

Democrats Debate In South Florida: Immigration Tops Agenda

By NANCY KLINGENER (/PEOPLE/NANCY-KLINGENER) • 14 HOURS AGO



(http://wlrn.org/sites/wlrn/files/styles/x_large/public/201603/sanders_clinton_debate.jpg)

Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton face off at Miami Dade College's Kendall campus Wednesday evening.

PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD

One day after splitting the primaries in Michigan and Mississippi – and less than a week before the Florida Primary – Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders debated Wednesday night in front of an enthusiastic and engaged audience at Miami-Dade College's Kendall campus, which Clinton referred to as "the largest college in North America."

On top of the agenda: Immigration. The debate focused on immigration reform for most of the first hour. Univision journalist Jorge Ramos, one of the moderators, insisted the candidates answer whether they would deport children. Both said they would not.

Faced with a question about whether she was "Hispandering," (<http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/12/08/458461200/a-politician-walks-into-king-taco-a-look-at-the-political-term-hispandering>) Clinton referred several times to an immigration reform bill that failed in 2007, saying the country would be in a much better position now if it had passed.

"I voted for that bill," Clinton said. "Sen. Sanders voted against it."

Sanders recounted his trip to Immokalee, and his viewing of the "semi-slavery" that the farm workers there experienced.

In the debate's second hour, topics turned to the familiar: economics, specifically student debt and access to health care as well as bailouts for Wall Street and the auto industry during the recession.

But it soon recaptured its distinctly Floridian flavor, with direct questions about relations with Cuba, combating climate change and references to the Bush v. Gore case, when disputed election results in Florida from the 2000 Presidential election went to the Supreme Court.

On Cuba, both candidates said they supported President Barack Obama's move to normalize relations with the country, though Clinton took a harder line about the current Cuban regime.

"The Cuban people deserve to have their human rights respected and upheld," she said. "They deserve to be able to move towards democracy."

Univision played an old cable access video of Sanders praising Cuba, praise he repeated in some parts.

"I hope very much, as soon as possible, it becomes a democratic country," Sanders said. "But on the other hand, it would be wrong not to say that in Cuba they have made some good advances in health care, in education."

FLORIDA PRIMARY ON THE HORIZON

The Florida primary, March 15, is a rich prize for candidates although the Democrats—unlike the Republicans—award delegates proportionately, not winner-take-all.

And in South Florida, the old adage that "all politics is local" expands to take in the Caribbean and Latin America (besides Cuba, the candidates also faced questions on how to address Puerto Rico's debt crisis).

"It's a different perspective," said Luis Miranda, communications director for the Democratic National Committee. "It's a perspective that's got a lot of different hues to it that I think are really important to capture in the Presidential campaign."

Miranda said the difference is the growth of the Hispanic community.

"You see it in South Florida perhaps better than anywhere else in the country," Miranda said. "You start to see what the future of the United States looks like."

U.S. Labor Secretary Thomas Perez—who has endorsed Clinton—said she's leading in polls in Florida because of her strength with minorities, including Hispanics.

"Florida is a microcosm of the Clinton coalition, where she has brought together a very racially and ethnically diverse coalition of folks around her candidacy," he said.

SUPPORTERS GATHER OUTSIDE

Before the debate, supporters of both candidates lined SW 104th Street outside the debate site.

While the Democratic primary contest has not seen the levels of rancor and personal insults as the Republican race, the differences between the supporters of the two candidates become more apparent as they stood right next to each other.

Jamie Friend carved 150 foam blocks with the letters to spell B-E-R-N-I-E.

"From the minute that Bernie announced, I've been full of inspiration. He's been my hero for years," she said. "And I felt like I was alone in my geekdom, like, 'Oh, my hero is Bernie Sanders.' 'Oh, you mean that socialist from Vermont?' 'Yes. That guy.'"