



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

## Miami's mayor failed to expand power at the polls. He may be politically weaker now.

BY JOEY FLECHAS  
[jflechas@miamiherald.com](mailto:jflechas@miamiherald.com)

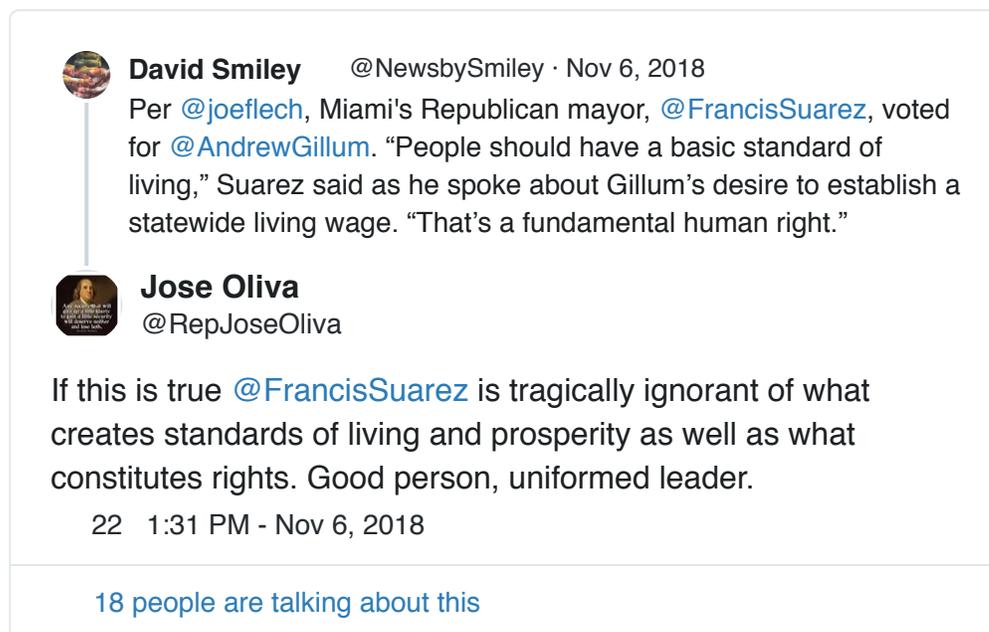
November 09, 2018 07:15 AM  
Updated 1 hour 57 minutes ago

Miami Mayor Francis Suarez might've woken up Wednesday with less political clout than he's ever had.

On Election Day, he lost his bid to expand the responsibilities of a position that is largely ceremonial, a key initiative of his young administration that was roundly rejected by voters.

As Suarez sought to become a “strong mayor,” two city commissioners and Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez openly blasted his campaign. They branded his efforts to become the city’s top administrator as a power grab disguised as an accountability measure.

Suarez also took heat from fellow Republicans on Tuesday when he told the Miami Herald he had voted for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Andrew Gillum. One of the most powerful Republicans in Florida, incoming state House speaker Jose Oliva, called him “tragically ignorant” in a tweet reacting to the revelation.



The image shows a screenshot of a tweet from David Smiley (@NewsbySmiley) dated Nov 6, 2018. The tweet text reads: "Per @joeflech, Miami's Republican mayor, @FrancisSuarez, voted for @AndrewGillum. 'People should have a basic standard of living,' Suarez said as he spoke about Gillum's desire to establish a statewide living wage. 'That's a fundamental human right.'" Below the tweet is a reply from Jose Oliva (@RepJoseOliva) dated Nov 6, 2018, at 1:31 PM. The reply text reads: "If this is true @FrancisSuarez is tragically ignorant of what creates standards of living and prosperity as well as what constitutes rights. Good person, uniformed leader." At the bottom of the screenshot, it says "18 people are talking about this".

**David Smiley** @NewsbySmiley · Nov 6, 2018  
Per [@joeflech](#), Miami's Republican mayor, [@FrancisSuarez](#), voted for [@AndrewGillum](#). “People should have a basic standard of living,” Suarez said as he spoke about Gillum’s desire to establish a statewide living wage. “That’s a fundamental human right.”

**Jose Oliva** @RepJoseOliva  
If this is true [@FrancisSuarez](#) is tragically ignorant of what creates standards of living and prosperity as well as what constitutes rights. Good person, uniformed leader.  
22 1:31 PM - Nov 6, 2018

18 people are talking about this

In both cases, the 41-year-old real estate attorney gambled his political capital and lost some of it. That could hurt him as he tries to stitch together votes to approve new infrastructure, housing and cultural projects — including the a new stadium for Miami’s Major League Soccer team.

“Suarez made two losing bets for this election, and they have the possibility of significantly decreasing his political power,” said Sean Foreman, a Barry University political science professor.

Suarez disagrees. Miami’s other two ballot questions — which he supported — passed, and he considers them wins: a deal to lease public waterfront land to developers in exchange for a new city administration building and initial terms for a soccer stadium/commercial complex for David Beckham’s new MLS team (though that plan is running into its own problems).

“Look, politics ebbs and flows every day. You don’t win every single political endeavor you’re involved with,” Suarez said.

Indeed, he’s unsuccessfully tried to change Miami’s government into a strong-mayor system before. During his eight years as a commissioner, he twice tried to convince commissioners to put the question to a public vote. Both times, commissioners didn’t put it on the ballot.

But Tuesday did mark a milestone. He’s successfully run for elected office three times with little to no real competition. One year after

Suarez swept into the office with 85 percent of the vote, Tuesday was the first time voters rebuffed Suarez at the ballot box.

And they were emphatic. About 64 percent voted against the strong-mayor proposal. No recounts here.

“While Francis Suarez is full of charisma, if he can’t get people to follow where he wants to lead, then his leadership is ineffective,” Foreman said.

On paper, Suarez has very little power to begin with. He can act as chairman of the City Commission, a responsibility he chooses to pass along to a chairman he appoints. But he has no vote, and he can’t give orders to his appointed city manager, Emilio Gonzalez, or any of Gonzalez’s more than 4,000 municipal employees. Suarez can fire Gonzalez, but the commission can, too. Or it can overrule the mayor.

So Suarez’s chief weapon is the power of persuasion he can wield from the bully pulpit. Some of his biggest critics are commissioners whom he needs to sway to get anything done.

Manolo Reyes, who holds Suarez’s old commission seat, said the vote represented a clear mandate that the current government structure works and the people don’t want “one single person to have absolute power.” Joe Carollo loudly campaigned against the measure, firing off attack ads that accused Suarez of wanting to become a “dictator-mayor.” Both he and Gimenez mailed ads showing pictures of Suarez’s newly-purchased \$1.4 million home in Coconut Grove, suggesting the mayor sought a pay raise so he could afford mortgage payments.

On Wednesday, Carollo dismissed Suarez’s desire to bring back a new strong-mayor plan later on.

“The voters clearly spoke,” he said.

With three years left in his term, Suarez said a key agenda item is the rolling out of projects funded by the Miami Forever Bond, a voter-approved plan to borrow \$400 million for anti-flooding work, parks improvements and new affordable housing projects. The first round of work is expected to be announced before the end of the year.

If Suarez wants to have a role in the approval of those projects, he'll need to have influence with the five commissioners who hold the power with their votes. If the city successfully negotiates a lease for the Beckham soccer complex, the agreement needs four of five commission votes for approval. But two commissioners, including Reyes, have already said they oppose the deal. To shepherd the proposal into a reality, Suarez will need to do some convincing.

Other projects he wants to see come to fruition: restoration of the Miami Marine Stadium and rent subsidies for tenants struggling to make ends meet.

Despite the sharp disagreements over the strong-mayor idea, Suarez remains an optimist.

“I have good relationships with the commissioners,” he said. “It’s something I will continue to emphasize. That’s my job. My obligation is to find consensus.”

He certainly flexed his political muscle with his strong-mayor campaign. Through the election season, Suarez spent a good deal of time and about \$3 million in political contributions to champion the change — a remarkable sum to support a ballot measure.

Along the way, he was continuously met with resistance ranging from staunch opposition to casual criticism. Carollo unsuccessfully sued to block the referendum, though that was less surprising than the skepticism over whether Suarez was prepared to juggle running the city with his job as a real estate attorney at Greenspoon Marder.

It was a new dynamic for Suarez, who has avoided making enemies and has a reputation for being a genial politician with a skill for consensus-building.

“You’re not ready for this,” said a man who called into a Radio Caracol 1260AM program where Suarez was promoting his proposal Monday afternoon, before Election Day. In Spanish, the man advised the mayor: “Hold off on the ambition for a little while. Keep working for the city, and then later you can become a strong mayor.”

The caller seemed to capture at least part of the pushback against Suarez’s plan: The politician should learn to walk in the mayor’s shoes before running.

“You have to learn from these situations, without a doubt. You have to grow,” Suarez said. “But I’m excited about the next three years.”

Jesse Manzano-Plaza, a political adviser who helped orchestrate the strong-mayor campaign, said it’s easy to consider the election a loss for Suarez, but time might look more kindly on his standing because he supported two measures that did pass.

“If these other projects are realized the way they’ve been presented, I think we’re going to look back at this and say, ‘Wow, look what he accomplished in his first year,’” Manzano-Plaza said.

Others in City Hall are simply happy to move beyond election season. Reyes believes the city will run better without the political distractions.

“Many of the city’s needs have been put on hold by the administration pending [the strong-mayor] vote, and now it’s time to stop the games, come together and get to work on increasing efficiency, security and quality of life for the residents of Miami,” he said.