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Democrats, the South is Not Beyond Reach - Just Look to MENA Immigrants

Every year, on a chilly early-November morning, my *baba* wakes up at dawn to walk to our nearest polling location in McLean, Virginia. And every year, he proudly returns with an “I voted” sticker in hand and a story of gratitude to share. As an immigrant, voting is not only a duty he proudly performs but a reminder of his commitment to the second country he calls home and the Democratic party to which he belongs.

As analysts and commentators call for [“dumping Dixie”](#) and focusing electoral efforts elsewhere, I know that as a native Virginian and the daughter of a Moroccan immigrant, incorporating Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) immigrants into the Democratic political fold and Southern electorate is crucial. By conducting interviews with Moroccan immigrants from Virginia to better understand their views on the Southern cultural and political landscape, I believe that the South is not beyond Democratic reach.

Middle Eastern and North African immigrants could flip certain communities in the South towards Democratic leadership if Democrats invest financially and politically in them. MENA Southern immigrant enclaves will prove to be a critical population to invest in because the majority identify as Democrats and they are demographically increasing at high rates. Currently, such immigrant enclaves are not largely supporting the Democratic party because they are not being invested in. This lack of investment has resulted in such immigrant communities feeling alienated from both the specific political party and larger Southern community. When you genuinely invest, both financially and socially, in underrepresented communities, such groups will and have come out in droves for the Democratic party in the past.

Longstanding Democratic dreams of flipping the South can come to fruition by the 2022 midterm cycle if Democratic operatives devote their time and energy towards earning the trust and support of MENA immigrant enclaves. Such communities’ political strength lies in increasing rates of immigration and demographic alterations. One can look to the Commonwealth of Virginia as a roadmap here. Once a reliably red state, Virginia is now controlled by a Democratic governor, lieutenant governor, two senators, and attorney general. What has accounted for that change? Immigrants in suburban Virginian neighborhoods. Specifically, Democrats have gained control of the state by investing in [suburban regions](#) around metropolitan areas, as evidenced most clearly in Northern Virginia. The state’s eastern cities, those with closer proximity to Washington, DC, have [voted for democrats](#) in increased numbers over the last twenty years. These communities are abundant with immigrant populations, and specifically MENA immigrants.

The state has followed [national trends](#) of immigration over the last thirty years and is among the states with the [fastest-growing](#) Middle Eastern and North African immigrant populations. Other states within the South have increasingly large MENA immigrant populations, including North Carolina with [20,500](#) and Georgia with [17,400](#). Nationally, most Middle Eastern and North African immigrants are Democrats, with almost [60 percent](#) of Arab Americans preferring President Joe Biden in the 2020 election. While demographics indicate that the state, and the greater South, will only accumulate more immigrants over the next decade, some assume this will tilt the political balance further left. But democratic investment into said communities is critical. You can't just rely on the hope that more immigrants will vote blue in the years to come but must instead ensure they feel welcomed into the party well before election day arrives.

Currently, Middle Eastern and North African communities are not flooding polling stations in support of the Democratic party because such investment hasn't occurred. This lack of investment has resulted in MENA immigrants feeling alienated from both the Democratic party and the South as a whole. In interviews with Moroccan immigrants residing in the Commonwealth, many stated that they felt alienated from the regional Democratic Party and the state itself. One migrant remarked that when he traveled fifteen minutes from his home to the town of Manassas, that is when he "entered true Virginia." In clarifying his reference to "true Virginia," he designated "white, primarily conservative, and older" individuals to encompass the authentic Commonwealth identity. Other interviewed immigrants echoed the same sentiment, indicating that non-white immigrant communities do not feel included within a homogenous Southern culture.

Moroccan migrants' concerns regarding authentic and proper Southern culture were reinforced in 2008 by John McCain's campaign spokeswoman, Nancy Pfotenhauer. She [stated](#), "the Democrats have just come in from the District of Columbia and moved into northern Virginia, and that's really what you see there. But the rest of the state—real Virginia, if you will—I think will be very responsive to Senator McCain's message." The designation of 'true' or 'real' Virginia being a conservative beacon for white voters hits home with many MENA immigrants. I can say with certainty, from living in the Commonwealth my whole life, that it is alienating this key Southern electoral bloc not only from greater politics but specifically the Democratic party. Rather, the Democratic party

The lessons learned from Virginia are applicable to the rest of the Southern region. Investing in underrepresented Southern communities has resulted in huge victories for Democrats in the past. Look at what happened in Georgia. For the first time since 2003, Georgia is represented by Democratic leadership, additionally resulting in Democratic control of the Senate. To be sure, what happened in Georgia is unique and will not occur in every other state that encompasses the South. Every minority population and person has their own political needs and desires. However,

due largely to grassroots organizing efforts and Black support, this historic win is a testament to what Democratic economic and social investment can do.

The growing presence of larger immigrant enclaves in Virginia and the greater American South increasingly challenge long-established ethnic and political hierarchies, chiseling at the walls of conceived 'Southernness.' The Virginia and South that I know and love can be gained by the Democratic party if operatives invest early to ensure immigrant populations, and specifically Middle Eastern and North African immigrant enclaves, not only feel included within the party on voting day, but welcomed into the broader Southern region.