

## The Challenges of Political Advocacy for Cuba During the Biden Presidency

Gary Prevost

Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Latin American Studies  
College of St. Benedict and St. John's University (Minnesota)

Research Fellow and Honorary Professor in Political Studies  
Nelson Mandela University (South Africa)

Mailing Address:

4432 Russell Avenue North  
Minneapolis, MN. 55412

Email Address:

[g.prevost@retiree.csbsju.edu](mailto:g.prevost@retiree.csbsju.edu)

### Abstract

When the Biden administration took office in January 2017, non-governmental organizations that do political advocacy for Cuba in the United States expected that the political climate would be conducive to reversing many of the anti-Cuba measures that had been enacted during the four years of the Trump presidency. As President Biden leaves office in the coming weeks those expectations have been largely unfilled as his administration has left in place most of his predecessor's Cuba policies in spite of concerted efforts by a coalition of US NGOs to convince the Biden administration to change course. This paper will analyze the tactics and strategies of key U.S. organizations including the National Network on Cuba (NNOC), Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and the Alliance for Cuba Engagement and Respect (ACERE) detailing their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the paper will analyze how these groups have engaged both the Democratic and Republican parties in an attempt to influence the policies of the Biden administration including focused work on city councils and labor organizations across the United States.

Submitted By:

Gary Prevost  
Professor Emeritus of Political Science  
College of St. Benedict and St. John's University  
Collegeville, MN

Mailing Address:

4432 Russell Avenue North  
Minneapolis, MN. 55412

Phone:

612-529-0510

Email:

[g.prevost@retiree.csbsju.edu](mailto:g.prevost@retiree.csbsju.edu)

When the Biden administration took office in January 2021, non-governmental organizations that do political advocacy for Cuba in the United States expected that the political climate would be conducive to reversing many of the anti-Cuba measures that had been enacted during the four years of the Trump presidency in part because like all other Democratic candidates in the 2020 primary season Joe Biden had signaled that he would return to the policies of the Obama/Biden administration. While Biden had not been a prominent figure in Obama's opening to Cuba there were no indications that he had opposed the policy change. As President Biden leaves office in the coming weeks those expectations have been largely unfulfilled as his administration has left in place most of his predecessor's policies in spite of concerted efforts by a coalition of US NGOs to convince this administration to change course. Most significantly Cuba has remained on the State Sponsors of Terrorism List (SSOT), a policy that has deepened Cuba's economic crisis during the last four years by limiting the island's options within the world economy. The paper will analyze the tactics and strategies of key U.S. organizations including the National Network on Cuba (NNOC), Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and the Alliance for Cuba Engagement and Respect (ACERE). In addition, the paper will analyze how these groups have worked with Democratic Party officials at the state and local level together trade unions to pass more than 100 resolutions calling for the end of the embargo/blockade and Cuba's removal from the SSOT.

From the perspective of those groups seeking a return to Obama's opening toward Cuba the arrival of the Biden presidency was the crucial element. It was the view of those seeking change in Cuba policy that a Trump reelection would have only deepened pressure on Cuba during a second term. This assessment was in line with a paper the author presented at this conference last year entitled, "The Death of Bipartisanship in Creating Positive Alternatives in US-Cuban Relations". The argument of that paper, which is also important in predicting Donald Trump's policies in the second term, was that long time Republican voices, especially officeholders from Midwest, had been silenced during Trump's years in office. The paper argued that going back to the Nixon and Ford years there had been important Republican advocates for normalization of relations based on both economic and national security grounds. That pattern continued during the Obama opening even from among some Cuban American Republicans though most leaders from that community opposed the policy change. Upon assuming office in 2017 Trump embraced those in the Cuban American community who wished to take a hard line on Cuba, rejecting feedback from various US government agencies that favored continued engagement with the island using the twenty-two bilateral agreements that were signed during the opening. As Cuba not a priority for Trump he outsourced control of Cuba policy to Senator Marco Rubio and National Security advisors John Bolton and Mauricio Claver-Carone. During the last three years of Trump's term, efforts to challenge his Cuba policy using Republican pressure were not successful and 2021 it was becoming clear to Cuba activists that the voice of the Republican Party on Cuba was a maximum pressure campaign of regime change with the full backing of the president.

With Trump and his hardline advisors returning to private life and no more direct influence on US policy, the arrival of Biden created the expectation that with modest encouragement from pro-engagement NGOs the new administration would gradually put back in place the policies of the Obama period. The need for forceful action was underscored by a particularly important action taken by the Trump White House, the return of Cuba to the SSOT list. Cuba had been on that list when it was created in 1982 during the Reagan years but had been removed by Barack Obama in 2015 following a State Department review. That removal was probably the most consequential act of the opening as it created the framework for a greater re-insertion of Cuba into world markets, especially in the banking and financial arena. The US embargo, under Congressional control remained overwhelmingly in place, but removal from the SSOT made it easier for Cuba to do commerce with the rest of the world. Activists were encouraged when almost immediately after Trump's actions on SSOT twelve Democratic senators,

including Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith from my state, Minnesota wrote to the Trump administration calling on him to reconsider the action.

This action by prominent Democratic leaders encouraged Cuba advocates that President Biden would take quick action to reverse Trump's policies. However, activist expectation for quick action on Cuba were dashed when more than one Biden advisor, including officials with responsibility of Latin America, stated that Cuba was not a priority as the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic made domestic policy initiatives their primary focus. Initially those seeking change remained hopeful but also realized that mobilizing political pressure for a reversal of the Trump policies was necessary. Leading the advocacy response was a relatively new Cuba organization, the Alliance for Cuba Engagement and Respect (ACERE), based in Washington, DC. It had been formed in the latter part of the Trump years when the Latin American Working Group (LAWG) retreated from Cuba work due to budget cuts and a perceived lack of legislative opportunities regarding Cuba. ACERE began its pressure almost immediately after Biden's election with a letter calling on him to restore the Obama/Biden era policies and to move beyond them to full normalization of relations. The demands in the November 2020 letter highlighted the primary demands that would be pursued from January 20, 2021, onward. They were:

- Work with the Cuban government to allow the return of diplomats to the embassies and to fully staff the U.S. Embassy in Havana.
- Lift all restrictions on remittances.
- Remove Cuba from the list of countries that do not collaborate in the fight against terrorism.
- Cancel the imposition of Title III of the Helms Burton Act.
- Instruct U.S. representatives in international financial institutions not to block the granting of credits or other financial advantages to Cuba.
- Authorize the export to Cuba of U.S. products for key branches of the Cuban economy (i.e. tourism, biotechnology).

Once Biden was in office ACERE mobilized a broad range of organizations, including faith, Cuban American, human rights, business, environmental, and academic to sign a letter to Biden that was sent on February 10, 2021. The groups included the Alliance of Baptists, Church World Service, National Council of Churches, National Foreign Trade Council, Oxfam America, Washington Office on Latin America, and Global Health Partners. This letter was more focused in its demands but also included some issues from the November letter. It began by calling for an immediate starting point, "we urge you to take executive action that returns the regulations governing trade and travel to where they stood on January 20, 2017." This section called for the removal of travel restrictions placed on Americans, ending the restrictions on remittances and trade and investment that had been strengthening the Cuban private sector. It also stressed that Title III of Helms Burton and Cuba's return to the SSOT could be accomplished with one comprehensive executive action. The letter repeated the demand for the full restaffing of the US embassy in Havana to permit Cuban citizens to again travel to the United States for family engagement and cultural and educational purposes. The letter also engaged the accomplishments of the Obama/Biden opening in government-to-government relations when 22 bilateral agreements were signed but implementation of the agreements was suspended by Trump administration. The letter called for the relaunching of U.S.-Cuban working groups on a range of issues from environmental cooperation in the Florida Straits and other climate related issues such as renewable energy and climate-resilient agriculture to law enforcement dialogue, to cooperation on migration and human trafficking to the more contentious issues of property claims and human rights. The letter ended with calling on the administration to urge Congress toward a quick ending of the embargo.

ACERE and other advocacy groups also began engaging the US Congress, particularly the House of Representatives with its Democratic majority to be a pressure point on the Democratic administration. The focal point of that effort became a Dear Colleague letter directed to Biden initiated by longtime Cuba advocates Bobbie Rush of Illinois and Barbara Lee of California. Its demands paralleled those of the February 10 organizational letter. After several weeks of work that included pressure from grassroots Cuba organizations around the country ultimately 119 representatives signed the letter, including the four Democrats from Minnesota, Ilhan Omar, Betty Mc Collum, Angie Craig, and Dean Phillips. As an indicator of the challenge in getting Democratic representatives to challenge a Democratic president only Omar and Mc Collum initially signed (both were long term Cuba supporters). The signatures of Craig and Phillips only came after meetings with their staff and considerable constituent pressure. Both came from districts that were considered “swing” between the two parties. Without strong grassroots organizations for Cuba in Minnesota their signatures would have been in doubt. 119 signatures were significant but it also signaled challenges for the Cuba advocacy work. The majority of the signatures came from the members of the Progressive Caucus, the Bernie Sanders wing of the Party. More than 100 Democratic representatives did not sign and only a small number of them were known as supporters of the embargo. Those Democrats that did not sign almost surely lessened the pressure on the president and there was no comparable Dear Colleague letter from the Senate. At a time early in his administration where there was an emphasis on bipartisanship it was also significant that not a single Republican representative signed the Rush letter, further validation that Trump’s hard line on Cuba had come to dominate the party even as he left Washington under the cloud of the January 6 events. Minnesota Cuba advocates made concerted efforts to gain support for the Rush letter from Republican Representative Tom Emmer, a long-standing opponent of the embargo from an agricultural district but those efforts were rebuffed.

In the months that followed the hopes for a quick return to Obama-era Cuba policies were dashed. Some small retreats from the Trump era were made that eased restrictions on remittances and charter flights from the US were increased but those gains were eclipsed in 2022 by new measures tightening the blockade. Most significantly European Union travelers who visited Cuba were denied a visa waiver for entry into the United States, a policy that has contributed to a dramatic drop in European tourism to Cuba, costing the Cuban billions of dollars of revenue in the last two years contributing significantly to the island’s current economic crisis. The renewed hardline from the Biden administration dovetailed well with Biden’s retreat from the Obama focus of engaging US adversaries that he had carried out with China, Iran, and Cuba. In its place Biden shaped his foreign policy on an advocacy of democracy worldwide in the face of his perception of growing autocracy. Cuba clearly fit into this latter category, especially following July 11, 2021, when significant, largely spontaneous demonstrations against growing shortages were met by a harsh government response, jailing hundreds.

In this anti-Cuba political climate, the Cuba solidarity movement in the United States decided in the fall of 2022 that its political focus would be a campaign to pressure the White House to remove Cuba from the SSOT. Other Cuba work, including brigades to the island and humanitarian aid would continue and in many ways be expanded over the next two years but political advocacy work which had long focused on the embargo/blockade as a whole would now focus on the SSOT. This focus was based on three primary factors. First, the embargo/blockade can only be lifted by the actions of both houses of Congress and in 2022 that was an impossible task because in part because of the lack of any Republican support as discussed earlier in the paper. Second, the removal of Cuba from the list was solely in the hands of the executive branch and it was therefore an action that President

Biden could take from without any interference the Republicans in Congress. Third, the justification given by the State Department for Cuba's return to the SSOT in January 2021 had been negated. In 2020 peace negotiations brokered primarily by Cuba between the Colombian government and the National Liberation Army (ELN) had broken down and the rightwing government of Colombia, a close ally of the Trump administration, demanded the return of the ELN negotiators to Colombia to stand trial. The Cuban government refused the request citing the terms of the negotiating agreement that in the event of a failure of the talks the ELN operatives could not be sent back to Colombia. The Trump administration, ignoring the terms of the agreement, placed Cuba back on the list from which they had been removed in 2015. However, in 2022, the political scene in Colombia dramatically changed with the election of socialist Gustavo Petro to the country's presidency committed to reengagement with the ELN. The rebels agreed to new talks and at the request of President Petro the Cuban government agreed to mediate. The talks would eventually be partially successful and almost immediately President Petro appealed directly to US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken to remove Cuba from the list in recognition of the positive role that they were playing in the ELN negotiations. Blinken acknowledged Petro's request but made no commitment for a change in US policy. Other Latin American presidents, including Mexico's Manuel Lopez Obrador echoed Petro's stance. This Latin American opposition, while not universal, was reminiscent of pressure on Obama that was regarded as a key factor in his 2014 opening and encouraged Cuba activists to believe that Biden could be similarly pressured.

Over the course of the next two years and continuing to the present in the final days of the Biden administration the NNOC in collaboration with a range of organizations has carried out a multi-faceted campaign, entitled #OffTheList. During selected time periods, including the present moment it is very much a grassroots effort aimed at getting as many people as possible send letters and emails and make phone calls to the White House with the sole demand of Cuba's removal from the SSOT. During the current period a campaign spearheaded by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has generated thousands of contacts with the White House. These grassroots actions have clearly attracted the attention of the Biden administration but to this point with no success. DSA has in the last year emerged as a major player in Cuba advocacy work following the visit of a large delegation of their leaders to the island. With tens of thousands of members and many officeholders, especially at the local level, they have succeeded in broadening a movement that for years tended to be dominated by political organizations operating to the left of the Democratic Party.

In addition to the grassroots campaigns, the NNOC, through its Local Resolutions Subcommittee embarked on a campaign to get local governments, primarily city councils, to pass resolutions against the blockade and Cuba's presence on the SSOT. The work began with the creation of a task force in 2017, but the work gained momentum in the last four years. As of this writing 30 US cities have passed resolutions with a total population of over 20 million people. The strategy of focusing on local government developed out of a realization that most major US cities and many smaller have councils dominated by Democrats so the problem of near total opposition to a change in Cuba policy from Republicans becomes a moot point. It has been the experience that once a resolution has been drafted and introduced by a member with positive views of Cuba the resolution passes with little or no opposition. While sponsorship often came from the most progressive members of a council, including Sanders's supporters or DSA members, ultimate support came from many centrist Democrats, supporters of Biden and Harris. The greater challenge for Cuba activists has been the ability to find supporters with the political contacts or inclination to seek a resolution. The focus was also done when it became clear that work against the blockade at the Congressional level or

with the Trump presidency was problematic because limited chance of success. Congressional work was largely blocked from 2017 forward by a coalition of united Republicans and anti-Cuba Democrats. As a result, the local government strategy was viewed as part of a longer-term grassroots strategy of building a constituency for a changed policy.

The first successful work for local resolutions was largely done in 2018 and 2019 in progressive cities that had long histories of Cuba solidarity work as resolution were passed in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Cleveland, Madison, WI, Berkeley, CA, Richmond, CA, Oakland CA, Pittsburgh, and Seattle. The focus shifted somewhat with the arrival of the COVID 19 pandemic in 2020. Working under the banner of the Saving Lives campaign the work on local resolutions shifted to gaining local government support for medical collaboration between the United States and Cuba. Though the campaign was not generally successful in fostering collaboration beyond what had already been underway before the pandemic, many resolutions were passed in 2020 and 2021, Some were from cities like Minneapolis, Oakland, and Berkely that had passed earlier resolutions, but some cities passed a medical collaboration resolution as their first Cuba action. That included San Francisco, Cambridge, MA, and Santa Cruz, CA. By 2022 even the pandemic passed and SSOT became a greater focus the momentum for local resolutions was growing and in the last two years several major US cities passed their first Cuba resolution calling for both an end to the blockade and Cuba's removal from the SSOT. In 2022 Chicago, our third largest city passed a Cuba resolution unanimously followed by one in Boston. In 2023 America's most populous city, New York, passed a resolution after two years of grassroots work by the Cuba Si Coalition. Last year resolutions were also passed in the major cities of Washington, DC and Detroit. In these two years resolutions have also passed in smaller cities like Brookline and Medford, MA, Sacramento and Emeryville, CA, Bloomington IN, New Haven, Windham, and Willimantic, CT. In some areas county boards were the focus and resolutions passed in Milwaukee County, WI and Wayne County, MI. Resolutions also were passed by school boards in the Milwaukee and the Los Angeles area. As 2024 comes to and end local activists are targeting several more major cities including Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Atlanta.

In mid-2023 the work on resolutions made a shift to focus primarily on the labor movement. The political logic to this focus was that pressure from labor unions might have more weight with President Biden given his reliance on the movement for his campaign for re-election. Led by longtime labor activist Bill Camp, the primary initial focus was on California where many individual unions had already passed anti-blockade resolutions. The strategy was to get as many local labor councils as possible to pass a resolution with a primary focus of getting Cuba off the SSOT and with a critical mass of councils on board to bring an SSOT resolution to California State AFL-CIO convention in July 2024. It was an ultimately successful effort with a dozen councils, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego passing resolutions and the successful passage of an SSOT resolution at the state convention. Efforts were made to expand the strategy beyond California to other central labor bodies and international unions. Those efforts are currently ongoing and recently the International Committee of the United Auto Workers sent a letter to Biden on SSOT. It is expected that labor will be a major focus in 2025 and will be paired with efforts to get more US unionists to spend May Day in Cuba. For several years now to California based organizations, the Los Angeles Hands Off Cuba Committee and Building Relations with Cuban Labor have organized delegations to the island, hosted by the Cuban Federation of Labor (CTC). It is expected that these delegations will yield more involvement of workers in Cuba solidarity activity.

The SSOT campaign did also have a focus on Congressional representatives with a focus on the Democrats. However, this campaign proved ultimately to be a tough sell in the lead up to the 2024

elections when Cuba was not an election issue, and the party leadership saw Florida as a swing state and did not wish to have a policy of engagement with Cuba. There was also a sense among many mainstream Democrats that the Obama opening had not yielded its expected result of a Cuba more aligned with the United States. Also, after the events of July 11, 2021, more up front expectations were expected from Cuba before there would be the renewal of an opening. Congressional leaders also took their cues from the administration that it was not prepared to make major changes, including Cuba's removal from the SSOT. With that judgment many Biden-leaning Democrats were unwilling to pressure the administration for a changed policy that was unlikely to occur. A good case of this reality was in Minnesota where a focus on SSOT and not the embargo proved a tough sell. Senator Amy Klobuchar introduced her long-standing bipartisan bill to end the embargo early in the 2021 session but over the next three years she steadfastly refused to call for Cuba's removal from SSOT. Her lead foreign policy aide told the Minnesota Cuba Committee in September 2024 that her office had serious concerns about Chinese spying activities on the island. In summer 2024, after much delay there was a House Dear Colleague letter to Biden that called for the SSOT removal in the wider context of seeking support for the Colombian peace process. It was said that only 56 members, almost exclusively from the Progressive Caucus in safe House districts, signed the letter. In Minnesota the two more conservative members in swing state districts, Dean Phillips and Angie Craig, did not sign even though both offices have indicated opposition to Cuba's SSOT presence.

As of this writing the #OFFTHELIST campaign is in a two-month final push while Biden remains in office. The campaign is entitled #STANDANDEND and has two demands- that the US government send immediate aid to Cuba to assist with hurricane relief and to remove Cuba from the SSOT. The campaign has generated more than 2000 letters, calls, and emails to the White House and also has included a letter signed by many organizations and progressive political leaders. The effort might yield some US assistance, given that some was provided following the fire in Matanzas but movement on SSOT is less likely if only because such an action would likely be undone almost immediately by President Trump. The campaign is being initiated more as movement building activity geared to prepare the Cuba advocacy movement for the inevitable challenge of the Trump administration's likely additional pressures on Cuba in 2025 and beyond.