engagement campaign and GOTV effort has to take into account how to incorporate the issue priorities for AMEMSA voters who are systematically excluded from voting.
REFLECTIONS (CONTINUED)

Overall, the findings and reflections from this campaign have helped JMC root and ground ourselves further in understanding community needs in Virginia. As a collective, we acknowledge that collective liberation will not be achieved through the ballot box; however, engaging the political system on our terms is important because of the stakes. Despite all of the barriers, AMEMSA communities are continuing to remain politically engaged and there is a glimmer of hope from the many who have been politicized in the past few years due to the deteriorating political conditions.

RESOURCES FOR ELECTIONS/CONTINGENCY PLANNING

- Find more information on how to vote in Virginia (https://www.elections.virginia.gov/casting-a-ballot/).
- To track your ballot in Virginia follow (https://www.elections.virginia.gov/citizen-portal/)
- If you witness voter suppression or anyone tries to stop you from exercising your right to vote please call the Election Protection Hotline at 1-866-687-8683

Planning Post-Election Scenario Resources

- Bystander Intervention training – trainings for post-election response efforts
  - Hold The Line Trainings (https://holdthelineguide.com/) - Hold the Line has created a guide designed to help people from all walks of life take action to. There is a role for everyone in this effort, and your help is needed.
  - DC Peace Teams: Bystander Intervention and Nonviolent Communication (https://dcpeacesteam.com). These sessions, by DC Peace Teams, will discuss the challenges that voters, election workers, demonstrators and others will face during the voting, vote counting, and results declaration periods, and how ABI and NVC tools may be used to protect the election process.
- For those who are not eligible to vote (formerly incarcerated and have not had your voting rights restored, undocumented, or a non-citizen) you remain a critical part of our community. Organize with Justice for Muslims Collective, phone-bank with us, and make your concerns heard by plugging into local work!

Get Engaged with JMC by visiting our website at JusticeForMuslims.org

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