



# Common Themes from the Commonwealth, 2022 Update: Puerto Rico's growing role in Florida politics

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## Introduction

In 2017, Florida overtook New York as the U.S. state with the largest Puerto Rican population. This milestone illustrated just how much political influence the Puerto Rican diaspora had come to exercise. Puerto Rico itself has no vote for president. But more than a million of those who identify it as their origin now cast votes in one of the most politically competitive states in the nation.

This is important, given that most presidential candidates'—and all Republican presidential candidates'—paths to the White House run through

Florida. Moreover, the data show that the relevant counties in Central Florida where Puerto Rican residents are concentrated are bellwethers for state-wide election victory and have been so for decades.

In 2020, The James Madison Institute published a white paper examining these crucial Floridian voters' attitudes toward Puerto Rico's status. We analyzed a series of surveys among Florida's Puerto Rican voters, in hopes of determining what kind of politicians they liked and disliked, and which messages – especially on statehood – were likely to succeed or fail in attracting their support.

From the data, we were able to draw several use-

ful conclusions. First, we found that a mere display of respect for the issue and its significance to these Floridian voters can keep a lot of doors open, whereas messages that merely disparage the idea risk closing those doors.



Second, we observed that those Puerto Rican voters most likely to be persuaded to vote for Republican candidates are also the ones most supportive of Puerto Rican statehood. To those unfamiliar with the island territory's politics, that may seem paradoxical, but it reflects an incongruity over how the issue is treated in the mainland United States versus how it is treated in Puerto Rico itself.

Puerto Ricans are American citizens from birth. They carry U.S. passports, serve in the U.S. military, and pay all federal taxes except income tax on Puerto Rico-source income (for which they do still have to pay Puerto Rico's income tax). Still, the island territory's legal status is different from that of U.S. states.

Florida (and national) presidential candidates cannot afford to overlook Puerto Rican voters, who have become concentrated in Central Florida, in the state's all-important I-4 corridor. And when courting these voters, candidates cannot overlook the strong opinions they tend to retain about Puerto Rican statehood, revealed in multiple opinion surveys in recent years.

Based on the data and these basic ideas, we posited in 2020 that Sen. Rick Scott's constructive approach to this issue during his 2018 campaign for office had probably turned a narrow election loss against a relatively popular incumbent into a very narrow win. We also warned that leaders such as President Trump and Sen-

ate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, while they were certainly entitled to oppose statehood on whatever ground they chose, needed to be careful about casting the entire issue as some kind of Democratic Party power-grab with no further significance.

Another election has intervened in the time since we published that white paper, and several additional polls have been taken. This update, recasting and applying the new available data, revisits the original paper's conclusions and attempts to apply the lessons to the new nuances of today's political debate.

## History of Puerto Rico's status

In 1898, amidst the Cuban struggle for independence from the Spanish Empire, the U.S.S. Maine exploded in Havana Harbor. Congress controversially—perhaps even opportunistically—decided that Spain was to blame and declared what we now refer to as the Spanish-American War.

Spain, already a moribund international power for a century, and further weakened by internal wars of succession, was utterly incapable of defending its remaining overseas possessions. American victory took less than four months, resulting in both Cuban independence and U.S. control of Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico.

The sudden inheritance of these Spanish possessions abruptly presented a unique political dilemma for Americans. The United States had been born in an act of a rejection of foreign control. Unlike most European nations, it had no history of taking overseas colonies. Yet suddenly, multiple opportunities to claim new overseas possessions were presenting themselves all at once.<sup>1</sup> Many Americans, cognizant of their own history, were ideologically opposed to the idea of annexing or governing these new territories. Among those viewing it as an affront to freedom and republicanism were Mark Twain and Andrew Carnegie.

The public's suspicion toward annexation led Congress, as part of its resolution declaring war on Spain, to add an amendment specifically forbidding the annexation of Cuba.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Spain's other territories went unmentioned. When the war ended, they were indeed absorbed. Heedless of any anti-imperialist sentiment at home, the U.S. government took control and sat on this new empire for decades before granting its residents a full measure of self-determination.

A series of subsequent U.S. Supreme Court rulings,

known as the Insular Cases, subsequently helped shape Puerto Rico's status as an "unincorporated" territory. In practice, this meant that the extension of constitutional rights to Puerto Ricans would be largely at the discretion of Congress. Progress here was slow—Congress waited until 1917 to extend U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans, and did so only for those born after 1899.

Even then, Puerto Rico's governors were appointed by U.S. presidents until Harry Truman signed the Elective Governor Act in 1947, allowing Puerto Ricans to elect their own governors. In 1952, Puerto Ricans adopted and ratified their current constitution, which established the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico—or, to translate more precisely from the original Spanish, the "Associated Free State of Puerto Rico"—as the formal name of the territory's local government. As such, Puerto Rico is neither an independent country nor a U.S. state.

Still, it bears noting that whatever one calls it, Puerto Rico's legal status is that of a U.S. territory. Words such as "Commonwealth" and "*Estado Libre Asociado*," although frequently raised in this debate in both official and unofficial contexts, do not have any special significance under U.S. law.

In practice, Puerto Rico's status means that it lacks voting representation in Congress and in the Electoral College, whereas statehood would instantly provide both. On the other side, Puerto Rico residents don't have to pay federal individual income tax on Puerto Rico-source income, even as they enjoy the benefits of U.S. military protection, federal courts, and federal law enforcement agencies. Puerto Ricans are full-fledged U.S. citizens who can trade freely with the mainland U.S. and travel to or reside in any U.S. state they please, without immigration or customs controls.

Puerto Rico also fields its own teams in international sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Baseball Classic, as if it were an independent country.

Meanwhile, Puerto Ricans are eligible for entitlements such as Medicare and Social Security (they do pay all payroll taxes) and participate in modified versions of federal welfare programs such as food stamps and Medicaid. Under federal law, Congress and the federal courts have seen fit to treat Puerto Rico as a state for some purposes but not for others.<sup>3</sup>

In the time since the adoption of its constitution, Puerto Rico has held multiple advisory referenda on statehood. The most recent one was a triumph for supporters of statehood. Still, so far, none of them have

convinced Congress to move forward with creating a fifty-first state.

In 1967, given a choice between statehood, independence, and a vaguely defined "commonwealth" option, 66 percent of Puerto Ricans chose "commonwealth." It bears noting here that the word "commonwealth" is itself controversial. Advocates for statehood complain that it is used to convey a vague, implicit promise that Puerto Rico can become more than just a territory, so long as it avoids becoming a state. This is why former Rep. Jose Serrano, D-N.Y., disparaged a version of the "commonwealth" option in a 2007 congressional hearing as "a letter to Santa Claus."<sup>4</sup>

In 1993, a plurality again backed "commonwealth" status, but by a much smaller margin—49 to 47 percent. Support for statehood had grown, but not into a majority when the option competed with the promise of a new package of popular but unsubstantiated benefits in an enhanced "commonwealth."

In a 1998 referendum, 47 percent again backed statehood, which lost to "none of the above"—a choice urged mainly by statehood opponents who were thwarted from including a "commonwealth" option on the ballot—at 50.5 percent.

A 2012 referendum, based on recommendations that originated with a task force in the Bush White House, took a different approach. Offered a "yes or no" choice on the status quo, 54 percent voted "no." It is based on that result that many pro-statehood politicians subsequently argued that the island's territorial status lacks popular legitimacy. However, on the second ballot question regarding what Puerto Rico's new status should be, 27 percent of voters left the question blank. If these ballots are not included, then 61 percent chose statehood; if they are, then only 44 percent did so. Another 24 percent chose "free association," an undefined option typically linked to independence but more recently an increasingly popular choice of former enhanced "commonwealth" proponents seeking an impossible mix of sovereignty with guaranteed benefits including U.S. citizenship, and four percent choosing "independence." This referendum also failed to settle the question or prompt Congress to act.<sup>5</sup>

Ahead of the next referendum in June 2017, polls showed support for statehood as high as 52 percent.<sup>6</sup> But opponents boycotted the plebiscite, such that 97 percent chose statehood amid turnout of only 23 percent. In numerical terms, there were about 300,000 fewer votes for statehood this time than there had been

in 2012. Thus, Congress again disregarded the result of this non-binding vote.

In November 2020, on the same day voters in states were voting for president, Puerto Rican voters were given their clearest choice yet in another non-binding referendum: “Should Puerto Rico be admitted immediately into the Union as a State?” This time, “Yes” emerged victorious with 52.5 percent, amid voter turnout by 73 percent of Puerto Rican voters living on the island. Still, subsequent efforts to move a bill through Congress failed in summer 2022.

## Supporters of statehood

The politics surrounding statehood is very different within Puerto Rico from outside—and that applies whether or not you happen to be Puerto Rican.

Within Puerto Rico, the statehood debate is defining, contentious, and poorly understood by outsiders. It comprises the main point of disagreement between Puerto Rico’s two local political parties, which do not line up cleanly with the national U.S. parties.

Recent polls suggest that roughly half of current Puerto Rico residents support statehood—48 percent according to a poll taken in September 2018. A series of Anderson Robbins Research polls in Puerto Rico between December 2014 and April 2018 pointed to higher levels of support for “seeking statehood”—between 58 and 68 percent at any given time reported being “strongly” or “somewhat” in favor.<sup>7</sup>

The last three “resident commissioners” elected to represent Puerto Rico in Congress over two decades have all been advocates for statehood and members of the pro-statehood New Party for Progress (PNP in Spanish). However, while in Washington, two of them (including the current one, Jenniffer González) have caucused with the House Republicans and one with House Democrats. Their predecessor caucused with the Democrats and was a member of the more left-wing, anti-statehood Popular Democratic Party (PPD).

Advocates of statehood argue that, in addition to full political rights, it will confer upon the island additional political stability. This, they argue, would attract much new investment, in addition to opening the way for the island to receive between \$1.7 billion and \$5.4 billion in additional federal spending in Puerto Rico over the current level, according to a 2014 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.<sup>8</sup>

Statehood would increase federal health care spending in Puerto Rico and boost spending on food security

and health care for the poor.

Statehood opponents frequently depict statehood as an imperialist “annexation” of Puerto Rico. There is increased interest, especially among liberals such as Rep. Nydia Velazquez (R-NY) and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), in an arrangement in which Puerto Rico gains independence but Puerto Ricans are permitted to keep their U.S. citizenship for life. Former “commonwealth” advocates are even pushing for an arrangement under which U.S. citizenship can be passed down to subsequent generations of Puerto Ricans in a sovereign country of Puerto Rico. As legal justification, they cite unique bilateral arrangements (“Compacts of Free Association”) the U.S. has with the Marshall Islands, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia. These compacts grant the U.S. exclusive military rights in a geopolitically important area of the Pacific, but they do not assert U.S. sovereignty or provide U.S. citizenship to residents of those Pacific Island nations.

This is only a broad sketch of how statehood is debated within Puerto Rico. It’s a different story outside of the territory. For most mainland Americans not of Puerto Rican extraction, the issue of statehood has little direct relevance. Yet on a national basis, Americans broadly support welcoming this territory as a new state. This is born out in both a 2019 Gallup survey, showing 66 percent support,<sup>9</sup> and in a more recent 2021 poll from Change Research, showing 59 percent support.<sup>10</sup>

Support for statehood among Floridian Puerto Ricans is high. A March 2019 Anzalone Liszt Grove (ALG) survey found that 77 percent would support statehood “[i]f the U.S. Congress offered” it.<sup>11</sup> An Equis Survey in October 2019 found support at 57 percent,<sup>12</sup> and a 2017 survey of this same geographic and demographic group by Voter Surveys and Consulting found support at 66 percent.<sup>13</sup>

This year, KA Consulting conducted a survey of Puerto Ricans living in five states—Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, New York, Texas, and Georgia. It found that 63 percent of respondents preferred statehood for Puerto Rico to both independence and the status quo.<sup>14</sup>

Again, this result contrasts with the more evenly divided results of the various referenda of the last 30 years within Puerto Rico itself, and with recent polling that shows roughly 48 percent support among those living there.<sup>15</sup> One possible explanation is that the roughly six million Puerto Ricans who have moved to the mainland are self-selecting. They have, as one commentator once put it, chosen statehood with their feet by moving to U.S. states.

As we will see below, the vast majority of Floridians and Puerto Ricans identify the island's uncertain status within the U.S. as a major reason for its problems. Those frustrated by this might be among the most likely to leave, and among the most conservative within an ethnic group that appears to be trending conservative overall.

## Opponents of statehood

In Washington, the strongest opponents of statehood fall into two categories. One consists of very left-wing Puerto Rican politicians who represent mainland constituencies.

Until his retirement in 2019, Rep. Luis Guterrez, D-Ill., was probably the most vocal opponent of Puerto Rican statehood in Congress. Along with Rep. Nydia Velasquez, D-N.Y., he strongly opposed the latest statehood referendum, arguing as early as 2013 that an up-or-down referendum on statehood would unfairly exclude other options, such as independence. Although he no longer explicitly supports independence, Gutierrez has argued in interviews that Puerto Rico should aspire to a status that is more independent than the current one—an autonomous nation that has a “treaty” and a “friendship” with the United States.<sup>16</sup> And that certainly sounds a lot like independence.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., also of Puerto Rican descent, has tried to “split the baby,” arguing alternately that statehood would guarantee better congressional attention to Puerto Rico, and that current efforts toward statehood amount to “imposing” it in a colonialist or imperialist fashion.<sup>17</sup> However, she has also hinted that she would support and honor the result of a binding referendum on the question.

It should be noted that there are also Puerto Rican Democrats in Washington who support statehood, such as Orlando-area Rep. Darren Soto and New York's Ritchie Torres.

The other category of statehood opponents consists of conservative Republicans. This strain of opposition also extends back a very long way, and relies on various arguments—for example, that it would linguistically divide America, increase government spending on the island, and increase Democrats' power in Congress.<sup>18</sup>

Former President Trump has not necessarily embraced any of these ideas, but in September 2018, in a radio interview with Geraldo Rivera, he did declare himself an “absolute no” on statehood, predicated on the inability of the island's politicians to govern. His

comment may have been tongue-in-cheek, as it was based on his feud with San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulin Cruz—ironically, a stridently anti-statehood politician—in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

“With the mayor of San Juan as bad as she is and as incompetent as she is, Puerto Rico shouldn't be talking about statehood until they get some people that really know what they're doing.”<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted that San Juan voters subsequently threw Yulin Cruz out of office.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, in discussing House Democrats' ambitious agenda in a June 2019 interview, embraced something more like the older, conventional conservative anti-statehood position. He



spoke as one quite convinced that Puerto Rican statehood is just part of a broader cynical power-grab by Democrats, which also includes packing the Supreme Court and abolishing the Senate filibuster. After citing the Green New Deal and Medicare for All proposals, McConnell told Fox News personality Laura Ingraham that Puerto Rican statehood is just part of Democrats' plans for making such “full-bore socialism” a reality.

“They plan to make the District of Columbia a state and give them two Democratic Senators, [making] Puerto Rico a state would give them two more Democratic Senators. They plan to expand the Supreme Court. So this is full-bore socialism on the march in the House, and, yeah, as long as I am Majority Leader in the Senate none of that stuff is going anywhere.”<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to this, the official national Republican Party platform has called since 1940 for Puerto Rican self-determination on the issue of statehood. The current platform specifically references Puerto Rico's right

to choose statehood and cites the 2012 referendum as a victory for that cause. And at least some Republican politicians with no connection to Puerto Rico do support it. Democratic Rep. Darren Soto's bill to admit Puerto Rico as a state with no further plebiscites has nineteen Republican co-sponsors in the House, including Puerto Rico's current elected non-voting representative—who is a Republican.

Support for Puerto Rican statehood has long existed within a true ideological cross-section of the Republican Party, from the moderate Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, to the very conservative former Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Idaho, and everyone in between, including the late and long-serving Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska.

This is, of course, only the most superficial overview

forth between the island and the U.S. mainland for any purpose whatsoever.

Yet in practice, this has not turned Puerto Rico into a prosperous offshore American tax haven. On the contrary, U.S. Census data show that between 2000 and 2021, its population declined by more than 14 percent, from 3.81 million to 3.26 million. For perspective, at the turn of the century, Puerto Rico had nearly twice as many residents as Utah. Utah surpassed Puerto Rico in population in 2019.<sup>21</sup>

Far from being the result of any one event, the mass flight from Puerto Rico has been running steadily over two decades, through the Great Recession, Hurricane Maria, the economic boom of the early Trump era, and COVID. In 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 344,694 homes in Puerto Rico were vacant—22 percent of the island's housing stock, up from an estimated 18 percent in 2016.<sup>22</sup>

So why this massive population drain? One decisive factor—but by no means the only one—seems to be the 1996 repeal of a key federal tax exemption on the profits of Puerto Rico-based companies.<sup>23</sup> In the time since, the 33 percent top marginal territorial tax rate for individuals—far higher than any state—has played some role in discouraging business formation and relocation, offsetting any federal income tax break. (As everywhere else, most people and individuals do not actually pay an effective rate that high, but top marginal rates create incentives.)

Statehood advocates (and most mainland Puerto Ricans) argue that the island's uncertain and ambiguous status is a harmful source of economic uncertainty. Regardless of the ultimate explanation, Puerto Rico has long been suffering from a complex web of both acute and chronic social and economic problems from which, at least prior to COVID, the mainland U.S. was mostly spared.

Puerto Rico's current unemployment rate—5.8 percent as of August 2022—is a vast improvement over its 17 percent peak in May 2010. But it is and has long been far above that of the U.S. (3.7 percent as of August 2022). This is in part because, even as the number of jobs in the U.S. has been rising gradually in the long term, the number of jobs in Puerto Rico shrank for the first 20 years of this century. Although Puerto Rico's employment levels have finally pulled out of their long tailspin, there were still nearly 60,000 fewer jobs there in August 2022 than there were in May 2000.<sup>24</sup>

Crime rates in Puerto Rico are also significantly



of the issue. But note the incongruity in the fact that a right-wing mainland perspective and a left-wing Puerto Rico perspective combine to drive opposition to statehood. Meanwhile, U.S. mainlanders and Puerto Rican mainlanders are unambiguously supportive of statehood. Those on the island itself are more evenly divided.

## Puerto Rico today

Those unfamiliar with its history and current events might view Puerto Rico's arrangement as the best of all worlds. Its residents pay no federal income tax on Puerto Rico-source income yet have access to federal benefits; its government bonds are completely tax-exempt; it enjoys unfettered free trade with the world's largest economy; its residents can move freely back and

higher than those of the U.S. mainland. The murder rate, for example, at nearly 17 per 100,000 population, is much higher than that of nearby Florida (5.9 per 100,000) and of the U.S. as a whole (6.5 per 100,000).<sup>25</sup>

Due to long-term fiscal mismanagement, the island's government and its politics were roiled in recent years by a debt crisis. In 2016, a bipartisan majority in Congress and the Obama administration imposed a fiscal control board to sort out territorial finances.<sup>26</sup>

Add to this the devastation of Hurricane Maria in 2017, its shockingly high death toll of 3,000, and the sluggish governmental response that left some people without power for 11 months. Finally, mix in a dose of political instability. Thanks to a major scandal in 2019, the island's elected governor, Ricardo Rossello, was forced to resign.

Although the picture has improved somewhat since we described it in 2020, Puerto Rico continues to underperform the rest of the U.S.

In this context, Puerto Ricans on the mainland are understandably concerned about events back in Puerto Rico. As we will see below, mainland Puerto Ricans have nuanced views about the many contributing factors to these problems. But they are also very likely to see statehood as part of the solution.

## Florida's Puerto Rican voters

Puerto Rico, as a territory, has no presidential electors. But Puerto Ricans exercise outsized influence in presidential elections, thanks to their island's large and influential diaspora. There are twice as many Puerto Ricans living in U.S. states today as there are in Puerto Rico. Moreover, as of 2017, the critical swing-state of Florida has a larger number of them than any other state.<sup>27</sup>

Puerto Ricans are now a very large and influential voting bloc, comprising 1.1 million potential voters in a state that has chosen the winner in 17 out of the last 20 presidential elections.

The conventional wisdom about Florida is that probably no candidate—and certainly no Republican candidate—can win the presidency without it. But the voting data tell that story at an even more granular level.

Central Florida, the region that most of these Puerto Ricans have come to inhabit (specifically the Interstate-4 corridor between Orlando and Tampa), has been decisive in every U.S. presidential election since 1992.<sup>28</sup> In every election where the Republican candidate gets 50 percent of the vote in 12 specific Central

Florida counties, he wins the state. When he falls short, he loses the state and the presidency.<sup>29</sup>

For example, Donald Trump easily won Florida in 2020. He decisively won this specific region of Central Florida over Joe Biden, 51.3 to 47.4 percent, a result very close to the overall statewide result of 51.2 to 47.9 percent.

Trump also won Florida in 2016 when he carried this region by a smaller margin, with 50.2 percent. Mitt Romney's loss in 2012 came after he got only 49.8 percent in that specific region of Central Florida and lost the state by less than 80,000 votes. George W. Bush won 50.5 percent in Central Florida in 2000 and went on to win the state and the presidency while testing the very limits of how close elections can be.

The region plays a similar role as a bellwether in other statewide races as well. Excepting 1994, when Jeb Bush won Central Florida but lost the governorship narrowly, the winner of this region has won every gubernatorial race since 1990. Given the region's rapid population growth, it is increasingly unlikely that anyone could win Florida today without winning Central Florida.

It therefore behooves any politician planning a run in Florida—including all presidential candidates—to think carefully about the Puerto Rican voters living in this key battleground and of the strong opinions they retain about Puerto Rico's status and future.

The aim of this analysis is not to recommend a particular course for Puerto Ricans, or even for candidates. It is certainly not to recommend that political candidates adopt insincere positions on a topic they may not even care about in order to pander to one group of voters. But the data are very clear that candidates supportive of statehood will have a better chance of connecting with Florida's Puerto Rican voters. Moreover, it is likely that candidates who are at least well-informed and respectful in their rhetoric on Puerto Ricans' choice on statehood will make a better impression with this crucial voter bloc, compared to those who dismiss it out of hand or disparage Puerto Ricans' ability to govern themselves.

The firm Voter Surveys and Consulting conducted two sequential surveys of Floridian Puerto Rican voters specifically living in Central Florida—the first in September 2014 and the second in late June and early July 2017.<sup>30</sup>

Although we will also consider the results of the March 2019 survey of Puerto Rican voters throughout the state of Florida by Anzalone Liszt Grove Research,

the VSC polls are especially useful because they asked identical questions and showed a progression over time. For example, they reflected a significant change in the Puerto Rican voters who inhabit central Florida. Only 12 percent of the 400 Central Florida Puerto Ricans surveyed in 2014 had come to Florida directly from Puerto Rico, with the large majority migrating there from other U.S. states. But by 2017—after such a short space of time—this share had quadrupled to 50 percent due to a massive outflow from the island.

## Party Affiliation/ Identification

Part of the role of the staff of election campaigns is to understand various segments of the electorate and their natural political leanings. Republicans do not simply ignore Democratic voter blocs – rather, they calibrate and create performance goals for each bloc.

Likewise, it is not enough for a Republican candidate merely to *win* the Evangelical vote—he or she must win this overwhelmingly Republican segment of the population by huge margins that reflect its lopsided political affiliation. Likewise, it is not enough for a Democrat to win black voters—in most states, Democrats cannot win elections without getting at least 85 to 90 percent of the black vote.

So it should not come as too much satisfaction for Democrats, nor with too much frustration for Republicans, that Puerto Rican voters in Florida are decisively Democratic. It only means that Democrats must try to run up the score with these voters, and that Republicans must work to overperform – to blunt Democrats’ advantage and lose by reasonable margins.

The two VSC polls, though somewhat old, point to a slight decrease over time in Democratic partisanship among Central Florida Puerto Ricans specifically. Respondents reported slightly decreased Democratic registration between the two polls—from 55 to 47 percent—and the share of registered Republicans grew from 19 percent to 26 percent. Unaffiliated and minor party registration was steady at 17 percent.

The share of respondents who described themselves as “straight Democratic” or “mostly Democratic” voters declined between the 2014 and 2017 surveys from 47 to 34 percent, whereas the number claiming to be “straight” or “mostly” Republican voters increased from 12 to 23 percent. Meanwhile, the number in the middle—of voters who said they voted for “a few more Democrats,” “a few more Republicans,” or “about equal-

ly for both,” grew by less than either poll’s margin of error, from 29 to 33 percent.

Still, this trend reflects that of most other Hispanic demographic groups currently. They are Democratic, trending more Republican all the time.

Compare these results with all Florida voters as of 2022 – 36 percent registered Republicans, 35 percent registered Democrats, and 27 percent unaffiliated – and it is evident that Central Florida Puerto Ricans are significantly more Democratic than the median voter.<sup>31</sup>

The poll also asked about ideological affiliation. Between 2014 and 2017, the share of Central Floridian Puerto Ricans calling themselves “conservatives” dipped from 48 to 42 percent. The number calling themselves “liberals” increased from 17 to 24 percent. Another interesting finding indirectly hints that Florida Puerto Ricans are not your average Democrats. In its 2017 version, the VSC poll found that 68 percent reported attending church at least once a month. Compare that to just 49 percent of all U.S. voters who do so, according to the 2016 national presidential exit poll.<sup>32</sup> Given the strong correlation between frequency of church attendance and the tendency to vote Republican, one must conclude that this is not your typical Democratic voter bloc.

The ALG poll, unlike the others, included South Florida Puerto Rican voters as about 25 percent of its sample. It also asked questions differently, so it should not be taken as a strict apples-to-apples comparison. However, its results regarding Puerto Rican voters’ general partisan tendencies are similar enough to provide confirmation. Fifty percent said they were registered Democrats, and 53 percent identified as “Democrat” (40 percent) or “lean Democrat” (13 percent). Eighteen percent were registered Republicans, and 22 percent identified as either “Republican” or “lean Republican.”

One interesting finding in ALG’s 2019 poll was that older Puerto Ricans were more likely to call themselves Democrats, whereas younger ones were more likely to say they lack any sort of strong affiliation. Overall, 47 percent of respondents described themselves as “not committed to either party,” led by 53 percent of those under 50. Compare that to 50 percent of those 65 and older. This is consistent with the VSC polls’ findings of changes in partisanship over time. ALG did not specifically ask about ideology. But on the contentious issue of abortion, which often serves as an ideological marker in mainland U.S. politics, the survey does show Puerto Ricans to be unusually pro-life (49 percent) for such a



strongly Democratic constituency.

Overall, the survey results suggest that Puerto Ricans living in Central Florida lean strongly Democratic compared to the median Florida voter, but that they are also much more conservative than the median Democrat; they might be getting more liberal over time, but they also might be getting less partisan and less Democratic.

## The Status Issue

Puerto Rican voters care about a wide variety of issues—taxes, education, the economy, gun control, abortion—the same things other Americans care about. But they also have a unique issue associated with them—Puerto Rico’s status. And it is our goal to consider carefully what role that specific issue plays in a key part of a crucial battleground state that both parties will be fighting to win later this year.

First, the survey data show that Puerto Rican voters in Central Florida care about this issue. VSC’s 2017 survey, taken just when the 2017 statehood referendum was underway, found that 85 percent of them believed the issue to be “extremely important” (40 percent) or “very important” (45 percent), an increase from 78 percent in 2014. The same poll shows 66 percent support for statehood.

This is consistent with ALG’s poll, in which 77 percent supported statehood and 80 percent of respondents said that the issue “is important for [their] 2020 vote.” Fifty-five percent called it “very important.”

The VSC surveys tested candidate positions on respondents, asking them to rate, from zero to ten, “how likely/unlikely they would be to vote for a candidate” taking the position in question. Two of the positions—“Congress to resolve the status of Puerto Rico” and “wants PR to become the 51st state with two Senators and five House members”—were awarded an 8.1 on the scale, and neither result varied from 2014. “Binding statehood bill for Puerto Rico” received a 7.6 in the 2017 survey, up from 7.5 in 2014. The position “keep territorial status without changes” rated only a 3.5, down from 4.6 in 2014.

ALG took a different approach in testing candidate positions. Its 2019 poll asked respondents, “Regardless of their political party, would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate who will work aggressively to achieve U.S. statehood for Puerto Rico?” Seventy-one percent said “more likely” (45 percent “much more likely”) compared to just 14 percent “less likely.” Even

though this is a statewide poll, this gigantic 57-point margin lends additional credibility to the results in the VSC polls. Statehood’s popularity in this community is a slam dunk.

The ALG poll also shows that the Puerto Rican diaspora in Florida has strong views—in some cases very strong—about Puerto Rico and the causes of its specific problems. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with several potential reasons for the territory’s “current economic and social crisis...and the migration of Puerto Ricans to Florida.” Given when it was asked (March 2019), respondents could have understood this phrase to refer to many problems, including the territory’s longstanding economic problems, its recent fiscal crisis, and even the massive failure of assistance after Hurricane Maria.

Consonant with the findings above, a majority (57 percent) agree with the statement that Puerto Rico’s “status as a Commonwealth and not a U.S. State is the underlying cause for the Island’s current crisis and living conditions.” This is a common theme for the state-



hood movement, and one that anti-statehood activists disparage as utopian.

A large majority (66 percent) feels that the national legislature “has never offered Puerto Ricans the same rights or opportunities.” A small majority (53 percent) feels that “Congressional neglect of those on the island is a personal knock to Puerto Ricans who are on the mainland,” although 39 percent disagree with that statement.

## Voter views of candidates

Both the VSC surveys and the ALG survey tested respondents’ favorability ratings for a variety of high-pro-

file politicians in Florida and elsewhere. In all cases, the results suggest that even though few Floridian Puerto Ricans identify as Republicans, they do often vote for Republican candidates.

Former Governor and current Sen. Rick Scott, a Republican, is a case study for Republicans to consider when courting this vote. Between 2014, when Scott was running for re-election as governor, and 2017, when he was running against Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson, Scott managed to completely remake his image. In its September 2014 poll, VSC found him with a net nine-

Democratic U.S. Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (43 to 20 percent fav/unfav) and Nydia Velazquez (34 to 12 percent fav/unfav), both of New York, and both of whom received high marks. So did Orlando-area Rep. Darren Soto (38 to 6 percent fav/unfav).

So did Puerto Rico's elected Republican representative to the U.S. Congress, Resident Commissioner Jenniffer Gonzalez (37 to 18 percent fav/unfav), who endorsed, campaigned for, and cut ads for Rick Scott in 2018.

Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis had not risen to prominence in time for the 2017 VSC poll. However, his popularity among Hispanic voters as of 2022 was in decisively positive territory, with 52 percent approving, albeit in a poll that did not specifically separate out Puerto Rican voters.<sup>33</sup>

The bottom line is that Republicans are playing an “away game” when they seek the votes of Florida's Puerto Rican voters. But good teams are capable of playing well on the road.

## Discussion

Polling is an inexact science. One must always avoid reading the tea leaves too closely, confusing tiny margins in opinion surveys with definitive evidence pointing to no-doubt conclusions. However, it is certainly reasonable to draw cautious and limited inferences from multiple polls that show both overwhelming majorities for a given position and a great intensity of support for it.

In this case, the survey data show that Floridian Puerto Rican voters “really, really” care about Puerto Rico's status. They support statehood for the island by an overwhelming margin. They believe even more strongly that Congress should respect Puerto Rican voters and give them statehood if they choose it in a yes-no referendum. And they tell pollsters that the issue will affect their vote in 2020.

Taken together, these findings provide ample evidence that candidates who either support statehood or are at least just respectful of Puerto Ricans' choice on statehood will have a better chance with these key voters than those that don't.

In light of the lopsided findings, the contrapositive appears reasonable as well—that those who harshly reject or even disparage the idea of statehood, or who go out of their way to imply that Puerto Ricans are incapable of governing themselves, are very likely to alienate that same Florida voter population, probably needlessly.



point unfavorable rating (28 to 37 percent fav/unfav) with this sub-population. But by summer 2017, deep into his second term, Scott had really turned things around, increasing his favorables by 21 points (49 to 35 percent fav/unfav). The ALG poll showed Scott with a similar 48 to 25 percent fav/unfav among Florida Puerto Ricans as of spring 2019.

In our discussion section, we will consider how Scott achieved this turnaround, and what it probably meant for his successful 2018 Senate campaign.

Note first, however, that Scott's good rating is not merely a reflection of an incumbency advantage. Consider the case of Sen. Marco Rubio, another Republican and a member of South Florida's Cuban-American community. Between 2014 and 2017, the VSC polls show Rubio's image with Florida Puerto Ricans deteriorating amid higher unfavorable ratings. He went from a net nine points positive (36 to 27 percent fav/unfav) to one point positive (44 to 43 percent). Again, this latter result is almost identical to the ALG poll of 2019 (40 percent fav/41 percent unfav).

As a side note, the ALG poll tested the favorables of other officials of Puerto Rican heritage, including

This may be what separates a candidate like Rick Scott from a candidate like his personal friend, Donald Trump.

For a small taste of how this issue works in Florida, consider again that 2017 VSC poll, which was taken more than a year before the November 2018 election. In a very early ballot test of the Florida Senate race (which Scott ultimately won), it found Puerto Rican Floridians favoring Sen. Bill Nelson over Scott, 49 to 32 percent.

This is not too surprising—Scott polled relatively well for a Republican, but this is a Democratic cohort, and Nelson had even stronger favorables than Scott. However, look behind those numbers and you get a glimpse of the role that Puerto Rico’s status is playing in the background. Among statehood supporters, this race between Scott and Nelson was nearly a tie—44 to 40 percent in Nelson’s favor. But Nelson built up a large lead among opponents of statehood, whether they supported Puerto Rican independence (55 to 23 percent for Nelson over Scott) or continued territorial status (68 to 12 percent for Nelson).

Some Republicans might look at such lopsided numbers and lose hope, but this is not how elections are run or messages tested. In a state with many key constituencies and critical battlegrounds, a successful campaign thinks about how to win 20 percent of one group instead of just 10 percent, 35 percent of another group instead of 25 percent, *et cetera*.

Republicans must realize that when they scrap for those few extra percentage points with Puerto Ricans in Florida, they will be aiming their pitch primarily at statehood supporters.

Yes, mainland Republicans do have many other things in common with Florida’s Puerto Ricans—things that mainland Republicans are more likely to consider matters of principle. Florida Puerto Ricans are mostly pro-life, for example (49 to 44 percent, according to the ALG poll), they attend church at much higher rates than other Americans, and 42 percent think of themselves as “conservative.” In this, they resemble other Hispanic voter groups that Republicans have feebly tried and, until 2020, mostly failed to win over.

The key point remains: as long as statehood remains an issue, its supporters will be the Puerto Rican voters most open to hearing from and voting for Republican candidates.

In this discussion, we will ponder the performance of three different Republicans. Here are the highlights:

Rick Scott, now a U.S. senator, defeated a strong in-

cumbent U.S. senator after backing statehood and running one of the most aggressive Puerto Rican outreach operations ever seen in Florida by any Republican. He outperformed Ron DeSantis (simultaneously running for governor) in the heavily Puerto Rican areas of Central Florida, despite winning by a narrower margin statewide.

DeSantis, who won his election alongside Scott, was not hostile toward Puerto Rican statehood, having even supported a pro-statehood bill in the U.S. House at one point. He simply did not focus as much time or resources on this particular population. His overall election strategy still worked well. He also faced an easier race against a first-time statewide candidate (Andrew Gillum, the mayor of Tallahassee) who had some ethical baggage known even at that time. DeSantis was able to win by a wider margin statewide despite losing a lot of votes in Central Florida that Scott managed to get.

Donald Trump found his way to a majority in Florida in 2016 with just 26 percent of the non-Cuban Hispanic vote. That may work for him because of his robust support in other quarters, but there is no guarantee that other Republicans can replicate such a feat. In 2020, the question was changed to ask specifically “Puerto Rican” voters their preference. Trump won 31 percent of their votes on his way to a 51 percent statewide victory.

By all rights, Rick Scott probably should have lost in 2018. It was a Democratic election year and, unlike DeSantis, he was facing a well-liked and entrenched Democratic incumbent in former Sen. Bill Nelson. Nelson, a former astronaut who had served three terms, was not even perceived to be in any danger when the cycle began.

But Scott had specific advantages—unlimited personal money, an unusually energetic campaign, and a great strategy that included a relentless effort to win over Latino voters. In psephological terms, these factors allowed him to turn nothing into something.

If Scott did even slightly better with Puerto Rican voters than the average Republican—and there is ample evidence that he did—then it is one of the many little things that you could say won him this exceptionally close race against the odds.

Scott, who already enjoyed a reasonably good reputation among Puerto Rican and other non-Cuban Hispanic voters by the time he announced for Senate, was relentless in working for their votes. He targeted them in Central Florida with Spanish-language ads. He not only advertised to them about education and the econ-

omy, but he also took a political risk by speaking out against President Trump's immigration policy, which had resulted in family separations at the border—a policy that ALG's poll shows to be very unpopular among Puerto Ricans, even though they are not immigrants.<sup>34</sup>

Scott made a point of conducting multiple Spanish-language media interviews, despite being relatively new to the language. He campaigned frequently with Puerto Rico's Republican congresswoman and took at least eight trips to the island after Hurricane Maria to tell Puerto Ricans that they were welcome in Florida.

Even though it had been Trump who initially convinced him to run for Senate in 2018, Scott both openly criticized Trump and absented himself from a Trump campaign rally in late July (He did later attend one in October.)

The result of all this is interesting and suggestive, if not completely definitive. DeSantis, who was concurrently running for governor and won election on the same day Scott did, won statewide by a larger margin.<sup>35</sup> But in the 12 Central Florida counties discussed above, Scott outperformed him. Scott won 51.2 percent there, DeSantis 50.4 percent.<sup>36</sup> And that may seem like a small difference, but for Scott it was the difference between winning and losing. Scott won his Senate seat by only 10,000 votes. Had he performed only as well as DeSantis in those Central Florida counties—either in terms of vote share or total votes—he would have lost the election.

To zoom in further, Scott managed to find a combined 15,000 more votes than DeSantis did in three of the most Puerto Rican-heavy counties in that region—Orange County (209,000 Puerto Rican residents), Osceola County (124,000), and Hillsborough County (129,000).<sup>37</sup>

Daniel Allott, writing for *National Review*, looked at Central Florida at an even more granular level, scrutinizing each of Volusia County's 125 precincts.<sup>38</sup> He found that even though DeSantis had represented this entire county in the U.S. House, Scott had managed to pry 1,000 more votes than DeSantis did out of the 16 precincts where the population was more than 25 percent Hispanic (not necessarily Puerto Rican).

Think of Scott's run as a model for future runs. Were he to run for re-election in 2024, he would likely face a less formidable opponent than Nelson. It is not unthinkable that he could do much better among Florida Puerto Ricans. Among the ones supporting statehood, he would have a reasonable shot at tying, and then los-

ing this demographic by, say 20 points instead of 30. That would be curtains for almost any Democratic opponent.

Trump succeeded in this region of Florida in 2020. Exit polls show he won 31 percent of Puerto Rican votes. Our analysis suggests that he could have done even better, had he not dismissed statehood without giving it much of a chance—at least “until they get some people that really know what they're doing.” This earned him strikingly (and perhaps unnecessarily) high negative ratings with Puerto Rican voters at the time.

Trump clearly wanted to be popular with Puerto Ricans, especially the ones in Florida—his Twitter missive about faked death tolls from the hurricane ended with, “I love Puerto Rico!” But this is harder to do when you call into question Puerto Ricans' ability to govern themselves. Yes, we saw above that Floridian Puerto Ricans favor statehood by large margins. But by even larger margins, they want their voice and their vote to be respected—which is to say, fully 85 percent “think that Congress should abide by the election results of a yes/no statehood vote in the island of Puerto Rico,” according to the ALG survey. From that perspective, Trump's message might come as a slap in the face. This is especially true now that such a referendum has produced a pro-statehood majority result.

There is surely more to Trump's unpopularity with Florida Puerto Ricans than just statehood. Trump's feud with local Puerto Rican officials over hurricane aid and hurricane deaths may have come off as petty.<sup>39</sup> Both Scott and Ron DeSantis—a strong Trump ally up to that point—had to distance themselves from Trump's remarks about the numbers of hurricane dead.

And there are surely reasons Trump is unpopular here that aren't related to Puerto Rican politics at all. His uncompromising immigration stance is just one example. Puerto Ricans are not immigrants, but they do have opinions about the issue, and surveys suggest that the ones in Florida strongly disagree with Trump's point of view. ALG offered respondents a choice of two statements on immigration. Only 28 percent agreed with the Trumpist message: “No undocumented immigrant should be allowed to cross the border to reside in the U.S. The United States needs stricter border control.”<sup>40</sup>

So it's important to remember, when looking at how various politicians perform, that not everything revolves around Puerto Rico.<sup>41</sup>

Still, as Scott's example illustrates, Republicans are

always going to be appealing primarily to statehood supporters whenever they approach Floridian Puerto Ricans for votes. Deride and belittle what is such a key issue for them right up top, and the battle to persuade them or convince them to overlook other points of disagreement becomes harder right from the start.

Perhaps Trump's expression of frustration with San Juan's mayor does not need to be his final, irrevocable position on the issue. Or perhaps it will be. Either way, future Republican candidates ought to learn from his mistake.

Note that when ALG asked its sample in 2019 to discuss reasons why Puerto Rico had so many problems, the two strongest points of agreement were on sentiments that one could naturally hear on the lips of Trump or any other conservative Republican candidate for office:

An overwhelming majority (79 percent) agreed with the statement that “[e]xcessive taxes have overburdened Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican businesses, hurting jobs and the local economy...”

A very large majority (71 percent) blamed “corruption and incompetence of all Puerto Rican governments” (meaning both territorial and local) for the “current crisis in Puerto Rico.”

This latter point is actually distantly related to what Trump said, just put in far less personal terms. One could imagine Trump making a similar point without dismissing the dreams of statehood that many Puerto Rican voters harbor precisely because they are frustrated by the corruption and incompetence he was referring to.

The ALG poll even identifies a potential message for use against Democratic politicians who support statehood for Washington, D.C. but equivocate on or oppose statehood for Puerto Rico, usually out of deference to left-wing anti-statehood politicians. The poll showed that 47 percent of Floridian Puerto Rican voters “would resent Democrats who support statehood for D.C., but not for Puerto Rico,” with 31 percent “strongly resent[ing]” such politicians. On this particular matter, registered Democratic voters are even slightly more likely to “resent” (50 percent) and “strongly resent” (35 percent) such Democrats. To be sure, this is not an obvious 75-25 message like many of the others discussed here, but it offers a negative message to accompany the positive messages of support for Puerto Rican self-determination or even statehood.



## Conclusion

Florida's Puerto Rican population has become a king-maker. It now exceeds one million, and it is concentrated in the part of Florida considered most important to winning statewide elections there since 1990.

Puerto Ricans in Florida are therefore massively influential now. All candidates for office in that state, and all presidential candidates, must think about smart ways of approaching them.

Surveys show that they lean Democratic in an evenly divided state, although they are unusually conservative for Democrats. Democrats must compete to win their votes by very large margins if they have any hope of winning statewide races, and Republicans can achieve victory by simply blunting the Democratic advantage with these voters.

Florida's Puerto Rican voters are very strongly supportive of Puerto Rican statehood. They also want to elect officials who share their view, or who at least who take the issue seriously and will respect Puerto Ricans' choice on statehood. They disapprove—sometimes strongly—of politicians who disparage this dream and speak of Puerto Ricans as if they were unable to govern themselves.

As it happens, statehood voters are also the ones most likely to support Republicans. This means that when Republicans make their pitch and scrap for a greater share of the Puerto Rican vote in Florida, they are appealing primarily to statehood supporters.

As the examples of Rick Scott and Donald Trump show, Republicans are capable of endearing themselves to Puerto Rican voters in Florida and also of confounding them. If Republicans wish to extend their long winning streak in Florida, they would do well to figure out what they have in common with Puerto Rican voters and make the best case they can.

# Endnotes

- 1 This includes Hawaii, which had applied for annexation in 1893 and was in fact annexed before the Spanish-American War had ended.
- 2 The amendment to the war resolution was proposed by Sen. Henry Teller, R-Colo.
- 3 In 2016, the Supreme Court had to adjudicate a question about whether Puerto Rico is considered a “state” in Chapter Nine bankruptcy cases.
- 4 “H.R. 900, Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2007; and H.R. 1230, Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2007,” Subcommittee on Insular Affairs of the Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives. Mar. 22, 2007.
- 5 Further confounding the issue was the fact that voters also ousted its incumbent Republican governor, Luis Fortuño, an ardent statehood advocate who had previously served as the island’s representative in Congress.
- 6 “Plebiscite Boycott Fails to Seduce the Masses,” *El Nuevo Dia*, May 24-26. Accessed at: [http://prdecide.elnuevodia.com/detalle/reportaje/311\\_plebiscite-boycott-fails-to-seducer-the-masses/](http://prdecide.elnuevodia.com/detalle/reportaje/311_plebiscite-boycott-fails-to-seducer-the-masses/)
- 7 “The Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation Survey of Puerto Rico Residents, September 2018,” Accessed at: <http://files.kff.org/attachment/Topline-and-Methodology-Views-and-Experiences-of-Puerto-Ricans-One-Year-After-Maria>
- 8 “Puerto Rico: Information on How Statehood Would Potentially Affect Selected Federal Programs and Revenue Sources.” Government Accountability Office, March 2014. Accessed at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/670/661334.pdf>. Cited in Jo Craven McGinty, “Statehood for Puerto Ricans: Billions More in U.S. Programs—and in Taxes,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 4, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/statehood-for-puerto-ricans-billions-more-in-u-s-programs-and-in-taxes-1509714000>
- 9 Gallup Organization, “Americans continue to support Puerto Rico statehood,” Accessed at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/260744/americans-continue-support-puerto-rico-statehood.aspx>
- 10 Francisco Proskauer Valerio and Nancy Zdunkewicz, “Voters Support Action on the Status of Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.,” Accessed at [https://changeresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Puerto-Rico\\_DC-Memo.pdf](https://changeresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Puerto-Rico_DC-Memo.pdf)
- 11 Anzalone Liszt Grove Research, “Florida’s Puerto Rican Diaspora: Findings and Recommendations from a statewide survey.” March 2019. ALG describes its survey and methodology thus: “A statewide survey of 600 likely November 2020 Puerto Rican Voters in Florida was conducted March 12-20, 2019 via landlines and cellphones among professional interviewers. The margin of error for the statewide sample is +/- 4.0 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence. The margin of error for subgroups varies and is higher. 86% of interviews were conducted via cell phone.”
- 12 Bianca Padro Ocasio, “Most of Florida’s Puerto Rican voters don’t like Trump -- but fewer say they’ll vote,” *Miami Herald*, Oct. 29, 2019. Accessed at <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article236728033.html>
- 13 Voter Surveys and Consulting, “Central Florida Puerto Ricans: Findings from 403 Telephone interviews conducted in June/ July 2017.”
- 14 “Key Findings,” a document produced by KA Consulting LLC. Accessed at: <http://www.pr51st.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Puerto-Rico-Key-Findings.pdf>
- 15 “The Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation Survey of Puerto Rico Residents, September 2018,” Accessed at: <http://files.kff.org/attachment/Topline-and-Methodology-Views-and-Experiences-of-Puerto-Ricans-One-Year-After-Maria>
- 16 Nomiki Konst, “Will Statehood Save Puerto Rico? Luis Gutierrez Interview,” TYT’s The Conversation, May 30, 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipV9AGRXS-fw>
- 17 “I’m not making a stance on statehood,” Ocasio-Cortez told *Jacobin*. “but I guarantee you that if Puerto Rico had votes in a presidential election, if they did have two senators, if they did have representation, four thousand people would not have died. I guarantee you. It’s gross and it’s cynical, but it’s true.” “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, In Her Own Words,” Daniel Denvir, July 11, 2018. Accessed at: <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/07/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-interview-democratic-primary>
- 18 For a relatively recent example, the late Phyllis Schlafly made most of these arguments in the 2007 tract, “Deceitful Tactics Used To Make Puerto Rico A State,” accessed at <https://www.phyllisschlafly.com/national-sovereignty/deceitful-tactics-used-to-make-puerto-rico-a-state-1066>
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- 22 U.S. Census estimate for 2020 accessed at [https://censo.estadisticas.pr/sites/default/files/CommunitySurvey/Puerto\\_Rico\\_17\\_5YR\\_2017\\_0.xlsx](https://censo.estadisticas.pr/sites/default/files/CommunitySurvey/Puerto_Rico_17_5YR_2017_0.xlsx); 2016 estimate from Jennifer Hinojosa and Edwin Melendez, “The Housing Crisis in Puerto Rico and the Impact of Hurricane Maria,” [https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/data\\_briefs/HousingPuertoRico.pdf](https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/data_briefs/HousingPuertoRico.pdf)
- 23 Zach Patton, “Does Puerto Rico Really Want to be the 51st State?” *Governing*, July 2013. Accessed at: <https://www.governing.com/topics/politics/gov-does-puerto-rico-really-want-to-be-51st-state.html>

24 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Economy at a Glance: Puerto Rico," data accessed at [https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LASST720000000000005?amp%253bdata\\_tool=XGtable&output\\_view=data&include\\_graphs=true](https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LASST720000000000005?amp%253bdata_tool=XGtable&output_view=data&include_graphs=true)

25 Data are for 2020 (most recent available year) via the FBI Crime Data Explorer, <https://crime-data-explorer.fr.cloud.gov/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend>

26 Left-wing statehood opponents disparage this appointed panel as "la Junta," as if it were part of a military coup. But it is worth noting that the federal government would not be able to impose such a panel if Puerto Rico were a state.

27 U.S. Census estimates, 2017.

28 This region comprises Orange, Brevard, Hernando, Lake, Marion, Polk, Seminole, Sumter, Volusia, Osceola, Pasco, and Hillsborough Counties. This streak only goes back to 1992 because Ross Perot's presence in the race muddied the waters, allowing George H.W. Bush to carry Florida with only 40.9 percent of the statewide vote and 42.4 percent of Central Florida.

29 Source: Florida Department of State, Division of Elections. Accessed at <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/Elections/ResultsArchive/Index.asp>

30 "I-4 Puerto Rican Residents," September 2014, and "Central Florida Puerto Ricans: Findings from 403 Telephone interviews conducted in June / July 2017." The methodology of the two polls was almost identical, and is described thus in the latter: "We interviewed 403 Puerto Ricans residing in the Orlando and Tampa / St Petersburg media markets. Respondents were selected from a file of residents with Hispanic surnames. Respondents were interviewed if they were of Puerto Rican origin....The margin of error associated with the results is +/-4.9%.

31 Republicans only attained a majority of registered Florida voters in 2021. Data accessed at <https://dos.myflorida.com/elections/data-statistics/voter-registration-statistics/voter-registration-reports/voter-registration-by-party-affiliation/>

32 Unfortunately, the specific question of church attendance was not broken out for Florida only. The 2016 exit poll is accessible at <https://www.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls>

33 StPetePolls.org, "Florida Statewide survey conducted for FloridaPolitics.com." Accessed at [http://stpetepolls.org/files/StPetePolls\\_2022\\_State-approve\\_February25\\_ES7N6.pdf](http://stpetepolls.org/files/StPetePolls_2022_State-approve_February25_ES7N6.pdf)

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36 He also outperformed Trump's 2016 share of the vote (50.2 percent).

37 U.S. Census, American Community Survey One-Year Estimates.

38 Daniel Allott, "Republicans Can Win Minority Voters;" *National Review*, Jan. 3, 2019. Accessed at: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/01/republicans-can-win-minority-voters/>

39 On Sept. 13, 2018 -- less than two months before the midterm election -- Trump tweeted: "3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000..." He followed up: "This was done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible when I was successfully raising Billions of Dollars to help rebuild Puerto Rico. If a person died for any reason, like old age, just add them onto the list. Bad politics. I love Puerto Rico!"

40 A large majority of 65 percent agreed with the opposing message, that "undocumented immigrants should be allowed to cross the border to reside in the U.S. and have a pathway to U.S. citizenship, if they follow laws and pay taxes."

41 A similar point tends to be lost when it comes to the larger national pool of Hispanic voters. Most of them don't really have any more of a personal connection to the issue of immigration than anyone else.



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