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# Ted Cruz Plays Up Cuban Heritage Before Florida Primary

By **MATT FLEGENHEIMER**   MARCH 9, 2016

MIAMI — Ted Cruz bounded onstage to a seldom-heard introduction — “the first Hispanic president of the United States” — and spoke later of his “abuelo and abuela” in Cuba.

He reminded reporters that he was the “son of a dishwasher” who stepped off a ferryboat in Key West nearly 60 years ago.

And as he addressed a pulsing crowd here, where Panamas outnumbered cowboy hats for the first time in recent Cruz campaign memory, the senator attempted to pioneer a Texan-cum-Cuban twang.

“Y’all know,” he said, “how to make a Cuban feel welcome.”

In a race with potentially history-making choices in both parties, Mr. Cruz has dwelled little on his Cuban heritage.

Though he regularly invokes the immigrant tale of his father, Rafael, he speaks sparingly of ethnic identity, dabbles only occasionally in uneven Spanish and has declined to highlight his biography as conspicuously as Senator Marco Rubio of Florida.

But making a late push in Tuesday's Florida primary, Mr. Cruz sounded at times like Mr. Rubio, his Cuban-American rival from the Senate whose campaign he could doom with a strong showing here.

Mr. Cruz spoke at Miami Dade College, a short walk from where Mr. Rubio announced his presidential candidacy last year. After weeks of high-profile Republican endorsements for Mr. Rubio, Mr. Cruz on Wednesday unveiled his own surprise supporter: Carly Fiorina, the former chairwoman of Hewlett-Packard who ended her bid for the Republican presidential nomination last month.

Mr. Cruz folded his father's story into an attack on Donald J. Trump's past practice of hiring foreigners — and on Mr. Trump's suggestion that Americans were not interested in service jobs.

“My dad, when he came from Cuba, he came and he started washing dishes for 50 cents an hour,” Mr. Cruz told attendees.

Some subjects were not broached. Mr. Cruz, who has been sharply critical of President Obama's decision to restore full diplomatic relations with Cuba, steered clear of the topic. Nor did the senator describe his father's efforts in support of Fidel Castro before fleeing the country.

Yet at a news conference afterward, Mr. Cruz held forth, with uncommon zeal, on his connection to Latinos, noting that he won about 40 percent of the Hispanic vote in his 2012 Senate race.

He detailed his father's flight from Cuba in 1957 (“That's an experience a lot of Floridians understand”), his efforts to rise up the economic ladder in the

United States (“It’s the Hispanic experience”) and the heartening prospect of two immigrant families from Cuba watching their sons run for president.

“It takes your breath away,” he said, taking care to praise Mr. Rubio.

Moments earlier, Mr. Cruz had offered a less glowing assessment of Mr. Rubio when asked if he should leave the race after several disappointing primaries.

“It is a simple question of math,” Mr. Cruz said. “If a candidate does not have a path to the nomination, then it is time for that candidate to prayerfully reflect with their family whether there is a path forward.”

Republican strategists see little running room for Mr. Cruz in Florida, arguing that he is boxed out here as long as Mr. Rubio remains in the race. While some have suggested that Mr. Cruz could make gains among deeply conservative voters in the Florida Panhandle, the region appears to be an area of strength for Mr. Trump. Mr. Rubio is well positioned in South Florida.

“I respect Ted Cruz a lot,” said Lincoln Diaz-Balart, a former congressman from Miami who is supporting Mr. Rubio. Mr. Diaz-Balart added that there was “absolute unity behind Marco in the Cuban-American community.”

Still, on Wednesday, Mr. Cruz insisted that he could “win in any state in the union.”

Since last week, when Mr. Cruz’s campaign said it had opened 10 offices in Florida, his advisers have argued that Mr. Rubio’s stumbles could provide an opening there.

At the least, the stop in Florida allowed Mr. Cruz to re-establish a presence in what will be a critical state in the general election. Though Mr. Rubio retains an edge among Cuban-Americans, Mr. Cruz is already well known to many locals, in part because of his father’s experience.

“I don’t know if voters in Kansas or Oregon know Ted Cruz is of Cuban descent, but I bet you a guava pastelito that most Cuban-American voters in South Florida know,” said Ana Navarro, a Republican strategist and CNN commentator who supported Jeb Bush.

She recalled going to a Cuban restaurant with Mr. Cruz during one visit. “I don’t know how fluent he is in Spanish,” she said, “but he can order ‘picadillo.’”

Among a diverse crowd of 200 or so on Wednesday, there was at least some reason to believe in a late Cruz surge. Several people defended his valiant if inelegant use of Spanish at a recent debate, after Mr. Rubio accused him of not knowing the language.

“Remember, he was raised in Texas,” said Cristina Brito, 61, whose parents also left Cuba. “It was like an American speaking Spanish.”

Jorge Lendeborg, 46, said he admired Mr. Cruz’s understated approach to his own biography. “Rubio is all about that,” he said. “Ted Cruz is not selling that. He’s Cuban, and whatever.”

Mr. Cruz seemed to flip at least one vote to his column: Lilia Morraz, 57, a daughter of Cuban immigrants who said she had been a Trump supporter but changed her mind after the event.

For others in her family, it was too late.

“My parents already voted for Trump,” she said. “They don’t even speak English.”

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