

## ***Why some Ethiopian voters in Virginia swung for Youngkin — and how it may spell trouble for Democrats elsewhere***



Protesters rallied outside of the White House on Nov. 8 to denounce President Biden's approach to the conflict in Ethiopia. (Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post)

By Teo Armus  
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Girma Makonnen had long considered himself a loyal Democrat. Since emigrating from Ethiopia and then settling in Northern Virginia more than two decades ago, he donated, phone-banked and door-knocked for a long list of liberal candidates. Except this year, when the 52-year-old voted for Glenn Youngkin — and other Republicans down the ticket.

“The Democratic Party right now is the Biden administration, and they blindsided us on foreign policy,” said Makonnen, an engineer who lives in Ashburn. “We were Democrats because we believed in the system. But everybody in the Ethiopian community is feeling the pain of neglect.”

Like him, some Ethiopian Americans in Virginia heeded calls to cast a vote for the GOP at the polls earlier this month amid a coordinated effort to express disapproval with how President Biden has handled [growing conflict in the East African nation](#). Those involved in the effort support Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who won the Nobel Peace Prize two years ago but has since led the country into an escalating civil war, vowing to “[bury this enemy with our blood and bones](#).”

Leaders of the effort say that by authorizing [sanctions](#) on Ethiopia and [cutting off trade benefits](#), Biden has effectively empowered the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), a repressive regime that led the country before Abiy.

And with seemingly no response to their concerns from the White House, organizers said, Abiy supporters in Virginia took their message to the polls — despite, or perhaps because of, the Ethiopian community's long allegiance with Democrats.

“The government’s approach is so illogical at this point that we have to show we are disappointed in an area that can potentially hurt the Democratic Party,” said Mesfin Tegenu, chairman of the American-Ethiopian Public Affairs Committee (AEPAC). Organizers with the group said they put out mass messaging on social media, canvassed at Ethiopian Orthodox churches and restaurants in the D.C. suburbs, and texted thousands of people in hopes of rallying community members to vote for Youngkin. Whether it made a difference in the election is difficult, if not outright impossible, to quantify. Although the Northern Virginia suburbs are home to one of the largest Ethiopian communities in the country, there is little data on how it functions as a voting bloc — or how members of the Ethiopian diaspora voted in Youngkin’s [narrow victory](#) over former governor Terry McAuliffe (D) earlier this month. Virginia is home to about 30,000 immigrants from Ethiopia — about 1 in 8 of all Ethiopians nationwide, according to [estimates from the Migration Policy Institute](#). Fairfax County and Alexandria have some of the highest concentrations of Ethiopians in the country.

A look at heavily East African precincts in the area, including those in Woodbridge and West End Alexandria, does not show a strong swing to Youngkin compared with previous years or other precincts in heavily blue Northern Virginia. Still, community leaders from across the political spectrum — including some who campaigned for McAuliffe — say it was impossible to ignore an unprecedented set of rumblings, one that may offer a warning to Democratic campaigns elsewhere. “It was pretty widespread,” said Bert Bayou, an Ethiopian American who helped canvass for McAuliffe as the vice president of Unite Here Local 23. “Ethiopians felt betrayed by the U.S., but specifically by the party.”

## ***A growing crisis***

Since late last year, Ethiopia has been marred by growing conflict between the government of Abiy and the TPLF, an armed political faction that claims to represent the country’s Tigray ethnic minority.

Many Ethiopians in the Washington area [had initially welcomed Abiy’s rise with enthusiasm](#), celebrating him as the country’s first democratically elected leader after three decades of the TPLF’s repressive regime.

Although Biden largely stayed mum on Ethiopia during his 2020 campaign, that has changed amid an escalating situation that has [displaced roughly 2 million people](#) and led the United Nations to warn that at least 400,000 people are at risk of famine. [What’s happening in Ethiopia? Here’s what the rebel advance toward Addis Ababa could mean.](#)

Top U.S. officials have cautioned [about imposing sanctions](#) against groups involved in the conflict and urged all Americans to leave the country. On Election Day in Virginia, the White House announced it would suspend trade benefits for Ethiopia. Groups such as AEPAC had worked for months to lobby elected officials at all levels of government to support, rather than punish, Abiy's government. They sent letters to approximately 70 members of Congress, Tegenu said, and planned demonstrations in downtown Washington.

But Biden and White House officials continued to place growing pressure on Abiy. With the Virginia elections ramping up, McAuliffe came into focus as a close ally of the Democratic establishment.

Solomon Addis Getahun, a historian at Central Michigan University who studies the Ethiopian diaspora, said a group such as AEPAC only captures the views of those Ethiopian Americans who support Abiy at the moment. Given Ethiopia's complicated patchwork of ethnic tribes — nearly all of which have members who have immigrated to the United States — and disagreements within the diaspora about Abiy and the TPLF, it is hardly the only perspective.

"There are people who are quiet; there are people who are very vocal," he said. "That those people are talking doesn't mean they represent the majority."

Groups of Tigrayan Americans, who likely represent a smaller slice of the population in the United States have also rallied in D.C. in opposition to a situation they have likened to genocide. They did not appear to get as involved in organizing their cause around the Virginia elections.

## ***Campaign strategy***

In mid-October, AEPAC sent [a draft pledge](#) to both campaigns, asking them to commit to acknowledging the value of Virginia's Ethiopian American community and lobbying to keep special trade benefits granted to Ethiopia. Neither campaign signed on.

Pro-Abiy advocacy groups continued to push, eventually securing two-minute videos from each campaign to play at an Ethiopian festival in Alexandria in mid-October.

"We're going to explore expanding our trading relationship with Ethiopia,"

Youngkin [said in his address](#), later posted online. "We should in fact be deeply engaged with trade for coffee, spices, knitting, woven materials and electrical machinery."

McAuliffe, who [spoke about](#) the importance of inclusion and repeated platform points about housing and education, avoided any mention of Ethiopia at all.

Gennet Negussie, a board member with the Global Ethiopian Advocacy Nexus, said the video showed how she felt McAuliffe had failed to listen to calls from her organization and others like it.

"I really like McAuliffe as a person, and I really think he gets it," said Negussie, who lives in Falls Church. "But just like how Republicans when Trump was in power did not have any backbone to speak against Trump, Democrats didn't stand up to party leadership on Ethiopia."

A McAuliffe spokesperson said in a statement that “Terry has always had strong relationships with the Ethiopian community” and “was grateful for the deep support he received from the Ethiopian and entire African Diaspora community.”

On the campaign trail, he [hosted](#) a small business roundtable at an Ethiopian restaurant in Woodbridge. And the week before the election, he [issued a statement](#) promising to create the state’s first African Diaspora advisory group.

But by then, the videos were already being circulated online.

### ***‘A lot of work to do’***

A few weeks ahead of Election Day, a group of about 35 Ethiopian American volunteers collected names and phone numbers for 3,500 Ethiopians across Northern Virginia, sending out text messages that linked to Youngkin’s video and urged Ethiopians to rally against Biden’s “biased and one-sided policy.”

On social media, they distributed messages bearing the Ethiopian flag, distributed in both English and Amharic, that echoed that sentiment. And they also went in person, speaking to potential voters at Ethiopian Orthodox churches in areas like Fairfax’s Skyline Plaza.

Elias Hiruy, who helped coordinate the effort and said he often has voted for Democrats, said he recognized that the Virginia governor does not hold direct influence over the United States. But he said that Democrats would hear the message.

“It’s not a local issue. It’s a party issue, but they’re all connected,” Hiruy said. “By protesting Terry McAuliffe, we make sure they’re protested all the way up.”

Meronne Teklu, an Ethiopian American who ran in the Democratic primary for Alexandria City Council and voted for McAuliffe, said there were lessons to be learned: Democrats in state and local races needed to better engage Ethiopians to show them why the party had their best interests at heart.

“If we are moving in the same trajectory of what we saw in the last election cycle here in Virginia, then I think we have a lot of work to do,” she said. “This issue isn’t going to go away.”

*Rachel Chason contributed to this report.*