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The Politics of Race and the Florida Gubernatorial Election of November 2018

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The Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies is a research institute that works for the advancement of the study of Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States in the doctoral programs at the CUNY Graduate Center. One of its major priorities is to provide funding and research opportunities to Latino students at the Ph.D. level.

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The Latino Data Project was developed with the goal of making information available on the dynamically growing Latino population of the United States and especially New York City through the analysis of extant data available from a variety of sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Institute for Health, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and state and local-level data sources.

All Latino Data Project reports are available at <http://clacls.gc.cuny.edu>

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Executive Summary

The Florida gubernatorial election of November 2018 pits the first African-American candidate for governor of the state Andrew Gillum, against Ron DeSantis a divisive, racist, white-supremacist, anti-immigrant clone of the current president.

Mr. Gillum has boldly embarked on an innovative strategy to possibly win the election. Recognizing that the white conservative and largely rural regions of the state are going to vote for DeSantis irrespective of anything he does, he has decided to focus his efforts on mobilizing traditional Democratic voters: progressive whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and young people. Unfortunately, these cohorts of the voting population have had comparatively lower voter registration and participation rates historically than white conservative older voters who won the state for the current president in 2016.

Using the latest voter registration data by race and party in Florida of July 30, 2018, this report provides an accurate statistical profile of the actual registered electorate. It also utilizes the U.S. Census Bureau's data on the presidential election of 2016 and the November 2014 mid-term election, to indicate voter participation and voting rates by race and age.

Mr. Gillum has a real chance at winning the governorship of Florida, but only if there is an increase in voter registration and participation in this election among groups which have supported, and likely will vote for, Democratic candidates in November 2018 in Florida and elsewhere.

Introduction

The Republican and Democratic gubernatorial primaries of August 28, 2018 couldn't have been more stark in the choice now facing Florida voters in the election of November 2018. The Republicans chose Ron DeSantis, an avid supporter of the current president of the United States who endorsed him enthusiastically. The Democratic Party, in what has been considered an upset, nominated Andrew Gillum, an African American who is the current mayor of Tallahassee.

There is little question that DeSantis will run a campaign based on racial divisiveness and the white supremacist/anti-immigrant/nationalistic/racist politics that have been at the center of the current presidency. This has become the Republican go-to strategy across the nation to mobilize and turnout the Republican Party base, largely white, rural or suburban, and without college educations. On August 29, a day after his victory in the primary DeSantis stated that voters would 'monkey this up' if his African-American opponent would be elected. Whether he mutes the anti-immigrant racist invective used by the president and Republicans across the nation, in a state with a large Latino population, remains to be seen.

Mr. Gillum was endorsed by Bernie Sanders and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. He has stated that he has no pretense of attracting Republican voters, but hopes to be victorious in November by running a campaign on issues which will mobilize and attract a coalition of progressive white, African American, Latino, and younger voters. He has supported universal health care, the elimination of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE), the legalization of marijuana, and he is a vocal advocate for impeachment of the current President. As the first African-American candidate for governor of Florida there is little question that race will be at the center of this election. Mr. DeSantis's recent racist pronouncements assure this.

Registered Voters by Race and Political Affiliation

This election will turn on voter turnout by race, party affiliation, and age. There are precise data on voter registration by race and party issued by the Florida Department of State, Division of Elections as of July 30, 2018. These indicate that 37.2% of all registered Florida voters are Democratic; 35.3% Republican; 26.8% with no party affiliation; and 0.7% registered with smaller parties. (See table 1). Although Democrats have a slight plurality of registered voters in the state, these data leave little doubt that the choices of independent voters will be critical in November.

Table 1
Percentage of All Registered Voters in
Florida by Party Affiliation as of July 30, 2018

Democratic	37.2%
Republican	35.3%
No Affiliation	26.8%
Small Parties	0.7%
Total	100.0%

Source: Florida Department of State.

The registered electorate by race is indicated in table 2. Clearly non-Hispanic Whites are the majority of registered voters in Florida although Hispanics and African Americans together comprise nearly 30% of the total Florida potential voters at the moment. Higher registration rates between now and the election could cause this to move upward.

The current president carried Florida by a margin of 1.2% in 2016 receiving 48.6% of the total vote to 47.4% for his opponent. His strongest support, according to exit polls, was among non-Hispanic whites of whom 64% voted for him. A significant share of Florida's Latinos, 35%, voted for him and this was a critical factor in understanding his victory. About 84% of African Americans voted for the Democratic candidate.¹

¹ These data were derived from surveys of a sample of voters leaving the polling stations in November 2016 and may be found at <https://edition.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls/florida/president>

Table 2
Registered Voters by Race in Florida as
of July 30, 2018

Non-Hispanic White	63.6%
Hispanic	16.4%
African-American	13.3%
Other	4.9%
Asian	1.9%
Total	100.0%

Source: Florida Department of State.

The racial structures of registered Florida voters of the major political parties are indicated in table 3. Clearly the Republican Party is overwhelmingly dominated by non-Hispanic whites who comprise 83.3% of all registered Republicans followed by Hispanics at 11.4%. The Democratic Party in Florida is more diverse. It should be stressed that the largest cohort are also non-Hispanic whites (48.2%) but that 28.4% of registered Democratic voters are African American and 17.1% are Hispanic. Independently registered voters lean more toward non-Hispanic whites at 58.7% with the second largest contingent being Latinos at 22%.

Table 3
Registered Voters by Major Party or No Affiliation by Race in
Florida as of July 30, 2018

	Republican	Democratic	No Affiliation
Non-Hispanic White	83.3%	48.2%	58.7%
Hispanic	11.4%	17.1%	22.0%
Other	2.6%	4.6%	8.1%
Asian	1.4%	1.6%	3.0%
African-American	1.3%	28.4%	8.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Florida Department of State.

Finally, we turn to how each racial group is registered by party affiliation. Although, 46.2% of all registered non-Hispanic whites in Florida are registered as Republicans, a greater share is registered as Democratic (28.2%) and Independent (24.8%) combined at 53%. Nearly 80% of African Americans are registered as Democrats. Hispanics are fairly dispersed with nearly 39% registered as Democrats, 25% as Republicans, and a very large 36.1% as Independents. (See table 4).

Table 4
Registered Voters by Race and Party Affiliation in Florida as of July 30, 2018

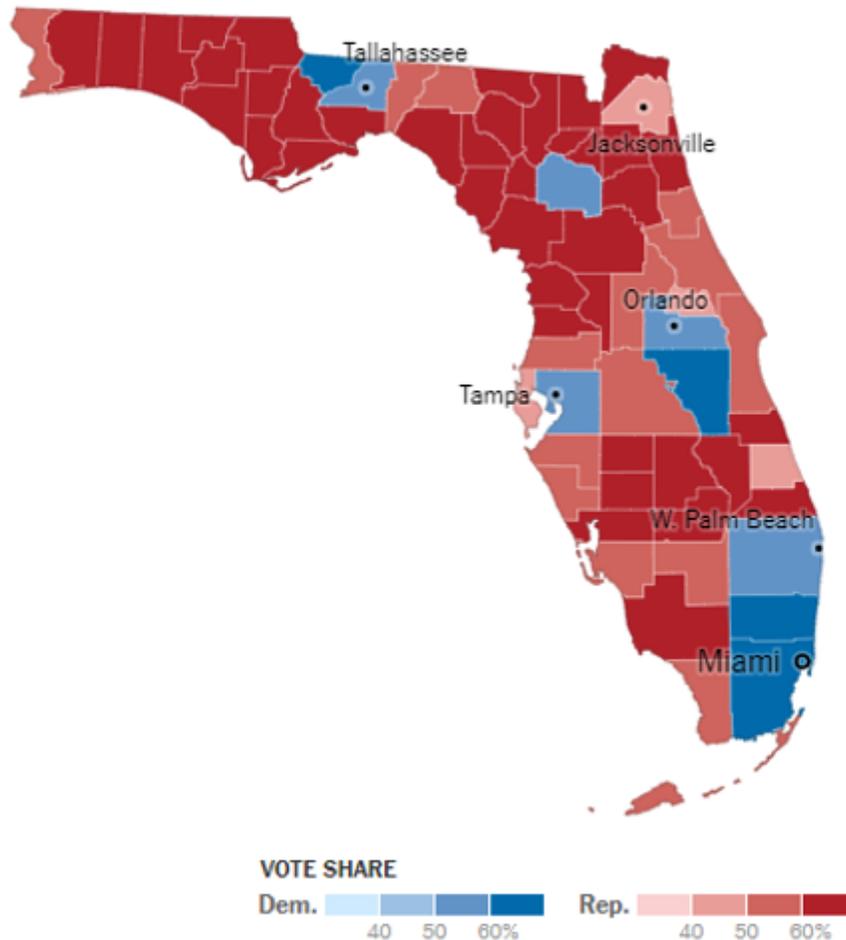
	Non-Hispanic White	African- American	Hispanic	Asian
Republican	46.2%	3.5%	24.5%	25.4%
Democratic	28.2%	79.7%	38.9%	31.9%
No Affiliation	24.8%	16.5%	36.1%	42.2%
Small Parties	0.8%	0.3%	0.4%	0.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Florida Department of State.

The 2016 Presidential Election in Florida

In 2016 the current president carried counties with predominantly non-Hispanic white voters by fairly large margins, while the Democratic candidate carried more urban and racially diversified counties in regions centered around Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Tampa, Orlando, Miami, and West Palm Beach. (See map 1).

Map 1
Voting in the November 2016 Presidential Election in Florida by County



Source: Florida Election Results <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/florida>

Voter Registration and Participation Rates by Race and Age in Florida, Presidential Election of 2016

There are many reasons why the Democratic candidate lost Florida and the national election in 2016. The most important were comparatively low voter registration and turnout rates among the racial groups and age categories which supported her. While nearly 64% of eligible non-Hispanic white voters went to the polls and supported the Republican candidate by 64% to 32%; only 50.5% of Florida's African Americans voted. They supported the Democratic candidate by a margin of 84% to 8% for the Republican candidate, according to exit

polls. Quite simply had a slightly higher percentage of African Americans registered and voted in the state of Florida, there would be a different president in the White House today. Among Hispanics, who supported the Democratic candidate by a margin of 62% to 35% according to exit polls, there was also a significantly lower voter turnout rate at 54.1%. Had more Latinos voted the results of the 2016 election in Florida would have been very different. Asians voted at the lowest rates but were a much smaller share of the electorate and registered voters as indicated previously. These figures highlight not only the importance of voter registration, but signal the need for targeted efforts to increase voter turnout on election day.

When we examine voter registration rates these mirror the relative differences in voting rates. Nearly 71% of the state's eligible non-Hispanic whites were registered to vote in 2016 compared to 55% of African Americans, 62% of Hispanics and only 50.4% of the Asian population. These data are for citizens 18 years of age and older. Thus, raising the registration rate among large swaths of the African-American and Hispanic populations will in all likelihood translate into higher voting rates among these critical sectors of Democratic support. The Gillum campaign should take note of this and needs to develop innovative strategies to raise voter registration among these groups.

This may be critical for his campaign in the Orlando area where large numbers of Puerto Ricans, who are eligible to vote because they are U.S. citizens, arrived after Hurricane María devastated the island. However, an article in the Washington Post of July 27, 2018 indicated that this newly-arrived Puerto Rican population is not registering to vote in significant numbers.² It is germane to ask what the Gillum campaign and the Democratic Party are doing about this as Puerto Ricans have a great deal of antipathy toward the current president because of his administration's disastrous response to María. If registered they are likely to vote Democratic. In a very tight election this recent Central Florida Puerto Rican migrant population may be a critical swing vote that could throw the election to Gillum.

This is also a factor given the current president's deranged remarks of September 13, 2018 in which he denied that close to 3,000 U.S. citizens died on the island claiming this to be a Democratic conspiracy to make him 'look bad.'³ Although DeSantis immediately distanced himself from these comments, it remains to be seen whether this is enough for a candidate who actively sought out the support of the president and has been identified with his extremist, racist, and anti-immigrant politics.

Related to this is a very graphic recognition of the importance of the Latino vote in Florida by DeSantis who named a conservative Republican Latina to be his running mate in Florida, Jeanette Nuñez, a Cuban-American who has served for eight years in the Florida House of Representatives. A fundamental question is whether Florida's non-Cuban Latino voters will be fooled by this transparent attempt by DeSantis to ingratiate himself with potential Latino voters in the state.⁴

² James Hohmann, "The Daily 202: Puerto Ricans who fled to Florida after Hurricane Maria are not registering to vote" Washington Post, July 27, 2018.

³ See New York Times, "Trump Honors Only One Victim in Puerto Rico: Himself" Sept. 13, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/opinion/editorials/trump-puerto-rico-death-toll.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

⁴ See Juan Escalante, "Ron DeSantis' Choice Of A Latina Running Mate Is A Pathetic Pandering Attempt" September 11, 2017, Huffington Post at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/opinion-jeanette-nunez-desantis_us_5b9691f2e4b0511db3e4c94a

Table 5
Registration and Voting Rates by Race in
Florida, Presidential Election 2016

	Registration Rates	Voting Rates
Non Hispanic White	70.9%	63.8%
African-American	55.2%	50.5%
Hispanic	62.0%	54.1%
Asian	50.4%	40.4%

Note: These percentages are of eligible voters; citizens 18 Years of age and older.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2016

In 2016 younger voters, ages 18 - 24 of all races, supported the Democratic candidate by a margin of 63% to 27%. However, as indicated in table 6 only 37.3% of eligible voters in this age category cast ballots. Voter participation rates were much higher in older age categories which supported the Republican candidate. Among 50-64 year olds 55% supported the Republican candidate, while the support was 57% among those 65 years of age and older. This last age cohort (65+) voted at a 69.8% rate. (See table 6). If the Gillum campaign wants to win this election by appealing to Democratic-supporting constituencies it would be wise to focus on raising the dismal 51.5% registration and 37.3% turnout rate among younger Floridians.

Table 6
Registration and Voting Rates by Age
Category in Florida, Presidential Election, 2016

Age Category	Registration Rates	Voting Rates
18 to 24	51.5%	37.3%
25 to 34	60.5%	51.6%
35 to 44	66.3%	57.6%
45 to 64	67.7%	62.3%
65+	74.7%	69.8%

Note: These percentages are of eligible voters; citizens 18 Years of age and older.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2016

Voter Registration and Participation Rates by Race and Age in Florida, Mid-term Election of 2014

Voting by race and age groups which have supported Democratic candidates are even worse in mid-term elections. In the November 2014 election only 36% of eligible Hispanic voters cast ballots compared with 44% of African Americans and 47.5% of non-Hispanic whites. Even worse, voters between the ages of 18 to 24 voted at an astoundingly low 17.6% of eligible voters. The Gillum campaign and the Democratic Party ought to address this if they want the Florida governorship. (See tables 7 and 8).

Table 7
Registration and Voting Rates by Race in
Florida, Mid-Term Election 2014

Race	Registration Rates	Voting Rates
Non Hispanic White	62.7%	47.5%
African-American	64.3%	44.0%
Hispanic	60.2%	36.0%
Asian	61.5%	43.0%

Note: These percentages are of eligible voters; citizens 18 Years of age and older.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2014

Table 8
Registration and Voting Rates by Age
Category in Florida, Mid-Term Election, 2014

Age Category	Registration Rates	Voting Rates
18 to 24	37.3%	17.6%
25 to 34	54.4%	30.0%
35 to 44	58.8%	35.8%
45 to 64	67.7%	51.6%
65+	72.2%	60.0%

Note: These percentages are of eligible voters; citizens 18 Years of age and older.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2014

Conclusion

Andrew Gillum has a real possibility of winning the November 2018 election and becoming the first African-American governor of the state of Florida. However, this will only occur if his campaign and the Democratic Party develop a strategy to register and turn out African American, Latino, and young voters who have had the lowest registration and voting participation rates in the state. There are enough non-Hispanic white progressive voters in Florida who have supported Democrats in the past and in all likelihood will vote for Mr. Gillum. They are most likely appalled by the divisiveness, blatant racism, and anti-immigrant discrimination personified by the person in the White House whom the Republican Candidate, Ron DeSantis, has chosen to emulate as a virtual clone.

However, the Democratic Party is going to have to find new strategies of voter registration before the election, and mobilization of voters on election day November 2018. Mr. Gillum has broken with past 'moderate' Democratic strategies of appealing to the very voters who rejected them in 2016 and continue to back the most destructive president in the history of the United States. In the past, efforts at attracting conservative support by appearing to be 'moderate' have been an abysmal failure in the state and elsewhere.

New and daring approaches and strategies are needed to mobilize Democratic voters especially African Americans, Latinos, and young people. The Puerto Rican population of Central Florida could be critical if they would register to vote. If successful and Mr. Gillum is able to win the governorship of Florida, perhaps a new set of similar approaches can be used in critical swing states which can be flipped from red to blue in November 2020 and put an end to the disgrace that has befallen the United States since January 2017.

This is especially the case in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania where the current president won by razor slim margins and where African-American and Latino voting turnouts on election day 2016 were well below those of non-Hispanic whites. But this is also the case in Arizona and Texas, states with large Latino populations who have very low registration and voter participation rates.

In Arizona where Hispanics comprise a quarter of the state's population 57% of eligible voters were registered in 2016 and only 47% voted. Over 68% of eligible non-Hispanic white voters went to the polls in Arizona and gave the current president a victory in the state.

A similar situation is found in Texas. Latinos comprise about 30% of the state's population but only 55% were registered and 41% voted in 2016. This compares with 63% of non-Hispanic whites who voted in the state. The mobilization of Latino voters in Texas could conceivably change the political hue of the state.

Can the Gillum campaign in Florida and the Democratic Party in the state and nationally develop winning strategies by developing innovative and dynamic voter registration drives and voter turnout campaigns among their constituents? The future of the Republic at this precarious moment in history may depend on this. The Florida gubernatorial election of November 2018 may assume unparalleled importance in the state's and nation's political destinies.