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Executive Summary

Few countries have figured as prominently in U.S. elections over the years as Cuba. From the first presidential campaign after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 to the 2020 contest, candidates have brought up Cuba to criticize their opponent for being soft on communism and weak on foreign policy, or to appeal to Cuban American voters in the battleground state of Florida. Indeed, in half the presidential elections since 1960, incumbent presidents have allowed perceived electoral pressure to bend their Cuba policy, by either tightening sanctions or retreating from dialogue.

This perceived electoral pressure has severely distorted U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba. Since 1959, that policy has angered our allies, pushed Cuba closer to America’s geopolitical competitors, worsened Cuban human rights, and enabled the Cuban regime to rally nationalist support. This is despite the fact that Cuban Americans have decided only a single election since 1960. Indeed, as this paper demonstrates, the electoral influence of Cuban Americans has been much more limited than generally supposed.

The United States’ brief opening to Cuba during Barack Obama’s presidency proved to be an anomaly. President Trump quickly reversed much of his predecessor’s policies in order to curry favor with the Cuban American voting constituency in Miami, based on promises he made during his 2016 campaign. President Biden, despite his rhetoric during the 2020 election, has left most of Trump’s sanctions in place.

Washington should change course, pursuing a Cuba policy that serves U.S. national interests overall, not the parochial interests of the Cuban American population in Miami. The United States and Cuba share common interests across a number of issues that can serve as the basis for productive engagement.

The United States should lift the economic embargo, or at least minimize its scope to allow greater commercial, cultural, and people-to-people engagement. For more than 60 years, the embargo has failed to overthrow the Cuban regime or foster positive change.

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Relaxing it would improve the lives of the Cuban people and provide new investment opportunities for American businesses. The deep cultural ties and shared interests between the United States and Cuba imply that the normalization of relations should be the ultimate policy goal. Realizing that ambition will not be easy politically, but, as Florida becomes more solidly Republican and less of a battleground state, the electoral costs of doing so are rapidly diminishing. The United States needs a *foreign* policy for Cuba, not a policy driven by short-term electoral calculations.
About the Author

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“Cuba is not a foreign policy question. Cuba is a domestic issue.”

— Brent Scowcroft, National Security Adviser to President George H. W. Bush

Campaigning in 2020, Joe Biden promised to resume Barack Obama’s policy of normalizing relations with Cuba “in large part.” But Democrats lost big in Florida, partly because Cuban American voters made a sharp turn to the right. That setback made the Biden White House reluctant to reverse the draconian economic sanctions Donald Trump imposed on the island, despite the crippling damage done to Cuba by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the 2024 campaign ramps up, the State Department still designates Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism, blocking its access to international financial institutions. Foreign and domestic companies still face the threat of U.S. federal lawsuits if they dare to do business with Cuba. A range of restrictions limit U.S. residents who might want to visit Cuba. Biden has continued policies aimed at choking off Cuba’s access to oil, blocking Cuban contracts to provide medical services to third countries, and punishing Europeans who visit Cuba by denying them a visa waiver to enter the United States.

As foreign policy, the results have been counterproductive, to say the least. This constellation of measures has catalyzed the largest migration crisis since 1959, with over 450,000 Cubans arriving in the United States in the past two years. It has angered Latin American and European allies, and, out of desperation, has driven Cuba closer to U.S. global rivals Russia and China. And while it has exacerbated the post-pandemic humanitarian crisis in Cuba, it has done nothing to improve human rights or the prospects of a democratic opening. Such are the consequences of an international issue becoming a domestic political football.
Sixteen Elections and Counting

Few countries have figured as prominently in U.S. elections over the years as 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. As Susan Eckstein has noted, there is an “ethnic electoral policy cycle” in U.S. policy toward Cuba.¹ 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, to blunt attacks from Barry Goldwater, Lyndon B. Johnson prohibited travel to Cuba and successfully pressured the Organization of American States to adopt mandatory sanctions.

- In 1992, George H. W. Bush signed the Cuban Democracy Act, further tightening the embargo, after challenger Bill Clinton endorsed it.

- In 1996, Clinton signed the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (Helms-Burton), adding new sanctions and codifying the embargo into law.

- In 2004, George W. Bush imposed limits on travel and family remittances to defuse criticism from Cuban American hard-liners.

- In 2020, Donald Trump did the same in hopes of mobilizing the same Cuban American constituency.

On only a single occasion has a 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 because he had abandoned the policy of coercive diplomacy in its entirety.\(^2\)

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

- In 1964, Lyndon B. 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 as appeasement during the Republican primary campaign.
- In 1996, Bill Clinton reneged on his promise of dialogue after the shootdown of the Brothers to the Rescue aircraft.

\(^2\) In 1988, Congress passed the Berman amendment to a trade bill that exempts artistic and informational materials from the embargo. President Reagan opposed the amendment, but signed the trade bill. 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.
In half the presidential elections since 1960, incumbent presidents have allowed perceived electoral pressure to bend their Cuba policy, either by tightening sanctions or retreating from dialogue.

In short, in half the presidential elections since 1960, incumbent presidents have allowed perceived electoral pressure to bend their Cuba policy, either by tightening sanctions or retreating from dialogue. Despite this relative consistency in policy outcomes, the politics around the Cuba issue have not been static. In the 65 years since the Cuban revolution, there have been four major shifts in the dynamics of how Cuba plays in domestic U.S. politics.

In the 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 generally.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War coincided with the emergence of Cuban Americans as a significant voting bloc, shifting how U.S. presidential candidates dealt with the issue. Whereas the focus on national security in earlier elections targeted the general electorate, from the 1990s onward, candidates’ appeals focused on Cuban American voters with a theme of democracy and human rights.

Before 1992, Democrats saw Florida as a solidly Republican state, rarely competitive in presidential elections, and they paid scant attention to the growing Cuban American voting bloc. Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign, however, aimed to compete in Florida by appealing to Cuban Americans with a Cuba policy tougher than George H. W. Bush’s. Although he did not carry Florida in 1992, he did in 1996, establishing Florida as a battleground state. Moreover, he won enough Cuban American votes that Democratic
presidential candidates would follow the Clinton “tough on Cuba” playbook for the next three election cycles.

Barack Obama broke with this conventional wisdom in 2008 by appealing to moderate members of the Cuban American community with a policy of engagement. To the surprise of many Democratic operatives, he was even more successful than Clinton, winning half the Cuban American vote in Florida in 2012, setting the stage for his dramatic decision to normalize relations with Havana in 2014. His decision to end 60 years of hostility was applauded around the world and unexpectedly popular at home, even among many Cuban Americans.

Then Donald Trump, in an effort to mobilize the conservative Cuban American base of the Florida Republican Party, turned back the clock, undoing most of what Obama had done. A shift to the right in Cuban American opinion in response to Trump’s leadership, and a new wave of disaffected immigrants reconfigured politics in the community, cowing moderate leaders who had supported Obama’s opening.

Biden has responded with a bizarre hybrid approach, relaxing some of Trump’s sanctions but leaving most in place—an impossible compromise between Obama’s policy of coexistence and Trump’s policy of regime change. The administration’s watchword has been to be “tough on the regime” while “supporting the Cuban people” as if it were possible to bankrupt the government without immiserating the population.

**Cuba as a Cold War Symbol**

From the triumph of the revolution in 1959 through the 1980s, Cuba was both a focal point and symbol of the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Because no administration was able to roll back the revolution or bend Cuban

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behavior to its will, Cuba was a convenient issue for challengers in presidential campaigns to invoke as an example of the incumbent administration’s foreign policy weakness.

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 having lost China). From August 1960 through Election Day, Cuba was a staple of Kennedy’s stump speech, offered as one example in a long line of policy failures by Eisenhower and Nixon. “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.4 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 and the paramilitary invasion that became the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961. Nixon wanted to launch it before the November election. “It would have been a cinch” to win the election if the Eisenhower administration had been able to overthrow Fidel Castro in the closing days of the presidential campaign, explained a top Nixon campaign aide.5

Once in office, Kennedy established the basic architecture of the policy of regime change, deploying paramilitary forces, launching a wide range of covert operations, and imposing a comprehensive economic embargo that remains in place today. Washington no longer resorts to paramilitary attacks on the island (although some Cuban exiles occasionally make forays ashore), but the rest of Kennedy’s policy framework has proven remarkably resilient despite having failed to achieve its stated aim.

Kennedy’s policy framework has proven remarkably resilient despite having failed to achieve its stated aim.

As Goldwater’s campaign got underway in the fall of 1963, he criticized Kennedy for promising Moscow that the United States would not attack Cuba, part of the deal that ended the 1962 missile crisis. Goldwater proposed establishing a government-in-exile at Guantánamo Naval Station and building a new exile army for yet another invasion. Kennedy, by contrast, hoped to exploit Fidel Castro’s anger over the withdrawal of Soviet missiles by offering rapprochement if Cuba would kick out the Soviets.

After Kennedy was assassinated, President Lyndon B. Johnson broke off the talks that Kennedy had initiated. He “did not want to appear soft on anything, especially Cuba,” National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy told his staff. Instead, Johnson successfully pushed a reluctant Organization of American States to impose mandatory sanctions against Cuba, breaking off all diplomatic and commercial relations.

Vietnam dominated the 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns, but in 1975, Ronald Reagan mounted a primary challenge to President Gerald Ford, attacking the whole architecture of détente, especially Ford’s policy toward Cuba and the Panama Canal. Reagan accused Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger of “working for months, for almost a year, to buddy up to Castro, to relax tensions and have relations with Castro’s Cuba.” He was not wrong. Having scored a diplomatic coup with his opening to China, Kissinger sought to extend normalization to Cuba, and negotiations to that end were underway.

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9 LeoGrande and Kornbluh, Back Channel to Cuba, 225–267.

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Reagan declared 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 stopped “exporting his revolution to other countries.”

Ford countered by breaking off Kissinger’s negotiations. “Let me say categorically and emphatically,” he declared during a campaign stop in Florida, “the United States will have nothing to do with Castro’s Cuba—period.”

Asked later what had derailed Kissinger’s attempted rapprochement, a Cuban official replied, “Your elections.”

When Jimmy Carter assumed office, he reopened the normalization dialogue with Havana, but it was soon derailed by Cuba’s military involvement in Africa. Warned by National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski that Havana’s African adventures made the president look weak, Carter retreated to the traditional policy of hostility as the 1980 election approached.

In 1980, Reagan renewed his attack on détente and again held up Cuba as proof of the incumbent’s weakness. “It’s time to stop pretending that détente 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 in his stump speech. “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.

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The Mariel migration crisis in the summer of 1980 shifted the debate from Cuba’s 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 U.S. interests. “Carter couldn’t get the Russians to move out of Cuba,” Reagan quipped, “so he’s moving out the Cubans.”

**Cuba Becomes a Domestic Political Issue**

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—Cuban Americans in Florida. The theme of Cuba as a proxy for the Soviet Union disappeared with the end of the Cold War. But the Cuban exilio still cared deeply about U.S. policy toward the island. They put their money and their growing electoral power behind candidates who agreed with them—and punished those who did not.

_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—Cuban Americans in Florida._

Before the 1980s, the Cuban diaspora in the United States was too small to make any difference in presidential elections, but the first stirrings of political activism were visible more than a decade earlier. With the passage of the Cuban Adjustment Act in 1966, more and more exiles became permanent residents and then citizens. As the community faced the reality that there was little chance of deposing Fidel Castro,

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activist 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.

The number of eligible Cuban voters in Florida was still too small in the 1960s and early 1970s to affect the outcome of most statewide elections. In 1968, eligible Cuban voters were only 1 percent of the eligible Florida electorate, and only about half of those were registered. But the rate at which they were registering foreshadowed their future influence, and it did not bode well for Democrats. In predominantly Cuban precincts in Miami-Dade in 1968, Nixon and segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace, running as an independent, together won 60 percent of the Cuban American vote. (see table 1).

By 1976, the number of Cuban American eligible voters in Florida had doubled since the 1970 Census, comprising about 4 percent of the state's eligible voters. Those seeking naturalization jumped four-fold from previous years. “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 chair of the Florida Democratic Party. “Now, everybody wants to have an American passport and the right to vote.” 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.

Presidential candidates campaigning in South Florida learned to expect questions about their stance on Cuba. A 1983 poll found that intensely anti-Castro attitudes dominated the Cuban American community. Seventy-eight percent agreed that the United States should provide arms and training to groups trying to overthrow Castro, and two-thirds

Favored a U.S. invasion of the island. From 1993 to 2016, the Florida International University poll of Cuban Americans in South Florida asked how important a candidate's position on Cuba was in determining their vote. Consistently, majorities ranging from 64 to 78 percent deemed it important, and 37 to 48 percent deemed it very important. “Perhaps only in South Florida’s Cuban community could candidates for city council, circuit judge, and state legislator win or lose an election solely on the basis of their foreign policy platforms,” wrote Miguel González-Pando in his history of the Cuban American community.

Gerald Ford won the 1976 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. Four years later, Reagan went after the Cuban American vote aggressively. Campaigning in Miami’s “Little Havana” on the eve of the Florida Republican 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 news 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 in New York and Miami. In November 1980, Reagan carried Florida 55 to 35 percent, winning 80 percent of the Cuban American vote (see table 1).

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19 The FIU polls are available at https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/
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*Cubans in Miami-Dade comprised about 60 percent of Cubans in Florida. Compiled from various sources.

Creating a constituency

Early in the first Reagan administration, Richard V. Allen, Reagan’s 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. It so dominated Cuban American politics in South Florida that it was known to all simply as “la Fundación.” 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 in Florida general elections. It also provided vocal support for Reagan’s policies toward Cuba and Central America.

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 in Florida general elections.

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. In November, Reagan won between 88 and 93 percent of the Cuban American vote in Florida. “Reagan’s anti-Communist rhetoric is so strong that the Cubans are simply in love with him,” admitted Alfredo Duran.

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The 1988 campaign offered conservative Cuban Americans an opportunity to flex their newfound political muscle. Reagan imposed no new sanctions on Cuba during his second term and negotiated the resumption of a migration agreement suspended since 1984. “Reagan came into office like Rambo, but now he is acting more like Mickey Mouse,” groused Tomas Garcia Fuste, news director at Miami’s most popular Spanish-language radio station. On a campaign trip to Miami for George H. W. Bush, Reagan was met by 250 angry protesters while airplanes circled overhead with banners reading, “No Negotiations with Cuba” and “Don’t Play with Words—Stop Talking With Castro.”

“As far as this administration is concerned, freedom for Cuba, liberty for her people, is a non-negotiable demand,” Reagan promised at the campaign event. “So long as Cuba remains an inhuman communist dungeon … there cannot and must not be any normalization of relations.”

Cuban Americans’ frustration with the Reagan-Bush administration’s Cuba policy did not redound to the benefit of Democrats, however. “The idea that Cuba has been abandoned as a priority foreign policy goal is a cause of great disgust, I guess, or dissatisfaction,” noted Miami Mayor Xavier Suárez, but “not enough to make anyone switch to the opponents.” 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.” In the general election against Michael Dukakis, Bush won 85 percent of the Cuban American vote in Florida (see table 1).

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26 Marx, “Cuban-Americans.”  
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 won the state only twice (Johnson in 1964 and Carter in 1976). Walter 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 among his targets. Florida’s electorate was more heterogeneous than that of other Southern states—retirees from the Northeast, Latinos from various countries, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Haitians, and more. Population growth also made it 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, 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 Joffee, director of the Mason-Dixon Florida Poll. Clinton did not expect to win the Cuban American vote, but he aimed to win enough of it that the Democrats’ advantage among the elderly, non-Cuban Latinos, and African Americans would carry the state.

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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 and Senator Bob Graham of Florida. President Bush opposed the bill because its extraterritorial provisions threatened to damage relations with U.S. allies.

On April 23, 1992, Clinton attended a fundraiser at Victor’s Café 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.30

Clinton’s gambit was carefully orchestrated by Torricelli and 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.31

It worked. Less than two weeks after Clinton’s Miami endorsement, Bush announced that he, too, supported the CDA. Signing the bill in Miami, Bush declared, “For freedom to rise in Cuba, Fidel Castro must fall. ... Our policy is the only way to put it, plain and simple: Democracy, Mr. Castro, not sometime, not someday, but now.”32 Clinton, however, had established his bona fides as tough on Cuba. 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.33 Less than a week before the election, CANF leaders issued a statement praising Clinton’s “deep-seated commitment to continue exerting pressure

on the Castro regime.” Most importantly, the statement concluded, “We need not fear a Bill Clinton administration.”

Nevertheless, on Election Day, most Cuban Americans still voted their traditional Republican loyalty; Bush won 71 percent of their votes to just 22 percent for Clinton (see table 1). Bush carried Florida by only 100,000 votes, a victory so narrow that Cuban Americans could rightly claim credit for it, but Clinton won nationwide. 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 stanch the flow of undocumented refugees that began with the “rafters crisis” in the summer of 1994 when thousands of Cubans, desperate to escape the economic depression in Cuba caused by the collapse of European Communism, tried to reach the United States on homemade rafts. To prevent Clinton from taking further steps to improve relations, Republican Senator Jesse Helms and Congressman Dan Burton introduced the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (known simply as Helms-Burton). It was designed to block foreign investment in Cuba, tighten the embargo, and prohibit its repeal until Cuba became a free-market democracy. At first, Clinton opposed the bill and threatened to veto it because it infringed on the president’s constitutional authority to make foreign policy.

Then, on February 24, two Cessna aircraft from the Cuban American group Brothers to the Rescue were shot down by Cuban MiG fighters as they approached Cuban airspace. All four pilots were killed. The shootdown drastically altered the political environment in Washington. “Clinton has tried to cozy up to Castro for three years,” charged Republican

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senator and presidential candidate Robert Dole. Campaigning in Miami with the Florida primary just weeks away, Dole demanded that “the murderers” responsible for the shootdown be indicted, convicted, and executed.

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. On March 12, 1996, Clinton signed it 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 if I won a second term to lift the embargo in return for positive changes within Cuba.”

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 conventional wisdom among Democrats that they had to be just as tough as Republicans on Cuba 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 five-year-old Elián González was found floating in an inner tube in the Florida Strait on Thanksgiving Day, 1999. His mother and 10 others drowned when a small smugglers’ boat capsized en route from Cuba to Miami. The Immigration and Naturalization Service released the boy into the custody of his great-uncle Lazaro González in Miami, but his father in Cuba, Juan Miguel

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González, wanted his son back. The “Miami relatives,” as they came to be known, refused to give him up. Elián became a symbol to the Cuban American community in Miami. A *Miami Herald* poll found that 91 percent of Cuban Americans in South Florida believed that Elián should stay in the United States.39 “Since the Bay of Pigs, there hasn’t been an issue of this level of importance to Cuban American voters,” said Washington pollster Rob Schrot.40

After determining that Elián’s father was a good parent, the Clinton administration ruled that Elián should be returned to him.41 Angry Republicans on Capitol Hill introduced legislation to give Elián U.S. citizenship, accusing the Clinton administration of wanting to “appease the Castro regime.”42 Republican presidential candidates George W. Bush and John McCain argued that Elián’s father should be required to come to the United States to claim custody, and Bush voiced support for the congressional effort to make Elián a citizen by an act of Congress.43 On the Democratic side, Al Gore said that he favored “whatever is in the best interests of the child,” without venturing an opinion as to what that might be.44

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. The Cuban American National Foundation threatened to work actively to defeat Gore. “If Elián gets sent back,” said Jim Nicholson,

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chair 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.”

As the Department of Justice negotiated with the Miami relatives, Gore suddenly broke with the administration, declaring that Elián should stay in the United States. Gore’s gambit was so obviously designed to appeal to Cuban American voters that it reinforced one of his major weaknesses—the public’s perception that he was an unprincipled opportunist. Gallup found that the public disapproved of Gore’s handling of Elián’s case by a two-to-one margin. “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.”

At 5:15 a.m. on April 22, 2000, 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 the boy from his Miami relatives and his return to Cuba produced a deep sense of betrayal. Gore tried to recover by picking Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut as his running mate. Lieberman had been a close friend of CANF president Jorge Mas Canosa, who died in 1997. In 1988, donations from CANF’s directors helped Lieberman narrowly defeat incumbent Senator Lowell Weicker; from then on, Lieberman was one of the top recipients of campaign donations from Cuban American hard-liners.

Campaigning in Little Havana, Lieberman pledged that a Gore administration would not relax sanctions on Cuba. Gore declared himself “a hard-liner,” adding, “I do not favor

any openings to the Castro government.” But Lieberman’s friendship with the Cuban American right was not enough to overcome the trauma of Elián’s return to Cuba. “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. In November, Al Gore won only about 23 percent of the Cuban American vote, losing Florida and the presidency 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.”

Kerry–Bush, 2004: The Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba

The pivotal role that Cuban Americans played in George W. Bush’s razor-thin victory in 2000 raised expectations that Bush would toughen U.S. sanctions. When, after three years in office, nothing much had changed, conservative Cuban Americans became increasingly disaffected. In July 2003, 13 Florida legislators, 11 of them Cuban Americans, wrote to Bush, warning that if he did not deliver on his campaign promise to increase pressure on Cuba, “We fear the historic and intense support from Cuban American voters for Republican federal candidates, including yourself, will be jeopardized.” Governor Jeb Bush, the president’s brother, underscored the seriousness of the political risk by publicly acknowledging that Washington had no “coherent policy” toward Cuba.

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

51 “Excerpts from an Interview with Gore about Foreign Policy,” New York Times, October 5, 2000,
52 Schneider, “Elián González defeated Al Gore.”
53 Clinton, My Life, 905.
change” in Cuba. A second poll of Miami-Dade Republican voters found that while 88 percent supported Bush, 70 percent agreed that he had not done enough to pressure Cuba, suggesting that his support was soft. “There will be a real fight for the Cuban exile vote,” predicted pollster Bendixen.56

Democratic aspirants saw Cuban American frustration as an opportunity. As if on cue, they began toughening their own stance on Cuba. Three years earlier, Senator John Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts, had said that a reassessment of the embargo was “long overdue,” and that U.S. policy remained frozen “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 replied, “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.57

Presidents have a unique advantage in a campaign. Challengers can only make promises; the president can act. On May 6, 2004, Bush’s 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.”58 President Bush promptly accepted them all.

The new sanctions had a significant impact on Cuban Americans, restricting both family travel and remittances. The new policy 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.59 The final policy package was a political gamble. By catering to Cuban


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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.60

In fact, a significant part of the community opposed the restrictions; even the Cuban American National Foundation criticized them.61 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. Responses were polarized between older, Cuban-born respondents who arrived in the United States before 1980 on the one side, and younger, more recent arrivals and respondents born in the United States on the other. The older group, who had fewer immediate family still on the island, favored the harsh sanctions by wide margins.62 Sanction supporters were more likely to be naturalized U.S. citizens, more likely to be registered to vote, and more likely to turn out to vote, than sanctions opponents.

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.63 Bush’s gamble had paid off.

60 Cuba Research Institute, FIU Cuba Poll (Miami: Florida International University), https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/
Kerry tried to exploit the split in the community by reorienting his appeal toward opponents of Bush’s sanctions, attacking the 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. It didn’t work. 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 (see table 1). 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 Cuba, abandoning the traditional Democratic strategy of trying to be tougher than 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 50 years had failed. The electoral logic underlying Obama’s strategy was still aimed at winning enough Cuban American votes to put Florida in play, but Obama’s appeal was new, premised on the shift in Cuban American opinion produced by demographic change.

The electoral logic underlying Obama’s strategy was still aimed at winning enough Cuban American votes to put Florida in play, but Obama’s appeal was new, premised on the shift in Cuban American opinion produced by demographic change.

When Florida International University began polling Cuban Americans in South Florida in 1991, 87 percent favored continuing the U.S. embargo. By 2007, support had fallen to 58%

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64 Lesley Clark, “Expand Travel to Cuba, Kerry Says,” Miami Herald, June 6, 2004.
percent. In 1993, 75 percent opposed selling food to Cuba, and 50 percent opposed selling medicine. By 2007, solid majorities—62 percent and 72 percent respectively—supported both.\(^6^5\)

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 found that fewer than half of those who arrived before 1985 were sending remittances to the island, whereas three-quarters of more recent arrivals were. In 2007, the voter 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.\(^6^6\) 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 Cuban American electorate by 2010), the electoral potential of the community’s moderate wing became unmistakable. In 2008, Cuban Americans were 6.6 percent of the Florida electorate.

Bush’s 2004 limits on family visits and remittances brought these differences in the community to the surface. In late 2006, 20 Cuban American organizations, including the Cuban American National Foundation, called on Bush to relax restrictions on travel and humanitarian assistance.\(^6^7\) 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.\(^6^8\)

Obama laid out his Cuba policy in a 2007 opinion editorial in the Miami Herald, taking pains to assure Cuban Americans he was not soft on the Castros. “A democratic opening in Cuba is, and should be, the foremost objective of our policy,” he wrote. But he

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\(^6^5\) Cuba Research Institute, FIU Cuba Poll.  
\(^6^6\) Cuba Research Institute, FIU Cuba Poll.  
\(^6^7\) Madeline Baró Díaz and Doreen Hemlock, “Ease Rules on Travel to Cuba, Group Asks,” South Florida Sun-Sentinel, December 5, 2006.  
\(^6^8\) Cuba Research Institute, FIU Cuba Poll.
criticized Bush’s policy as “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 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. McCain, by contrast, opposed any changes in Bush’s policy, promising to keep the embargo in place and attacking Obama’s willingness to open a dialogue with Cuban leaders.

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 by his son Jorge Mas Santos. 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 received several standing ovations. 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.

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. Yet as innovative and successful as Obama’s strategy proved to be, it made no

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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: Invisible island**

During his first year in the White House, Obama kept his campaign promise to lift all restrictions on Cuban American travel and remittances, renewed diplomatic conversations with Havana on issues of mutual interest, and declared to other hemispheric heads of state at the Summit of the Americas that he wanted a “new beginning” in U.S.-Cuban relations. But before his new policy could gain momentum, it was stopped dead in December 2009 by the arrest in Cuba of USAID “democracy promotion” subcontractor Alan Gross.\(^{74}\) Relations remained frozen for the next three years.

Domestic issues—recovery from the 2008 Great Recession and the controversial Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. Obamacare)—dominated the campaign agenda in 2012. The topic of Cuba flared briefly during the Republican primaries as Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich vied for the Cuban American primary vote, but it was not a prominent issue in the general election. Obama’s pro-family policies on travel and remittances were popular in Miami, and he had done little else because of Gross’s imprisonment. On more than a half-dozen campaign trips to Florida, Obama never once mentioned Cuba, and even though the final presidential debate was held in Florida and devoted to foreign policy, there was not a single question about Cuba.

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Clinton–Trump, 2016: The art of the deal

President Obama’s 2014 decision to reestablish 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 and 2016, 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. In just two years, Washington and Havana signed 22 bilateral accords on issues of mutual interest. In 2016, Obama became the first U.S. president to visit Cuba since Calvin Coolidge in 1928.

Republican presidential aspirants in 2016 were nearly unanimous in their opposition to Obama’s opening. Every new development in the normalization process prompted more hyperbolic Republican denunciations, especially from the two Cuban American candidates, Republican Senators Marco Rubio of Florida and Ted Cruz of Texas.75 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 doing everything I can do to unravel as many of these changes as possible,” he added.76 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.”77 Republican Governor Jeb Bush of Florida called the opening a “misstep” that


“undermines America’s credibility and undermines the quest for a free and democratic Cuba.” Donald Trump was equivocal.

At first, 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. 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).

Moreover, the new policy found significant support among Cuban 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). A Florida International University poll in the summer of 2016, after Obama’s

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trip to Cuba, found that support for normalization among Cuban Americans in South Florida had grown to 56 percent and support for ending the embargo to 54 percent.\textsuperscript{82}

Hillary Clinton, who had taken a tough stance on Cuba in the 2008 campaign, now embraced normalization. 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 she promised to expand on his policy of engagement. She did not shy away from arguing that engagement would weaken the Cuban regime and hasten its demise. The embargo had only strengthened the hand of hard-liners 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.”\textsuperscript{83}

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.”\textsuperscript{84} A few months later, during the March 2016 Republican primary debate, he stumbled through 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.”\textsuperscript{85} 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.”

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. At that same 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. 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. Trump hurried to Miami to shore up his support among 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.”

Campaigning in Miami, Trump and Pence both pledged to roll back Obama’s policy in its entirety. “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.” In October, Trump was endorsed by the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association.

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88 Mazzei, “Trump Says It’s ‘Fine.’”
92 Diamond, “Trump Shifts on Cuba.”

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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. 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.

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. “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.” 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.

Biden–Trump, 2020: Do no harm

President Trump kept his 2016 campaign promise to reverse Obama’s policy of engagement. Speaking to a cheering crowd of Cuban exiles in Miami on July 17, 2017, 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. 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. The embassy’s consular

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section stopped processing Cuban visa requests and suspended both the Family Reunification Program and the refugee program. Immigrant visas issued at the Havana Embassy fell from 9,752 in FY 2017 to just 29 in FY 2018 and zero in FY 2019 and 2020. Pressured by Marco 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, to sue Cuban, U.S., or foreign companies in U.S. federal court for using property nationalized after the 1959 revolution. The administration targeted Cuba’s energy supply by imposing sanctions on companies shipping Venezuelan oil to Cuba. The State Department pressured countries to cancel their medical assistance contracts with Cuba or risk losing U.S. assistance, and conservative governments in Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, and El Salvador quickly obliged.

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 policies won praise from the Cuban American right, but two years into his administration, opinion in South Florida was still divided. A 2018 Florida International
University (FIU) poll found the community evenly split on whether to keep the embargo (51 percent in favor, 49 percent against), and large majorities favored maintaining diplomatic relations, food and medicine sales, unrestricted travel, and people-to-people educational exchanges.100 Two years later, however, an FIU poll in the middle of the 2020 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. Fifty-nine percent said they would vote for Trump, compared to just 25 percent for Biden. Among the most important findings was that recent arrivals from Cuba—usually a moderate constituency that wanted to maintain ties with family on the island—were now identifying with Republicans.101

But it was an Equis Research poll eight months earlier, in November 2019, that shaped Joe Biden’s campaign strategy on Cuba. The poll confirmed a dramatic shift among Cubans who arrived in the United States after the 1994 rafter 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.102 Equis offered several mutually reinforcing explanations for this dramatic shift: Trump’s hard-line policies had re-energized the right; Republican 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

100 Cuba Research Institute, FIU Cuba Poll (Miami: Florida International University), https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/.
created a highly partisan pro-Republican milieu into which new arrivals from Cuba (and Venezuela and Nicaragua) were being socialized.\textsuperscript{103}

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.” That, however, was not the lesson the campaign took from the data.\textsuperscript{104}

The Biden campaign's central focus was to rebuild the “blue wall” 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 its infrastructure in Florida, prompting bitter complaints from organizers on the ground.\textsuperscript{105} 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 Cuban Americans. “We’ve seen firsthand that Democrats have abandoned the battlefield,” complained Democratic pollster Fernand Amandi.\textsuperscript{106}

On the issue of Cuba, Biden faced a dilemma. As Obama’s vice president, he could hardly repudiate one of Obama’s signature diplomatic achievements. But the shift in Cuban American opinion suggested that embracing normalization 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

\textsuperscript{103} Equis Research, \textit{Florida: Background on the LatAm Vote}, October 20, 2020, \url{https://equisresearch.medium.com/florida-background-on-the-latam-vote-d44c2193f4da}
\textsuperscript{104} Equis, \textit{Deep Dive}.
found Biden trailing Trump among Cuban Americans by 30 to 40 points, the campaign had even less incentive to invest in chasing their votes.\textsuperscript{107}

When Biden had to talk about Cuba, he followed Obama’s 2008 formula of focusing on Cuban American families. “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.”\textsuperscript{108} Asked directly if he would return to Obama’s policy of engagement, he answered, “Yes, I would … in large part.”\textsuperscript{109} When Trump imposed sanctions on remittance service providers in the closing weeks of the campaign, the Biden camp denounced it for “denying Cuban Americans the right to help their families.”\textsuperscript{110}

Trump’s Florida strategy built on the strategy Ron DeSantis and Rick Scott used in their races for governor and U.S. Senate in 2018, when they accused Democrats of being socialists.\textsuperscript{111} By tying all Democrats to self-avowed Democratic socialists Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Republicans were able to mobilize the Cuban, Venezuela, and Nicaraguan diasporas that had fled socialism in their home countries.

Cuba jumped back into the headlines when Biden was selecting his running mate. Among the finalists was Democratic Representative Karen Bass of California, who, as a young woman, had traveled to Cuba several times with the Venceremos Brigade solidarity group. As a member of Congress, she had a long record of supporting


\textsuperscript{108} “Joe Biden Answers 10 Questions on Latin America,” \textit{Americas Quarterly}, March 4, 2020, \url{https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/updated-2020-candidates-answer-10-questions-on-latin-america/}.

\textsuperscript{109} “Joe Biden Confident He’ll Turn Florida Blue, Says He’ll Restore Obama-Era Cuba Policies in Exclusive CBS4 Interview,” CBS News Miami, April 27, 2020, \url{https://www.cbsnews.com/miami/news/cbs4-joe-biden-interview/}.


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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.112 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.113 Even after Biden named Senator Kamala 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.”114

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 with large Cuban populations (FL 26th and 27th) to Cuban American Republicans. However, 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, steps Obama had taken during his first weeks in office. In 2023, the consular section of the U.S. Embassy resumed processing immigrant visas. But the looming 2024 campaign caused the administration to renege

on a 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.115

In the 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.”116

Recent polls have confirmed the continuing shift in Cuban American opinion away from support for engagement with Cuba. A 2022 Florida International University poll showed Democrats 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 only marginally different from Trump’s. Cuban American antipathy toward Democrats reaches across a wide range of policy issues, foreign and domestic.117

In the White House, political calculations remain unchanged from the 2020 campaign: do nothing on Cuba because anything positive entails political costs with no offsetting gains. Speaking at the U.S. Institute for Peace in September 2022, the NSC adviser on Latin America, Juan Gonzalez, observed that Latin America, more than most regions, involved “very huge domestic equities. ... It’s hard to take the politics out of some of the

115 Interview with Representative Jim McGovern, Democrat of Massachusetts, https://twitter.com/QuincyInstit/status/1663628506813853697.
116 Trump speech in Hialeah, Florida, November 8, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_0LU991czk&ab_channel=RightSideBroadcastingNetwork.
considerations when you’re trying to drive policy. The chances that Biden would take action to reduce sanctions on Cuba before the 2024 election are nearly nil.

In the White House, political calculations remain unchanged from the 2020 campaign: do nothing on Cuba because anything positive entails political costs with no offsetting gains.

Another reason for the campaign’s caution is the Florida Senate race, where Republican Rick Scott is running for reelection. Scott’s low popularity makes him one of the few vulnerable Republican incumbents in 2024, whereas several Democrats are facing tough reelections, putting the party’s Senate majority in jeopardy. If there is even an outside chance that Democrats could pickup a Senate seat in Florida to offset expected losses elsewhere, the Biden campaign will do nothing on Cuba that might complicate that race.

Barring some unforeseen crisis, Cuba itself is not likely to be a major issue in the 2024 campaign. Biden will say as little as he can get away with, and since he has left most of Trump’s sanctions in place, there are few things about his Cuba policy that Republicans can easily attack. Instead, Republicans are certain to reiterate the strategy that was so effective in the 2018, 2020, and 2022 election cycles—the charge that Democrats are socialists bent on destroying America.

A look at the electoral landscape explains why both Democrats and Republicans focus on Florida. Most of the electoral map of the United States is predetermined. 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 Democrats’ “blue wall” of Wisconsin (0.63 percent), Pennsylvania (1.16 percent), and Michigan (2.78 percent).

118 A video of the event is available here: https://www.usip.org/events/there-path-greater-unity-western-hemisphere.
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. If Republicans lose Florida’s 29 electoral votes, they can afford to lose only 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. Biden’s 2024 campaign indicated it would focus on holding the states they won in 2020 (the blue wall plus Arizona and Georgia), and make a push for Florida and North Carolina. A referendum on abortion rights will be on the ballot in Florida in November 2024, which is likely to spur Democratic turnout. “Florida’s back in play,” Florida Democratic Party Chairwoman Nikki Fried told the Washington Post, and the Biden campaign reacted by promising to invest more resources to contest the state. 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 Trump in 2016 by 112,911 votes; Biden lost it by 371,686 votes. In 2022, Governor Ron DeSantis beat Charlie Crist by 1.5 million votes, and Senator Marco Rubio beat Val Demings by 1.3 million. According to exit polls, 67 percent of Cuban Americans voted for Rubio in the 2022 midterm elections, and 69 percent for DeSantis.

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Cuban American Republicans

Cuba policy used to be decisive in determining how Cuban Americans voted. FIU polls from 1993 to 2016 found big majorities saying it was important, and many of them declaring it very important. But the salience of the issue was lowest among those who had arrived recently or were born in the United States, and highest among the oldest age cohort. That suggests that as the older generation passes from the scene and the proportion of the community born in the United States grows, the salience of Cuba policy for Cuban American voters may gradually decline.

As the older generation passes from the scene and the proportion of the community born in the United States grows, the salience of Cuba policy for Cuban American voters may gradually decline.

In 2018, the FIU poll replaced the question about the importance of Cuba policy with one asking respondents to rank the importance of about 10 issues. In three successive polls, Cuba policy ranked far behind healthcare, the economy, and immigration. Except for those over age 76, respondents ranked Cuba policy last or near last in all three polls. No doubt some of the difference between the early and later polls results from the change in question wording, but it does suggest that Democrats could appeal to Cuban Americans on the basis of issues other than Cuba.

But as the salience of the Cuba issue declines, Cuban Americans look increasingly like other Republican voters. Even though Trump’s 2020 margin of victory among Cuban Americans was reminiscent of the historic margins Republicans won in the 1990s and early 2000s, Cuban American support over and above the support Republican candidates have received from the general electorate has fallen substantially since 2004 (see table 2). That suggests that a candidate’s stance on Cuba may not make as
much of a difference to Cuban American voters as their partisan identification, as Guillermo Grenier has argued.\textsuperscript{122}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Cuban American Vote Premium in Florida}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Election & Republican Percent of Florida Vote & Republican Percent of Cuban American Vote & Cuban American Premium \\
\hline
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 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\footnotesize{Source: Republican share of the Cuban American vote is an average of the exit poll and Miami-Dade precinct analyses in Table I.}
\end{table}

The “historic exile” was always conservative on foreign policy, especially toward Cuba, and gravitated toward Republican presidential candidates who typically were the most anti-communist. Their belief that President Kennedy doomed the Bay of Pigs invasion by withholding air support made them 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.\textsuperscript{123}

But the partisan identification of Cuban Americans as Republicans was not foreordained. As their voter registration increased, Republicans and Democrats split the


new voters roughly equally into the 1970s, and Democrats could win local contests.\footnote{Grenier, “Engagement with Cuba?”} In 1976, Jimmy Carter narrowly lost the Cuban American vote to Gerald Ford, 48 to 52 percent.\footnote{Gerald R. Webster, “Factors in the Growth of Republican Voting in the Miami-Dade County SMSA,” \textit{Southeastern Geographer} 27, no. 1 (May 1987): 1–17.} But traditional Democratic constituencies saw the rise of Cuban Americans as a threat to their control of the party and resisted it, whereas Florida Republicans opened their arms to the community, seeing them as a building block for a Republican majority. The Republican Party worked for years to establish itself as the party of Cuban Americans in Florida, while Democrats have generally conceded the field, making little effort to build links in the community.\footnote{Grenier, “Engagement with Cuba?”} As a result, Democrats have little prospect in the short term of making major inroads into the increasingly Republican Cuban American community.

**Does Florida Make a Difference?**

Despite the intensity with which both parties have focused on Florida for the past 30 years, Florida has rarely been decisive in determining the outcome of U.S. presidential elections. And Cuban Americans have only occasionally been 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’s and Bush’s margins of victory were far too big in 1980, 1984, and 1988 for Cuban Americans to have made the difference (see table 3).
Despite the intensity with which both parties have focused on Florida for the past 30 years, Florida has rarely been decisive in determining the outcome of U.S. presidential elections.

That changed in 1992, when Bill Clinton lost Florida, winning only about 22 percent of the Cuban vote despite his best efforts. He would have carried the state had he won just 37 percent (as he nearly managed to do four years later). Nevertheless, his relative success compared to prior Democratic candidates inaugurated the Democrats’ quadrennial quest to cut into the Republicans’ margin with the Cuban community. Gore’s 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 in 2016, 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 57 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, 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 both parties have identified Cuban Americans as a key constituency to be courted, the record shows that Cuban Americans in Florida have decided only one presidential election since 1960. In the 16 U.S. elections since Fidel Castro rode into Havana in 1959, Florida’s electoral votes have made the difference only twice—in 2000 and 2004 (see table 4). 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 have won the general election anyway. Cuban Americans have arguably been the decisive vote in Florida only in 1992, 2000, and 2012. In short, there has only been one election since 1960 in which Cuban Americans made the difference in Florida and in which Florida decided the election—2000, the election that continues to haunt Democratic political operatives with a kind of electoral post-traumatic stress disorder.
## Table 3: Cuban American Voters in Presidential Elections in Florida

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election</th>
<th>Florida Winner</th>
<th>Cuban American Eligible Voters</th>
<th>Cuban American Turnout</th>
<th>Cuban American Vote</th>
<th>Cuban American Vote Split (average percentage)</th>
<th>Cuban American Vote Split (estimated)</th>
<th>Florida Total Winning Margin</th>
<th>Votes Needed to Change the Outcome</th>
<th>Votes Needed as Percent of Cuban American Vote</th>
<th>Percent of Cuban American Voters Needed by Loser to Change the Outcome</th>
<th>Did Cuban Americans Decide Florida</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>239,938</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>172,755</td>
<td>Democrat 16%Republican 80%</td>
<td>Democrat 27,641Republican 138,204</td>
<td>627,476</td>
<td>313,738</td>
<td>182%</td>
<td>292%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Reagan</td>
<td>304,610</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>219,319</td>
<td>Democrat 10%Republican 91%</td>
<td>Democrat 21,932Republican 143,698</td>
<td>1,281,534</td>
<td>640,767</td>
<td>292%</td>
<td>182%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>369,281</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>264,775</td>
<td>Democrat 15%Republican 85%</td>
<td>Democrat 39,716Republican 225,059</td>
<td>926,184</td>
<td>481,092</td>
<td>182%</td>
<td>292%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>census</td>
<td>401,617</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat 70%Republican 30%</td>
<td>Democrat 71,563Republican 230,953</td>
<td>100,512</td>
<td>50,256</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Clinton</td>
<td>522,489</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
<td>306,701</td>
<td>Democrat 38%Republican 63%</td>
<td>Democrat 116,546Republican 193,222</td>
<td>302,334</td>
<td>151,167</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>112%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>census</td>
<td>582,926</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat 64.6%Republican 35.4%</td>
<td>Democrat 86,611Republican 289,959</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>660,046</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>424,135</td>
<td>Democrat 27%Republican 73%</td>
<td>Democrat 114,516Republican 309,618</td>
<td>380,978</td>
<td>190,489</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Obama</td>
<td>738,367</td>
<td>69.4%</td>
<td>512,427</td>
<td>Democrat 38%Republican 62%</td>
<td>Democrat 194,722Republican 317,705</td>
<td>236,450</td>
<td>118,225</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>census</td>
<td>816,088</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Democrat 67.2%Republican 32.8%</td>
<td>Democrat 593,344Republican 308,539</td>
<td>74,309</td>
<td>37,155</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Obama</td>
<td>882,952</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>593,344</td>
<td>Democrat 48%Republican 52%</td>
<td>Democrat 284,805Republican 308,539</td>
<td>74,309</td>
<td>37,155</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Trump</td>
<td>1,022,079</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>592,806</td>
<td>Democrat 47%Republican 53%</td>
<td>Democrat 268,033Republican 302,250</td>
<td>112,911</td>
<td>56,456</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Trump</td>
<td>1,177,403</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
<td>664,047</td>
<td>Democrat 37%Republican 63%</td>
<td>Democrat 245,698Republican 424,990</td>
<td>371,686</td>
<td>185,843</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Data on the winning margin in Florida is from “Statistics: Data Archives, Elections,” The American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, [https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections). 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.
(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 exit 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.
Conclusion - What Would a Foreign Policy Toward Cuba Look Like?

At the outset of the second Clinton administration, his foreign policy team was grappling with how to repair relations with Havana after the shootdown of the Brothers to the Rescue aircraft and the passage of the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (Helms-Burton). In a meeting of senior National Security Council staff, every idea tabled was met with the objections that Miami would never accept it. Finally, National Security Adviser Sandy Berger interrupted. “Let’s pretend we’re the president’s foreign policy advisers,” he suggested, with a hint of sarcasm.127

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127 LeoGrande and Kornbluh, Back Channel to Cuba, 316.
A Cuba policy that serves the national interests of the United States rather than the parochial interests of the Cuban American right in Miami, or the political fortunes of would-be presidents, would begin with an acknowledgment that the current policy of hostility is not going to depose the Cuban government—something that ought to be self-evident after 65 years of trying in vain. A realistic foreign policy would instead be based on identifying and building upon areas of common interest, while recognizing and managing areas of disagreement like human rights.

*A Cuba policy that serves the national interests of the United States...would begin with an acknowledgment that the current policy of hostility is not going to depose the Cuban government.*

In the field of national security, the United States and Cuba share a common interest in combating transnational crime—narcotics trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, etc.—and the Cubans have historically proved to be reliable partners. Engagement would also provide Havana an opportunity to avoid dependence on the United States’ global rivals Russia and China, and would give Cuba an incentive to cooperate in the search for peaceful solutions to the conflicts in Venezuela and Nicaragua, as it did successfully in Angola in the 1980s and recently in Colombia.

The United States and Cuba share common interests on a wide range of other issues as well, transnational problems that near-neighbors can only effectively tackle together—environmental protection, the impacts of climate change, public health, plant and animal safety, aviation and maritime safety, etc. During his last two years in office, President Obama concluded 22 bilateral agreements with Cuba on a range of these issues, but many of them have been moribund since the Trump administration.

Lifting the economic embargo, or curtailing its scope as Obama did, would help jump-start the Cuban economy, improve the lives of the Cuban people, stimulate the

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emergent private sector, and open new trade and investment opportunities to U.S. businesses. It might even create a favorable environment for discussing compensation for nationalized property—discussions that began under Obama but were shuttered by Trump.

Finally, the United States and Cuba have deep cultural ties stretching back more than a century and a half, links that have grown more profound as the Cuban American population has expanded. Despite the difficulties of traveling to Cuba, nearly a million U.S. residents visit annually, many of them to see family. Cultural and educational exchanges are rich, though they, too, must run the gamut of government regulations. Cuban and U.S. professionals in medicine, education, agriculture, environmental science, and many other fields actively collaborate despite embargo restrictions that make it harder than it should be. The interests of both countries would be best served by sweeping away all these impediments to engagement, letting ordinary citizens build the bridges of reconciliation that the two governments have had such a hard time constructing.

In 2024, a policy like this can seem like a bridge too far. But not so long ago, the United States took the first steps down this path, during the last two years of the Obama presidency. The progress made in just 24 months was substantial, though was not without its setbacks, and the domestic political response was more positive than even the policy’s authors expected. Asked what made Obama’s dramatic break with the past possible after so many decades of hostility, Ben Rhodes, who led the U.S. negotiating team, gave a surprisingly simple answer: leadership and political will.\textsuperscript{128} The normalization of relations with Cuba happened, he said, because it was something the president was determined to do.

\textsuperscript{128} LeoGrande and Kornbluh, \textit{Back Channel to Cuba}, 421.
About the Quincy Institute

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