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Can 'community centers' help GOP court voters of color?

The RNC, which is opening community centers across the country, tells National Journal that an office targeting AAPI voters in Texas and one aimed at Hispanic voters in Vegas are coming later this month.



RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel and Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart speak at the opening of an RNC Hispanic Community Center in Doral, Fla.

Mini Racker

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DORAL, Fla.—On Wednesday, Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel was scheduled to appear at a little office in a South Florida shopping center. Beneath streamers and strings of flags representing Latin American countries, members of the largely Hispanic and Latino group awaiting her wore baseball caps emblazoned with military logos or “Make America Great Again.” Of the upwards of 70 people present, only two wore masks. Kyle Rittenhouse’s trial, covered by Fox News, played out on a television on one wall, but no one was really watching. Instead, visitors greeted each other with hugs, handshakes, and arms around shoulders as they awaited the start of a small-business roundtable at the RNC’s Hispanic community center outside Miami.

Tucked between Cuban cafes and Peruvian eateries, Japanese restaurants and threading salons, in strip malls across the country, are nine such centers. Next up: an Asian Pacific American Center in Coppell, Texas, and a Hispanic community center in Las Vegas, both planned to open this month, the RNC told *National Journal* exclusively. Those centers are among [35 the committee plans to have open by the midterms](/s/715556/rnc-oyo/) (/s/715556/rnc-oyo/), including 25 by the end of this year.

Along with the Hispanic community center in Doral, the party currently operates one in Milwaukee, and three more in Texas: in Laredo, McAllen, and San Antonio. It has an APA community center in Little Saigon, located in Southern California’s Orange County, and one in Norcross, Georgia, near Atlanta. The outskirts of Atlanta are also home to one of the RNC’s two Black community centers; the other is in Cleveland, Ohio.

The community centers are keystones of the RNC's strategy to build on its recent gains among voters of color in 2022 and beyond. Despite Democrats' persistent and considerable advantage with these voters, [immigrant neighborhoods across the country grew redder](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/20/us/politics/election-hispanics-asians-voting.html) (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/20/us/politics/election-hispanics-asians-voting.html) in 2020. Several of Republicans' biggest victories in the House were the work of [candidates from immigrant backgrounds](/s/712005/diverse-new-members-could-help-gop-message-the-american-dream/) (/s/712005/diverse-new-members-could-help-gop-message-the-american-dream/), like Korean American Reps. Young Kim and Michelle Steel in Orange County and Cuban American Reps. Carlos Giménez and Maria Elvira Salazar in South Florida. Nationwide, Latino voters voted for former President Trump at higher rates than they did in 2016. Trump even improved his performance [with Black voters](https://www.vox.com/2020/11/4/21537966/trump-black-voters-exit-polls) (https://www.vox.com/2020/11/4/21537966/trump-black-voters-exit-polls). Then, following last week's gubernatorial election in Virginia, some [exit polls](https://www.cnn.com/election/2021/november/exit-polls/virginia/governor/o) (https://www.cnn.com/election/2021/november/exit-polls/virginia/governor/o) indicated that Glenn Youngkin outperformed Trump among Black voters. And [there's debate over whether he won Latino voters](https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/04/latino-poll-virginia-youngkin-mcauliffe-519425) (https://www.politico.com/news/2021/11/04/latino-poll-virginia-youngkin-mcauliffe-519425) against former Gov. Terry McAuliffe.

The Republican Party's message to voters of color isn't much different from its message to voters in general. Empowering parents to shape their children's education is a major focus. RNC communications director Danielle Alvarez said school choice is a topic of discussion at the party's Black community centers, as are HBCUs. Across the community centers, Republicans said, visitors are concerned about Democratic overreach and its impact on the economy, a topic that came up at the Wednesday roundtable.

“In this community, nobody has to tell us how to describe when government wants to control everything and take away your personal freedoms,” said Cuban-American Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart. “There's one word for that. And we know it well.

It's socialism. And over our dead bodies are we going to allow the United States of America to go down the road to socialism.”

Attendees clapped furiously. Business owners then discussed hiring difficulties and worries about the costs of complying with President Biden's vaccine mandates. They were upset about inflated food, gas, and rent prices. They said they were struggling because needed materials were stuck in the supply chain.

“My father said, “These are the things that used to happen in Cuba, not the United States,” relayed Carolina Ferreiro, the owner of local business Pharma Natural.



📷 The RNC's new Hispanic Community Center in Doral, Fla. MINI RACKER

In addressing inflation, McDaniel mentioned proposed changes to the cap on the state and local tax deduction in Democrats' reconciliation bill, calling it "the biggest tax cut for the rich you've ever seen."

When Díaz-Balart referred to COVID-19 as "the Chinese Wuhan virus" and added, "To the press: Don't get mad at me; it came from Wuhan," the crowd chuckled. "China!" an attendee yelled. "Spanish Flu!" cried someone else.

"The RNC is listening to people," said Díaz-Balart in an interview after the event. "That's what this is all about—to listen to people, to make sure ... they have access to all the elected officials. This is a great part of that. I think it's more than just this center. It kind of conveys an attitude."

Díaz-Balart said he'd visited a few times for events, including for the community center's opening in early October. By all accounts, that opening, and the other eight, have been well-attended, sometimes standing-room-only or with visitors pouring into the parking lot.

For now, the centers seem to be as much about firing up already-involved activists and local politicians as about finding new votes.

Many attendees at Wednesday's event were Republican Party officials and candidates. Among them was Daniel Sotelo, a small-business owner who works in construction and is running for a state House seat, having [lost three bids for public office](https://floridapolitics.com/archives/440220-hd-118-candidate-daniel-sotelo-adds-76750-during-june-with-help-from-a-50k-self-loan/) (https://floridapolitics.com/archives/440220-hd-118-candidate-daniel-sotelo-adds-76750-during-june-with-help-from-a-50k-self-loan/) since 2018. Also present was George Navarini, who is running again in the 104th state House district after coming up 16 points short against a Democrat last year. Navarini said he had visited the center several times, sometimes for particular events and sometimes not.

“This gives an opportunity [for] Joe Mechanic out of Miami International Airport, or Jane Nurse who’s working out of Jackson West [Medical Center], during their lunch break, before work, after work, [to] pop in and make their points known,” Navarini said.

But if Joe or Jane were among the attendees at Wednesday’s round table, they did not speak up. Complicating matters for ordinary community members who might want to stop in is the fact that the offices don’t necessarily keep predictable business hours; the Doral center, for instance, was closing down shortly after Wednesday’s event, around noon.

On a Tuesday in mid-October, a 5:15 p.m. visit to the RNC’s Atlanta APA community center revealed an office similar to the one in Doral. Inside, six chairs sat around a table covered by a red plastic tablecloth. The center was decorated with potted plants, an orchid, and photos of the city. Framed quotes, alongside photos of the Asian American leaders who provided them, beckoned visitors in. One, from Georgia Republican Party Asian and Pacific Islander board member Sunny Wong, read: “Asian Pacific Americans embody the American spirit of family values, hard work, and personal liberty. Republican inroads within the APA community highlight the failure of Democrats’ radical policies.”

A bottle of hand sanitizer and a bin of masks stood ready near the entrance. But the door was locked, and the center was dark, empty, and closed.

Alvarez said that each center has a paid staffer to decide its hours of operation, which are variable and depend on the needs of the local community. Centers might be open in the evenings or on the weekend for an event, she said; they might be closed at odd hours if the staffer is out working elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Republican politicians who spoke to *National Journal* said the centers were always open when they dropped by. McAllen Mayor Javier Villalobos, [the first registered Republican elected to the nonpartisan office this century](#).

(<https://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/11/texas-republicans-mcallen-south-texas/>), was one of those politicians. He said that when he stopped in at the center in his city after its opening, not much was going on, but that he expects things to pick up as more candidates declare bids and campaign there.

Already, a year out from the midterms, Republicans are publicizing events at the community centers through word of mouth, culturally specific news outlets, and social media. Sotelo, the Florida state House candidate, said he had first heard about the Doral center through Instagram. Listed on the GOP Victory website are multiple events at the centers over just the next week, including voter-registration and voter-contact trainings and meetings on “election integrity.”

In California, state Republican Party chair Jessica Millan Patterson said the party has used the Orange County center for five trainings and two voter-registration walks in Vietnamese, as well as two open houses. But she said the cold, hard numbers don't capture what it's all about.

“It's not like a typical headquarters, where you see a bunch of phones and computers and all of that sort of campaign-centered stuff,” Patterson said.

Instead of rows of phones, rows of dominoes are arranged on a small table at the front of the Doral office. Alvarez said the idea to rebrand political offices as cultural community centers started right here in South Florida last cycle.

“In one of our Miami offices, a lot of folks would come, not just to do volunteer work, but to truly use it as a community center,” Alvarez said. “They'd come and they'd watch the World Cup, a soccer game, or a sporting event. We really started seeing the community utilize this type of office space for community purposes.”

“ [A staffer] learned that in the Vietnamese community bubble tea is really popular. So we have a bubble-tea bar in that community center. ”

RNC COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR DANIELLE ALVAREZ

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The RNC is relying on small touches that speak to visitors’ cultures to help give the centers a community feel. At the opening of the Doral center, for instance, there was cafecito and pastelitos. For the Orange County center, Alvarez said another RNC staffer had tailored the space to the neighborhood.

“She learned that in the Vietnamese community bubble tea is really popular,” she said. “So we have a bubble-tea bar in that community center.”

Jane Hong, a history professor at Occidental College currently working on a book about Asian American evangelicals and politics, said that those sort of cultural appeals can look performative.

“At the same time, I guess politicians—that’s what they do,” she continued. “I mean, they might go to an Italian American event and serve pasta.”

And for communities of color that have been ignored or taken for granted by political parties, the investment symbolized by the community centers and the opportunity to be listened to could actually make a difference come 2022.

“The idea that parties will actually make some kind of effort—I think that does actually matter for some Asian American voters who historically have felt very overlooked and invisible,” Hong said.

Geraldo Cadava, a history professor at Northwestern University and the author of *The Hispanic Republican: The Shaping of an American Political Identity, from Nixon to Trump*, agreed that community centers can indeed impact elections. He brought up a center the Richard Nixon campaign set up in East Los Angeles half a century ago. Nixon’s center had a more practical bent than the RNC’s; it hosted job fairs and provided legal services to help Mexican residents resolve immigration issues. When Nixon won almost half of Mexican American voters in that area in 1960, those close to him credited the center.

Providing additional services at the RNC centers isn’t out of the question, Alvarez said, depending on what community members say they need. But the committee is modeling its efforts on a different former president.

“Obama had a really good field operation,” Alvarez said. The RNC's centers, she said, stem from “our Growth and Opportunity report in 2014, and from the successes that Democrats had in field organizing, and specifically the Obama camp.”

[Both parties \(/s/713185/as-they-look-to-flip-another-southern-state-dems-eye-voters-of-color/\)](/s/713185/as-they-look-to-flip-another-southern-state-dems-eye-voters-of-color/) have acknowledged the reality that recruiting voters of color requires showing up in communities year-round instead of just pleading for votes weeks before every election. The RNC’s centers prove that the party is taking that fact seriously, but it

could do more. The party could situate future community centers in swing states where it previously hasn't invested as much in organizing voters of color. It could also pledge to make them a permanent fixture of its campaign infrastructure.

Asked if the centers would remain open after 2022, Alvarez said it depends whether McDaniel runs for the chairmanship again and wins, and if not, whether the person who succeeds her wants to keep them open—and that it depends on resources.

“The reality of the situation is, any entity maxes out their spending by Election Day,” she said. “It's just kind of the way it works. You don't leave money on the table.”

Contributions by Erin Covey