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Florida

Population Magnet, Microcosm of America, Trailblazer Incubator

Florida is not a single entity but rather a composite of many diverse parts, each with its own unique identity. The huge influx of persons from other states and abroad over the past 50 years has given Florida cultural diversity and a melting-pot ambiance.

Throughout the history of the United States, multiple racial and ethnic minority outsider groups have struggled to overcome stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion in order to become equal insiders in the country's political, social, and economic spheres.

Trailblazers, as the word is used here, refers to those individuals in minority groups who have braved the tangled jungle of government in the past half century and carved out a trail for others like them to follow. Hundreds of individuals in minority groups in Florida have followed the blazed trail of their predecessors and continue to serve today. (See Appendixes B–E for comprehensive lists.)

The trailblazers in this book are from the past half century only. They were preceded by a large number of Hispanics who served in the territorial and state legislatures in the 1800s, and several blacks who were elected during Reconstruction. The focus on minorities since the 1960s reflects the increased opportunities for minorities to serve in public office made possible by laws, constitutional amendments, and court decisions that expanded civil rights.

Each individual in this book is a *first*—by virtue of race/ethnicity in combination with gender and, if applicable, political party to attain a legislative, judicial, or executive post at the state level or in Congress. Thus we have, for example, Joe Lang Kershaw, the first African American who was male and a Democrat elected to the Florida House, as well as Gwen Cherry, also African American and a Democrat elected to the House but who was female. Some individuals were trailblazers at more than one post. One is Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, the first Cuban-American female Republican elected to the Florida House, the Florida Senate, and then the U.S. Congress.

This book assumes that trail blazing at the state level represents a cumulative process, in which each person's achievements were built upon those of others at the city

or county level, for example, or drew upon the growing strength of organizations like the NAACP and networks like the Bay of Pigs veterans. The “first” person in history to be elected or appointed to a given state office thus benefitted from earlier trail blazing that occurred in laws and regulations as well as in public attitudes and perceptions.

Acknowledging the cumulative process does not diminish the importance of the trailblazers in this book. All faced challenges, some more serious than others, that required a measure of courage, intelligence, and self-confidence, and all needed family and community support.

In some cases, however, the “first” came about as a matter of circumstance or apparent subterfuge. One state legislator of Korean heritage, for example, ran for office at the request of a state legislator seeking higher office and for whom she served as campaign manager. In another example, the “first” was a candidate who purposely hid his racial identity to take advantage of a name he shared with a well-known white official.

Nonetheless, as individuals and as a group, the people in this book introduced diversity into the state’s politics and government. Having laid new paths in old territory, they are important to study.

First of all, they serve as role models. To minority professionals working quietly and steadily, yet heretofore ignored and overlooked for public office; to students mulling futures and careers; to housewives, laborers, and community activists struggling to overcome problems in their communities, the trailblazers offer a beacon of hope and inspiration.

Once elected or selected, trailblazers stand to make a difference, defying the business-as-usual policies and practices of the bodies in which they serve. Legislative agendas, for example, are more likely to contain proposals to improve education, jobs, and living conditions for minority populations. Hiring practices change in order to recruit a wider diversity of candidates.

Finally, and no less important, the election or appointment of trailblazers can improve the white community’s racial attitudes and tolerance. Many who might have doubted the competence of minority officeholders gradually shift their perceptions. Young people, who have grown up with racial/ethnic and gender diversity in government, are more likely to accept diversity as a fact of life. They expect to see it among those who seek political office—from both major political parties.

Such significant effects raise questions. How did these trailblazers emerge? What triggered their embarkation on new paths? Why Florida? Are there lessons here from which officeholders, current and potential, in other states can learn? And what advice do these pathbreakers have for young minorities contemplating running for office or dreaming of being appointed to top-level executive and judicial posts?

We can begin to answer these questions by looking first at the state’s minority

population growth and how it has changed the political landscape at the state and local levels.

Florida: Population Magnet, Microcosm of America

Trailblazers have emerged as Florida's population has grown over the past half century. The state has experienced an influx of retirees fleeing cold winters; Cubans fleeing Castro; Haitians fleeing poverty; Colombians, Venezuelans, Nicaraguans, and others from Latin America seeking economic opportunity or escaping political unrest.¹

Florida has become a real “melting pot” of cultures. Once one of the least appealing, most racially polarized, and poorest states, Florida is now one of the most desirable and most diverse. The transition has altered the faces and politics of those chosen to govern the state. The transition largely began during the tumultuous 1960s, with the Civil Rights Movement and court-ordered changes that gave rise to more

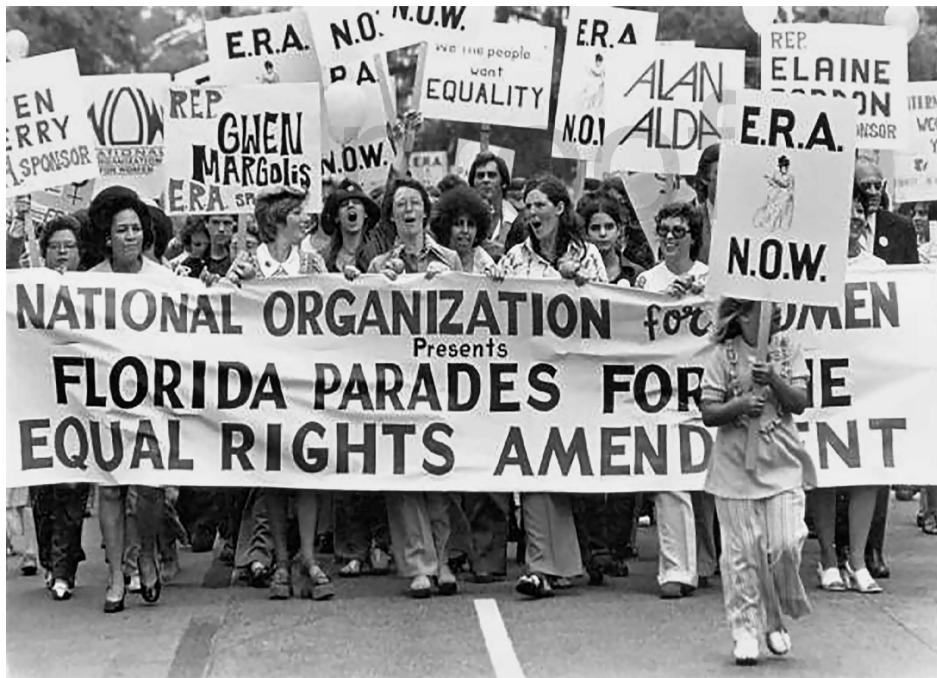


Figure 1.1. State Rep. Gwen Cherry (*second from left in front row*) marches in a parade with fellow women legislators Gwen Margolis and Elaine Gordon. An ardent advocate for women's rights, Cherry served as state President of the National Organization for Women and headed the Florida branch of the National Women's Political Caucus. She introduced a bill for Florida to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, which the House did twice, but each time it failed in the Senate. State Archives of Florida, *Florida Memory*, <https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/2697>, n.d.

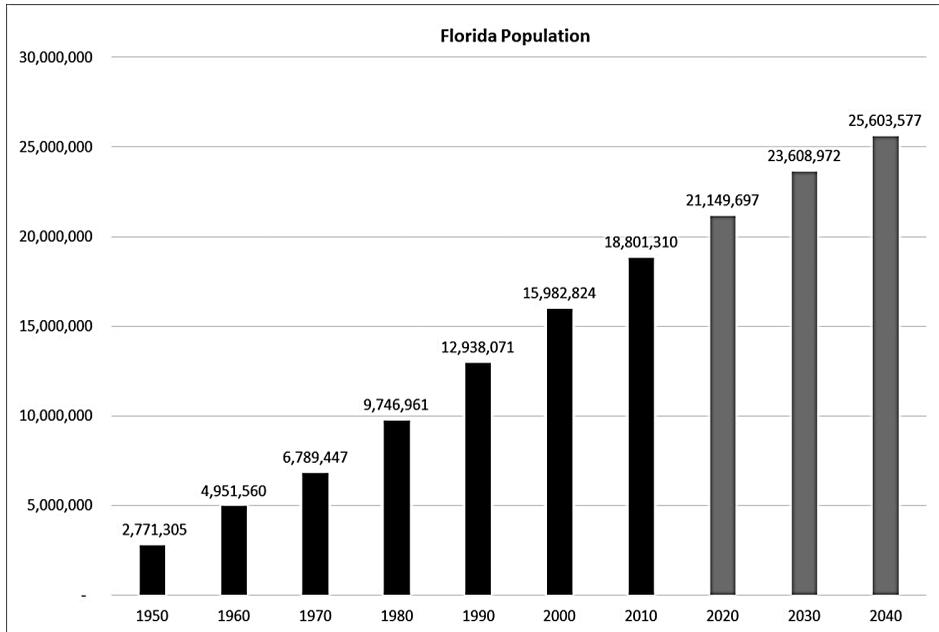


Figure 1.2. Florida's booming population. Sources: U.S. Census 1950–2010; Florida Demographic Estimating Conference, 2014; University of Florida Bureau of Business and Economic Research, Florida Population Studies, Bulletin 169, June 2014; http://edr.state.fl.us/Content/population-demographics/data/Pop_Census_Day.pdf.

representation for urban areas (the one-person, one-vote principle).² The push for gender equality began in the 1970s with the women's movement—out of which came Florida's first minority female legislator.

The paths followed by minority trailblazers have varied by their race/ethnicity, gender, political party, and geographical location. The tendency of immigrants to move to population centers with enclaves of other immigrants who share their heritage or country of origin explains why so many trailblazers in state and congressional offices have come from Florida's large metropolitan areas—Miami, Tampa, Orlando, and Jacksonville.

Florida, which became the nation's third largest state in 2014, has grown significantly in every decade since the 1950s (see figure 1.2). It has been transformed from a Confederate state to one best described as “a microcosm of America.” More than two-thirds of its residents were not born in Florida—a pattern extending back to 1960 when the U.S. Census Bureau first began collecting this information. At the same time, the state has become the nation's premier swing state—evolving from a one-party (“yellow dog Democrat”) state to a deeply divided purple state within a half century (see figure 1.3).³

Racial and ethnic conflict—Seminole Indian wars, slavery and emancipation, Reconstruction followed by segregation, the communist revolution in Cuba, and the

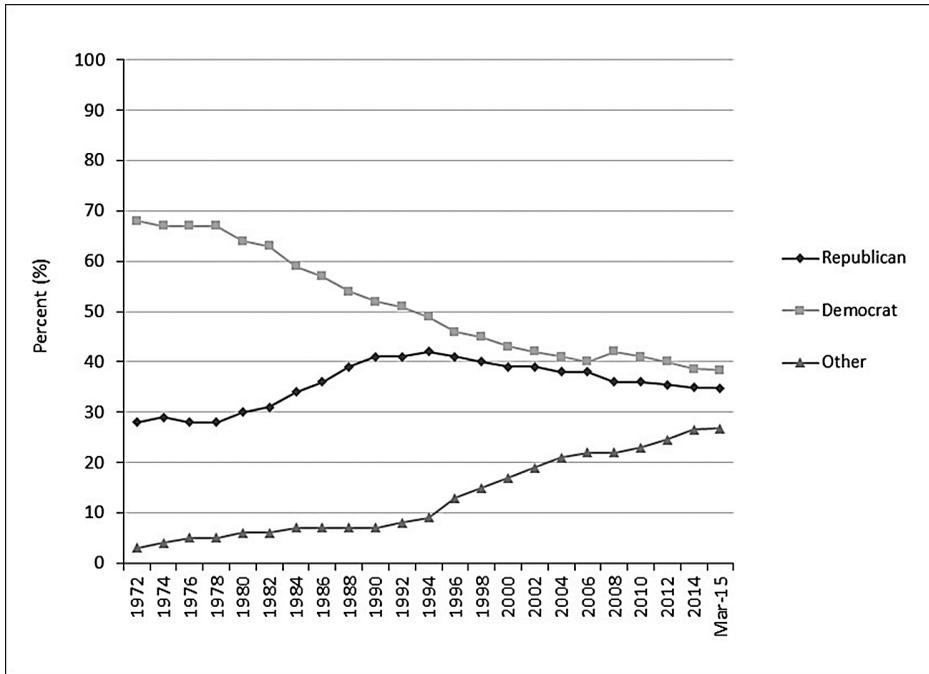


Figure 1.3. Florida voter party registration percentages: 1972–2015. Source: Compiled from data from the Florida Division of Elections.

Hispanic and Haitian migration to the state—has long driven Florida’s political history. Racial and ethnic politics continues to shape public affairs in Florida and may grow even more important in the next century as the state’s population continues to diversify.

The state’s racial/ethnic makeup now mirrors the nation at-large, more so than any other swing state (see table 1.1). However, broad racial/ethnic groupings widely cited by the media mask the fact that Florida’s black and Hispanic populations have become considerably more diverse, driven by in-migration from Latin America (Caribbean—55 percent, Central America—22 percent, and South America—23 percent).⁴ Nearly one-fifth of its residents are foreign born⁵ (see figure 1.4), and three-fourths of those residents are from Latin America (see figure 1.5). Ethnic solidarity tends to be strongest among foreign-born residents.⁶

As immigrants have flocked to Florida, especially to the largest metropolitan areas (Miami, Tampa, and Orlando), the state has seen the rise of *country-of-origin*, or *identity*, politics.⁷ But parlaying ethnic pride into racial/ethnic political representation requires naturalization. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, higher naturalization rates have occurred among immigrants from the Caribbean (54 percent) than from South (44 percent) or Central (32 percent) American countries. The highest rates among immigrants from Latin American countries are Jamaica (61 percent) and Cuba (56 percent).⁸

Do minorities register to vote? By the mid-2010s, nearly one-third of Florida’s registered voters were minorities—Hispanics (15 percent), blacks (14 percent), Asians/

Table 1.1. Florida's racial and ethnic composition closely mirrors the nation

Race/ethnicity	Percentage of population			
	2000		2015	
	Florida (%)	U.S. (%)	Florida (%)	U.S. (%)
White	78.0	75.1	78.1	77.7
Non-Hispanic White	65.4	69.1	56.4	62.6
Hispanic/Latino	16.8	12.5	23.6	17.1
African American	14.6	12.3	16.7	13.2
Asian	1.7	3.6	2.7	5.3
Native American	0.3	0.9	0.5	1.2
Pacific Islander	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2
Some other race	3.0	5.5	3.6	6.2
Two or more races	2.4	2.4	1.9	2.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Pacific Islanders (2 percent), and Native Americans/Alaskans (0.3 percent) (see figure 1.6). By far, the most solidly cohesive from a *party registration* perspective were blacks (see figure 1.10). Hispanics were more divided, with a sizable portion registering as independents (No Party Affiliation, or NPA). Asians were the most likely to register as NPAs—a pattern observed nationally as well.⁹

Partisan differences in the *voting patterns within* each broadly labeled racial/ethnic group (black, Hispanic, Asian, Native-American) are often explained by the country of origin of a candidate or candidate's family (for example, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti,

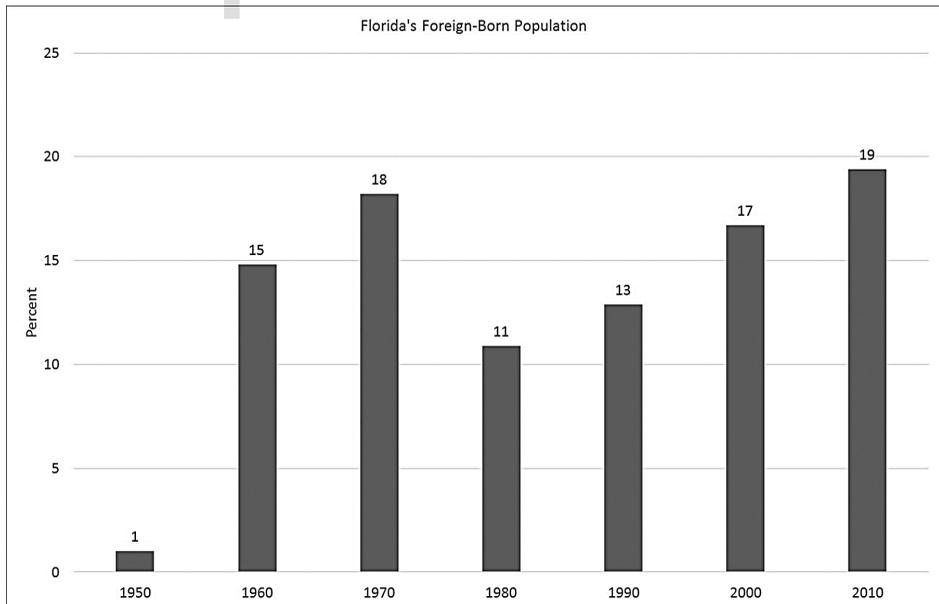


Figure 1.4. Florida's foreign-born population diversifies the state's population. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.