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POLITICS

The Trump Administration's Response To Hurricane Maria Could Doom Florida Republicans

Puerto Ricans have been steadily turning central Florida blue for a decade. But Maria built a network that has mobilized the diaspora like never before.

By Carolina Moreno
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CHRIS MCGONIGAL/HUFFPOST
Arleen Sevilla poses for a photo while canvassing in the Chickasaw Woods subdivision in Orlando, Florida, on Oct. 30, 2018.

ORLANDO, Fla. — Arleen Sevilla moved swiftly from house to house. With a stack of mail-in ballot request forms in one arm, she used the tablet in her hand to identify homes in the area where registered Latino voters live.

The 29-year-old canvasser works for Vamos4PRAction, one of more than a dozen organizations working to inform and motivate Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in central Florida to vote in the midterm elections on Nov. 6. She is also among the estimated 160,000 to 176,000 Puerto Ricans displaced by Hurricane Maria who have permanently relocated to the U.S. mainland.

After almost three months without power and water in their hometown of Manatí, Puerto Rico, the former pastry chef and her family were able to buy plane tickets and relocate to Altamonte Springs, a suburban city in North Orlando. They spent two months living in a hotel, with the help of FEMA, and moved into an apartment of their own once the aid ran out.

Since then, they've struggled to adapt. Sevilla and her son, who has autism, don't speak English, and the family says they've faced discrimination from people who accuse them of wanting to live off the government. Sevilla and her husband grow particularly upset when people, President Donald Trump included, praise hurricane relief efforts in Puerto Rico.

"He did do something: He threw toilet paper at us as if we were crap," she said of Trump. "It makes me angry because there are so many lies that they're telling and people really believe they helped Puerto Rico."

So when a fellow Maria survivor told Sevilla about Vamos4PR, she was eager to join their ranks, despite never having been involved in politics in Puerto Rico.

CHRIS MCGONIGAL/HUFFPOST
Arleen Sevilla walks by a house with signs supporting Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) while canvassing in Orlando.

Puerto Ricans' political power is growing in central Florida, becoming an emerging political force since the island's economic crisis sparked an exodus from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland more than a decade ago.

Most of the Latinos that Vamos4PR targets are unlike Sevilla — longtime U.S. residents who are already registered as either Democrats or independents, but who may not have voted in previous elections.

The organization is endorsing Democratic candidates — Tallahassee Mayor Andrew Gillum for governor and incumbent Sen. Bill Nelson, whose seat is being challenged by the state's current governor, Gov. Rick Scott (R). Though canvassers talk about candidates' stances on a variety of issues — including universal health care and raising the minimum wage — Hurricane Maria, and Trump's response to it, comes up frequently.

Hurricane Maria represents an important political event for this voting bloc, which is largely unhappy with the federal government's response to the storm and has found ways to mobilize in its aftermath.

"I usually don't vote at all, this is the first time in many years," said Pablo Gelabert. The 43-year-old Puerto Rican native has lived in Florida for more than 20 years and had already gone to vote by the time Sevilla knocked on his door. "I have never cared as much as I do right now."

CHRIS MCGONIGAL/HUFFPOST
Pablo Gelabert stands outside his home in Orlando on Oct. 30, 2018.

Gelabert has no family left on the island, but told Sevilla the federal response to Hurricane Maria was "terrible" and that it's one of the many reasons he supports candidates that are "the complete opposite of Trump."

Recent arrivals, by contrast, are not as mobilized to vote and require a more fundamental education on how the political system works in the mainland U.S. On the island, Puerto Ricans can only vote in local elections — which revolve around a multi-party political system — and despite being U.S. citizens, they are unable to vote in either presidential or midterm elections unless they reside on the mainland.

"The focus has tended to be: 'Oh, Puerto Ricans are moving from Puerto Rico to the United States. They are U.S. citizens. They can register to vote automatically,'" said Carlos Vargas-Ramos, political scientist and research associate at the City University of New York's Center for Puerto Rican Studies.

"Yes, that is true, in theory. In practice, we know that for the people who were displaced by the storm, voting is not going to be a priority. The first order of priority is going to be to secure housing, and to secure a job to pay for that housing."

Instead, Vargas-Ramos said, political science research indicates the longer someone has lived in a particular community the more likely they are to turn up to vote.

The good news for Democrats is that the Puerto Rican diaspora in Florida has been growing since deteriorating economic conditions on the island sparked a mass migration in 2006 — and when Puerto Rican voters show up, they tend to go Democratic.

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> —Pablo Gelabert, 43

"The raw impact of the Puerto Rican vote in central Florida is significant," according to Steve Schale, a Tallahassee-based political strategist and Barack Obama's state director in 2008.

"If you go back to just the 2006 midterm election, the counties that make up the Orlando metropolitan area voted overwhelmingly Republican. Today those counties make up very much the core of the Democratic base in Florida, and it's a function largely of that Puerto Rican population."

Edwin Meléndez, director of CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, told HuffPost he estimates that in the year after Hurricane Maria, between 67,000 to 73,000 survivors joined the more than 1 million Puerto Ricans already living in Florida. Most of them relocated to central Florida counties like Orange and Osceola where the Puerto Rican population is concentrated.

Voter registration data in Florida doesn't include a breakdown of voters by origin, but a recent Pew Research Center study found that Latino registered voters in the state increased by 6.2 percent since the 2016 presidential election. More telling is that registration numbers for Latinos grew fastest in 14 of the 18 Florida counties with the largest Puerto Rican populations.

CHRIS MCGONIGAL/HUFFPOST
Canvassers working with Vamos4PR participate in a training exercise on how to approach people at their homes.

Vargas-Ramos estimates that based on census data, Puerto Ricans currently make up about 5.4 percent of the eligible voting population in Florida.

"It's not a huge number, but in a race that is very tight, 5 percent may make a big difference at election time," he said.

Early voting data suggests that Latino turnout is higher in Florida this election, according to Schale. As of Monday, there were more early votes by Latinos compared to the same period four years ago. Out of the 1 million voters who've already voted in this election but didn't in the last midterm, 18 percent are Latino, Schale added.

"That says to me that the Hispanic population is bigger but also that turnout is probably a little bit better," Schale said, adding that there's been greater turnout among Latinos and Democrats in areas where Puerto Ricans abound. "I think there's reason to believe turnout among Puerto Ricans is going to be higher than it was four years ago, and there's a reason to believe that that's a very good thing for my party."

But Alex Patton, a Gainesville-based Republican campaign consultant, told HuffPost that an uptick in early voting numbers could merely be a sign of enthusiasm and holds little predictive power.

"Historically, [Latinos] are an unreliable voting bloc in midterm elections," he said. "I guess the 5 million dollar question is: Do recent events, in the last six months, change that? And we're getting ready to find out."

Collaboration Born Out Of Despair

The federal response to Hurricane Maria continues to be a sore subject for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora. Marcos Vilar, executive director of Alianza for Progress, a political organization working to mobilize Latinos in central Florida, pointed to a series of focus groups the polling firm Latino Decisions conducted in May.

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The report included commentary from long-term residents and recent arrivals and found that the diaspora largely considered the Trump administration's hurricane relief efforts to be "inadequate at best, and willful neglect at worst." The participants also said they felt disrespected and forgotten by federal politicians in Maria's aftermath.

Florida Senate candidates Scott and Nelson have appealed to Puerto Rican voters by reminding them of their efforts post-Maria. Scott, for example, offered advice and assistance to the island's Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), which struggled to restore power to residents on the island for months. Meanwhile, Nelson worked to advocate for additional aid for both the island and to Puerto Ricans displaced by the storm.

CHRIS MCGONIGAL/HUFFPOST
An information sheet showing political candidates in Florida.

Schale and Vargas-Ramos said there's no question that Hurricane Maria was key for Puerto Ricans in the run-up to the midterm elections — both in influencing how they feel about the federal government and how they mobilize.

"The Puerto Ricans that I do expect to be highly motivated and likely to turn out to vote in this election are the Puerto Ricans that mobilized themselves [in the mainland] to assist those who were displaced by the storm whether in Puerto Rico or in the United States," Vargas-Ramos said.

"They banded together and worked collectively to address the situation with Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and the United States," he continued, adding that they found both the federal and local response "insufficient" and that "many of them are likely to vote to express their opinion about what the governmental response was like."

Even before the election cycle began, the Trump administration's feeble hurricane relief efforts in Puerto Rico had mobilized the diaspora to act and help the island.

"Immediately after the hurricane, people here started collecting goods and money and resources to send to the island, and networks were born out of that effort," Vilar said. "People in Tampa, Orlando, Miami, Jacksonville, Tallahassee discovered each other, bonded and created relationships that sort of launched us into the election."

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> —Marcos Vilar, executive director of Alianza for Progress

In the small, baby-blue house in downtown Kissimmee that serves as Alianza's headquarters, Puerto Rican flags hang on the wall next to maps of the Osceola County voting district and signs featuring a coqui frog holding a megaphone next to the words "Respeta Mi Gente" (Respect My People) — a campaign the group began earlier this year to rally Puerto Ricans and Latinos overall during the electoral cycle.

It's under this campaign that about 10 Latino-led organizations, many with Puerto Rican roots like Vamos4PR, are working to reach registered Latino voters and incentivize them to make it to the ballot box. With the help of its partners, the group intended to visit 110,000 central Florida homes three times before Tuesday.

"If we as [Puerto Rican] progressives are not lifting our part, we are hurting the progressive cause, we are hurting other people that need the same things that we need," Vilar added. "This way people can say 'Puerto Ricans came to Orlando and they made a difference.'"

CAROLINA MORENO/HUFFPOST
Inside the headquarters of Alianza for Progress in Kissimmee, Florida.

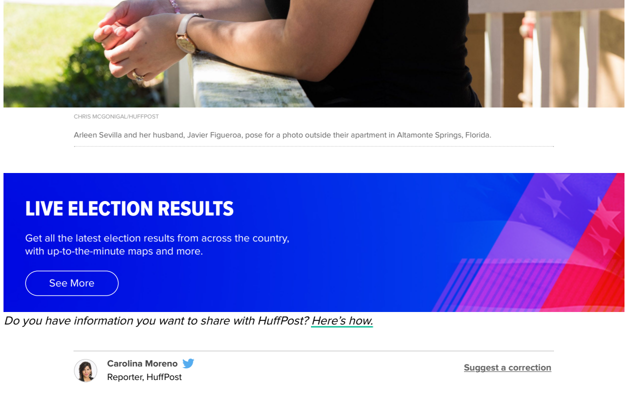
A Vote For The Island

Puerto Ricans are also hoping their votes will help their home island. Wanda Ramos, co-founder of Vamos4PR, told HuffPost the group's mobilization efforts have not only focused on explaining how the mainland political system works, but also how new arrivals can help the island's reconstruction efforts by voting.

"In Puerto Rico, we don't really have representation on the federal level," Ramos said. "We don't have elected officials that have the power to vote to be able to help us. So we have to make the effort to reach those people to create change for the island."

It's something that weighs on Sevilla and her husband as well. The couple, who will mark their one-year anniversary in Florida on Tuesday, still have a lot of family left on the island and they're eager to help any way they can.

"Now we have a vote and what we do counts, so we are gonna make the difference," said Javier Figueroa, Sevilla's husband. "I don't like politics, but anything that I can do here that can potentially benefit Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico can count on me. And everything that's going to benefit all of us Latino brothers and sisters, they can all count on Puerto Rico to support them."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Arleen Sevilla and her husband, Javier Figueroa, pose for a photo outside their apartment in Altamonte Springs, Florida.

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