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In GOP, Emmer takes the lead on Cuba

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The U.S. House freshman who represents Minnesota's most conservative congressional district has taken on a daunting challenge: Persuading entrenched Republicans to rise above generations of partisan feuding and lift the trade embargo on Cuba.

Republican Rep. Tom Emmer took a trip to Havana last year that dramatically reshaped his perspective on the island under communist rule.

He said he was not moved by the policy arguments or pressure by American businesses looking to cash in, but by the Cuban people.

Emmer now talks about translators and professors and seamstresses whose lives would be changed if the embargo were lifted. Cuban people, he says, are asking for more opportunity and the chance to do business with America to help themselves.

"You really have to put yourself in the shoes of the people to understand where they're coming from. They've been taught that capitalism is a bad thing, but they want an opportunity to self-determine," Emmer said. "They want to grow and be doing business with America and Americans. ... They have survived the worst of times."

Lifting the Cuban trade embargo is among the most prickly issues in areas with large populations of Cuban immigrants, such as Florida. It bitterly divides many Republicans, torn between business interests that see opportunity on the island and politically connected Cuban advocates determined to snuff out the existing communist government.

Emmer approaches it with the history in mind, but with the perspective of someone 1,800 miles away who hasn't been entrenched in old politics.

"You think after 54 or 55 years of doing something a certain way, it might make sense to re-evaluate whether or not that policy is effective?" he said.

Emmer's work on the issue places him in the same camp as President Obama, who urged Congress to lift the embargo last week during his final State of the Union address.

Just over a year ago, Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro restored ties between the two countries and relaxed many restrictions in banking and travel. Since then, embassies have opened in both countries and there has been increasing support on Capitol Hill to relax more rules, including lifting travel bans and boosting agricultural exports.

To win over his Republican colleagues, Emmer has met with those he sees with potential to move on the issue. With each conversation, he works to nudge them closer to supporting the lifting of the embargo. So far, he has 10 Republicans and one Democrat signed onto his bill — more GOP support than has ever been seen on a measure like this. Emmer said another 30 Republicans quietly pledged their support if it comes to a vote.

It is a remarkable evolution from the fiery, small-government crusader who narrowly lost a gubernatorial race to Mark Dayton in 2010 only to win the seat held by outgoing U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann in 2014.

Emmer's Cuban work immediately put him at odds with the former Republican officeholder, a Tea Party favorite.

After turning over the seat to Emmer, Bachmann launched a petition drive blasting her former colleagues for bowing to "the radical Obama agenda." She urged supporters to sign her "No Coddling Communist Cuba!" petition.

Within Emmer's House district, there is dissent. Rosalind Kohls, 66, is a longtime Emmer supporter — both when he ran for governor and then in his first bid for Congress.

But, growing up in Miami, she saw and heard only bad coming out of the Fidel Castro regime. She says she is disappointed that Emmer is so aggressively pushing for this now.

"If this actually comes to pass where Congress lifts the embargo, then I'll support Emmer's primary opponent. That's the end of that," said Kohls, who lives in St. Cloud. "It appears to me that Emmer doesn't really realize what's going on in Cuba."

Emmer's bill has drawn attention from national advocacy groups, who generally see the Republican-controlled House as one of the biggest obstacles to normalizing trade relations between the two countries.

"The House is a huge priority for us," said Steven Law, who runs the GOP super PAC American Crossroads and advises the Engage Cuba Coalition.

"I think there's some really interesting aspects to [Emmer's] personality that make him well-suited to advance the issue," Law said. "He has a refreshing ability to take a look at an issue ... and see the potential of moving it forward."

Emmer has met with every Cuban-American member of the House to let them know what he's doing, as well as GOP House Speaker Paul Ryan — who was once part of a Cuba working group.

The measure seems to have an easier path in the Republican-controlled U.S. Senate. A similar version sponsored by Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Wyoming Republican Sen. Mike Enzi has 22 cosponsors, but only three Republicans.

Klobuchar sees an urgency to the issue, and says there is more Republican support for lifting the travel ban to Cuba. But she notes that merely lifting the travel ban will give businesses from foreign countries a huge advantage as Cuba grows into a trade and travel mecca.

"If we just lift the travel embargo, pretty soon, a few years from now, Americans will be sleeping in Chinese hotels and eating German foods there," said Klobuchar, who has also traveled to Cuba in the past year to push for a full embargo lift.

Outside Florida and other areas with large Cuban communities, Americans generally favor easing trade and travel

restrictions. Last fall, a GOP pollster for the Atlantic Council found more than 60 percent of voters in Iowa, Indiana, Ohio and Tennessee backed restoring relationships.

The debate is putting Emmer at odds with other prominent Republicans. On the presidential campaign trail, Republican hopefuls Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, each of whom has a Cuban background, have been reliable opponents of lifting the embargo.

Minnesota companies and farmers stand to benefit from an open trade relationship with Cuba.

Almost \$30 million in Minnesota agricultural exports went to Cuba in 2012, the most recent year with available statistics, and another \$490,000 in nonfarm exports, such as medical devices, went to Cuba in 2014 under humanitarian exceptions on the trade embargo laws, according to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

State economists estimate that with full trade available, Minnesota exports could more than double annually.

U.S. Rep. Rick Crawford, a Republican from a rural district in Arkansas, signed onto Emmer's bill. Crawford, who has his own bill to allow agricultural trade, said it wasn't a hard sell for him.

"This is a vestige of the Cold War and largely a Camelot legacy that has outlived its usefulness," Crawford said.

Emmer acknowledges slim chances of passing the measure in 2016 — presidential election years are generally known for foot-dragging in the federal government's legislative branch. He contends the incremental work and relationships will still help him try to reach his goals as early as next year.

"It's my job to build support for this," Emmer said. "Once I have an adequate amount of support, I will go to the speaker and say, 'Mr. Speaker, I think we are entitled to a vote.' "

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