

Transcript

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POP & POLITICS WITH FARAI CHIDEYA
FIRST MIDTERM ELECTION SPECIAL: FLORIDA
"RACE, RAGE, AND RECONCILIATION"
OCTOBER 21, 2010

(soundbite) THE AMERICAN DREAM HAS BECOME A NIGHTMARE.

(soundbite): THEY'RE COMING FROM ALL OVER, THEY'RE COMING ACROSS, THEY'RE COMING ALL THE WAY THROUGH THE COUNTRY

Farai Chideya, host:

I'm Farai Chideya. This election season is filled with anger--and despair about the future.

ABIDAH ALI: WE'RE STILL VIEWED AS OH, YOU'RE MUSLIM, YOU'RE EITHER A TERRORIST OR AN OPPRESSED WOMAN, YOU DON'T HAVE RIGHTS.

Chideya: I went to the bellwether state of Florida and I found lots of anxiety--about jobs, housing, national identity.

BEVERLY BRADLEY: THERE IS RACISM, THERE'S ALWAYS GONNA BE RACISM.

Chideya: We talked to voters about what's on their minds on November. Do they still have faith that their vote counts?

MAX RAMEAU: PEOPLE HAVE FOUGHT AND DIED FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE, AND SHOULD HAVE.

CASSANDRA: I DIDN'T VOTE, BECAUSE I DIDN'T SEE WHAT WAS THE POINT.

Chideya: It's Pop and Politics on the road in Florida from WNYC and American Public Media. First, the news.

SEGMENT A

Chideya: What happens to a dream deferred when it's the AMERICAN Dream? Right now money is tight and political tempers are running HOT.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: THAT'S NOT RIGHT. YOU'RE NOT DOING YOUR JOB. AND THAT'S, I GET REALLY UPSET ABOUT THAT.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I MEAN, THEY WERE VOTING HIM IN BECAUSE HE'S BLACK SLASH MUSLIM. THAT'S RIDICULOUS.

JANET WILSON: WE DON'T HAVE IMMIGRATION. WE HAVE INVASION.

Chideya: Some citizens want action:

BRADLEY: THEY WANT YOU TO VOTE FOR THEM AND SUPPORT THEM, BUT THEY NEVER TAKE THE TIME TO COME OUT HERE AND SUPPORT US.

Chideya: Some, more civility in political debates:

ERNIE SIRACKI: DEPICT THE PRESIDENT WITH A BONE THROUGH HIS NOSE. CLAIM THAT HE'S A MUSLIM BORN ON MARS. HOW DO WE MOVE AWAY FROM THAT?

Chideya: I'm Farai Chideya and this is Pop & Politics. It's the 2010 midterm election season and we're going on a road trip. A journey to hear what people are saying at this time of high anxiety. What are people thinking as they prepare to vote - or NOT - on November 2nd?

Chideya: There's not just one flash point in this election. There are many. The economy, jobs, housing, religion and race are all ISSUES. Behind them are EMOTIONS, a widespread sense of rage and frustration. It's quite a turn from two years ago. We've gone from this:

OBAMA: OUR TIME HAS COME. OUR MOVEMENT IS REAL. AND CHANGE IS COMING TO AMERICA. (APPLAUSE).

Chideya: To this:

PALIN: NOW A YEAR LATER, I'VE GOT TO ASK THOSE SUPPORTERS OF ALL THAT, HOW'S THAT HOPEY-CHANGEY STUFF WORKIN' OUT FOR YA?

Chideya: To this:

BECK: WE VOTED FOR CHANGE. YOU KNOW WHAT THAT CHANGE WAS? THE CHANGE WE WANTED WAS AN END TO THE GAMES!

Chideya: America: divided. That seems obvious. But what isn't always so clear is why. As a starting point, let's acknowledge a few things. There are more than 300 million people in this country. If you wake up in the morning and grab a coffee on your way to an office tower.... or wake up before dawn to farm... or have to drive two hours to find work because your town has all but shut down, well, that's probably going to affect how you think about politics, and life. We're all people, just people. Big elections like the upcoming midterms point out just how personal the political is. Add to that issues of race, ethnicity, immigration, and religion... and we've got plenty on our minds.

(sound) airplane announcement: Ladies and Gentleman Jet Blue airways welcomes you to Ft. Lauderdale Florida (fade out) where the local time is [fade under]

Chideya: Florida seemed like the perfect place to look at all the ways our differences play out against a tapestry of economic stress and political upheaval.

(sound): Going to car rental, Ma'am. Here you go.

Chideya: The state's one of the most racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse in the country. And it's no stranger to political tensions. Back in the Bush-Gore election of 2000, Florida's 22nd Congressional District was "hanging chad" central.

Chideya: This year, it's making headlines again. Two-term Democratic incumbent Ron Klein is in a tight race with Republican Allen West, a retired Army Colonel who's a black conservative. He might not have a lot else in common with Lady Gaga, but he *is* a YouTube star. This video's been viewed more than two MILLION times.

WEST YOUTUBE CLIP: IF YOU'RE HERE TO STAND UP. TO GET YOUR MUSKET. TO FIX YOUR BAYONET. TO CHARGE INTO THE RANKS. YOU ARE MY BROTHER AND SISTER IN THIS FIGHT. [fade under applause]

Chideya: West served 21 years in the military and received a Bronze Star. He resigned in 2004 with full benefits after admitting he threatened an Iraqi police officer during an interrogation. That ended his military career, but it made him even more of a hero to some conservatives.

[song: Baracuda]

Chideya: He's even been floated as a possible running mate on a Palin 2012 Presidential ticket.... though she hasn't actually said she's running.

Chideya: But we're getting ahead of ourselves. On November second, voters will choose between Allen West and incumbent Ron Klein.

KLEIN AD: I'm Ron Klein and I approved this message. Distortions from Allen West can't hid the facts. Even with a six-figure income, Allen West has show a consistent lack of personal responsibility. An IRS lien for back taxes. A court order to pay \$5000 in past due credit card bills. [fade]

WEST AD: Welcome to South Florida, Mr. President. You and Ron Klein should leave that closed door, high roller fundraiser and drive by our shuttered business and foreclosed homes. I'll go anywhere you wish to debate your failed big government policies. Heck, I'll even debate you and Klein together if that's what it takes. The people of South Florida...[fade]

Chideya: Here's how Congressman Klein describes himself and the race:

KLEIN: I'M A BIG BELIEVER IN CONSENSUS. MY OPPONENT HAS A DIFFERENT VIEW. HE'S MUCH MORE DIVISIVE IN HIS APPROACH. IT'S "MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY" AND IT IS SORT OF MORE OF AN ANGRY APPROACH.

Chideya: So to find out more, I went to visit the Allen West campaign office, It's in Deerfield Beach, just north of Fort Lauderdale.

Chideya: Kids sat around a table, stuffing envelopes. These home-schooled students were getting a real-world civics lesson. Betsy Mack supervised 11 year old Andrew.

MACK: WELL I CAME DOWN HERE AND I MET HIM. I LISTENED TO HIM. HE JUST MAKES YOU WANT TO SALUTE THE FLAG.

ANDREW: I HOPE THAT HE HELPS IN CONGRESS, VOTING FOR LIKE MORE FREEDOMS. 'CAUSE A LOT OF THE DEMOCRATS THAT ARE IN RIGHT NOW, THEY'RE VOTING FOR LIKE LESS AND LESS FREEDOMS FOR LIKE PEOPLE WITH LIKE THE SOCIALISTIC MEDICINE.

Chideya: Allen West is running in "purple state" territory. The Congressional district has equal amounts of Democrats and Republicans, and a quarter of voters say that they're Independents. The area also has active chapters of the Tea Party. And Tea Party folks seem to *love* Allen West.

WEST: IF YOU WANT TO SAY THAT MY PRINCIPLES THAT I'M SPEAKING ABOUT THE, THE PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNANCE THAT I'M TALKING ABOUT, IS IN LINE WITH THE TEA PARTY AND THEIR DIRECTION , YEAH, THAT'S TRUE.

Chideya: West doesn't like aligning himself with the traditional categories of race and party politics. He's a black man who's against affirmative action. And he's a Republican. In fact, he's one of fourteen black G-O-P candidates running for the House this fall.

ALLEN WEST: THIS IS NOT ABOUT RACE FOR ME. IT REALLY IS ABOUT CONTENT OF CHARACTER. IT'S NOT ABOUT THE COLOR OF SKIN. NOW IF YOU WANT TO SAY THAT, ARE THERE POCKETS OF PEOPLE OUT THERE THAT DON'T LIKE A BLACK PERSON? ABSOLUTELY. BUT INSTITUTIONAL RACISM IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IS GONE.

BEVERLY BRADLEY: MAYBE HE HASN'T EXPERIENCED IT, BUT THAT IS NOT TRUE. THERE IS RACISM. THERE'S ALWAYS GOING TO BE RACISM. I DON'T KNOW WHAT WORLD HE'S LIVING IN, BUT THAT IS NOT TRUE. THAT IS NOT TRUE.

Chideya: That's Beverly Bradley in Tallevast, Florida. She lives 170 miles and WORLDS away from Colonel Allen West.

Chideya: I drove in to Tallevast as dusk settled. People were lined up at Mount Tabor Baptist Church. It was muggy and hot outside. Mosquitoes swarmed. People stood in line waiting to get into the church, laughing and talking. It felt a sort of like a family reunion. Except for the lawyers milling about in suits and ties. The townspeople were there to meet with them.

Chideya: Tallevast is at the center of a major lawsuit. It brings up issues of environmental racism AND whether State law protected the community. I wanted to find out if this fight affected how and whether the people of Tallevast get politically involved, by voting or other means.

Chideya: What happened here? Residents say a plant that made parts for nuclear weapons here destroyed their land and their health. There are just eighty homes and nearly all have been touched by lung disease or cancer. Yet the adults I spoke with told about the good times in Tallevast. And we met eleven-year-old Zeria (ZAIR-ee-uh) -- a big fan of her hometown.

ZARIA: IT'S PRETTY COOL. MY NEIGHBORHOOD IS JUST ONE CIRCLE AND A WHOLE BUNCH OF PEOPLE, KIDS AND WE HAVE A COMMUNITY CENTER...

Chideya: Tallevast could be a nice place to live.

ZARIA: PEOPLE JUST SAY THAT IT IS CONTAMINATED. THEY JUST SAY THAT IT IS CONTAMINATED AND IT'S A CHEMICAL PUT IN OUR PLANT. I DON'T REALLY KNOW WHAT IT MEANS. ARE WE ALLOWED TO DO SHOUT OUTS? SHOUTS OUT? TO MY UM DOG, AND NATE, SMOKEY AND BRANDON. HEY HOW ARE YOU GUYS?

Chideya: Across the street from where Zaria stands is the former American Beryllium Plant. The long building is like a big beige box. But this plant made components for nuclear weapons for more than three decades. Lockheed Martin bought it in the mid-90s and discovered chemicals had leaked into the soil. They started testing the groundwater and found high levels of a cancer-causing chemical called T-C-E. Gary Cambre [KAM-bray] is a spokesman for Lockheed Martin.

CAMBRE: I BELIEVE WHEN THE CONTAMINATION WAS FOUND IN 2000, LOCKHEED MARTIN NOTIFIED THE STATE, WHICH WAS REQUIRED BY FLORIDA LAW AT THE TIME. (Farai Chideya ON TAPE): AND WHEN DID THE RESIDENTS GET NOTIFIED?
CAMBRE: I BELIEVE THAT WAS LIKE 2003 WHEN THE STATE NOTIFIED RESIDENTS.

Chideya: You heard that right: The people of Tallevast didn't find out that their drinking water was contaminated for *three years*. And the reason they found out? One of the residents happened to notice some people taking soil samples from her front yard and started asking questions. At the time, Florida law required Lockheed Martin to tell the state about the contamination, *but not the residents*.

Chideya: The people of Tallevast say no one was watching out for them - not Lockheed Martin OR the government. And that's brought up old wounds.

BYERS: WELCOME TO THE SOUTH.

Chideya: That's Roderick (roh-DER-ik) Byers .

RODERICK BYERS: THE OLD SAYING IS VERY MUCH TRUE. THEY DO DO THINGS DIFFERENT DOWN HERE. IT'S AS MY GRANDFATHER ONCE TOLD ME, IT'S NOT PEOPLE DRESSED IN SHEETS AND BURNING CROSSES IN YOUR YARD. IT'S THE ONES THAT PUT ON A SUIT AND TIE AND GO TO WORK EVERY DAY THAT YOU NEED TO BE AFRAID OF. FOR THIS COMMUNITY. THESE 80 HOMES THAT'S OUT HERE, THERE'S WHERE THE RACISM IS.

Chideya: Beverly Bradley places the blame on politicians.

BEVERLY BRADLY: THEY'VE NEVER DONE ANYTHING FOR TALLEVAST. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHO MY REPRESENTATIVE IS 'CAUSE THE LAST TIME ANYONE CAME PROBABLY WAS ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO. YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY? BECAUSE IT'S A BLACK COMMUNITY AND YOU KNOW THEY JUST FIGURE THEY LEAVE US ALONE, WE'LL LEAVE THEM ALONE.

Chideya: You hear a lot about "voter apathy." But what gets called "apathy" is sometimes more like fatigue, or disgust. Even residents working fiercely on the local level to keep their neighborhoods strong may give up on the idea of VOTING in elections. Like the upcoming midterms.

Chideya: Cassandra Bryce grew up across from the plant. She's now Tallevast's de-facto town historian.

BRYCE: I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHO OUR STATE REPRESENTATIVE IS. OUR COUNTY REPRESENTATIVE IS. NO ONE'S EVER COME HERE. IT'S LIKE WE'RE JUST AN OUTCAST HERE IN TALLEVAST.

(Chideya ON ACTUALITY:) DO YOU FEEL LIKE VOTING OR ENGAGING WITH POLITICS AT THIS POINT? DO YOU DO IT PERSONALLY? DO YOU FEEL IT HELPS?

BRYCE: NO, I DON'T FEEL LIKE IT HELPS. I DIDN'T VOTE BECAUSE I DIDN'T SEE WHAT WAS THE POINT. NO ONE'S EVER COME AND SET FOOT IN TALLEVAST, WENT ROUND SHAKING ANYBODY'S HANDS INTRODUCING THEMSELVES. NOTHING. ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. I'M DISAPPOINTED WITH THE DEMOCRATS.

(Chideya ON TAPE:) SO IF YOU AND OTHERS MOVE, WHICH IS COMPLETELY UNDERSTANDABLE GIVEN WHAT APPEAR TO BE THE SERIOUS HEALTH RISKS HERE, YOU CAN PRETTY MUCH CALL THIS TOWN DEAD RIGHT?

BRYCE: PRETTY MUCH. YES...ALL OUR LEGACY, ALL OUR HISTORY. THAT'S THE SAD PART. I'M GONNA CRY IN A MINUTE. I DON'T WANT IT TO GO. I GET ALL TEARY EYED WHEN I TALK ABOUT IT. HOPEFULLY EVERYTHING WONT BE LOST. I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO IF YOU KNOW EVERYBODY MOVES OUT. ALL THE HISTORY HERE. I'M SORRY.

Chideya: For now, many Tallevast residents are staying. They're waiting on a pending settlement with Lockheed Martin. Neither side will disclose details. Lockheed Martin's representative did tell us that half of the town needs to accept the settlement for it to take effect.

Chideya: With a kind nostalgia you hear a lot in a changing America, Beverly and William Bradley say they miss the old Tallevast, when it was vibrant and people looked out for one another.

WILLIAM BRADLEY: MY LITTLE BOY USED TO WALK AT NIGHT. HE USED TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE. FOUR YEARS OLD. COULDN'T KEEP HIM IN THE HOUSE. PUT A LOCK UP TO THE TOP OF THE DOOR, HE'D STILL GOT THE LOCK OPEN. HE WAS 4 YEARS OLD.

BEVERLY BRADLEY: WHEN I HAD MY LITTLE BOY. MY LITTLE BOY USED TO LOVE TO GO. HE WOULDN'T STAY HOME> AND I COULD WALK UP THE STREET AND ASK ANYONE IN TALLEVAST, HEY, YOU SEEN MY SON? THEY COULD TELL YOU WHERE HE WAS. BECAUSE EVERYBODY WATCHED OUT FOR EVERYBODY.

WILLIAM BRADLEY: BUT NO HARM TO HIM. SO THAT'S WHY I REALLY LIKE THIS PLACE.

Chideya: Stay with us for more of our road trip through America as we lead up to the midterm elections.

CRIST INTERVIEW: You know in this race, we have an African-American candidate, we have a Hispanic candidate, and myself, a Greek-American candidate and regardless of what your

ethnicity might be, everyone wants and hopes for fundamental fairness.

Chideya: I'm Farai Chideya and this is Pop and Politics, a production of WNYC with American Public Media.

BREAK (:20 - :21)

SEGMENT B

Chideya: Have you ever been on a road trip? Well, you're on one right now, with *us*: Pop and Politics from WNYC and American Public Media.

Chideya: I'm Farai Chideya. I went out with a team of journalists to find the heart and soul of politics in America. Now we're bringing you along with us on our journey through Florida.

Chideya: Florida's one of the biggest states in America, and it represents much of what's changing about the U-S. We spoke to Aubrey Jewett, a political science professor at the University of Central Florida.

JEWETT: WE'RE THE BIGGEST BATTLEGROUND STATE. WE'RE THE FOURTH LARGEST STATE. WE'VE BEEN FAST GROWING, SORT OF JUST LIKE THE NATION IS. OUR DEMOGRAPHICS: THE POPULATION OF SENIORS IS HIGH AS THE AMERICAN POPULATION IS AGING. OUR POPULATION'S BECOMING MORE DIVERSE WHEN IT COMES TO HISPANICS AND BLACKS AND INTERNATIONAL POPULATION. THAT'S THE SAME THING WE SEE ACROSS THE UNITED STATES. AND SO ON THE ONE HAND WE ARE UNIQUE AND WE HAVE SOME INTERESTING FACTORS THAT MAKE US A LITTLE DIFFERENT AND ON THE OTHER HAND WE ARE A REALLY GOOD STATE AS FAR AS BEING REPRESENTATIVE OF WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE REST OF THE COUNTRY.

<<Florida car road trip sound>>

Chideya: So if Florida represents the country, and you're going there on a political road trip, Miami is your one-stop shop. You can travel from Little Havana to Little Haiti, from the pastel-colored hotels of Miami Beach to desolate street corners.

Chideya: The city is the heart of a three way Senate race that's making national waves. Independent Charlie Crist is Florida's Governor.

CRIST AD ACTUALITY: IF I'M ELECTED TO THE U-S SENATE, I'LL DO EXACTLY WHAT I'VE DONE AS GOVERNOR. I'LL TAKE THE BEST IDEAS FROM REPUBLICANS, DEMOCRATS OR INDEPENDENTS AND TRY TO PUT THEM INTO PLACE, BECAUSE THE JOB [FADE].

Chideya: Crist switched parties after he announced he was running for Senate, and Miami is one of his frequent stops to court votes and money. The other two candidates claim Miami as home. Democrat Kendrick Meek

MEEK AD: I'M THE ONLY ONE WHO HAS FOUGHT AGAINST DEVELOPERS DRAINING THE EVERGLADES. THE ONLY ONE AGAINST OFF-SHORE DRILLING FOR OIL BEFORE AND AFTER THE BP SPILL. THE ONLY ONE AGAINST PRIVATIZING SOCIAL SECURITY. THE ONLY ONE WHO'S PRO-CHOICE. WHO TOOK ON GEORGE BUSH. WHO'S FOUGHT FOR MIDDLE CLASS TAX CUTS [FADE]

Chideya: and Republican Marco Rubio:

RUBIO AD: THEY NEVER COULD. I'M MARCO RUBIO. WHAT MAKES OUR STORY SO SPECIAL IS THAT IT ISN'T UNIQUE. THE AMERICAN DREAM IS STILL A REALITY. AND I APPROVE THIS MESSAGE BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT WORTH FIGHTING FOR.

Chideya: Miami is also an epicenter of the housing crisis. It has the *fifth* highest foreclosure rate in the nation. So, what happened? A perfect storm of reasons why a market implodes. Overbuilding. Speculation. Flipping. Predatory lending. And of course, people who make bad choices in a time of crisis and financial desperation.

Chideya: Take Miami Gardens, about 20 minutes north of downtown. When I visited, most yards were lush and green. Some were overgrown, and a handful of homes looked abandoned.

MILLIGAN: THIS CORNER THAT'S BUSHY, THAT'S MY BUTTERFLY CORNER FOR THE GRANDKIDS. I LOVE FLOWERS, AS YOU CAN SEE.

Chideya: That's sixty-two year old Ruby Milligan (MILL-uh-ghen). She's lived in this house in for seventeen years. And she bought it because it's right down the street from her 89 year old mother's house. Ruby's herself has had a stroke. She worked for years as a middle school teacher to buy her this house, but now she could lose it.

MILLIGAN: I LOVE THE PLACE, I'M ON THE CANAL. IT'S BEAUTIFUL, IT'S PEACEFUL. BUT HOW DO I GET OUT OF THE FORECLOSURE?

Chideya: She refinanced her house several times, most recently declaring bankruptcy in 2006. She liquidated her retirement investments to pay construction bills and lawyer's fees. Now, her home value is "underwater" - it's worth a lot less than her mortgage.

MILLIGAN: WHEN I BOUGHT THE HOUSE IT WAS BASICALLY A BIG HOUSE IN NEED OF A LOT OF REPAIR. BUT I TOOK THE HOUSE BECAUSE IT WAS DOWN THE STREET FROM MOM. AND I NEEDED TO DO ALL THESE REPAIRS AND SO THE MAJORITY OF MY RETIREMENT MONEY HAS GONE INTO MAKING THE HOUSE LIVABLE. AND PEOPLE SAY WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT IF THE HOUSE IS IN FORECLOSURE? I HAD RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS. I DIDN'T WANT TO GET UP AND MOVE, MOM IS DOWN THE STREET. AND SO WHAT DO YOU DO? YOU REPAIR, AND YOU LIVE WHERE YOU ARE.

FARAI CHIDEYA ON TAPE: EVEN TODAY AS WE CAME TO YOUR HOUSE, YOU'RE STILL REPAIRING A HOUSE THAT YOU MAY NOT EVEN BE ABLE TO KEEP.

MILLIGAN: EXACTLY. YES.

FARAI CHIDEYA ON TAPE: SO STANDING IN YOUR BACKYARD, YOU ARE HOUSE-

PROUD EVEN UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES. AND SO MUCH OF OWNING A HOUSE HAS BEEN TIED UP WITH THE AMERICAN DREAM, THE IDEA OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN. SO HOW DO YOU VIEW YOUR OWN RELATIONSHIP TO THE AMERICAN DREAM?

MILLIGAN: THE AMERICAN DREAM HAS BECOME A NIGHTMARE. I AM BLESSED BECAUSE I HAD MY FIRST HOME I THINK AT 26 OR 27. TO ME UNTIL YOU HAVE THAT LITTLE PLOT OF LAND THAT YOU CAN CALL YOUR OWN, THAT YOU CAN PLANT A ZILLION FLOWERS, AND YOU CAN PAINT IT AND DO ALL KINDS OF THINGS THAT YOU WANT TO. THIS IS MY SPOT IN THE WORLD, THIS IS MY NICHE. AND I'VE HAD THAT MOST OF MY LIFE. I GREW UP WITH PARENTS WHO EVEN THOUGH WE ORIGINALLY STARTED OUT IN THE PROJECTS. MY PARENT'S GOAL WAS ALWAYS TO OWN THEIR OWN HOME. I THINK WE CONTRIBUTE MORE TO OUR SOCIETY WHEN WE TAKE A PLOT OF LAND AND GROW IT OR MAKE IT BEAUTIFUL.

FARAI CHIDEYA ON TAPE: IN A WORST CASE SCENARIO SITUATION, IF YOU LOSE YOUR HOME, WHAT WOULD YOU DO. WOULD YOU LIVE WITH ONE OF YOUR SONS?

MILLIGAN: I DON'T WANT TO LIVE WITH ANYONE. I HAVE AN EXTREMELY INDEPENDENT STREAK. I'M NOT SURE. I'D PROBABLY RENT FOR A WHILE AND MAKE A DECISION. EVEN TO THE POINT WHEN IT MEANT I UP AND LEFT THE COUNTRY. I'D BE FINE. THE COUNTRY IS IN A TRANSITION THAT I REALLY DON'T UNDERSTAND. I THINK A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO COULD MAKE THE COUNTRY BETTER ARE SIMPLY SITTING ON THE MONEY AND PEOPLE ARE HURTING.

Chideya: The foreclosure crisis in Florida is one of the biggest economic issues in the state... but not one of the biggest POLITICAL issues. It's as if citizens have stopped asking politicians to be accountable.

Chideya: I asked Ruby what she would say to her own Congressional representative, Democratic Senate candidate Kendrick Meek, if she had a chance?

MILLIGAN: PROBABLY NOTHING.

FARAI CHIDEYA: REALLY. WHY?

RUBY: KENDRICK HAS BEEN BUSY RUNNING FOR OFFICE, AND I THINK A LOT OF HIS ATTENTION IS ON WINNING. THERE'S A COLDNESS THAT'S JUST YUCK. I'M SORRY.

Chideya: An hour later, I met Congressman Meek in his campaign office - just a few minutes' drive from Ruby's home, and told him about her.

MEEK: WHAT I'M HEARING IN DESCRIBING HER SITUATION, I NEED TO KNOW WHO SHE IS AND HAVE HER WORK ON IT WITH A CASEWORKER. BECAUSE MANY TIMES WE RUN INTO SITUATIONS WHERE PEOPLE TAKE THINGS INTO THEIR OWN HANDS, AND THE NEXT THING YOU KNOW THEY FIND THEMSELVES SIGNING DOCUMENTS THEY DON'T HAVE A FULL UNDERSTANDING OF.

Chideya: The Congressman literally grew up in politics. His mother, Carrie Meek, held the seat

before he did, so Miami Gardens is home turf. He took me on a drive through the neighborhood and tried to stay upbeat.

MEEK: WE ALWAYS HAVE TO WORK HARD, AND HARD WORK WILL PAY OFF IN THE LONG RUN. I BELIEVE THAT, AND THAT'S A PART OF WHAT WE CALL THIS AMERICAN DREAM. THAT IF YOU WORK TOWARDS POSITIVE CHANGE IT WILL HAPPEN, AND THAT'S THE REASON WHY THE LIGHT WILL NEVER GO OUT, THE FLAG WILL ALWAYS FLY.

FARAI CHIDEYA ON TAPE: BUT RIGHT THERE, FOR RENT, A HUGE SIGN, FORMER BANK OF AMERICA BUILDING IT LOOKS LIKE. THE WHOLE BUILDING SAYS "FOR RENT".

MEEK: THEY'VE ALWAYS HAD A FOR RENT SIGN. THAT BUILDING IS ACTUALLY CARVED UP FOR SMALL OFFICES.

FARAI CHIDEYA ON TAPE: SO WHEN YOU LOOK OUT AT THIS NEIGHBORHOOD, DO YOU STILL SEE OPPORTUNITY STILL?

MEEK: I SEE OPPORTUNITY. I SEE A TRUCK HERE, CARGO EXPRESS INC, OBVIOUSLY SOMETHING'S MOVING SOMEWHERE. I SEE THAT BUS ACROSS THE STREET. PEOPLE ARE STILL GOING TO WORK OR PICKING UP THEIR CHILDREN, THERE'S STILL BUS DRIVERS, THE LIGHTS ARE STILL WORKING HERE.

Chideya: Voters may not be convinced that things are working out so well in Miami. Some lifelong Democrats -- including Ruby -- say they're supporting Charlie Crist, who's now running as an Independent.

Chideya: I had a chance to speak to Governor Crist in a union hall just outside of Miami. Most of the men there were Democrats, but their union has endorsed Crist simply because they see him, not Meek, as the best chance to beat Rubio.

Chideya: The Governor presents himself as the best of both worlds... both parties, that is.

CRIST: I THINK IT'S HAVING THAT INDEPENDENT ABILITY TO SPEAK FREELY ABOUT WHAT BOTH PARTIES CAN DO TO HELP US GET THROUGH THIS VERY CHALLENGING ECONOMY. FOR EXAMPLE, EARLY ON IN MY ADMINISTRATION, I SUPPORTED THE STIMULUS AND WAS PRETTY ROUNDLY CRITICIZED BY REPUBLICANS FOR HAVING DONE SO. YET I KNOW AS GOVERNOR, LIKE EVERY OTHER GOVERNOR IN THE COUNTRY WHO ULTIMATELY ACCEPTED THE STIMULUS MONEY, THAT IT SAVED 20,000 EDUCATION JOBS IN FLORIDA. YET, I ALSO UNDERSTAND AS A FISCAL CONSERVATIVE THAT ITS GOOD TO CUT TAXES. THAT'S WHY I SUPPORT THE TAX CUTS GOING FORWARD AND BEING PERMANENT, BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT IF YOU REDUCE TAXES, YOU PUT MORE OF THE PEOPLE'S HARD EARNED MONEY IN THEIR POCKET OR IN THE POCKET OF SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS WHO REALLY ARE THE BACKBONE OF THE COUNTRY AND GET US OUT OF THIS SOONER RATHER THAN LATER.

Chideya: More and more Americans are registering as independent. In Florida, nearly a quarter of voters aren't affiliated with either major party. Political parties are more than ideology, they're

also about resources, from voter databases to funding for television ads. Crist lost the resources of the Republican party when he left it. The candidate ahead in the polls is Republican Marco Rubio, who repeatedly declined our requests for an interview. Aubrey Jewett is a political science professor at the University of Central Florida.

JEWETT: IT'S REALLY A HISTORIC RACE BECAUSE IT'S THE FIRST TIME AT LEAST IN MODERN TIMES THAT WE'VE HAD AN INDEPENDENT OR NON-PARTY CANDIDATE WHO HAS A SERIOUS CHANCE OF WINNING. HIS CHANCE RIGHT NOW ARE NOT SO GREAT, BUT WHEN HE GOT IN IT, IT LOOKED LIKE HE HAD A SHOT.

Chideya: But most polls now show Rubio leading by as much as six percentage points. Contrary to what was predicted when Crist left the G-O-P, his candidacy is splitting the Democratic vote, not the Republican vote. Jewett says Rubio's a conservative's conservative and the GOP base is fired up this year:

JEWETT: WHERE THE REPUBLICAN PARTY IS GOING NOW, THEY WANT IDEOLOGICAL PURITY. THEY WANT CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICANS. THEY DON'T WANT MODERATES OR GOD FORBID IF THERE'S ANY LIBERAL REPUBLICANS OUT THERE, THEY SURE DON'T WANT THEM REPRESENTING THEM IN OFFICE.

Chideya: Professor Jewett says there's a distinct pattern to this "throw the bums out" attitude among voters.

JEWETT: ON AVERAGE, I THINK WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT POLITICAL SCIENTISTS WOULD CALL A LOT OF RETROSPECTIVE VOTING. PEOPLE GET ANXIOUS AND THEY LOOK AT WHICH PARTY IS IN CHARGE, AND THEY SAY "WE DON'T LIKE THE WAY THINGS ARE GOING AND SO WE'RE GOING TO GIVE THE OTHER PARTY A CHANCE." AND I THINK THAT'S CERTAINLY WHAT YOU SAW IN '06 AND DEFINITELY '08.

Chideya: Jewett says fixing the economy has been the number one concern for Florida voters in the past few years. Now mind you, in 2006 Florida's unemployment rate was just 3%, well below the national average. Now it's gone up to 12%, a couple points ABOVE the national average. And, of course, that affects who can pay their mortgages and stay in their homes.

Chideya: Of all the solutions to the housing crisis, Max Rameau (ruh-MOH)'s is one of the most dramatic. The group he runs argues it's time to take to the streets and reclaim the houses.

RAMEAU: WHAT WE DO AT TAKE BACK THE LAND IS WE IDENTIFY VACANT GOVERNMENT-OWNED AND FORECLOSED HOMES, WE OPEN THEM UP, AND WE MOVE HOMELESS FAMILIES INTO PEOPLE-LESS HOMES.

Chideya: That's right. They go, find homes that are empty but in good shape, and put families in them... families that can't pay, but the group believes can be responsible neighbors. Mainly, they put families in working-income neighborhoods hit by foreclosures, like the one where Max lives. I met him at his house, near Miami's Little Haiti. He knows the history of an abandoned house across the street that he says was bought and sold four times, rising in price from \$100,000 to \$300,000. And then, he says, the prices fell back to where they were before the boom.

RAMEAU: AND IN JANUARY OF 2010, THE FAMILY WHO WAS THERE LEFT ALMOST UNANNOUNCED, WE DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE THAT THEY LEFT. AND THEN WE WERE WALKING IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD ONE DAY AND JUST SAW THAT THE PLACE WAS EMPTY. SO THE HOME HAD BEEN BROKEN INTO A NUMBER OF TIMES, BUT IT WAS SITTING THERE VACANT, IT WAS A DANGER FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY, AND ACTUALLY SEVERAL NEIGHBORS CAME UP AND BOARDED UP THE HOME THEMSELVES.

Chideya: What happens to neighborhoods with abandoned houses isn't theoretical to Max. He sees it every day. It's also part of his work with Take Back the Land. In fact, he says people have called the group and asked them to place families in abandoned homes so they don't fill up with squatters or get stripped of fixtures. Max has his own philosophy about why turning to the government doesn't always work.

RAMEAU: OUR PRIMARY CONCERN IS NOT WHAT WE CAN GET OUT OF THE ELECTED OFFICIALS...THAT'S REALLY NOT ONE OF OUR BIG CONCERNS TO BE QUITE FRANK. VOTING IS AN EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TOOL TO HAVE IN THE TOOLBOX. AND PEOPLE HAVE FOUGHT AND DIED FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE, AND SHOULD HAVE. I DON'T THINK HOWEVER, IT'S NECESSARILY THE MOST IMPORTANT TOOL...VOTING IS THE BARE MINIMUM. IF ALL YOU DO IS VOTE EVERY FOUR YEARS, EVERY TWO YEARS, YOU ARE DOING THE LEAST AMOUNT POSSIBLE. THE REALITY IS WHEN SIGNIFICANT LEGISLATION WAS PASSED IN THIS COUNTRY IT HAPPENED ON THE HEELS OF DIRECT ACTION TAKING PLACE.

FARAI CHIDEYA ON TAPE: LEGALLY, WHY DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO DO WHAT MANY PEOPLE WOULD CONSIDER A CONTRAVENTION OF AMERICAN PROPERTY LAW, WHICH SAYS THAT WHOEVER OWNS A DEED TO A HOUSE GETS TO DECIDE WHAT HAPPENS IN THAT HOUSE?

RAMEAU: WE DON'T HAVE THE LEGAL RIGHT TO DO IT, AND THAT'S EXACTLY THE POINT. BANKS DO NOT NEED HOMES IN ORDER TO STAY ALIVE. .HUMAN BEINGS NEED HOMES IN ORDER TO STAY ALIVE. I THINK IT IS MORALLY UNACCEPTABLE, IT IS MORALLY REPUGNANT TO HAVE TENS OF THOUSANDS OF VACANT HOMES THAT ARE SITTING THERE WITH NO ONE LIVING THERE WITH NOONE LIVING IN THEM, WITH NO VALUE TO HUMANITY.

ZALEWSKI: PEOPLE DREAM ABOUT WHERE THEIR KIDS ARE GOING TO GROW UP, AND WHERE THE DOG'S GONNA RUN AROUND AND HOW THEY'RE GOING TO HAVE THIS NEIGHBORLY FEEL AND THINGS LIKE THAT.

Chideya: Peter Zalewski (zuh-LOO-skee) is a man whose vision of home ownership couldn't be more different than Max's. To him, a roof over your head isn't a universal right but about the pursuit of profit. That comes with a big reality check about what owning a home really means.

ZALEWSKI: WHAT WE DO IS WE COME IN WE LOOK AT IT LIKE WALL STREET. IT'S ALL NUMBERS. FAMILY OF FOUR LIVES THERE AND THEY'RE LIVING THE AMERICAN DREAM, THAT'S GREAT. IF IT'S A RENTER LIVING THERE AND THEY GET THROWN OUT IN 6 MONTHS, MAKES NO DIFFERENCE TO US. WE'RE ALL ABOUT THE NUMBERS

Chideya: Peter's the founder of the Miami real estate firm Condo Vultures.

ZALEWSKI: VULTURES ARE THOSE DISGUSTING ANIMALS THAT CONSUME THE CARCASS OF ROADKILL, IF YOU WILL.

Chideya: When we met Peter, his company was buying 700 foreclosed properties in one swoop, and would parcel them out to willing buyers ... many from outside the United States. Why is there so much inventory? Peter was in Miami five years ago during the building boom.

ZALEWSKI: YOU'D ALWAYS SEE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS. THE OTHER THING YOU'D ALWAYS SEE IS NAILS LAYING ALL OVER THE STREET. I MUST HAVE GOT A FLAT A MONTH DURING THE BOOM BECAUSE THERE WERE 82 TOWERS GOING UP SIMULTANEOUSLY...AS I WANDERED AROUND WITH MY CONTACTS AND I LOOKED, I WOULD HAVE DUST IN MY EYES NONSTOP. THAT'S THE THING I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER ABOUT THE BOOM IS NOW I DON'T HAVE TO USE EYE DROPS.

Chideya: Now the builders are hurting... as are homeowners. Peter doesn't think there's much use turning to politicians to clean the mess up. He figures if people got a lot less sentimental, they'd be a lot better off.

ZALEWSKI: YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LOOK AT YOUR HOUSE AS THE AMERICAN DREAM ANYMORE, AND YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LOOK AT YOUR EMPLOYER AS SOMEONE WHO'S GOING TO BE EMPLOYING YOU 10 YEARS FROM NOW. I THINK THOSE DAYS ARE GONE FOREVER.

Chideya: Peter's the kind of guy who doesn't seem to care if people disagree with him. So when it comes to solutions to the housing crisis, he has a suggestion that would tick a LOT of people off.

ZALEWSKI: WHETHER YOU'RE FOR IMMIGRATION OR AGAINST IMMIGRATINO, IF YOU'RE IN REAL ESTATE YOU LOVE IMMIGRATION, LEGAL OR ILLEGAL, MAKES NO DIFFERENCE. YOU HAVE BODIES FILLING RESIDENCES. AN AS BODIES FILL RESIDENCES, THAT CREATES A GREATER DEMAND, WITH LESS SUPPLY WHICH DRIVES UP PRICING. SO FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE, I'D JUST AS SOON OPEN THE BORDERS LET EVERYBODY COME. IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE TO ME.

Chideya: We'll return from a short break and dig into immigration as it affects Florida AND the nation.

Farai Chideya: Stay with us on our political road trip as we lead up to the midterm elections. I'm Farai Chideya and this is Pop & Politics, a production of WNYC with American Public Media.

BREAK (:40)

Chideya: This is Pop and Politics from WNYC and American Public Media.

I'm Farai Chideya. Our road trip through American Politics continues - in Florida.

(sound of radio stations changing in car: religious talk, Spanish speaking radio cuts in.)

Chideya: This is what you hear when you turn the radio dial while driving in Florida: a sound-clash of culture, religion, language.... and politics.

(we could fade under the sound of the dial-turning and come up here on the National Anthem)

Chideya: I drove north near the Western coast of Florida -- that's the side bordering the Gulf - towards Sun City, a MASSIVE retirement community with twenty thousand people. When it comes to senior citizens, Florida's number one. That's right -- with balmy winter weather and low taxes, Florida has the most residents over 65 of any state.

Chideya: When I pulled up at Sun City Center, it was a glorious day. People playing bocce ball on the lawn. Tricked out golf carts instead of cars. I'd come for a breakfast put together by Sun City's Democratic and Republican clubs.

(sound) WE'VE GOT SOME MUFFINS AND ORANGE JUICE RIGHT OVER THERE.

Chideya: NINETY-NINE percent of residents in Sun City are white. And from what I found, ONE HUNDRED percent of them are opinionated...about everything. Like William James, Ernie Siracki [si-RAH-kee] and Janet Wilson.

JAMES: WE SPENT \$1.3 MILLION DOLLARS FOR THE TURTLES. WE DUG A HOLE UNDER THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SO THE TURTLES COULD GO TO THE SEA. IF THAT WAS MY MONEY, I WOULDN'T HAVE SPENT IT. WOULD YOU?

SIRACKI: I THINK PROTECTION OF SEA TURTLES IS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE IN THIS COUNTRY, AND I THINK THAT SOMEBODY HAS TO STEP FORWARD AND DEAL WITH IT.

WILSON: THIS GENTLEMAN OVER HERE WANTS TO SAVE THE TURTLES. HE THINKS THE GOVERNMENT HAS TO DO IT. I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE TURTLES.

Chideya: Protecting Sea turtles is the kind of issue some people just argue for argument's sake. One that got a lot more of the people in the room talking was immigration.

Chideya: Here's Janet Wilson:

WILSON: WE DON'T HAVE IMMIGRATION WE HAVE INVASION. THEY'RE JUST COMING HERE WITH DOPE AND ALL OVER THE PLACE, THEY'RE NOT COMING FOR JOBS! THEY'RE SITTING ON THE CORNERS.

Chideya: And Judy Allen:

JUDY ALLEN: THEY'RE COMING FROM THE MIDDLE EAST, THEY'RE COMING FROM ALL OVER. THEY'RE COMING ACROSS, THEY'RE COMING ALL THE WAY THROUGH THE COUNTRY, AND SOMEONE BETTER WAKE UP PRETTY SOON BECAUSE IT'S NOT GOING TO GET BETTER UNTIL THEY DO.

Chideya: Claudia Davidson brought it back the question of labor:

CLAUDIA DAVIDSON: CONSTRUCTION, LANDSCAPING, IF YOU HAD THAT DONE, CHANCES ARE THERE WAS AN ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT DOING IT.

Chideya: Senior citizens are one of the most reliable voting groups in the country. In this midterm election, one big question is whether a lot of the newer, younger voters who came out in 2008 will return. Sun City is a planned community. It's citizens have made a conscious decision to live with people their own age, and their own class... given that 99 percent of them are white, their own race. That means they don't bump up against some of the Floridians who live very different lives... like undocumented immigrants. Yet Florida is one of the top five states in sheer numbers of illegal immigrant population.

Chideya: Flare ups over the issue in the state have been milder than, say, Arizona. Still, as we heard in Sun City, it's on people's minds... not just in Florida, but across the U-S.

TAPE: ANOTHER HOT BUTTON ISSUE IN THE FOX OPINION DYNAMIC SURVEY? IMMIGRATION.

TAPE: THE STATE OF ARIZONA MAY NOW DEAL WITH ANCHOR BABIES, THOSE ARE INFANTS BORN IN THE U.S.A. TO ILLEGAL ALIEN MOMS. THE BABIES AUTOMATICALLY GET AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP.

TAPE: AT ITS AWARDS DINNER, THE PRESIDENT INVOKED THE DREAM ACT. THE BILL WOULD PROVIDE A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP FOR MINOR CHILDREN WHO ARE IN THE COUNTRY ILLEGALLY IF THEY SEEK HIGHER EDUCATION OR MILITARY SERVICE.

TAPE: THAT ENCOURAGES MORE ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION.

Chideya: The Dream Act was one of the biggest NATIONAL immigration issues to come before Congress this year. It ended up stuck in the Senate and won't come up again until next year.

Chideya: In January, a group of students walked FIFTEEN HUNDRED miles from Miami to Washington DC in support of the DREAM Act. One of them was twenty-five year old Gaby Pacheco. Her family immigrated to Miami from Ecuador when she was seven. They came on tourist visas and just... *stayed*. Gaby went to school, did well, made friends. Even though she's not a citizen, Gaby got a scholarship to attend Miami Dade College.

PACHECO: I REMEMBER BEING KNOWN IN SCHOOL AS THE QUOTE-UNQUOTE ILLEGAL GIRL. WHEN WE TALK ABOUT IMMIGRANTS, USUALLY THEY PAINT THIS FACE OF YOU KNOW, THE ILLEGAL. AND WHEN WE TALK ABOUT ILLEGALS AUTOMATICALLY IN OUR MIND WE START THINKING TERRORIST AND CRIMINALS, AND SO WE HAVE THIS TAINTED VIEW OF WHAT IMMIGRANTS ARE, AND I WISH THAT THAT WOULD BE ERASED.

Chideya: Gaby is one of nearly seven hundred thousand people who are in Florida without legal immigration status.

ACTUALITY: KNOCK KNOCK KNOW. OPEN UP. IT'S ICE.

Chideya: That's the sound of Gaby and friends role-playing an immigration raid. Their "Know Your Rights" seminars teach people what to do if immigration officials come to their door, when the adrenaline is PUMPING. Four people stood in front of the class at Miami Dade College. Two played the role of immigration agents; two played the role of illegal immigrants here in the US.

There wasn't a script. They laughed nervously. They were just told to play the parts. *And go.*

(sound): GET DOWN ON THE GROUND. WHERE ARE YOU FROM? WHERE ARE YOU FROM? WHERE'S YOUR GREEN CARD? FROM CUBA. GIVE ME YOUR GREEN CARD. WHAT'S YOUR NAME? STAY QUIET. JUST STAY QUIET.

Chideya: The seminars aren't the only thing Gaby does to try to change how unauthorized immigrants are treated. Recently, she helped register voters -- her goal was to register ten people for every undocumented person she knows.

Chideya: Despite her activism, she still lives in fear.

PACHECO: THE OTHER DAY I WAS HOME. HEARD SOMEONE DRIVING UP. RAN TO BATHROOM WENT INTO TUB AND WAS HIDING THERE. THEN IT WAS MY BOYFRIEND. AND HE WAS LIKE WHAT ARE YOU DOING? HIDING. IT'S A REAL FEAR. A REAL FEAR. THEY KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR AND YOUR HEART STARTS BEATING SUPER FAST BECAUSE YOU DON'T KNOW WHO IT'S GOING TO BE AND EVEN THOUGH I'M HERE TEACHING PEOPLE THEIR RIGHTS... TEACHING PEOPLE THAT WHEN THEY KNOCK ON THE DOOR, THEY SHOULD BE COMPOSED AND THEY SHOULDN'T OPEN IT AND THEY SHOULDN'T SAY ANYTHING, THE REALITY IS YOU ARE AFRAID. IN THE LAND OF THE FREE. WE ARE IN A PRISON. WE ARE JAILED.

Chideya: There are more than 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States, that's according to the Pew Hispanic Center says there are more than and critics say their taxes shouldn't to pay for health care, services and schools for people who are not here legally. In fact, polls show the majority of Floridians would vote for a candidate who stands for tougher immigration law.

Chideya: To get more perspective, we talked to a Floridian whose family immigrated legally. Florida's population is interesting in part because it's two largest Latino groups are Cubans and Puerto Ricans, both of which both have immediate legal immigration status.

Chideya: We met Rafael Yaniz [YAH-nee-z] in Gainesville. He's a student at the University of Florida and a registered Republican.

YANIZ: BEING OF WHITE CUBAN DESCENT I'M A HISPANIC, BUT IF I'M DRIVING THROUGH ARIZONA, TO A PASSING POLICE OFFICER I MAY JUST LOOK WHITE. AND THAT'S UNFORTUNATELY A HARSH REALITY THAT WHILE I WONT GET PULLED OVER BUT SOMEBODY WHO HAPPENS TO BE A LITTLE BIT DARKER WHO MIGHT BE JUST AS AMERICAN OR QUOTE-UNQUOTE MORE AMERICAN THAN I AM, MIGHT GET PULLED OVER AND IT'S BECAUSE OF THE COLOR OF THEIR SKIN.

Chideya: When Rafael's parents AND grandparents came to the U.S., they did so legally. Rafael wants tougher immigration laws. But he also realizes, not every group of people is treated the same.

YANIZ: IT'S REALLY TOUGH. IT REALLY IS A TOUGH ISSUE. AMERICA, FOR EXAMPLE, LOOKING AT MEXICANS COMING TO OUR COUNTRY AND THAT STEREOTYPES THAT THEY WILL IMPOSE ON MEXICANS.... IT SPEAKS TO A DEEPER ISSUE OF XENOPHOBIA.

THERE ARE STATISTICS THAT SHOW BY ABOUT 2040 OR 2050 ABOUT HALF OF THE POPULATION WILL BE SPANISH SPEAKING. THE FACE OF AMERICAN IS LITERALLY BEING TRANSFORMED. WE'LL GOING FROM VERY ENGLISH SPEAKING COUNTRY TO BILINGUAL. AND IT'S PART OF A LARGER ISSUE. HOW DO WE WANT TO DEFINE OUR COUNTRY? HOW DO WE WANT TO DEFINE OUR FUTURE?

Chideya: Of course, how we define America, and who we see as American, is even broader than race, ethnicity, and national origin. Take religion... the week of my trip was a flash point in the battles over the meaning of Islam.

ACTUALITY: PRESIDENT OBAMA HAS ISSUED AN URGENT APPEAL TO A FLORIDA PASTOR WHO'S PLANNING TO BURN COPIES OF THE QURAN TO CALL THE EVENT OFF.

Chideya: I drove north on September 10th, the day before a Gainesville-area pastor named Terry Jones planned to burn copies of the Quran. Most people, locally and nationally, HATED that idea.

Chideya: And yet.... the same week the National Enquirer had a cover headline that screamed "Proof Obama is a Muslim!" A Pew poll in August even found that 18 percent Americans think the President is Muslim. For the record, he's a Christian. And there are plenty of people who don't like the idea of what Islam represents... even if they have the facts wrong.

Chideya: And, here's one of those moments where reporting gets tricky. Who you are, what you look like, your skin color, your gender, can affect an interview. So, one day in Gainesville, two of our reporters set out for the University's football stadium. They're both white and yes, that matters, given what happened when they asked a group of tailgaters in the parking lot what they thought about the President. Here's what our reporters heard:

(UNIDENTIFIED MALE): I MEAN WHAT DOES HE HAVE, ANOTHER TWO YEARS IN OFFICE? BECAUSE HE'S PROBABLY NOT GOING TO GET ELECTED AGAIN. OBAMA? NO WAY HE IS GOING TO GET ELECTED AGAIN. NO WAY. WELL EXCEPT ALL THOSE RETARDED PEOPLE IN HARLEM THAT ARE ALL VOTING FOR HIM. ALL THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE NO CLUE. I MEAN HALF OF THEM DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHO HIS VICE PRESIDENT WAS. YOU WATCH THOSE YOUTUBE VIDEOS OF ALL THOSE PEOPLE WHO VOTED FOR HIM IN HARLEM. LET'S GO GATORS! IT'S RIDICULOUS. I MEAN THEY WERE VOTING HIM IN BECAUSE HE WAS BLACK SLASH MUSLIM. THAT'S RIDICULOUS.

Chideya: Black-slash-Muslim. Retarded people in Harlem. Would they have said it to me, a black woman? Maybe not. Does it represent the way the majority of people in Gainesville or the United States think? No. But can you ignore that's the way some people feel? History has shown time and again that ignoring tensions often allows conflict to grow.

Chideya: So, On Friday night, September 10, the night before the scheduled Quran burning, Gainesville was a true battleground for intolerance verses tolerance. In a cavernous church hall, I met people gathered for an interfaith event to counter the anger of the Quran burning plan. The room had a pageant-like feel. People wore salwar kameez, the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk, yarmulkes, and Western-style Sunday Best... or, more casually, shorts. Gainesville's diversity was on display. It *almost* made singing Kumbaya ok.

(sound): KUMBAYA

Chideya: Pastor Dan Johnson organized the event in the hall of Trinity United Methodist Church, where normally he presides over four thousand parishioners.

JOHNSON:: WE IN GAINESVILLE KNOW THAT THAT'S NOT WHO WE ARE. THE OUTPOURING IN THIS COMMUNITY FOR WHAT WE ARE DOING TONIGHT HAS BEEN HUGE. BECAUSE THAT'S WHO I THINK WE ARE I THINK IT'S WHO MOST AMERICANS ARE.

Chideya: He showed me around.

JOHNSON:: THIS IS A CONFESSING BOOTH OVER THERE, AND THERE WE'RE INVITING PEOPLE TO WRITE PRAYERS OF CONFESSION OF HOW WE'VE WRONGED A PERSON OF ANOTHER RACE.

Chideya: Humeraa Qamar [hoo-MAIR-ah KAH-mehr] is co-organizer of the event. She and her husband Dr. Asad Qamar [ah-SAHK KAH-mehr] are muslim, and immigrants from Pakistan.

HUMERAA QAMAR: I THINK WHAT'S HAPPENING RIGHT NOW, THE BASIS OF ALL THIS ISLAMOPHOBIA IS STEMMING FROM A VERY, VERY SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO ARE TRYING TO SCARE THE VOTERS. THAT SOMEHOW MUSLIMS ARE BAD AND THEY'RE TERRORISTS.

ASAD QAMAR: THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES WHEN PEOPLE OF JEWISH FAITH HAVE BEEN VICTIMIZED. CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN PERSECUTED AND I THINK MUSLIMS WILL GO THROUGH THE SAME.

Chideya: Abidah Ali [Ah-bEE-dah Ah-LEE] is nineteen and a student at the University of Florida. She also helps run a group called "Islam on Campus."

ABIDAH: THE WHOLE TERM ISLAMOPHOBIA OCCURRING HERE, I DON'T SEE THAT GETTING ANY BETTER, ANY TIME SOON. IT JUST SEEMS LIKE RIGHT NOW ISLAM IS THAT ONE MINORITY GROUP THAT'S BEING KIND OF FOCUSED ON BY THE MEDIA. AND I KNOW IN A COUPLE OF YEARS IT'S GOING TO BE ANOTHER MINORITY GROUP AND IT'S JUST GOING TO KEEP SWITCHING BUT RIGHT NOW IT'S OUR TIME.

Chideya: Abidah, was wearing a hijab, or head covering, and an abaya. I asked her to describe it, and she put me on the spot.

ABIDAH: THE ABAYA? HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE ABAYA?

FARAI CHIDEYA: WELL IT'S A DRESS THAT HAS QUALITIES OF A ROBE IN THAT IT'S VERY LOOSE AND IT PROVIDES FULL COVERAGE, IT GOES DOWN TO THE ANKLES.

ABIDAH: BASICALLY THE PURPOSE OF ABAYA IS TO COVER THE ORNAMENTS THAT GOD CONSIDERS BEAUTIFUL, WHICH IS LIKE WOMANLY THINGS I DON'T REALLY GO INTO THAT. UM, SO, THAT'S REALLY WHAT IT IS. IT'S JUST FROM NECK TO, HEAD TO

TOE COVERING BASICALLY SO THAT NO ONE'S REALLY ATTRACTED TO ANY PART OF YOU.

FARAI CHIDEYA: DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU GET TREATED AS AN AMERICAN WHEN PEOPLE JUST MEET YOU FOR THE FIRST TIME, DOES THAT MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU?

ABIDAH: I THINK WHEN PEOPLE FIRST MEET ME, THEY'RE HONESTLY SHOCKED. WHEN YOU SEE A GIRL WITH HIJAB, THE MEDIA HAS PORTRAYED A WOMAN WITH HIJAB AS SOMEONE WHO HAS NO VOICE, WHO IS TOLD NOT TO SPEAK UP, WHO HAS NO RIGHTS, WHEN IN REALITY I SPEAK UP WHEN I WANT TO, I HAVE MY RIGHTS, I'M AN AMERICAN, I'M A WOMAN, AND I'M A MUSLIM AT THE SAME TIME. I WAS WALKING AND A BUNCH OF GUYS WERE LIKE, "HEY GIRL, WHY YOU WEARIN THAT, YOU LOOK STUPID." BECAUSE WE'RE STILL VIEWED AS, "OH YOU'RE A MUSLIM. YOU'RE EITHER A TERRORIST, YOU'RE AN OPPRESSED WOMAN, YOU DON'T HAVE RIGHTS." BECAUSE THEY JUST ASSOCIATE EVERYBODY WITH THAT MINORITY. THE MAJORITY IS PAYING FOR THE MINORITY ACTIONS STILL. IF YOU LOOK AT ME, I MAY LOOK NOT SO FRIENDLY, I GUESS. BUT THE MINUTE YOU HEAR ME TALK, IF PEOPLE GIVE ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK I KNOW I CAN GET YOU TO LIKE ME. I HAVE FAITH THAT IF TERRY JONES MET ME, HE WOULD LIKE ME, I'M PRETTY SURE.

Chideya: You might remember that the Quran burning never happened, but it still left scars. A few days after the interfaith event, President Obama made a speech about the DREAM Act. But it felt like he could have been talking directly to Gainesville... or to the many places in America where we're divided.

OBAMA: SOME TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE ECONOMIC ANXIETY THAT PEOPLE ARE FEELING TO STOKE FEAR OF PEOPLE WHO LOOK AND THINK AND WORSHIP DIFFERENTLY. TO INFLAME PASSIONS BETWEEN US AND THEM. I HAVE NEWS FOR THOSE PEOPLE. IT WON'T WORK. THERE IS NO "US AND THEM". IN THIS COUNTRY THERE'S ONLY "US."

Chideya: After I got back to New York, I called Pastor Dan Johnson to see if there really was an "us." Are people even willing to start a dialogue about hot-button issues like religion and politics? Even the Pastor saw some roadblocks.

JOHNSON: IT'S HARD WORK TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW. ALSO, I THINK YOU HAVE TO BE FAIRLY SECURE IN WHO YOU ARE TO BE WILLING TO EXPLORE OTHER POINTS OF VIEW AND IN THIS TIME OF UNCERTAINTY FORM SOME REASON PEOPLE ARE LESS INCLINED TO DO THAT.

Chideya: I asked Pastor Johnson if he ever got dismayed or depressed by the current mood in America.

JOHNSON: I HAVE NOT GONE INTO A DEPRESSION OVER IT, BUT I GET DEEPLY CONCERNED. BUT I THINK THAT BECOMES THE CATALYST FOR POSITIVE ACTION. THIS SAD EVENT DID HONESTLY, AND I'M NOT BEING NAIVE HERE, CREATED A VERY POSITIVE OUTCOME. I WISH AND HOPE IT COULD HAVE THE SAME EFFECT AROUND THE COUNTRY.

Chideya: Looking back on our trip through Florida shows that when we talk about “politics,” we’re talking about a lot more than voting. The life of churches, communities, activists and business owners can bring us into conflict and some times into consensus. Will this upcoming election bring us that sense that we’ve reached a new common ground, or push us further apart? We’ll find out soon.

Chideya: Thank you for joining us for Pop and Politics’ political road trip through Florida. Tune in with us next time when we head to Arizona -- a land of battles over immigration and law enforcement, plus big questions about the economy.

Pop and Politics is produced by Nona Willis Aronowitz, Aaron Ernst, Nelli Black, Ave Carrillo, Suzie Lechtenberg and Kerry Donahue. This program was funded in part by the Ford Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Chideya: I'm Farai Chideya. This is Pop and Politics, a co-production with WNYC Radio and distributed by American Public Media.