

The Role of Cuba in U.S. Presidential Election Campaigns  
William M. LeoGrande

Paper to be Presented at the XXI Edition of the Conversation Series «Cuba in the Foreign Policy of the United States of America»

Few countries have figured more prominently in U.S. elections than Cuba. From the first presidential campaign after the triumph of the revolution in 1959 to the 2020 contest, candidates have raised the issue either to criticize their opponent for being soft on Cuba and foreign policy generally, or to appeal to Cuban American voters in the battleground state of Florida. In the U.S. presidential election campaigns from the 1960s to the 1980s, Cold War themes predominated. Cuba was framed as a proxy for the Soviet Union, and a tough policy toward Cuba was seen as the hallmark of a strong foreign policy. The collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War coincided with the emergence of Cuban Americans as a significant voting bloc in Florida, generating a shift in how U.S. campaigns dealt with the issue of Cuba. The theme of Cuba as a national security threat was replaced by the theme of democracy and human rights, with candidates making vague promises to bring about regime change. Whereas the focus on national security in earlier elections targeted the general electorate, from the 1990s onward, candidates' appeals focused on Cuban American voters.

As Susan Eckstein has noted, there is an “ethnic electoral policy cycle” in U.S. policy toward Cuba. In election years, policy is far more likely to be driven by electoral concerns, resulting in tougher sanctions or an end to efforts to improve relations. There have been 16 U.S. presidential elections between 1960 and 2020. On six occasions, sitting presidents have tightened sanctions during an election year to bolster their party's electoral prospects:

- In 1960, encouraged by Vice-President and Republican candidate Richard Nixon, Dwight D. Eisenhower imposed the first trade sanctions on Cuba;
- In 1964, Lyndon Johnson prohibited travel to Cuba and pressured the Organization of American States to adopt mandatory sanctions;
- In 1992, George H. W. Bush signed the Cuban Democracy Act after challenger Bill Clinton endorsed it;
- In 1996, Clinton signed the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (Helms-Burton);
- In 2004, George W. Bush imposed limits on travel and family remittances to defuse criticism from Cuban American hardliners;
- In 2020, Donald Trump did the same in hopes of mobilizing the same Cuban American constituency.

On only a single occasion has the U.S. president relaxed sanctions during an election year; in 2016, Barack Obama eased elements of the embargo as part of his broader policy of normalizing relations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 2000, Congress passed the Trade Sanctions and Export Enhancement Act, which legalized the sale of agricultural products to Cuba but also prohibited tourism. President Clinton signed the bill, although he did not initiate the Cuba provisions.

Elections campaigns are not a healthy environment for diplomatic efforts either. On four occasions, impending U.S. elections have derailed efforts to improve relations between Washington and Havana:

- In 1964, Lyndon Johnson abandoned John F. Kennedy's incipient dialogue with Cuba for fear of looking soft;
- In 1976, Gerald Ford halted Henry Kissinger's normalization negotiations when Ronald Reagan attacked the talks in the Republican primary campaign;
- In 1979-80, Zbigniew Brzezinski convinced Jimmy Carter that his policy of normalization made him look soft;
- In 1996, when Bill Clinton reneged on his promise of dialogue after the shootdown of the Brothers to the Rescue aircraft.

This history does not bode well for any improvement in U.S.-Cuban relations during the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign just getting underway.

#### *Kennedy-Nixon 1960: Who Lost Cuba?*

Before the 1980s, the Cuba issue was raised by challengers as an example of the incumbent administration's weakness on foreign policy generally, especially in confrontation with the Soviet Union. The target audience was the general electorate; there were not enough U.S. citizens of Cuban origin in any state to make a difference at the ballot box.

In 1960, John F. Kennedy accused the Eisenhower-Nixon administration of having lost Cuba to communism (turning the tables on Republicans who in the 1950s accused Democrats of losing China). "If you can't stand up to Castro, how can you be expected to stand up to Khrushchev?" Kennedy taunted Vice-President Richard Nixon on the campaign trail.<sup>1</sup> From August 1960 through election day, Cuba was a staple of Kennedy's stump speech, offered as one example in a long line of Eisenhower's—and Nixon's-- foreign policy failures. Kennedy even made Cuba the main focus of his opening statement in the fourth presidential debate.

Worried that Castro's anti-American rhetoric and shift toward Moscow made him look soft, Nixon became one of the government's most outspoken advocates for economic sanctions to show, as he put it, "that we would not allow ourselves to be kicked around completely."<sup>2</sup> Nixon also promoted the paramilitary invasion that became the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961. He argued for speeding up the invasion of Cuba to happen before the November election. "It would have been a cinch to win the election if the Eisenhower administration destroyed Fidel Castro in the closing days of the presidential campaign," explained a top Nixon campaign aide.<sup>3</sup>

In an August 1960 Gallup poll, only 4.4 percent of respondents named Cuba as "the most important problem" facing the country, but Cuba contributed to the electorate's general malaise about the U.S. place in the world; 73.5 percent of respondents named foreign policy issues as most important, whereas only 12.8 percent cited domestic economic ones.<sup>4</sup> Kennedy's margin of victory was narrow; he won Texas and Illinois by a combined total of just over 55,000 votes.

#### *Johnson-Goldwater 1964: Dialogue Disrupted*

As Barry Goldwater's campaign got underway in the fall of 1963, he criticized Kennedy for promising Moscow that the United States would not attack Cuba as part of the deal that ended the 1962 missile crisis. He proposed that the United States establish a government-in-exile based at Guantánamo Naval Station, and train and equip an exile army for yet another invasion.<sup>5</sup>

Behind the scenes, Kennedy was moving in the opposite direction, hoping to exploit Fidel Castro's anger at Nikita Khrushchev for removing Soviet nuclear missiles from Cuba. Kennedy offered Castro normal relations if Cuba would expel the Soviets. A tentative dialogue was just beginning when Kennedy was assassinated, but President Lyndon Johnson decided to shelve Kennedy's initiative. The president did "not want to appear soft on anything, especially Cuba," National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy told his staff.<sup>6</sup> That was especially true in an election year when he expected his Republican opponent to be a hawkish Cold Warrior like Nixon or Goldwater. Instead, Johnson pushed a reluctant Organization of American States to impose mandatory sanctions against Cuba, breaking all diplomatic and commercial relations with Cuba. Only Mexico refused to comply.

Cuba was not a significant issue in the 1964 campaign itself, but when it came up, Johnson tried to take partial credit for Kennedy's success in the missile crisis to inoculate himself from Goldwater's attacks.<sup>7</sup> Goldwater's belligerence on Cuba contributed to his main liability, the fear that he would provoke a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. But to keep Cuba off the campaign agenda in 1964, Johnson sacrificed the opportunity to normalize relations that Kennedy had begun.

#### *Humphrey-Nixon 1968 and McGovern-Nixon 1972: Vietnam*

The issue of Vietnam dominated the 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns and Cuba received hardly a mention. When asked, in 1968, if he favored "softening" the embargo, Nixon replied, "Nothing could be further from the truth," and pledged to tighten it.<sup>8</sup> Hubert Humphrey, when asked, was noncommittal, saying that a change in the embargo should only be done "in consultation" with the Organization of American States, but that the policy "ought to be examined."<sup>9</sup> Notably, the 1972 Democratic Party Platform, written by the progressive Democratic majority that nominated George McGovern, called for normalizing relations: "After 13 years of boycott, crisis and hostility, the time has come to re-examine our relations with Cuba and to seek a way to resolve this cold war confrontation on mutually acceptable terms."<sup>10</sup> On the campaign trail, however, McGovern said nothing about Cuba policy and a lengthy foreign policy statement released by his campaign in October 1972 did not even mention it.<sup>11</sup>

Although Cuba was not a campaign issue, these two campaign cycles marked the first stirring of national political activism by Cuban Americans in Florida. With the passage of the Cuban Adjustment Act in 1966, increasing numbers of exiles were becoming permanent residents and then citizens. As the community faced the reality that there was little chance of deposing Fidel Castro, politically active members turned their attention first to local and then national politics. Miami was home to both Cuban Americans for Nixon in 1968 and 1972, and Cuban Americans for McGovern in 1972. Presidential candidates at campaign events in south Florida learned to expect questions about their stance on Cuba. Even though the number of eligible Cuban voters in Florida was still too small (at roughly 82,000) to affect the outcome of most statewide elections, the rate at which they were registering foreshadowed their future influence, and it did not bode well for Democrats. An analysis of predominantly Cuban precincts in Miami-Dade in 1968 revealed the community's conservatism. Together, Nixon and Governor George Wallace, running as a segregationist independent, won 60 percent of the Cuban American vote.<sup>12</sup>

*Carter-Ford 1976: Dialogue Disrupted, Again*

By 1974, the bipartisan support for the embargo that prevailed in the 1960s was gone. Liberal Democrats in Congress openly favored normalizing relations and, with the support of moderate Republicans, threatened to end the embargo legislatively. At the OAS, Latin American governments were demanding repeal of the 1964 resolution imposing mandatory sanctions. President Gerald Ford's secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, concluded that the diplomatic cost of maintaining the embargo had become greater than the domestic political cost of lifting it. Moreover, rapprochement with Cuba fit neatly into Kissinger's global strategy of détente with the Soviet Union and China. From 1974 to early 1976, U.S. and Cuban diplomats conducted talks aimed at normalizing relations. The talks broke down over Cuba's decision in November 1975 to send combat troops to Angola to fend off an invasion by South Africa, and its political reverberations in domestic U.S. politics.

In late 1975, Ronald Reagan launched a primary challenge to Ford's nomination, attacking the whole architecture of détente, and focusing on Ford's policy toward Cuba and the Panama Canal. Reagan made his first campaign stop in Miami where he criticized Ford for negotiating with Havana, and returned to Florida in early January 1976, declaring he would not talk to the Cuban government until Castro kicked out the Soviets, agreed to let the United States keep Guantánamo Naval Station, restored democratic rights, and "stops exporting his revolution to other countries."<sup>13</sup>

By 1976, the number of Cuban American eligible voters in Florida had doubled since the 1970 census, hitting 161,000. That year the number of Cubans seeking naturalization jumped four-fold from previous years, and they began registering to vote. "There was a time when becoming an American citizen was regarded by some older leaders as unpatriotic," explained Alfredo Duran, Bay of Pigs veteran and chairman of the Florida Democratic Party. "Now, everybody wants to have an American passport and the right to vote."<sup>14</sup> For the first time, Cuban American voters were a large enough constituency—some 23 percent of registered Republicans in Dade County—to potentially decide Florida's Republican primary.

Speaking in Orlando days before the primary, Reagan accused Kissinger and Ford of "working for months, for almost year, to buddy up to Castro, to relax tensions and have relations with Castro's Cuba."<sup>15</sup> Ford countered by breaking off negotiations with Havana. "Let me say categorically and emphatically," he declared during a February campaign stop in Florida, "the United States will have nothing to do with Castro's Cuba—period." Visiting Miami again two weeks later, the president called Castro "an international outlaw," and promised to accelerate the naturalization process for some 30,000 eligible Cuban immigrants so they could vote in November.<sup>16</sup>

Ford won the Florida primary with 53 percent of the vote to Reagan's 47 percent, but Reagan won the Cuban American vote handily, 71 to 29 percent.<sup>17</sup> Reagan's focus on Ford's abortive effort at detente with Cuba damaged Ford's appeal to Cuban Americans. In 1968 and 1972, they were staunch Nixon supporters because of his anti-communism. In the 1976 general election, Jimmy Carter, who said almost nothing about Cuba during the campaign other than to promise not to lift the embargo, won 48 percent of the Cuban vote to Ford's 52 percent—the best a Democrat would do until Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign.<sup>18</sup>

Asked what had derailed Kissinger's attempted rapprochement, a Cuban official replied, "Your elections."<sup>19</sup>

*Carter-Reagan, 1980: Mariel*

In 1980, Reagan renewed his attack on détente, and once again, Cuba was held up as proof of the incumbent's weakness. Reagan's stump speech featured an extended discussion of Cuba as an aggressive Soviet proxy. "It's time to stop pretending that detente with the Soviet Union is still alive while it arms Cubans to the teeth and sends them to secure Soviet beachheads in the third world," Reagan said. "Why couldn't we blockade Cuba and then say to the Soviets, 'When your troops get out of Afghanistan, we will drop the blockade around Cuba?'" Carter had been foolish, Reagan said, to offer Cuba "a hand of friendship" to normalize relations. "I do not believe that relations can be normalized between our two countries," he said, "until Cuba is out from underneath Soviet domination and Cuba is ready to restore freedom to its people."<sup>20</sup>

Campaigning in Miami's "Little Havana" on the eve of the Florida primary, Reagan attended the annual Calle de Ocho festival, laid a wreath at the monument to the exiles killed at the Bay of Pigs, and then held a press conference limited to Cuban American journalists, where he criticized the Carter administration for "harassing... those who are sympathetic with the freeing of Cuba"—a reference to federal investigations of a wave of terrorist bombings and assassinations by Cuban exile paramilitary groups.<sup>21</sup>

The Mariel migration crisis in the summer of 1980 shifted the terms of the campaign debate about Cuba from its alleged role as a Soviet proxy to its threat to border security. Carter's inability to control the southern border—following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the seizure of American hostages in Iran—reinforced the public's perception that the president was incapable of defending the interests of the United States abroad. "Carter couldn't get the Russians to move out of Cuba," Reagan quipped, "so he's moving out the Cubans."<sup>22</sup>

On November 4, 1980, Ronald Reagan won a landslide victory, carrying Florida 55 to 35 percent and winning 80 percent of the Cuban American vote. The 1980 election marked an inflection point after which presidential candidates targeted their messages on Cuba not to the electorate as a whole but to one specific bloc of highly motivated voters—Cubans in Florida. The theme of Cuba as a proxy for the Soviet Union disappeared with the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union. But the Cuban *exilio* still cared deeply about U.S. policy toward the island and were willing to put their money and their growing electoral power behind candidates who agreed with them-- and punish those who did not.

*Mondale-Reagan, 1984: Emergence of the Cuban American Voting Bloc*

Reagan's hardline anti-communism, his military aid to rightwing dictatorships in Latin America, his invasion of Cuba's ally Grenada, and his support for Radio Martí endeared him to the Cuban American right. In turn, Reagan saw Cuban Americans as an important political ally for defending his Central American policy from hostile congressional Democrats. Early in the administration, Richard V. Allen, Reagan's first national security adviser, encouraged a group of wealthy exiles to create the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), which became one of the most powerful ethnic foreign-policy organizations in the United States and so dominated Cuban American politics in Florida that it was known to all simply as "la Fundación."<sup>23</sup> The Cuban American community went from being a relatively small, disorganized electorate only influential in primaries, to being a highly organized political force and key component of the Republican base for winning Florida in general elections.

Yet Reagan said little about Cuba in 1984 except when speaking to Cuban American audiences. In March 1984, he invited 200 prominent Cuban Americans to the White House. "What we are witnessing to the south is a power play by Cuba and the Soviet Union, pure and

simple,” Reagan declared. “Like a roving wolf, Castro's Cuba looks to its peace-loving neighbors with hungry eyes and sharp teeth.”<sup>24</sup> But he made no campaign trips to Florida and rarely mentioned Cuba in his standard stump speech. He didn't need to. “Reagan's anti-communist rhetoric is so strong that the Cubans are simply in love with him,” admitted former Democratic Party state chair Alfredo Duran. In the year leading up to the 1984 election, 75 percent of new Cuban American voters registered as Republicans in Dade County, and the total number of registered Republicans among Cuban Americans overtook the total number of Democrats.<sup>25</sup> In November, Reagan won between 88 and 93 percent of the Cuban American vote in Florida.

*Dukakis-Bush, 1988: The Case of Orlando Bosch*

George H. W. Bush framed his 1988 campaign as a continuation of the reign of Reagan. Had he spoken Spanish, he might have coined the slogan, “Somos continuidad.” Like Reagan before him, he portrayed Democrats as weak and incompetent, especially on foreign and defense policy. And like Reagan, he downplayed the Cuba issue except when appealing directly to Cuban Americans.

The 1988 campaign offered conservative Cuban Americans an opportunity to flex their new found political muscle. The Reagan-Bush administration's resumption in 1987 of the 1984 migration agreement, suspended by Havana when Radio Martí went on the air, was opposed in Miami. Expanded cultural exchanges heightened suspicions that Reagan and Bush were no longer committed to regime change. “Reagan came into office like Rambo, but now he is acting more like Mickey Mouse,” said Tomas Garcia Fuste, news director at Miami's most popular Spanish-language radio station.<sup>26</sup> In February, four Cuban American Republican state legislators wrote Reagan an open letter complaining that he had done little to free Cuba from Castro.<sup>27</sup>

The case of Orlando Bosch crystalized conservative Cuban Americans' fear that Reagan and Bush no longer saw Cuba as a priority. Bosch was responsible for a number of terrorist attacks on Cuban targets, the most infamous being the 1976 bombing of a Cuban civilian airliner killing all 73 people on board. He was arrested after entering the United States illegally in 1988 and the Department of Justice began proceedings to deport him. On the Cuban American right, Bosch was seen as a hero, and his supporters launched a movement to pressure Reagan to let him stay in the United States. The erosion of Cuban American support for the administration was serious enough to bring Reagan to Miami on a campaign trip for Bush. Outside the venue, 250 Cuban Americans demonstrated their support for Bosch, and airplanes circled overhead with banners reading, “No Negotiations with Cuba,” and “Don't Play with Words -- Stop Talking With Castro.” Inside, Reagan met privately with several dozen Cuban American luminaries to reassure them he was not going soft on Castro.<sup>28</sup> At a fundraising luncheon, he let loose with rhetorical guns blazing. “There is an unbridgeable gulf between the governments of the United States and Cuba,” he said. “It is the gulf between freedom and tyranny. And as far as this administration is concerned, freedom for Cuba, liberty for her people, is a non-negotiable demand...So long as Cuba remains an inhuman communist dungeon...there cannot and must not be any normalization of relations.”<sup>29</sup>

Cuban Americans' frustration with the Reagan-Bush administration's Cuba policy did not redound to the benefit of Democrats. “The idea that Cuba has been abandoned as a priority foreign policy goal is a cause of great disgust, or dissatisfaction,” noted Miami Mayor Xavier Suárez. “but not enough to make anyone switch to the opponents.”<sup>30</sup> Another Cuban American put it this way: “Most of us are one-issue voters, and we vote for the candidate who hates Castro the most. And this time that's clearly Bush.”<sup>31</sup> In the general election, Bush won 85 percent of the

Cuban American vote in Florida. A year and a half later, he directed the Justice Department to drop its effort to deport Bosch, allowing him to remain in the United States.<sup>32</sup>

*Clinton-Bush, 1992: The Cuban Democracy Act*

The 1992 presidential election was a watershed for the Cuba issue in U.S. presidential elections. The Cuban American community's anti-communism had led it to support Republicans by wide margins, so Democrats paid little attention to it before 1992. Moreover, Florida was not generally regarded as a swing state. Since Harry Truman's victory in 1948, Democrats had only won the state twice (Johnson in 1964 and Carter in 1976). Mondale made just one campaign stop in Florida after his nomination in 1984, and Dukakis scaled back campaign operations there two months before the 1988 election.

As former governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton was determined to break the Republicans' hold on the south and Florida was one of his targets. Florida's rapid population growth made its electorate more heterogeneous than that of other southern states—retirees from the northeast, Latinos from various countries, Puerto Ricans, Haitians, and more. Population growth also made Florida more important. In 1960, it had just 10 electoral votes; by 1992, it had 25—the fourth largest behind California, New York, and Texas. For a Republican candidate, finding a path to victory without Florida had become nearly impossible.

The political weight of Cuban Americans had also grown dramatically during the Reagan-Bush years. "In a close general election in which Cuban Americans turn out more heavily than anyone else, they can give a Republican candidate a net gain of up to six percentage points," noted Robert Joffe, director of the Mason-Dixon Florida Poll.<sup>33</sup>

Clinton sought to win between a quarter and a third of the Cuban American vote—enough so that Democrats' advantage among the elderly, non-Cuban Latinos, and African Americans would be enough to carry the state. Early in the campaign, Clinton saw an opportunity to outflank President Bush on the right. A bill to tighten the embargo, the Cuban Democracy Act, was working its way through Congress, sponsored by two Democrats, Representative Robert Torricelli of New Jersey (the state with the second largest concentration of Cuban Americans) and Senator Bob Graham of Florida. President Bush opposed the bill because its extraterritorial provisions threatened to damage relations with Canada and U.S. allies in Europe and Latin America. It would also have prohibited U.S. assistance to Boris Yeltsin's new government in Russia unless Yeltsin cut off all aid to Cuba.

On April 23, 1992, Clinton attended a fundraiser organized by Torricelli at Victor's Cafe in the heart of Little Havana, with 300 of Miami's wealthiest Cuban Americans. "I think this administration has missed a big opportunity to put the hammer down on Fidel Castro and Cuba," Clinton told the largely Republican audience. "I have read the Torricelli-Graham bill and I like it." Clinton's campaign raised \$125,000 that evening.<sup>34</sup> Clinton's gambit was carefully orchestrated by Torricelli and Torricelli's close friend and patron, Cuban American National Foundation President Jorge Mas Canosa. Mas sent word to Clinton in March that if he would endorse the CDA, Mas would open the doors to the Cuban American community for him, which, not coincidentally, would pressure Bush to support the bill.<sup>35</sup>

When Bush learned of Clinton's move on Cuba, he told State Department officials, "I will not be upstaged on Cuba by Bill Clinton." Less than two weeks after Clinton's Miami endorsement, Bush announced that he, too, supported the CDA.<sup>36</sup> Signing the bill in Miami, Bush declared, "For freedom to rise in Cuba, Fidel Castro must fall.... Our policy is plain and simple: Democracy, Castro. Not sometime, not someday, but now."<sup>37</sup>

But the political damage to Bush had been done. Clinton had established his bona fides as tougher on Cuba than his Republican opponent. In September, 13 Cuban American members of the Dade County Republican Party Executive Committee broke with their party to endorse Clinton because they believed he would do more to rid Cuba of Fidel Castro than Bush. "President Bush comes to Miami and tells the Cuban community that he wants to free Cuba," they wrote in a statement announcing their endorsement. "Meanwhile, he does nothing to achieve that goal."<sup>38</sup>

Less than a week before the election, Clinton reaped his reward for helping Mas Canosa pass the CDA. After a campaign rally in Tampa, CANF leaders issued a statement thanking Clinton for supporting the CDA, and praising his "deep-seated commitment to continue exerting pressure on the Castro regime." Most importantly, the statement concluded, Clinton's Cuba policy had demonstrated to Cuban Americans that, "we need not fear a Bill Clinton administration."<sup>39</sup> The statement, drafted in consultation with the Clinton campaign, hit the Miami Cuban American community like a bombshell. The reaction of staunch Republicans was so intense that Mas felt compelled to publicly reaffirm that he would be voting for Bush out of loyalty, but that "my work for Cuba is much more important and far superior to my party preferences."<sup>40</sup>

Despite Clinton's best efforts, on election day, most Cuban Americans voted their traditional Republican loyalty; Bush won 71 percent of their votes to just 22 percent for Clinton. Bush carried Florida by only 100,000 votes, a victory so narrow that Cuban Americans could rightly claim credit for it. But it was a Pyrrhic victory since Clinton won nation-wide. The lesson that Democratic political operatives took from 1992 was that a tough stand on Cuba could erode Republican support among Cuban Americans enough to put Florida in play, forcing Republicans to devote time and money there instead of elsewhere. Florida had become a swing state.

#### *Clinton-Dole, 1996: Helms Burton*

In 1994 and 1995, President Clinton signed migration agreements with Cuba to staunch the flow of undocumented refugees that began with the "rafters crisis" in the summer of 1994. Uncontrolled migration posed a bigger political threat to Clinton than angry Cuban Americans in south Florida. The accords made Republicans suspect that Clinton might take further steps to improve bilateral relations, so Senator Jesse Helms and Congressman Dan Burton introduced legislation to tie Clinton's hands. The Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (known simply as Helms-Burton) was designed to block foreign investment in Cuba, tighten the embargo, and prohibit its repeal until Cuba became a free-market democracy and compensated all U.S. citizens—including naturalized Cuban Americans—whose property was confiscated after 1959. The Clinton administration opposed the bill and threatened to veto it because it infringed on the president's constitutional authority to make foreign policy.

On February 24, two Cessna aircraft from the Cuban American group Brothers to the Rescue (BTTR) were shot down by Cuban MiG fighters as the Cessnas approached Cuban airspace. All four pilots were killed. The shutdown drastically altered the political environment in Washington. "Clinton has tried to cozy up to Castro for three years," charged Republican senator and presidential candidate Robert Dole. "If I'd been in the Oval Office, I think there's a good chance Castro might be gone because we'd have tightened the screws."<sup>41</sup> Campaigning in Miami with the Florida primary just weeks away, Dole demanded that "the murderers" responsible for the shutdown be indicted, convicted and executed.<sup>42</sup>



In the White House, the president's political advisers argued that he had no choice but to sign the Helms-Burton bill despite his objections to it. Helms exploited Clinton's vulnerability by adding a new provision, writing the embargo into law so that only Congress could lift it. The White House did not object. On March 12, 1996, Clinton signed the bill into law and handed the pen to Jorge Mas Canosa as a souvenir. "Supporting the bill was good election-year politics in Florida," Clinton wrote in his autobiography, "but it undermined whatever chance I might have had if I won a second term to lift the embargo in return for positive changes within Cuba."<sup>43</sup>

It was good politics; Clinton's support for the Helms-Burton immunized him from Republican attacks on his Cuba policy. Dole tried to energize Cuban Americans by ratcheting up his rhetoric. "The appeasement policy of the Clinton Administration will be replaced with an iron resolve to bring Fidel Castro down and end his regime of terror in Cuba," Dole told a Cuban American crowd during a campaign swing through Florida.<sup>44</sup> But the Republican party's anti-immigrant stance and support for making English the only official language undercut Dole's appeal. "The Cuban issue is just a litmus test that has to be passed," explained political scientist Dario Moreno. Once a candidate passed that test by demonstrating his toughness on Cuba, as Clinton had by supporting Helms-Burton, then other issues became more salient for them.<sup>45</sup>

In November, Clinton won between 35 and 40 percent of the Cuban American vote—the best showing since Jimmy Carter in 1976—although he carried Florida by such a wide margin that he would have won the state even if he had done no better in 1996 among Cuban Americans than he had in 1992. The result reinforced the lesson Democratic campaign operatives took from 1992: a Democratic candidate had to be just as tough as Republicans on Cuba, if not tougher, so that Cuban Americans would vote based on other issues, where Democrats held the advantage.

#### *Gore-Bush, 2000: Elián González*

The 2000 presidential campaign had just begun when the five year old boy was found floating in an inner tube in the Florida Strait on Thanksgiving Day, 1999. His mother and 10 others drowned when their small smugglers' boat capsized enroute from Cuba to Miami. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) released the boy into the custody of his great uncle Lazaro González in Miami, but his father in Cuba, Juan Miguel González, wanted his son back. The "Miami relatives," as they came to be known, refused to give him up. Elián became symbol to the Cuban American community in Miami—the "miracle boy" saved by divine intervention, the symbol of Cuba's youth, of Cuba's future. A *Miami Herald* poll found that 91 percent of Cuban Americans in South Florida believed Elián should stay in the United States.<sup>46</sup> "Since the Bay of Pigs, there hasn't been an issue of this level of importance to Cuban American voters," said Washington pollster Rob Schroth.<sup>47</sup>

After determining that Elián's father was a good parent, the Clinton administration ruled that Elián should be returned to him.<sup>48</sup> Angry Republicans on Capitol Hill introduced legislation to give Elián U.S. citizenship, accusing the Clinton administration of wanting to "appease the Castro regime."<sup>49</sup> The presidential candidates were more circumspect, however, because public opinion outside the Cuban American community, both in Florida and nationally, favored returning the child to his father. In Miami-Dade, 81 percent of the black voters and 65 percent of the white voters favored Elián's return.<sup>50</sup> Nationally, in January 2000, 57 percent thought the boy belonged with his father and by April, that had grown to 68 percent.<sup>51</sup> On the Republican side, George W. Bush and John McCain both argued that Elián's father should be required to come to the United States to claim custody, and Bush voiced his support for the Congressional effort to make Elián a citizen by an act of Congress.<sup>52</sup> On the Democratic side, Al Gore said that he

avored “whatever is in the best interests of the child,” without venturing an opinion as to what that might be.<sup>53</sup>

In April, Juan Miguel González did come to the United States to pick up Elián, but the Miami relatives ignored a federal order to surrender him. Alex Penelas, the Democratic mayor of Miami-Dade County, warned that Cuban Americans would hold Gore accountable if Clinton returned Elián to Cuba. “It's guilt by association,” Penelas said, “and a lot of people think there is more he [Gore] should be doing.” The Cuban American National Foundation echoed the warning, threatening to work actively to defeat Gore. The Republicans seemed to almost relish the possibilities. “If Elián gets sent back,” said Jim Nicholson, chairman of the Republican National Committee, “the Cuban community will remember which party wanted to hand a small child back to Fidel Castro across a barbed-wire fence.”<sup>54</sup>

As the Department of Justice negotiated with the Miami relatives, Gore suddenly reversed his position, declaring that Elián should stay in the United States and that Congress should give him permanent residency. It was essentially George Bush’s position. “I’m glad the vice president now supports legal residency for Elián González,” Bush said when he heard the news. “I wish he could convince the rest of the administration of the wisdom of that approach.”<sup>55</sup>

Gore’s gambit was a political blunder of the first order. It was so obviously designed to appeal to Cuban American voters that it reinforced one of Gore’s major weaknesses—the public’s perception that he was an unprincipled opportunist whose views shifted with the prevailing political winds. Gallup found that the public disapproved of Gore’s handling of Elián’s case by a two-to-one margin.<sup>56</sup> “He turned off a great number of voters nationally because they considered him to be pandering to the Cuban-American community,” said pollster Sergio Bendixen, “and he didn't gain any Cuban American support.”<sup>57</sup> Gore’s decision may have cost him the election. Had he been forthright in taking a principled position in favor of returning Elián to his father, he might have limited the defection of progressive Democrats to Ralph Nader’s Green Party, which won more than 97,000 votes.

At 5:15 am on April 22, an Immigration and Naturalization Service SWAT team broke into the Miami relatives’ house and spirited Elián away. For many Cuban Americans, the forcible removal of Elián from his Miami relatives and his return to Cuba two months later produced a deep sense of betrayal. Gore tried to recover by picking Senator Joe Lieberman (D-Conn) as his running mate. Lieberman had been a close friend of CANF president Jorge Mas Canosa. In 1988, donations from CANF’s directors helped Lieberman narrowly defeat incumbent Senator Lowell Weicker and thereafter, Lieberman was consistently one of the top recipients of campaign donations from Cuban American hardliners. “Joe Lieberman is a great friend of the Cuban cause,” said Joe Garcia, CANF's executive director. “He's never failed to be with us.”<sup>58</sup>

For the remainder of the campaign, Gore focused on traditional Democratic strongholds in Florida, leaving Little Havana to Lieberman. Campaigning there in September, Lieberman pledged that a Gore administration would not relax sanctions on Cuba. “I will not rest until we all do what we can to achieve for the people of that great island the freedom that we treasure in the United States of America,” Lieberman told the group.<sup>59</sup> Gore declared himself “a hardliner” on Cuba, adding, “I do not favor any openings to the Castro government.”<sup>60</sup>

Lieberman’s friendship with the Cuban American right was not enough to overcome the trauma of Elián’s return to Cuba, for which the community held Gore responsible, notwithstanding his lame attempt to distance himself from the decision. “It was humiliating to Cuban Americans,” noted pollster Sergio Bendixen, “and the 2000 election was payback.” They

called it “*el voto castigo*”—the punishment vote.<sup>61</sup> In November, Al Gore won only about 23 percent of the Cuban American vote, losing the election by just 537 votes. “I had worked for eight years to strengthen our position in the state and among Cuban Americans,” Bill Clinton lamented in his memoir, “and the Elián case had wiped out most of our gains.”<sup>62</sup>

### *Kerry-Bush, 2004: Who’s Tougher?*

The pivotal role that Cuban Americans played in George W. Bush’s razor thin victory in 2000 raised expectations in the community that Bush would toughen U.S. sanctions. When, after three years in office, nothing much had changed, conservative Cuban Americans became increasingly disaffected. The catalyst that turned disaffection into open revolt was the administration’s July 2003 decision to return to the island 12 Cubans who had hijacked a research vessel to come to the United States. In response, 13 Florida legislators, 11 of them Cuban Americans, wrote to the president calling the decision “misguided and offensive.” The Cuban American community was impatient for Bush to deliver on his campaign promise to increase pressure on Cuba, they warned. If he did not, “we fear the historic and intense support from Cuban American voters for Republican federal candidates, including yourself, will be jeopardized.”<sup>63</sup> Governor Jeb Bush, the president’s brother, underscored the seriousness of the political risk by publicly breaking with the administration, calling the return of the hijackers “just not right,” and acknowledging that the Washington had no “coherent policy” toward Cuba.<sup>64</sup>

A March 2004 Univision poll of south Florida Hispanic voters, a majority of whom were Cuban, disapproved of the job Bush had done “promoting democracy and regime change” in Cuba.<sup>65</sup> A second poll of Miami-Dade Republican voters found that while 88 percent supported President Bush, 70 percent agreed that Bush had not done enough to pressure Cuba, suggesting that his support was soft.<sup>66</sup> “There will be a real fight for the Cuban exile vote,” predicted pollster Sergio Bendixen.<sup>67</sup>

Democrats saw Cuban American frustration as an opportunity. As if on cue, Democratic aspirants began courting Cuban American leaders and toughening their own stance on Cuba to outflank Bush on the right, as Clinton did to George H. W. Bush in 1992. Vermont Governor Howard Dean abandoned his prior position in favor of “constructive engagement” claiming that the recent arrest of dissidents in Cuba meant “we can’t do it right now.”<sup>68</sup> Back in 2000, Senator John Kerry (D-Mass) said that a reassessment of the embargo was “long overdue” and that U.S. policy remained frozen in place only “because of the power of the Cuban American lobby.” But in September 2003 on *Meet the Press*, when asked if he would lift U.S. sanctions, he said no. “Not unilaterally, not now, no.... I don’t like Fidel Castro. I wouldn’t just give him a reward for nothing, no.” Instead, Kerry suggested increasing U.S. support for dissidents, although he stuck by his past support for freer travel because, “I think that people traveling in there weakens Castro.”<sup>69</sup>

Presidents have a unique advantage in a campaign. Aspiring candidates can only make promises; the president can act. On May 6, 2004, the special presidential Commission on Assistance to Free Cuba issued its first report, recommending a menu of policy options “to bring about an expeditious end to the Castro dictatorship.”<sup>70</sup> President Bush promptly accepted them all. The new sanctions were aimed at constricting the flow of hard currency, crippling the economy, stoking popular discontent, and thereby precipitating the Cuban government’s collapse—the same logic that had animated the embargo since its imposition in 1962. The new sanctions had a significant impact on Cuban Americans, cutting allowed family visits from one trip annually to only one trip every three years with no provisions for emergency exceptions.

They limited visits to immediate family members, and cut what visitors could spend while in Cuba by two-thirds. The new regulations also restricted remittances and the gift packages that Cuban Americans could send to family members.

The policy package was the product of an intense debate inside the administration between those who advocated even tougher measures like cutting off remittances entirely, and those who feared the humanitarian impact that would have on Cuban families.<sup>71</sup> The final policy package was a political gamble. By catering to Cuban American hard-liners' demands to put maximum pressure on the Castro government, Bush risked alienating members of the community whose ability to visit family and send remittances was being limited. This was not a small group. A 2004 poll by Florida International University among Cubans living in south Florida found that 36.5 percent had visited Cuba and 53.6 percent had sent family remittances.<sup>72</sup>

In fact, a significant part of the community opposed the restrictions and even the Cuban American National Foundation criticized them.<sup>73</sup> A Southwest Voter Registration Education Project poll found that while 59 percent of Cuban Americans supported Bush's policy overall, 37 percent opposed limiting family visits to once every three years and 64 percent opposed the elimination of emergency visits. The responses were polarized between older, Cuban-born respondents who arrived in the United States before 1980, and younger, more recent arrivals, and respondents born in the United States. The older group, who had fewer immediate family still on the island, favored the harsh sanctions by wide margins.<sup>74</sup> Those who supported the sanctions were more likely to be naturalized U.S. citizens, more likely to register to vote, and more likely to turn out to vote, than those who opposed them.

A month after the new sanctions were unveiled, a Bendixen poll found that Kerry was leading Bush 40 to 29 percent among Cubans who arrived after 1980 (with 31 percent undecided) and by 58 to 32 percent among Cuban Americans born in the United States (10 percent undecided). But among those who arrived before 1980, who constituted two-thirds of Cuban American eligible voters, Bush held a dominant 89 to 8 percent lead, with just 3 percent undecided. Those favoring Kerry constituted just 25 percent of the Cuban American electorate.<sup>75</sup> On balance, more respondents said Bush's sanctions made them more likely rather to vote for him rather than less.<sup>76</sup> Bush's gamble had paid off.

Kerry tried to exploit the split in the community by reorienting his appeal toward opponents of Bush's sanctions, attacking Bush's new initiative as a "cynical and misguided ploy for a few Florida votes [that] punishes and isolates the Cuban people." As an alternative he offered "selective engagement," including "principled travel" by Cuban Americans, unlimited remittances, and educational and cultural exchanges.<sup>77</sup> Republicans hit back by accusing Kerry of "flip-flopping" on Cuba, elevating the term to permanent place in the American political lexicon.

Exit polls recorded that George W. Bush won 75 percent of the Cuban American vote in Florida to John Kerry's 25 percent, and once again, the state gave Bush his Electoral College majority. Bush won the state 52 to 47 percent, a margin so wide that Kerry would have had to win 72 percent of the Cuban American vote to close the gap—an impossible hurdle. But Kerry's strategy of appealing to moderate Cuban Americans with a policy supporting family engagement foreshadowed Barack Obama's approach four years later.

### *Obama-McCain, 2008: Appealing to Moderates*

Barack Obama took a radically new approach to campaigning on the issue of Cuba, abandoning the traditional Democratic strategy of trying to appeal to Cuban Americans by being

tougher than the Republicans. Instead, he offered a policy of diplomatic and people-to-people engagement focused on Cuban American families, arguing that the policy of the previous fifty years had failed. Hostility, isolation, and economic sanctions had not brought democracy to Cuba, nor had it improved the lives of the Cuban people.

The electoral logic underlying Obama's strategy was still aimed at winning enough Cuban American votes to put the Florida in play, forcing the Republican candidate to spend time and money in a state that Republicans could not afford to lose. But Obama's appeal was new, premised on the shift in Cuban American opinion resulting from demographic change in the community. When Florida International University began polling Cuban Americans in south Florida in 1991, 87 percent favored continuation of the U.S. embargo. By 2007, support had fallen to 58 percent. In 1993, 75 percent opposed the sale of food to Cuba and 50 percent opposed the sale of medicine. By 2007, solid majorities—62 percent and 72 percent respectively—supported both.<sup>78</sup>

Exiles who arrived in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, the “historical exile,” came as political refugees, motivated principally by their opposition to the socialist direction of the revolution. Those who arrived in the Mariel exodus in 1980 and afterwards were more likely to have left for economic reasons and to have maintained ties with family on the island. A 2007 poll of Cuban Americans in south Florida found that 58 percent were sending remittances to Cuba, but fewer than half of those who arrived before 1985 were doing so, whereas three quarters of recent arrivals were. In the 1990s, these attitudinal differences had little impact on Cuban American voting behavior because a higher proportion of the early arrivals were naturalized citizens and were also more likely to be registered and turnout to vote. In 2007, the registration rate for those who arrived before 1985 was over 90 percent, whereas for post-cold war arrivals who were citizens, the rate was only 60 percent.<sup>79</sup> But as more and more of the post-1980 immigrants obtained citizenship, and as the number of Cuban Americans born in the United States rose (reaching half the electorate by 2010), the electoral potential of the community's moderate wing became unmistakable.

Bush's 2004 limits on family visits and remittances brought latent differences in the community to the surface, and the Cuban American National Foundation's opposition to the Bush measures legitimized dissent from the traditional orthodoxy of unremitting hostility. In late 2006, twenty Cuban American organizations, including the foundation, called on Bush to relax restrictions on travel and humanitarian assistance.<sup>80</sup> By 2007, 64 percent of Cuban Americans in south Florida wanted the restrictions lifted and 41 percent reported that the restrictions had an impact on them personally.<sup>81</sup>

Obama laid out his Cuba policy in an opinion editorial in the *Miami Herald*, taking pains to assure Cuban Americans he was not soft on Cuba. “A democratic opening in Cuba is, and should be, the foremost objective of our policy,” he wrote. But he criticized Bush's policy as “grand gestures” and “posturing” that had further entrenched the regime by cutting off outside contact, especially with Cuban Americans. “Cuban American connections to family in Cuba are not only a basic right in humanitarian terms,” Obama wrote, “but also our best tool for helping to foster the beginnings of grass-roots democracy on the island.” He promised to lift all restrictions on Cuban American family travel and remittances and to pursue “aggressive and principled diplomacy” to convince the Cuban government to begin a process of democratization in exchange for better relations with Washington.<sup>82</sup> Obama's policy argument, put succinctly, was that the coercive approach to regime change had failed, so he would try engagement as an alternative.

Obama's primary opponent, Hillary Clinton, took the traditional Democratic posture pioneered by her husband: Be as tough on Cuba as the Republicans. Early in the campaign, Obama pledged to meet with the leaders of hostile countries because, "the notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them... is ridiculous."<sup>83</sup> That answer became the premise for charges that Obama was naïve and too inexperienced in foreign affairs to be trusted with the presidency—an attack spearheaded by Clinton and then taken up by John McCain. Clinton called Obama "irresponsible" and McCain called his offer of dialogue "the worst possible signal to Cuba's dictator."<sup>84</sup> Clinton said she would only meet with Castro if and when Cuba began a transition to democracy by "releasing political prisoners, ending some of the oppressive practices on the press, opening up the economy."<sup>85</sup>

Obama's position on family engagement was in sync with the evolving views of the Cuban American National Foundation's leadership, led since the death of founder Jorge Mas Canosa in 1997 by his son Jorge Mas Santos. Mas Santos shifted CANF toward the political center, prompting 20 hardline board members to resign in protest. The schism reproduced within CANF the generational cleavage within the community at large. In May 2008, CANF invited Obama, Clinton, and McCain to address its Cuban Independence Day celebration. Only Obama accepted. "It's time for more than tough talk that never yields results. It's time for a new strategy," Obama declared to a crowd of some 900. "There are no better ambassadors for freedom than Cuban Americans." He repeated his promise to allow unlimited family travel and remittances, but added a pledge to keep the embargo in place as "leverage" on the Cuban government, telling Cuba's leaders, "if you take significant steps toward democracy, beginning with the freeing of all political prisoners, we will take steps to begin normalizing relations."<sup>86</sup> He received several standing ovations. The McCain campaign was so angry they cancelled a planned fundraiser with CANF leaders and donors because the foundation had "embraced" Obama's Cuba policy. Just two weeks before the election, Jorge Mas Santos published an op-ed in the *Miami Herald* echoing Obama's critique of the Bush-McCain policy and endorsing a new strategy very much like Obama's.<sup>87</sup>

In November, Obama matched Bill Clinton's 1996 mark by winning roughly 35 percent of the Cuban American vote in Florida, proving the effectiveness of his appeal for engagement. Exit polling found that while 84 percent of south Florida Cuban American voters 65 or older voted for McCain, 55 percent of those 29 or younger backed Obama.<sup>88</sup> Yet as innovative and successful as Obama's strategy proved to be, it made no difference in the outcome of the election. Voters nationwide punished the Republican Party for the 2008 financial crisis, giving Obama a winning margin of 192 votes in the Electoral College, making Florida's electoral votes irrelevant. Obama carried Florida, but by such a large margin that he would have won the state even if he had drawn just 20 percent of the Cuban American vote.

### *Obama-Romney, 2012: Cuba Disappears*

Obama did not make much progress in his first term pursuing a new policy of engagement with Cuba. Within a few weeks of taking office, he kept his campaign promise to eliminate restrictions on Cuban American family travel and remittances. But before the end of the year, the arrest in Cuba of USAID "democracy promotion" subcontractor Alan Gross brought progress to a halt, and relations remained frozen for the next three years. As the 2012 campaign began, there was not much in Obama's Cuba policy for Republicans to attack.

Moreover, foreign policy played a minor role in the campaign. Domestic issues--recovery from the 2008 Great Recession and the controversial Affordable Care Act (aka

Obamacare)—dominated the agenda. The issue of Cuba flared briefly during the Republican primaries. Campaigning in Miami in January 2012, Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich tried to outdo one another professing their toughness on Cuba. Gingrich promised to use every “non-military tool,” including covert operations, to overthrow the Cuban government. Romney condemned Obama’s openings for family travel and remittances. Speaking to Cuban American civic leaders at a political rally in Miami’s Freedom Tower, Romney declared, “I want to be the American president that’s proud to be able to say, ‘I was president at the time that we brought freedom back to the people of Cuba.’”<sup>89</sup> He did not specify how he would accomplish that.

The issue of Cuba flared again in May when the Obama administration approved a visa for Raúl’s daughter, Mariela Castro, to visit the United States to speak at a conference on LGBTQ rights. “The United States should be standing up for freedom, not coddling the privileged children of communist dictators,” said a Romney campaign official. “Obama Rolling out the Red Carpet for the Castro Family,” headlined a Republican National Committee press release. A number of Florida Democrats jumped on the bandwagon condemning the decision. None mentioned that Mariela had visited the United States three times while George W. Bush was president.<sup>90</sup> Castro herself did not help matters by declaring, “I would vote for President Obama. I think he’s sincere and speaks from the heart.” The Romney campaign spliced her endorsement into a Spanish-language attack ad for television.<sup>91</sup>

But mostly, Romney steered clear of the Cuba issue, not mentioning it in his standard stump speech, even when he delivered it in Florida. Neither he nor vice-presidential nominee Paul Ryan had a strong record on the issue. While vying for the Republican nomination in 2008, Romney committed a serious gaffe by ending a campaign speech to a Cuban American audience by declaring, “Patria o Muerte! Venceremos!”—Fidel Castro’s signature closing for his orations.<sup>92</sup> Romney and the Republican Party’s tough stance on immigration did not help them with Cuban Americans, either. Libertarian Paul Ryan opposed constraints on foreign trade so he had voted repeatedly to lift the embargo on Cuba. “If we think engagement works well with China, well, it ought to work well with Cuba,” told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 2002. “The embargo doesn’t work. It is a failed policy.”<sup>93</sup> Even as a prospective presidential candidate, in April 2011, he told reporters in Tallahassee, “If we wouldn’t have had this embargo for 40 years, Castro would have been gone a long time ago.”<sup>94</sup> Ryan recanted this apostasy on the campaign trail in Florida, claiming that Cuban American Republicans in Congress had taught him the error of his ways. “They’ve given me a great education about how we need to clamp down on the Castro regime,” Ryan said during a campaign stop at Little Havana’s famous Versailles restaurant. “We will be tough on Castro.”<sup>95</sup> The Romney campaign tried to rally its Cuban American base by accusing Obama of “appeasement” for his policies on travel and remittances.<sup>96</sup> But a 2011 poll found that 61 percent of Cuban Americans opposed returning to George W. Bush’s restrictions.<sup>97</sup>

President Obama made more than a half dozen trips to Florida during the campaign and never once mentioned Cuba. Even though the final presidential debate was devoted to foreign policy and held in Florida, there was not a single question about Cuba and neither candidate raised the issue. Despite the low profile of the Cuba issue in the campaign, Obama improved on his 2008 showing significantly, winning half the Cuban American vote. Two statewide exit polls showed Obama either winning among Cuban Americans, 49 percent to Romney’s 47 percent (Edison Research National Election Pool), or losing narrowly, 48 percent to Romney’s 52 percent (Bendixen & Amandi International). No Democrat had ever done so well. The result seemed to

confirm the idea, often repeated by Democratic pollster Sergio Bendixen, that if the issue of the Cuba was not centerstage, Cuban Americans would vote their pocketbooks and elect Democrats.

*Clinton-Trump, 2016: The Art of the Deal*

President Obama's 2014 decision to re-establish diplomatic relations and begin a broader process of normalizing relations with Cuba set in motion a series of events lasting for the rest of his term in office. In 2015, the administration announced regulatory reforms relaxing elements of the embargo, removed Cuba from the list of state sponsors of international terrorism, and restored full diplomatic relations. Cuba was invited to the Seventh Summit of the Americas where Obama and Raúl Castro met for their first substantive discussion, and the two countries signed the first of what would ultimately be 22 bilateral accords on issues of mutual interest. In 2016, the administration issued three more rounds of regulatory reforms to broaden trade and Obama became the first U.S. president to visit Cuba since Calvin Coolidge in 1928.

Republican presidential aspirants were nearly unanimous in their opposition to Obama's opening, framing it as part of their narrative about Obama's weakness in foreign policy and his "appeasement" of America's enemies. Every new development in the normalization process prompted more hyperbolic Republican denunciations, especially from the two Cuban American candidates, Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz.<sup>98</sup> By being the most incessant and vitriolic critic of Obama's policy, Rubio managed to position himself among the leading contenders early in the race. Rubio called Obama, "the single worst negotiator we have had in the White House in my lifetime," arguing that the president gave the Cuban government "everything it asked for" and got nothing in return. "I am committed to unravel as many of these changes as possible," he added.<sup>99</sup> Cruz, burnishing his own Cuban American credentials, said of the new policy, "Fidel and Raúl Castro have just received both international legitimacy and a badly-needed economic lifeline from President Obama."<sup>100</sup> Governor Jeb Bush called the opening a "misstep" that "undermines America's credibility and undermines the quest for a free and democratic Cuba."<sup>101</sup> Donald Trump was equivocal, shifting positions several times during the course of the campaign.

Yet Cuba did not gain traction as a major campaign issue because support for Obama's opening was so widespread. A CBS-New York Times poll taken right after the December 17, 2014, announcement found that 54 percent of the public approved of both reestablishing diplomatic relations and allowing trade with Cuba, while only 28 percent disapproved. Other polls found similar results.<sup>102</sup> Seven months later, support for Obama's policy had grown, with 73 percent of the public in favor of diplomatic relations and 72 percent in favor of ending the embargo, according to a Pew Research poll. A majority of Republicans agreed (56 percent and 59 percent in favor respectively), as did even self-identified conservative Republicans (52 percent and 55 percent in favor).<sup>103</sup>

The new policy found significant support even among Cuba Americans. A Bendixen & Amandi national poll in March 2015 found 51 percent of Cuban Americans in support of normalization and a plurality of 47 percent in favor of lifting the embargo. Those living in Florida supported Obama's policy (52 percent in favor, 40 percent opposed).<sup>104</sup> A Florida International University poll in the summer of 2016, after Obama's trip to Cuba, found that support among Cuban Americans for a policy of normalization had grown to 56 percent and support for ending the embargo to 54 percent.<sup>105</sup>

Hillary Clinton, who had taken a tough stance on Cuba in the 2008 campaign now embraced normalization. At the start of the campaign in July 2015, she gave a major speech in Miami echoing Obama's argument that the embargo was a failure that should be ended, and promised to expand on his policy of engagement. Yet her tone was noticeably more explicit about trying to catalyze internal political change. She did not shy away from arguing that



engagement would weaken the Cuban regime and hasten its “day of reckoning with the Cuban people.” The embargo had only strengthened the hand of hardliners in Havana, “helping the regime keep Cuba a closed and controlled society rather than working to open it up to positive outside influences,” she said. “Engagement is not a gift to the Castros—it’s a threat to the Castros. An American embassy in Havana isn’t a concession—it’s a beacon. Lifting the embargo doesn’t set back the advance of freedom—it advances freedom.”<sup>106</sup>

Donald Trump’s campaign was never heavy on policy details and Cuba was no exception. At first, he supported Obama’s policy, albeit with a caveat. “Fifty years is enough,” he said in late 2015. “The concept of opening with Cuba is fine, but we should have made a better deal.”<sup>107</sup> A few months later, during the March 2016 Republican primary debate, he stumbled through answering a question about Cuba, concluding, “I would want to make a good deal, I would want to make a strong, solid, good deal because right now, everything is in Cuba’s favor...All we do is keep giving. We give and give and give.... I would probably have the embassy closed until such time as a really good deal was made and struck by the United States.”<sup>108</sup> Less than two weeks later, he told CNN that he would probably maintain diplomatic relations. “Maybe it won’t work out, but I will tell you, I think Cuba has a certain potential and I think it’s OK to bring Cuba into the fold.”<sup>109</sup>

Trump said little more about Cuba until September 2016, when *Newsweek* magazine broke the story that in 1998, Trump secretly explored the possibility of opening business operations in Cuba, in violation of the U.S. embargo, and then tried to disguise the illegal activity as an allowable charitable project.<sup>110</sup> At that time, Trump was flirting with running for president on Ross Perot’s Reform Party ticket, and delivered a fiery speech to Cuban Americans in Miami, denouncing Fidel Castro as “a killer” and pledging to maintain the embargo.<sup>111</sup>

The Clinton campaign jumped on the story as yet another example of Trump’s dishonesty and habit of putting his personal business interests ahead of the national interest.<sup>112</sup> Trump hurried to Miami to shore up his support among hardline Cuban Americans and shortly thereafter announced a new Cuba policy via Twitter: “The people of Cuba have struggled too long. Will reverse Obama’s executive orders and concessions towards Cuba until freedoms are restored.”<sup>113</sup>

In the final weeks of the campaign, the Republican ticket focused on energizing its Florida base, including conservative Cuban Americans. Campaigning in Miami, Trump and Pence both pledged to roll back Obama’s policy in its entirety. “We will support continuing the embargo until real political and religious freedoms are a reality for all the people of Cuba,” Pence said. “Donald Trump will stand with freedom-loving Cubans in the fight against Communist oppression.”<sup>114</sup>

“All of the concessions that Barack Obama has granted the Castro regime were done with executive order, which means the next president can reverse them,” Trump said. “And that is what I will do unless the Castro regime meets our demands. Those demands will include religious and political freedom for the Cuban people and the freeing of political prisoners”<sup>115</sup> In October, Trump was endorsed by the Bay of Pigs veterans association.

In the end, Trump’s appeal to Cuban Americans had limited success. According to exit polls, he won somewhere between 52 percent and 54 percent of their votes, only slightly better than Mitt Romney had done in 2012.<sup>116</sup> By contrast, in the predominately white rural counties along the I-4 corridor and in the Florida panhandle, Trump crushed Clinton by huge margins. Trump won Florida the same way he won Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin: white blue-collar workers, fed up with politics and politicians ignoring their needs, turned out in record numbers for him.<sup>117</sup>

Yet Trump believed he owed Cuban Americans a political debt. When Fidel Castro died on November 26, 2016, President-Elect Trump condemned the Cuban leader and promised Cuban Americans he would work for a free Cuba. “Our administration will do all it can to ensure the Cuban people can finally begin their journey toward prosperity and liberty,” Trump wrote. “I join the many Cuban Americans who supported me so greatly in the presidential campaign...with the hope of one day soon seeing a free Cuba.”<sup>118</sup> Two days later, he tweeted, “If Cuba is unwilling to make a better deal for the Cuban people, the Cuban/American people and the U.S. as a whole, I will terminate deal.”<sup>119</sup>

*Biden-Trump, 2020: Do No Harm*

President Trump kept his 2016 campaign promise to reverse Obama’s policy of engagement. Trump himself was not especially interested in Cuba policy, outsourcing it to Republican Cuban American legislators on Capitol Hill. “Make Rubio happy,” he instructed his staff.<sup>120</sup> On June 16, 2017, Rubio tweeted a photo of himself and Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart (R-Fla.) in Rubio’s Senate office, captioned, “the night @MarioDB and I hammered out the new Cuba policy.” Speaking to a cheering crowd of Cuban exiles in Miami the next day, Trump declared, “Effective immediately, I am canceling the last administration’s completely one-sided deal with Cuba.” He imposed an initial round of sanctions limiting “people-to-people” educational travel and prohibiting transactions with a long list of Cuban enterprises managed by the armed forces, including major hotels where most U.S. tour groups stayed.<sup>121</sup>

In September, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson downsized the U.S. embassy in Havana after two dozen U.S. personnel reported suffering unexplained neurological symptoms—the so-called “Havana Syndrome.”<sup>122</sup> The embassy’s consular section stopped processing Cuban visa requests and suspended both the Family Reunification Program and the refugee program. Immigrant visas issued to Cubans fell 90 percent. Pressured by Rubio, Tillerson also expelled an equivalent group of Cuban diplomats from Washington.

In 2019, the Trump administration launched a “maximum pressure” campaign to cut off Cuba’s principal sources of foreign currency in hopes of collapsing the Cuban economy and the regime along with it. To deter foreign investors, Trump activated Title III of the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, enabling U.S. nationals, including Cuban Americans, who lost property after the 1959 revolution, to sue Cuban, U.S., or foreign companies in U.S. federal court for using their confiscated property. The administration targeted Cuba’s energy supply by imposing sanctions on companies shipping Venezuelan oil to Cuba. The State Department pressured countries to end their medical assistance contracts with Cuba, and conservative governments in Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, and El Salvador quickly obliged. The Brazilian program alone involved over 11,000 medical personnel, generating \$250 million in annual revenue for Cuba.

Trump’s most serious sanctions focused on travel and remittances. The administration eliminated the people-to-people travel category entirely, blocking most non-Cuban American travelers. It severed commercial and charter air links to all Cuban cities except Havana, and halted visits by U.S. cruise ships, which carried some 800,000 people to Cuba in 2018. Remittances, unlimited under Obama, were capped at \$1,000 per quarter, and just weeks before the 2020 presidential election, Trump blocked Cuban Americans from wiring funds through Western Union.

Trump’s hardline policies won praise from the Cuban American right, but two years into his administration, opinion in south Florida was still as divided as it had been before. A 2018 FIU

poll found the community evenly split on whether to keep the embargo (51 percent in favor, 49 percent against), and large majorities in favor of maintaining diplomatic relations, selling food and medicine to Cuba, unrestricted travel, and people-to-people educational exchanges.<sup>123</sup>

Two years later, however, an FIU poll in the middle of the presidential campaign revealed a significant shift toward tougher policies. Support for the embargo had jumped to 60 percent. Seventy-two percent favored the policy of maximum pressure to bring about regime change and 66 percent supported Trump's handling of the Cuba issue, although most respondents opposed elements of Trump's policy that had a negative impact on their own community. There was strong opposition to closing the U.S. Embassy consular section and denying immigrant visas, suspending the Family Reunification Program, and halting air service to cities other than Havana. Nevertheless, 59 percent said they would vote for Trump, compared to just 25 percent for Biden. Among the most important findings was that the most recent arrivals from Cuba—usually a moderate constituency that wanted to maintain ties with family on the island—were now identifying with Republicans.<sup>124</sup>

But it was an Equis Research poll eight months earlier, in November 2019, that shaped Joe Biden's campaign strategy on Cuba. "Trump has already locked down his share of the Cuban vote," Equis reported, with a 66 percent job approval rating and a 63 to 29 percent margin in an election against an unnamed Democrat. The poll confirmed a dramatic shift among Cubans who arrived in the United States after the 1994 rafters crisis, a group that had been strong supporters of Obama's opening. During the Trump administration, this cohort turned against engagement, switching to the Republican Party and Donald Trump. From 2014 to 2019, the Democrats' share of registered Cuban American voters fell from 30 to 15 percent.<sup>125</sup>

Equis offered several mutually reinforcing explanations for this dramatic shift: Trump's hardline policies had re-energized the right; Republicans' charges that socialist Democrats would destroy America resonated with exiles who had fled socialist regimes; and the "disinformation-heavy" Spanish-language media bubble in south Florida, especially the rise of social media influencers like Trump cheerleader Alex Otaola, spread outlandish conspiracy theories. Taken together, these developments created a highly partisan pro-Republican milieu into which new arrivals from Cuba (and Venezuela and Nicaragua) were being socialized.<sup>126</sup>

Despite the daunting polling numbers, Equis recommended that the Biden campaign fight for Cuban American support, arguing, "Biden doesn't need to win the Cuban vote, but the electoral math requires him to compete for increased support. Tens of thousands of votes are on the line in a state always decided by narrow margins." That, however, was not the lesson that the campaign took from the data.

The central focus of the Biden campaign was to rebuild the "blue wall" of Democratic states in the Midwest-- Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania-- that Hillary Clinton lost to Trump in 2016 by a combined total of just 77,744 votes. Florida and North Carolina were also seen as competitive, but the campaign was slow to build up its infrastructure in Florida, prompting bitter complaints from organizers on the ground.<sup>127</sup> Once it got going, the Florida campaign targeted traditional Democratic supporters—seniors, African Americans, and non-Cuban Latinos—to maximize turnout in the midst of COVID. It did not make a major effort to contest Trump's support among Cuba Americans, much to the frustration of Cuban American Democrats. "We've seen firsthand that Democrats have abandoned the battlefield," complained Democratic pollster Fernand Amandi.<sup>128</sup>

In appealing to Cuban Americans, the campaign faced a dilemma. As Obama's former vice-president, Biden could hardly repudiate one of Obama's signature diplomatic achievements.

But Biden himself had been skeptical of the opening to Cuba, and the shift in Cuban American opinion revealed by the FIU and Equis polls suggested that vocally embracing Obama's policy was no longer good politics. The result was a strategy of "do no harm." The campaign tried to say as little as possible about Cuba, convinced that anything Biden said would lose Cuban American votes without gaining any elsewhere. When polling in the months before election day found Biden trailing Trump among Cuban Americans by 30 to 40 points, the campaign had even less incentive to invest in chasing their votes.<sup>129</sup>

Biden could not evade the Cuba issue entirely, so he followed Obama's 2008 formula of focusing on the harm done to Cuban American families by U.S. sanctions. "Americans – and especially Cuban-Americans – can be our best ambassadors for freedom in Cuba," he said, cribbing a line from Obama's 2008 speech to the Cuban American National Foundation. "Therefore, as president, I will promptly reverse the failed Trump policies that have inflicted harm on the Cuban people and done nothing to advance democracy and human rights."<sup>130</sup> Asked directly if he would return to Obama's policy of engagement, he answered, "Yes, I would... in large part."<sup>131</sup> When Trump imposed sanctions on remittance service providers in the closing weeks of the campaign, the Biden camp called it a "cruel distraction" that was "denying Cuban Americans the right to help their families."<sup>132</sup>

The Republican strategy in Florida amplified the strategy successfully deployed by Ron DeSantis and Rick Scott in their races for governor and U.S. Senate in 2018, when they accused Democrats of being socialists.<sup>133</sup> By tying all Democrats to self-avowed democratic socialists Bernie Sanders and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Republicans were able to mobilized the Cuban, Venezuela, and Nicaraguan diasporas that had fled socialism in their home countries. In 2020, Sanders' strong showing in the early primaries was fodder for Republican accusations that the Democratic Party was a hotbed of socialism. In February, Sanders views on Cuba resurfaced when, in an interview with *60 Minutes*, he repeated his 1989 statement that the Cuban revolution had produced important gains in education.<sup>134</sup>

After Biden secured the nomination, Republicans kept up the drum beat of the socialist bogeyman. The issue of Cuba arose again when Biden was selecting his running mate. Among the finalists was Karen Bass (D-CA), who, as a young woman, had traveled to Cuba several times with a solidarity group, the Venceremos Brigade. As a member of Congress she had a long record of supporting engagement with Cuba. Florida Democrats were appalled at the prospect of her on the ticket. "Fairly or unfairly, Karen Bass's history on this subject makes Bernie Sanders look like Ronald Reagan," said pollster Amandi.<sup>135</sup> Biden himself did not regard her history as disqualifying, he told aides, because he believed the election would be won or lost in the Midwest, not Florida.<sup>136</sup> Even after Biden named Senator Kamila Harris as his running mate, Donald Trump was still using Bass as a foil, tweeting in October, "Joe Biden is a PUPPET of CASTRO-CHAVISTAS like Crazy Bernie, AOC and Castro-lover Karen Bass.... Biden is weak on socialism."<sup>137</sup>

On election day, Biden and the Democrats took a beating among Cuban American voters. Trump won more than 60 percent of their vote in Miami-Dade, and Democrats lost two House seats in south Florida. It was a devastating defeat, but Biden's unerring focus on the Midwest proved to be a winning formula. He carried Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania by a combined total of just 255,425 votes, giving him an Electoral College majority. Trump's gains among Cuban Americans accounted for only a third of the margin of Biden's loss in Florida, so while the campaign's decision not to compete aggressively for their votes ran up Trump's totals, it made no difference in the statewide outcome.

### *Biden-Trump(?), 2024: Promises Unkept*

Joe Biden did not keep his promise to return to Obama's policy of engagement. For over a year, he did nothing. Finally, in May 2022, under pressure from Latin American leaders poised to boycott the Summit of the Americas, Biden removed restrictions on family remittances and relaxed some travel regulations. But the looming 2024 campaign caused the administration to renege on its promise to relax regulations to help Cuba's emerging private sector. Congressional Democrats who supported Obama's opening began referring to the "Trump-Biden" Cuba policy.

In the initial Republican primary debates, the issue of Cuba did not come up, even during the debate held in Miami. But in a competing rally in Hialeah, where a majority of residents are Cuban Americans, Donald Trump played to the crowd. "We have some great Cubans here and nobody ever did more for Americans who love Cuba than a gentleman named Donald J. Trump when he was President," Trump congratulated himself. He claimed that his "tough sanctions" had Cuba on the cusp of collapse until Biden came in and "blew it." The Cubans "were ready to do anything for our Cuban Americans and for me," he fantasized. "You were going to be taking it over very quickly."<sup>138</sup>

In the White House, political calculations remain unchanged from the 2020 campaign: do nothing on Cuba because anything positive entails political costs, especially in Florida, with no off-setting political gains. Speaking at the U.S. Institute for Peace in September 2022, NSC adviser on Latin American Juan Gonzalez observed that Latin America, more than most regions, involved "tremendous domestic equities.... It's hard to take politics out of consideration when you're making policy."<sup>139</sup> The chances that Biden will take action to reduce sanctions on Cuba before the 2024 election are nearly nil.

Barring some unforeseen crisis, Cuba is not likely to be a major issue in the 2024 campaign. Biden will follow his 2020 script and say as little as he can get away with. Since Biden has left most of Trump's sanctions in place, there are few things about his Cuba policy that Republicans can easily attack, though as Trump has shown repeatedly, reality is not a constraint on his rhetoric. Republicans are certain to reiterate the charge that Democrats' are socialists who will destroy America, because that strategy was so effective in Florida in the 2018, 2020, and 2022 election cycles.

### *The 2024 Electoral Landscape*

Most of the electoral map of the United States is pre-determined. In 2020, there were only eight states in which the winner's margin of victory was less than 5 percentage points: Georgia (0.24 percent), Arizona (0.31 percent), North Carolina (1.35 percent), Nevada (2.39 percent), Florida (3.36 percent), and the Democrat's "blue wall" of Wisconsin (0.63 percent), Pennsylvania (1.16 percent), and Michigan (2.78 percent). Apart from these battleground states, Democrats begin the race almost assured of 226 of the 270 electoral votes needed to win; Republicans begin with 187. Of the battleground states' 123 electoral votes, Republicans have to win more than two-thirds to put together a majority. Florida's importance is magnified by its size. It has the fourth most electoral votes, behind California, Texas, and New York, and is the only one that is competitive. If Republicans lose Florida's 29 electoral votes, they can only afford to lose one other small swing state (Arizona, Nevada, or Wisconsin).

This electoral math is why Republicans see Florida as a must-win state and why Democrats continue to contest it, even though it is the swing state where Republicans had the largest margin of victory in 2020 and made further gains in 2022. Biden's campaign has

indicated they will focus on holding the states they won last time (the blue wall plus Arizona and Georgia), and make a push for Florida and North Carolina.<sup>140</sup> This is essentially the same strategy Democrats have followed ever since 1992: put Florida in play to force Republicans to expend time and money there rather than in other swing states.

However, the ability of Democrats to actually threaten Republicans in Florida has been declining. Hillary Clinton lost the state to Donald Trump in 2016 by 112,911 votes; Biden lost it by three times that margin, 371,686 votes. In 2022, Gov. Ron DeSantis beat Charlie Crist by 1.5 million votes and Sen. Marco Rubio beat Val Demings by 1.3 million.

Cuban Americans have contributed to this expansion of the Republicans' advantage. Recent polls have confirmed the continuing shift in Cuban American opinion away from support for a policy of engagement with Cuba. A 2022 Florida International University poll showed Democrats at a deep disadvantage among Cuban American voters in south Florida, outnumbered by Republicans two-to-one in party registration. Support for the embargo has rebounded to 63 percent, with recent immigrants almost as strongly in favor as early ones. Cuban Americans overwhelmingly opposed President Biden's Cuba policy, 72 percent to 28 percent—even though Biden's policy was not substantially different than Trump's. In fact, Cuban American antipathy toward Democrats went beyond Cuba, reaching across a wide range of policy issues, foreign and domestic.<sup>141</sup> According to exit polls, 67 percent of Cuban Americans in Florida voted for Rubio in the 2022 mid-term elections, and 69 percent for Gov. Ron DeSantis.<sup>142</sup>

Is there anything Democrats can do to break the Republican lock on the Cuban American vote? In the short run, probably not. As Guillermo Grenier has argued, the Republican Party has worked for years to establish itself as the party of Cuban Americans in Florida while the Democrats have generally conceded the field, making little effort to build their own links in the community.<sup>143</sup> The "historic exile" was always conservative on foreign policy, especially toward Cuba, and gravitated toward Republican presidential candidates who typically were the most hardline anti-communists. Their belief that Kennedy doomed the Bay of Pigs invasion by withholding air support made them more open to Republican appeals. A 1970 survey found that members of the community preferred the Republican Party to Democrats 73 percent to 16 percent, with many citing the Bay of Pigs as the reason.<sup>144</sup>

The partisan identification of Cuban Americans as Republicans was not foreordained or immutable. As their voter registration increased, Republicans and Democrats split the new voters roughly equally into the 1970s and Democrats proved they could win local contests.<sup>145</sup> In 1976, Jimmy Carter narrowly lost the Cuban American vote to Gerald Ford, 48 to 52 percent.<sup>146</sup> But while traditional Democratic constituencies saw the rise of Cuban Americans as a threat to their control of the party and resisted it, Florida Republicans opened their arms to the community, seeing them as an important building bloc to assemble a Republican majority. Organizing on the ground combined with Ronald Reagan's aggressive anti-communism consolidated Cuban Americans' Republican partisanship in the 1980s. Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy against Cuba cemented that partisanship in the new millennium.

<b>Cuban-American Presidential Election Vote in Florida, 1976-2020</b>				
	<b>State-wide Exit Polls (%)</b>		<b>Miami-Dade (%)</b>	
	<b>Bendixen &amp; Amandi</b>	<b>National Election Pool (Edison)</b>	<b>Miami-Dade Exit Polls</b>	<b>Miami-Dade Precincts (%)</b>
<b>1976</b>				
Ford				52
Carter				48
<b>1980</b>				
Reagan				80
Carter				16
Anderson				4
<b>1984</b>				
Reagan			93	88
Mondale			7	12
<b>1988</b>				
Bush				85
Dukakis				15
<b>1992</b>				
Bush	71			70
Clinton	22			22
Perot	7			8
<b>1996</b>				
Dole	65		61	62
Clinton	35		40	38
<b>2000</b>				
Bush	75	81		75
Gore	25	19		25
<b>2004</b>				
Bush	71	78	73	69
Kerry	29	21	27	31
<b>2008</b>				
McCain	65	53	65	64
Obama	35	47	35	36
<b>2012</b>				
Romney	52	49	49	58
Obama	48	51	51	42
<b>2016</b>				
Trump	52	57		51
Clinton	48	43		49
<b>2020</b>				
Trump		58		69
Biden		42		31

Sources: Compiled from various sources.

Yet even though Trump's 2020 margin of victory among Cuban Americans was reminiscent of the margins Republicans won in the 1990s and early 2000s, the degree of Cuban American support *over and above* the support Republican candidates have received from the general electorate has fallen substantially since 2004, giving Democrats some hope for the future.

<b>Cuban American Vote Premium in Florida</b>			
<b>Election</b>	<b>Republican Percent of Florida Vote</b>	<b>Republican Percent of Cuban American Vote</b>	<b>Cuban American Premium</b>
1976	47.30	52.0	4.7
1980	55.99	80.0	24.0
1984	65.33	90.5	25.2
1988	61.25	85.0	23.8
1992	41.01	70.5	29.5
1996	42.50	62.5	20.0
2000	50.01	77.0	27.0
2004	52.53	72.7	20.1
2008	48.60	61.8	13.2
2012	49.60	52.0	2.4
2016	50.62	53.3	2.7
2020	51.70	63.5	11.8

Source: Republican share of the Cuban American vote is an average of the exit poll and Miami-Dade precinct analyses above.

### *Does Florida Make a Difference?*

Despite the intensity with which both parties have focused on Florida for the past 30 years-- a focus that has made Cuba a campaign issue more often than any other country-- Florida has rarely been decisive in determining the outcome of U.S. presidential elections. And Cuban Americans have only occasionally be decisive in deciding the outcome in Florida. Prior to 1992, the number of eligible Cuban American voters in Florida was not enough to make a difference in the general election because margins of victory were consistently larger than the Cuban American vote in its entirety. Even as the number of Cuban voters grew during the 1980s, the size of Reagan and Bush's margins of victory were far too big in 1980, 1984, and 1988 for Cubans Americans to have made the difference.



Cuban American Voters in Presidential Elections in Florida													
Election	Florida Winner	Cuban American eligible voters	Cuban American turnout	Cuban American vote	Cuban American vote split (average percentage)		Cuban American vote split (estimated)		Florida total winning margin	Votes needed to change the outcome	Votes needed as percent of Cuban American vote	Percent of Cuban American votes needed by loser to change the outcome	Did Cuban Americans decide Florida?
					Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican					
1980	Reagan	239,938	72%	172,755	16%	80%	27,641	138,204	627,476	313,738	182%		No
1984	Reagan	<b>304,610</b>	72%	219,319	10%	91%	21,932	143,698	1,281,534	640,767	292%		No
1988	Bush	<b>369,281</b>	71.7%	264,775	15%	85%	39,716	225,058	962,184	481,092	182%		No
1990	census	401,617											
1992	<i>Bush</i>	<b>462,053</b>	70.4%	325,285	22%	71%	71,563	230,953	100,512	50,256	15%	37%	Yes
1996	Clinton	<b>522,489</b>	58.7%	306,701	38%	63%	116,546	193,222	302,334	151,167	49%	112%	No
2000	census	582,925											
2000	Bush	582,925	64.6%	376,570	23%	77%	86,611	289,959	537	269	0%	23%	Yes
2004	Bush	<b>660,646</b>	64.2%	424,135	27%	73%	114,516	309,618	380,978	190,489	45%	72%	No
2008	Obama	<b>738,367</b>	69.4%	512,427	38%	62%	194,722	317,705	236,450	118,225	23%	85%	No
2010	census	816,088											
2012	Obama	882,952	67.2%	593,344	48%	52%	284,805	308,539	74,309	37,155	6%	58%	Yes
2016	Trump	1,022,079	58.0%	592,806	47%	53%	268,033	302,250	112,911	56,456	10%	57%	No
2020	<i>Trump</i>	1,177,403	56.4%	664,047	37%	64%	245,698	424,990	371,686	185,843	28%	65%	No

Sources: Estimates of the number of Cuban American voters and for whom they voted can vary widely. Our estimates are based on three statistics:

(1) Eligible Cuban American voters, based on the number of U.S. citizens who identify as being of Cuban heritage, as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau from the decennial census and American Community Survey. Where ACS data is unavailable between census years, estimates (in italics) are based on interpolation between census years.

(2) Turnout rate of eligible Cuban American voters, as estimated by the Pew Research Center based on the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Supplement. Estimates for 1980 and 1984 are based on 1988.

(3) The two-party distribution of the Cuban American vote (except when a third party candidate's vote total exceeds 4 percent), based on the average of estimates from statewide exit polls, Miami-Dade exit polls, and Miami-Dade precinct analysis. Results from using just the average of statewide exits polls do not differ significantly.

From the three statistics above we can derive estimates of the number of Cuban American votes for the candidates and what impact hypothetical shifts in the Cuban American vote would have had on the election's outcome.

<b>Florida in U.S. Presidential Elections</b>						
<b>Election</b>	<b>National Winner</b>	<b>Florida Winner</b>	<b>Winner's Electoral Vote Margin</b>	<b>Florida's Electoral Votes</b>	<b>Did Florida Decide the Election?</b>	<b>Did Cuban Americans Decide Florida?</b>
<b>1960</b>	Kennedy	Nixon	84	10	No	No
<b>1964</b>	Johnson	Johnson	432	14	No	No
<b>1968</b>	Nixon	Nixon	110	14	No	No
<b>1972</b>	Nixon	Nixon	503	17	No	No
<b>1976</b>	Carter	Carter	57	17	No	No
<b>1980</b>	Reagan	Reagan	440	17	No	No
<b>1984</b>	Reagan	Reagan	512	21	No	No
<b>1988</b>	Bush	Bush	315	21	No	No
<b>1992</b>	Clinton	Bush	202	25	No	<b>Yes</b>
<b>1996</b>	Clinton	Clinton	220	25	No	No
<b>2000</b>	Bush	Bush	5	25	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>2004</b>	Bush	Bush	35	25	<b>Yes</b>	No
<b>2008</b>	Obama	Obama	192	27	No	No
<b>2012</b>	Obama	Obama	126	29	No	<b>Yes</b>
<b>2016</b>	Trump	Trump	77	29	No	No
<b>2020</b>	Biden	Trump	74	29	No	No

That changed in 1992, when Clinton lost Florida, winning only about 22 percent of the Cuban vote despite his best efforts. But he could have carried the state had he won just 37 percent (as he managed to do four years later). Clinton's 1992 loss in Florida was immaterial; he won the presidency anyway. Nevertheless, Clinton's relative success compared to prior Democratic candidates inaugurated the Democrats' quadrennial quest to cut into the Republicans' margin with the Cuban community. Gore's his poor showing among Cuban Americans was decisive both in Florida and in the Electoral College in the dramatic and, for Democrats, traumatic 2000 election. Kerry's 2004 race with Bush was close enough nationally that Florida once again made the difference in the Electoral College, but Kerry lost Florida by a wide margin.

Obama carried Florida in 2008 winning about 38 percent of the Cuban vote, but his margin statewide was large enough that McCain would have needed a Reaganesque vote share of 85 percent among Cuban Americans to have won the state (and he still would have lost nationwide). In his second campaign, Obama did even better against Mitt Romney, splitting the Cuban American vote almost evenly. This time, Obama's margin statewide was small enough that Romney could have flipped Florida had he won just 6 percent more of the Cuban vote than he did. But he still would have lost the White House.

Hillary Clinton took about 47 percent of the Cuban American vote, which was better than any other Democrat except Obama in 2012, but her losses in white blue-collar counties were so large that she would have needed a record 56.5 percent of the Cuban vote to win the state. Even that would not have made up for the loss of the Democrats "blue wall" in the Midwest. Four

years later, Joe Biden lost Florida by such a wide margin that he would have needed 65 percent of the Cuban American vote to carry the state. But, having rebuilt the “blue wall,” he didn’t need Florida.

In short, although Florida has been regarded as a battleground state since 1992, and Cuban Americans have been identified by both parties as a key constituency to be courted, the record shows neither Florida nor Cuban Americans have decided presidential elections. In the 16 U.S. elections since Fidel Castro rode into Havana in 1959, Florida’s electoral votes have only made the difference twice—in 2000 and 2004. In all the other elections, either the winner of Florida lost the general election (1960, 1992, 2020), or the electoral count was so lopsided that even if the victor had lost Florida, he would still have won the general election anyway. Cuban Americans have arguably been the decisive vote in Florida only in 1992, 2000, and 2012. There has only been one election since 1960 in which Cuban Americans made the difference in Florida *and* Florida decided the election—2000, the election that continues to haunt Democratic political operatives with electoral post-traumatic stress disorder.

## Notes

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