



Language Access & Local Voting Rights

A Case Study of Arabic Language Assistance in Michigan Communities

Demos

Thank You

We thank the individuals from local government and community-based organizations who have worked on the enactment of language access policies in Michigan and were interviewed for this report: Council Member Mustapha Hammoud of the city council of Dearborn, Michigan; Shams Al-Badry of the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS); and the National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC).

About Dēmos

Dēmos is a non-profit public policy organization working to build a just, inclusive, multiracial democracy and economy. We work hand in hand to build power with and for Black and brown communities, forging strategic alliances with grassroots and state-based organizations.

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Introduction

Language assistance is essential to ensure that voters who lack English proficiency can participate fully in our democracy.

Since the federal Voting Rights Act (VRA) was amended to include language assistance provisions in 1975, many voters throughout the country have had access to translated election materials and interpreter services. This assistance has led to higher rates of voter registration and voter turnout in many communities.¹

However, the federal VRA does not guarantee language access to all voters who might need assistance. Tens of thousands of limited-English-proficient (LEP) voters fall outside of the federal VRA's reach because of the law's strict population thresholds and because of its limited definitions of "language minorities" who are eligible for assistance. In recent years, many state and local governments have responded to these gaps by enacting their own language access policies, including state-level voting rights acts and local ordinances focusing on large LEP populations.

Some of the most recent local efforts have revolved around providing Arabic language assistance in the metropolitan area of Detroit, Michigan, which has among the highest concentrations of Arab Americans in the United States. Despite years of advocacy to include Arab Americans among the language groups covered by the federal VRA,² Arabic-language assistance is not

Arabic-language assistance is not mandated under federal law, and state-level voting rights legislation has yet to be enacted in Michigan as of this writing.



mandated under federal law, and state-level voting rights legislation has yet to be enacted in Michigan as of this writing. The Detroit-area cities of Dearborn and Hamtramck each enacted policies in 2022 to address the needs of these LEP populations and to bridge significant gaps in federal and state coverage.

This study examines how local policies can be an effective response to major limitations of the federal VRA, how community-based advocacy can support the passage of language-access laws, and how challenges to the implementation of local policies can be overcome. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to gaining local language access policies, but this study will use the policies in Dearborn and Hamtramck to illuminate some of the more effective practices that can be applied in future language access advocacy campaigns.

The Need for Local Language Access Laws

Limitations of VRA Section 203

Section 203 of the federal VRA guarantees language assistance to limited-English-proficient voters throughout the U.S. and has played a critical role in expanding access to the ballot for many historically marginalized communities.³ However, the mandates of the VRA apply only to “language minorities” who have faced well-documented discrimination and whose voting rights have been compromised by English-only election materials. At present, the VRA’s covered language minorities are restricted to “persons who are American Indian, Asian American, Alaskan Natives or of Spanish heritage.”⁴ States and localities have no federal obligations to provide language assistance to voters who speak a language whose origin is African, Caribbean, European (other than Spanish), Middle Eastern, or Pacific Islander—among many others.



The mandates of the VRA apply only to “language minorities” who have faced well-documented discrimination and whose voting rights have been compromised by English-only election materials.

Section 203 employs multiple formulas that rely on a group's population size to determine coverage for a state or locality. A local jurisdiction such as a city or a county can be covered under either of two tests:⁵

5%

Percentage-Based Benchmark

For each protected language group, if the number of voting-age citizens who are limited-English-proficient is greater than five percent of the citizen voting-age population in a local jurisdiction, and their illiteracy rate is above the national average,⁶ then Section 203 coverage applies for that language group.

10,000 Citizens

Population-Based Benchmark

For each protected language group, if the number of voting-age citizens who are LEP is greater than 10,000 in a local jurisdiction, and their illiteracy rate is above the national average, then Section 203 coverage applies for that language group.

Entire states can also be covered if the five percent benchmark is met statewide. In addition, special requirements apply to Indigenous populations whose communities may overlap two or more municipal geographies, so that all jurisdictions that contain part of the tribal land are covered.⁷

Failing to satisfy these benchmarks means that no language assistance is required by the VRA in a jurisdiction, even if populations are sizable. Because census determinations are made every five years, jurisdictions may eventually gain federal VRA coverage, but it is also possible to lose coverage if a group's relative percentage drops below five percent or the absolute numbers drop below 10,000.

Once a jurisdiction is covered by the VRA, there are extensive requirements for translations of election materials—voter registration forms, information packets, sample ballots, actual ballots, signage, and an array of other written materials—as well as for oral assistance, which typically includes interpreter services and the hiring of bilingual poll workers.⁸

A Patchwork of State and Local Policies

To address the shortcomings of Section 203, some state and local governments have enacted language access policies that accomplish one or more of the following: (1) extending the covered language groups beyond the federal language-minority definitions, (2) employing benchmarks below the VRA minimums (for example three percent of the citizen voting-age population or 7,500 citizens), or (3) using a broader base to calculate eligibility, such as counting all of the residents in a city who speak a language, rather than counting only the voting-eligible LEP citizens. For instance, a strong policy might say that any language group whose adult population numbers 5,000 or more would be eligible for translated ballots and other election materials. A weaker policy might employ the same language-minority group definitions and population base as the VRA but only lower the benchmarks to four percent and 8,500 and only offer translated sample ballots.

Some jurisdictions have focused on expanding language assistance coverage for specific ethnic groups and languages. In these cities and counties, a fast-growing immigrant community has become a significant portion of the voting population. At the same time, advocates have become more organized, and there is growing support to accommodate community interests among government officials, some of whom are themselves members of these ethnic communities. For instance, Haitian Creole ballot translations have been available in Florida's Miami-Dade County for several years to assist the county's large Haitian American population.⁹ Numerous cities in Southern California have similarly addressed language needs among ethnic groups that fall outside federal coverage. For example, the City of Glendale has offered ballot translations in Armenian, and the City of Beverly Hills has offered ballot translations in Farsi.¹⁰ Illinois' Cook County currently provides language assistance to voters in eleven specified languages other than English, including the non-Section-203 languages of Arabic, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian.¹¹

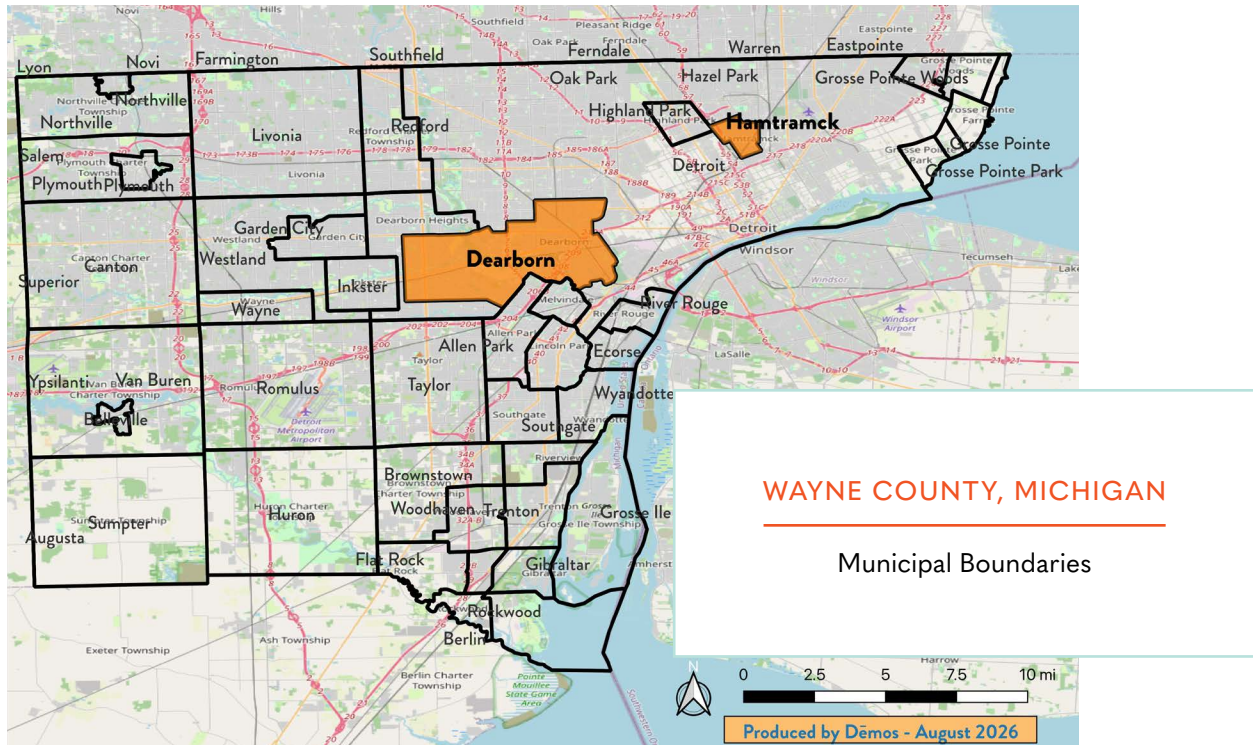
Other state and local governments do not target specific languages but employ language-group definitions and numerical benchmarks that are less restrictive than the federal ones. In California, state law requires county election officials to provide sample ballots and instructions in precincts where three percent or more of the voting-age residents (not just adult LEP citizens) are members of a single language group and lack sufficient skills in English to vote without assistance.¹² For instance, in San Diego County, sample ballots are offered in Arabic, Farsi, Somali, and several Asian languages, in addition to the VRA-covered languages of Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.¹³

State-level voting rights acts can also address shortcomings in the federal VRA.¹⁴ State VRAs typically expand language assistance and address key provisions of the federal VRA, such as litigation standards and preclearance systems, that have been undermined by court decisions and have not been restored by Congress.¹⁵ For instance, the Connecticut Voting Rights Act (CTVRA) was enacted in 2023 and employs benchmarks significantly lower than the federal benchmarks: a 4,000 absolute-number test, as well as a percent-test of two percent.¹⁶ The CTVRA does not link coverage to language minorities with documented histories of discrimination. Instead, the CTVRA extends coverage to municipalities in which voting age citizens “speak a particular shared language other than English and are limited English proficient individuals.”¹⁷

Demography and Language Needs in Arab American Communities

Unlike the data for language minorities covered by the VRA, precise numbers for Arab American populations can be difficult to obtain through U.S. Census data.¹⁸ There is no distinct “Arab American” category under federal data guidelines, and Arab American populations are not clearly broken down within the “white” racial category.¹⁹ Nonetheless, there are Census Bureau survey data on countries of origin and language usage, as well as estimates from local government and nonprofit organizations, that can provide insights into Michigan’s Arab American populations and their language needs.

First, Michigan’s Arab American communities are among the largest in the United States, and second only to California’s in total numbers. Census Bureau data from 2024 have estimated Michigan’s Arab American population to be over 218,000;²⁰ however, according to a 2026 analysis by the Arab American Institute that takes into account immigration and census undercounting, the actual number may be closer to 400,000.²¹ The estimated growth in Michigan’s Arab American population since 2020 is approximately 87 percent.²² The state’s Arab American population is also diverse and draws on several countries of origin; some of the largest numbers in Michigan communities are of Lebanese, Iraqi, or Yemeni descent.²³



Municipal Boundary Shapefiles Source: Wayne County, MI

Base map and data from OpenStreetMap and OpenStreetMap Foundation (CC-BY-SA).
<https://www.openstreetmap.org> and contributors.

Several cities in Michigan's Wayne County have among the highest concentrations of Arab Americans in the country.²⁴ Dearborn, with an overall population of nearly 110,000 people, has been estimated to be roughly one-half Arab American.²⁵ Nearby Dearborn Heights, with a population of over 60,000 people, has been estimated to be at least one-third Arab American.²⁶ And in Hamtramck, which has a population of nearly 28,000, Arab Americans are estimated to be over one-third of the city's population.²⁷

ESTIMATED ARAB AMERICAN PERCENTAGE OF OVERALL POPULATION

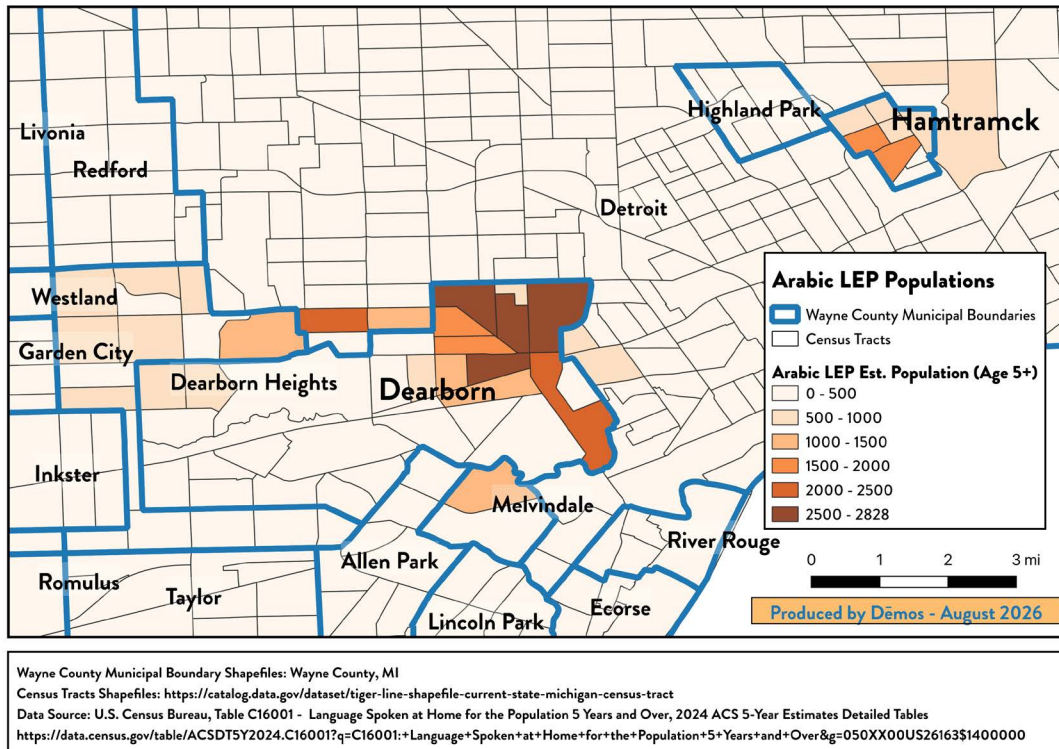
Dearborn (nearly)

1/2

Hamtramck (over)

1/3

LIMITED-ENGLISH-PROFICIENT ARABIC SPEAKERS IN DEARBORN AND HAMTRAMCK



Levels of limited English proficiency are also high among Arab Americans. In 2024, the limited-English-proficient population among Arabic speakers in Wayne County was estimated to be nearly 45 percent.²⁸ Statewide, Arabic speakers are the second-largest non-English language group in Michigan, exceeded only by Spanish speakers. Recent estimates place the number of Arabic speakers in Michigan at approximately 210,000, with 190,000 of them residing in the metropolitan Detroit area alone.²⁹

Nada Al-Hanooti of Emgage Michigan, a Muslim American civic engagement organization, recently provided anecdotes to Michigan Public Radio that illustrate some of the challenges that LEP voters face, particularly elderly voters.³⁰ Al-Hanooti recounted a prior election day at a polling site in Dearborn Heights where she encountered a Lebanese American woman who reminded her of her grandmother. She recalled the woman telling her, “I never leave my house. I am vulnerable to COVID. I just left [home] just to vote.” As the woman was preparing to leave the polling site, Al-Hanooti sat down next to her and helped her fill out the form, which was available only in English. It had become clear to her that the woman would not have been able to cast an English-only ballot without her help. In the interview, Al-Hanooti also made clear that her experience was not unique:

Her colleagues had witnessed several voters struggle with English-only forms in the city of Dearborn. She emphasized, “This is a form of voter suppression.”

Voter suppression and intimidation have been serious problems for Arab Americans in Michigan and other parts of the country.³¹ The City of Hamtramck itself has been subject to voting rights litigation to remedy anti-Arab discrimination. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Justice sued Hamtramck for violations of Section 2 of the VRA during the 1999 elections; these acts included election workers challenging the citizenship of voters with dark skin (targeting South Asian voters) and voters with Arabic-sounding names, as well as requiring those voters to take an oath and to provide extra identification.³²

Among the remedies in a settlement agreement with the federal government were requiring Hamtramck to end racial profiling and to establish a short-term language assistance program for South Asian (Bengali-speaking) and Arab American voters. Hamtramck was eventually covered under Section 203 for Bengali beginning in 2011, but Arabic-language assistance expired within a few years under the settlement agreement.³³



“This is a form of voter suppression.”

—
NADA AL-HANOOTI,
EMGAGE MICHIGAN

Language Access Policies of Dearborn & Hamtramck

To better understand Arabic-language assistance in Michigan, it is useful to look at both the actual requirements of the policies and the processes that produced them.

The next section will examine the Dearborn and Hamtramck policy requirements together, because the resolutions are almost identically worded and were passed within weeks of each other. The analyses of the advocacy work and legislative processes will focus on Dearborn, since it was the first of the two cities to enact a resolution and it is more typical of municipalities that do not have a prior history of VRA litigation or of Section 203 compliance.

City Council Resolutions: Key Provisions and Requirements

The policies adopted by Dearborn in March of 2022 and Hamtramck in April of 2022 contain clear references to the VRA and specific gaps in federal coverage. The two city council resolutions are nearly identical, but there is one major difference: The Dearborn resolution mandates assistance for all language groups that meet the resolution's numerical criteria—with Arabic being the only language that is currently eligible for coverage; the Hamtramck resolution, however, mandates only Arabic-language assistance and makes assistance for any other language groups that might satisfy the numerical criteria entirely optional. (See Appendices A and B for the text of each resolution.)

Each resolution draws on the federal Voting Rights Act and criticizes the narrowness of the “language minority group” definitions while establishing broader numerical triggers that are taken directly from Section 203. The Dearborn and Hamtramck resolutions employ the same five percent/10,000 tests of the VRA, but they make an important

change in the denominator used to calculate eligibility.³⁴ Instead of using voting-age citizens who are limited-English-proficient as the base, the resolutions use “the city’s residents” who speak the language as the base. This formula makes it much easier for a language group to qualify for assistance, because the base is larger and includes Arabic-speaking minors and noncitizens who reside in the city.

Both resolutions also cover a wide range of election materials, not just sample ballots, which are often the only materials offered under more-limited policies. Both require “timely translation for all official ballots, notices, absentee ballot applications, registration forms, appropriate signage, and affidavits.” The resolutions also state that “[t]he Clerk shall provide equitable language access in operations and communications related to its elections.” However, interpreter services by poll workers and other election officials are not clearly guaranteed under the policies, unlike federal VRA standards that require both written translations and oral assistance. While Modern Standard Arabic can be used for written translations, it also is not clear how each city might address voters’ spoken dialects of Arabic, such as Lebanese Arabic vs. Yemeni Arabic, based on the variations and the predominance of dialects among LEP voters in each city.³⁵

Since the policies are relatively new, outreach and education for LEP communities to expand usage of the translated ballots will continue to be needed.³⁶ And, during early implementation, translation issues did arise. For example, media reports have noted that some voters have had trouble with the formality of some of the Arabic related to voting instructions and to ballot measures containing legislative language; instead, voters often prefer the use of more informal language in the translations.³⁷

A more serious translation problem arose in the November 2022 election, when there was an error in the Dearborn ballot’s judicial elections section that instructed voters to select “not more than one” rather than “not more than two.”³⁸ That year, Michigan had two open seats on the Michigan Supreme Court, and voters with flawed translations might have cast votes for only a single candidate, even though they could have voted for two.³⁹ However, no comparable translation problems have arisen since then.

Despite some of these implementation and translation challenges, reports by voters gaining access to translated ballots for the first time have been positive. For instance, one Lebanese American voter from Dearborn first became a naturalized citizen in 2021 and registered to vote on the same day. She explained, “That was the moment where I really felt that I am an American citizen.”⁴⁰ In reaction to being able to use a translated ballot for the first time, she stated, “I felt like I was at home when I voted in Arabic.”

“I felt like I was at home when I voted in Arabic.”

—
DEARBORN LEBANESE
AMERICAN VOTER

Advocacy and Policy Making for the Dearborn Resolution

Interviews that Dēmos conducted with Mustapha Hammoud, the Dearborn Council member who sponsored the resolution, and Shams Al-Badry, an advocate who has spent years working on civic engagement in Arab American communities, revealed a complex interplay of grassroots advocacy and local politics, as well as a state-level layer of policy influence. Some of these dynamics are likely unique to Dearborn, a city that is often called the “Capital of Arab America” and that is situated as a hub for local, state, and national advocacy. But Dearborn is also typical of many communities with large and growing foreign-born populations whose members are gaining increasing political influence, including winning seats on local boards and city councils.

In analyzing Dearborn’s language policy, it is useful to examine developments chronologically, but it is also important to consider how three sets of actors interacted throughout the process: (1) the Michigan secretary of state’s office, which has provided strong support for language assistance across the state; (2) grassroots advocates led by Arab American community organizations and their allies supporting voting rights; and (3) Dearborn’s local government officials, including its city council, mayor, and city clerk.⁴¹ These actors did not always coordinate with each other, and they were often at odds. For instance, advocates focused their early work on the city clerk, who at the time was not supportive of expanding translated materials, and less so on the city council. On the other hand, the council member who introduced the resolution drew on community support but relied largely on his own drafting and data analysis, relying more on the advice from the city’s legal staff. But the basic goals and interests of the actors eventually converged to produce the language access policy.

Secretary of State's Office

The need for Arabic-language ballots in Michigan has existed for many years, but the policies to make translations a reality appeared only in the early 2020s. Initial efforts by Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson to expand language assistance in Michigan predated the Dearborn-specific policies, and the secretary's office made several translated materials available for local use. In 2020, Secretary Benson formed a Michigan Language Access Task Force, composed of over 50 organizations and over 200 partners statewide that assisted in the creation of translated materials and web resources. These items included voter registration applications, absentee ballot applications, and toolkits that were translated into Arabic, Spanish, Bengali, Korean, Tagalog, Mandarin, Burmese, Hindi and Urdu.⁴² Under a pilot program implemented for the 2020 general elections, Dearborn was one of five Michigan cities that received sample ballots that had been translated, depending on the specific need, into Arabic, Spanish, or Bengali through the work of the Language Access Task Force.⁴³

Grassroots Advocacy and the City Clerk

Before the Dearborn resolution was introduced in 2022, advocates for Arabic-language assistance and their allies had pushed City Clerk George Darany—a longtime Dearborn-based elected official who is of Syrian and Lebanese descent⁴⁴—to offer translated election materials.⁴⁵ A broad coalition of organizations—local and national, as well as Arab American and non-Arab American—were involved in these efforts. At various stages, advocates included representatives from the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), Emgage Michigan, Michigan Voices, Voters Not Politicians, the League of Women Voters, the National Network for Arab American Communities, and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.⁴⁶

In July 2021, advocates met with Dearborn's city clerk to urge both the translation of sample ballots into Arabic and the posting of these sample ballots at all polling sites for the August 2021 elections. Nada Al-Hanooti of Emgage Michigan expressed some of the community's frustrations on local television: "What we had to do last election, we actually had to bring volunteers to translate voter registration forms and to translate their ballots inside with them, so they did not have those services for us."⁴⁷ In a separate interview, Al-Hanooti stated, "We pushed hard. It's up to us to put pressure and advocate for [translated ballots], because what we care about is making sure ... that there's fair and equal access to all Dearborn constituents, whether they speak English, whether they don't."⁴⁸

Abed Ayoub, a representative of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), based in Washington, D.C., also expressed dissatisfaction that the city clerk had not met prior demands to translate election material: “All we’re asking is, is do your job, translate the material. Now, it took members, community members emailing him. It took our organization getting involved to get a simple translation of the absentee ballot posted.”⁴⁹ Ayoub added, “[W]hat I’m saying is your policies are having a [disparate] impact on Arab Americans, and he needs to understand that.”

“It took our organization getting involved to get a simple translation of the absentee ballot posted.”

—
ABED AYOUB,
REPRESENTATIVE
OF THE AMERICAN-ARAB
ANTI-DISCRIMINATION
COMMITTEE

As is often the case in debates around language assistance, election officials in Dearborn were reluctant to offer new services when funding, resources, and the extent of voter needs were in question. In an email response to the ADC, the city clerk stated that his office had “only recently been contacted by a few residents requesting that election materials be written in Arabic.”⁵⁰ He added, “I am very surprised that residents would contact your office in D.C. before calling their clerk’s office in Dearborn. In my mind, this means that the need for Arabic election information is not widespread.”⁵¹

Ultimately, the city clerk agreed to post Arabic-language sample ballots on the Dearborn website, as well as at polling sites, beginning with the August 2021 primary election.⁵² But he remained adamant about not producing translations of other election materials. In an off-camera interview with local television, Darany stated that voters who only speak Arabic could compare the sample ballot to the real ballot, but that official ballots were not in the budget.⁵³ He opposed adding official ballots, because those ballots could open the door to ballots in other languages, which he argued would not be cost-effective.

Dearborn City Council’s Resolution

Arab American influence on the Dearborn City Council goes back decades, and since 2013 the seven-member council has had an Arab American majority. In 2022, four of its members were Arab American, including Mustapha Hammoud, the sponsor of the Arabic-translation resolution. Abdullah Hammoud (no relation to the council member) also began his tenure in 2022 as the city’s first Arab American mayor. Arab American

representation in elected office does not guarantee that those officials will support language access legislation, but it is clear from the statements of the mayor and the council members that their personal experiences and knowledge of local Arab American communities strongly influenced their support of the language-access resolution.

Council member Hammoud had been in office for only a few months when he introduced the Arabic-translation resolution at the city council's March 22, 2022 meeting.⁵⁴ Compiled quickly and first circulated in draft form only days before the meeting, the resolution was timed so that translated ballots could be available for the August 2022 primary elections, which were the first elections of the 2020s reflecting Michigan's new redistricting maps. Council member Hammoud also offered a detailed empirical analysis of Dearborn's electorate and the number of Arabic speakers in each precinct.

In his introductory remarks, council member Hammoud stressed the personal effects of language access on Arab American voters and recounted how he had been introduced to translated ballots through his father's work in the 2000s on Hamtramck's voter intimidation problems, as well as through conversations at that time with Jocelyn Benson, who had been a longtime advocate for language access prior to her tenure as secretary of state.⁵⁵ Council member Hammoud stated, "We all know voting is one of the most important rights we have as American citizens. Providing greater access to people builds additional trust, engagement, and integration of residents into our democracy."⁵⁶

Council member Erin Byrnes, who was the secondary sponsor of the resolution, offered her full endorsement: "I think every person, every voter has the right to read a ballot in a language that they are most comfortable and most familiar with and feel most confident with. ... [E]very resident when they go to vote should see the process of voting as a reflection of who they are."⁵⁷ She added, "It's a greater step towards equity and inclusion and recognizing our community."⁵⁸ Council member

Kamal Alsawafy expressed similar support: "This is about civic engagement, about being a part of your own community. My parents didn't start voting 'til I started voting. And while the process might seem like it's second nature to some, it could be intimidating to others. ... [O]ur democracy only gets better when we're all involved in it."⁵⁹

"Every resident when
they go to vote should
see the process of
voting as a reflection
of who they are."

COUNCIL MEMBER ERIN BYRNES

Although there was no opposition to the concept of translated ballots, a few council members expressed concerns that the resolution had been rushed, that there would be insufficient input from the public, and that the timing and cost of implementation were too uncertain. In addition, City Clerk George Darany expressed misgivings about costs and the deadline to have materials ready for the August 2022 election. He offered preliminary budgetary estimates that varied depending on whether multiple dialects would be needed to assist visually impaired voters.⁶⁰ The estimates fell within a range of roughly \$10,000 to \$20,000 per election.⁶¹

In response to concerns about uncertain or excessive costs, council member Hammoud posed the basic question: “How much is too much to spend on democracy?”⁶² He continued: “I’m hearing numbers like 10,000, 15,000. I’d be happy to spend \$100,000 a year on democracy. ... I think in a hundred million worth of tax money that’s given to this city, I think we can spare a little bit of extra money to make sure that everybody feels that they have a stock in our democracy.”

Mayor Abdullah Hammoud also expressed his support for the resolution and the allocation of sufficient dollars to implement it: “The issue of translated ballots is not a new issue.

It’s an issue that we’ve been discussing for decades. ... [F]rankly, what was frightening was some of the commentary that was spoken to in previous council meetings about why there should not be translated ballots. And I found that very undemocratic.”⁶³ He added, “As the administration, we are committed to fully fund the translation of ballots. We can find the funding within our budget, be it \$20,000 or be it \$100,000.”

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MAYOR ABDULLAH HAMMOUD

During public comments, Bilal Hammoud (no relation to either of the Dearborn officials), who was the former chair of the Department of State’s Language Access Task Force, offered additional insights into the implementation of prior language assistance in Michigan, including Hamtramck.⁶⁴ He also provided information on potential costs and, based on his recent conversations with vendors, offered an even lower cost estimate of \$4,000 per election to implement the translations. Hassan Abdullah, chair of the Dearborn Charter

Commission,⁶⁵ also expressed his personal support and directed more pointed remarks to the city clerk, criticizing any potential delays: “When you make a commitment to public service, increasing civic engagement falls under that umbrella [of the clerk’s responsibilities], and ensuring that it is done for this year, I think, is extremely important.”⁶⁶

Other speakers, including election workers and nonprofit representatives, recounted their personal experiences with language barriers and the effects on Arabic-speaking voters. Some individuals even offered to provide translation services for free or at a discount to the city. Nada Al-Hanooti of Emgage Michigan offered community-focused advocacy—reminding the city clerk that the translation issue was hardly novel and had been pushed by advocates for months—and concluded with a more personal note: “I’m here to urge you, to plead with you, to preserve our democracy, to make sure that people like my mother feel empowered to make their vote heard autonomously.”⁶⁷

On the city council’s final vote, a motion was introduced to sever language from the resolution setting the deadline for the August 2022 primary—basically deferring the translations to an unspecified date. The motion was defeated by a 5-2 vote. The full resolution was then voted on, and it passed by a unanimous vote.

Controversies and Legal Challenges

Although the Dearborn resolution saw minimal opposition during the city council meeting, there were controversies and challenges in the aftermath of its passage. Within days of the March 22 meeting, Maria Marzolo Darany, the wife of the city clerk, caused an uproar and was criticized because of a social media post that read in part, “What is typical is the group of bullies including both Hammouds and their cohorts for the last 4+ yrs. attacking precinct workers during election (to the point of needing police escort) and clerks (sic) office. So sad. We do speak American in this country as most immigrants learn.”⁶⁸

In an interview with local news, Nada Al-Hanooti of Emgage Michigan expressed her anger at the post: “This message is not only irresponsible but is racially charged.” The city clerk responded to the controversy, but he did little to criticize the actual post. He stated, “[I t]hink she said we do speak American in this country, which obviously is true. We also speak a lot of other different languages. She printed that. Those are her words, not mine.” Darany commented that he was ready to move forward to implement the resolution: “We will work as hard as we can to make sure this happens in August.”

The legality of the Dearborn resolution also became an issue when Wayne County Clerk Cathy Garrett questioned whether the city council had the authority to impose translation mandates.⁶⁹ In an April 2022 letter to the secretary of state, the county clerk wrote, “I look forward to reviewing the legal authority provided to the City of Dearborn from your office and the approved steps a City or Township in this state, that is not bound by federal mandate, follows regarding ballots and election materials being translated in other languages.” She expressed concerns that the resolution “does not specify any language or dialect” and that translated ballots could be considered “unofficial” and left uncounted.

The dispute was resolved when the secretary of state’s chief external affairs officer wrote in a reply letter that “The law does not prevent jurisdictions from translating ballots to other languages, and even if a lower percentage of the population speaks that language or if the language is not specifically covered by the Voting Rights Act.”⁷⁰ The letter further clarified that Michigan election law empowers local officials to translate ballots into other languages: “If the City of Dearborn and Wayne County seek to expand voting access among the more than 50% of Dearborn residents who speak Arabic, they have authority to do so under the same provisions of the Michigan Election Law governing the general printing of ballots.”⁷¹

Opportunities & Lessons

Below are some of the opportunities for improvement in the Dearborn and Hamtramck resolutions, as well as lessons for new language-access campaigns that can be drawn from the Michigan examples.

Building on the Dearborn and Hamtramck Resolutions

The Dearborn and Hamtramck resolutions provide both symbolic and practical support for limited-English-proficient voters through Arabic translations of ballots and election materials. But the resolutions' requirements are less than ideal, and they offer both greater and lesser protection than the federal Voting Rights Act.

The Dearborn resolution is stronger in that it is not limited by coverage to specific language minorities and employs numerical triggers that are more relaxed than the ones in Section 203 of the VRA. On the other hand, the Hamtramck resolution guarantees assistance only to Arabic speakers, and it is uncertain if additional language groups will ever receive comparable services. However, both resolutions lack guarantees of oral assistance—including providing bilingual poll workers—that are present in the federal VRA and its regulations. The resolutions also lack mechanisms for monitoring compliance and for periodic review. And while there are long histories of community engagement in Dearborn and Hamtramck, there are no requirements for community advisory bodies in the resolutions, nor are there specific provisions for community education regarding the availability of translated materials. For advocates such as Shams Al-Badry of the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), effective implementation must include funding for both translated materials and educational outreach to LEP voters.⁷²

Another limitation of the Dearborn and Hamtramck policies is their status as city council resolutions, rather than as city ordinances or city charter amendments. Passage as a resolution means that the policies can be easily modified or undone by later city councils, compared to an ordinance or a charter amendment that could have stronger budgetary mandates and more permanency. Council member Mustapha Hammoud, the sponsor of the Dearborn resolution, has made clear that passing a city ordinance to codify the translation policy is an important next step, but a formal ordinance has yet to be enacted.⁷³

Lessons in Advocacy and Governmental Relations

The language-access resolutions in Dearborn and Hamtramck demonstrate that local community-based advocacy and governmental action can align to produce policies that promote democratic participation. State-level election officials were also highly supportive of the local initiatives and provided both legal and logistical assistance that was critical to the creation and implementation of the resolutions. At the same time, however, advocates for language assistance encountered blockages that are common in the language access arena. Local election officials are often reluctant to make changes related to language access, and genuine concerns about resources and costs can frequently evolve into direct opposition, as was seen with clerks in Michigan.⁷⁴ Once governing bodies such as the Dearborn City Council and the Michigan secretary of state asserted their support at key stages, advocates faced far smoother sailing.

The Dearborn and Hamtramck examples thus illustrate the critical importance of having a champion on a city council or other governing body who can introduce legislation, develop bases of support, and defend the legislation against challengers. In the case of Dearborn, council member Hammoud played a central role in drafting the resolution, producing arguments and data to support the resolution, and defending the resolution when challenged.⁷⁵ In a lesser but still important role, Michigan's Secretary of State Benson helped set the stage for the Dearborn and Hamtramck policies by creating the Language Access Task Force and deploying translated materials to local governments. Her office was also key to allaying the concerns of the Wayne County clerk that might have derailed the Dearborn policy.

The alignment of interests that occurred in Dearborn and Hamtramck provide useful examples of when advocacy coalitions can together work effectively, but there are no guarantees of success. A clear example is the neighboring city of Dearborn Heights, which also has a high percentage of Arab American LEP voters but has yet to enact comparable legislation. Nor has Wayne County. Nonetheless, the advocacy activities in Dearborn and Hamtramck do reflect effective strategies that can lead to changes in local policies. Advocates for Arabic-language assistance in Dearborn and Hamtramck worked in coalition with state and national Arab American organizations, such as Emgage USA and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, as well as with state civil rights and voting rights organizations, such as Michigan Voices and the League of Women Voters. This coalition clearly influenced the city clerk and members of the city council.

Advocates also effectively used personal examples of LEP voters who faced challenges in voting, in addition to demographic and ethnic statistics for Michigan and the Wayne County localities. Stories of elderly voters who were newly naturalized and were voting for the first time carried resonance at city council meetings, and they even generated personal accounts from some of the council members themselves. However, firsthand accounts of voting challenges faced by actual LEP voters were not as extensive as the secondhand reports relayed by advocates in the Dearborn meeting. These types of narratives—particularly when told by the voters themselves through in-person testimony, emails, and letters—can have a powerful impact on elected officials.⁷⁶

Finally, one key area in which advocates might have further bolstered their arguments was in developing estimates of specific costs of implementation, including mapping out scenarios for different sets of written materials, looking at potential costs of interpreter services and poll workers, and projecting added costs based on assistance for multiple spoken dialects. In the case of Dearborn, the city clerk's estimates were markedly higher than ones offered by the former chair of the Michigan Language Access Task Force, and higher budgetary figures can be a deterrent to adopting language access policies. Several Dearborn city officials were, on principle, willing to tolerate a much higher budget for translation, but showing an appreciation of cost-effectiveness and presenting concrete data on projected costs can enhance advocates' credibility and influence passage of the legislation.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Arab American communities in the United States have witnessed enormous growth in both population and political power in recent decades.

The Michigan communities of Dearborn and Hamtramck have reflected this growth, which has included not only increasing numbers of community-based organizations and elected officials but larger numbers of limited-English-proficient voters whose participation in democratic processes has been compromised by ballots that are available only in English. The city resolutions that now mandate that election materials in Dearborn and Hamtramck be translated into Arabic represent another important step in the growth of these communities. The policies will continue to provide strong examples of how grassroots advocacy and government initiative can expand democratic participation in communities across the U.S.

Appendix

Appendix A

Dearborn City Council Resolution 03-176-22

By Hammoud supported by Byrnes

WHEREAS: Voting rights are guaranteed by the Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Nineteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, and

WHEREAS: The Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 is a landmark piece of federal legislation in the United States that prohibits discrimination in voting, and

WHEREAS: The VRA sought to secure the right to vote for minorities throughout the country, and

WHEREAS: Two provisions of the VRA require certain jurisdictions to provide election materials to voters in multiple languages, Section 4(f)(4) and Section 203(c), and

WHEREAS: A jurisdiction covered by either provision must provide all materials related to an election—such as voter registration materials, ballots, notices, and instructions—in the language of any applicable language minority group residing in the jurisdiction, and

WHEREAS: 52 U.S. Code § 10310 narrowly defines “language minority group” as persons who are American Indian, Asian American, Alaskan Natives or of Spanish heritage, and

WHEREAS: The VRA is considered by the US Justice Department to be the most effective piece of federal civil rights legislation ever enacted in the country, and

WHEREAS: The City Council of Dearborn believes in the values of an accessible, safe, and secure democratic voting process for residents of the City of Dearborn, and

WHEREAS: The City of Dearborn is confident additional accessibility can be accomplished effectively and at reasonable cost; therefore be it

RESOLVED: The Clerk shall provide equitable language access in operations and communications related to its elections; be it

RESOLVED: Language access for election materials shall be provided in the English language and any language(s) that are the Language Spoken at Home by a minimum of 10,000 or 5% of the city’s residents (whichever criterion is met first) as reported by the most recent American Community Survey; be it further

RESOLVED: The Clerk shall provide timely translation for all official ballots, notices, absentee ballot applications, registration forms, appropriate signage, and affidavits; be it further

RESOLVED: The timely translation for all election materials shall be completed for the August 2022 primary election; be it further

RESOLVED: The Clerk shall receive the necessary appropriation as determined by the Council to provide equitable language access for all election related materials from the City's General Fund; be it further

RESOLVED: That this resolution be given immediate effect.

Upon a roll call vote as follows;

Yeas: Abraham, Alsawafy, Byrnes, Hammoud, Herrick, Paris and Sareini (7);

Nays: none (0)

Absent: (0), the resolution passes.

Appendix B

HAMTRAMCK RESOLUTION 2022-40

APPROVING TRANSLATION OF ELECTION MATERIALS INTO ARABIC

WHEREAS, voting rights are guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution; and

WHEREAS, the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 is a landmark piece of federal legislation in the United States that prohibits discrimination in voting; and

WHEREAS, the VRA sought to secure the right to vote for minorities throughout the country; and

WHEREAS, two provisions of the VRA require certain jurisdictions to provide election materials to voters in multiple languages, Section 4(f)(4) and Section 203(c); and

WHEREAS, a jurisdiction covered by either provision must provide all materials related to an election—such as voter registration materials, ballots, notices, and instructions—in the language of any applicable language minority group residing in the jurisdiction; and

WHEREAS, 52 U.S. Code § 10310 narrowly defines “language minority group” as persons who are American Indian, Asian American, Alaskan Natives or of Spanish heritage; and

WHEREAS, the VRA is considered by the US Justice Department to be the most effective piece of federal civil rights legislation ever enacted in the country; and

WHEREAS, the City Council of Hamtramck believes in the values of an accessible, safe, and secure democratic voting process for residents of the City of Hamtramck; and

WHEREAS, the City of Hamtramck is confident additional accessibility can be accomplished effectively and at reasonable cost.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED: The Clerk shall provide equitable language access in operations and communications related to its elections; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: Language access for election materials can be provided in the English language and any language(s) that are the Language Spoken at Home by a minimum of 10,000 or 5% of the city's residents (whichever criterion is met first) as reported by the most recent American Community Survey; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: The Clerk shall provide timely translation for all official ballots, notices, absentee ballot applications, registration forms, appropriate signage, and affidavits; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: The timely translation for all election materials shall be completed for the August 2022 primary election; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: The Clerk shall receive the necessary appropriation as determined by the Council to provide equitable language access for all election related materials from the City's General Fund; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That this resolution be given immediate effect.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF HAMTRAMCK, WAYNE COUNTY, MICHIGAN TO APPROVING ALL ELECTION MATERIAL TO BE TRANSLATED INTO ARABIC.

PASSED AND APPROVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF HAMTRAMCK, WAYNE COUNTY, MICHIGAN THIS 12th DAY OF APRIL 2022.

AYES: Alsomiri, Hassan, Jaczkowski, Refai, Choudhury, Albarmaki

NAYS:

ABSENT:

Endnotes

- 1 Jens Manuel Krogstad and Phi Nguyen, “The Impact of Language Assistance on Voter Turnout: Lessons from California” (Demos, 2026), <https://www.demos.org/policy-briefs/impact-language-assistance-voter-turnout-lessons-california>; NALEO Educational Fund, “From Paper to Practice: How California Authorities Can Better Enforce Language Access Laws and Give More Eligible Voters Equal Access to the Ballot (2025), p. 15, https://naleo.org/COMMS/PRA/2025/25-097_NEF_PRA_Language_Access_Report_FINAL.pdf.
- 2 Brenda Fathy Abdelall, “Not Enough of a Minority?: Arab Americans and the Language Assistance Provisions (Section 203) of the Voting Rights Act,” *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 38, no. 4 (2005).
- 3 Another provision of the federal VRA, Section 208, guarantees disabled and limited-English-speaking voters the opportunity to bring an individual with them to assist with in-person voting. 52 U.S.C. § 10508. Section 208 applies nationwide and is not limited to members of language-minority groups. Section 208 does not, however, impose any requirements on governments to provide translations or interpreter services, and it requires only a basic accommodation of the voter and the assistor.
- 4 52 U.S.C. § 10310(c)(3).
- 5 52 U.S.C. § 10503(b)(2).
- 6 Addressing illiteracy is an essential element of Section 203’s goal of remedying discrimination in the educational system that has caused illiteracy and depressed voter participation. Congress found that “[a]mong other factors, the denial of the right to vote of such minority group citizens is ordinarily directly related to the unequal educational opportunities afforded them resulting in high illiteracy and low voting participation. The Congress declares that, in order to enforce the guarantees of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to the United States Constitution, it is necessary to eliminate such discrimination by prohibiting these practices, and by prescribing other remedial devices.” 52 U.S.C. § 10503(a).
- 7 52 U.S.C. § 10503(b)(2)(A)(i)(III).
- 8 Specific implementation requirements and guidelines for language assistance are contained in Title 28 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Chapter 1, Part 55. 28 C.F.R. pt. 55 (2026).
- 9 JoNel Newman, “Ensuring That Florida’s Language Minorities Have Access to the Ballot,” *Stetson Law Review* 36 (2007), <https://stetsonlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/36.2.02.Newman.pdf>.
- 10 Angelo N. Ancheta, “Language Assistance and Local Voting Rights Law,” *Indiana Law Review* 44, no. 1 (2010), <https://journals.indianapolis.iu.edu/index.php/inlawrev/article/view/4082>.
- 11 See Cook County Clerk’s Office, “Language Assistance” (2026), <https://www.cookcountyclerkil.gov/elections/ways-to-vote/voting-accessibility-and-assistance/language-assistance>.
- 12 California Elections Code § 14201.
- 13 San Diego County Registrar of Voters, “Facsimile/Reference Ballots” (2026), <https://www.sdvote.com/content/rov/en/elections/facsimile.html>.
- 14 Recently passed state VRAs include statutes in Delaware (2026), New Jersey (2026), Maryland (2025/2026), Colorado (2025), Minnesota (2024), Connecticut (2023), and New York (2022). See NAACP Legal Defense

- Fund, State Voting Rights Acts, <https://www.naacpldf.org/state-voting-rights-acts/>. The Michigan Legislature was unable to pass a state VRA in 2024, but a newly introduced package of bills was passed by the state Senate in June of 2026 and is awaiting action in the state House. See NAACP Legal Defense Fund, "Michigan Needs its Own Voting Rights Act," <https://naacpldf.org/michigan-voting-rights-act/>.
- 15 The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013), nullified the coverage formula for the federal VRA's preclearance system, which requires covered jurisdictions to obtain approval from the federal government before imposing any changes in a local election system. The Supreme Court more recently undermined the vote dilution standards under Section 2 of the VRA by imposing an intentional discrimination requirement that is nearly impossible to satisfy. *Louisiana v. Callais*, No. 24-109 (April 29, 2026). The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would amend the VRA to overturn several adverse court decisions, has been introduced in Congress over several years but has eluded passage.
 - 16 Angelo Ancheta, "Language Access and State Voting Rights Acts: A Case Study of the Connecticut VRA" (Dēmos, 2025), <https://www.demos.org/research/language-access-state-voting-rights-acts>.
 - 17 Connecticut General Statutes § 9-368l(b)(1). Even if the numerical benchmarks are not satisfied, the Connecticut secretary of state has the discretion to determine whether there is a "significant and substantial need" for a municipality to add a language for assistance. Connecticut General Statutes § 9-368l(f).
 - 18 Kristine J. Ajrouch et al., "A Sociodemographic Overview of Diverse Communities in Arab Detroit," in *Beyond Refuge in Arab Detroit*, ed. Hanoosh et al. (Wayne State University Press, 2025).
 - 19 An overlapping classification for individuals who are of Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) origin can be used, but the Arab American and MENA categories do not align perfectly. Starting with the 2030 census, there will be a distinct MENA ethnicity category that should offer more granularity than current federal governmental categories set by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). See "Revisions to OMB's Statistical Policy Directive No. 15: Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity" (March 29, 2024), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/03/29/2024-06469/revisions-to-ombs-statistical-policy-directive-no-15-standards-for-maintaining-collecting-and>.
 - 20 U.S. Census Bureau, "People Reporting Ancestry," data.census.gov. Table B04006, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2024.B04006?q=+ancestry+michigan> (accessed August 2, 2026).
 - 21 Arab American Institute (January 8, 2026), "Michigan Population Data," <https://www.aaiusa.org/states-map/michigan>.
 - 22 Ibid.
 - 23 Ibid.
 - 24 Arab American Institute, "Arab American Demographics: Michigan," <https://www.aaiusa.org/top-states/cpq505k2sm8cxfk2lux470kjgct3wa> (accessed August 2, 2026). Census data for 2024 estimates the total Arab American population in Wayne County to be nearly 142,000. U.S. Census Bureau, "People Reporting Ancestry," data.census.gov. Table B04006, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2024.B04006?q=+ancestry+wayne+county+michigan> (accessed August 2, 2026).
 - 25 Community estimates suggest that the Dearborn is majority-Arab American, but Census Bureau estimates for 2024 indicate that the percentage is approximately 46%. U.S. Census Bureau, "People Reporting Ancestry," data.census.gov. Table B04006, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2024.B04006?q=ancestry+dearborn+michigan> (accessed August 2, 2026).
 - 26 U.S. Census Bureau, "People Reporting Ancestry," data.census.gov. Table B04006, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2024.B04006?q=ancestry+dearborn+heights+michigan> (accessed August 2, 2026).
 - 27 Ibid.
 - 28 U.S. Census Bureau, "Language Spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over," data.census.gov. Table B16001, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2024.B16001?q=arabic+spoken+in+Wayne+County,+Michigan> (accessed August 2, 2026).
 - 29 Mohamad Moslimani, "5 Facts About Arabic Speakers in the U.S.," Pew Research Center (May 18, 2023), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/05/18/5-facts-about-arabic-speakers-in-the-us/>.

- 30 Beenish Ahmed (July 29, 2021), "Dearborn Needs Arabic-Language Election Materials, Arab-American Advocates Say," Michigan Public, <https://www.michiganpublic.org/news/2021-07-29/dearborn-needs-arabic-language-election-materials-arab-american-advocates-say>. In a subsequent interview, Al-Hanooti drew on a personal example of how newly naturalized first-time voters could benefit from ballots translated into Arabic: "Imagine having someone like my mom — who was born in a refugee camp in Syria, and came here, and got her citizenship three days before Trump's inauguration — [who] walks in there, taking up space and voting by herself. In her language. That is so powerful and beautiful." Frances Kai-Hwa Wong, "Why Arabic Ballots Are Now Being Offered in Michigan and What This Means for Voter Access in the U.S.," PBS.org, Nov. 4, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/with-ballots-in-arabic-how-one-community-is-voting-with-dignity-in-michigan>.
- 31 For recent reports of anti-Arab discrimination see Arab American Institute, "The Arab American Vote 2024" (October 2, 2024), <https://www.aaiusa.org/library/the-arab-american-vote-2024>; Council on American-Islamic Relations (2026), "The Right to Be Different," <https://www.cair.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/The-Right-to-be-Different-2026.pdf>. Longstanding discrimination against Arab Americans remains a significant problem, but it has not persuaded legislators to amend Section 203 to include Arab Americans in the VRA's language-minority definitions. Jocelyn Friedrichs Benson, "Expanding the Language Protections of the Voting Rights Act to Additional Communities," in *The Battle over Bilingual Ballots: Language Minorities and Political Access under the Voting Rights Act*, ed. Tucker (Ashgate Publishing, 2009).
- 32 *United States v. City of Hamtramck*, No. 00-73541 (E.D. Mich. Aug. 7, 2000), https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2010/12/15/hamtramck_cd.pdf.
- 33 In 2021, Hamtramck was sued for failing to comply with the VRA by providing adequate language assistance to Bengali-speaking voters. *Detroit Action v. City of Hamtramck*, No. 2:21-cv-11315 (E.D. Mich. 2021). Under a settlement agreement, Hamtramck agreed to provide translated ballots and other election materials, to offer sufficient interpreter services at precincts, and to appoint a coordinator to oversee future compliance. AALDEF (July 6, 2021), "City of Hamtramck Settles Voting Rights Act Lawsuit; Agrees to Provide Bengali Language Assistance" (Press Release), <https://www.aaldef.org/press-release/city-of-hamtramck-settles-voting-rights-act-lawsuit-agrees-to-provide-bengali-language-assistance/>.
- 34 The Dearborn resolution states: "Language access for election materials shall be provided in the English language and any language(s) that are the Language Spoken at Home by a minimum of 10,000 or 5% of the city's residents (whichever criterion is met first) as reported by the most recent American Community Survey." Instead of employing the language "shall be provided" to require language assistance, the Hamtramck resolution states that assistance "can be provided," thus making it optional for the city clerk to provide coverage to a numerically eligible group.
- 35 Under federal VRA regulations, covered jurisdictions determine which language or dialect would be most effective. 28 CFR § 55.11.
- 36 Dēmos interview with Shams Al-Badry, Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), August 8, 2025.
- 37 Hayley Harding (July 7, 2025), "Many Michigan Voters Could Benefit from a Ballot in Arabic, but the Law Isn't on Their Side," Votebeat Michigan, <https://www.votebeat.org/michigan/2025/07/07/arabic-language-ballots-election-voting-materials-translated-dearborn-hamtramck/>.
- 38 Praveena Somasundaram (November 9, 2022), "Small Error in Arabic Ballots Points to Bigger Voting Issues," *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/11/09/arabic-language-ballots-voting-access/>.
- 39 Ibid. The error affected 34 voters who had requested translated ballots before it was caught.
- 40 Hayley Harding (July 7, 2025), "Many Michigan Voters Could Benefit from a Ballot in Arabic, but the Law Isn't on Their Side," Votebeat Michigan, <https://www.votebeat.org/michigan/2025/07/07/arabic-language-ballots-election-voting-materials-translated-dearborn-hamtramck/>.
- 41 This analysis of multiple actors draws loosely on theoretical approaches employed in the "advocacy coalition framework" that is often used in political science and public policy scholarship. Hank C. Jenkins-Smith and Christopher M. Weible, eds., *The Advocacy Coalition Framework* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025).

- 42 Michigan Department of State, "Michigan Department of State provides resources for non-English speaking voters," updated October 31, 2020, <https://www.michigan.gov/sos/resources/news/2020/10/31/michigan-department-of-state-provides-resources-for-non-english-speaking-voters>.
- 43 According to former Task Force chair Bilal Hammoud, communities in the pilot program included Dearborn, Hamtramck, Pontiac, Grand Rapids, and Southwest Detroit. Sarah Williams (October 28, 2020), "This Dearborn Heights Resident Is Helping Non-English Speaking Voters Bring Power to Their Voices," Model D, <https://modeldmedia.com/language-access-task-force/>.
- 44 What's Up Media (December 24, 2019), "A Spot of Hope with George Darany" (timestamp 7:15), accessed August 7, 2026, <https://www.whatsupmedianetwork.com/2019/12/a-spot-of-hope-with-george-darany>. Prior to his election in 2017 as the Dearborn City Clerk, George Darany had served on the Dearborn City Council and in the Michigan House of Representatives.
- 45 Dēmos interview with Shams Al-Badry, Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), August 8, 2025.
- 46 The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) is a Dearborn-based multiservice organization; Emgage Michigan is a state affiliate of a national voter empowerment organization focused on Muslim Americans; Michigan Voices is a statewide multimember coalition of progressive organizations; Voters Not Politicians is a nonpartisan advocacy organization that advances structural democracy reforms in Michigan; the National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC) is a national organization affiliated with ACCESS addressing civic engagement and other empowerment issues; the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee is a Washington, D.C.-based organization addressing the civil rights of Arab Americans.
- 47 Grant Hermes (July 27, 2021), "Civil rights advocates ask city of Dearborn for Arabic-language voting ballots," (TV broadcast), WDIV, <https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/local/2021/07/19/civil-rights-advocates-ask-city-of-dearborn-for-arabic-language-voting-ballots/>.
- 48 Beenish Ahmed (July 29, 2021), "Dearborn Needs Arabic-Language Election Materials, Arab-American Advocates Say," Michigan Public, <https://www.michiganpublic.org/news/2021-07-29/dearborn-needs-arabic-language-election-materials-arab-american-advocates-say>.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Ibid. The city clerk also noted that translated sample ballots had been produced by the state for the 2020 general election, but they were available only three days before the election.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Dēmos interview with Dearborn council member Mustapha Hammoud, June 16, 2025.
- 55 City of Dearborn (September 19, 2025), "Dearborn City Council Meeting March 22, 2022" (timestamp 1:01:19), accessed August 7, 2026 https://archive.org/details/codmi-Dearborn_City_Council_Meeting_March_22_2022. Council member Hammoud's father was a Wayne County prosecutor during the early 2000s. <https://abedhammoudlaw.com/biography/>. He also thanked Secretary of State Benson for her initiatives supporting language access, and Secretary Benson attended the initial portions of the March 22 meeting. A member of her staff offered comments on the Department of State's support for local language assistance.
- 56 Ibid. Council member Hammoud also stressed how Arabic language assistance could promote election integrity and security: "We aim to create a safe, accessible, and secure democratic process in the City of Dearborn to guarantee the integrity of our election and to ensure the voter's intent is heard at the ballot box." (timestamp 1:02:08).
- 57 Ibid. (timestamp 1:03:14).
- 58 Ibid. (timestamp 1:03:42).
- 59 Ibid. (timestamp 1:14:54).
- 60 Ibid. According to the city clerk, assisting visually impaired voters at the polling sites could require voting machines to provide spoken instructions and electoral information in a particular Arabic dialect.

- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid. (timestamp 1:17:25).
- 63 Ibid. (timestamp 1:18:13).
- 64 Ibid. (timestamp 1:34:29).
- 65 Ibid. (timestamp 1:24:40).
- 66 Ibid. (timestamp 1:28:09).
- 67 Ibid. (timestamp 1:45:11).
- 68 Simon Shaykhet (March 24, 2022), "Dearborn Clerk Responds to Wife's Post on Speaking 'American' as Arabic Ballot Vote Passes," WXYZ, (italics added), <https://www.wxyz.com/news/dearborn-clerk-responds-to-wifes-post-on-speaking-american-as-arabic-ballot-vote-passes>.
- 69 Sarah Cwiek (April 4, 2022), "Wayne County Clerk Questions Dearborn Plan for Ballot Translation," Michigan Public, <https://www.michiganpublic.org/politics-government/2022-04-04/wayne-county-clerk-questions-dearborn-plan-for-ballot-translation>.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 In a subsequent city council meeting, the Wayne County clerk expressed her support for translations but continued to raise concerns: "The secretary of state's support for expanding the voting accessibility in the city of Dearborn I agree with," Garrett said. "However, it should've also been coupled with an established procedure or pathway forward to implement this Council's resolution." Hassan Abbas, "Wayne County Clerk Cathy Garrett Appears at Dearborn Council Meeting to Comment on Election Translation Efforts," Council member Hammoud replied that there was sufficient precedent with Bengali translations in Hamtramck to provide procedures for the county to implement Arabic in Dearborn. Hassan Abbas (April 1, 2022), The Arab American News, <https://arabamericannews.com/2022/04/16/wayne-county-clerk-cathy-garrett-appears-at-dearborn-council-meeting-to-comment-on-election-translation-efforts/>.
- 72 Dēmos interview with Shams Al-Badry, Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), August 8, 2025. On the other hand, there is also the risk that, because of a concentration of community-based organizations and potential volunteers, local government might shirk official responsibilities and become overly reliant on nongovernmental actors and volunteerism. Coordination with local community member is central to implementing strong programs, but civil society cannot be a substitute for actual election administration. A prominent example in the context of Section 203 noncompliance is *Toyukak v. Treadwell*, No. 3:13-cv-00137-SLG (D. Alaska 2015), a case involving Alaska Natives in which the local government left translations entirely up to "outreach workers" rather taking on primary responsibilities. A case discussion is available at <https://narf.org/cases/toyukak-v-treadwell/>.
- 73 Dēmos interview with Dearborn Council Member Mustapha Hammoud, June 16, 2025.
- 74 For some examples of opposing positions on language assistance among election officials, see Matt Vasilogambros (May 10, 2022), "Immigrant Communities Push for More Non-English Ballots," Stateline, <https://stateline.org/2022/05/10/immigrant-communities-push-for-more-non-english-ballots/>.
- 75 The co-ethnicity that exists on the majority-Arab-American Dearborn City Council is not necessarily determinative of support for language-access legislation targeting Arab American, but it was certainly relevant in creating policy arguments and drawing on personal narratives. For a more general analysis of Arab American elected officials and their interaction with policy issues, see Mysara Abu-Hashem, "Arab Americans in Electoral Politics" (Ph.D. dissertation, American University, 2017).
- 76 For a summary of the role of narratives in influencing policy making, see Bruce Davidson, "The Role of Narrative Change in Influencing Policy" (2016), <https://commonslibrary.org/the-role-of-narrative-change-in-influencing-policy/>.
- 77 For a compilation of various cost-savings methods in language access policies, see U.S. Election Assistance Commission (2018), "Language Access for Voters Summit 2018," <https://www.eac.gov/events/2018/07/24/language-access-voters-summit-2018>.