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Maria Sanchez, 73, a resident of Haley Sofge Towers, said 'you have some elderly people here who are 90, and 92 years old and they deceive them.' She was speaking of canvassers who changed voters' affiliation to Republican without the voters' consent.

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'That is fraud.' GOP registered more than 100 voters as Republicans without their consent

By Bianca Padró Ocasio, Ana Claudia Chacin, Sarah Blaskey, Rosmery Izaguirre, Ben Conarck, Nicholas Nehamas, and Joey Flechas

At first, Nelia Estevez didn't believe that her voter registration could have been changed without her knowledge to reflect a new political party. Voting was sacrosanct to the 69-year-old Cuban immigrant, and she was certain of her party affiliation, she told a Miami Herald reporter who visited.

"I've been a Democrat since the day I became a citizen," Estevez said as she rifled through old mail from the elections department, each letter carefully labeled by year and stowed in a plastic tub. She pulled out card after card showing the same thing — Democrat — until she found the most recent letter, and there it was: "Republican Party of Florida."

"They changed me!" she cried. "Who would do this?"

Records kept by the Miami-Dade elections department provided an answer: canvassers from the Republican Party of Florida. They submitted the form that changed Estevez from Democrat to Republican on Dec. 22, 2021. Later, Republican canvassers submitted a second form, again marking her down as a Republican, records show.

Estevez doesn't even remember speaking with any of them.

In all, 22 voters at Vernon Ashley Plaza, the public housing complex in Hialeah where Estevez lives, told reporters their party affiliation had also been changed without their knowledge or consent last year. All of them became Republicans. All of the paperwork was submitted by Republican Party canvassers, records show.

The pattern was repeated in low-income housing complexes throughout Hialeah and Little Havana, a Herald investigation found. A team of reporters visited eight locations where voter registration data showed unusually high numbers of voters switching from one party to another last year. The reporters knocked on every door where someone's party affiliation had changed.

Four out of every five voters who spoke to the Herald — 141 in total — said that their party affiliation had been changed without their knowledge. In all but six cases, records show they were registered as Republicans by canvassers from the Republican Party of Florida. (Four of the others had recently moved and their registrations were sent through the DMV. And the remaining two were registered as Republicans, but by Democratic Party canvassers, records show.)

Herald reporters visited the elections department and reviewed each voter's registration history to determine when the party affiliation changes were made and which third-party voter registration organization was responsible.

Only 16 voters told the Herald they intended to change their voter registration last year. All of them switched to Republican. Eleven others were unclear in their responses.

Like Estevez, many voters who spoke to the Herald didn't realize a change had been made to their party affiliation until they were visited by reporters. They tended to be elderly — the average age was 76. Often, they were first-generation immigrants from Cuba, Colombia, the Dominican Republic or other parts of Latin America.

Many described being misled by canvassers who said they needed a new voter ID card, to update their addresses or to verify their signatures. Then the canvassers would offer to help with the paperwork. (Getting a new voter card or updating addresses is necessary only if a voter has recently moved, and can be done online, through the DMV while updating an identification card.)

Some didn't remember having conversations about their registrations at all, although records show their forms were submitted by Republican Party canvassers. Canvassers often visited the same voter more than once, submitting multiple registration forms all indicating affiliation with the Republican Party of Florida.

Under Florida State Statute 104.011, willfully submitting false voter registration information is a third-degree felony in the state of Florida, punishable by up to five years in prison and fines of up to \$5,000.

Some voters interviewed by the Herald have also given statements to investigators from the State Attorney's Office in Miami as part of an ongoing criminal probe into voter registration fraud.

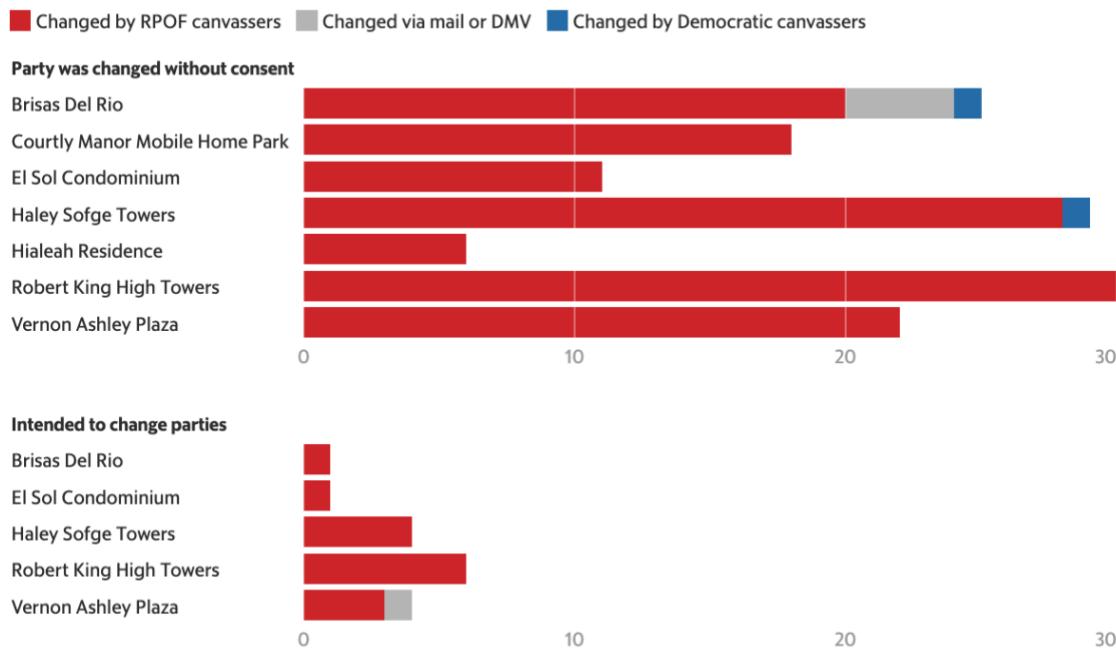
In email responses to the Herald's findings, Helen Aguirre Ferré, executive director of the Republican Party of Florida, said that the party "follows all applicable laws relating to voter registration" and that it is the party's protocol to "review every concern with our [voter registration] vendors promptly."

She added: "Let's be honest, it is suspect that these reports surfaced immediately after Florida Republicans overtook Democrats in voter registration in record numbers."

She declined to speak with reporters.

FOUR OUT OF FIVE VOTERS' PARTY AFFILIATION CHANGED WITHOUT CONSENT, MOST BY GOP

Miami Herald reporters talked to voters at these locations in Hialeah and Little Havana whose party affiliations changed – almost exclusively to Republican – in 2021. Here's what we learned.



To collect data on voters' intentions, reporters knocked on every door in these locations where a voter's party affiliation changed in 2021 and interviewed each of the 168 voters who answered. Data on when and how the party changed, and whether the process was facilitated by third-party canvassers, came from the Miami-Dade Department of Elections.

Chart: Sarah Blaskey • [Get the data](#)

Ferré is correct that Republicans recently surpassed Democrats in statewide party members. As of Jan. 31, there were almost 67,500 more registered Republicans than Democrats.

John McKager "Mac" Stipanovich, a former Florida Republican strategist and chief of staff to Republican Gov. Bob Martinez who has since left the party, said the Herald's investigation, which builds on reporting by WPLG Local 10 News, suggests there could've been an organized effort to reinforce the idea that South Florida's Hispanic voters were fleeing the Democratic Party.

"It strikes me as part of the messaging and the gloating by Florida Republicans about their registration gains," Stipanovich said. "It's part of this effort to build this sense of momentum and inevitability about the Republican Party's strength with Hispanic voters in Florida. ... This enables them to say: 'Look what's happening in Florida, in Miami-Dade. Hispanic voters are abandoning the Democratic Party. Join the parade.'"

In Little Havana, Maria Sanchez, 73, said she suffered after she found out her registration had been changed without her knowledge. She wasn't particularly upset because of the party changing, Sanchez said, but rather by the humiliation of being tricked.

"I've felt terrible because I'm seeing the way they're abusing elderly people. Because I still have some clarity, but you have some elderly people here who are 90 and 92 years old and they deceive them," Sanchez said.

A resident at the Haley Sofge Towers, one of the low-income housing buildings in Miami where some of the first claims of voter registration fraud emerged, Sanchez realized what happened only after receiving a call from the elections department.

"I feel mocked, humiliated ... I truly do," she said.

Like Sanchez, many voters who spoke to the Herald were upset by what they saw as trickery and attacks on the democratic process. ("There is some little game there," one man said.) Some fretted about how they would correct their registration. ("I need help. I can't see well," said a woman while squinting at the elections department website on her phone.) A few were most concerned about getting caught up in political problems. ("I'm very worried," one woman said over and over. "I have bad knees and I just can't handle this on top of everything else.")

Others were indifferent. ("Regardless, I'm an independent and I'm going to vote for whoever I want," one woman said.) And a handful were happy with the changes. ("I've always been a Republican," one man said, although his voter registration showed otherwise and he confirmed he had not agreed to update his party registration in the previous calendar year.)

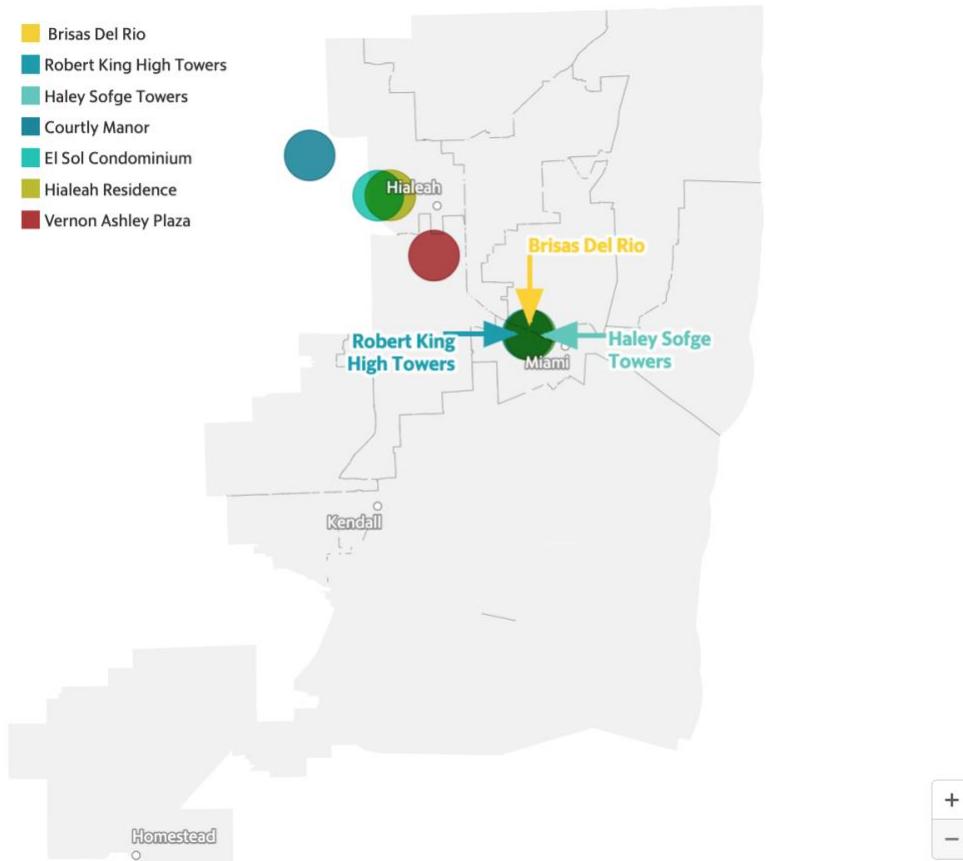
Most of the voters whose party was changed without their consent were previously registered Democrats, although a sizable minority had not had any prior party affiliation, voter records show.

Canvassing operations often target densely populated residences. On any given year, records show small numbers of voters at these locations change their affiliation. But 2021 was different.

Herald reporters interviewed voters at Hialeah Residence, Robert King High Towers (both), El Sol Condominium, Vernon Ashley Plaza, Haley Sofge Towers, Brisas Del Rio and Courtly Manor Mobile Home Park, where about one in five voters' party affiliations changed in 2021, a rate that had previously been unheard of, voter records show. At Brisas Del Rio, records showed party affiliation changes for half of the voters living there last year.

PARTY AFFILIATION CHANGED FOR UNUSUAL NUMBERS OF VOTERS IN THESE PLACES IN 2021

Reporters visited eight of the locations around Miami-Dade County and knocked on every door where records showed a voter's party affiliation switched in 2021. Select a location to see what we learned.



In the past, voters in those buildings who changed their affiliation switched between NPA ("no party affiliation") and either of the two major political parties at nearly equal rates. Changes to Republican never accounted for more than about half of the total.

But in 2021, 94% of voters in those buildings whose party affiliation changed became Republicans, most from being registered Democrats.

Although the GOP has always had a strong base of support among conservative Cuban Americans in those buildings, data show the 2021 registration drive resulted in registered Republicans becoming the majority of voters in all but one of the locations visited by the Herald.

A review of statewide voter records did not reveal similar trends outside of South Florida.

Sen. Joe Gruters, a Sarasota Republican and the chairman of the Republican Party of Florida, said he was not aware of the Herald's findings, which had been presented to the party, but said the party will "do whatever we can to comply with the law and do what's right."

“Whatever ends up happening, we will deal with it internally in terms of, if there’s a bad apple somewhere, we’ll replace them immediately,” Gruters said.

DISTRICT 37

Most of the voters interviewed by the Herald were in Senate District 37, a Miami district, where Republican Sen. Ileana Garcia won in 2020 by just 32 votes. Out of 104 voters whose party changed in that district, 84 told the Herald the change had been made without their permission.

The 2020 District 37 race was at the center of a wide-ranging “ghost candidate” scheme in which a sham candidate who had the same last name as the Democratic incumbent was recruited, apparently with the intention of confusing voters to sway the outcome in favor of the Republican. So far the case has led to two indictments and revealed widespread “dark money” connections to power players around the state.

Garcia has denied any involvement in the plan. The Miami-Dade State Attorney’s Office has said there is no evidence to show that Garcia knew of the plan or had any involvement.

Regarding the volume of party switching in her district, Garcia said in a text message to the Herald that, although neither she nor her campaign have been part of any voter registration efforts, she believed in engaging voters in her district regardless of their party.

“My work as a senator in District 37 reflects that party affiliation has no bearing when it comes to fighting for the needs of the district,” Garcia said.



Juan Salazar, 77, outside his apartment home in the Little Havana neighborhood of Miami, Florida, on Saturday, Feb. 5, 2022. Salazar explained his party affiliation was changed from Democrat to Republican without his permission. MATIAS J. OCNER MOCNER@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Juan-Carlos Planas, an election attorney and former GOP state representative who is now a Democrat, said the Herald's data suggested a coordinated effort by the Republican Party to switch voters in those areas.

"The fact that they would turn to our most elderly citizens is despicable," Planas said. "These folks are in public housing. They are the downtrodden."

Planas said changing voters' parties without their consent could violate another statute that prohibits interfering with "the free exercise of the elector's right to vote at any election."

That's because voters who unknowingly became Republicans would not be able to vote in Florida's Democratic primaries, which are open only to party members. Breaking that law is a third-degree felony.

"You could call this elder abuse," Planas said.

DECEIVED

The first time two canvassers knocked on the door of Ana Luisa Rubio, a 71-year-old resident of the Robert King High Tower in Little Havana who has proudly not affiliated herself with any political party, she turned them away, questioning why they'd want her to fill out a new registration form in the first place.

But about two weeks later, the canvassers came back. Around November of last year, a man carrying a clipboard with a stack of empty forms knocked on Rubio's door. He gave her the same speech she'd heard the first time, that they would send her an updated voter ID card if she filled out a new registration form — the same offer she now knows many of her neighbors received.

Except this time around, the canvassers caught her in a moment when her guard was down: It was late in the day and she was exhausted from moving to a new apartment, packing and unpacking boxes by herself. The man at the door, she says, was being pressured by a fellow canvasser to wrap up the conversation.

"So I just asked him, 'OK, what is it that you want? ... Where do I sign?' " Rubio said, recalling that the canvasser filled out the rest of the form for her.

By December, she had gotten a new voter ID card in the mail, identifying her as a Republican.

"I will never forgive myself for being so trusting in that moment, something I am not," she said.

At the time, Rubio didn't know who those people were at her door. She noticed a badge but didn't ask who they were working for.

But a different voter whose affiliation was changed unknowingly after being visited by canvassers, 54-year-old Noel Almora of Hialeah Gardens, did take notice. He said a man and a woman came to his house to fill out forms for him and his wife. Suspicious of the canvassers, Almora took a picture of the man's badge.

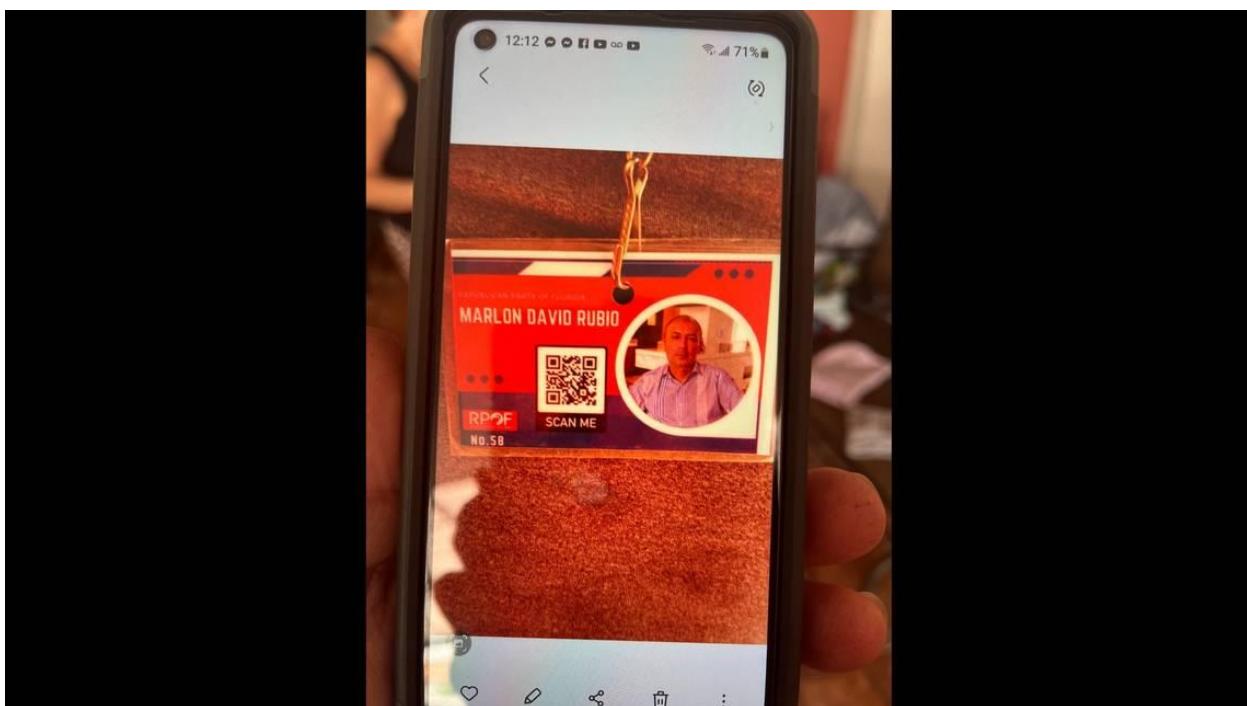
The badge identified him as Marlon David Rubio, and showed he was canvassing for the Republican Party of Florida. Rubio did not respond to Herald reporters who knocked on his door last weekend.

Rubio later sent the Herald a statement saying he was working for a Florida-based canvassing firm called Victory Labs. In the statement, he told the Herald he always shows voters his badge and also wears a cap that identifies the campaign he's working for.

"I haven't changed any political affiliation without the consent of a voter. Voters review the form before signing and they provide their license or Social Security number to verify their identity," he said. "I've always conducted my work with honesty and integrity and I've never had any issues in my work. I am a firm believer in conducting safe and free elections to uphold democracy and I would never do something to compromise that process."

Victory Labs confirmed that Rubio was working for the firm and that it had been contracted to do canvassing for the Republican Party of Florida through an Arizona-based company called September Group LLC. (Shown the badge photo, Ana Luisa Rubio said she is not acquainted with Marlon David Rubio.)

"Victory Labs works in accordance with all applicable laws," Hillary Koellner, an executive at both Victory Labs and September Group, wrote in an email. "We are at a loss as to why some are claiming they didn't fill out and sign the registration forms."



Noel Almora, of Hialeah Gardens, shows reporters a photo of the canvasser who stopped by his house last year. Rosmery Izaguirre RIZAGUIRRE@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Koellner said canvassers simply asked people if they were registered or wanted to update their registration, then helped them fill out forms and asked them to sign at the bottom. She said Victory Labs paid canvassers on an hourly basis with no bonus for registrations.

“For this specific campaign, canvassers used a ‘cold pitch’ strategy, meaning that they had no information concerning the person who answered the door. They didn’t have a list of people to target, they picked areas that seemed like high-density housing and areas they would find the most doors to knock on in close proximity. Elderly Hispanics weren’t targeted,” she wrote.

“Canvassers clearly identified themselves with the Republican Party of Florida by wearing a hat with party initials, a badge that has their picture and name as it appears on their state ID as well as the logo of the party.”

Koellner said that September Group terminated its contract with Victory Labs this past week.

“Victory Labs is no longer conducting any voter registration efforts in Miami-Dade,” she said.

State campaign finance records do not show any sign of the Florida GOP engaging the September Group in the most recent election cycle.

In 2018, the Republican Party of Florida paid the September Group more than \$1 million, largely for canvassing, records show.



Zenaida Zapata, a 74-year-old resident of Hialeah Gardens, is among a group of voters who say their classification was changed to Republican without their consent after a visit by canvassers. Pedro Portal PPORTAL@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Herald reporters attempted to contact the second canvasser, who was first identified by WPLG Local 10 News as Maria Barek. A man answered the door of her listed home address through a Ring doorbell device and asked reporters to leave. Victory Labs confirmed Barek was also working for the firm.

Mike Hogan, Duval County's Supervisor of Elections, said third-party canvassing groups must act carefully.

Hogan said last June his office discovered canvassers turning in registration forms with signatures that looked the same and were made by the same pen. The case led to two arrests, Hogan said, and investigators learned that canvassers were being paid bonuses for everyone they managed to process.

"Whether you're a candidate or a person who's working with amendments ... if you're going to pay a circulator, you want those documents that come to us that are going to be accurate and truthful," Hogan said.

THE FIGHT OVER VOTER FRAUD

Gov. Ron DeSantis has spoken frequently about voter fraud and the need for increased election security, and has pushed a proposal to create a new law enforcement body that would be dedicated to investigating allegations of fraud. Democrats say he and other Republicans, including former President

Donald Trump, have exaggerated or fabricated allegations of illegal voting to justify tightening rules at the state level in an attempt to discourage turnout, particularly among Black people and other minorities.

David Jolly, a former Republican congressman from the Tampa-area who later left the GOP, said this scandal should prompt DeSantis to take action.

“For a governor who believes election integrity is a major problem, there is no greater opportunity to prove that than to come down on the Republicans in South Florida who appear to have done this,” Jolly said. “If Ron DeSantis is serious about voter fraud in the state of Florida, he’d be the leading voice on this.”

DeSantis’ office declined to comment on the Herald’s findings, instead referring reporters to a Feb. 4 tweet from Secretary of State Laurel Lee, which said such allegations demonstrate the need for a police agency to enforce election integrity, as advocated by DeSantis.

Jolly said the scandal deserved the full attention of criminal investigators — and potentially a class-action civil lawsuit from voters against the Florida GOP.

“What occurred, based on your findings, is one of the two major parties in Florida switched voter registrations to benefit itself in an election, regardless of how far up in the party hierarchy that knowledge went,” he said. “That is graft. That is fraud.”

Liliana Martinez, who has worked for years for political campaigns to court elderly Hispanic citizens at senior centers throughout Miami Beach, said she was outraged about the switching.

“Never in my life have I seen this,” Martinez said. “It’s like brainwashing a person who makes their own independent decisions.”

But Martínez said she knows the truth will eventually get out.

“Todo se sabe,” she said, “People talk. Seniors are respectable people and they will not stay silent.”

BEHIND OUR REPORTING

A team of Miami Herald reporters visited eight addresses in Little Havana, Hialeah and Hialeah Gardens where data show some of the highest concentrations of voters’ party affiliation switches in Miami-Dade County. The locations included Courtly Manor Mobile Home Park, Hialeah Residence, Robert King High Towers (both), El Sol Condominium, Vernon Ashley Plaza, Haley Sofge Towers and Brisas Del Rio.

In each location, reporters knocked on every door where records showed a voter’s party affiliation had been changed within the last year. The only exception was Hialeah Residence, where reporters were only able to visit four of the 10 floors before management asked them to leave.

Of the 340 doors knocked, 168 voters answered and spoke to reporters and 141 of them said that the recent party switch had been made without their knowledge or consent.

In order to determine how each switch was made, reporters went to the Miami-Dade elections department and checked the voter history of every voter who spoke with the Herald. The vast majority (135 of 141) had “11-93,” the canvasser code for the Republican Party of Florida, listed as the third-party organization that turned in their voter registration form that caused the switch in party affiliation.