



Candidate for vacant Miami-Dade County Commission District 5 seat, Eileen Higgins, reacts to learning the first results of the special election on Tuesday, May 22, 2018, at Batch Gastropub in the neighborhood of Brickell in Miami.

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

Newcomer finishes first in Miami-Dade as Higgins and Barreiro advance to June runoff

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Newcomer Eileen Higgins rode a wave of support from the Democratic Party to take first place in Tuesday's election to replace Miami-Dade Commissioner Bruno Barreiro and will face the former commissioner's wife, Republican Zoraida Barreiro, in a runoff election next month for the non-partisan seat. Both candidates eliminated former state senator Alex Diaz de la Portilla, who finished third.

With all precincts reporting shortly before 9 p.m., Higgins held nearly 35 percent of the vote, followed by Barreiro at 33 percent, with 222 votes separating them. Diaz de la Portilla was in third with 27 percent, followed by former television actor Carlos Garin with less than 5 percent.

With no candidate crossing the 50 percent threshold, the top two finishers advance to a June 19 runoff, setting up a four-week contest to decide who will represent a district that includes Little Havana, South Beach and parts of downtown Miami.

The results delivered a big win for local Democrats as party support for a first-time candidate helped push Higgins ahead of candidates with two well-known names in local politics. Strategists on both sides of the aisle portrayed the strong showing by the lone Democrat in the race as evidence that a "blue wave" that has lifted Democratic candidates in special elections since Donald Trump became president had landed in a Miami-Dade commission race, too.



David Smiley

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8:11 PM - May 22, 2018

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"The advantage held by Republicans in Miami-Dade special elections for almost two decades seems to have evaporated overnight," said Jesse Manzano-Plaza, a Republican campaign consultant who managed the 2016 reelection effort for Miami-Dade's Republican mayor, Carlos Gimenez.

The three Republican candidates still won 65 percent of the vote Tuesday, and the big question heading into June will be where Diaz de la Portilla's voters land. If they stick with the Republican and Higgins can't boost her support, the seat would remain in Republican hands. But if Higgins can use the momentum from Tuesday's upset to eat into the Republican vote — or bring new voters into the contest — she could take the seat.

In a statement released by her campaign, Higgins said: "The residents of District 5 rejected status quo politics and are ready to elect a champion who will fight for a transit system that works, combats sea level rise with a plan and delivers on affordable housing initiatives."

Board Of County Commissioners, District 5

CANDIDATE		PERCENT	VOTES
Zoraida A. Barreiro		33.08%	3,937
Alex Diaz de la Portilla		27.21%	3,238
Carlos Garin		4.77%	568
Filosa Medina		34.94%	4,150

Tuesday's results cap a nearly month-long contest to win a special election called after Bruno Barreiro resigned his commission seat to run in a Republican congressional primary. The winner can serve out the remaining two years in Barreiro's final term of office, then be able to run for reelection twice before having to give up the seat under the county's new two-term limit.



Former Miami-Dade County Commissioner Bruno Barreiro during a 2015 meeting. He resigned his seat on March 30 to run for Congress, creating a vacancy that has to be filled by special election.

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The election featured a clash between two well-known names in local politics. Bruno Barreiro served on the commission for 20 years. One Diaz de la Portilla brother, Miguel, has already served on the County Commission and followed Alex in the state Senate; another, Renier, was also in the state Legislature and on the Miami-Dade school board.

As the only Democrat in the nonpartisan race, Higgins, 53 and a marketing executive, hoped to ride a national backlash against Trump to snag a runoff slot. She won endorsements from labor unions in and out of county government, along with prominent local Democrats, and backing from party coffers.

A community activist in Miami-Dade involved in anti-violence and affordable-housing efforts, Higgins wasn't the first choice by Democrats hoping to recruit an established name to run for the open seat. None signed up, leaving Higgins to run her first-time campaign against the wife of a popular commissioner (Bruno Barreiro faced no challenger when he last faced reelection in 2016) and a politician who used to represent part of the district in Tallahassee.

Zoraida Barreiro shied away from large public events — she was the only candidate to ditch a Spanish-language debate on América TeVé — while working small crowds of voters she knew from her husband's years as a candidate and a commissioner. She also had the advantage of having campaigned throughout part of the district when she ran unsuccessfully for a Miami commission seat last year.

Most of the campaign money and negative campaigning focused on Barreiro and Diaz de la Portilla, with each camp trying to flip the other's name recognition into a liability.



Zoraida Barreiro, running to replace her husband, Bruno Barreiro, as the commissioner for Miami-Dade County's District 5, arrives to Edukos restaurant in Miami to meet supporters on Tuesday, May 22, 2018. She finished second and won a slot in the two-person runoff to be held June 19.

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Political mailers against Zoraida Barreiro hit Bruno Barreiro for his support of the 2009 Marlins Park public-funding agreement in an effort to tie his voting record to his wife. Diaz de la Portilla got his with ads highlighting his various brushes with the legal system, including his estranged wife seeking a restraining order against him in 2010.

Bruno Barreiro was the only commissioner to publicly support Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, and Hillary Clinton won District 5 by nearly 30 points. Christian Ulvert, the campaign consultant assigned to the Higgins race by the Democratic Party, said the plan is to link the Barreiro name with the president heading into the runoff.

"Donald Trump is, without a doubt, going to be a factor in this race," he said.

Though Higgins was a fresh face to politics, she issued her share of negative ads. One showed the Barreiros and the Diaz de la Portillas lined up next to Trump and his children, under a banner asking if voters were sick of dynasties.

All four candidates live on the Miami side of the district, meaning the contest will leave Miami Beach without a resident on the County Commission no matter who wins. In a district where nearly two out of every three voters identify themselves as Hispanic, the race drew three candidates of Cuban heritage. The fourth, Higgins, used the hashtag #lagringa as a nod to her role as the one non-Hispanic in the race.

Barreiro, 50, works as an executive for the healthcare company founded by her husband's family. She was born in Cuba and arrived in the United States during the Mariel boat lift. She received endorsements from unions representing county firefighters and water-and-sewer employees.

Diaz de la Portilla, 53, is a professional campaign consultant whose parents came from Cuba. Garin also came to the United States from Cuba. Higgins grew up in New Mexico, and speaks Spanish, having served as a Peace Corps director in Belize.



Alex Diaz de la Portilla greets supporters during a post election party at Le Koke Wine and Bites in Little Havana on May 22, 2018. He finished third in the race to replace Miami-Dade Commissioner Bruno Barreiro and missed a slot in the June 19 runoff.

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Fundraising reports are incomplete, but the published results show Barreiro ahead with about \$180,000 raised through her campaign and two political committees she registered to help solicit donations. Diaz de la Portilla finished second with about \$150,000, and Higgins third with \$50,000. Garin raised less than \$6,000 for his campaign.

While Higgins used the race to make her debut in local politics, both Barreiro and Diaz de la Portilla hoped for comebacks. Barreiro lost her race for the Miami City Commission last year, finishing third and missing a runoff that former mayor Joe Carollo ultimately won. Diaz de la Portilla lost his bid to return to the Florida Senate last year.



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It's brother versus brother in Miami-Dade's District 5 commission race. Miami commish Joe Carollo backing Alex Diaz de la Portilla. Frank Carollo, his brother and predecessor on commission, backing Zoraida Barreiro. Joe beat Zoraida for Frank's city commish seat last year

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Higgins received the only public endorsements from sitting commissioners. Daniella Levine Cava, a Democrat, and Xavier Suarez, an independent, both backed her. No other commissioner announced their endorsements, including the five other Democrats on a commission that was evenly divided by party before Barreiro resigned. A Republican win in District 5 would reset the nonpartisan board's six-and-six split.

The race helped magnify some political rifts in the Miami political establishment.

Carollo, whose Miami district is surrounded by Miami-Dade's District 5, backed Diaz de la Portilla in the race. Frank Carollo, who held the city seat before his brother, backed Barreiro. Joe Carollo is a top foe of Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, whose father, the county commissioner, endorsed



Miami-Dade County Commission candidate Carlos Garin during a break during a May 9, 2018 televised debate at América TeVé for the special election to fill the District 5 seat vacated by Bruno Barreiro.

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Higgins. A son of Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, lobbyist C.J. Gimenez, signed on to the Diaz de la Portilla campaign.

Democrats had tried to recruit a current or former office holder to run for the rare open seat on the commission, but all declined.

Turnout topped 12 percent, with fewer than 12,000 votes cast in a district with nearly 95,000 voters. Mail-in ballots (once described as "absentee" but available to all district voters who wanted them) accounted for about 55 percent of the vote.

Early voting generated 18 percent of the votes cast, with the remaining 27 percent cast on Election Day. Barreiro took the early lead, with 35 percent of the share of the mail-in ballots. Diaz de la Portilla was in second place then, at 31 percent.

Higgins was a close third at 29 percent. But the Democrat won the nearly two-week Early Voting period, with 42 percent of the ballots cast. She also dominated on Election Day, taking nearly as many votes on Tuesday as did Barreiro and Diaz de la Portilla combined.

With all precincts reporting, Tuesday's tally showed 11,902 votes cast. Higgins received 4,159 and Barreiro got 3,937. Diaz de la Portilla finished with 3,238, and Garin with 568.