



Maria Elvira Salazar and Donna Shalala discussed Obamacare Wednesday during visits to the Miami Herald Editorial Board as they campaign to replace Ileana Ros-Lehtinen in Congress.

By Matias J. Ocnor ✉

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Democrats running for Congress don't speak Spanish. So why do they keep having Spanish debates?

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Two Democrats who don't speak Spanish are carrying their party's hopes of flipping Republican-held congressional seats in bilingual Miami, creating a language barrier that has given their Hispanic opponents a clear advantage when it comes to live debates.

Little more than two weeks from Election Day — and with early voting now under way — Mary Barzee Flores and Donna Shalala have participated in a combined three televised debates this month in their quests to unseat Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart and best Maria Elvira Salazar, respectively. None of the debates has been in English.

In the contest for Florida's 25th District, which stretches from Northwest Miami-Dade across the Everglades to Collier and Hendry counties, Barzee Flores ventured onto Univision 23 to spar with the longtime incumbent, Diaz-Balart. In the 27th District, which covers coastal and central Dade, Shalala has been on both Univision and Telemundo 51 in debates against Salazar and independent candidate Mayra Joli.

The televised contests — the most direct contrast between candidates that any voter could get during a campaign — potentially reached a majority of the population living in the two districts, which have Hispanic majorities. But roughly 40 percent of the electorate in the two districts is not in that demographic, meaning a significant portion of registered voters have been shut out so far from events pitting the candidates against each other in the purest form of politics.

Allegations of debate dodging are ubiquitous in campaign season on all sides. But whether intentional or happenstance, the lack of English-language debates has not only left tens of thousands of voters in the dark, but also forced Barzee Flores and Shalala to participate in contests in which they are at a disadvantage.

On Telemundo and Univision, the Democrats were required to wear ear pieces and listen to translations in order to answer questions and respond to attacks. When they spoke, their comments were translated to the audience, likely reinforcing their opponents' messaging that the candidates don't understand Miami's majority-Hispanic congressional districts.

"Some folks are bilingual. Some are not," said Jose Luis Castillo, a political consultant for Salazar, noting that the former Spanish-language broadcaster has agreed to appear on Channel 10's "This Week in South Florida" on Oct. 28. "Maria Elvira is happy to debate [Shalala] on Michael Putney."

Curiously, the only debate in the one race where both candidates are bilingual — between Rep. Carlos Curbelo and Debbie Mucarsel-Powell in Florida's 26th District — has been in English, an issue on its own. But the dearth of English-language debates in the other two contests has become an issue.

Shalala's campaign has accused Salazar of dodging debates in English. But it's not just the candidate saying that. Jim DeFede, the host of CBS4's "Facing South Florida," said that he'd been trying to schedule a debate between Salazar and Shalala since early September.

Salazar "said she would and has never come on. We proposed a debate. She's apparently refusing to debate in English," he said.

Salazar, though, told a crowd at Anacapri Italian Restaurant on Wednesday that she hadn't debated Shalala in English because the demand for a debate didn't exist with English-language stations. She has turned down previous dates due to what her campaign said were scheduling issues, but reiterated that she's agreed to appear Sunday on Putney's program — an event Shalala's camp has resisted because half of early voting will have passed by then.

“We did two in Spanish because the two television stations requested it. No other television station in English has requested a debate except Michael Putney in English for half an hour on the 28th. We don’t control that,” Salazar said. “We don’t control it. It’s the stations wanting to invest the time.”

Jesse Manzano-Plaza, a Republican political consultant based out of Miami, said that in the race to replace retiring U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen — a seat once considered a pickup for the minority party — Democrats may have only themselves to blame for the situation by nominating Shalala.

“There’s some sort of disconnect, whether it’s with the national Democratic Party or the party in Miami-Dade, where they’re missing this simple and basic tenet of campaigning in Miami-Dade County, what this community is made of and how diverse it is,” he said. “A year ago a lot of people were talking about the fact that the ideal Democrat candidate to represent the district would have to be Hispanic. And here we are today.”

In Barzee Flores’ bid to unseat Diaz-Balart, her campaign says they’d be happy to debate any time in any language if Diaz-Balart would only agree to more than one. “We’d debate in *kreyol*,” said campaign manager Sam Miller.

Miller said Diaz-Balart never responded to a letter he sent last month requesting that the incumbent agree to six debates with his challenger. But Diaz-Balart said during an Oct. 12 appearance before the Miami Herald Editorial Board that he hopes there will be more debates, and he doesn’t care what language they’re in.

Since then, the two have not met again. Now, time is running short.

“It’s an issue of schedule,” Diaz-Balart said. “The issue of whether it’s in Spanish or in English is, to me, just less of an issue. As you can tell I speak both languages.”

This article has been updated to reflect that Carlos Curbelo and Debbie Mucarsel-Powell have only debated in English.

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