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POLITICS / 2018 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Puerto Ricans Who Fled The Hurricane Are Preparing To Vote For The First Time In Florida

"We will vote, and the things we achieve here we achieve for them," one woman who fled Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria told BuzzFeed News.

Kelly Kraham
BuzzFeed News Reporter
Orlando, Florida
kelly.kraham@buzzfeed.com

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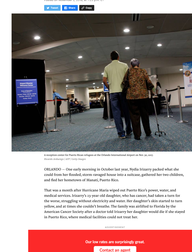
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Most of the political outreach to Puerto Ricans in Florida is being done by a handful of mostly progressive Latino groups, including Alianza, actively courting Puerto Rican voters in Central Florida. Under two umbrella groups — Respeta Mi Gente and Vamos4PR — hundreds of canvassers have been out every day since voter registration closed October 9, focusing their get-out-the-vote campaigns largely on Latino neighborhoods.

Some member organizations, including Organize Florida, Vamos4PR Action, and Boricua Vota, have endorsed Democrats down the ticket, starting with Nelson for the Senate and Gillum for governor. Nonpartisan groups like the Hispanic Federation are also a part of the coalitions but are not endorsing candidates.

The groups under Respeta Mi Gente and Vamos4PR have together worked with thousands of newly arrived Puerto Ricans on housing, jobs, and voter engagement. They don't have an exact breakdown of how many new Puerto Rican voters they registered or have reached in the lead-up to the midterms, but referred to the overall increase in Latino voter registration across the state.

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"For anybody to say that one party did more than the other, they're being disingenuous."

Another group reaching out to potential Puerto Rican voters, Latino Leadership, is nonpartisan but more conservative. The group's executive director, Manuel Guzmán, told BuzzFeed News that Latino Leadership has been in touch with around 10,000 newly arrived Puerto Rican families, helping connect them with services and get oriented in Florida. The group also spoke to around 1,500 people as part of a phone canvassing effort, in addition to having some canvassers on the ground, Guzmán said, though she couldn't say exactly how many people the group had registered to vote.

Guzmán pushed back on complaints about the GOP's outreach to the Puerto Rican community. "For anybody to say that one party did more than the other, they're being disingenuous. I will say, and I've said it often, Gov. Scott did step up," she said.

Guzmán said Scott met with Latino Leadership staff for three hours to talk about the families they were working with. She said other Republicans, including Adam Putnam, Florida's agriculture commissioner, who lost the Republican primary for governor this year, as well as state Rep. Bob Cortes and Rene Plasencia, had been working on education initiatives in particular for Puerto Rican students to be able to enroll in local schools and colleges.

"It's not enough to just show up to a hotel. If you're able to change policy, then do it," she said, referring to the education initiatives and Scott's airport welcome centers for Puerto Ricans. Welcome to Florida initiative. "I think that maybe one party did a better job of having cameras while they were doing that work."

Both the Republican National Committee and the Democratic National Committee have devoted resources to attract the Puerto Rican community as well.

A DNC spokesperson pointed to $100,000 the party spent in Florida and Pennsylvania each, funding Puerto Rican organizers "to help connect [Puerto Ricans] to social services in the community and register them to vote." Ahead of the midterms, they also worked with the MirKam consultancy group, founded by Lin-Manuel Miranda's father, Luis A. Miranda Jr., to "identify issues of importance and messages that connect with the Puerto Rican community."

"We want Puerto Rican voters to know that their values are the Democratic Party's values, and we will continue to fight for their interests here in the states and on the island," said Enrique Gutiérrez, the DNC's director of Hispanic media, in a statement to BuzzFeed News.

The RNC's director of Puerto Rican engagement, Gary Berrios, has hired staff to work on Puerto Rican voter outreach and registration drives, and the party has held training workshops for volunteers and fellows to work in Puerto Rican communities in Central Florida, along with voter registration drives.

Yali Nuñez, the RNC's director of Hispanic Media, said in a statement to BuzzFeed News that the party "understands the pain and devastation Puerto Rico went through," and pointed to the RNC's Welcome to Florida workshops, which gave people information about "Florida civics, school choice, and local employment" as well as the billions in federal aid sent to the island to help recover from the hurricane.

"Puerto Ricans know that the president and the Republican Party are there for them," Nunez said. "We are focused on making them feel at home, and are counting on their support on November 6 so that our shared values continue to unite this country."

But for some Puerto Rican families, an early impression of Republican politicians in Florida is hard to shake. More than half a dozen people who spoke to BuzzFeed News brought up the party's annual Sunshine Summit, which took place in Kissimmee this year, recalling the image of Florida GOP leaders driving without stopping past dozens of displaced families who were about to lose their temporary housing.

The families, organized by Vamos4PR, camped outside the conference for two days. Father Rodriguez was there with them. He says that of all the Republican officials at the conference, only Sen. Marco Rubio sent a representative outside to actually talk to the families.

"That was the extent of my fellow Republicans stepping in to help these families, whereas on the other side of the aisle they were personally investing themselves. They were showing up, crying, and holding hands," he said. "That's an image I'll never forget. And if that moved me, that's permanently seared into the mind of the Puerto Rican voter."

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For Father Rodriguez, the real concern going into the midterms is that all the attention the community is getting could disappear after Election Day, and with it funding for organizations helping displaced Puerto Ricans, like his church, even as most people who have moved to the mainland are likely to bring family members over from the island in the coming years.

"I really pray that I'm wrong, but my heart tells me that a lot of these extra resources that we've seen are going to disappear after November 7." ●

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Nidhi Prakash is a reporter for BuzzFeed News and is based in Washington, DC.
Contact Nidhi Prakash at nidhi.prakash@buzzfeed.com.
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