



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Rs and Ds aren't supposed to matter in local races. That's changing in Miami-Dade.

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When Patricio Moreno filed his papers to run for a nonpartisan seat on the Miami-Dade County Commission this week, the local Democratic Party was by his side.

Juan Cuba, the Democratic county chairman, said he helped recruit Moreno, a real estate agent from Doral, to challenge Jose "Pepe" Diaz, a Republican who has held the District 12 seat for 16 years. So Cuba joined his fellow Democrat for the trip to the county's Doral election headquarters on Tuesday to help Moreno qualify to run in what could be the latest clash between Republicans and Democrats in a local race where party affiliation isn't supposed to matter.

"We want to make sure we're electing people who share our values," Cuba said. "Everyone comes in with their own perspective on how they see the world. Their choice of which party they align with is a very significant choice that any candidate makes. That's a big factor in how they approach issues."



Miami-Dade Commissioner Sally Heyman won reelection to a final four-year term on Tuesday, June 19, when no other candidate filed to run against her in District 4. Five other commissioners face reelection campaigns against challengers.

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The bid to inject party labels into county races has met outrage from Republican leaders and resistance from most Democratic commissioners, who opted to stay out of a recent contest between a Republican and Democratic candidate for an open seat on the board. Critics of Cuba's approach see partisanship spoiling an elected board that, for all its faults, manages to avoid party-versus-party dysfunction.

"The local issues should be people and policy, not partisan," said Commissioner Sally Heyman, a Democrat automatically reelected on Tuesday when no challenger filed for her District 4 seat. "I'm fearful it's turning into that."

The push by Miami-Dade Democrats to field county candidates rests largely on math: Republicans finish third in party registration in the county, behind independents and Democrats, who account for nearly 42 percent of all voters. And while Miami-Dade is a national Democratic stronghold — Hillary Clinton carried the county by 30 points over Donald Trump in 2016 — the 13-member commission was until Friday evenly split by Republicans and Democrats. A Republican, Carlos Gimenez, has been mayor since 2011.

Democrats managed to tip the partisan balance this month with the election of Eileen Higgins to fill the District 5 seat, which had been held for 20 years by Bruno Barreiro, a Republican who endorsed Trump in 2016 and now is running in the GOP congressional primary to replace retiring Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Miami.

Higgins won with unprecedented support from Democratic leadership in the special election, including campaign cash, organizational assistance, and canvassing efforts and shared volunteers from a string of office holders and candidates, including former Clinton cabinet secretary Donna Shalala and Florida Sen. Annette Taddeo, D-Miami. A national network of volunteer postcard writers sent District 5 residents notes urging them to vote for Higgins, the "progressive" candidate.



Eileen Higgins @eyesonmyworld
Replying to @Gingitnj @DemocratWit

9 Jun

Thanks. I met five people last night who told me they had been receiving handmade postcards. It's working! #PostcardsToVoters



Mimi S
@Gingitnj

I'm not done yet - 5 more going out tomorrow
pic.twitter.com/eJhcRubVF1
11:18 AM - Jun 10, 2018



Her opponent, Zoraida Barreiro, tapped Miami's most prominent Republican, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, for mailers and robocalls as she tried to win her husband's former seat in a district that includes Little Havana. But Higgins secured a six-point win, stunning political observers who had assumed the district's concentration of older Cuban-Americans would deliver for the conservative candidate.



Miami-Dade Commissioner Jose "Pepe" Diaz, a Republican who is running for reelection in 2018 for his non-partisan seat representing District 12.

Changing demographics played into the Higgins win, with polls showing younger Cuban-Americans less loyal to the Republican Party and a surging population in the downtown Miami segments of District 5 favoring Democrats. But advisers on both sides of the race also credited a factor unique to the current political climate: Higgins was the first commissioner elected under President Trump.

"For many years, the Democrats have tried to turn these [Miami] races into partisan contests," said Jesse Manzano-Plaza, a Republican campaign consultant. "What may have helped them this time is they had a catalyst to channel the dissatisfaction of their voters out there. Those voters overwhelmingly voted against Donald Trump."

Higgins was sworn into office Friday, officially tipping the balance of the commission to the Democrats, 7 to 5, with one independent. But partisan labels haven't been that helpful in predicting how incumbent commissioners would vote or campaign.

Only one of the Democratic commissioners on the board, Daniella Levine Cava, endorsed Higgins in the District 5 race. A year ago, the county's decision to drop its "sanctuary" protections of immigration offenders at county jails passed easily, with only two Democrats voting against.

Heyman drafted the resolution that endorsed the tougher policy first enacted by Gimenez in response to Trump's threat to strip federal funding from sanctuary jurisdictions. That prompted Cuba to publicly vow to find other Democrats to run against Heyman in 2018 — an effort that failed with the passing of the June 19 filing deadline.

"He made it clear they needed a more progressive vote," Heyman said of Cuba, the Democratic Party chairman. "My response is 'public service first.' I welcome alliances with my colleagues."



Juan Cuba, chairman of the Miami-Dade Democratic Party, pictured in a 2013 file photo with now-state senator Annette Taddeo, D-Miami, right, and fellow Democratic organizer Rachel Johnson.

Miami Herald File Photo

Though she benefited from party support and put Trump's photo on an attack mailer against Barreiro, Higgins said voters she met while campaigning weren't interested in partisan issues.

"People at the doors didn't ask about that," she said. "They asked about services."

Of the five incumbents up for reelection in August (the odd-numbered commission districts have elections in 2020), four have challengers from other parties. The exception is District 2 Commissioner Jean Monestime, who faces fellow Democrat Dorrin Rolle, who used to represent the district.

Candidates compete in a nonpartisan primary Aug. 28, and party affiliations are not listed on the ballots. A candidate can win outright by taking more than 50 percent of the vote. Otherwise, the top two finishers compete in a November runoff on Election Day.

Cuba said Moreno is the only candidate recruited by the party. Nelson Diaz, chairman of the Miami-Dade Republican Party, said his organization didn't recruit any candidates for the commission races. Still, he expects the party to wade into the contests like it did with the Higgins and Barreiro race.

"If the Democrats engage in any race, then we will engage," he said. "They're intentionally *partisan-izing* the County Commission. So more than likely we will engage in all of these races."

Moreno, who ran unsuccessfully as the Democratic nominee for a state House seat in 2016, said it was the immigration "detainer" issue that helped spur him to run for a county post. "This race is not going to be about Party, but about defending the community," he said in a statement. "I expect the Party to help me, but the message won't be partisan. It will be on the issues."

Moreno is the only Democrat in the District 12 race; the other challenger, former Doral city employee Rafael Pineyro, is an independent.

In a statement, Diaz said he's not interested in talking about party affiliations when it comes to the District 12 race.

"Out of respect to the position," he wrote, "I simply don't want to make this partisan or weigh in on any attempts by parties to control these non-partisan seat.s"



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