

Influencers to the Democrats: Tell us your solutions to Florida's many challenges



BY THE MIAMI HERALD EDITORIAL BOARD

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Democratic presidential candidates have gathered in Miami this week for two debates. As Floridians watch with an eye toward how the candidates will discuss issues important to the Sunshine State, we asked the Herald's panel of Florida Influencers — 50 leaders in business, law, nonprofits and the arts — “What do you want to hear from the Democratic candidates as it relates to Florida's challenges?”

Here are some of the issues they want to hear discussed in the debates:



We continue to hear about fixing America’s infrastructure from both sides of the aisle. Here in Florida, we know we are one of the states that deserves urgent attention. Our highway system, which makes up 10 percent of our total roads, is used by more than half of our population. Our coastal areas are at a consistent risk from storms that cause major flooding and polluted water. And we are behind the curve when it comes to renewable energy as natural gas still dominates our production. Understanding that a national increase in funding for infrastructure is inevitable, how can you ensure that a sustainable solution will be created that maximizes our tax dollars?

Josh Boloña, student body president, University of Central Florida



As president, what guidance and support would you provide to Florida leaders to balance federal interests of ICE, state interests connected with Florida's sanctuary-cities ban and the social welfare of a diverse, immigrant-dominated local electorate? What are your plans to assist states like Florida in their effort to cope with sea level rise and the costs associated with it? In states like Florida, where the Legislature has refused to expand Medicaid, what if anything is the role of the federal government? Why are we still discussing equal pay for women in states like Florida?

Yolanda Cash Jackson, shareholder, Becker & Poliakoff



Florida maintains one of the largest Hispanic populations in the United States and it boasts the second-highest number of Latino-owned small businesses of any state. Hispanics also own the fastest growing electorate in Florida, numbering greater than 2 million. Our incredible state is a hotbed of cultural diversity and inclusion. This dynamic profile is felt in our cities, as well as in our economy. I believe that our wide-ranging perspectives make us a stronger state — a better state. What is your stance on the topic of immigration, which has become such an important national concern? In the same vein, what measures would you enact to better position Florida’s Latinos and Hispanic-owned businesses for success?

Carmen Castillo, president and CEO, SDI International Corp.



American cities are under attack. Armies of water molecules are invading our coastlines. They will conquer American soil. The water will rise and it will not recede. I want to know what our future commander-in-chief will do to protect Americans and American cities from the invading seas. Current American policy (e.g., weak regulations and fossil-fuel subsidies) encourages climate polluters to continue warming our planet. The greenhouse gases they release are changing our global climate, causing glaciers to melt and oceans to rise.

Twenty presidential hopefuls will discuss America's future at Miami's Arsht Center, elevation 3.26 feet. The candidates must explain how they will combat America's greatest threat: global climate change and sea level rise. I want to know what each candidate plans to do to help a polarized Congress (and nation) understand the urgency. How will they work together to plan for equitable solutions for the changes to come? How will they prevent future environmental damage so we reduce the harm we cause to people not yet born?

Xavier Cortada, professor of practice, art, University of Miami



I want to know how the candidates plan to help our country come together and focus on the values and virtues that we all hold dear — unity, inclusion and civility. Beyond that, they need to have solid and practical ideas on how to fix our broken healthcare system and a plan for comprehensive immigration reform that balances our safety and security concerns with a firm, fair and practical policy that reflects our true values as a nation of immigrants.

I'm also interested to hear how they would approach global threats like Iran, North Korea and Russia, as well as the situation in Venezuela. Next, they need to discuss how we can move beyond the climate change debate and focus on concrete ways to reverse the damage caused to the environment in a way that reflects economic, business and regulatory realities. Finally, I'm interested in hearing how they plan to address the rise in mass shootings in the United States.

Wifredo Ferrer, executive partner, Holland & Knight, Miami office



It is my hope that a number of key issues that are important to Florida's future such as immigration, education and growth/development will be addressed. But what I'd like to hear are some substantive thoughts from the candidates on climate change and the environment, as there have been significant and noticeable changes in Florida during the past few years that many experts have attributed to a result of climate change.

Last year's deadly red tide along the Gulf Coast, which killed so much of our state's most precious aquatic life, emphasized the seriousness of this issue. And, there are added concerns in Florida as we enter into another hurricane season, because the increased number of major storms and their intensity in recent years have forecasters beginning to question whether there is a correlation with climate change. Climate change is a global issue and was a major agenda item at last week's European Council meeting in Brussels, Belgium. While the European leaders did not come to a consensus on establishing policy initiatives at this meeting, the topic elicited much discussion, which I hope the Democratic candidates will follow this week.

Luis Garcia, president, Adonel Concrete



What is your plan to address the immigration problem? We need to address the DREAMers, those already here as well as stem the tide of those coming in. We keep pushing this issue down the road, and it is now at a critical point. This is one of the largest problems facing us as a nation.

Debbie Harvey, president and COO, Ron Jon Surf Shop



Gun control. Our discussions are fierce after our country experiences a tragic incident. It would be hopeful if the impact of gun violence were recognized in the Democratic presidential debates, to see gun control become a part of the daily political conversation, not as a response to an incident.

Stacy Hyde, CEO, Broward House



What do you plan to do to lower the cost of prescription drugs for American families?

Jeff Johnson, state director, AARP



Recognizing the fact that U.S. trade deficits with leading trade partners have significantly increased over the past two decades, what are your thoughts on how our nation's future trade practices and agreements can best reflect the realities of the 21st century labor and trade landscape, while optimizing and growing our nation's participation?

Ram Kancharla, vice president, planning & development, Port Tampa Bay



I hope candidates begin by bursting some prevalent recent myths: that “government is the problem,” that trickle-down economics always works and that providing for the common good comes at the expense of the ordinary individual. Beyond this, they must specify how they intend to mend the gaping tears in our social fabric and patch the holes in our social safety net. Candidates must likewise spell out their answers to Florida’s most pressing problems: sea level rise, economic inequality, unaffordable housing, inadequate transportation, inaccessible healthcare and an underfunded, but micromanaged, educational system.

In so doing, I hope they tear an occasional page out of the Republican playbook: Floridians, like other Americans, benefit when strict partisanship yields to the spirit of compromise. My greatest hope, nonetheless, is that candidates speak out, uprightly and unflinchingly, about the deplorable conditions under which undocumented children are kept just 35 miles to the south of the ArshtCenter. No candidate — however brilliant, however poised, however charming — will win my approval absent a strong moral stance on this issue, a stance grounded in our common humanity and reflective of our common patriotic values as Americans.

Nancy Lawther, president, Miami-Dade Council PTA/PTSA



What do the Democrats propose should be done regarding Florida's waning natural resources (e.g., clean water, citrus industry). Florida is sinking. On whom does the responsibility lie to come up with solutions — the local or federal government? And when can we make larger strides in a game plan?

Margaret Lezcano, managing director and head of Southeast Public Finance, UBS



The Council for Educational Change’s focus is on K-12 public education. We would like the candidates to address the need to improve the quality of education in public schools. Florida and other states have increasingly shifted resources from struggling public schools to privately ran charter schools. Depriving public schools of resources ultimately penalizes students who, for many reasons, are unable to attend charter schools and their only option is to attend the failing school in their district.

I want to hear candidates talk about how the United States will lead by example by introducing grants and innovative programs to further train and prepare teachers and principals to help them lead schools to success. School leadership is not different from the leadership team at the helm of a corporation. If a business has a team with strong leadership skills, that business will grow and thrive. Schools with a strong leadership team will do the same.

Case in point, Miami Northwestern Senior High used to be an F school for years until we paired the principal with a CEO. Under the mentorship of the business leader, the school principal was able to turn the school into a beacon of hope for students in Liberty City, a low-income community north of downtown Miami. The graduation rate has jumped from nearly 40 percent to nearly 90 percent in recent years. All it took was strengthening the school leadership to change the culture of the school into believing that they could succeed regardless of the challenges in the students’ personal lives and the street violence in the neighborhood.

Struggling public schools should not be considered a ‘lost cause.’ Instead, they should become a fertile ground for applying ‘best practices’ in public education. And that begins by strengthening school leadership.

Elaine Liftin, president, Council for Educational Change



The cost and access to healthcare is a real problem — and recognizing this is a first step toward addressing this ‘world hunger’ issue. Many can agree that the Affordable Care Act, passed nearly 10 years ago, reduced the number of uninsured people in America, secured protections for those with pre-existing conditions and advanced the notion that basic healthcare is a human right. That said, the system is far from perfect, with many challenges remaining that cannot be addressed in one, four-year presidential term; and in certain states, Florida included, healthcare funding is limited and insufficient. I want to understand from the candidates their realistic, implementable and sustainably fundable solutions to provide affordable and accessible healthcare, both privately and publicly funded.’

Ana Lopez-Blazquez, executive vice president, chief strategy and transformation officer, Baptist Health South Florida



The United States has a severe housing shortage. This is especially true for our nation's renters, and even more so for those who earn lower incomes. Today, we need 7.4 million additional rental units that are affordable to America's 11.4 million extremely low-income families. Here in Florida, a greater portion of renters (55 percent) are cost-burdened than in any other state. These hard-working individuals and their children are at enormous risk of experiencing homelessness as they are forced to choose between paying rent and having enough to eat. What is your plan to address this crisis and ensure that our lowest income neighbors have a safe, affordable home?

Annie Lord, executive director, Miami Homes For All



Florida is one of the most diverse states in the country. Every conceivable demographic is represented here. Were Florida its own country, it would be the world's 18th largest economy. For over 30 years, it has been the nation's leader of educational choice and accountability. It has more families participating in choice programs than any state in the nation. Since the implementation of these reforms, public schools have improved dramatically. Moreover, reading scores, graduation rates, AP test taking, NAEP scores have all had Florida in the top five in the nation, and minorities have benefited most from these choice and accountability programs.

Would you continue to support these programs from your bully pulpit in Washington, exporting this success story to other states while expanding more school choice opportunities in the District of Columbia?

Bob McClure, president and CEO, James Madison Institute



With 1,200 miles of coastline and more than 660 beaches, Florida has more exposure to the effects of sea level rise than any other state in the continental United States. Today, lower-lying and coastal areas are regularly flooding during king tides and routine seasonal storms. But it's not only coastal properties that are at risk. Sea level rise also drives saltwater intrusion to our aquifers and freshwater recharge areas affecting the drinking water for millions of Florida's residents and visitors.

Moreover, the risk of a 100-year storm or Category 5 Hurricane is not a question of 'if' — but rather 'when' — it will occur. No matter how it is examined, the long-term negative economic impact of sea level rise to Florida and the nation could easily reach hundreds of billions of dollars. What initiatives will you undertake to elevate sea level rise to a top national priority and recognize the exigent threat it is to our coastal communities and nation's economy?

Gene Prescott, president, Biltmore Hotel



Equitable access to higher education must be a social and political priority. Every candidate must pledge to reform the current flawed system of metrics that puts Florida's open-access colleges such as Miami Dade College at a disadvantage. We are constrained by metrics and financial aid policies that, for the most part, are still tied to seat time, credit hours and traditional college degrees. This does not accommodate the type of training that emerging industries are asking of us.

MDC is at the forefront of this education innovation. As Florida continues to expand its economy beyond tourism and the service sector, the candidates should outline precisely how they will support cutting-edge academic models designed to train a new generation of workforce professionals ready to tackle the demands of the 21st century global economy. Our focus on these programs is leading to income mobility for our students and is assisting industry by providing talent pipelines.

Lenore Rodicio, executive vice president and provost, Miami Dade College



Florida's environment is the foundation of our economy. Eight million South Floridians depend upon the Everglades for their drinking water, and climate change is literally lapping at our shores. What will this mean for tourism, property values, beaches, waterways and wildlife? Floridians are eager to hear candidates' thoughts on how to meet and minimize the challenges of our changing climate as well as their commitment to restoring America's Everglades.

Julie Wraithmell, executive director, Audubon Florida