

## **Cuban-American Partisanship: A Secular Realignment?**

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Cuban Americans are relative newcomers to the U.S. political process. It was not until the 1980s that Cuban Americans began to appear regularly on the Miami-Dade ballot. Cuban Americans were in part mobilized by the tough anti-Castro and anti-communist rhetoric of Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan. The Republican candidate energized a rally in Tamiami Park by predicting that the Castro regime would not survive a Reagan administration. Cubans responded by turning out in high numbers in the 1980 presidential election, over 78 percent of the eligible voters, and voting overwhelmingly for Reagan (Moreno and Warren 1992). The 1980 and 1984 presidential elections cemented a strong relationship between the Republican Party and the Miami Cuban community.

This alliance was reinforced in 1989 with the election of the first Cuban American to Congress, Ileana Ros-Leitinen. This election, combined with the “cult of Reagan,” has solidly coalesced Cubans as an ethnic voting bloc in support of the Republican Party for the last three decades. This party affiliation and long-term attachment began more as a reactionary event to the 1989 election for Florida’s 18<sup>th</sup> Congressional district, which saw a bitter divide among ethnic and racial groups in the county. Cubans ended up siding with the Republicans as the Democrats formed a coalition of Jews, Blacks and Anglos in a futile attempt to “stop the Cubans” (Moreno and Rae 1992, 190–197). Since then, the strongest regions of support for Republicans in terms of party registration and vote returns in the county have come

from homogeneous Hispanic precincts (HHPs),<sup>1</sup> where many individuals tend to be of Cuban descent (Hill and Moreno 2005; Hill, Moreno, et al. 2001). For example, in the presidential elections spanning from 1980 to 2000 the Republican Party won on average 78.67 percent of the vote in Hispanic precincts in Miami-Dade,<sup>2</sup> rivaling white evangelicals and even blacks in terms of party loyalty. Today, in 2013, Hispanics make up 72.6 percent of all Republicans in Miami-Dade, a testament to how well the party has recruited Hispanics over the years.<sup>3</sup>

To many, the Cuban émigrés who settled in Miami were seen as a natural fit for the Republican Party, which tended to be more conservative and strict anti-communists (González-Pando 1998, 73). And while small in terms of overall numbers—Cuban Americans currently make up 6.5 percent of the total population in Florida and 34.3 percent of all residents in Miami-Dade in 2013<sup>4</sup>—the Republican Party to this day relies heavily on the Cuban vote in South Florida to form a viable state coalition necessary to win elections.

However, there is reason to believe that Cuban support for the Republican Party is beginning to decline, as many pundits and journalist have been quick to announce the end of Republican dominance among Cubans in Miami-Dade (Woods 2008; Silva 2007; Caputo 2012). The beginning of the end supposedly culminated with the 2012 presidential election, where, surprisingly to many, there was a dispute as to which party won the Cuban vote, pitting pollsters and academics

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<sup>1</sup> Homogeneous Hispanic precincts are defined as precincts/districts with more than 70 percent of the total population being of Hispanic descent.

<sup>2</sup> Miami-Dade elections department.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. (County level voter registration data.)

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *American Fact Finder*, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/> (accessed August 13, 2013).

against each other to determine which party the Cubans supported (Tamayo 2012; Bendixen & Amandi *International* 2012). Exit polling from Fox News and Pew showed that Obama won the Cuban vote with 49 percent to Romney's 47 percent, while Democratic polling firm Bendixen & Amandi argued that Obama almost won the Cuban vote with 48 percent to Romney's 52 percent.<sup>5</sup> Local professors Dario Moreno and Kevin Hill provided an ecological study arguing that Cubans still supported the Republicans overall, albeit narrowly (Tamayo 2012).

No matter what position you take on who won the Cuban vote in 2012, the reality is that the Cuban ethnic vote has shifted from being staunchly Republican for the last 20 years to becoming a toss-up between each party in 2013. Many are still wondering how one of the most loyal Republican demographic groups in the country could become a swing vote pretty much overnight.

The truth, however, is that there has been a gradual, or secular, shift in party loyalty, both in terms of registration and voting behavior of Hispanics in Miami-Dade. While Hispanics have traditionally supported Republican candidates, we are now seeing a visible schism in traditional Republican strongholds across the county. Districts/precincts that were once considered safely Republican are now turning away from the party, both in terms of party registration and electoral behavior. In reality, Republican strength has been declining for the past decade, and what we are witnessing today is the result of a process otherwise known as a secular

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<sup>5</sup> For Fox News and PEW reporting and exit polls on the 2012 election for Florida: <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/elections/2012-exit-poll/FL/President>. To access Bendixen & Amandi's exit polling numbers, see <http://bendixenandamandi.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/pdf>.

realignment. Various factors have culminated to this point, where by now the Hispanic vote in Miami-Dade is now considered a toss-up.

## **Change for the Long Term**

The theory of secular realignment was introduced by V.O. Key, Jr., in his seminal 1959 study, *Secular Realignment in the Party System*, where he defined the process as a gradual shift in party strength among groups within a geographical area that spans many elections and results in a shift in party loyalty (Key 1959). As Key argues, “The rise and fall of parties may to some degree be the consequence of trends that perhaps persist over decades and elections may mark only steps in a more or less continuous creation of new loyalties and decay of old” (Key 1959). This is in contrast to critical realignment theory, which argues that party loyalties and shifts in political power change abruptly, resulting in a new party system that persists over time (Key 1955). Realignment theory is typically associated with this latter understanding of electoral behavior and is where many scholars have focused their attention and critiques over the years (Mayhew, 2002; Key, 1955; Burnham, 1970).

Our position, therefore, is that Republican decline in Miami-Dade has been occurring for some time due to various factors. By analyzing party registration trends, demographic shifts, and electoral behavior in Hispanic Precincts (HHPs) and districts with a high Cuban concentration, we get a clearer picture of what is happening to traditional Republican strongholds across the county.

## **Party Registration Trends and the Decline of Republican Dominance in Hispanic Precincts over Time**

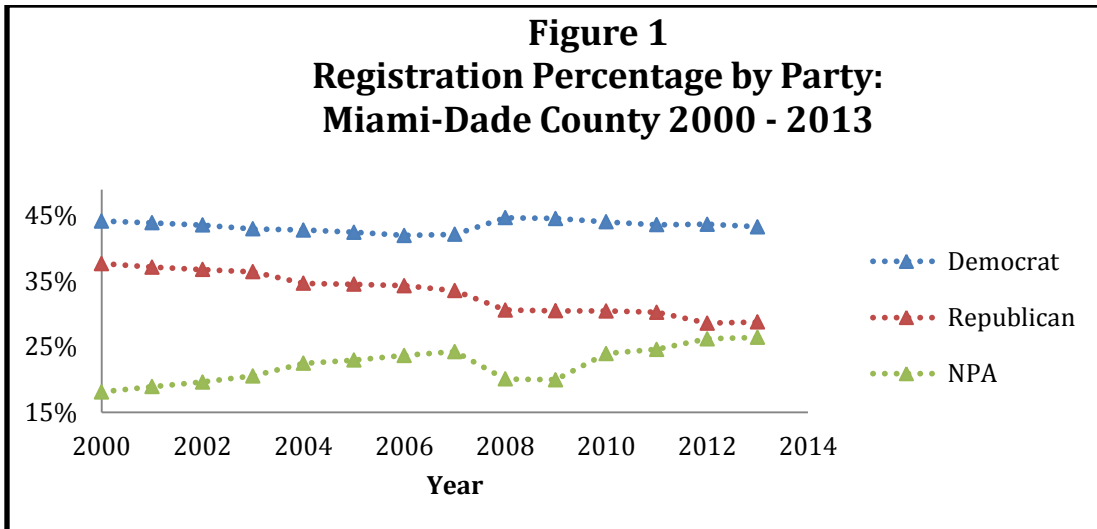
In Miami-Dade, Democrats currently hold a sizable lead in party registration with 550,342 registered Democrats (43.3 percent of voters) compared to 365,325 Republicans (28.7 percent of voters), a difference of roughly 185,000.<sup>6</sup> Go back 13 years to 2000 and you find Democratic and Republican registration numbers that are less disparate. By the end of 2000, there were 398,935 Democrats compared to 340,222 Republicans, which amounted to a more manageable 58,713 difference for the Republicans.<sup>7</sup>

Over the years, Republican decline has been constant while Democrat and NPA registration have trended upwards. As Figure 1 below shows, the percentage of registered Democrats in the county has hovered around 43 to 44 for the last decade, while Republicans have been on the decline across the county since 2000 and are now rivaling NPAs in terms of registration numbers. In 2000, Republicans numbered 37.7 percent of all registered voters, but today make up a smaller share of the electorate at 28.7 percent.

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<sup>6</sup> Miami-Dade County Elections Department: Party Registration Statistics (accessed August, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



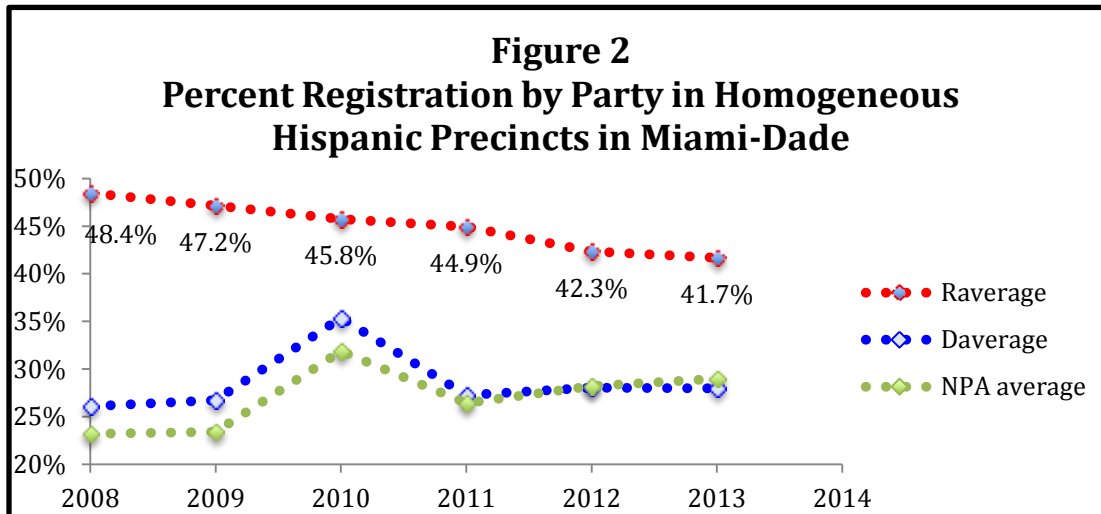
In traditional Republican strongholds, such as Cuban districts in Miami-Dade and homogeneous Hispanic precincts (HHPs) across the county, we also find a noticeable decline over the years in party registration among Republicans. This is important given that while Democrats have been gaining handily throughout the county, Hispanic precincts are on average *more* Republican. Figure 2 analyzes party registration trends in HHPs since 2008.<sup>8</sup>

With the exception of 2010, Democrats have hovered around 27–28 percent of the total registrants in HHPs, while Republicans have been losing steady shares of the electorate, averaging a loss of 1.34 percent every year in HHPs since 2008. In just five years Republican numbers dropped by 6.7 percent, from 48.4 percent of total registered voters to 41.7 percent, and continue to trend downwards. Even if Democrat and NPA registration numbers are not getting traction at the moment in

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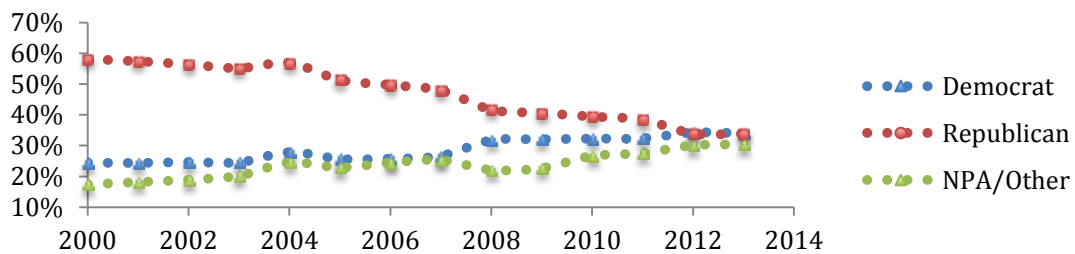
<sup>8</sup> Prior to 2008, the Miami-Dade elections department did not track how many Hispanic Republicans were registered in specific precincts; it just had race as a separate category.

HHPs, the mere fact that Republican registration is dropping off in HHPs points to a weakening of party loyalty in what has traditionally been the Republican’s strongest region of support.

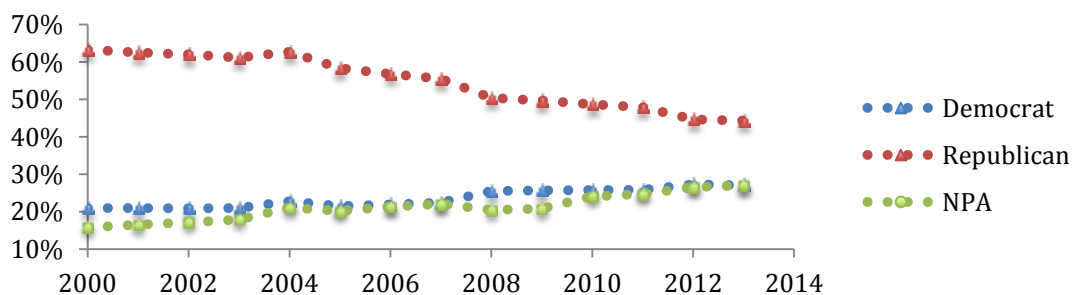


Republican registration decline is also noticeable in districts with high Cuban populations such as Miami’s city Commission Districts 3 and 4, Miami-Dade County Commission District 10, and precincts in west Miami-Dade ranging from 400 to 500. Figures 3 through 5 track party registration percentage over time in these districts/precincts with high Cuban populations and what we see is consistent Republican decline over time.

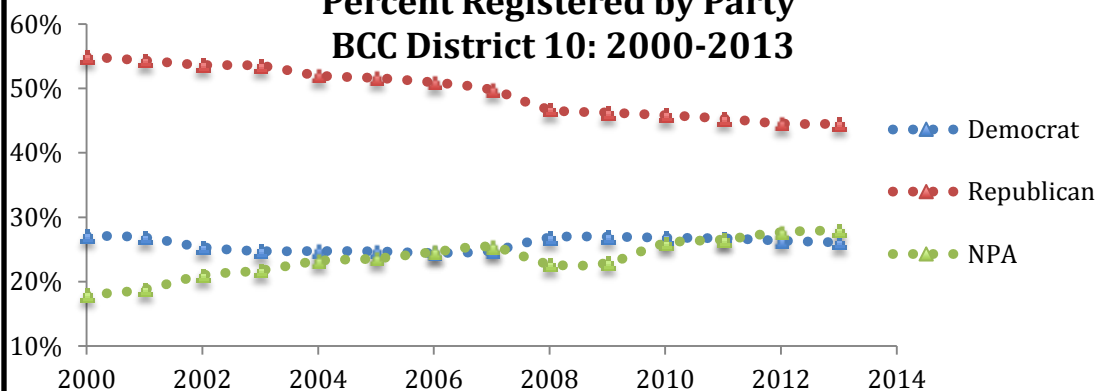
**Figure 3**  
**Percent Registered by Party**  
**City of Miami Commission District 3: 2000-2013**



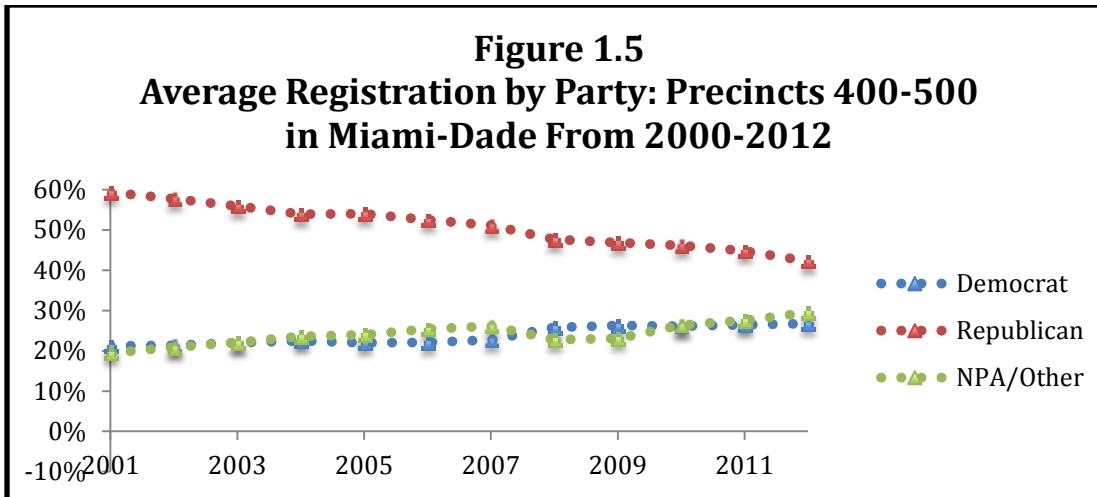
**Figure 4**  
**Percent Registered by Party**  
**City of Miami Commission District 4: 2000-2013**



**Figure 5**  
**Percent Registered by Party**  
**BCC District 10: 2000-2013**







The registration data from districts/precincts with high Cuban populations point to a steady decline in Republican registration, as the Party dropped below 50 percent of total registered voters in each district/precinct analyzed. In City Commission District 3 (Figure 3), the amount of registered Republicans dropped by 24.25 percent since 2000 while Democratic and NPA registration went up 9.57 percent and 13 percent, respectively. In District 3, Republicans had a 33.67 percent advantage in 2000, as 58 percent of all registered voters were Republican, compared to 24 percent Democrat. After 2004, however, Republican registration declined and never returned to its pre-2004 numbers. Today, there are more Democrats in what was once a solid Republican district. Democrats now make up 34.02 percent of registered voters while Republicans have dropped to 33.87 percent.

In City Commission District 4 (Figure 4), we see pretty much the same trend. There was a decline of 18.94 percentage points in registered Republicans (from 63 to 44 percent of registered voters) and a 6 percent increase in the amount or

registered Democrats (21 to 27 percent of total registered voters), while NPA registration went up 11.25 percent (from 15 to 27 percent of voters) since 2000. Again, 2004 was the turning point for Republicans in the district and the party has been unable to regain their foothold since.

For County District 10 (Figure 5), we see the trend continuing, albeit a little more slowly. Republicans lost 10.43 percent of total voters since 2000 (from 54 to 44 percent of voters), while NPA registration increased 10.05 percent to settle at 27 percent of all voters in the district in 2013. Democrats dropped by only 1.05 percent in thirteen years, making up 26 percent of the voters in District 10 today.

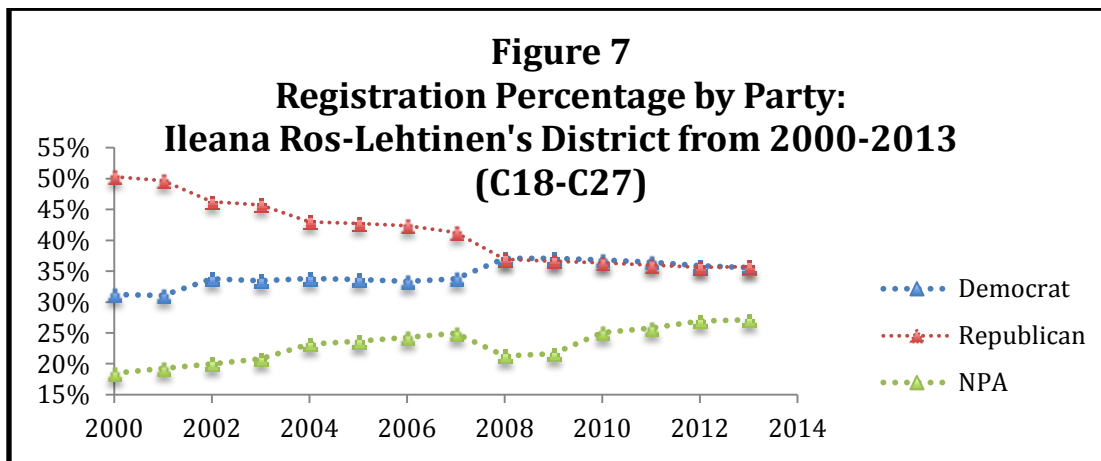
Looking at precincts in West Miami-Dade, the trend is the same as in other districts with a high Cuban population.<sup>9</sup> Figure 6 records the average registration percentage by party over time in precincts 400-500. Republicans dropped from 60 to 42 percent of registered voters, an 18 percent drop since 2000. Democrats increased their numbers from 21 to 26 percent of registered voters, while NPA registration went from 19 to 27 percent.

As party registration trends show, Republicans are losing far more and at a much faster rate at the expense of Democratic and NPA registration in Cuban districts across the county. In fact, in all of these districts we see double-digit losses in Republican registration, a double-digit increase in NPA registration, and a pretty constant Democratic percentage that trends upwards or stays relatively the same over time. Even in “safe” Republican districts, like Ileana Ros-Lehtinen’s

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<sup>9</sup> To analyze precincts with high Cuban populations in West Miami-Dade, we take the average registration percentage by party in each precinct from 400-500 from the year 2000 to 2012.

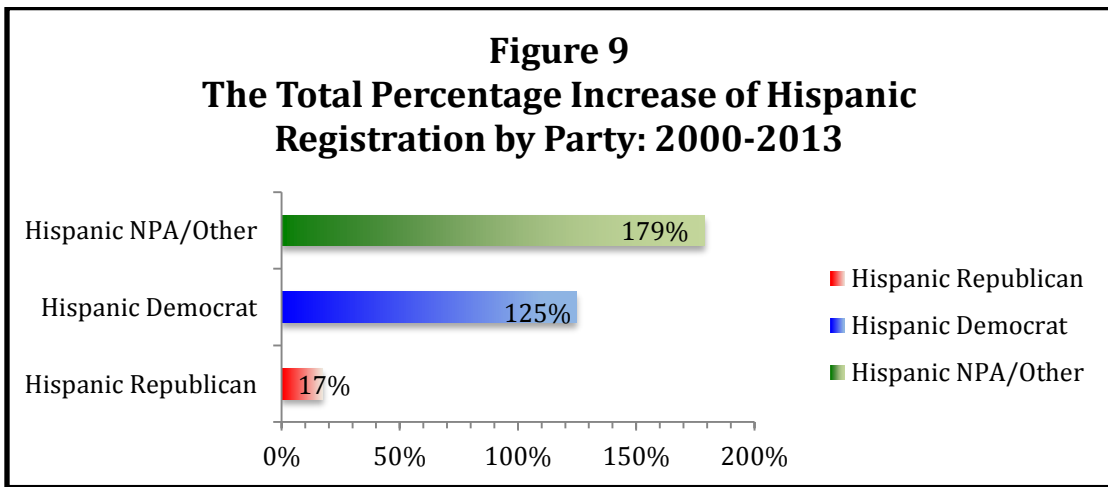
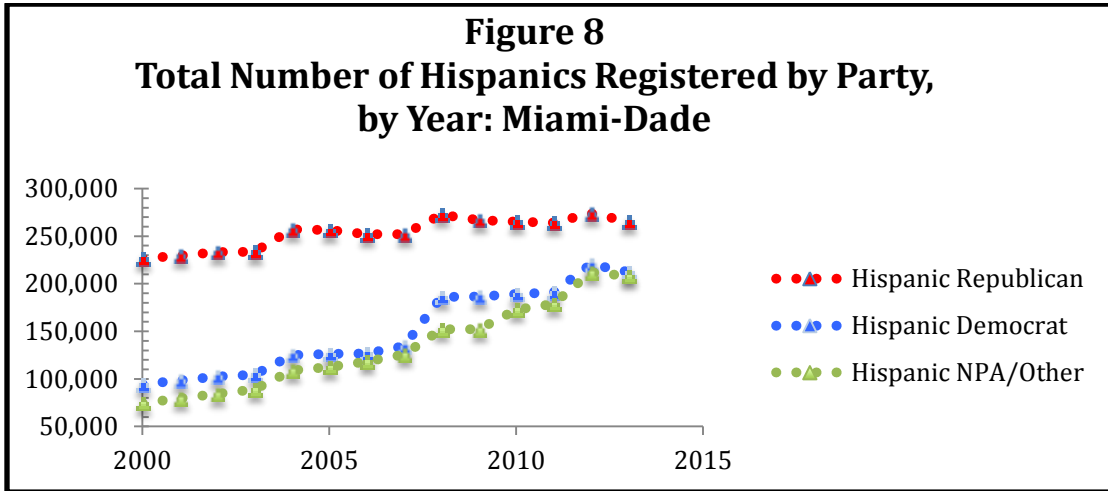
Congressional district 27, we see a strong decline that mirrors the broader inability of Republicans to compete with NPA or Democratic registration across the county, as Figure 7 shows. During Ros-Lehtinen’s tenure, her district profile has shifted away from her party and is now on the verge of having more Democrats than Republicans—35.71 percent of registered voters in her district are Republican while 35.58 percent are Democrat.



**Democratic and NPA gains among Hispanics: Closing the Gap**

The numbers point to an issue with Hispanic registration in general. While we see Republican registration dropping off in traditional Republican districts, the Party’s ineffectiveness has been their inability to attract *more* Hispanics since 2000 at a faster rate than Democrats or NPA. In contrast, the Democratic Party has been quick to close the gap since 2000, making its strongest gains in 2008 among

Hispanics. As figures 8 and 9 below illustrate, Hispanics are registering Democrat and NPA at a much faster rate than Republican.



Hispanics have been registering as Democrats and NPA at an alarming rate, if taken from the viewpoint of the Republican Party. In Figure 8, we see the Republicans dominating among Hispanics in 2000, amassing 226,552 registered Hispanics compared to 94,428 Hispanic Democrats. This was a consequence of traditional party alignments dating back to the 1980s, but in little over 10 years,

from 2000-2013, Democrats more than doubled the amount of Hispanics in their party. Today, there are 212,388 Hispanic Democrats (an increase of 117,960 or 125 percent), while the Republican Party increased its amount of Hispanics by 39,105 (an increase of 17 percent) in the last 13 years to 265,657. NPA registration among Hispanics outpaced both parties combined, increasing 179 percent since 2000, an increase from 74,527 to 207,981 Hispanics in little over a decade.

As we analyze the party registration data, we start to see a picture emerging that lends itself to a Republican realignment in the works. Two things immediately stand out: 1) Republicans are not attracting Hispanics to their party as they once did. We see more and more Hispanics either register Democrat or NPA and at a much faster rate than Republican; and 2) Republicans are losing the registration battle in what was once their strongest regions of support, as showed by their declining numbers in particular Cuban districts and HHPs. Districts/precincts that once held a considerable registration advantage for the Republican Party have had double-digit drops and are trending downwards. The Republicans are not restocking their voter rolls in these districts, which will undoubtedly hamper their ability to stay competitive in the future.

## **Electoral shifts, Voting Behavior, and Republican Loss**

One method to analyze party strength among a population is to look at party registration numbers; another way is to look at its voting behavior. As we mentioned earlier, the Republican Party's strongest region of support comes from

HHPs in Miami-Dade in terms of party registration, where, on average, 42 percent of voters are registered Republican compared to 27 percent Democrat. As a result, we expect that HHPs would return the greatest number of votes for the Republican Party when compared to the rest of the county. That is, when analyzing a precinct/district, the more registered Hispanics there are, the more likely the precinct/district is to vote Republican compared to a district/precinct with a lower percent of total Hispanics. Through regression analysis (OLS) and homogeneous precinct analysis, we can gauge Hispanic support for Republicans throughout the county over time. If there is a Republican realignment occurring among Hispanics, as we posit, then we should notice a drop in Republican support in HHPs over time. Figure 10 tracks the vote returns in the last three presidential elections from HHPs utilizing homogeneous precinct analysis.

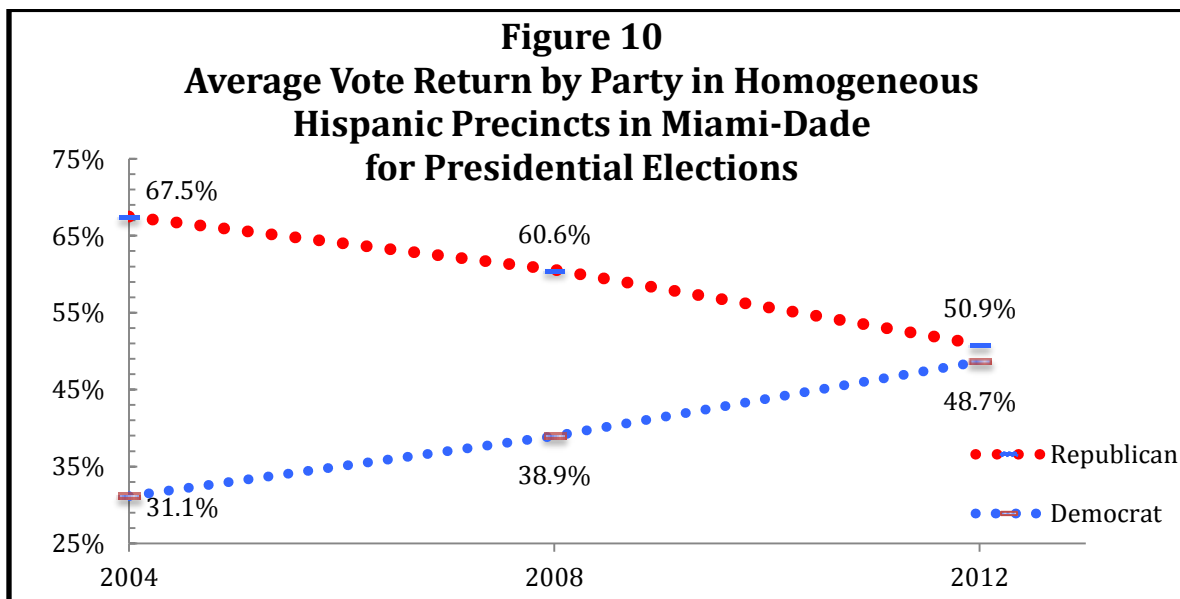


Figure 10 analyzes homogeneous precincts and shows that, on average, precincts containing more than 70 percent Hispanic are more likely to vote Republican.<sup>10</sup> The numbers point to a 16.6 percent decline since 2004, but Republicans still averaged more than 50 percent in HHPs, albeit only getting an average of 50.9 percent in 2012.

In 2004, Republicans won, on average, 67.5 percent of the presidential vote in HHPs, while Democrats struggled, getting only 31.1 percent of the vote under Kerry—a difference of 36.4 percent. Undoubtedly, Republicans look to have held a clear advantage in Hispanic precincts in 2004 and among Hispanics in general.

In 2008, given the state of the economy and the lackluster support for the war in Iraq, Democrats were poised to do well at the presidential level. With the understanding that Republican support was going to drop overall from the last presidential election—if the 2006 midterm elections were any predictor, which saw Democrats take control of both Congressional chambers—the Republican Party still did relatively well in HHPs in Miami-Dade, winning an average of 60.6 percent of the vote, dropping a slight 6.9 percent from the previous election. Democrats, in contrast, gained 7.8 percent more in HHPs from the previous presidential election winning 38.9 percent in 2004. The gap between the parties dropped from 36.4 percent in 2004 to 21.7 percent in 2008. In electoral terms, this was still a strong victory, and given the issues the Republicans faced in 2008, this wasn't that big of a surprise. Even when Republicans lose elections they do well in HHPs and among Hispanics in general, or at least in 2008 they did.

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<sup>10</sup> The homogeneous precinct analysis took the vote returns for each party in all precincts with more than 70 percent Hispanic and averaged them.

In 2012, however, we see a strong shift from the last two presidential elections away from Republicans and towards the Democrats. In just eight years, the Democrats closed a gap of 36 percent in 2004 down to 2 percent in 2012, winning on average 48.7 percent of the vote in HHPs, compared to 50.9 percent for the Republicans. HHPs were pretty much a toss-up in 2012, as Hispanics were less likely to support Republicans when compared to previous elections. Republicans are now competing with Democrats in HHPs—a political realignment is on the verge of happening—, which points to a problem for the Republican Party if it is looking to stay competitive in the county. This once solid demographic group is now a toss-up.

## **Hispanic Republican Support & Analysis: Ethnicity as a Predictor of Vote Choice since 2004**

To further gauge if in fact Hispanic support for Republicans has decreased, we analyze the link between ethnicity and voting behavior throughout the county by utilizing OLS regression analysis. If Republican support has declined, we should see ethnicity (Hispanic percentage of total population in a precinct) decline as a predictor of vote choice in favor of Republicans. Figures 11, 12, and 13 on the following page tracks the regression outputs and plots for the last three presidential elections studying the link between ethnicity and vote choice.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The regression analyzed the link between the percentage vote return for the Republican Party (dependent variable) in a precinct and ethnicity (dependent variable), which was measured by the percent of Hispanics in a precinct. For complete SPSS outputs please see appendix.

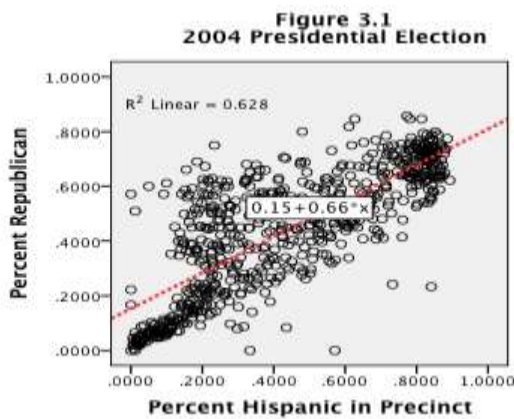


For the presidential elections of 2004 and 2008, we see a strong link between ethnicity and voting behavior throughout the county, as more than 60 percent of the variance in both models is explained by ethnicity, which is measured by the coefficient of determination (R-Squared). The regression model returned an R-Square of 38 percent for the 2012 election, which shows a decreased link between ethnicity and Republican support. In all regression models, the significance level was below .05, showing that ethnicity was a significant predictor of vote choice.

For the 2004 election, the regression function, which measures the impact of the independent variable (ethnicity) on the dependent variable (vote for Republican), is calculated at  $Y = .15 + .66(X)$ .

**Figure 11**

**2004 Presidential Election**

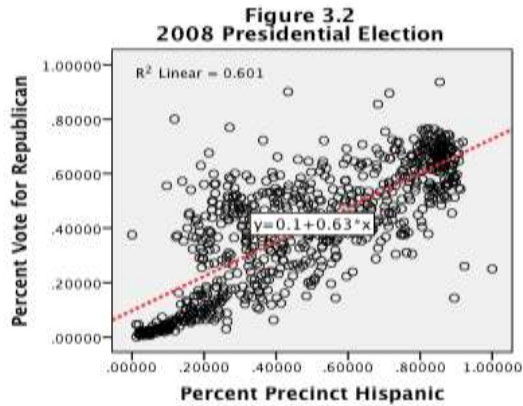


Regression	R Squared	Sig
$Y = .15 + .66(X)$	.628	0.00

Precinct with 100 percent Hispanic =  $.66(1.00) + .15 = 81$  percent  
 Precinct with 0 percent Hispanic =  $.66(0) + .15 = 15$  percent

**Figure 12**

**2008 Presidential Election**



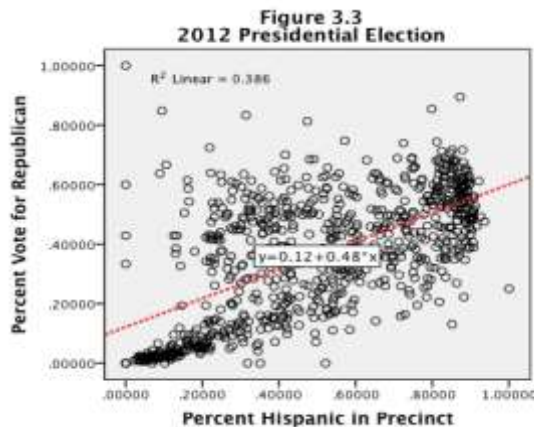
Regression	R Squared	Sig
$Y = .10 + .63(X)$	.601	0.00

Precinct with 100 percent Hispanic =  $.63(1.00) + .10 = 73$  percent

Precinct with 0 percent Hispanic =  $.63(0) + .10 = 10$  percent

**Figure 3**

**2012 Presidential Election**



Regression	R Squared	Sig
$Y = .12 + .48(X)$	.386	0.00

Precinct with 100 percent Hispanic =  $.48(1.00) + .12 = 60$  percent

Precinct with 0 percent Hispanic =  $.48(0) + .12 = 12$  percent

For everyone one unit increase (one percent) in the amount of Hispanics in a precinct we see a .66 increase in Republican support from the district.

Hypothetically, a precinct that is 100 percent Hispanic ( $X = 1.00$ ), according to the regression model, is predicted to have given 81 percent of the vote to the Republicans in 2004. That is, to put it another way, Republicans won 81 percent of the Hispanic vote in 2004. In contrast, a precinct with no Hispanics in 2004 would have been predicted, according to the regression model, to give 15 percent of the

vote to Republicans. In 2004, the more Hispanics in a precinct, in terms of total population, the more likely it was to vote for the Republican Party.

For the 2008 election we see a slight drop off among Hispanic support of about 8 percent countywide, as one unit increase in Hispanic percentage meant .63 unit increase in the support for Republicans ( $Y = .10 + .63(X)$ ). The model had Republicans winning roughly 73 percent of the Hispanic vote in 2008, pointing to a strong showing for the Republican Party among Hispanics, but a noticeable decline from the 2004 election.

Four years later, in 2012, Republican dominance among Hispanics did indeed drop significantly from 2004. The model points to a total decline of 21 percentage points across the county among Hispanics since 2004 (from 81 to 60 percent) and a 13 percent decline from 2008 (from 73 to 60 percent). Compared to previous elections, there was only a .48 unit increase in the support for Republicans when Hispanic percentage increased in a precinct. According to the model though, Republicans won the Hispanic vote in Miami-Dade but are clearly losing ground to the Democrats. Republicans are losing significant support from their once solid coalitions in the county, which will undoubtedly hamper their ability to mount successful elections in the future. The Republican Party is on the verge of losing the Hispanic vote in Miami-Dade and has been significantly weakened in its traditional strongholds across the county.

## **Conclusion**

This gradual secular realignment among Cuban voters occurred due to several demographic and policy issues. First, the dramatic decline of the importance of the Cuba issue among Cuban American voters eroded support for the GOP. In 1980 the Cuban community's overwhelming support for Ronald Reagan was largely based on his promise to destabilize the Castro regime. Reagan's hardline anti-communist approach contrasted favorably to the Carter's administration effort to normalize relations with the communist government. Cuban-American enthusiasm for a hardline U.S. Cuba policy waned after the failure of three Republican administrations (Reagan, Bush, and Bush) to bring meaningful change to Cuba.

The Democratic Party also adjusted its policies to be more appealing to Cuban voters. Bill Clinton in 1992 endorsed the U.S. economic embargo against Cuba and in 1996 Clinton endorsed the Helms-Burton Act that codified the embargo in U.S. law. Barak Obama, during his 2008 presidential campaign, announced his support for the embargo in a speech to the Cuban American National Foundation. More importantly, over the last three decades neither Republican nor Democratic administrations have advocated any major change in U.S.-Cuban relations.

Cuban Americans in a 2005 poll ranked Cuba as only the fifteenth most important issue facing the United States. The declining importance of the Cuba issue combined with the lack of any real differences between the two parties has weakened the GOP appeal among Cuban voters. Republican campaigns that tout the party hardline position against the Castro regime are now largely ineffective and outdated.

It is no coincidence that the realignment of the Cuban-American vote is occurring three decades after it first shifted to the GOP. Thirty years constitute a political generation and we are witnesses to a generational shift in Cuban-American political behavior. Although most Cuban Americans share a strong commitment for a “free Cuba,” the intensity of younger Cubans on this issue is far less than their parents and grandparents. Younger Cuban Americans voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 and they are far more likely to become Democrats than older Cubans.

Finally, many Cuban Americans reject the extreme fiscal and social conservatism of the GOP. Cuban voters do not only support a hardline foreign policy toward their former homeland but they also take advantage of many social and economic programs designed for the urban underclass. The Cuban elderly, ironically the demographics most supportive of the Republicans, are consumers of a wide variety of social programs, ranging from elderly meals programs to Section 8 housing. Obama targeted this group in 2012 with a series of Spanish-language radio and television ads warning of Republican efforts to cut these social programs that many Cuban depend on.

Republicans’ failure to adapt to the changing landscape of Miami politics has created an opportunity for Democrats to make major gains in Florida. If current trends continue, Democrats over the next decade can gain one additional congressional seat, two state senate seats, and at least five state house seats. More important, if Democratic national and statewide candidates can duplicate Obama’s performance in 2012, the state could shift for the foreseeable future to the Democrats.

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