

POLITICS

Miami-Dade Mayor Gimenez wins reelection; rival refuses to concede

By Patricia Mazzei

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The Miami-Dade mayor's race, which had recently gotten a dose of intrigue over an absentee-ballot fraud investigation, ended without any mystery Tuesday night when Mayor Carlos Gimenez cruised to victory.

But his chief rival, County Commission Chairman Joe Martinez, wouldn't give in.

Martinez refused to concede late Tuesday despite returns that showed Gimenez winning by nearly 25 percentage points, with all precincts reporting.

Gimenez, apparently awaiting a Martinez concession, delayed his appearance at a campaign rally, even though results showed he had won the election outright, without requiring a runoff. Gimenez won just over 54 percent of the vote, compared to Martinez's 31 percent.

"I'm very honored to have been given this vote of confidence by the people of Miami-Dade County," Gimenez said in an interview late Tuesday night.

Of Martinez's refusal to concede, Gimenez said, "I think it's up to him. I think this is a pretty resounding victory. I would hope that he would [concede] and we would move forward as a community."

The nonpartisan race, the most prominent county contest, was overshadowed over the past two weeks by the voter-fraud probe that indirectly brushed Gimenez, the state attorney and a county commissioner. But the probe appeared to do little to hurt Gimenez at the polls.

Gimenez's victory gives him a mandate to continue the philosophy he followed over the past year, in which he shrank the county budget, got commissioners to approve lowering the property-tax rate by 2 percent this year and nearly 12 percent last year, and reorganized the county bureaucracy, reducing the number of departments to 25 from 42.

Gimenez, then a county commissioner, was elected last year to complete the term of Mayor Carlos Alvarez, who was recalled by a frustrated electorate seeking a new direction at County Hall. Gimenez's first year as mayor amounted to a tryout for voters to judge him on at the polls Tuesday.

"In the first year there were some big changes," Gimenez said Tuesday morning after he voted just outside Coral Gables. "Now we have to carry through those changes. We have to follow through on the reorganization. My big priority is going to be job creation and diversifying the economy."

Five other candidates drew scant votes in the race. Helen Barbary Williams, who opposed former Mayor Alvarez in 2008, drew 6 percent of the vote. None of the other candidates reached that threshold.

The results will be made official Friday. Turnout, at 19.52 percent, was slightly higher than at last year's three special elections — the Alvarez recall, a first-round mayoral election and a mayoral runoff — which hovered between 16 percent and 17.3 percent.

Martinez campaigned from the commission dais. But outside of the West Miami-Dade district he represented for 12 years, he had relatively low name recognition — and only limited funds to buy advertising. Gimenez, by comparison, ran an advertising juggernaut, with radio and television spots in English and Spanish, a slew of mailers and at least two electronic billboards.

Though he was far behind, Martinez refused to concede the election late Tuesday, telling more than 100 supporters packed at the 94th Aero Squadron restaurant by Miami International Airport that he was “still in this race.”

“For right now, this isn't over,” he said, adding that he will not concede until the absentee-ballot fraud investigation is complete. “If anyone was expecting a different type of speech, my bad.”

Perhaps a reflection of the mood earlier in the night, a DJ played the electric slide and colored lights flashed from behind the podium — but nobody danced.

Gimenez's campaign celebrated at the DoubleTree hotel by the airport, where the stage was festooned with red, white and blue balloons and supporters bought drinks at a cash bar.

The race between former firefighter Gimenez and former police officer Martinez, longtime foes on the commission dais, was unusually peaceful. Gimenez even congratulated Martinez on Tuesday morning for what Gimenez called a “pretty clean” race. The two had few policy differences and refrained from engaging in personal jabs, even after the ballot investigation touched Gimenez.

Miami-Dade police have arrested two Hialeah absentee-ballot brokers, known as *boleteros* in Spanish, over the past two weeks. Police trailed one of them, Deisy Cabrera, last month on a day she entered the building housing Gimenez's Hialeah campaign office. Gimenez has adamantly denied any connection to Cabrera.

Tuesday morning, Gimenez pledged to work with the state attorney's office to crack down on voter fraud.

“It's been a scourge on Miami-Dade County for a long time, and in certain areas more than others, to be honest,” he said. “There's been a whisper campaign — everybody knows what's been going on here for years, and we've just got to stop it.”

Martinez, for one, showed up at his West Kendall precinct Tuesday morning with his unfilled absentee ballot, saying he no longer trusted mailing it to the elections department.

He also boldly predicted that there would not be a runoff in the race and that he would win outright despite being vastly outraised in campaign funds.

“The election will end today,” he said. “I do not believe there's going to be a runoff. So we're going to have three months for a transition period.”

When Martinez walked out of the precinct, he ran into Gimenez's wife, Lourdes, who was handing out fliers. “Hi, commish,” she said to Martinez, giving him a handshake and a kiss on the cheek.

Gimenez will not be sworn into his new term until after the Nov. 6 general election. Martinez will remain commission chairman until then, during a key period in which the board will have to settle on a budget for the coming fiscal year.

Because Gimenez's first year as strong mayor was to complete the balance of former Mayor Alvarez's term, Gimenez will be eligible to run again for reelection in 2016.

The prospect of potentially having eight years at the helm of the county gives Gimenez, a former Miami fire chief and city manager, a chance to take a breath and leave his stamp at County Hall. He essentially spent the last year and a half campaigning, winning over the political establishment that backed his opponent in last year's mayoral race, former Hialeah Mayor Julio Robaina, and making a point of appearing in media interviews to avoid becoming detached from voters, a criticism leveled against Alvarez toward the end of his tenure.

Gimenez has faced sharp criticism, however, from union leaders who have accused him of balancing the county budget on the backs of employees. Last year, the mayor negotiated steep concessions from the bargaining units and imposed a controversial, additional healthcare contribution from employees' base pay — a move Martinez opposed.

When a Gimenez campaign worker offered an unidentified woman a flier at John A. Ferguson Senior High School, Martinez's precinct, the woman said she would not even consider voting for Gimenez. "My husband's a county employee," she scoffed.

But other voters said they voted to keep Gimenez because they like what they have seen from him so far.

"So far, he's been doing a good job," said Joyce Lowry, 52, who voted Tuesday afternoon at a Miami fire station. "I like the fact that he's plodding along in the right direction."

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