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Former U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen

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When you work in politics, you find out really early that the most important question you have to answer is what is a person's "voting intensity" issue? You don't get elected to Congress, or stay there very long, if you don't figure it out.

Floridians who have moved from Puerto Rico — American citizens who have the full right to vote in Florida — are no different. These 1.1 million potential voters have overwhelmingly moved to Central Florida, in the area known as the I-4 corridor, between Tampa and Orlando. Speaking to the voting intensity issue of these voters is increasingly the key to winning statewide, especially for Republicans.

That voting intensity issue is statehood for Puerto Rico, or at least a fair hearing for statehood.

A new study by Florida's James Madison Institute tells us without a doubt and using hard data that the voting intensity issue for the 1.1 million Central Floridians of Puerto Rican descent is openness to Puerto Rican statehood. Two-thirds to three-fourths of these voters favor statehood for Puerto Rico, according to recent polls. This is the second election-eve edition of this study by JMI, which has compiled a treasure trove of Florida Puerto Rican voter data going back over a decade.

Florida's voters of Puerto Rican descent have all the same general issue intensities this year as anyone else — inflation, the cost of groceries and gasoline, the border, and crime. But what makes them stand out is a passionate issue uniquely their own — wanting to see their ancestral homeland of Puerto Rico become a state.

This is not just another preference, but a voting intensity. Eighty-five percent of these Floridians found the issue of Puerto Rican statehood to be "extremely" or "very" important. The status issue ranked much higher than other issues in order of importance to these voters. Seventy-one percent are more likely to vote for a candidate (of either political party) who is open to Puerto Rican statehood.

My party, the Republican Party, cannot win Florida without winning Central Florida. And we can no longer win Central Florida without carrying a high enough percentage of this Puerto Rican "diaspora" vote. Central Florida has been decisive for every Republican presidential candidate since 1992. In every election where the Republican presidential candidate wins 50 percent or more of a dozen key Central Florida counties, he wins the state and almost always the White

House. When the GOP candidate for president fails to do so, he loses Florida and invariably also the White House.

As Central Florida goes, so goes the road to the White House.

We've also seen the importance of Central Florida and its Puerto Rican diaspora population in recent Florida statewide elections. In 2018, then-Governor (now-Senator) Rick Scott embraced the cause of Puerto Rican statehood and quickly made up the deficit among self-identified Puerto Rican voters. While then-Sen. Bill Nelson was on the record in favor of Puerto Rican statehood, he had to temper that position given the overwhelming support he also had among those who were strongly opposed to statehood. Nelson paid the price for this in Central Florida, losing to Scott in the crucial dozen counties by a healthy margin by modern standards — two full percentage points, 51-49.

Unlike Scott, Gov. Ron DeSantis did not advocate for Puerto Rican statehood, but he has been respectful and open to the idea with those for whom it was their vote intensity issue. As a result, DeSantis carried Central Florida with 50.4 percent of the vote, just enough to win the state.

Scott did better in Central Florida in his Senate race than DeSantis did in his race for governor. It may not sound like much, but a Republican winning Central Florida 51-49 makes for a much more comfortable statewide margin than winning it only 50.4 to 49.6.

What does all this mean for Republicans in 2022, especially DeSantis and Sen. Marco Rubio? The lesson is simple — when a voter tells you this strongly what their vote intensity issue is, you listen to them if you want to get their vote.

In a way, Puerto Ricans living in the United States have already chosen statehood, so we shouldn't be so cavalier when addressing it. I would encourage DeSantis, Rubio and their campaigns to pay attention to this pre-existing and well-worn roadmap.

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