

## Engagement with Cuba? How About Engaging with Cuban-Americans? How the Democrats Lost and Could Regain the Trust of Cuban Americans

Guillermo Grenier, Florida International University

Abstract: We often place Cuba at the center of the Cuban American universe and all assume that party identification and voting is dependent on a Cuban American's attitude toward the island. Policy preferences are considered the independent variables and partisan alignment is viewed as the dependent variable. There is evidence that this is precisely backwards--that Cuban Americans' partisan allegiance influences their views on Cuba policy and that partisan allegiance is a product of how the two parties engage the community. Using historical data tracing the relationship of the two parties with the community, this essay presents an argument for the importance of party engagement and suggests a way that the Democratic Party might make some inroads into the Cuban American community of south Florida.

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There is a certain Sisyphean aspect to analyzing the political attitudes of Cuban Americans in south Florida. Broad patterns can be discovered, specific inconsistencies can be documented, but no amount of documentation or contextualization will prevent the stone of knowledge-- or what we assume to be knowledge-- from hurtling back downhill, leaving the analyst to start anew trying to understand the riddles of the community.

During the Trump years, a community which by all indications was moving away from the hardline attitudes in the 1990s and towards a more pluralistic political profile, suddenly reversed course. As recently as [2016](#), Cuban Americans seemed to embrace President Barack Obama's opening to Cuba. The elections of 2016 initiated the Trumpian turn in the Cuban-American community, oxygenating the old Cold War ideologists' opposition to engagement with the Cuban government but also pumping new Republican blood into the community.

Many Cuban Americans shared the Republican fervor for Trump's broader agenda. Yet analysts and policy makers still focus obsessively on the attitudes of Cuban Americans towards Cuba policy as the key to understanding Cuban-American voting behavior. Just a few months after the election, a Democratic [pollster reaffirmed](#) the hardline turn, and the media reinforces the message that Cuban Americans are against returning to the Obama policies. This poll offered the Biden administration, which committed itself to consulting with Cuban Americans before undertaking any policy changes towards Cuba, the cover it needed to leave Trump's sanctions in place. Only one writer pointed out that perhaps Cuban Americans, a predominantly Republican electorate, are just behaving like other [Republicans](#) illegitimate (Santiago 2021).

Perhaps we have approached these questions in the wrong way, overestimating the roll of Cuba in shaping the Cuban-American vote and underestimating the role of partisanship and the parties' engagement with the Cuban-American community. The same [polls](#) that measure attitudes about US-Cuba policy also consistently report that Cuba policy ranks well below domestic concerns, such as the economy, crime, and healthcare in the minds of Cuban-American voters. Still, political operatives cling to the belief that measuring the attitudes of Cuban Americans towards U.S-Cuba policies will provide the key to harvesting the most votes possible.

We assume that the socio-political conditions in Cuba when the migrant left govern the attitudes towards U.S-Cuba policy once in South Florida. We analyze “waves” of migration and categorize them by “generations” or “vintages” (Pedraza 1985; Eckstein 2009; Grenier 2006). We explain the more conciliatory attitudes of the new arrivals by reference to the difficulties of the Special Period, to the emotive elements associated with family left behind, with distance from the Revolutionary upheaval which, we “know” shapes the attitudes of the “old guard.” The time of departure supposedly determines a migrant’s attitudes on US policy towards Cuba which, in turn, provides the Democratic and Republican parties with an ideological profile dictating their political strategy.

Another assumption is that second and third generation Cuban-Americans will exhibit a more conciliatory attitudes towards US-Cuba policy and will decide their partisan allegiance based on other policy considerations. But when demographic factors are controlled, it seems generational effects in political attitudes “may occur indirectly—perhaps through party identification” (Bishin and Klodstad 2012, 596). That is, party affiliation may drive policy attitudes rather than the other way around.

All of these assumptions place Cuba at the center of Cuban American universe and all assume that party identification and voting is dependent on a Cuban American’s attitude toward the island. Policy preferences are considered the independent variables (established in the insularity of the Cuban Enclave of South Florida by some yet undiscovered dynamic), and partisan alignment is viewed as the dependent variable. There is evidence that this is precisely backwards-- that Cuban Americans’ partisan allegiance influences their views on Cuba policy and that partisan allegiance is a product of how the two parties engage the community.

### **Exhibit A: Examining the Creation Myth**

At first, Cuban exiles were viewed as Cold War trophies by both parties, but Republicans were first out of the box in exploiting their symbolic capital. In 1964, Dr. Fernando Penabaz, a U.S.-born Cuban-American, was named the party’s National Chairman for Cuban American affairs (McDermott 1964, 1). Republicans mobilized Cuban women to run a bilingual phone bank and mailing campaign directed at Dade County residents urging them to vote for Goldwater. “We can’t vote but we’re doing all we can to open the eyes of the American people...” said one of the Cuban women (Martinez 1964, 16-A).

Despite this strong appeal to the Cuban exiles, an analysis of the 1968 election published by the *Miami Herald*, showed that those Cubans who had become citizens split registrations evenly between the two parties: Democrats (39.9%) and Republicans (40.1%), with 20% Independent

voters. Cubans consistently voted for a Democrat for Mayor of the City of Miami--Steve Clark--and Democratic, staunchly anti-communist Congressional Representatives like Claude Pepper and Dante Fascell (Green, 1971, 3-G).

Cubans manned the trenches for both parties in the Florida in 1976. Alfredo Duran, a Bay of Pigs veteran, was Democratic Party State Chairman. Al Cardenas served as chairman of Gerald Ford's Latin community campaign in Dade County. Analysts of the period acknowledge that the growing Cuban American electorate was not monolithic in its political affiliation. Indeed, Cuban-American voters, still a small percentage of the population, were mostly registered as Democrats and split their allegiance between the two parties in the 1976 elections, with some estimating that Jimmy Carter won as much as 75% of the Cuban American vote (Torres, 1999; Cadava, 2020).

Chronicles of the period report vocal support for Carter's policy of rapprochement with Cuba, even as extremists violently attacked those who supported normalization of relations. Over 100 bombs exploded in the Miami area during 1975-1976 targeting businesses and individuals with conciliatory attitudes towards the Cuban government and attacks continued into the 1980s. Carter's policy encouraged Cuban Americans who wished to visit family on the island to express their desires publicly. Local travel agencies witnessed hundreds of Cubans requesting information about how to acquire visas to visit the island (Ayres 1977, 10). Preachers used to pulpit to support reproachment (Perez 1976, 12-AW). Although Cuban migrants supporting any U.S. policy that appeared to legitimize the Cuban government were often criticized and accused of being "communists" in the Spanish language media, there was no blanket stigma associated with the Democratic Party (Fabricio 1972, 8-C; Fabricio 1976). Democratic candidates running for local offices still received strong support from Cuban voters. All six Republican Cubans running for local office during the 1976 election cycle lost.

### **The Republican Turn: Party Building Strategy and Ronald Reagan**

The Republican Party's decision to organize Cuban-Americans was a strategic one. During the late 1970s and through the 1980s, Republicans developed a national party-building strategy designed to identify and invest in Latino talent throughout the country, particularly in strong Democratic regions. The goal was to diminish the winning margin of Democrats in statewide and national elections (Galvin 2010). In south Florida, Cuban-Americans were hungry for political recognition and Republicans were hungry for a base.

Florida Democrats held a majority of seats in the State Senate until 1995 and in the House until 1997. Since then both chambers have been controlled by Republicans. Cuban Americans led the vanguard of the Republican takeover, but Democrats were not helpless. Lost opportunities litter the path from the Reagan Revolution to when Lee Atwater anointed the 18<sup>th</sup> Congressional District as "belonging" to a Cuban American, namely Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Searingen 1989, 10A). One example is the scion of Cuban American politics, Lincoln Diaz Balart. The political influence of the Diaz-Balart family preceded their incorporation into the Republican Party. They were, in the contemporary parlance, "influencers." Lincoln's aunt was the first wife of Fidel Castro and his father served in the Cuban House of Representatives and founded an anti-revolutionary organization, La Rosa Blanca, when he settled in the United States. In 1982, Lincoln Diaz-Balart served as president of the Dade County Young Democrats and the Florida

Young Democrats. He was a member of the executive committee of the Dade County Democratic Party. That year he ran against Republican Humberto Cortina to represent State District 113. He lost. For the next three years he worked to organize Cuban American Democrats but received little support from the party.

In 1985, Diaz-Balart and his entire family switched parties. As a State Representative and later as a congressman, he and other Republican Cuban American state representatives frequented meetings of building trades and public sector labor unions and made working-class Cuban Americans part of their constituencies. They built the base by turning exiles into citizens, not by talking foreign policy. They built the base by responding to the needs of the elderly population, by supporting “comedores,” elderly dining halls, to deal with their nutritional and social needs, by providing career paths for young professionals, by assisting constituents in filling out immigration paperwork, insurance, and social security claims, by offering internships to their kids and job referrals or small business loan recommendations. The Republican Party built its base through constituent service, assisting Cuban-Americans in resolving their daily problems and the preoccupations that arise from being an immigrant in the United States (Grenier, 1990).<sup>i</sup>

Cuban American Democrats during this period were trying without success to encourage their party to engage with the community on all issues, not just US-Cuba policy. Polls repeatedly showed that Cubans favored generous social programs even as they favored a strong, anti-communist foreign policy. But Cuban-American Democrats felt that their party had “...written the Cuban Americans off.” Maria Elena Toraño, the highest-ranking Cuban-born official in the Carter administration, came back to Miami and offered her services to engage in party-building activities. “I was a woman, a Hispanic and a former appointee. I said I wanted to pay the party back for what it did for me,” she said. “Know what I heard? Nothing” (Fiedler 1985, 4E).

Cubans in the 1970s and early 1980s were alienated from other groups in South Florida. As Bob Simms, head of the Metro Dade Community Relations Board said in 1983, “[y]ou’ve got three distinct communities here with very little interaction between them” (Martinez, 1983). In the 1980s, both Anglos and African Americans feared and resisted a perceived “Cuban takeover.” The Black community castigated Cubans for being Spanish-speaking Anglos engaging in similar discriminatory practices while benefiting from government resources at the expense of established minority communities. The Official English ordinance passed in 1980 (repealed in 1993) after a bitter battle was cast by the Anglos as a fight for control of the county. In the 1984 legislative races the *Miami Herald* reported many non-Cubans voting against Cuban candidates out of anti-Cuban feelings (Zaldivar 1984, 1D).

The Republican Party and Ronald Reagan promised a way of integrating Cuban exiles into the American sociopolitical system, a way to achieve power and prestige. The Republican Party understood what the Democrats did not: “The Republican Party caters not only to the philosophy of Cuban Americans,” commented Maria Elena Toraño in 1985 “but also to their emotional need to be pampered” (Fiedler 1985, 4E). Pampering, in this case meant accepting the inconsistencies of Cuban American perspectives and focusing on making them feel welcomed. The Republican Party offered the safe harbor where Cubans could dock, loaded with the “omni presence of the past” as the cargo (Bustamante, 2021). “Pampering” helped develop the “social identity” of Cuban Americans as Republicans. In the 1984 elections, Reagan received 30 percent of the

national Latino vote and 80 percent of the Cuban American vote. By 1990 there were eight Cuban-American State legislators elected from south Florida, two state senators, and one Congressional representative in office-- all Republicans.

### **The Hard Line is not a Republican Trademark**

The one political characteristic, according to analysts and pundits, that separates Cubans from most other Latinos immigrant populations is their interest in foreign policy, particularly the issue of communism. This is the reason often given for the “natural” incorporation of Cuban Americans into the Republican Party. Still, a party’s attitude towards the community goes a long way in shaping how the party is viewed. The criticism of the Nixon trip to China was “managed” by the White House by meeting with Cuban American leaders. Party leaders approached the Dade Cuban Republican organization to conduct an “informal campaign” to rally support of Cuban Americans for the presidential trips to Communist countries. “The idea was not to get their public support necessarily but rather to commit them so that they would not speak out against the trip” (Fabricio 1973, 2B).

The Reagan hardline stance against socialist governments garnered the respect of many Cuban American Cold Warriors. But it is not true that the Democratic Party was viewed as being “soft” on Cuba by Cuban Americans. Not only did the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba occur during a Democratic administration, but, according to Carlos Prio, the former president of Cuba interviewed in Miami in 1976 while active in counter revolutionary activities, the most numerous and significant CIA operations against Castro occurred during the Kennedy period after the Bay of Pigs. After its creation in 1981, the Cuban American National Foundation donated generously to cold-war Democrats like Congressman Dante Fascell and Claude Pepper while supporting Reagan’s campaign against the Contras in Nicaragua.

Reagan’s successor, George H. W. Bush did not support the passage of the Cuban Democracy Act until his Democratic challenger for the presidency, Bill Clinton, forced his hand by announcing support. And not only did the U.S. embargo on trade reach maturity under a Democratic administration (Kennedy), it was codified by Clinton. Republicans were not significantly more hostile than Democrats towards Cuba-- until Obama changed the rules of the game.

### **Leadership Matters**

When Obama opened up diplomatic relations, travel, and commercial engagement with the island, he did so without consulting the old political guard of Miami. As Pepe Hernandez, president of the Cuban American Foundation (CANF) explained, “Like they say in domino, they’ve been shuffled off the table quite substantially in the past few years but especially since Dec. 17, 2014” (Mazzei 2016). The CANF, under Jorge Mas Santos, supported the Obama move in a public statement (Mas Santos 2008, A19) and a detailed white paper, “A New Course for U.S. Cuban Policy: Advancing People-Driven Change” (CANF 2009). After limited protests against Obama’s opening, the community adjusted to the new normal. By the time Obama left office, over 64% of Cuban-Americans supported the engagement initiatives. ([FIU Cuba Poll 2020](#)) The shift in community attitudes during the Obama years reflected the new normal established by Washington leadership.

If we combine the data sets of the FIU Cuba Poll, an accumulation of data points of over 10,000 respondents back to the early 1990s, a compelling, previously unexplored pattern is evident. When we control for the influence of demographic, socioeconomic, birthplace, and immigrant cohort variables, that is, when we measure *only* the influence of the political party occupying the White House, a strong, unambiguous pattern emerges: leadership from Washington has a significant and direct influence on the views of Cuban Americans towards U.S.-Cuba policy.

Exhibit A in this argument is the pattern established since the mid-1990s by the community's support for the hot-button issue of the embargo. During the George H. W. Bush administration, 85% of Cuban Americans in South Florida supported the embargo. By 1995, two years into the Clinton administration, support was at 82%. From 1995 to 2000, however, even as the Helms-Burton Act made it through a Republican Congress, the embargo endorsement rate declined by 3.6% per year — a total of 18 percentage points from 1995 to 2000. The George W. Bush years saw a stabilization of the embargo support at the level reached during the Clinton years. Approximately 63% supported it at the beginning of the administration and 64% supported at the end of his two terms.

During the Obama administration, support for the embargo resumed its decline by 2.6% per year. This resulted in a drop of 21 percentage points between 2008 and 2016. The ascension of Trump increased the rate of support for the embargo by 5.1% per year, yielding a rise of more than 10 percentage points in merely two years. In short, whoever controls the White House shapes the attitudes about Cuba among Cuban Americans in south Florida. (Grenier and Lai, unpublished paper). Cubans, just like other Americans, take “cues” from their president.

### **Conclusion: Build it and they might come**

The Republicans deep party roots in south Florida allow its message to saturate the media, particularly the Spanish language media, and established a solid foundation for Republicans' “[unprecedented ground game](#)” in the 2020 elections. The Cuban American vote did not disappoint. There was a twenty-three percentage point swing from Democrat to Republican in Miami Dade County that cannot be explained by the changing attitudes of Cuban Americans on U.S.-Cuba relations. In 2020 Democrats lost two Democratic congressional districts which Trump had, in turn, lost by double digits in 2016, and where the Democratic incumbents went out of their way to be “tough” on Cuba. Democrats also lost every competitive State legislative race. A threshold has been crossed in the Cuban American community and in Miami-Dade County; Cuban Americans are central to the Republican wave in South Florida, a wave built though years of grassroots organizing and constituency service, not just pandering to Cuban American attitudes towards Cuba.

Are Democrats “out of the game?” There is still strong evidence that Cuban Americans voters are concerned with social issues. Not only is Cuba at the bottom of the priority list when voters are asked to rank concerns, but analysis of [national data](#) shows that they are considerably more liberal on core Republican issues than the typical Republican. They are closer to Democrats on student debt relief, health care, DACA, immigration and other policy issues.

Whether Democrats actually “gave upon Cuban Americans” might be contested by party strategist. But one thing is clear. The Democratic Party cannot establish credibility among Cuban Americans simply by being tough/tougher on Cuba. Equally clear is that the Democrats have no strategy to engage the Cuban voters as citizens, rather than an exile. Thanks to President Obama, for the first time since the 1959 Revolution the Democrats have an effective blueprint, if they chose to follow it, of how to engage Cuba and promote structural changes on the island. It is time for the party to develop a similar strategy towards engagement with the Cuban American voter. Put boots on the ground. Implement basic organizing strategies. Recognize and address the broad range of social, cultural, economic needs of Cuban-Americans. Engage aggressively and consistently with the community. Build trust among the voters. In other words, to quote Joe Hill, Don’t mourn! Organize! What’s the worst that can happen?

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<sup>i</sup> The author served as director of a labor center serving the labor movement of the entire State of Florida from the 1980s to 2002 and witnessed the incorporation of the Cuban workers into the Republican Party.

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