

# ‘AN UPHILL BATTLE’



Voter outreach efforts at Hola Community Arts in Henderson County. [PHOTO COURTESY OF ADRIANA CHAVELA]

## NC organizers work to energize Latino vote a month from election

**By Brian Gordon**  
USA Today Network

Growing up in Puerto Rico, Freddy Medina says three things invariably

sparked excitement on the island: boxing, baseball, and politics.

Medina, a community organizer in Raleigh, saw Puerto Ricans approach

campaigns with the fervor of a ringside crowd on fight night. During election seasons, communities rallied around candidates who walked the streets amid

festive atmospheres.

“We’re pretty lively people in general,” he said. “Politics is sort of our third sport.”

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## LATINO

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Yet among the more than 100,000 Puerto Ricans now living in North Carolina, Medina doesn't see the same passion this election cycle. Other Latino advocates statewide say they too see a dearth of interest among eligible voters, causing some to worry lower turnouts could tilt races in November.

Only 4.4% of North Carolina voters are Latinos, but in a swing state, every percentage point counts within this growing, Democrat-leaning electorate. In 2016, President Donald Trump carried North Carolina by around 170,000 votes, while Gov. Roy Cooper claimed his position by a mere 10,280 ballots. Scores of down ballot races could flip the General Assembly, and the race between Democrat Cal Cunningham and incumbent Republican Thom Tillis could flip the U.S. Senate.

The Sept. 17 Suffolk University/USA TODAY Network Poll found Biden led Trump 46.2% to 42.8%, within the poll's margin of error. In the same poll, Cooper held a more commanding 50.4% to 38% lead over Lt. Gov. Dan Forest.

While most Latinos in North Carolina can't vote - due to age or citizenship status - many who can choose not to, with registration rates among eligible Latino voters lagging more than 20% behind rates for white and Black voters according to data from the Census Bureau and the N.C. State Board of Elections (NCSBE).

Latino advocates say the pandemic - which disproportionately hit their communities - has hindered voter outreach, but they also point to other underlying issues - like past broken promises, few Latino candidates, and less campaign investment - keeping would-be voters away.

### An emerging electorate

"An uphill battle" is how Cristal Figueroa describes getting out the vote in communities that often feel politically overlooked. Last year, Figueroa, 25, ran for North Carolina Senate in Henderson County and now serves as political director for the Latino advocacy group Poder NC Action, where she's spearheaded mass phone banking and women-focused voting initiatives.

Because Latino turnout is traditionally lower than other groups, Figueroa said many campaigns don't dedicate as much resources and time to connect with Latino voters, which in turn perpetuates patterns of low turnout and voter apathy.

"It's been very difficult speaking to a community that has more or less been forgotten by the current political cycle," she said. "We have a lot of empty promises, but we don't really have actual, tangible policies."

Figueroa mentioned that politicians haven't delivered strong pathways to citizenship or the ability for undocumented residents in North Carolina to have driver's licenses. She suggested more Latino candidates like Ricky Hurtado, who is running in Alamance County for the state house, would spur voter engagement. No Latinos currently serve in the General Assembly.

"That's the kind of candidate we need," she said of Hurtado. "Candidates that actually know what we've been through. Actually have had the life that we've had and can speak for the community because they can speak to the community."

The relative newness of North Carolina's Latino community - many came to the state in the past three decades - may contribute to a less established voting tradition due to their lack of citizenship or civic connections, especially in contrast to the Latino electorates in states like Florida, California, and Arizona.

No Latinos currently serve in the General Assembly and the total number of Latinos holding public office statewide, organizers estimated, can be counted on two hands. Yet politicians like Hurtado and Javiera Caballero, a Durham City councilwoman, represent an emerging group of young Latinos appearing on North Carolina ballots.

"I know folks are working really hard to engage a young electorate that doesn't necessarily have the same story of voting as their parents," said Caballero, who anticipates a tremendous jump in Latino voting by 2024, including by her now 14-year old daughter. "I think people are laying the groundwork this election and it'll pay dividends."

### Not a monolith

While future prospects for Latino voting seem bright, organizers keep a wary eye on this year's races.

Out of North Carolina's 338,000 eligible Latino voters, only 66% are registered to vote, compared to 89% of eligible white voters and 90% of eligible Black voters. Since the March primary, only 7,800 new Latinos in North Carolina have registered to vote according to the NCSBE database.

Coronavirus has curtailed many efforts to raise this figure. Latinos only make up 0.6% of the state's population but account for more than a third of the

state's positive COVID-19 cases. Voter outreach is an intimate process, especially within populations facing language barriers and historically distrust of governments, and voting advocates say the virus cut many face-to-face opportunities.

"Finding areas to meet has been tough," said Norma Negrón, founder of Latino Community Connects, who, during normal election seasons, would attend Fayetteville-area festivals, markets, and churches to register voters and promote candidates.

Yet Negrón said the virus doesn't excuse candidates from traditionally overlooking Latino communities.

"I hear all the time from people saying even if we vote, we don't get heard," she said.

To better connect with Latino voters, some contend campaigns must better recognize the complexities within the electorate.

"I think when we think of the Latino population, a lot of people think it's a monolith community," said Benito Garcia, a writer who covers Latino issues in Western North Carolina. "I think that's so dangerous. It's a very diverse group of people with different backgrounds, different stories, and they vote according to their own personal path."

### 'Understand the intricacies'

While around two-thirds of Latinos support Democrats, a sizable portion lean Republican. Many voters from countries like Cuba and Venezuela support Trump, fearing a liberal administration would drive the United States towards a form of socialism they despised in their native countries.

"I'm originally from Venezuela, and we went from being one of the richest countries in the world to actually having people trying to find food in the garbage due to socialism," said Omar Lugo, head of Latinos for Trump of Alamance County.

Abortion access also pushes some toward Republican candidates, as Figueroa experienced while campaigning in Henderson County.

"It has been a topic that has created single-topic voters," she said.

While conservative Latinos have these specific policies to rally around, liberal advocates say they've struggle to pinpoint issues that

energize the many and diverse subsets of Latinos, which range from undocumented residents to American-born citizens.

"We don't have problems with immigration," Medina said of Puerto Ricans in North Carolina. "Our problems are fundamentally different because of the special status of Puerto Rico in the United States. If parties spend a little bit more time trying to understand the intricacies and the needs of our community, then we would see a lot more engagement from our community."

He advised Democratic candidates up and down the ballot to, in addition to immigration, continue highlighting affordable housing, health care, and other social problems that could improve their daily lives. Medina also would like to see the national Biden campaign spend more money on outreach to the Puerto Ricans in North Carolina, a community that's grown by tens of thousands since Hurricane Maria drove them from their home island in 2017.

Biden campaign spokesperson Subhan Cheema said, "We know our path to victory runs through the Latino community. This is why we have invested in building an operation that is reflective of the community, reaches voters in both English and Spanish and more importantly uses public health guidance as our North Star."

Trump campaign spokesperson Danielle Alvarez said Latinos "connect with President Trump's pro-family, pro-growth message." She also accused the Biden campaign of viewing the Latino electorate as "monolithic".

While the Trump campaign hasn't held Latino-centered events in North Carolina, the Biden campaign has run several ads and a litany of virtual events catered to Latino voters and Puerto Rican communities specifically.

Yet Medina senses streaming virtual events, while safer during a pandemic, don't inject the same enthusiasm as a political caravan on the streets of San Juan. He believes some small, in-person events - held safely - could go a long way in getting out the vote.

"Some Puerto Ricans want to feel the warmth of being part of a team, and the parties haven't so far provided for that type of excitement to build up," Medina said. "Politics here have been a little bit more dull."

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