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## Miami Dade's Cuban-American Voters in the 2008 Election

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**Introduction**

January 1, 2009 marked the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, and for the approximately 850,000 Cuban-Americans living in South Florida, it was received with mixed emotions. Generations of Cuban-Americans have lived with the dream of seeing a free Cuba; a transition that many assumed would be symbolized by Fidel Castro's removal from power. In July 2006, when Cuba announced Fidel Castro's illness, many in the Cuban-American community expected a decline of totalitarianism. Instead, however, Raul Castro's succession has engendered little change.

While little has changed in Cuba, attitudes among the Cuban-American voters in Miami-Dade County have become increasingly complex. No longer is this a community whose views can be easily stereotyped. On some dimensions attitudes and behavior exhibit little change, while on others, attitudes are indicative of a community whose views may be in transition. Despite media projections, conjecture, and perhaps even wishful thinking, for instance, 63.9% of Cuban-American voters supported the Republican, John McCain, a figure that while lower than the vote Bush garnered in 2000 and 2004, still represents a very strong commitment by the Cuban-American community to the Republican Party.

In this paper we describe the behavior and attitudes of Cuban-American voters in the 2008 election by presenting data from the 2008 Miami-Dade County Exit Poll (Bishin and Klofstad 2008). Our findings suggest that while the seismic shift in the political preferences of the Cuban-American community predicted by the national news media was not realized, modest changes in vote preferences and more dramatic changes in

attitudes toward U.S.-Cuba foreign policy did occur. In general, these results are consistent with our expectations articulated in previous research, in which we held that large scale changes in Cuban-American's voting preferences were unlikely to occur since they seem most likely to be driven by replacement of older Cuban-American voters by younger, more recent immigrants and their relatives (Bishin et al. 2008).

In the pages that follow, we examine the attitudes and preferences most commonly thought to have influenced Cuban-American voting behavior in 2008. We begin by examining party and ideological identification, followed by attitudes among the different generations, and finally, the views held by women—a group that is especially important as they constitute a growing majority of Miami's Cuban-American electorate (Bishin et al. 2008).

### **Partisanship and Ideology**

Based on their unique sociopolitical history, and especially when compared to other racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States, Cuban-Americans are traditionally seen as a solidly Republican voting bloc. In the lead-up to the 2008 presidential election, however, journalists hypothesized that changes in this community through the introduction of younger, politically progressive voters would shift their support toward the Democratic Party (e.g., Silva 2007, Reiff 2008). Data on the partisanship and ideology of Cuban-American voters in Miami-Dade County, however, do not evince such a trend.

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

|            | Liberal | Moderate | Conservative |
|------------|---------|----------|--------------|
| Non-Cubans | 42.0%   | 36.4     | 21.6         |
| Cubans     | 19.8    | 37.9     | 42.3         |

The ideological positions of Cuban and non-Cuban voters in Miami-Dade County are presented in Table 1. These results refute the notion that Cuban-American voters in South Florida are shifting their support *en masse* in a more liberal direction. Twice as many Cuban-American voters in Miami-Dade reported that they are conservative compared to those who stated that they are liberal. Moreover, these Cuban-American voters are far more conservative and far less liberal than non-Cubans. In comparison to previous studies of Cuban-American voters in Miami-Dade (e.g., Bishin et al. 2008), the results in Table 1 suggest that while some in this voting bloc might be moderating—between 2004 and 2008 the proportion identifying as liberal increased by about seven points—Cuban-American voters in South Florida are still solidly conservative as the proportion identifying as conservative decreased by less than 2 points.

**Table 2. Partisanship among Cuban and Non-Cuban Voters in Miami Dade County**

|            | Strong Democrat | Democrat | Independent | Republican | Strong Republican |
|------------|-----------------|----------|-------------|------------|-------------------|
| Non-Cubans | 31.5%           | 25.7     | 20.2        | 16.6       | 6.0               |
| Cubans     | 8.0             | 12.9     | 20.6        | 40.1       | 18.5              |

Similar results are seen regarding partisanship. The data presented in Table 2 show that 58 percent of Cuban-American voters reported that they identify with the Republican Party compared to just twenty percent who identify with the Democrats. Moreover, Cuban-American voters are much more likely to identify with the Republican Party than are non-Cubans. While these results suggest that this voting bloc might have slightly softened in its support for the Republicans in 2008 (i.e., in 2004 68.5% of Cuban-American voters identified themselves as Republicans), Cuban-American voters in Miami-Dade are still overwhelmingly supportive of the Republican Party.

#### **U.S. Foreign Policy towards Cuba**

While measures of partisanship and ideology indicate only modest change, Cuban-Americans' attitudes toward U.S.-Cuba foreign policy exhibit much more dramatic differences. Support for tightening the embargo and the travel ban has dropped by roughly half between 2004 and 2008 (Bishin et al 2008).<sup>1</sup> Differences between Cubans and non-Cubans are still evident, however, as seen in Table 3.

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<sup>1</sup> More specifically, in 2004, 63.8% of Cuban-Americans supported tightening the embargo and 53.2% supported tightening the travel restrictions.

**Table 3. Cuba Policy Positions among Cuban and Non-Cuban Voters in Miami Dade County**

|                   | Tightened | Eased* | Kept the Same |
|-------------------|-----------|--------|---------------|
| <u>Embargo</u>    |           |        |               |
| Non-Cubans        | 16.0      | 63.1   | 20.9          |
| Cubans            | 28.5      | 43.5   | 28.0          |
| <u>Travel Ban</u> |           |        |               |
| Non-Cubans        | 12.2      | 68.5   | 19.3          |
| Cubans            | 26.4      | 47.5   | 26.1          |

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

Perhaps the most significant findings to emerge from this table is that significant numbers of Cuban-Americans now support easing the trade embargo and travel ban. While easing these restrictions never garners majority support, Cuban-Americans' support for easing both the embargo (which increased from 26.7 to 43.4%) and travel restrictions (which increased from 32.9 to 47.4%) have both increased by about 17 points since 2004 (Bishin et al. 2008). Consequently, while we see only modest evidence of changes in fundamental political preferences such as partisanship and ideology, changes in attitudes on issues central to the Cuban-American community are very significant.

### **Opinion by Generation**

The expectation that massive change in Cuban-Americans' voting preferences is under way is driven by two explanations (e.g., Goodnaugh 2004; Silva 2007; Reiff 2008). Most commonly, the entrance of post-Mariel immigrants, who studies show tend to

oppose restrictions on U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba<sup>2</sup>, into the voting electorate is projected to lead to increased support for the Democrats. The second explanation, an issue to which our data speak more directly, is that older, first generation, immigrants are gradually being replaced by younger, third generation voters who are more open both to the Democrats and to relaxing restrictions on U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba.

**Table 4. Cuban-American Support for Tightening Sanctions by Generation**

| Generation | Embargo | Travel Ban | Remittances |
|------------|---------|------------|-------------|
| First      | 32.5    | 30.4       | 26.3        |
| Second     | 27.3    | 27.1       | 23.7        |
| Third      | 22.8    | 20.7       | 17.1        |

The data presented in Table 4 show that second and third generation Cuban-Americans are less supportive of U.S. sanctions on Cuba. Unfortunately, it is hard to know whether this is a function of each successive generation adhering to more moderate positions, or whether these opinions result from the effects of the presidential campaigns. When considered in combination with the results seen in Table 3, however, we can infer that these younger Cuban-American voters have begun to question whether the U.S. policies designed to pressure Cuba have been effective.<sup>3</sup> Instead, their attitudes are more

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<sup>2</sup> About 46.3% of Cuban Americans whose families immigrated after 1980 support eliminating the embargo as compared with only 21.2% of those whose families immigrated before 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Some see US policy fueling the Cuban regime's rhetoric and helping them justify totalitarian behavior. The regime argues the US economic embargo, restrictions on travel to Cuba, and the restrictions on sending financial support to family and friends on the island, intensifies the Cubans' hardship.

consistent with the view that the U.S. government should constructively engage the Cuban government rather than continue a policy of isolation.

**Table 5. Cuban-American Support for McCain by Generation**

| Generation | McCain Vote |
|------------|-------------|
| First      | 72.4        |
| Second     | 59.6        |
| Third      | 63.0        |

We also see evolution in the voting behavior of Cuban-Americans. Overall, these data demonstrate that the Cuban-American community has shifted from voting “extremely” to “very strongly” Republican, as support for the Republican presidential candidate decreased from 71.5% in 2004, to 63.6% in 2008 (Bishin et al. 2008). The data in Table 5 suggest that second and third generation Cuban-Americans appear to have led this shift. It is important to note, however, that despite their relatively lower levels of support for John McCain in the 2008 election, younger Cuban-Americans still staunchly support the GOP (as also evidenced by the re-election of all three Cuban-American Republican members of Congress from South Florida in an overwhelmingly Democratic year).

Taken together, these results present something of a paradox. On the one hand, second and third generation Cuban-Americans are much less likely to support further increasing sanctions, while on the other, members of the third generation appear to have much more strongly supported John McCain than did those in the second generation. Advanced statistical analyses (not shown here, but available from the authors), however,



suggest that such conclusions are premature. Once the influence of party identification and socio-economic status are considered, we observe no statistical difference in the levels of support for John McCain between second and third generation Cuban-Americans. Members of the first generation, however, do support the GOP at statistically significantly higher rates than the second generation, even after controlling for these alternative factors. Consequently, while younger Cuban-American voters have not shifted their support to the Democrats, clear generational differences in opinion appear to be emerging; which suggest the electorate is likely to become less Republican over time, both in their attitudes and their behavior.

### **The Enduring Enigma of Cuban-American Women**

Women represent an important subconstituency of Cuban-Americans, both because they tend to be very slightly more anti-Castro and pro-GOP than men and because they constitute a strong majority of the Cuban-American electorate (58.1%). Studies of American politics have documented attitudinal differences between men and women over issues of welfare and state services, abortion, gender equality, and security (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef, and Lin 2004; Kaufmann 2006). Despite higher levels both of identification with the Republican Party and conservatism than men, in our 2004 poll, Cuban-American women exhibited more liberal views on social policies (Bishin et al. 2008). They only held more conservative views over issues pertaining to the orientation of U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba.

Our results for 2008, however, begin to paint something of a different picture. Though roughly comparable numbers of Cuban-American women identified themselves

as conservative in 2008 (41.2% in 2008 compared to 40.4% in 2004), fewer Cuban-American women (and men) identified with the Republican Party. Moreover, we find that women tend to be at least slightly more conservative than men across all issues even though there has been change in the absolute levels of support across issues. On traditional U.S.-Cuba foreign policy issues, for example, our results show that Cuban-American voters as a whole have adopted more moderate views.

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

|                    | Tightened | Eased* | Kept the Same |
|--------------------|-----------|--------|---------------|
| <u>Embargo</u>     |           |        |               |
| Men                | 28.5      | 45.0   | 26.5          |
| Women              | 28.8      | 43.4   | 27.8          |
| <u>Travel Ban</u>  |           |        |               |
| Men                | 23.0      | 50.6   | 26.4          |
| Women              | 26.3      | 48.9   | 24.9          |
| <u>Remittances</u> |           |        |               |
| Men                | 20.0      | 51.0   | 29.0          |
| Women              | 22.9      | 48.0   | 29.1          |

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

Table 6 allows us to explore how Cuban-American men and women regard the issues of the trade embargo and travel ban to Cuba. In 2004 nearly 65% of women, compared to 61% of men, preferred strengthening the trade embargo. Similarly, 53% of women, compared to 50% of men, preferred strengthening the travel ban.<sup>4</sup> By 2008, however, both Cuban-American men and women held considerably more moderate views

<sup>4</sup> While these differences are not quite statistically significant, they occur on every issue, reducing the likelihood that they occur due to chance alone.

toward the embargo, with only about 29% of both men (28.5%) and women (28.8%) calling for increased restrictions. Slightly larger differences between men and women are observed on the issues of the travel ban, and restricting remittances. The general trend suggests that while increased numbers of Cuban-Americans as a group support a shift toward easing, or preserving the status quo on the embargo, travel ban, and remittances, women are still slightly more conservative on these issues, even though both are significantly more moderate than in 2004.

**Table 7. Issue Positions among Cuban-Americans in Miami Dade County**

|       | Gay Marriage |        | Importation of Prescription Drugs |         | Abortion |         |
|-------|--------------|--------|-----------------------------------|---------|----------|---------|
|       | Support      | Oppose | Legal                             | Illegal | Legal    | Illegal |
| Men   | 41.8         | 41.9   | 73.6                              | 14.2    | 62.1     | 38.0    |
| Women | 34.1         | 48.7   | 56.2                              | 20.1    | 50.7     | 49.3    |

No opinion is the omitted category for each of these questions, hence some rows do not sum to 100 percent.

Table 7 presents issue positions for Cuban-American men and women on three domestic social issues in 2008. Overall, these results reflect something of a shift from the findings of our previous study in that women appear more conservative across all three issues than do men. Column one shows that Cuban-American women oppose gay marriage at higher rate than men (48.7% compared to 41.9%). These results are at odds with scholarship that reasons that women and gays have shared appreciation of inequality and discrimination (e.g., Herek 2002). Similarly, in 2008, women were much less supportive of abortion rights than were men (62.1% to 50.7%). Women were only

slightly less supportive of abortion rights than they were in 2004 (in 2008 50.7% said abortion should be legal in some cases compared to 51.6% in 2004). By contrast, Cuban-American women adopted slightly more restrictive views on importing prescription drugs between 2004 and 2008. Support for importing prescription medicines dropped from 59% to 56.2%.

Overall then, women's opinions seem to have become somewhat more conservative in the last four years. While many of the opinion differences between men and women on individual issues are small, and thus should be taken only as suggestive, they are now consistent across all issues. This reflects a change from 2004 where women appeared more conservative only on issues pertaining to U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba.

These data also raise the question: why do women appear more conservative relative to men than they did in 2004? The answer is simple: men's opinions liberalized considerably on all issues, except gay marriage. Cuban-American men's support for legalizing the importation of prescription drugs increased from 59% to 73.6% in 2008 (Table 6, Column 2). The change in Cuban-American male attitudes toward abortion is also considerable. In 2004, only 42.2% of men thought that abortion should be legal under at least some circumstances. By 2008, 62.1% of men thought that abortion should be legal in some cases – approximately a 75% increase from 2004 levels.

Gay marriage is a trickier issue to assess as the question asked in 2004 pertained to a constitutional ban on gay marriage, a position that a plurality of both men and women opposed. Our 2008 question, which assesses opposition to gay marriage independent of a legal ban, suggests much lower support for gay marriage among women

than men. While men are almost evenly split, only a third of women support gay marriage, while not quite half oppose it.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Fifty years after the Cuban revolution, change in the demographics of Miami-Dade's Cuban-American community is clearly afoot. While the voting electorate remains more Republican and conservative than Miami-Dade County as a whole, and the 2008 election saw only a small move away from the GOP presidential candidate, Cuban-Americans' attitudes on issues of U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba seem to be in transition as support for tightening sanctions is about half of what it was four years ago.

In many respects, these results raise as many questions as they answer. While one answer for Cuban-Americans' slightly decreased support for the GOP lies in the decreased importance Cuban-American voters placed on issues of U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba—our data show that the majority of Cuban-Americans rated the economy as the most important issue facing the country in 2008—our data are unable to provide a definitive answer. After all, numerous scenarios might explain the differences we observe between 2004 and 2008. It is possible, for example, that the Obama campaign's attempt to offer very modest shifts in U.S.-Cuba policy, its emphasis on economic issues, and its messages of change and emphasis on a unified national American identity (e.g., Transue 2007, Bishin 2009) each partly contributed to this shift. Nor can we tell whether the attitude shifts on U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba are a result of the change in the

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<sup>5</sup> It is unclear, how much of this shift, however, is due to the difference in the wording of our question, or due to the advertising around the state ballot proposition banning the practice.

Castro regime, greater desire for engagement among younger generations, or the relatively small policy differences offered by the candidates in 2008.

Clearly, future research is needed to evaluate whether the changes observed in 2008 are limited to the context of that election, or are the first signs of broader change in this community. Perhaps most importantly, future research should examine the degree to which changes in attitudes are driving changes in Cuban-American's voting behavior. Toward this end, we have taken some initial steps, but much research remains.

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## **Appendix: Questions from 2004 Exit Poll of Voters in Miami Dade County Used in Tables**

### *Partisanship*

“No matter how you voted today, do you usually think of yourself as a(n): ‘Strong Democrat’, ‘Democrat’, ‘Independent’, ‘Republican’, ‘Strong Republican’, or ‘Something else’?”

### *Ideology*

“On most political matters, do you consider yourself: ‘Very Liberal’, ‘Liberal’, ‘Moderate’, ‘Conservative’, ‘Very Conservative’, or ‘Something Else’?”

### *Views on Abortion*

“Abortion should be: ‘Always Legal’, ‘Usually Legal’, ‘Usually Illegal’, or ‘Always Illegal’?”

### *Views on Gay Marriage*

“Do you support or oppose gay marriage?”

### *Views on Foreign Prescription Drugs*

“Should it be legal or illegal for Americans to buy prescription drugs from Canada or other countries?”

### *Economic Sanctions*

“Economic sanctions on Cuba should be: ‘Tightened Further’, ‘Kept the Same’, ‘Eased Somewhat’, or ‘Eliminated Entirely’?”

### *Travel Ban*

“The ban on travel to Cuba should be: ‘Tightened Further’, ‘Kept the Same’, ‘Eased Somewhat’, or ‘Eliminated Entirely’?”

### *Remittances*

“Restrictions on sending remittances to Cuba should be: ‘Tightened Further’, ‘Kept the Same’, ‘Eased Somewhat’, or ‘Eliminated Entirely’?”

### Margins of Error for Subpopulations in 2008:

Cuban-Americans 3.8%

Non-Cuban 2.5%

Cuban-American women 5.2%

Cuban-American men 5.9%



### About the Authors

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