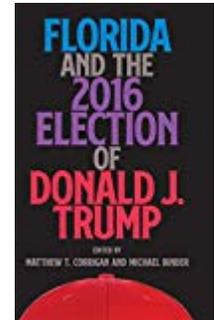


Matthew T. Corrigan, Michael M. Binder, eds. *Florida and the 2016 Election of Donald J. Trump*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019. 202 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-5623-4.



Reviewed by Robert A. Taylor (Florida Institute of Technology)

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Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

On Election Night 2016, the American political establishment was rocked as the unlikely candidacy of Donald J. Trump rolled over Hillary Clinton. Even before the last vote tabulations, pundits and just plain folks were asking the basic question: why? In the post-election analysis, it appeared obvious that Florida, with its rich electoral vote count as well as being the ultimate battleground and “swing state,” helped make it happen. How did Trump, a real estate developer and reality television star with no political or military experience upset the more experienced Democratic nominee in the Sunshine State? Editors Matthew T. Corrigan and Michael assemble here a collection of data-rich essays that examine various aspects of the 2016 presidential contest in Florida. They present what is a solid primer for understanding how Florida has influenced, and in some cases decided, the selection of American presidents since the 1990s.

Florida’s status as a necessary win for any seeking the White House is reaffirmed in this study. Since 1996, the state has a perfect record for going to the ultimate winner of the national presidential

contest. Close election margins make it a “swing state” that could lean either way in the final vote tally. The peninsula state evolved over time from being part of the Democratic Solid South to being “Presidential Republican” to reflecting a true two-party system. Florida’s major population and demographic changes make this a reality today, and the margin for victory for a Republican or Democratic presidential candidate is only 2.9 percent. Such a win awards twenty-nine electoral votes, and by 2024 that number is certain to rise.

Again, how did Donald Trump, himself a part-time Floridian in 2016, gain the advantage, and the Republican nomination? First, he would have to best two seemingly powerful Florida Republican favorite-son contenders. Jeb Bush, a former two-term Florida governor whose father and brother were ex-presidents, enjoyed wide support in the state’s Hispanic community. However, establishment Bush could not compete with Trump’s “naked populism” (p. 37) message, nor with Trump’s better understanding of media. Trump’s barrage of anti-Washington, anti-immigrant, and

anti-international attacks overwhelmed the moderate, temperate Bush. In the end, his campaign died a sad death in South Carolina before the Florida primary even took place. Senator Marco Rubio, a rising Republican leader and Tea Party favorite, did little better and was trounced by Trump in the Florida primary by almost 20 percent. These more traditional candidates were brushed aside, which should have served as warning to the Clinton campaign and its traditional strategy.

An essay by Scott C. McKee and David A. Smith digs deeper into the Florida electorate and why it was so receptive to the Trump “Make American Great Again” message. They conclude it was a rich field for his fiery messages. A county-by-county study found Trump enjoying substantial support from traditional Republican strongholds like northern Florida and the panhandle. His aggressive, angry themes flipped four major counties that had gone for Obama in 2012 into his camp. Such voting inroads also took place along the famous “I-4 Corridor,” stretching from the Tampa Bay area to Daytona Beach, to the detriment of the Clinton forces. McKee and Smith conclude that the Florida political landscape was ready-made for a Donald Trump in 2016, and will continue to be so in 2020. It is no accident that Trump moved his residency from New York to Florida in time for his reelection bid.

Florida and the 2016 Election returns to the I-4 Corridor and finds it crucial to Trump’s victory. Clinton only managed to take three of the eighteen counties in this zone despite significant effort. Her campaign flooded the television markets there with anti-Trump ads, so many in fact they may have drowned themselves out. Smaller amounts were spent on more local efforts that might have resulted in actual voters making it to the polls for her. She could never recreate the Florida Obama coalition even with this work, and Trump triumphed. Republican voter turnout was 8 percent higher than Democrats and independents, with only the Miami area remaining solidly for Clinton

(pp. 97-98). Frankly, the data shows that the Trump team did a far better job in motivating their voters to get to the polls, hence winning the state.

Donald Trump’s heated attacks against immigration in general and Hispanics in particular appeared to work to Clinton’s advantage in Florida. The state’s large and growing Hispanic population offered Clinton a bloc of citizens ready to vote against Donald Trump. But in the case study by Michael Binder and Peter Licari, lumping potential voters under the blanket term “Hispanics” is far from wise—they are Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Central Americans. All have different experiences and cultural heritages, particularly when it comes to politics. Research shows that at the time of the 2016 election, Florida Hispanics were more interested in basic economic issues than in immigration and the fiery rhetoric generated by candidate Trump. The Clinton forces never came to understand this salient point, and thus never managed to mobilize this key segment of the Florida electorate in the numbers necessary to help secure a Clinton victory.

Another 2016 election issue still looms over 2020. This is the state of absentee voting, voting by mail, and early voting in Florida. After the debacle of 2000, state election officials labored to improve and modernize voting and in theory expand opportunities for Floridians to exercise their right to vote. Such efforts, especially voting by mail, were not without controversy, as various groups opposed the new voting plan as open to fraud. Nevertheless, in 2016 some 70 percent of Florida ballots were cast in some fashion before Election Day. However, as the data shows, having these options did not raise the number of potential voters by any significant number. Those planning to vote would have done it on Election Day itself without the early options. Moreover, those voters physically going to a polling place that day tended to vote for Trump in large numbers and sealed his win.

Even before the first ballot was cast, Trump and his supports charged that the 2016 election

was “rigged.” This complaint continued even after Trump won the presidency through the Electoral College. Florida, still stinging from 2000, made as certain as possible that election results were honest and accurate. After serious post-election review, a study by Daniel A. Smith et al. found that no significant voter fraud or tampering (Russian cyberattacks notwithstanding) took place. The American voting system, like democracy itself, is not perfect. However, in 2016 Florida it worked quite well in providing a clear winner, according to the Smith study.

The essays and their contributors to *Florida and the 2016 Election of Donald J. Trump* do a masterful job in laying out the forces at work in that wildly unpredictable political battle. It brings into stark focus the way Trump won Florida, and how he could win it again in 2020. Whether he will is open to debate, but as this volume points out the factors that made 2016 happen still exist in the Sunshine State in 2020.

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