



# Florida the Frontier State

Ryan Ellis

Florida is in many ways a frontier state. Like its western counterparts, Florida constantly absorbs an influx of new residents from the other 49 states, as well as overseas. In the past year, Florida has topped the country with 221,000 people moving from other states (on a per-capita basis, it's still ranked a very high seventh).

People come to Florida for the low taxes, warm weather, and lack of government overreach that characterizes places like

California and New York.

The same is true with respect to migration from Cuba and Venezuela in south Florida, and Puerto Rico in central Florida. It's the latter group that deserves some additional focus.

Over the past two election cycles, The James Madison Institute has studied the impact that the Puerto Rican "diaspora" population has on the politics of Florida, and in turn what that means for the United

States. The 2022 edition of this report, again authored by David Freddoso of the Washington Examiner, has been released ahead of the 2022 election season.

David Freddoso is an editor at the Washington Examiner. He's the author of several books on national politics and a protege of the late Robert Novak. He's one of the keenest election night minds on Twitter, and has done the deep dive homework on how Puerto Ricans in Florida vote compared to their neighbors, and what implications this has for politics in Florida.

Freddoso has discovered a pattern going back a decade in Florida elections—as goes the Puerto Rican vote in central Florida, so goes central Florida; and as goes central Florida, so goes the statewide margin. So, a key question for Republicans and Democrats running for office in Florida is what makes the Puerto Rican vote here tick?

### **Puerto Rico the Odd Duck**

As legal arrangements go, the territory of Puerto Rico is a bit of an odd duck. The roughly three million residents of Puerto Rico are United States citizens. They serve in the U.S. military. They send a non-voting delegate (called a “resident commissioner”) to the U.S. House of Representatives. They pay all U.S. taxes, except on Puerto Rico-source income where even higher taxes are paid to the territorial government. As U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans don't need a passport to travel or move to the fifty United States—indeed, today there are nearly twice as many people of Puerto Rican descent living in the fifty states than there are living in Puerto Rico.

On the other hand, Puerto Rico is

separated from the states in important ways. Besides the local tax issue, there are other differences. They don't get to vote for President of the United States or elect U.S. Senators. They have their own Olympic Team. For tax purposes, they are in many ways treated in the same way as a foreign country (for example, several large U.S. corporations have controlled foreign corporations set up in Puerto Rico). The relationship with entitlement programs like Medicare, Medicaid, and food stamps is irregular, despite the full payment of payroll taxes to Washington.

As a result, the key question which separates Puerto Ricans from other Americans is the so-called “status question.” Over decades of plebiscites and other measures, it's clear that a majority (though not an overwhelming one) of Puerto Ricans living on the island would like to become the 51st state. Others would prefer to maintain the current territorial status. Still others would like some “third way,” or even outright independence.

### **Puerto Ricans Living and Voting in Florida**

Since Puerto Ricans can move to any state, it should not surprise anyone that many Puerto Ricans have chosen to migrate to Florida. After all, who wouldn't want to move to a place with no state income tax, plenty of job opportunities, and an existing community of neighbors who preceded you?

According to Freddoso's research, there are 1.1 million potential Puerto Rican voters living in the state of Florida. Freddoso's research has definitively shown that for the past decade (at least), the vote-moving

issues for these voters include the same kitchen table and pocketbook items that all voters care about. However, these voters have another first-tier issue uniquely their own—they want Puerto Rico to be allowed to become a state if they want to be. After all, these voters have already chosen statehood with their feet by moving from Puerto Rico to Florida. They are patriotic and want their homeland to join the several states just like Arizona, Alaska, and Florida have.

Whether it's a gubernatorial, senatorial, or presidential statewide election, being open and respectful to the Puerto Rican Floridian's aspiration for statehood is a minimum requirement to getting a sufficient share of the Puerto Rican vote to win central Florida, and ultimately the whole state. This is a key insight Freddoso's research has yielded, and it is only possible due to the opportunities and high standards JMI demands. To my knowledge, no other time series study exists which shows this particular social science data.

That does not mean that a presidential, senatorial, or gubernatorial candidate must endorse statehood in order to win the hearts and minds of Puerto Rican Floridians—but he or she should be respectful of it. A politician with the position “I don't think Puerto Rico should ever be a state” or “As long as I have anything to say about it Puerto Rico will never be a state” is unlikely to get a sufficient share of the Puerto Rican vote to win statewide. It's that simple. Just like Cubans and Venezuelans have their own idiosyncratic vote-moving issues, Puerto Ricans have theirs.

Freddoso shows in his analysis that this is not a partisan issue. Republicans and

Democrats that respect the Puerto Rican aspiration for statehood do well with Florida voters of Puerto Rican descent. Those who do not respect that aspiration, from either party, underperform and risk losing the state.

### **Florida the Bellwether**

Florida is not the swing state it was in the first decade of this century. It has become a much redder state. However, as Freddoso has found, a politician who doesn't manage the Puerto Rican population in central Florida intelligently can easily lose a statewide election with this margin alone.

The truth about how to handle Puerto Rican voters in Florida is increasingly well known among savvy political consultants and politicians in Florida (thanks in large part to the social science research done by JMI), but the rest of the country is behind the learning curve.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) often uses an “over my dead body” line in his stump speeches about making sure the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico will never become states so long as he is the Senate Majority Leader. The implication, of course, is that these two new states would yield four dependably Democratic senators. This is ironic, since the current resident commissioner of Puerto Rico is a Republican, and the Puerto Rican governorship and legislature regularly swings back and forth between the major political parties (unlike reliably Democratic D.C.)

Besides the inaccurate equivocation between the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico as political entities, McConnell also

makes life hard on Republicans running statewide in Florida. It's awkward for Marco Rubio or Rick Scott to campaign in central Florida and get questioned by voters about the Kentucky senator's comments (which get routinely repeated in other GOP senators' talking points). Ditto for Governor DeSantis as he raises his national profile. Whoever the Republican nominee for president is will also have to explain McConnell's position locally.

The Democrats are not exempt from this issue. Many national Democrats are determined to pursue a "third way" arrangement or independence for Puerto Rico, and are viewed as outright opponents of statehood.

That doesn't do any favors for Democrats running statewide in Florida, especially given the rightward shift of the state since the turn of the century.

National politicians in both parties don't understand the local dynamics of Puerto Ricans living in Florida. That's why it's crucial to continue to highlight that the JMI study of this topic makes the case that respect for statehood aspirations is the key to winning over Puerto Rican-Floridian voters.

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