

Young Black voters press Biden on Gaza

Say he must do more to protect Palestinians

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WASHINGTON – Demetrius Briscoe voted for Joe Biden in 2020, but the senior at Bowie State University, a historically Black university in Maryland, is on the fence about whether he will support the president next year.

Briscoe, 25, doesn't think many of his peers will vote for Biden because he hasn't demanded a cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war that has left thousands of Palestinian civilians injured or dead.

"He's really putting a stain on his presidency that I don't think will be easily washed away," said Briscoe, adding that Biden and fellow Democrats in Maryland should urge more action. "If the Democrats call for a cease-fire it may save the Democratic Party from, I think, a wave of young people not voting for them."

One issue expected to haunt Biden with younger Black voters like Briscoe is whether he has done enough to demand more protections for Palestinians, some young people and political experts said. They argue Biden's positions, including not calling for an immediate cease-fire, could cost him support from African Americans, traditionally a loyal voting bloc for Democrats.

Biden has opposed calls for a cease-fire, arguing an outcome with Hamas still in control of Gaza is unacceptable.

"There is a moral imperative that Biden is choosing to ignore, and it can very well cost him and down-ticket candidates the election," said Jason Williams, associate professor of justice studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

Across the country, there have been thousands of pro-Palestinian rallies with nearly 30% of them on college campuses, according to a recent report by a consortium at Harvard University.

At a rally in October at Howard University, a historically Black university in Washington, students slammed Biden for not calling for a cease-fire and com-



Thousands participated in the National March on Washington: Free Palestine rally on Nov. 4. Organizers made a push to demand both a cease-fire in the Israel-Gaza war and an end to U.S. aid to Israel. ERIC KAYNE/USA TODAY

plained he hasn't done enough to help Palestinians. Delaney Leonard, a 19-year-old sophomore at Howard who helped organize the rally, said she has no intention of voting for Biden. She doesn't think she's alone.

"It's definitely going to play a factor into people making their voting decisions," Leonard said.

One major challenge Biden faces is trying to counter narratives shared on social media about the war, said Keesha Middlemass, an associate professor of political science at Howard University.

"Young people are finally seeing the impact of America's war machine," said Middlemass, adding that some are concerned about the nation's support of Israel. "That's what students are so fearful of – is this blind loyalty without consideration of the rights of Palestinians to exist?"

Although Biden has stood in solidarity with Israel since it was attacked by Hamas on Oct. 7, his administration has started to shift its tone, becoming more critical about how Israel is carrying out its war amid the rising number of Palestinian civilian casualties.

During a Dec. 2 speech in Dubai, Vice President Kamala Harris said "international humanitarian law must be respected" and that "too many innocent Palestinians have been killed."

The White House last week pressed Israel to find a point to wind down its air and ground campaign in Gaza, but Is-

raeli officials have said it will still take "several months" to defeat Hamas and end the war.

In Biden's most direct criticism of Israel since the war began, he warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that Israel is "starting to lose" international support in its war against Hamas because of its "indiscriminate bombing" in Gaza.

For some African Americans, there's a sense of solidarity with Palestinians.

Khadirah Muhammad, a senior at Georgia State University, remembers seeing on social media the Black Lives Matter murals in Gaza and watching Palestinians demonstrating during the 2020 George Floyd protests. For her, it was a symbol of solidarity with Palestinians also in the struggle for freedom.

"I just feel like it's necessary to speak up when things are wrong," said Muhammad, 22, who joined a pro-Palestinian rally on campus in October.

Williams pointed to other instances where Palestinians supported African Americans during social justice protests, including over the deaths of Michael Brown in Missouri and Trayvon Martin in Florida.

During the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Jewish faith leaders, students and activists were key supporters of African Americans. But for decades, some segments of the African American community have expressed strong support for Palestinians.

The turning point was in the 1960s with the Black Power wing of the Black freedom struggle, said Michael R. Fischbach, professor of history at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, and author of "Black Power and Palestine Transnational Countries of Color."

Fischbach said he's not surprised younger African Americans feel empathy for Palestinians. He said several factors connect them, including a sense of kinship in this "global gated community," a pushback against what they believe is settler colonialism and shared experiences of living in segregated communities.

"A lot of young people, notably of color in this country, can instinctively identify with Palestinians because it resembles, again, the experience that they're seeing at home," Fischbach said.

Briscoe said some young people are wary of backing Democrats because they don't want to support a party that doesn't condemn what they call genocide.

The White House has taken exception to allegations that Israel is carrying out "genocide" against Palestinians. It has argued it is Hamas, not Israel, seeking the genocide of a group of people.

"This word 'genocide' is getting thrown around in a pretty inappropriate way by lots of different folks," John Kirby, a White House spokesman on national security matters, said last month. "What Hamas wants, make no mistake about it, is genocide. They want to wipe Israel off the map. They've said so publicly on more than one occasion."

Hannah Saxon, an 18-year-old freshman at North Carolina A&T University, will vote for the first time next year. She's weighing whom she will support. She said Biden's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict matters. She's troubled by the deaths of so many Palestinian civilians, whom she called "the underdogs."

Saxon said she doesn't want to vote for Democrats simply because African Americans traditionally support them. "You want to do it because you believe in this person and they'll do the right thing for this country," she said, but added, "If Trump is running again, Biden is the better choice."