
Democrats' Florida Push Calls for US Shift on Cuba

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When Charlie Crist went to Miami's Little Havana recently, the Democratic candidate for governor stood before a crowd and said what few politicians have in decades of scrounging for votes in the Cuban-American neighborhood: End the trade embargo against Cuba. "If you really care about people on the island, we need to get rid of the embargo and let freedom reign," he said, shouting above a small band of protesters who responded with chants of "Shame on you!"

Crist's supporters cheered louder.

It was a scene inconceivable just a few years ago, when politicians were careful about what they said on the issue, for fear of alienating Cuban-American voters, many of whom fled Fidel Castro's Cuba in the 1960s.

But Democrats now sense an opening with newer Cuban arrivals and second-generation Cuban-Americans who favor resuming diplomatic relations with the communist island. In a sign of just how much the climate has shifted, Democrat Hillary Rodham Clinton, who backed trade limits when she ran for president in 2008, is now calling for the embargo to be lifted. She described it as "Castro's best friend" and said it hampers "our broader agenda across Latin America."

Her words mark the first time a leading presidential contender from either political party has suggested reversing the 52-year-old policy. The efforts represent the largest challenge to Cuban-American orthodoxy in decades and could help reshape American foreign policy.

It also could alter the political landscape in the largest swing-voting state, where Republicans long have dominated the Cuban vote by taking a hard line on the embargo. Crist's campaign will be the first statewide test of whether the trade restrictions are still a live wire for politicians in Florida, home to 70 percent of the nation's Cubans.

Crist is a former Republican governor who once said he would only visit Cuba "when it's free." Now that he's a

Democrat and trying to regain his old job, he has floated the idea of going to Havana “to learn from the people of Cuba and help find opportunities for Florida businesses.”

He argues that the embargo has failed because it has not toppled the Castro government but has hurt the Cuban people. “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result,” he told reporters at the opening of a campaign office in Little Havana.

Florida Republicans are outraged, casting Crist’s position as a betrayal of the Cuban-American community.

“I’m going to stand with Cuban-Americans that believe in freedom, believe in democracy, believe in freedom of speech and oppose the oppression of Cuba,” said GOP Gov. Rick Scott. Crist, he added, will “be standing with Castro.”

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Nationwide, the share of Cuban registered voters who identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party has doubled in the past decade, from 22 percent to 44 percent, according to the Pew Research Center. Less than half of Cuban voters now affiliate with the Republican Party, down from 64 percent over the same time period.

President Barack Obama won Florida twice, campaigning on easing travel restrictions for Cuban-Americans who want to visit their families on the island and allowing them to send more money to their relatives. In 2012, he captured nearly half the Cuban-American vote, a record for a Democrat.

The shift is driven in part by changing demographics.

Cuban-Americans, once the dominant bloc of Florida’s Hispanic vote, have seen their political clout diminished by a huge influx of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and people from Central and South America, who lean Democratic. In the 2012 election, 42 percent of Hispanic voters in the state were Cuban, an 11 percentage point drop from 2000, according to the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey.

The exiles who arrived in the decade and a half following Cuba’s 1959 revolution have been dying off while their children and fresh waves of immigrants hold a different view of Cuba. More than one-third of the Cubans residing in Miami-Dade County arrived after 1995, with many supporting travel and trade policies that strengthen ties between the U.S. and Cuba, said Guillermo Grenier, a lead researcher for the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University.

American business leaders, long among the most strident defenders of the embargo, are publicly talking about investing in Cuba.”

The politics are way behind public opinion on this one,” said Steve Schale, a Democratic consultant and Crist adviser who managed Obama’s Florida campaign in 2008.

Overall, polls of the community have confirmed a tilt toward engagement, with the most recent survey by Florida International University finding Cuban-Americans in Miami split over the embargo, which was a near record, and 71 percent saying it had not worked either very well or at all. “The embargo! It’s so screwed up!” said Caridad Novo, as she sipped espresso at a cafe in Doral, a Miami suburb.

The 52-year-old Cuban, who came to Florida during the 1980 Mariel boat crisis, said U.S. trade restrictions drive up the cost of sending goods to her family in Cuba. Shipping a 4-pound can of milk to her 3-year-old grandson in Havana costs \$55, she said. But some scholars and political operatives say Crist risks energizing Republicans in the conservative exile community while attracting little support from younger Cuban-Americans and newer arrivals, who tend to be less politically active.

The recent Florida International University poll found that less than one-third of those who have arrived since 1995 are U.S. citizens. Voter registration rates among newer arrivals lag their older counterparts by double digits.

"What is changing is opinions" on the embargo, Grenier said. "But for the opinions to become relevant to policymakers, they have to translate into more than just opinions. They have to be votes."
