Candidates Battle for the Hispanic Vote Ahead of Florida's Primary

Cuban-Americans make up the heart of the primary’s Latino voters – and in a tight race, their support is key

By Edward B. Colby

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At 3:26 p.m. Wednesday, Mitt Romney walked into the packed main hall of downtown Miami’s Freedom Tower to growing cheers and some whistling.

On stage he raised arms with Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and former Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart.

"Good afternoon, Miami," Ros-Lehtinen said in Spanish to the crowd. "Are you ready?"

The audience was certainly ready for the message of the man Ros-Lehtinen introduced as “el proximo presidente,” which translates to English as "the next president." Surrounded by Florida political power players, the GOP contender spoke often of giving freedom to Cubans, and said he would work to change regimes in the country.

“It is time for us to strike for freedom in Cuba, and I will do so as president,” he said.

When he wasn’t focused on Cuba and Fidel Castro – or criticizing what he characterized as President Obama’s excessively generous approach to the aging dictator – Romney was thinking about Latin America as a whole. He talked up free trade agreements with Colombia and Panama, said that in his administration he would task someone to encourage freedom and democracy in the hemisphere, and promised, “I will use the power of America to spread freedom in Latin America,” especially in Cuba.

In a Florida campaign that is by necessity heavy on TV, Romney’s appearance at the Freedom Tower – an immigration station for Cuban refugees in the early years of the Castro regime – was his most prominent in-person appeal to Cuban-American voters.

They make up the heart of the primary’s Latino voters – and in a tight race, their support is key.
It is “very important for him to get the votes of Cuban-Americans in South Florida,” said Romney supporter Anthony Rodriguez, 23, of Kendall. “It’s a big deal to do it here, in the tower of liberty.”

Earlier the same day, Newt Gingrich made a similar pitch at Florida International University, where he proposed a “Cuban Spring” and said he would employ many non-military tools to help topple the Castro regime.

Gingrich is running aggressively on his anti-Castro “bona fides” and on his immigration policy, Dario Moreno, a political science professor at FIU, said this week.

So far, however, the former Massachusetts governor has a 35 percent to 20 percent edge over Gingrich among Latino voters in Florida, according to a new Latino Decisions/Univision poll.

Florida is the first 2012 state with a large Latino population. Of the 4 million and change Republicans registered for the primary statewide, 11.1 percent identify as Hispanic. In Miami-Dade County, 72 percent of the primary electorate is Hispanic.

The biggest issues for Latino voters are “the same as Anglo voters – it’s jobs, the economy, the housing crisis,” Moreno said.

Romney’s advantages include that his campaign got started early, he said.

“He started hitting with mailers and Spanish-language ads earlier than the other candidates, which is key in a state that has so many absentee ballots, especially Hispanic absentee ballots,” Moreno said.

And overall Florida is more moderate than South Carolina – where Gingrich shook up the Republican race with his convincing victory – which also plays to Romney, Moreno said.

“But the question is, can that overcome, and Romney’s early start, can that overcome the surge that Gingrich is enjoying?” he said.

Kevin Wagner, an assistant professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University, predicted that “it’s going to be relatively difficult for either of them in this state (among Latino voters) because of their relatively strong anti-immigration stance.”

Still, Gingrich could benefit from his statement where he bucked the party base in Iowa and said he was against breaking up families by kicking people out of the country who have lived here a long time, even if they are illegal immigrants, Wagner noted.
“That was a bold stance for him in Iowa, and to some degree it might pay off for him in Florida,” he said.

George Gonzalez, an associate professor of political science at the University of Miami, agreed that Gingrich should have an upper hand because of his more moderate position on immigration.

“A lot of these anti-undocumented arguments are really veiled or an anti-Hispanic position. So I think Cubans and other Hispanics here in the state are leery of the anti-undocumented worker argument,” he said.

But Florida has a different immigration question than other border states, Gonzalez noted, as Cuban-Americans are able to get automatic residency if they get on U.S. soil, and Puerto Ricans can also get automatic residency.

Illustrating the complexities, Gingrich’s campaign launched a Spanish-language radio ad accusing Romney of being the "most anti-immigrant candidate" last week, but said it would pull it down Wednesday in deference to the wishes of the most popular politician in the state, Senator Marco Rubio.

Telephone messages left with the Romney and Gingrich campaigns were not returned.

Former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum and Texas Congressman Ron Paul are lagging far behind in the Florida polls, but both say they will stay in the presidential race once it moves on to other states.

Hogan Gidley, Santorum’s national communications director, said his candidate’s message and vision for the country is for everybody, not necessarily one particular group.

“Latino voters, I’m sure, would be excited about Rick Santorum’s manufacturing plan to bring back jobs to this country, to help grow our economy at all levels for our people,” Gidley said. “The bottom line is whether you’re white, African-American or Hispanic, Latino, whatever, you’re probably struggling right now. This economy is not good for anybody. And Rick Santorum has a plan that allows for upward mobility.”

Gonzalez says that the Cuban-American vote is certainly a strong, important base for Republicans – and something more for November.

With Florida again a key swing state in the general election, “it’s almost like you cannot win the presidency without winning Florida, in particular,” he says, and “Republicans need a strong showing among Cuban-Americans.”
Overall, the dominant issue of the primary is electability, Gonzalez says.

“So in a way whoever wins that Cuban vote, what that candidate will be able to say,” he says, is “I did well in the one vote that we know is key to Republicans. Because if we can’t get out the Cuban vote on Election Day, then Republicans can’t win.”