

Former Governor of Puerto Rico Discusses Florida's Growing Puerto Rican Voter Bloc

BY MARIA CARRASQUILLO

Florida's Puerto Rican electorate is "up for grabs," suggested former governor of Puerto Rico Luis Fortuño (R) in a recent interview, and it could very well decide who wins this important swing state in the 2016 presidential election. The recent and historic exodus of large numbers of Puerto Ricans to Florida's I-4 corridor, largely in response to the island's ongoing economic crisis, is drawing unprecedented attention to this battleground state. The voting tendencies of new arrivals potentially differ from those of the long-established Puerto Rican electorate in New York (which has consistently supported the Democratic Party), making them a wildcard in the upcoming election.

It is estimated that more than twelve million Latinos will be casting their vote in the 2016 presidential election, and the Latino vote will likely influence the outcome in such key battleground states as Florida, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. The growing Puerto Rican community in Florida's I-4 corridor has the opportunity to play a decisive role in the upcoming election for a number of reasons, including its increasing size and legal status. Pew Research data shows that Florida's Puerto Rican population now surpasses one million, with approximately 100,000 people having arrived since 2012 and settling mostly in the Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford area. Unlike other Latino immigrants, Puerto Ricans are born with U.S. citizenship and therefore can register to vote more easily, which makes them an important electorate to court.

But, despite a past preference for the Democrats, the Puerto Rican vote might not be guaranteed to either party. The relative "newness" of the Florida Puerto Rican electorate in U.S. presidential elections makes their voting behavior especially difficult to predict. Fortuño noted that Florida, and the I-4 corridor specifically, previously voted for Republican Senator (and now GOP presidential candidate) Marco Rubio in 2010 and Democratic President Barack Obama in 2012. More recently, voters in Orange and Osceola counties, which are now home to most newly arrived Puerto Ricans, turned out in large numbers to support Republican Rick Scott, narrowing Democrat Charlie Crist's margin of victory in these counties.

For Mr. Fortuño, where a candidate stands on the contentious issue of the island's political status may play an important role in his or her ability to court the growing number of Puerto Rican voters in central Florida. While former GOP primary candidate Jeb Bush openly expressed support for resolving the question of the island's statehood, many on both sides of the aisle have remained quiet about the future of this U.S. territory. At the same time, the fact that the debate in Congress continues regarding whether to provide funds to relieve Puerto Rico's financial crisis—thus affecting the island's ability to file for bankruptcy—will likely influence how Puerto Ricans feel about the Democratic or Republican nominee. What candidates have to say about the island's economic straits may shape Puerto Rican voters' perception of the extent to which a given candidate supports their interests and those of relatives still on the island.

The immigration debate, though not directly affecting newly arrived Puerto Ricans, could also play a role in the decision-making of this constituency. Recent controversial remarks on immigration by some GOP primary candidates have resulted in backlash against these candidates among prominent Latino activists, organizations, celebrities, and fellow politicians. The tenor of the immigration debate raises the question of whether any Republican nominee would be able to win over enough of this voting bloc, which broadly supports immigration reform, in this year's presidential contest.

“Depending on how they handle themselves on these issues, they’ll do better or worse with the Hispanic community,” Mr. Fortuño noted, with regards to recent provocative statements coming from some GOP primary candidates.

Speaking specifically about I-4 corridor voters, Mr. Fortuño emphasized that all candidates should understand “that these voters are up for grabs, that what they say and how they say it matters, and if they don’t heed that advice, and resort to incendiary rhetoric, they will pay the price.”