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CANDIDATES SCRAMBLE TO WIN HISPANIC VOTES IN FLORIDA

By Michael Shear and Trip Gabriel
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The leading Republican candidates spent Wednesday appealing for the votes of South Florida's Hispanic voters, with the campaigns of Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich skirmishing over an advertisement that branded Mr. Romney as anti-immigration.

The Spanish-language radio advertisement by the Gingrich campaign called Mr. Romney "the most anti-immigrant candidate" in the field. That drew a strong condemnation on Wednesday from Senator Marco Rubio, a Cuban-American who is remaining neutral in the race and who said in remarks to The Miami Herald that the advertisement was "inaccurate, inflammatory and doesn't belong in this campaign." And Mr. Romney, addressing the commercial, called himself "pro-immigrant" in remarks before an event sponsored by Univision, the Spanish-language network. "It's very sad for a candidate to resort to that kind of epithet," he said.

The Gingrich campaign said it was pulling down the radio advertisement, because, Mr. Gingrich said, "I have great respect for Senator Rubio." But the back-and-forth highlighted the scramble for votes among Hispanic voters, particularly the Cuban-Americans who are such a force in South Florida's Republican politics.

People of Hispanic origin make up 22.5 percent of Florida's population, compared with 16.3 percent of the United States population, according to census data from 2010. They tend to vote more with Republicans than elsewhere, although polls from 2008 show that President Obama picked up more than half the Hispanic votes in the state, a contrast to the 2004 election, when a majority sided with George W. Bush.

Mr. Romney, Mr. Gingrich and Rick Santorum all appeared at the Univision event, where Mr. Gingrich faced one of the toughest interviews of his campaign when questioned by Jorge Ramos of the network.

Mr. Ramos noted that in a poll released Wednesday by Univision, ABC News and Latino Decisions, in which Mr. Gingrich was matched against Mr. Obama, a vast majority of Hispanic voters chose Mr. Obama.

"You would lose the general election with these numbers," he warned.

Mr. Gingrich's policy proposals for the 11 million illegal immigrants in the country are a shade more moderate than those of some of his rivals; Mr. Romney has spoken out against amnesty for illegal immigrants and raised, in Monday's debate, the idea of "self-deportation," or inducing illegal immigrants to leave voluntarily. Discussing these positions, Mr. Gingrich accused Mr. Romney of lacking "concern for the humanity of the people who are already here."

Mr. Ramos pressed him on why, if he was compassionate, he did not support the Dream Act, which would offer some illegal immigrants brought to this country as children a path to

citizenship. Mr. Gingrich said he was for “half the Dream Act,” giving citizenship to people who enlist in the United States Army.

As the Republicans appealed for votes among Cuban-Americans and other Hispanics, one person who said he was not enamored of the field expressed his distaste: Fidel Castro, the retired Cuban leader whose 1959 takeover prompted the exodus of Cubans to South Florida.

“The selection of a Republican candidate for the presidency of this globalized and expansive empire is – and I mean this seriously – the greatest competition of idiocy and ignorance that has ever been,” he wrote in an opinion piece in state-owned news media.

He had reason to be annoyed. In Monday’s debate, Mr. Gingrich said he would authorize covert actions to bring down the Cuban government, while Mr. Romney cited the Jan. 19 death of a Cuban prisoner, Wilman Villar Mendoza, in calling for maintaining a tough policy toward Cuba. The candidates also discussed whether the 85-year-old leader would go to heaven or hell.

In Mr. Romney’s appearance before the Univision event, he defended his proposal for “self-deportation,” saying that if illegal immigrants were no longer able to find work, they would decide to go back to their home country.

He said that by criticizing his proposals before the same group, Mr. Gingrich was pandering for Hispanic votes.

“It’s very tempting to come into an audience like this and to pander to the audience,” Mr. Romney said.

Mr. Ramos, in his interview with Mr. Romney, noted that the candidate’s father was born in Mexico and asked whether Mr. Romney could claim to be Mexican-American.

“I don’t think people would think I’m being honest if I said I was Mexican-American,” Mr. Romney said, laughing. But he added: “I would appreciate it if you could get that word out.”