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# We Are Not a Monolith: Cuban & Latino Voters Ahead of the Midterms

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## Latino Voters in America

To politically savvy Latinos, few things are more frustrating than the myth of “the Latino vote.” Touted by pollsters, politicians, and politicians alike, the idea that there is a Latin American voting bloc has, perhaps, been one of the surest ways to disengage Latino voters from American political campaigns.

There has long been a fallacy that Latinos all vote the same way. This fallacy is not only ignorant, but politically dangerous. It ignores the fact that Latinos come from different countries with different cultural, religious, racial, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Yet, when the so-called Latino vote fails to meet the expectations of either party, blame is placed on Latinos as a group, rather than on the political parties' failure to recognize that Latinos are not a monolith.

*“The ‘Cuban vote’ has almost always been considered Republican but younger generations of Cuban Americans don’t hold the same political leanings as their parents and grandparents, making the ‘Cuban vote’ harder to count on for Republicans, while Democrats are largely ignoring the voter base.”*

In 2020, Politico ran the headline, “How Miami Cubans disrupted Biden’s path to a Florida win.” There was so much surprise that Joe Biden lost the state of Florida because Democrats falsely assumed that Florida’s 27% Latino population would vote along Democratic party lines.

## Cubanos Con Biden

Mike Rivero, co-founder of Cubanos Pa'lante, formerly Cubanos Con Biden, knows this all too well. Cubanos Pa'lante, a community of progressive Cuban Americans, are striving to change that. The organization advocates for issues that affect the Cuban American community. Their work has ranged from humanitarian work to activism, and has driven voter registration and Get Out the Vote (GOTV) efforts. Cubanos Pa'lante has also been instrumental in supporting mutual aid efforts in Cuba since protests on the island began escalating in 2021.

Ahead of the 2022 midterm elections, I wanted to know what “the Cuban vote” looks like, especially in a place like Florida where the Governor’s and Senate races are making national headlines and where the so-called Latino and Cuban votes are especially scrutinized. When it comes to the Cuban vote, in particular, because Cuban American Republicans have historically been more vocal, Democrats really haven’t done a good enough job of reaching out to Latin communities and when they have, the messaging hasn’t been right. As Rivero put it, “When you go to Little Havana and talk to Cuban immigrants or Venezuelan or Nicaraguan immigrants and say Latinx, no one uses that.” The term is alienating to Spanish speaking voters who don’t use the term.

Meanwhile, Republicans have done better at engaging the Spanish speaking community, not only in South Florida, but nationally as well. Rivero shared that Florida has been a testing ground for the Republican Party for years. The GOP started by engaging the Cuban community and have employed the same tactics successfully with Venezuelans and Nicaraguans. Rivero shared that Republicans are replicating those efforts in Texas, Arizona, California, and other places with large Latino populations and with tremendous success. Their successful tactic? Playing on the shared trauma that many Latino communities face.

It has always been somewhat of a joke that Democrats are communists, but when it comes to political campaigning, Republicans have effectively weaponized that sentiment. A large part of why Joe Biden lost out on Latin American voters is because of the GOP’s targeted efforts to paint him as a Communist, despite the fact that Biden may well have been the least Progressive candidate among all Democratic nominees for the 2020 election. According to Rivero, it’s “brilliant in the sense that they’ve been able to tap into the trauma. People have had to flee their homes, their communities, their countries because of Communism, and when people have a preconceived notion that a Democrat is communist and Republicans exploit that, they’re going to get the votes.” No one who has lived that trauma is going to take a chance on a candidate who could turn into another Castro or Maduro or Chavez.

## **Key Issues on the Ballot**

Rivero and I talked about some of the key issues on the ballot this election. The Dobbs decision, which overturned Roe v. Wade and revoked federal protection around abortion rights, has energized the Democratic base, but it’s still tough to see how this election season is going to go. In their GOTV efforts, Cubanos Pa’lante is framing Dobbs as removing choice and limiting freedom, which resonates well with communities who saw their own freedoms stripped away, leading them to leave for the US in the first place.

But while that messaging might resonate with some voters, Republicans are using the same message — of limiting freedoms — to clap back against gun control. Despite the May 2022 Uvalde shooting hitting hard for Latinos across the US, Republicans were quick to point out that among the first actions communist leaders in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela took upon ascending to power was to restrict gun access from the populace.

Largely, Latinos are voting on affordable housing and access to healthcare this election cycle — like much of the country. These topics are where grassroots campaigns are having the most success, particularly in Florida where Democrat Val Demings is campaigning hard to win Senator Marco Rubio's seat. Demings, employing the same grassroots tactics that helped Barack Obama win the state in 2012, is hoping to gain ground with Republicans and swing voters by citing Rubio's efforts to dismantle the Affordable Care Act along with his Republican colleagues. It's a smart move and one that gives Rivero a lot of hope for his home state, particularly in an area like Hialeah, a Republican stronghold 10 miles outside of Miami that enrolled more people under the ACA than anywhere else in the country.

*"The reason why Obama won Florida, in places like Hialeah, is because there was a presence; someone from the campaign you could always talk to." — Mike Rivero*

## **Immigration**

Another topic that's increasingly coming up among Latino voters is immigration. While Democrats have falsely assumed that immigration is the key issue that Latinos vote on, that hasn't been the case. At this moment though, particularly for Cuban voters, immigration is much more of a topic of focus than it previously has been. The United States, right now, is seeing the largest wave of Cuban immigrants than at any point in history. But with the end of the Adjustment Act, this wave of Cuban immigrants isn't entitled to the same benefits that their predecessors were.

With FL Governor DeSantis and TX Governor Abbott sending buses and flights of recent arrivals to Washington, DC, Delaware, and most recently, Martha's Vineyard to make a political statement, many Cubans coming across the border through Mexico are being turned away or sent up the East Coast. "This is real life," Rivero said. "You've been planning for years to get your mom, dad, uncle out of Cuba. Now they're here and DeSantis decided to bus them to Delaware. This is real life. These are people's families."

Suddenly, the Cuban American community is facing what many other immigrant communities have faced for a long time. This is bringing the issue of immigration to the forefront of Cuban minds and in Florida, where Cuban-American Lt. Governor Janet Nunez is seen as turning her back on her own people after boasting of the Governor's plan to send "illegal" Cubans to President Biden's home state, it's backfiring.

## **Latino Voters in the United States**

When I asked Rivero what he most wanted people to know about Latino/Cuban voters, he reiterated that these communities are not monolithic. Political parties have a tendency to approach these communities assuming they know what the issues are going to be, without having a conversation. There are a lot of issues that are important to the Latino community and the best way to garner their support and their votes is to listen.

*“We’re people. We have families. We have the same issues everyone else is going through. We aren’t just a voting bloc,” Rivero says.*

It’s a lesson that both Republicans and Democrats alike will need to learn if they want to keep Latino voters engaged. But the lesson isn’t engaging them as Latinos, it’s engaging the way white voters are engaged, as individuals within disparate groups. As for this year’s midterm elections, while Florida and Texas are certainly states to watch, it will be up to candidates and political parties with ambitions for 2024 to pay close attention to how to engage Latino communities, not as a voting bloc, but as a diverse community of voters.

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