



Policy Decisions Affecting Puerto Ricans in Florida

A Comparison of Gov. Scott and Sen. Nelson

By Puerto Rico Relief and Economic Policy team October 25, 2018

Gov. Rick Scott (R-FL) and Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL) have both discussed their efforts to champion issues of interest for the Puerto Rican community. This interactive comparison lays out their policy positions on a range of matters important to Puerto Rican families, particularly those forced from Puerto Rico due to the devastation of Hurricane Maria and now are working to rebuild their lives in Florida.

Gov. Scott portrays himself as a strong supporter of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. Recently, he has even tried to distance himself from the words and actions of President Donald Trump on Puerto Rico.¹ His actual record as governor, such as on health care, climate change, and immigration, however, is closely aligned with the Trump administration's policies and would harm Puerto Rican families both in Florida and in Puerto Rico.

Sen. Nelson's actions and efforts, in strong contrast, have consistently combated the Trump administration's woefully inadequate hurricane response. Even before Hurricane Maria, he has pushed policies that would help Puerto Ricans obtain well-paying jobs and access affordable health care and housing, while treating Puerto Ricans—who are fellow American citizens—with equality.

The Center for American Progress Action Fund's Puerto Rico Relief and Economic Policy Initiative is a program that focuses both on the immediate-term hurricane response efforts for Puerto Rico, as well as on long-term planning, economic recovery, and solvency. Through the initiative, CAPAF aims to contribute bold, progressive ideas to the ongoing dialogue on Puerto Rico recovery efforts and direct existing policy, advocacy, and communications resources to myriad issues affecting Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican diaspora.

Endnotes

¹ Brendan Morrow, "Rick Scott and Ron DeSantis softly criticize Trump for Puerto Rico conspiracy theory," *The Week*, September 13, 2018, available at <http://theweek.com/speedreads/795772/rick-scott-ron-desantis-softly-criticize-trump-puerto-rico-conspiracy-theory>.

The effects of Gov. Scott's and Sen. Nelson's policy decisions on Puerto Ricans in Florida

Issue	 Gov. Rick Scott (R-FL)	 Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL)
 Response to Hurricane Maria Three thousand people died and tens of thousands were displaced from their homes. ² The Government Accountability Office found that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was unprepared, understaffed, untrained, and failed to house disaster victims. ³	President Donald Trump said the government “did a fantastic job in Puerto Rico.” ⁴ Of the federal response, Gov. Scott shockingly said, “I don’t know what I would do differently.” ⁵	Sen. Nelson has stated, “Most Americans who died as a result of Hurricane Maria were not killed by storm surge, rain or wind, but rather as a result of an inadequate response by the federal government.” ⁶
 Housing Hundreds of Puerto Rican families were in FEMA-funded housing until the agency ended its assistance. ⁷ Some of these families remain in temporary lodging due to Florida’s shortage of affordable housing. ⁸ Almost a third of Florida renters use half their income on housing. ⁹	Gov. Scott’s most recent state budget cuts \$92 million from affordable housing. ¹⁰	Sen. Nelson advocated for continued assistance for transitional housing and introduced legislation—ultimately blocked by Senate Republicans—to establish a special program for disaster housing and to help subsidize housing in central Florida. ¹¹
 Environment Climate change: Florida and Puerto Rico will experience more intense Category 4 and 5 hurricanes amid rising sea levels. ¹² Climate change could cost Florida an estimated \$100 billion. ¹³ Sea levels in Puerto Rico are likely to rise 1 to 3 feet, resulting in beach erosion and worsening coastal flooding. ¹⁴	Gov. Scott is a climate change denier who, instead of preparing Florida for the impacts of climate change, abolished a commission to better coordinate state climate policy. ¹⁵	Sen. Nelson talks extensively about the threats of climate change in Florida and Puerto Rico. ¹⁶ He introduced legislation to support coastal communities in upgrading their infrastructure to address climate change. ¹⁷
Pollution: Runoff from agricultural fertilizer and septic tanks is supercharging the growth of harmful algal blooms that are causing health, environmental, and economic damage. ¹⁸	Gov. Scott fought Environmental Protection Agency efforts to limit agricultural and sewage runoff that cause the blooms. ¹⁹	Sen. Nelson authored bipartisan legislation that passed the Senate to provide federal funding to prevent the blooms. ²⁰
 Health care Affordable Care Act (ACA): The ACA led to coverage for 20 million Americans, including millions of Latinos. ²¹ About 1.6 million Floridians gained coverage since the ACA’s enactment. ²² Importantly, the ACA ensured that insurers cannot discriminate against people with pre-existing conditions, nearly 8 million of whom live in Florida. ²³	Gov. Scott aligned with President Trump to repeal the ACA and founded an organization to help overturn the legislation. ²⁴ Florida is party to a lawsuit to overturn the law and, notably, protections for people with pre-existing conditions. ²⁵	Sen. Nelson supports the ACA and voted against its repeal. ²⁶ He has also defended ACA protections for people with pre-existing conditions. ²⁷
Medicaid expansion: Two out of every 10 nonelderly adults in Florida are uninsured—the third-highest uninsured rate in the country. ²⁸ Expanding Medicaid could cover an estimated 800,000 people in Florida. ²⁹	Gov. Scott opposed Medicaid expansion in Florida, despite campaigning in support of it during his gubernatorial re-election campaign. ³⁰	Sen. Nelson supports the expansion of Medicaid in Florida, arguing that by not expanding the program, Florida is losing out on an estimated \$5 billion in federal dollars. ³¹
Medicaid parity: More than 40 percent of people in Puerto Rico depend on Medicaid for care. ³² Yet, the federal government caps reimbursements for Puerto Rico’s Medicaid program, but not those for states, thereby forcing the Puerto Rican government to cover the shortfall. ³³	Gov. Scott has not advocated to address this unfairness, despite receiving a personal request from Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rosselló. ³⁴	Sen. Nelson sponsored legislation to eliminate the Medicaid cap on funding for Puerto Rico, which would result in Puerto Rico receiving substantially higher reimbursement rates. ³⁵
HIV/AIDS: The rate of Hispanic men in Florida with an HIV diagnosis is 1.9 times that of white males, while the rate is 2.5 times higher for Hispanic women when compared with white women. ³⁶	In April, Florida announced it would not continue the contract for a nonprofit health care facility that has provided support to the Puerto Rican community since 1999. ³⁷	Sen. Nelson has advocated for funding to support low-income Americans living with HIV/AIDS. ³⁸

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Issue



Economy



Gov. Rick Scott (R-FL)



Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL)

Florida's minimum wage, which has not kept pace with living costs, is currently \$8.25. Since 2010, the median wage has gone down, with Hispanic women making the lowest hourly wage.³⁹

Gov. Scott promoted Florida's low minimum wage as a way to lure companies to the state.⁴⁰

Sen. Nelson supports legislation to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour.⁴¹



Voting and civil rights

Voting rights: The Voting Rights Act (VRA) guarantees language access to election materials for U.S. citizens from Puerto Rico.⁴² A federal judge recently ordered 32 Florida counties, where more than 36,500 Puerto Ricans live, to comply with the VRA and provide election materials and assistance in Spanish.⁴³

Under Gov. Scott's tenure, a federal court ruled in 2014 that Florida violated federal law by attempting "to purge non-citizens from voter rolls."⁴⁴ The efforts, opposed by the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, disproportionately affected the Latino community.

Sen. Nelson cited concerns about voter suppression efforts when he voted against Jeff Sessions, Trump's attorney general.⁴⁵

Voter disenfranchisement: Hispanics constitute 12 percent of Florida's prison population.⁴⁶ But unlike Puerto Rico, where incarcerated people can vote, Florida permanently prevents anyone with a felony conviction from voting, even after they complete their sentence and pay their debts.⁴⁷ Eligibility can only be restored through an arbitrary, yearslong appeal to the state's clemency board, which is chaired by Gov. Scott.⁴⁸

Gov. Scott is hostile toward the idea of people with prior felony convictions voting. Since taking office, he has restored voting eligibility to just 3,000 people. His predecessor, by comparison, restored eligibility to 150,000 citizens.⁴⁹

Sen. Nelson supports restoring the eligibility to vote to American citizens who have done their time and completed their sentence.⁵⁰



Immigration

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under President Barack Obama created the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program to allow young people who came to the United States as children and who pass a background check to remain in the country lawfully.⁵¹ In 2014, the DHS announced a policy to expand DACA to include additional Dreamers, such as those with the longest and deepest ties to the country.⁵²

Under Gov. Scott, Florida sued the federal government to block President Obama's efforts to expand DACA to protect more Dreamers.⁵³

Sen. Nelson joined an amicus brief in support of President Obama's policies for Dreamers.⁵⁴

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