

‘The Blue Wave Came’: Win for Non-Hispanic Democrat Signals Big Shift in Miami

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MIAMI — Little Havana awoke recently to an unexpected new reality: The iconic neighborhood, the traditional heart of South Florida’s proud Cuban exile community, would no longer be represented on the county commission by a Cuban-American Republican.

Instead, voters elected a Democrat so clearly not Hispanic that the candidate herself playfully embraced the nickname of “La Gringa.”

Eileen Higgins’s surprise victory in a heavily Hispanic district has deeply unsettled Republicans in South Florida, where local elections have long been determined by ethnicity. Now, some Republicans worry that her win portends more losses for the party in November. Democrats have won three consecutive special elections in Miami-Dade County over the past nine months.

“The blue wave is not coming,” said Jesse Manzano-Plaza, a veteran Republican political consultant who said he had been doubted by many in his party when he warned that Ms. Higgins could pull off an upset. “The blue wave came.”

Ms. Higgins’s win cemented the belief held by Democrats — and, privately, by many Republicans — that the 27th Congressional District, a Republican-held seat that includes all of Ms. Higgins’s

county commission district, is likely to flip. But strategists from both parties see a far more significant development: a fundamental realignment of South Florida politics, which could in turn have consequences for all of the state.

For years, South Florida’s Cuban community voted reliably for Cuban-American candidates in local elections. Most often, those candidates were Republican: Three Hispanic-majority congressional seats are held by the party. The county mayor, perhaps the most powerful local official, is also a Republican.

But if Hispanic voters can no longer be counted on to favor Hispanic candidates, Mr. Manzano-Plaza said, then an increasing number of districts here might start performing as they do in state and national elections: blue. The presumed front-runner in the 27th District, the Democratic-leaning seat being vacated by Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Republican who is retiring, is Donna Shalala, a Democrat who is not Hispanic. Another non-Hispanic Democrat, Mary Barzee Flores, is challenging Representative Mario Diaz-Balart, a Republican, in a safer Republican seat.

“I don’t know if we want to call it a sign of maturity, but for many years in Miami-Dade County, ethnicity trumped party,” said Mr. Manzano-Plaza, who is Cuban-American. “We ran this town for 30 years like that. Now, potentially, we’re about to have a congressional district from South Florida that has a majority-Hispanic seat represented by an Anglo. I don’t think we’re understanding the impact that this has.”



Voters at a polling place in Little Havana in 2016. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

Turning around the once-hapless Democratic Party in Miami-Dade, Florida’s most populous county, could go a long way in allowing Democrats to win control in Tallahassee and Washington, said Christian Ulvert, a Democratic political consultant who ran Ms. Higgins’s campaign. Republicans control the governor’s mansion and State Legislature, and a majority of congressional seats.

“If you go back in history, it was the rise of the Cuban-American base in Miami-Dade that propelled the Republican Party of Florida to get power,” Mr. Ulvert said. “History is repeating itself — it’s the changing of the guard in Miami-Dade that’s likely going to propel the rise of the Florida Democratic Party.”

Miami-Dade was a Democratic bastion in the 1980s before the Republican Party, building on President Ronald Reagan’s popularity as an anti-Communist, persuaded Cuban-Americans to switch their registration to Republican. The party then ran candidates in newly drawn districts and grew its power in Miami-Dade, the State Legislature and Congress — until recently. Ms. Higgins’s commission district is represented in the State Senate by a Cuban-American Democrat, and in the State House by a non-Hispanic Democrat who also was Florida’s first openly gay legislator. A Colombian-American Democrat flipped a special State Senate district in September, and a Cuban-American Democrat won a swing State House district last month.

None of those gains have won Democrats a legislative majority. But Matthew C. Isbell, a Democratic data strategist in South Florida, sees a long-term trend in his party’s favor if voters in the region who already cast ballots for Democrats in presidential elections stop splitting their tickets — as some of them do now — to vote for Republicans for Congress or the State Legislature.

“Kerry won. Obama won. Clinton had these crazy margins,” Mr. Isbell said. “But down ballot, you still had Republican dominance. Now we’re finally starting to see that sea change.”

Traditional conservative enclaves, including Little Havana, are still red, thanks to older Cuban-Americans who reliably vote in nearly every election. But Little Havana is also home to so many Central and South Americans that locals like to say it should have been renamed Little Managua. And the neighborhoods around it have turned pink and purple as newer immigrants, urban professionals and young families have moved in, bringing their more progressive politics with them.

“Go to Little Havana and order a Cuban sandwich,” said Allan Valdes, 35, a Democrat who arrived from Cuba in 1992. “It’ll be made by a Guatemalan, or a Honduran, or a Mexican, or a Nicaraguan. The Cubans left to Coral Gables. They went to Westchester. They went to places a little bit nicer.”

Mr. Valdes, a federal government employee who voted for Ms. Higgins, lives in Shenandoah, a leafy residential neighborhood south of Little Havana that reflects the district’s changing demographics. When Dr. Aymarah Robles moved in across the street from him in 2005, elderly Cuban couples lived in three of the houses on the block, she said.

“All those neighbors have died, and they have been replaced with young couples, and also, there’s children,” said Dr. Robles, 64, a pulmonologist who left Cuba when she was 6. “I have a Mexican neighbor and a Nicaraguan neighbor — they’re a couple. There’s Argentinians. There’s Salvadorans. And this is just within a five-house radius.”



Little Havana is a traditional conservative enclave, thanks to older Cuban-Americans who reliably vote in nearly every election. But it is now also home to many Central and South Americans.
Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

The influx of new people has raised rents and threatened to price out longtime residents and small businesses, and refocused local priorities on affordable housing, the environment and public transit.

“We have these incredible buildings being built, and you look at the skyline at night, and they’re all dark,” said Kiki Mutis, 46, a Colombian-born Shenandoah resident who, along with her Hungarian-born boyfriend, backed Ms. Higgins. “So there’s a lot of foreign investment in these buildings, which is good, but not if it’s taking away from people who live — and cannot afford to live — here.”

Addressing those issues directly helped her win over voters, said Ms. Higgins, 53, who cautioned against reading too much into her victory in a low-turnout election, to a commission that was technically nonpartisan — though the campaign took on a decidedly partisan tone.

“I happened to be the candidate who cared about things that every person in District Five cared about, and I was able to communicate that, and none of that had to do with party or ethnicity,” she said. “They never asked me what party I was. They asked me what I thought about traffic. ‘What do you mean, what do I think about traffic? It’s horrible!’” (Ms. Higgins, a well-off marketing executive who once worked for the State Department, famously likes to ride the bus.)

Ms. Higgins defeated a Republican opponent who had been seen as a shoo-in for the seat: Zoraida Barreiro, the wife of Bruno A. Barreiro, a 20-year commissioner who had resigned to run for Congress. Mr. Barreiro stepped aside months before the law required him to, forcing a special June election expected to boost his wife's chances, since other candidates would have little time to build name recognition.

The Higgins campaign characterized the Barreiros as members of a political dynasty who had squandered their opportunity to improve residents' quality of life.

"They didn't let her develop a personality," Mr. Barreiro lamented of how the opposition portrayed his wife, who did not respond to an interview request. "In the press, every other question was, 'Do you think your last name is helping you? Do you think your husband is helping you? Do you have a different position from your husband?' It was never, 'What do you think, Zoraida Barreiro? What do you want to do?'"

The anti-establishment message attracted Denise Galvez, the head of a local chapter of Latinas for Trump, who crossed party lines and campaigned for Ms. Higgins. Ms. Galvez tried to persuade fellow Republicans that Ms. Higgins's pragmatic positions made her an appealing outsider, even if she was a Democrat.

"It was more a vote against the same old politicians that have been taking advantage of Miami — and yes, a lot of them happen to be Republican and Cuban-American, I'm sorry to say," Ms. Galvez said. "This is very similar to what happened in the Trump election, where a lot of moderate-leaners and independents were sick of establishment dynasties and political corruption more than anything else."

Mr. Barreiro remains one of several Republican candidates vying to replace Ms. Ros-Lehtinen in the 27th District. The arc of Ms. Ros-Lehtinen's political career has tracked her party's: Her election in 1989 signaled the arrival of Cuban-American Republicans to the highest echelons of political power. Her retirement might signal the party's eclipse. A Democrat is likely to be elected to replace her, and none of the Democratic candidates are Hispanic.