

Cuba's Communist Party would thrive under democracy, but only if it gives up power soon

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Cuba has been under communist rule since Fidel Castro overthrew Fulgencio Batista in 1959. After many years of international isolation and a trade embargo begun in the 1960s, President Obama last year 'normalised' relations with the country, creating potential for an eventual transition to democracy. Here, **James Loxton** argues that the Cuban Communist Party would stand a good chance of thriving in a hypothetical democratic future as an 'authoritarian successor party' – but that this likelihood decreases the longer the regime clings to authoritarian control*



Credit: [Sonali Campion](#)

Since the resumption of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States [in 2015](#), there has been much speculation about whether changes [on the island](#) could eventually result in [democratization](#). As democracy promoters push for change in Cuba, they should not try to appeal to Cuban officials' better angels. Instead, they should appeal to their self-interest by highlighting that the Communist Party would almost certainly thrive in a hypothetical democratic future.

Authoritarian successor parties as a worldwide phenomenon

One of the dirty secrets of those who study democratization is that former authoritarian officials often enjoy tremendous political success after the introduction of free and fair elections. They do this by forming what I call "[authoritarian successor parties](#)" (ASPs). These are parties that emerge from authoritarian regimes, but that operate after a transition to democracy. They are not the ruling parties of existing electoral authoritarian regimes, as in Russia, Zimbabwe, or Singapore. Instead, despite their authoritarian origins, ASPs are parties that today operate

under democracy.

ASPs are extremely widespread. [My research](#) shows that of the 65 countries that democratized between 1974 and 2010, 47 produced a prominent ASP (meaning it won at least 10 percent of the vote in a national democratic election). And in a whopping 36 countries, the ASP was democratically elected back into office (meaning it won the presidency or prime minister's office).

In other words, in *nearly three-quarters* of all new democracies (72 percent), a prominent ASP emerged, and in *over one-half* of all new democracies (55 percent), the ASP was democratically returned to office.

[ASPs are a worldwide phenomenon](#). They are major actors everywhere from Mexico to Mongolia, Poland to Panama, Slovenia to South Korea, Ghana to Guatemala. Most recently, Peru's ASP won a majority of seats in Congress and its presidential candidate, [Keiko Fujimori, lost by a mere 0.2 percent](#).

ASPs in the post-communist world and Latin America

Most relevant for Cuba, ASPs have been especially successful in the post-communist world and Latin America, exceeding in these regions the (already high) global average.

In the post-communist world, ASPs have been prominent actors in 16 of 19 new democracies (84 percent), and returned to power in 14 of them ([74 percent](#)). In Latin America, ASPs have been prominent actors in 11 of 15 new democracies (73 percent), and returned to power in 9 of them ([60 percent](#)).

As a communist regime in a Latin American country, this bodes well for the Communist Party of Cuba. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Latin American country whose former authoritarian regime most resembled Cuba's—Nicaragua—produced a strong ASP that was elected back into office in 2006.

The benefits of a dictatorial past

What allows parties with roots in dictatorship to thrive under democracy? To succeed, all political parties need a grassroots organization for campaigning and getting out the vote, [and they need a way to appeal to the electorate](#). Dictatorships often produce these very ingredients. They construct large organizations for repression and/or mobilization, and they try to build popular support by highlighting their accomplishments in areas such as the economy and public security, or by appealing to a foreign enemy—"communism" for right-wing dictatorships, "imperialism" for left-wing dictatorships. Sometimes they also attempt to buy support through material handouts. When dictatorships bequeath these resources to their partisan successors, they provide them, paradoxically, with the tools for succeeding under democracy. I call this "authoritarian inheritance."

There are strong reasons to think that the Communist Party of Cuba would enter democracy with a large authoritarian inheritance. For one, it would possess an enormous organization that could be retrofitted for democratic ends. As of 2011, the party boasted 800,000 members, [a huge number in a country of 11 million inhabitants](#). Moreover, it has branches in every corner of the national territory, and has experience mobilizing people for periodic elections—albeit ones that, to date, have been largely meaningless. Its membership and territorial presence make the party formidable by any standard. But it would be even more formidable in relative terms, since repression has made opposition organizing virtually impossible for the past half-century. In a democratic future, the Communist Party would have a massive organisational head start.

It would also inherit a compelling "[brand](#)" that it could use to attract voters. Despite the regime's many failings, its success in the areas of health and education is undeniable. On the United Nations' Education Index, Cuba is ranked higher than every country in [Latin America except Chile](#), and its life expectancy of 79.3 years puts it ahead of the United States, where life expectancy is [78.9 years](#). In addition to touting its social policy achievements, the party could present itself as the inheritor of a proud history of nationalist defiance, the David that stood eye-to-eye with the Goliath to the north for over fifty years and never blinked.

The inheritance of a vast organization and a popular brand would allow the Communist Party to win elections—and to win them fairly, without coercion or fraud.

Of course, there would be challenges, too. In voters' minds, it would not just be the party of social policy and national sovereignty; it would also be the party of political repression and economic mismanagement. Invariably, this “[authoritarian baggage](#)”—the liabilities associated with an authoritarian past—would lead many voters to support the opposition.

This would likely set in motion one of two patterns that have played out in other new democracies. One is what we might call the “Lithuanian model.” This is where the ASP wins the founding democratic election, but is voted out of office in a subsequent election (and then returned to office later). The other is what we might call the “Polish model.” This is where the ASP loses the founding election, but is voted back into office shortly thereafter by voters disillusioned with the poor governing performance of the former opposition.

The future is bright—but not inevitable

Neither scenario should be frightening to Cuba's Communist Party. In both, the party would continue to occupy a central place in national life and have access to political power. Former authoritarian officials would most likely not even be subject to human rights trials, since they could use their [political clout to block these](#). The costs of democracy would be relatively few, and the gains would be great: Cuba would cease to be a pariah, the last full-blown case of dictatorship in the Americas.

If this future is not frightening, it is also not automatic. Not all ASPs are equally successful. As the political scientists Dan Slater and Joseph Wong have argued, ruling parties that initiate transitions to democracy from a position of strength tend to outperform [those that do so under duress](#). If a dictatorship ends in crisis, its brand will be tarnished and voters will be less likely to support its successor. Crisis also increases the likelihood that party factions will read the writing on the wall and defect before the regime collapses, reducing the organizational strength of the party.

The Communist Party of Cuba would be wise to get out while the getting is good, and embrace a new life as an authoritarian successor party. If it waits too long, any fears that party leaders might have about what lays in store for them in a hypothetical democratic future might just become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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James Loxton is a lecturer in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. He is currently completing work on the edited volume *Life after Dictatorship: Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide*.