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## What to Expect from the Cuban-American Electorate

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## Introduction

Over the last four decades a conventional wisdom about Cuban-Americans holding extreme and almost rabid support for Republicans has evolved. In fact, few groups are as loyal to their presidential candidates as Cuban-Americans are to Republicans—in the last three elections they supported GOP presidential candidates at greater than a 70% clip—a rate rivaled only by white Evangelical Protestants who show similar levels of support (Greenberg 2004). Only African-Americans, who support Democrats at rates exceeding 90%, are more loyal to their party. Moreover, with respect to American foreign policy, the community has overwhelmingly opposed dialogue, travel by American tourists, and trade with Castro's Cuba. Driven in large part by media portrayals of Cuban-American's activism on questions of foreign policy toward Cuba, the Elian Gonzalez saga, and Republican officials' support of these positions, the Cuban community is commonly perceived as a bastion of unwavering conservatism that takes a hard line against Castro.

So pervasive is this stereotype that over the last few years the media have portrayed a new contrasting view in which Cuban-American voters are “up for grabs” and much more likely to vote Democratic. This narrative is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the titles of the articles describing the purported shift, such as “Neither Bloc nor Lock” (Goodnough 2004), “Obama Charts a Path through Divided Cuban Vote” (Silva 2007), and “Will Little Havana go Blue?” (Reiff 2008). Like most stereotypes, however, these contain only an element of truth.

The evidence we present in this paper suggests that both views are incorrect. The overwhelming homogeneity among Cuban-American voters in supporting Republicans,

the travel ban, and the embargo, conceals much greater opinion diversity on other, especially social, issues. Moreover, in the pages that follow, we show that on several of these issues the community is not only more liberal than commonly thought, but quite liberal in absolute terms as well. Finally, we also demonstrate that on social issues, this liberalism is especially pronounced among women, an often overlooked group that comprises a solid majority of the Cuban-American electorate. Understanding these nuances in Cuban-American attitudes provides great leverage for understanding what the future holds for this important voting bloc.

Perhaps the most important nuance for understanding the prospects for Cuban-American's political behavior is to distinguish between the views of Cuban-American voters and the Cuban-American community. While newer, post-Mariel (1980) arrivals, now constitute just under half of South Florida's Cuban-American voting age community (U.S. Census 2000), they constitute only about 1 in 8 Cuban-American voters.<sup>1</sup> As polls show that these more recent immigrants disproportionately hold supportive positions toward engagement on U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba, the failure to recognize the difference between the community as a whole and those who vote may lead to mistaken inferences about the effects of attitude and demographic change on Cuban-American's political behavior.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This figure (46.5%) is calculated by taking the population of the community that identifies as Cuban and calculates the proportion that emigrated from Cuba after 1980. It differs slightly from the more commonly cited estimate of 51%, that is obtained using only the foreign born Cuban population as the denominator.

<sup>2</sup> Further consider that voters represent an even more refined highly motivated subset of the electorate (those eligible to vote), who bear the costs associated with voting. Consequently, except where noted, the data described in this paper pertain to the Miami Dade County electorate and are based on data from the 2004 Exit Poll of Voters in Miami Dade County (Bishin and Stevens 2004).

Several explanations for the differences between the community and the voting electorate seem plausible. First, owing to the “wet foot dry foot” policy, more recent Cuban immigrants are less likely to be naturalized citizens, a fact that precludes their inclusion in the electorate. The 2000 U.S. Census reports that only 29.3% of those immigrating after 1980 are naturalized citizens as compared with the 88% of those who immigrated before 1980. Second, recently naturalized citizens are more likely to be of lower socio-economic status, a characteristic that is associated with decreased levels of political participation (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Verba, Schlozman, Brady 1995). Finally, these recent immigrants are among those who were least likely to have exhibited a history of political activism in Cuba, an important fact since studies increasingly show that political participation is a learned trait (Verba, Schlozman, Brady 1995). In a 2004 pilot study of recently arrived Cubans, for example, more than 85% of subjects demonstrated mistrust toward political systems and government institutions (Gomez et al. 2004). Regardless of their source, the opinion differences between the community and the voting electorate have potentially significant implications for our understanding of the voting behavior and attitudes of Cuban-Americans in South Florida.

### **Partisanship and Ideology among Cuban-Americans**

Despite assertions of a shift in the Cuban-American electorate, there is little reason to believe that major changes are afoot. While comparable data from previous years do not exist, in 2004, 68.5% of Cuban-American voters identified themselves as Republicans, 16.2% as independents, and only 15.3% identified as Democrats. A plurality also identify as conservative, as Table 1 shows that Cubans are more than twice

as likely to self-identify as conservative than are non-Cubans. Despite journalists emphasizing the inroads Democrats have made in the Cuban-American community, in 2004, George Bush garnered 72.7% of the Cuban-American vote in Miami Dade County. This total reflected a decrease of less than 10 points from the 81% Bush was estimated to have garnered in 2000 in the aftermath of the Elian Gonzalez saga, in what pundits speculated was the high watermark of Cuban-American opposition to Democrats (Goodnough 2004).<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1. Ideology among Cuban and Non-Cuban Voters in Miami Dade County.**

	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Non-Cubans	29.4%	49.7	20.8
Cubans	12.5	43.5	44.0

While the roots of Cuban-American's dissatisfaction with Democrats go back to the Kennedy Administration botching the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the Kennedy-Kruschev pact which guaranteed that the U.S. would not intervene in Cuba, the contemporary basis for their support for the GOP is attributed to the party's fierce opposition to both communism and the Castro regime. The Bush Administration's tightening of sanctions in July of 2004 appeared designed to further appease this important constituency. The Cuban-American voting electorate's support for both the travel ban and the trade embargo is seen in Table 2, which shows that even after the new measures were implemented, and contrary to the views often portrayed in the press, a majority of Cuban-American voters preferred sanctions be tightened even further!

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<sup>3</sup> The poll, which surveyed almost 1500 voters, has a margin of error of about 2.6%. Error margins for subpopulations are presented in Appendix A.

**Table 2. Cuba Policy Positions among Cuban and Non-Cuban Voters in Miami Dade County.**

	Tightened	Eased*	Kept the Same
<u>Embargo</u>			
Non-Cubans	25.7%	57.1	17.2
Cubans	63.8	26.7	9.5
<u>Travel Ban</u>			
Non-Cubans	19.0	65.0	16.0
Cubans	53.2	32.9	13.9

\*Note: Eased includes those who said restrictions should be either eased or eliminated.

Opinion polls and journalistic accounts typically describe a Cuban-American community that now opposes the travel ban and is divided over the embargo (e.g., Grenier and Gladwin 2007). Obviously, the results presented in Table 2 present a very different picture. The only consistency between the voting electorate and the community is seen in the fact that support for further tightening the travel restrictions runs about ten points behind support for tightening the embargo. Interestingly, this preference is reflected among both Cubans and non-Cubans. Of course it is also worth noting that majorities of the non-Cuban voting electorate, which constitute a solid majority of both the population and the electorate, support either easing or eliminating the restrictions on both trade and travel.

Some suggest that younger Cuban-Americans have different views on Cuba policy. Results from the 2004 Exit Poll suggest, however, that attitudes on the travel and trade sanctions do not seem to vary much across generations. Table 3 shows that contrary to the presumption that views on these issues will moderate with time as younger generations who lack the memory and experience of Castro's Cuba enter the electorate, we see little difference in the views on these issues among younger Cuban-Americans. In fact, the youngest generation has attitudes on both travel and trade that fit

neatly between those of their parents (second generation) and their grandparents (first generation). It bears noting, however, that we lack a measure of opinion intensity and so it is possible that attitudes held with great vigor among the first generation may be only weakly held by their grandchildren.<sup>4</sup> In fact, focus groups conducted by the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies suggest that Cuban-Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 rate domestic policy concerns as more important than questions of U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba, and forecast that domestic concerns will more greatly affect their vote choice in the 2008 presidential election (Gomez et al. 2004).

**Table 3. Cuban-American Support for Tightening Sanctions by Generation.**

Generation	Embargo	Travel Ban
First	70.3%	62.0
Second	55.8	44.8
Third	60.3	48.1

Consistent with historical stereotypes, when taken together these results depict a Cuban-American voting electorate that is strongly Republican, conservative, and opposed to easing sanctions on the Castro regime. The results are clearly at odds with news reports claiming considerable moderation among the Cuban-American community. Moreover, to the extent that change on these issues is occurring, the results of Table 3 suggest it will likely occur by the entrance of new Cuban-American immigrants into the electorate rather than through the changing of attitudes of those who already participate.

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<sup>4</sup> It is also possible that the members of the third generation who are motivated to vote are motivated by the Cuba issue. Research suggests that young people, who tend to lack socio-economic status and a history of participation, vote at lower rates than the population as a whole (Verba, Schlozman, Brady 1995). If so, the views of third

While results pertaining to party identification, ideology and foreign policy depict a fairly unified and largely homogeneous voting electorate, they also present an incomplete portrait of the community by concealing substantial opinion diversity. As one turns from foreign policy to questions of domestic policy, much greater variation in voters' attitudes becomes apparent. Not only is the voting electorate more liberal than the party on a number of issues, but on several others, the majority-preferred positions are quite liberal in an absolute sense.

This phenomenon is not unique to the Cuban-American electorate, however. A well documented political science research literature depicts an American public that is described as symbolically conservative but operationally liberal, in that support for conservatism in the abstract does not necessarily entail support for conservative policies (Stimson 1999). Moreover, among Cuban-Americans, these differences across issues are further accentuated by the attitude differences exhibited between men and women.

### **Social Policy Attitudes among Cuban-Americans**

To examine voters' social policy attitudes, we again turn to the 2004 Exit Poll which asked respondents their opinion about four social issues on which the parties and presidential candidates adopted opposing positions in the 2004 presidential campaigns. The issues of abortion, gun control, banning gay marriage, and importing prescription drugs, are also seen to differentiate liberal and conservative points of view.<sup>5</sup>

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generation *voters* might systematically differ from their peers in the community. Unfortunately, we have no way to investigate this hypothesis.

<sup>5</sup> Though the positions are often inconsistent with the philosophies that underlie these ideologies (e.g., business and religious conservatives disagree on abortion restrictions).



Among the most visible issues of the 2004 campaign was the proposal to pass a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage. While both presidential candidates opposed gay marriage, only George Bush supported the constitutional amendment outlawing it. John Kerry supported civil unions as a non-religious alternative that would provide same-sex couples legal standing equivalent to marriage (Lee 2004). National polls showed that about 50% of Americans supported a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage (Hart and Teeter 2004).

**Table 4. Issue Positions among Cuban and Non-Cuban Voters in Miami-Dade County.**

	Gay Marriage Ban		Increased Gun Control		Abortion		Importation of Prescription Drugs	
	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Legal	Illegal	Legal	Illegal
Non-Cubans	24.1%	55.7	79.4	20.6	69.8	30.2	78.0	7.4
Cubans	32.7	48.5	71.6	28.4	47.5	52.5	59.6	15.8

No opinion is the omitted category for each of these questions, hence percentages do not sum to 1.

Attitudes for voters in Miami Dade are seen in the first column of Table 4. While Miami-Dade County is more liberal than the nation as a whole, even among Cuban-Americans fewer than one in three supported the gay marriage ban—roughly twenty points lower than the national average. Almost 70% of Cuban-Americans either opposed the amendment or had no opinion on the issue. Clearly, Cuban-American voters are only slightly more conservative on this issue than is the Miami-Dade voting electorate as a whole.

Similar results, illustrated in column 2, are evident on the issue of gun control. Cuban-Americans overwhelmingly support increased restrictions on guns with over 70% indicating restrictions on guns should be increased. This figure is only slightly smaller

than the support for gun control among non-Cubans and is stunning given the central role that gun rights play in both the GOP platform, and the notion of what it means to be conservative.

While gay marriage and gun control are issues on which Cubans are liberal in both relative and absolute terms, on abortion the community is more evenly divided. Perhaps owing to their Catholicism, Cubans are almost evenly divided as to whether abortion laws should be tightened. It is here that we see the largest differences between the Cuban and non-Cuban community on social issues. Nonetheless, despite their centrality to Republican politics, Cubans are split on the issue.

The final social issue for which we have data on Cuban-American voters is legalizing the importation of prescription drugs from other countries. These results are depicted in Table 4, column 4. While Cuban-American voters overwhelmingly favor legalizing the importation of prescription drugs, they do so at a rate about 20 points lower than non-Cubans. The 60% support levels are consistent with free market conservative principles, but in direct contrast to the position of the Bush Administration. Once again, we see Cubans as conservative only in a relative sense as their overall issue position is much more consistent with the Democratic platform. As we will see in the next section, the pattern of Cuban-Americans taking more liberal positions is even more pronounced among Cuban-American women.

### **Policy Attitudes among Cuban-American Women**

Attitudinal differences between Cuban-American men and women provide a fascinating contrast to the previous analyses in that women are more extreme on foreign

policy issues, but more liberal on social issues. Popular discourse tends to portray the Cuban-American electorate as a relatively cohesive Republican and conservative group. Examination of women's partisanship, ideology, and voting behavior support this perception. Women identify with the Republican Party at rates almost identical, though slightly higher, than men (68.3% vs. 67.6%) but as conservative at lower rates than men (40.4% v. 47.8%). Especially striking, 73.4% of Cuban-American women voted to re-elect Bush, while slightly fewer (69.8%) men did so. On Cuba-U.S. foreign policy, as seen in Table 5, women exhibit similarly strong preferences.

**Table 5. Cuba Policy Positions among Cuban and Non-Cubans in Miami-Dade County.**

	Tightened	Eased*	Kept the Same
<u>Embargo</u>			
Men	61.2%	29.6	9.2
Women	64.6	25.6	9.7
<u>Travel Ban</u>			
Men	49.6%	36.7	13.7
Women	53.1	31.6	15.3

\*Note: Eased includes those who said restrictions should be either eased or eliminated.

On the travel ban and embargo women appear even slightly more supportive of the sanctions than do Cuban-American men. In this respect, Cuban-American women depart from the general characterization that women are more liberal on policy than men. We also find that the gap in support for the embargo and travel ban continues to persist, regardless of gender, in that support for further tightening travel restrictions runs about 10 points behind support for tightening the trade embargo.

Historically, opinion differences between men and women have been most pronounced over issues of welfare and state services (e.g. education, health, social

services), abortion rights, gender equality, and security (e.g. war and gun control). For some of these issue-areas, namely abortion and other women's rights, the gap between female and male positions has narrowed. Nonetheless, women's more liberal policy leanings continue to hold over a number of policies (Kaufmann 2006; Box-Steffensmeier, DeBoef and Lin 2004). Re-examining opinion on the social issues discussed in the previous section, but disaggregating by gender, we see that with the exception of prescription drugs, Cuban-American women exhibit consistently more liberal leanings on social issues.

**Table 6. Issue Positions among Cuban-Americans in Miami-Dade County.**

	Gay Marriage Ban		Increased Gun Control		Abortion		Importation of Prescription Drugs	
	Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose	Legal	Illegal	Legal	Illegal
Men	39.0%	45.5	66.2	33.8	42.2	57.8	59.0	18.5
Women	28.2	49.7	76.4	23.6	51.6	48.4	59.0	14.0

No opinion is the omitted category for each of these questions, hence some percentages do not sum to 1.

Among Cuban-American women, Table 6 (column 1) shows that 49.7% oppose an amendment to ban gay marriage, while slightly fewer men, 45.5%, voice similar opposition. Women are only slightly more conservative than the public as a whole. (Recall from Table 4 that non-Cubans opposed the ban by 55.7%). Evidence of a gender gap on the issue of gay marriage is not terribly surprising, as other research shows that women express greater support for gay rights and same-sex coupling than men (Herek 2002). Attitude differences between men and women, and women's greater compassion

for gay rights, may be attributable to perceptions of shared experiences of discrimination and disadvantage that in turn fosters recognition of similarity and empathy.

Recall from the previous section that Cuban-Americans harbor more traditional views on abortion. Yet, here too (Table 6, column 3) we find more support among Cuban-American women, approximately 52% of whom believe that abortion should be legal at least sometimes (compared to approximately 42% of men). This might seem intuitive as women are more inclined to support socially liberal policies but, in fact, men and women's positions on abortion differ only slightly in the U.S. population, even though the issue often holds more salience for women (Kaufmann 2006; Box-Steffensmeier, DeBoef and Lin 2004).

Similarly large gender differences are also visible on the issue of gun control seen in Table 6, column 2. Though Cuban-American men and women both overwhelmingly support increased gun restrictions, only 66.2% of men support increasing restrictions compared to 76.4% of women. Notably, Cuban-American's support for increased gun restrictions is comparable to the view held by non-Cubans.<sup>6</sup>

Consistent with a political science literature that finds that women are more progressive, these results suggest that the social liberalism observed in the Cuban-American community is even more pronounced for women. Cuban-American women tend to differ, however, on issues relating to the more stereotypical Cuban-American identity. Specifically, Cuban-American women are staunchly Republican, conservative, and supportive, even slightly more so than men, of policies designed to crack down on the Castro regime. To the extent that attitude change in the community drives changes in

political behavior, because they both constitute a majority and hold more progressive attitudes on social issues, this change will likely start with women.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper presents a more complex view of Cuban-American attitudes that comports poorly with extant stereotypes. We distinguish between claims about the community and the voting electorate to provide one of the first examinations of Miami-Dade's Cuban-American community's voting patterns. We illustrate a largely unappreciated degree of social liberalism that resides within what is commonly viewed as the 'hard-line' community. These views are especially widely held among Cuban-American women who constitute a majority of this electorate. On foreign policy issues, however, the moniker appears well earned. Consequently, there is little reason to expect much change in the views of Miami's Cuban-American voting electorate until issues relating to Cuban foreign policy are resolved.

The question of what will happen to this staunchly Republican voting bloc after the end of the Castro era may be informed by the results presented herein. It seems clear that Cuban-Americans voting patterns have been driven by support for both the GOP, owing to their stance on Cuba policy, and their support for anti-Castro policy. It also seems likely that given their majority status, women constitute 55% of the Cuban-American electorate; they will play a central role in any changes that occur.

The heterogeneity on social issues that we describe here suggests that the answer to this question is likely complex. Three observations follow. First, it appears that

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<sup>6</sup> Only on our final issue, legalizing the importation of prescription drugs are differences

Cuban-American voters are likely to become much less monolithic once the Cuba issue is resolved as the Cuban-American identity becomes less central to everyday politics (e.g., Bishin 2009). Second, changes also seem likely to occur as the more recent immigrants slowly matriculate into the electorate and gain socio-economic status. Third, any inroads Democrats make are likely to occur only after the classic anti-Castro Cuban identity recedes, and is most likely to be successful by targeting Cuban-American women and their progressive attitudes on social policy.

It would be folly, however, to conclude that Cubans would automatically embrace Democrats owing to their positions on social issues. Recall that while Cubans are liberal on some issues, on others they are still more conservative and Republican than the non-Cuban population. Consequently, to the extent that Cuban issues recede in importance, the Cuban-American vote is more likely to be up for grabs than it is to simply swing to Democrats. In such a context, pressing economic and foreign policy questions are also likely to play an increased role in affecting citizens voting decision.<sup>7</sup> These data also suggest, however, that Democrats are more likely to make successful inroads among Cuban women than men. Paradoxically, despite their increased progressivity on social issues, it is women who appear both most firmly opposed to easing the policies designed to punish Castro, and for whom these identities appear most central.

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between Cuban-American men and women not apparent.

<sup>7</sup> Additional analyses of the determinants of vote choice among Cubans in 2004 (not shown here) suggests that attitudes toward Iraq influenced the voting decision in 2004.

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**Appendix A.** Questions from 2004 Exit Poll of Voters in Miami Dade County Used in Tables.

[E] No matter how you voted today, do you usually feel that you are a:

- 1  Strong Democrat            4  Republican  
2  Democrat                    5  Strong Republican  
3  Independent                6  Something else

[F] On most political matters, do you consider yourself:

- 1  Liberal    2  Moderate    3  Conservative

[Y] Abortion should be:

- 1  Always legal                3  Usually illegal  
2  Usually legal               4  Always illegal

[Z] Do you support or oppose a Constitutional Amendment to ban gay marriage?

- 1  Support    2  Oppose    3  No opinion

[BB] Should it be legal or illegal for Americans to buy prescription drugs from Canada and other countries?

- 1  Legal    2  Illegal    3  No opinion

[CC] Economic sanctions on Cuba should be:

- 1  Tightened further    3  Eased somewhat  
2  Kept the same       4  Eliminated entirely

[DD] The ban on travel to Cuba should be:

- 1  Tightened further    3  Eased somewhat  
2  Kept the same       4  Eliminated entirely

[SS] Do you support or oppose stricter gun control laws?

- 1  Support                    2  Oppose

Margins of Error for Subpopulations:

Cuban-Americans 4.7%

Non-Cuban 3.2%

Cuban-American women 6.4%

Cuban-American men 7.0%

### About the Authors

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