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## US-Cuban Relations: Prospects for Improvement?

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Hilary Clinton's recent comments about the Cuban leadership highlights the extent to which the prospect of an improvement in relations between the two countries has largely evaporated. Washington seems determined to link the removal of the trade embargo with human rights on the island while Havana, for its part, denounces American hypocrisy and attempts to subvert the achievements of the Revolution.

That the state of US-Cuban relations has reached this rather predictable point followed arguably unrealistically high expectations towards an Obama presidency across the region as a whole. Yet in the case of Cuba it was always hedged with a certain degree of wariness. The inability of any improvement in relations between the two countries is deep-rooted and demonstrates the persistence of path dependence. Although it did not seek out to be so, the Cuban Revolution resulted in a zero-sum game for Washington, the defeat of the Batista dictatorship sweeping away the direct political and economic investment that the US had built up over preceding decades. These actions prompted the deterioration in relations between the two countries' leaderships, leading to the trade embargo that has remained in place despite the collapse of the Cubans' principal international sponsor, the Soviet Union, in 1989-91.

Another path-dependent aspect of this freeze was the impact that four successive waves of Cuban immigration have had on domestic American politics – which have reinforced the existing policy. Unlike other Hispanic groups, Cuban motivations to reach the US have been as much political as they have been economic. The most active politically have tended to be anti-Castro in their views, from the rich who fled after 1959, and the more middle and working class Cubans between 1965 and 1974, to the exiles from all social classes who took advantage of the Mariel boatlift after 1980, to those who have braved the straits since 1992 when Washington tightened the embargo.

The influence of this Cuba-American lobby on US policy has been felt mainly in two ways. First, compared to other Hispanics, Cuban-Americans have tended to support more conservative politicians who support their political position. This may account for the greater degree to which Cuban-Americans identify with Republicans rather than Democrats. A [Florida International University poll](#) noted that in 2008 52% of Cuban-American voters were registered Republicans, with 62% voting for John McCain and 72% for Republican congressional candidates. This was in marked contrast to other Hispanic communities, which voted overwhelmingly for Obama in 2008, including in Florida, where most Cuban-Americans reside.

Second, Cuban-Americans are able to make their position count in relation to US policy towards Cuba. Being richer than other Hispanics they have more resources at their disposal, which through the use of campaign finance they are able to gain support for their views. This is most notably demonstrated by the [exposition](#) that more than \$10m in campaign contributions have been distributed by groups such as the US-Cuba Democracy Political Action Committee (PAC) and others since 2004. This money has reaped results: both Democrat and Republican congressmen who have been beneficiaries have modified their positions accordingly, while the anti-Castro PACs are demonstrating awareness of changing times: whereas 71% of funds were allocated to Republicans in 2004, in 2010 an estimated 76% will go into Democrats' hands.

And yet, could the power of the anti-Castro lobby in the Cuban-American population be overstated, perhaps even coming to an end? There are at least three points that might indicate their strength will be weakened. First, although their presence is extremely visible in Florida, where two-thirds of them live, they only accounted for [3.5%](#) of the total Hispanic population in 2008. As well as being overshadowed by the sheer size of the Mexican-Americans (66%) and Puerto Ricans (9%), they are also [among the slowest growing](#); Cuban women accounted for the lowest levels of fertility when compared to the other two Hispanic groups. Over time this should mean that the influence of Cuban-American concerns may be diminished – or at least restricted only to internal Florida politics – as other Hispanic-specific issues become more prominent.

Second, US policy may come under greater scrutiny, especially if the Cuban-American population begins to pay closer attention to its own internal contradictions. On one hand Cuban-Americans tend to have a [more favourable view of government](#) than other Hispanic groups. This may partly be due to the more positive response by Washington to immigration by Cuban-

Americans and their lower feelings of concern on the issue compared to others. On the other hand the 2008 poll revealed that a large majority (79%) felt that the trade embargo has either not worked very well or at all; when asked if they would favour re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba nearly two-thirds (65%) were in support. The differences felt by Cuban-Americans on these issues could well prompt a re-evaluation in the future.

Such a shift may already be underway. A third factor that may account for the decline in the strength of the anti-Castro groups may be evident in the diversity of the Cuban population. The breakdown of the 2008 poll revealed significant differences in respondents' political choices. Those who were older or left the island earlier were much more likely to vote Republican, whereas among the young, recent arrivals and US-born Cubans the margin of difference between the two parties was narrower.

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