

Trump needs Florida in 2020. He obviously knows that.

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President Donald Trump walks with, from left, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., during a visit to Lake Okechobee and Herbert Hoover Dike at Canal Point, Fla., Friday, March 23, 2018. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

By **David Smiley**
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Donald Trump must win Florida in 2020 if he wants to remain president. And he knows it.

The part-time Florida resident has spent more time here than any location outside of Washington since becoming president, and not just because he likes golf. His campaign is dedicating resources to the state and its 29 electoral college votes as if it were an entire region. And this month alone, the president has made repeated overtures to different segments of Florida’s complex electorate through the power of the purse and international policy.

So as Democrats divide their attention among the largest field of candidates in modern history, the president’s reelection campaign is already kicking into gear around a massive voter-data operation and a high-profile stable of surrogates. In a complete reversal from 2016, Trump’s team is in sync from the White House down to the local parties, giving him a vast arsenal with which to target a specific number of voters that strategists believe will send him to four more years in office.

“The path to victory is through Florida,” said 2016 Trump Florida campaign co-chairman Joe Gruters, now the head of the Republican Party of Florida. “There’s so much at stake.”

It’s been 95 years since a Republican won a presidential election without picking up Florida. And Trump doesn’t intend to break that record.

This month alone, he reversed course and agreed to fully fund a \$200 million budget request for Everglades restoration projects and announced a 90 percent

reduction in state aid for disaster recovery efforts in the hurricane-ravaged Panhandle. He’s made further inroads in South Florida’s diverse Hispanic community by increasing financial pressures against leftist regimes in Venezuela and Cuba. And according to the L.A. Times, Trump now plans to roll out his 2020 campaign with an event located along the Interstate-4 corridor, which cuts across battleground Central Florida

“He’s very clear-eyed about Florida,” said Susie Wiles, who in 2016 led Trump’s Florida campaign.

At the same time, the Trump-endorsed Super PAC America First Action is planning to raise \$300 million of its own dollars, a “good chunk” of which is slated to be spent in Florida. Meanwhile, Trump’s campaign manager, Brad Parscale, is scheduled to make his fourth public appearance in the state this month when he visits Little Havana Thursday to give a private talk to the Miami Young Republicans.

Parscale, who was Trump’s digital guru in 2016, specializes in micro-targeting, a data-based advertising strategy that uses a bevy of data points — like whether you subscribe to Guns & Ammo magazine or drive a MINI Cooper — in order to tailor ads and grassroots efforts directly to specific voters. The Republican National Committee says it has spent nearly \$300 million on its operation since Mitt Romney lost in 2012, and credits a successful last-minute push in Florida that put Trump over the top on their ability to target a specific set of 400,000 undecided voters in the state over the final 72 hours of the campaign.

The America First Action Super PAC estimates that 10.5 million Florida voters will participate in the 2020 election, and believes the fight for the state will come down to whether the president can pick up another million votes between now and November 2020.

“We have to win Florida,” said Rick Gorka, the RNC’s deputy communications director, last week.

Mathematically, Florida was a luxury for Trump in 2016. Despite losing the popular vote, Trump beat Hillary Clinton so soundly in the electoral college that he could have lost the state and still won the presidency.

But that seems less likely in 2020, after Democrats rebounded in the rust belt in November. Florida, on the other hand, was one of the few states that seemed immune to the 2018 “blue wave,” making it that much more important to Trump in 2020. Plus, the state and its diverse population of 22 million people is seen as a bellwether for the rest of the country.

“If we were to see something where Trump lost Florida it would be indicative of a very bad night for him,” said Rob Schmidt, vice president of strategy and research for McLaughlin & Associates, which polls for Trump’s campaign. “It becomes a domino effect.”

Schmidt, who has worked with the Republican Party of Florida and a pro-Trump Super PAC, said he’s not privy to the internal Trump polling data. But public polls and reports detailing internal polling suggest Trump is currently in a dog fight here.

Quinnipiac University found in March that 51 percent of voters in the state “definitely” won’t vote to reelect the president. The following month, St. Leo University found that Trump’s approval rating in the state was below 42 percent. And in mid-May Florida Atlantic University found that the president was either in a tie or slightly ahead of the leading Democratic candidates in head-to-head matchups.

There are also potential cracks in the armor, namely a renewed push to drill off Florida’s coasts even after Trump’s administration declared the idea off the table

register 1 million Florida voters and have tripled the size of their political staff from 2015.

Strategists like Schmidt and Wiles dismiss arguments that Florida has become a red state after decades of Republican control, noting that there were three statewide recounts in November. But after significantly out-performing Mitt Romney’s 2012 vote tallies in 2016, Trump now heads into 2020 with a purring operation and a head full of steam.

This cycle, the Republican National Committee is fully behind him far out from election day, as is a Republican Party of Florida now stocked with the people who helped run Trump’s campaign in the state. Florida is also led by some of Trump’s closest allies, who were elected in November after the president spent the final week of the campaign holding rallies in the state.

“Floridians sent a clear message that they approve of the Trump agenda when they elected Governor Ron DeSantis and Senator Rick Scott,” said Kayleigh McEnany, national press secretary for Trump 2020.

DeSantis’ surprising victory in November could be among the most important developments for the president. The former Freedom Caucus congressman is now widely shown by polls to be popular with a strong majority of Florida voters. And, along with Gruters, he has pushed some of the president’s top priorities, such as banning sanctuary cities and pushing to open up pharmaceutical markets with Canada.

“Ron DeSantis wouldn’t be the governor were it not for the president of the United States weighing in and helping him,” said Gruters, who also helped push Trump’s priorities this year in the Florida Senate. “That’s going to pay off large dividends. Now, Ron DeSantis will help deliver Florida for the president.”

For now, 18 months from election day, Trump has the advantage. But it’s debatable how much that head start will be worth when November 2020 rolls around. Steve Schale, a Democratic political strategist and pollster who led Barack Obama’s 2008 Florida campaign, said maybe Trump has an advantage of a percentage point.

But a lot will happen between now and next November.

“Whatever edge you have is insignificant,” said Schale. “It’s still a hyper-competitive state.”



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