



ELECTION 2021 GOVERNMENT + POLITICS

THE BULLETIN

'Inexcusable': Question in Democratic LG debate about Rasoul's Muslim donors sparks backlash

BY: GRAHAM MOOMAW - MAY 25, 2021 9:46 PM



 Del. Sam Rasoul, D-Roanoke. (Ned Oliver/ Virginia Mercury)

The topic of campaign finance reform was raised in an unusual way Tuesday night at the first and only televised debate of Virginia's Democratic primary for lieutenant governor, with a moderator tailoring a question specifically to Del. Sam Rasoul, the first Muslim ever elected to the General Assembly.

Dave Lucas, an anchor at WJLA, noted that the [Washington Post had reported](#) Rasoul led the six-candidate primary field in fundraising partly due to big contributions from donors connected to Muslim advocacy groups.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Lucas said. “But that was the case. Talk a little bit about your fundraising efforts. And can you assure Virginians if you’re elected, you’ll represent all of them, regardless of faith or beliefs?”

Though some later called the question inappropriate, Rasoul, a Roanoke-area progressive who has advocated for reforming Virginia’s wide-open campaign finance reform, didn’t respond directly to the invocation of his religion during the hour-long debate at George Mason University.

“What I have seen is that there are special interests who have a stranglehold in Richmond,” Rasoul said. “I’ve seen Dominion Energy and many others, over and over again, unfortunately when it comes to environmental policy and other policies, stifle some of the work that needs to be done. As your next lieutenant governor, you can count on me as a decisive, tie-breaking vote to ensure that the interests of the people are represented more than any other special interest.”

Rasoul reported receiving almost \$75,000 this cycle from Manal Fakhoury, a Florida pharmacist listed as a board member of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Democratic Party of Virginia Chairwoman Susan Swecker later [said on Twitter](#) she felt the question was “discriminatory and inexcusable” and had “personally conveyed” her thoughts to the moderator after the party-sanctioned event.

Sean Perryman, a former Fairfax NAACP leader, also [pushed back on social media](#) after the debate, saying: “No other candidate was asked about their ability to serve all Virginians because of their faith.”

But onstage, Perryman too drew attention to the five-figure checks flowing to Rasoul and also called out Del. Mark Levine, an Alexandria attorney and former broadcast political commentator, for loaning his own campaign \$360,000.

“This is why we need campaign finance reform,” Perryman said. “Because it locks people, regular people, out of the process.”

In 2017, Rasoul [announced](#) he would no longer take money from special interest PACs or lobbyists. He also disavowed donations of more than \$5,000 from any source, a rule he is not following for his statewide campaign en route to raising a [field-leading \\$1.29 million](#) as of March 31.

Levine noted that he sponsored a campaign finance reform bill in the General Assembly that would've capped the size of donations in a system that currently allows donors to give candidates as much money as they want as long as it's publicly disclosed. Levine also said he doesn't have big backing from corporate donors.

"That means that I'm not owned by anybody," he said.

Del. Hala Ayala, who touted her endorsements from Gov. Ralph Northam and Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn, seemed to suggest all her donations had come from Virginians.

"We should be focused on the voters and not being on the phones for 10, 15 hours a day fundraising," said Ayala, of Prince William County.

That drew a rebuttal from Norfolk City Councilwoman Andria McClellan, who noted Ayala [reported receiving more than \\$185,000](#) in in-kind support from a Maryland-based company called Good Vibes Entertainment LLC.

"This is the Wild West here in Virginia," McClellan said.

Businessman Xavier Warren was the only candidate who seemed to take note of the original question onstage, offering a statement of support for Rasoul and saying Virginia should be welcoming to all.

"As a follower of Jesus, I live by the golden rule," Warren said. "You treat those the way you want to be treated."



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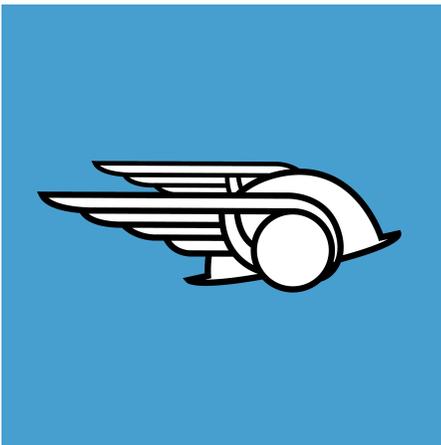
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