

Diplomatic Breakthrough:  
Politics, Reform, and Trust in the Restoration of US-Cuba Relations

Samuel Garcia  
Advised by Doctor Beatriz Magaloni  
Stanford University  
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## Introduction

On December 17, 2014, President Barack Obama and President Raúl Castro announced that the United States and Cuba would “begin to normalize relations.”<sup>1</sup> The announcement concluded, at least temporarily, a history of animosity and provocation leading back to the severance of diplomatic ties in 1961. This diplomatic breakthrough has meaningful implications for the broader study of international relations. Rapprochement is central to effective diplomacy. Without it, there would be little hope for productive relations between states – past grievances would prevent all once-adversaries from turning toward a cooperative future.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis aims to explain how the restoration of US-Cuba relations came to be. It focuses on three primary factors: domestic politics within the United States, reform initiatives within Cuba, and a diplomatic trust-building process between Obama and Castro. I argue that shifting political tides within the United States and reform processes initiated by Castro within Cuba, while important, are insufficient to account for the re-establishment of relations. A narrow focus on each country’s domestic context overlooks the significance of the working trust established between Obama and Castro – a trust developed through a series of “costly signals” and with the diplomatic intervention of Pope Francis.<sup>3</sup>

Domestic political considerations have long been of utmost importance in presidential decision making related to Cuba.<sup>4</sup> From the breakdown of relations in 1961 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, each successive US president feared the broad political implications of backing down from the hardline policies toward Cuba initiated by President Eisenhower.<sup>5</sup>

Following the ideological fervor of the Cold War, US national opinion related to Cuba has remained relevant to presidential policy decisions in certain instances. The long-term adversarial nature of the US-Cuba relationship has fueled intense resistance to impressions of capitulation before a perceived enemy. President Clinton’s response to the surge of Cuban migration during the 1994 Balsero crisis,

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<sup>1</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes,” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/17/statement-president-cuba-policy-changes> (Accessed April 17, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>4</sup> William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 413-4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 412, 50.

for example, was largely shaped by his fear of replicating President Carter’s “weak and ineffective” dealings with the Cuban government during an earlier migration crisis.<sup>6</sup>

Trends in Gallup polling reveal a significant positive shift in US national opinion toward Cuba leading up to and during the Obama presidency. The data indicate not only that the Obama administration entered negotiations with the Cuban government at a moment of relatively favorable US opinion toward Cuba, but also that the generally positive trajectory continued following the announcement and initiation of restored diplomatic relations (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

While this national trend is noteworthy for the reasons cited above, relevant US domestic political considerations in the modern era are largely specific to the Cuban-American community – especially because Cuban-Americans, primarily based in Miami, are known to wield their political power effectively.<sup>7</sup> Rytz contends that “the Cuban-American community is commonly considered to dispose of the most successful lobby among immigrant communities in the United States.”<sup>8</sup> Paul and Paul, utilizing “a survey and interviews of policymakers regarding the comparative influence of ethnic groups,” conclude that Cuban-Americans are one of only three ethnic interest groups “judged as having too much influence by a majority of policymakers” in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Given this prominence, this paper’s analysis of US domestic political factors will focus specifically on the Cuban-American community.

The Cuban-American community has historically opposed a thaw in diplomatic relations between the two nations. As such, LeoGrande and Kornbluh note the importance of “gradual attitudinal changes” in fostering Obama’s willingness and ability to initiate Cuba policy changes.<sup>10</sup> Sweig similarly highlights “generational and political evolution” within the Cuban-American community, arguing that young Cuban-Americans are “open to and actively pursuing connectedness ... over isolation.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 281.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Ambrosio, *Ethnic Identity Groups and U.S. Foreign Policy*, (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 8; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 405, 414.

<sup>8</sup> Henriette M. Rytz, *Ethnic Interest Groups in US Foreign Policy-Making: A Cuban-American Story of Success and Failure*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 6.

<sup>9</sup> David M. Paul and Rachel Anderson Paul, *Ethnic Lobbies and US Foreign Policy*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), 28.

<sup>10</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 397.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Sweig, *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 294-5.

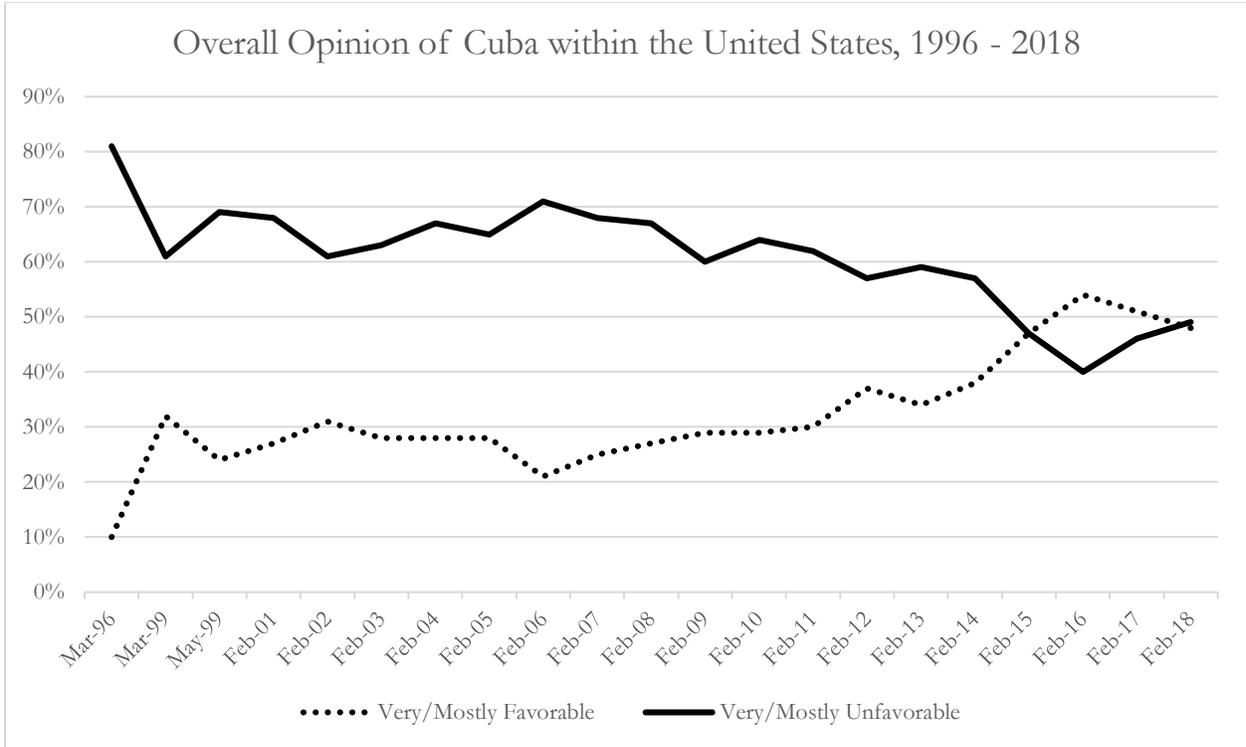


Figure 1. Source: Gallup Polling.

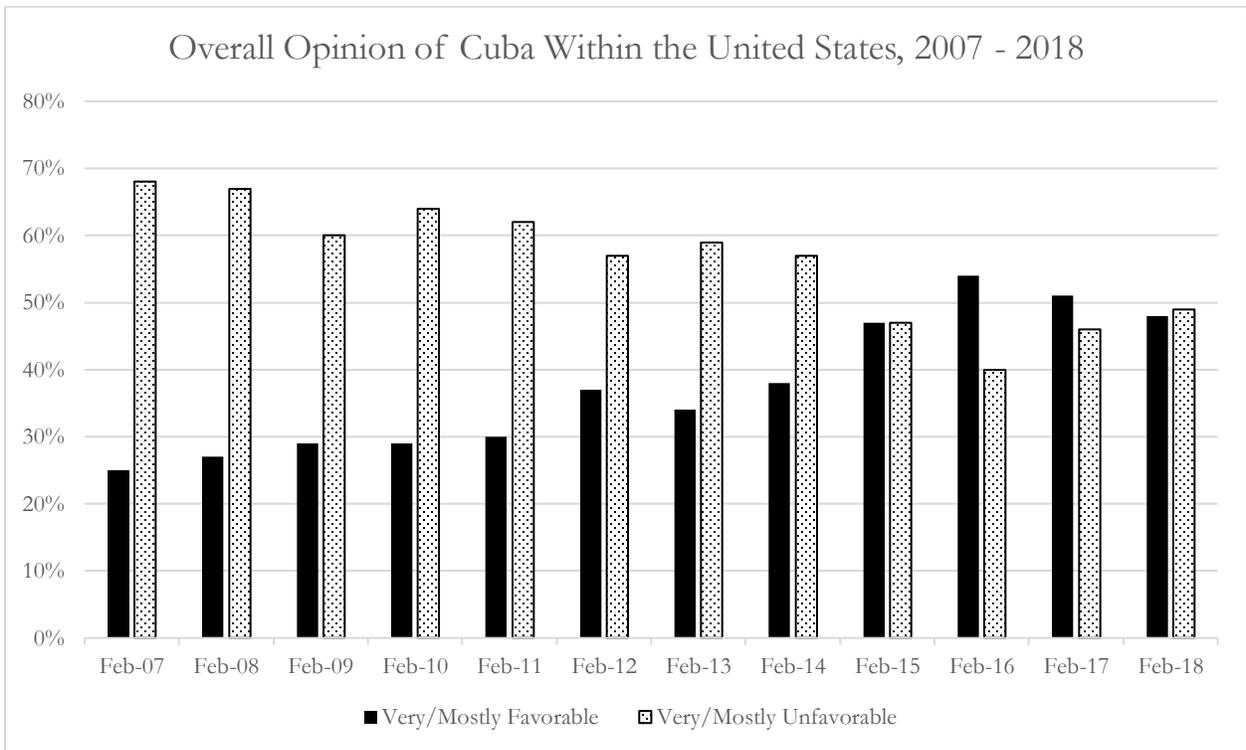


Figure 2. Source: Gallup Polling.

There were undoubtedly notable political shifts within the Cuban-American community leading up to and during Obama's presidency (see Figures 3 and 4). These shifts did influence the Obama administration's calculus on Cuba policy. Former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, who led the Obama administration's negotiations with the Cuban government, explicitly acknowledged the relevance of Cuban-American opinion, noting, "We've ... been engaging the Cuban-American community that follows these issues very closely .... Part of what makes the Cuba issue so unique is the interest and passion that Cuban-Americans feel about it."<sup>12</sup> Empirical analysis of trends in Cuban-American public opinion will follow.

Domestic reform within Cuba is a second relevant factor in examining the restoration of ties between the two nations. US leaders have long maintained that Cuba's illiberal system impedes more substantive relations with the United States.<sup>13</sup> Following the collapse of the Soviet Union (and thus the Soviet-Cuban alliance) and the cessation of Cuban foreign policy entanglements in Africa and Latin America – factors cited by President Carter and President Ford as insurmountable blockades to a strengthening of US-Cuba relations – President H.W. Bush shifted his focus, asserting that "the United States ... would normalize relations only if Cuba abandoned socialism and adopted multiparty electoral democracy."<sup>14</sup>

While Obama ultimately broke with his predecessors on Cuba, he earlier asserted that Cuban economic and political reform would be critical to his willingness to reshape US-Cuba relations.<sup>15</sup> In a speech in Miami on August 21, 2007, then-presidential candidate Obama argued, "Our support for the aspirations of the Cuban people ... [is] ill-served by the further entrenchment of the Castro regime, which is why we need to advance peaceful political and economic reform on the island."<sup>16</sup> He went on to argue that "the United States should ... tak[e] certain steps now and pledg[e] to take additional steps as temporary openings are solidified into lasting change."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary. "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, 2/18/2016," <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/18/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-and-deputy-national-security> (accessed April 11, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 266, 408.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>16</sup> Barack Obama, "Our Main Goal: Freedom in Cuba." This speech is cited in LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 368, and is referenced in Jon Lee Anderson, "A New Cuba," *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

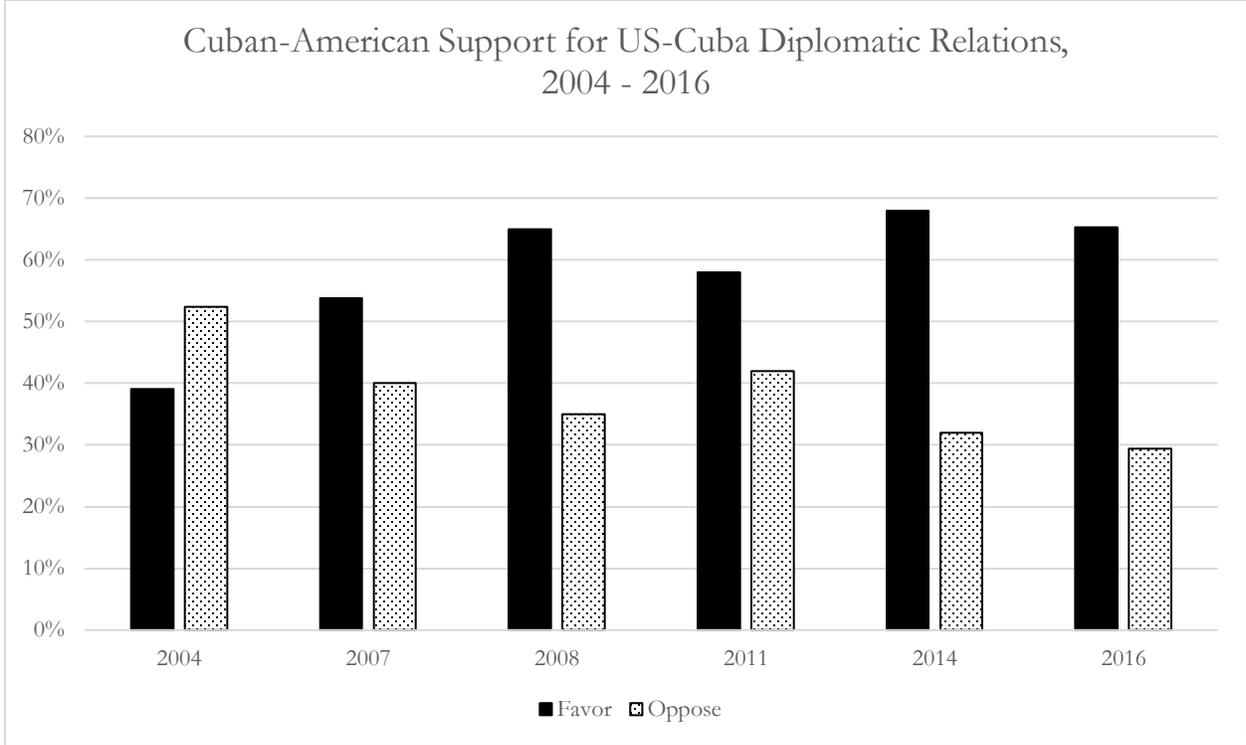


Figure 3. Source: Florida International University Cuba Poll.

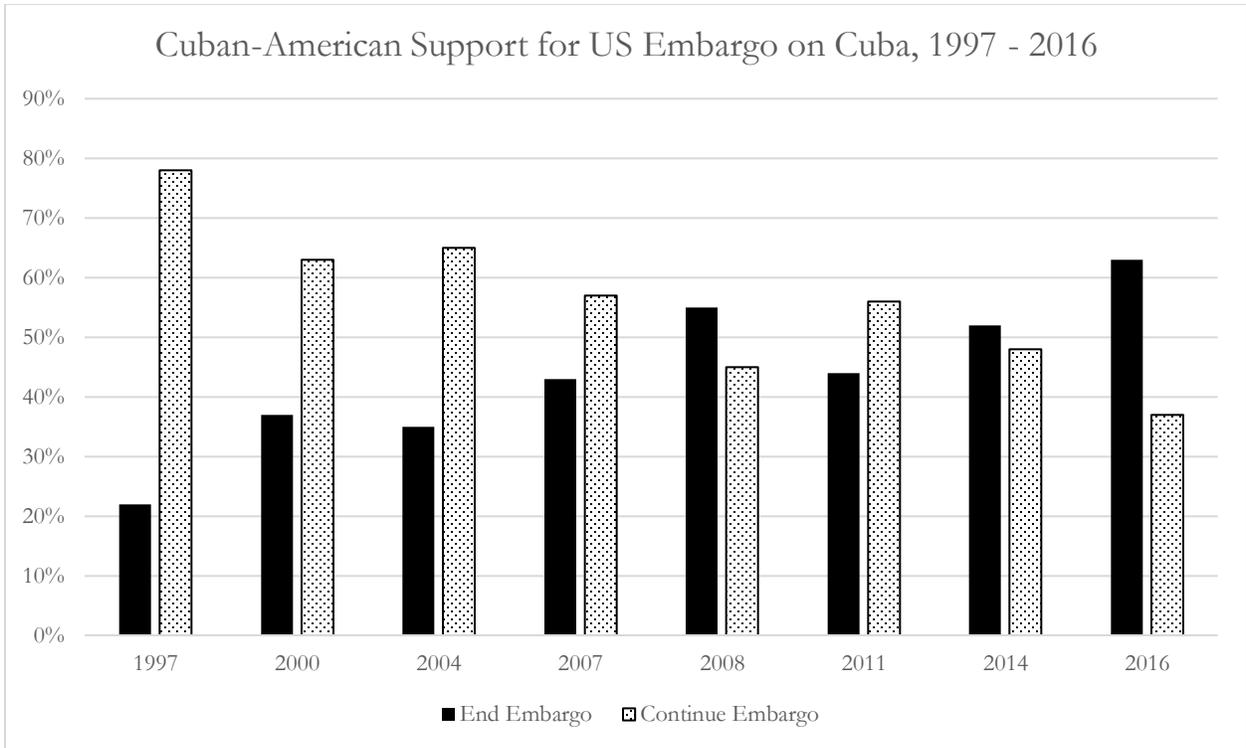


Figure 4. Source: Florida International University Cuba Poll.

Once elected president, Obama regularly reaffirmed the importance of reform within Cuba. In a roundtable press interview on September 28, 2011, Obama emphasized that he was “open to a new relationship with Cuba if the Cuban government start[ed] taking the proper steps to open up ... and provide the space and the respect for human rights that would allow the Cuban people to determine their own destiny.”<sup>18</sup> He also noted, “We are prepared to see what happens in Cuba. If we see positive movement we will respond in a positive way.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, Obama consistently pointed to Cuban reforms as a factor that could deliver a breakthrough in US-Cuba relations.

Given that the restoration of US-Cuba relations ultimately arose, it makes sense to assess the role that Cuban reforms may have played. Domínguez notes that Castro spearheaded “significant albeit slow-moving economic policy change (implemented through a limited use of market mechanisms).”<sup>20</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh go further, arguing that Cuba’s “historic economic reforms were moving the island toward a mixed economy akin to Vietnam’s, and incipient political decompression allowed more space for open debate and more robust civil society.”<sup>21</sup> They thus contend that Castro and his “ambitious reform program” had “mov[ed] Cuba in directions long cited by Washington as necessary for better relations.”<sup>22</sup>

It is important to contextualize these reforms within Cuba’s wider political and economic history. They are not the first of their kind. As Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López point out, Cuba’s “economic and social policies have swung eight times since 1959, giving rise to cycles of different intensity and length that have alternated from movement toward or away from the market.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, after implementing reforms “to boost economic performance and ... maintain control,” the Cuban government has tended to shift back to “idealist cycles” that ignore challenging economic realities.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President in an ‘Open for Questions’ Roundtable,” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/28/remarks-president-open-questions-roundtable> (Accessed April 11, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Jorge I. Domínguez, María del Carmen Zabala Argüelles, Mayra Espina Prieto, Lorena Barberia, and Soledad Artiz Prillaman, *Social Policies and Decentralization in Cuba: Change in the Context of 21st-Century Latin America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>21</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 408.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Jorge Pérez-López, *Cuba Under Raúl Castro: Assessing the Reforms*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

The subsequent establishment and pursuit of ideological goals have then “contributed to adverse economic ... performance and even crises.”<sup>25</sup>

This “policy seesaw” has had real implications for the Cuban people.<sup>26</sup> From 1997 to 2003, for example, “small private restaurants (paladares) were first authorized, then banned, and finally authorized again, but subject to heavy regulations. Private taxi drivers suffered initially the same uncertainty ... and later were prohibited from serving tourists.”<sup>27</sup> Such profound economic uncertainty presents challenges for Cuban citizens. Thus, it is important to consider the extent to which Castro’s reforms could, in Obama’s words, “solidif[y] into lasting change.”<sup>28</sup>

Raúl Castro has been more willing to implement economic reforms than Fidel was. Mesa-Lago and Pérez-Lopez contend that “Fidel’s charismatic leadership and ideological bend prevented the logic of pragmatism from institutionalizing state socialism and implementing comprehensive and stable market reforms.”<sup>29</sup> It follows that Raúl, who notoriously lacks that same charismatic spark, is better situated to guide Cuba through a period of lasting reform.<sup>30</sup> As Sweig points out, Castro’s pragmatic tendency has long-term roots: “Raúl is credited with inserting a voice of pragmatism into the Cuban leadership’s debates about economic issues during the 1990’s, pushing Fidel to accept reforms that allowed Cubans to feed themselves more easily and employ themselves in limited trades and services.”<sup>31</sup>

It is also important to consider the direct effects that Castro’s reforms have had on the Cuban people. Obama argued in 2007 that “US policy must be built around empowering the Cuban people” – a consideration that he stressed throughout his presidency.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in the official presidential policy directive initiating the normalization of US-Cuba relations, Obama asserted that “the objective of the new policy is to help the Cuban people to achieve a better future for

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<sup>25</sup> Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López, *Cuba Under Raúl Castro*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Obama, “Our Main Goal: Freedom in Cuba.”

<sup>29</sup> Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López, *Cuba Under Raúl Castro*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, xxviii.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 211.

<sup>32</sup> Obama, “Our Main Goal: Freedom in Cuba.”

themselves.”<sup>33</sup> Given this emphasis, this paper’s analysis will devote particular attention to the impacts of reform on the Cuban people.

As noted, this paper contends that US domestic politics and Cuban reform initiatives cannot fully account for the re-establishment of US-Cuba relations. The political path to restored relations was never an obvious or inevitable one.<sup>34</sup> Obama did not enter the White House – or his second term – knowing that a fundamental reformulation of the US-Cuba relationship was possible, even despite political change within the Cuban-American community. Politics in Miami shifted faster than they did in the House and Senate.<sup>35</sup> As such, Obama had to avoid alienating Cuba policy hardliners in Congress – including those within his own party.<sup>36</sup> The 2009 arrest of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) sub-contractor Alan Gross in Cuba added to the political sensitivity of bolstering relations.<sup>37</sup> As a result, Obama approached Cuba “cautious[ly]” and “incremental[ly].”<sup>38</sup> The 2016 presidential election further calls into question the practical consequences of shifting Cuban-American opinion toward Cuba.

Castro’s reforms within Cuba were also significant, but their implementation was exceedingly slow, their scope inherently limited. They did little to address Obama’s earlier pledges to make broader policy reform contingent on civil and political openings within the Cuban system, for example.

As such, there is a missing factor in explaining diplomatic breakthrough between the United States and Cuba. Sweig notes that domestic contexts “would [not] have mattered ... had White House negotiators not found willing partners in their Cuban counterparts.”<sup>39</sup> While true, this explanation does not extend far enough. This paper argues that the missing factor was the establishment of a working trust between Obama and Castro. Decades of hostility created a fundamental mistrust between the two countries.<sup>40</sup> Had the two leaders not instituted a sufficient level of trust, no

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<sup>33</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Presidential Policy Directive – United States-Cuba Normalization,” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/10/14/presidential-policy-directive-united-states-cuba-normalization> (Accessed April 24, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 292-4.

<sup>35</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 371-2, 398.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 371-2, 398.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 371, 400-1.

<sup>39</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 295.

<sup>40</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 401.

breakthrough would have been possible – even given political change in Miami and economic reform in Havana.

The pronounced lack of trust between the United States and Cuba is not surprising. As LeoGrande and Kornbluh note, “the Cubans had heard promises ... many times before; if only they would make concessions up front on an issue of interest to the United States, better relations would follow. More than once, the Cubans had taken [a] deal, but never did they see any payoff.”<sup>41</sup> Anderson quotes Carlos Saladrigas, a prominent Cuban-American businessperson and advocate for strengthened US-Cuba relations, in noting that the opposite is also true – “Every time an American president tried to make an overture to Cuba, Fidel did something to stop it.”<sup>42</sup>

The lack of trust extends beyond false promises and interrupted negotiations. Over the past several decades, “the United States had tried to dislodge the Castro regime by a variety of methods, including invasion, attempted assassination, funding dissidents, and a baroque plot to create a fake Twitter service that was intended to aid an antigovernment uprising.”<sup>43</sup> Though these attempts failed in Cuba, they succeeded in other Latin American nations. It is thus easy to understand the origins of the deep mistrust that existed between the two countries.

The United States and Cuba participated in “successive acts of mutual accommodation” to signal a willingness to cooperate, engage in dialogue, and build trust, even early in the Obama presidency.<sup>44</sup> This process was frequently interrupted by hiccups, misunderstandings, and disruptions, however. The most obvious was the previously-mentioned arrest of USAID sub-contractor Alan Gross (this episode will be discussed in greater depth later in this paper). Such disruptions made prolonged cooperation difficult and added to the already complex process of establishing trust between historical adversaries. A long standstill in policy action between the two nations arose.<sup>45</sup>

Obama and Castro eventually overcame that standstill and resumed momentum in the trust-building process, though it proved difficult. It demanded several essential signals and steps, and ultimately

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<sup>41</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 396.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 35; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 410.

<sup>45</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 281.

required the intervention of Pope Francis. In a testament to the consequence of Pope Francis's role, the United States and Cuba finalized the terms of their bilateral agreement at the Vatican.<sup>46</sup>

This paper will break analysis of domestic politics within the United States, reform processes within Cuba, and the bilateral trust-building process into three separate periods. The first is the pre-negotiation period. This period begins with Obama's positions on Cuba as a presidential candidate, spans the first term of his presidency and his re-election, and concludes with the first secret meeting between US and Cuban negotiators in June of 2013.<sup>47</sup> The second is the clandestine negotiating period. This period spans the duration of the secret negotiations conducted between the United States and Cuba and concludes on December 17, 2014, when Obama and Castro announced their shared intention to re-establish diplomatic relations. The third is the post-announcement period. This period spans from the 2014 announcement to the present, including the management of logistics to formally restore relations, the Obama family's visit to Havana, and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States.

Breaking analysis into these periods is useful for several reasons. First, it illustrates the generally positive trends in both Cuban-American opinion and Cuban economic reform processes during the Obama presidency. Next, and conversely, it clarifies that substantial diplomatic obstacles persisted despite these developments, thus illuminating the shortcomings of an excessively narrow focus on domestic contexts. Lastly, it recognizes that trust-building developments in the US-Cuba relationship built on each other over time. Rapprochement between historical adversaries is an incremental process.<sup>48</sup> It will be examined accordingly.

Analysis of the US domestic political context primarily relies on the Cuba Poll periodically conducted by the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University (FIU).<sup>49</sup> The FIU Cuba Poll is "the longest-running research project tracking the opinions of the Cuban-American community in South Florida."<sup>50</sup> The poll's geographic focus in Miami-Dade County is useful given

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<sup>46</sup> Anderson, "A New Cuba"; Sweig, *Cuba*, 292.

<sup>47</sup> Anderson, "A New Cuba."

<sup>48</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 37; Kenneth E. Boulding, *Stable Peace* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 23-4.

<sup>49</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh discuss the FIU Cuba Poll in *Back Channel to Cuba*, 397.

<sup>50</sup> Cuban Research Institute, "FIU Cuba Poll," <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/> (Accessed April 24, 2018).

that roughly “two-thirds ... of all Cubans and Cuban-Americans nationwide live in Florida with a majority ... living in metropolitan Miami.”<sup>51</sup> Organizations including the Brookings Institution, the Cuba Study Group, the Ford Foundation, and the *Miami Herald* have collaborated and contributed to the Cuba Poll.<sup>52</sup> An examination of Cuban-American voting patterns in recent presidential elections will complement this analysis.

Analysis of reform within Cuba depends primarily on the International Republican Institute’s (IRI) periodic polls of public opinion within Cuba. IRI describes itself as “a non-profit, non-partisan organization committed to advancing freedom and democracy worldwide.”<sup>53</sup> It must be noted that IRI is closely associated with the US federal government and “receives funding through grants from the US State Department, US Agency for International Development, [and] the National Endowment for Democracy,” among other sources.<sup>54</sup> As such, IRI is not an unbiased source as it relates to US-Cuba relations. With that said, IRI’s surveys provide a relatively rare opportunity to empirically assess public opinion within Cuba, especially regarding sensitive political topics. Further, IRI’s divulgence of its survey processes helps ensure that analysis can be conducted in a straightforward manner.

IRI’s surveys depend on personal interviews within Cuba. Given limitations on political expression in Cuba and “to help neutralize suspicions” regarding the polling process, IRI’s team does not acknowledge that they are conducting a poll – “instead, they ask their questions during casual conversations struck up at bus stops and other public mingling places.”<sup>55</sup>

Freedom House’s periodic reports on Cuba’s social, political, and economic landscape will complement IRI data. Freedom House describes itself as “an independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world.”<sup>56</sup> Like IRI, Freedom

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<sup>51</sup> Audrey Singer and Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, “Renewed U.S.-Cuba Talks Spotlight Future Migration Issues,” Brookings Institution, January 23, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2015/01/23/renewed-u-s-cuba-talks-spotlight-future-migration-issues/> (Accessed April 24, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Cuban Research Institute, “FIU Cuba Poll.”

<sup>53</sup> International Republican Institute, “Frequently Asked Questions,” <http://www.iri.org/who-we-are/faqs> (Accessed April 13, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Glenn Garvin, “How secret poll in Cuba was done,” *Miami Herald*, April 9, 2015, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article17887739.html> (Accessed April 24, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Freedom House, “About Us,” <https://freedomhouse.org/about-us> (Accessed April 13, 2018).

House is not an unbiased source with regard to US-Cuba relations. As LeoGrande and Kornbluh note, “US efforts to use computer technology to undermine the Cuban regime traced back to the very first democracy promotion grant that President Bill Clinton gave to Freedom House in 1995.”<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, its reports are useful in tracking changes in Cuba’s reform trajectory over time.

Reform analysis will also depend on Raúl Castro’s assessments of Cuba’s social, economic, and political conditions during the Sixth and Seventh Congresses of the Cuban Communist Party in 2011 and 2016, respectively. Relying on Castro’s evaluations introduces bias in the opposite direction. As head of the Cuban state and Communist Party, Castro faced incentives to exaggerate progress within Cuba to bolster both domestic support and international perception of the Cuban system. With that said, Castro’s analysis is often strikingly critical. Information drawn from the Obama White House and from other scholars who have investigated Castro’s moves to reform the Cuban economy will complement this analysis.

Examination of the bilateral trust-building process will depend on accounts of major, if not well-known, events that effectively signaled each side’s willingness to cooperate in forging a new diplomatic relationship.<sup>58</sup> These events will be considered through the lens of theoretical explanations for the transition from hostile to friendly interstate relations.

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<sup>57</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 374.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

## Literature Review

Before beginning empirical analysis, it is worth contextualizing the US-Cuba case within two wider bodies of literature. The first is theoretical explanations of the nature of relations between states. The second explores the role of trust in international relations. Both of these bodies offer valuable insights regarding the specific case in question.

### **On Interstate Relations**

Realist theorists contend that interstate relations reflect states' needs to survive and grow in power.<sup>59</sup> According to Waltz, states “strengthen and enlarge” their alliances while “weaken[ing] and shrink[ing]” opposing alliances to bolster their power and prevent others from doing the same.<sup>60</sup> Each state's pursuit of security leads to an international “balance of power” that “prevent[s] the supremacy of a single power or coalition of powers” – a notion that resonates more in the bipolar context of the Cold War than in the current unipolar system dominated by the United States.<sup>61</sup> While Cuba faced economic incentives to align itself with the United States following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is difficult to claim that the United States repaired relations with Cuba to bolster its realist power within the international system. Further, the restoration of diplomatic ties has little practical effect on the steep imbalance of power between the two countries.

Morgenthau acknowledges that the pursuit of power largely shapes interstate relations, but also notes the importance of ideology and international institutions.<sup>62</sup> He argues, “In a world whose moving force is the aspiration of sovereign nations for power, peace can be maintained by” mechanisms including “international law, international morality, and world public opinion.”<sup>63</sup> This argument stands out in that it points to conceptual considerations relevant to interstate relations.<sup>64</sup> As such, Morgenthau stresses the need for effective diplomacy within the international system.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), 126.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 118; Stephen R. Rock, *Why Peace Breaks Out: Great Power Rapprochement in Historical Perspective* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>62</sup> Hans Joachim Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 27; Rock, *Why Peace Breaks Out*, 5, 10.

<sup>63</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 27.

<sup>64</sup> Rock, *Why Peace Breaks Out*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 593.

Rock questions “a narrow realist interpretation of international political behavior.”<sup>66</sup> He instead claims that similarities between nations, most notably a common “political ideology,” form the basis for friendly relations.<sup>67</sup> This notion evokes a wider scholarly emphasis on the centrality of shared values, especially democratic governance and economic interdependence, on the establishment of harmonious interstate relations.<sup>68</sup> Kant first argued that the spread of democratic republican governance would lead to “perceptual peace” between nations.<sup>69</sup> Fukuyama, affirming the link between democracy and international cooperation, asserts that Kant created “the intellectual basis for contemporary liberal internationalism” and argues that the failure of the United Nations to deliver international peace results from its inclusion of non-democracies.<sup>70</sup>

The theories presented by Kant and Fukuyama help explain crucial elements of US foreign policy toward Cuba. As noted, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, prospects for diplomatic reconciliation between the United States and Cuba were cut short by President George H.W. Bush: “Our goals for the Cuban nation ... are plain and clear. Freedom and democracy ... not sometime, not someday, but now. If Cuba holds fully free and fair elections ... we can expect relations between our two countries to improve significantly.”<sup>71</sup> President George W. Bush went further, making regime change in Cuba an explicit goal of his foreign policy.<sup>72</sup> Thus, both presidents agreed on the importance of liberal values in forming the basis for non-hostile relations with the United States.

Boulding holds that the diplomatic weight of interstate commonalities is overstated.<sup>73</sup> He argues, “The stable peace relationship is not the same as having a common language, a common religion, a common culture, or even common interests.”<sup>74</sup> As such, “neither similarities nor differences are any guarantee of peace.”<sup>75</sup> He claims that the dynamics leading to harmonious relations are much more subtle: “The only guarantees of peace are compatible self-images,” which are developed in a “complex, mutual learning process.”<sup>76</sup> Noting the delicacy of engagement between historical

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<sup>66</sup> Rock, *Why Peace Breaks Out*, 9, 15.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-6.

<sup>68</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Immanuel Kant and Hans Reiss, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 99.

<sup>70</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 281-3.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 267.

<sup>72</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 345.

<sup>73</sup> Boulding, *Stable Peace*, 17.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

adversaries, Boulding emphasizes a “piecemeal ... but realistic approach” that recognizes “the enormous importance of what is not said, not signed, but quietly taken as rule of behavior.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, he describes national “peace policies” based on gradual accommodation and “communicated by nods, smiles, and raised eyebrows.”<sup>78</sup> Boulding’s emphasis of subtle gestures stands out in the restoration of US-Cuba relations. As will become clear, a number of such gestures facilitated the agreement reached between the two nations.

Kupchan explicitly rejects the notion that democratic governance and economic interconnectivity are prerequisites for international cooperation. He explains that “non-democracies can be reliable contributors to international stability” and that “deft diplomacy, not trade or investment” lead to rapprochement.<sup>79</sup> He focuses instead on the significance of restraint in diplomatic behavior.<sup>80</sup> As such, he departs from a limited focus on liberal political systems supported by Kant and Fukuyama and implemented by the Presidents Bush. The relevance of Kupchan’s argument is immediately evident given the non-democratic nature of the Cuban system and the distinct lack of economic interdependence between the United States and Cuba.

### **On Domestic Politics**

Scholarship on the relationship between domestic politics and interstate relations has undergone a notable conceptual evolution over the past several decades. Realist scholars in the aftermath of the Second World War approached interstate relations through three distinct lenses: “the individual, the state, and the state system.”<sup>81</sup> This segmented approach has notable shortcomings. As Singer notes, a comprehensive understanding of the international system “is of necessity lost when ... focus is shifted to a lower, and more partial, level” – individual domestic political contexts, for example.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Boulding, *Stable Peace*, 17.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-9.

<sup>79</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 8.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 407.

<sup>81</sup> J. David Singer, “International Conflict: Three Levels of Analysis,” *World Politics* 12, no. 3 (1960), 453-461. Discussed in Andrew Moravcsik, “Integrating International and Domestic Theories of Interstate Bargaining,” in *Double Edged Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>82</sup> Singer, “International Conflict: Three Levels of Analysis,” 80.

Subsequent scholarship is more attentive to the nuanced relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy. Putnam contends that the discussion of one-way influence – “the mere observation that domestic factors influence international affairs and vice versa” – understates the profound “entanglement” between domestic and international contexts.<sup>83</sup> As such, he urges scholars “to seek theories that integrate both spheres.”<sup>84</sup> He proposes a “general equilibrium” model to “account simultaneously” for the relevance of national and international factors in shaping foreign policy decisions.<sup>85</sup> His model envisions a “two-level game” in which political leaders must “maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures” while “minimiz[ing] the adverse consequences of foreign developments.”<sup>86</sup>

Much contemporary scholarship builds off of Putnam’s “two-level game” approach to interstate relations. Hill argues that “no-one now believes that foreign policy is unaffected by what occurs within states ... Even neo-realists concede that there are important things which cannot be explained by international dynamics.”<sup>87</sup> Moravcsik contends that “the question facing ... theorists today is not whether to combine domestic and international explanations ... but how best to do so.”<sup>88</sup> Milner, too, notes that “domestic politics and international relations are inextricably related.”<sup>89</sup>

There is no scholarly consensus on precisely how much sway domestic considerations have on foreign policy, however. Millner argues that “states are not unitary actors” and that foreign “policy choices ... are the result of a strategic game among ... internal actors.”<sup>90</sup> Boulding, on the other hand, contends that “the view that” domestic political factors “play a dominant or determining role is [an] example of a political superstition.”<sup>91</sup> Given this debate, examining the role of domestic politics in shaping the contemporary US-Cuba relationship is particularly worthwhile.

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<sup>83</sup> Robert Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988), 433.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>86</sup> Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics,” 436.

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 220.

<sup>88</sup> Moravcsik, “Integrating International and Domestic Theories of Interstate Bargaining,” 7.

<sup>89</sup> Helen V. Milner, *Interests, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Boulding, *Stable Peace*, 23.

## On Diplomatic Trust

There is disagreement among scholars regarding the capacity for trust in the international system. Realist theorists like Mearsheimer argue that trust is not a relevant concept in interstate relations. The inability of states to gauge each other's true intentions leads to perpetual mistrust.<sup>92</sup> While periods of cooperation are possible, realists contend that "moral principles" like trust "can never be fully realized" within the international system – and as a result, "genuine peace is not likely."<sup>93</sup> Thus, realists contend that "there is little use in studying international trust" given that "the level of trust is never high enough to affect behavior."<sup>94</sup>

Other theorists hold that states can develop mutual trust. While diplomatic mistrust is a serious problem, it is a fixable one.<sup>95</sup> Kydd, for example, notes that "some states trust each other enough to cooperate ..., have normal relations, and enjoy mutual security."<sup>96</sup> Kupchan also notes the utility of trust, arguing that it "minimizes the effects of uncertainty" and allows potential partners to work together "even in the face of incomplete information."<sup>97</sup> The US-Cuba case demonstrates that working levels of diplomatic trust are achievable and can contribute to significant breakthroughs within the international system.

There is also debate regarding the mechanisms through which interstate trust is established. Gambetta argues that trust is a "problem ... of communication."<sup>98</sup> Even given "perfectly adequate motives for cooperation," states "need to know about each other's motives ... to trust each other."<sup>99</sup> As such, the relevant issue is the way that states communicate their trustworthiness. Dasgupta contends that a reputation for trust is established gradually "through behavior over time."<sup>100</sup> He describes trust "as a commodity" and argues that parties must "invest resources" in the pursuit of a

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<sup>92</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3, 5-49. See also Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, 14 and Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 38.

<sup>93</sup> Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," 9; Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 3.

<sup>94</sup> Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, 14.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-6.

<sup>97</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 180, 38.

<sup>98</sup> Diego Gambetta, *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (New York: B. Blackwell, 1988), 216.

<sup>99</sup> Gambetta, *Trust*, 216.

<sup>100</sup> Partha Dasgupta, "Trust as a Commodity," in *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* ed. Diego Gambetta, 52, 63.

reputation of trustworthiness.<sup>101</sup> Only through this long-term investment can states communicate their credibility to potential partners.

Regarding the initiation of a trust-building process, both Boulding and Kupchan highlight the importance of a first step in setting the stage for future cooperation. Boulding argues that the “peace dynamic must become explicit ... in some dramatic public statement and act” by one state.<sup>102</sup>

Kupchan argues that “strategic necessity” motivates a state to initiate cooperation through “an act of unilateral accommodation.”<sup>103</sup> Though selfishly motivated, this initial move “open[s] the door to a standing down of rivalry and the advance of reconciliation.”<sup>104</sup> The process then continues with “successive rounds of mutual accommodation,” back-and-forth moves through which two countries establish mutual comfort and, eventually, trust.<sup>105</sup> Eventually, “compatible identities” emerge “through the generation of a new narrative of friendship” led by political leaders.<sup>106</sup> At this point, the two nations move beyond purely strategic incentives and reach an understanding of “benign motivation.”<sup>107</sup> This understanding is the essence of diplomatic rapprochement.

Kydd argues that trustworthiness is conveyed through “costly signaling,” which he defines as “making small but significant gestures that serve to prove that one is trustworthy.”<sup>108</sup> He notes the difficulty of selecting effective trust-building signals: If signals are insufficiently costly, they demonstrate no value and may be interpreted as attempts at trickery.<sup>109</sup> If they are too costly, potential partners face no incentive to respond in turn, and may instead take the money and run.<sup>110</sup> These unique considerations again point to the delicate nature of diplomatic trust building between once-adversaries.

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<sup>101</sup> Dasgupta, “Trust as a Commodity,” 70.

<sup>102</sup> Boulding, *Stable Peace*, 113.

<sup>103</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 180, 6.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 180, 6.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 180, 6.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>108</sup> Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, 5.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 187-8.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

Booth and Wheeler also point to the need for “a mutual learning process” in the establishment of interstate trust.<sup>111</sup> They contend that an essential vehicle in this process is “visionary leaders who take risks for trust.”<sup>112</sup> This argument is also relevant to the US-Cuba case. Both Obama and Castro took substantial political risks in initiating the restoration of ties between the United States and Cuba.

Hoffman rejects the notion of incremental trust building. He argues that a strategy that allows states to signal trustworthiness through initially inconsequential issues encourages cheating on more consequential issues that follow.<sup>113</sup> These warped incentives lead untrustworthy states to feign cooperation in order “have an opportunity to exploit their counterparts’ vital interests.”<sup>114</sup> He instead posits that nations develop trust through the creation of “rules, norms, and principles” that guard against exploitation and domestic criticism.<sup>115</sup> In Hoffman’s view, states do not need trust; they need cover. Hoffman is correct in asserting that rapprochement requires some degree of political opening. His argument is also relevant in the fact that both the United States and Cuba maintained a high level of secrecy throughout their negotiations.<sup>116</sup> Still, he understates the importance of reciprocity in the establishment of diplomatic trust. Further, he underestimates the extent to which states can recognize insufficiently costly concessions.

Bar-Siman-Tov, Bennink, Kelman, and Kriesburg emphasize the interpersonal elements of diplomatic reconciliation, which they consider “the most important condition for shifting ... toward stable peace.”<sup>117</sup> They note the need to “openly address painful questions of past conflict so as to build a foundation for normal peace relations.”<sup>118</sup> This argument is plainly applicable to the US-Cuba context. The ability to address past grievances, to come to terms with the past in order to forge ahead with the future, was integral to reshaping relations between the United States and Cuba.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 230.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>113</sup> Aaron A. Hoffman, *Building Trust: Overcoming Suspicion in International Conflict* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 140

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>116</sup> Anderson, *A New Cuba*.

<sup>117</sup> Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>119</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Road to Havana,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/united-states-cuba-obama-visit/474510/> (Accessed April 24, 2018).

Another relevant consideration is the extent to which third-party countries can serve as trust-brokers between states with limited trust. Bar-Siman-Tov contends that reconciliation is a “mutual and consensual process” that “cannot be imposed by one side or even by an external side (that is, a mediator).”<sup>120</sup> Of course, it is necessary to distinguish between the imposition and the facilitation of trust in a diplomatic context.

Kydd argues that “the presence of a hegemonic actor who is relatively trustworthy can make cooperation possible where it otherwise would not be.”<sup>121</sup> He points to the role of the United States in the aftermath of the Second World War, in which US credibility helped broker cooperation between the European states.<sup>122</sup> As he argues, “French fears and German power were ultimately counterbalanced by American ... trustworthiness,” which “enable[ed] a virtuous spiral of increasing cooperation and trust-building.”<sup>123</sup>

Booth and Wheeler also note the potential for “third party mediators who can bring parties together and keep them talking.”<sup>124</sup> Unlike Kydd, they do not assume that the third party must be a hegemonic power. Thus, they illuminate the possibility that third parties can contribute to diplomatic trust simply by fostering dialogue and by themselves being trustworthy. This notion is important in the context of US-Cuba relations, especially given that the Vatican is not a hegemonic power in the contemporary international community.

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<sup>120</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, 5.

<sup>121</sup> Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, 179.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>124</sup> Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 254.

## **The Pre-Negotiation Period**

## Domestic Politics within the United States

Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president of the United States on February 10, 2007. The following month, the Cuban Research Institute conducted its periodic Cuba Poll.<sup>125</sup> 57.4 percent of respondents indicated their support for the restoration of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba. 76.4 percent of respondents expressed that the US embargo of Cuba had worked not very well or not at all.

For reference, the same poll conducted in 2004 found that 42 percent of Cuban-Americans favored the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, while 74.4 percent indicated that the embargo had worked not very well or not at all.<sup>126</sup> In only three years, support for diplomatic reconciliation had grown approximately 15 percent. Given new majority support for restored US-Cuba relations, then-presidential candidate Obama approached the presidency amidst a unique Cuban-American political context.

In August of 2007, Obama echoed the Cuban-American community's dissatisfaction with the embargo, describing the US approach to Cuba as "failed policy."<sup>127</sup> He promised to "grant Cuban-Americans unrestricted rights to visit family and send remittances to the island."<sup>128</sup> Further – and in line with bolstered support for diplomatic reconciliation – he indicated a willingness to "take steps to normalize relations" in response to reforms within Cuba.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Cuban Research Institute, "2007 FIU Cuba Poll," Florida International University, <http://ipor.fiu.edu/cuba8/pollresults.html> (Accessed April 29, 2018). "This survey was done by the Institute for Public Opinion Research and the Cuban Research Institute of Florida International University. 1,000 randomly selected Cuban-American respondents were polled in Miami-Dade County, Florida. Interviews were completed on March 26, 2007. The margin of error for the overall poll is plus or minus 3.2%. This is the eighth in the series of FIU/Cuba Polls conducted since 1991."

<sup>126</sup> Cuban Research Institute, "2004 FIU Cuba Poll," Florida International University, <http://ipor.fiu.edu/cuba7/index.html> (Accessed April 29, 2018). "This survey was conducted by the Institute for Public Opinion Research and the Cuban Research Institute of Florida International University. 1,201 randomly selected Cuban-American respondents were polled in Miami-Dade County and 606 in Broward. Interviews were completed on March 16, 2004. The margin of error for the overall poll is plus or minus 2.4%. This is the seventh in the series of FIU/Cuba Polls conducted since 1991."

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 368.

<sup>128</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 368; Obama, "Our Main Goal: Freedom in Cuba."

<sup>129</sup> Obama, "Our Main Goal: Freedom in Cuba."

Years prior, President Clinton shared Obama's frustration with the status quo of US-Cuba relations. He privately called attention to the "folly of ... hostile US policy toward Cuba."<sup>130</sup> Clinton faced a different political context than Obama did, however. 80 percent of respondents to the 1993 FIU Cuba Poll conducted at the start of Clinton's presidency, for example, "favored maintaining the ... policy of no diplomatic relations and no trade."<sup>131</sup> Clinton was therefore unwilling to risk political backlash by altering the US-Cuba relationship.<sup>132</sup> Thus, Obama was not the first modern president to disfavor diplomatic animosity toward Cuba. Shifting opinion within the Cuban-American community made him better situated to make a change, however.<sup>133</sup>

With that said, Obama's approach to Cuba on the campaign trail was by no means a political no-brainer.<sup>134</sup> The same 2007 FIU Cuba Poll indicating majority Cuban-American support for the restoration of diplomatic relations also found that 51.1 percent of Cuban-Americans strongly or mostly favored "direct US military action to overthrow the Cuban government" – hardly the mark of a Cuban-American community that had fundamentally redefined its posture toward Cuba.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, of the seven presidential candidates covered in the Cuban-American National Foundation's (CANF) 2008 Voter Guide, Obama was the lone candidate not to dismiss outright the prospect of broad-scale negotiations with the Cuban government.<sup>136</sup> Other presidential candidates – including Hillary Clinton – still did not view a shift in US policy toward Cuba as a political risk worth taking.<sup>137</sup>

Obama's approach paid off. As LeoGrande and Kornbluh explain, "Obama received 35 percent of the Cuban-American vote ... and ... carried Florida" during the 2008 election, "proving that a Democrat could take a moderate stance on Cuba."<sup>138</sup> The next FIU Cuba Poll, conducted in

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<sup>130</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 268-9.

<sup>131</sup> Institute for Public Opinion Research and the Cuban Research Institute, "The 1993 FIU Cuba Poll," Florida International University School of Journalism and Mass Communication, July 1, 1993, <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/1993-cuba-poll.pdf> (Accessed April 24, 2018).

<sup>132</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 268-9.

<sup>133</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 294; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 408.

<sup>134</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 368.

<sup>135</sup> 2007 FIU Cuba Poll.

<sup>136</sup> Cuban American National Foundation, "Cuban American Voter Guide: Election 2008," <http://canf.org/the-archive/archive-search/2008/354-cuban-american-voter-guide-election-2008> (Accessed April 24, 2018); LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 368.

<sup>137</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 368.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

December of 2008, reaffirmed broad Cuban-American support for Obama's new approach.<sup>139</sup> 65 percent of respondents indicated support for the re-establishment of diplomatic relations – up from 57.4 percent just one year prior (the combined margin of error of the two polls is plus or minus 6.8 percent). 65 percent and 66 percent favored Obama's proposals to “en[d] current restrictions on sending money to Cuba for Cuban-Americans” and to “en[d] current restrictions on travel to Cuba for Cuban-Americans,” respectively.<sup>140</sup> Thus, the poll indicated continued growth in moderate Cuban-American opinion regarding US-Cuba policy. It also displayed a lack of political backlash to Obama's campaign-trail Cuba policy proposals.

Two months into the presidency, Obama followed through on his campaign commitments related to Cuba and Cuban-Americans.<sup>141</sup> He directed his administration to “lift restrictions on travel-related transactions” for Cuban-Americans and to “remove restrictions on remittances to a person's family member in Cuba.”<sup>142</sup> Dan Restrepo, Obama's lead advisor on Latin America, explained that these changes not only “made good policy,” but also that “the politics ... worked.”<sup>143</sup> Riding the wave of shifting public opinion within the Cuban-American community, Obama took his first steps in reshaping US policy toward Cuba.

The next FIU Cuba Poll was conducted in September of 2011.<sup>144</sup> It indicated a small dent in Cuban-American support for rapprochement with Cuba. Support for a restoration of diplomatic relations shifted back to 58 percent – still a clear majority, but a reduction relative to 65 percent in the 2008

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<sup>139</sup> Institute for Public Opinion Research and the Cuban Research Institute, “The 2008 FIU Cuba Poll, Florida International University, December 8, 2008, <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/2008-cuba-poll.pdf> (Accessed May 4, 2018). “This survey was done by the Institute for Public Opinion Research of Florida International University. 800 randomly selected Cuban-American respondents were polled in Miami-Dade County, Florida. 500 interviews were done to land-line phones and 300 to cell phones. The survey was done in Spanish and English with all bilingual interviewers. Interviews were completed on December 1, 2008. The margin of error for the overall poll is plus or minus 3.6%.”

<sup>140</sup> 2008 FIU Cuba Poll.

<sup>141</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 369.

<sup>142</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Memorandum for the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of Commerce. Subject: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in Cuba,” [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the\\_press\\_office/Memorandum-Promoting-Democracy-and-Human-Rights-in-Cuba](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the_press_office/Memorandum-Promoting-Democracy-and-Human-Rights-in-Cuba) (Accessed April 13, 2018).

<sup>143</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>144</sup> Cuban Research Institute, “2011 Cuba Poll,” Florida International University, <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/2011-cuba-poll.pdf> (Accessed May 4, 2018). “648 randomly selected Cuban-American respondents were polled in Miami-Dade County. Interviews were completed on September 19, 2011. The margin of error for the overall poll is plus or minus 3.9%. This is the tenth in the series of Cuba Polls conducted by the Principal Investigators (Grenier/Gladwin) since 1991. Overall results are weighted to be representative of the Cuban-American community of Miami-Dade County as a whole.”

poll.<sup>145</sup> While this reduction may reflect challenges associated with the margin of error in polling (the sum of the margins of error for the 2008 and 2011 polls is plus or minus 7.5 percent), it is worth considering why there may have been stagnation or a reduction in Cuban-American support for diplomatic rapprochement.

One potential explanation is the Cuban government's 2009 arrest of Alan Gross, a USAID sub-contractor who had covertly distributed internet and communications equipment to non-governmental organizations within Cuba.<sup>146</sup> In February of 2011, Gross was "charged with crimes against the [Cuban] state."<sup>147</sup> White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs issued a statement arguing that Gross was "unjustly detained and deprived of his liberty and freedom" and "call[ed] for his immediate release."<sup>148</sup> The next month, Gross was "sentenced to 15 years in prison by a Cuban court."<sup>149</sup> This harsh sentencing of a US citizen may have contributed to diminished support for a friendlier diplomatic relationship between the United States and Cuba.

If Gross's detention did not lead to a dip in Cuban-American support for diplomatic reconciliation, it created other political headaches for the Obama administration. LeoGrande and Kornbluh note that "Alan Gross's arrest drastically reduced the possibility of progress" on a reshaping of US policy toward Cuba.<sup>150</sup> The situation put Obama at considerable political risk – to discuss prospects for normalization would undoubtedly lead to claims that Obama was willing to cast aside important US interests – the well-being of a US government contractor, for example – and yield to the Cuban government.<sup>151</sup>

The Obama administration's public frustration regarding a broader lack of policy reciprocity from the Cuban government could also explain a reduction in Cuban-American support for

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<sup>145</sup> 2011 FIU Cuba Poll; 2008 FIU Cuba Poll.

<sup>146</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 376; Anderson, "A New Cuba."

<sup>147</sup> Ginger Thompson, "Cuban Trial of American Reaches End," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/06/world/americas/06cuba.html> (Accessed April 13, 2018).

<sup>148</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the Press Secretary on the Charging of Alan Gross," <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/04/statement-press-secretary-charging-alan-gross> (Accessed April 13, 2018).

<sup>149</sup> Randal C. Archibold, "Cuba Gives 15-Year Prison Term to American," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/world/americas/13cuba.html> (Accessed April 13, 2018); Anderson, "A New Cuba."

<sup>150</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 387.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

rapprochement with Cuba.<sup>152</sup> Obama had hoped “to see some significant Cuban response” to his changes in travel and remittance policy.”<sup>153</sup> He specifically argued that “Cuba has to take some steps, send some signals . . . to show that they want to move beyond the patterns of the last fifty years.”<sup>154</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton similarly noted, “We do expect Cuba to reciprocate.”<sup>155</sup> By publicly airing this dissatisfaction with the Cuban government, the Obama administration may have contributed to a reduction in support for rapprochement.

The political challenges presented by Gross’s detention were insufficient to extinguish Obama’s electoral prospects in Florida during the 2012 presidential election, however. Sweig notes that “exit polls suggested that [Obama] . . . earned close to if not a clear majority” of the Cuban-American vote, thus winning Miami-Dade County “even more decisively than before.”<sup>156</sup> The *Miami Herald* cites both Edison Research and Bendixen & Amanti International polling in reporting that Obama won between 48 percent and 49 percent of Florida’s Cuban-American vote, thus affirming Sweig’s claim.<sup>157</sup> Obama was a second-term president, and Cuban-Americans had helped get him there.

There seems to be a sense among the US public that Obama’s re-election was the defining factor in enabling the restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba. It is true that “success in Florida and the fact that [Obama] would not have to stand for re-election . . . gave him more freedom of action on Cuba than any president in recent decades.”<sup>158</sup> Fidel Castro himself remarked decades prior that only a second-term president “would have the political courage” to begin to normalize relations.<sup>159</sup>

It is not the case that Obama’s re-election illuminated a clear path to the restoration of US-Cuba diplomatic ties, however, especially given Gross’s continued imprisonment.<sup>160</sup> Moreover, as LeoGrande and Kornbluh note, “Opponents like Marco Rubio . . . and Robert Menendez in the Senate were still determined to fight a legislative guerilla war against the president’s Cuba policy by

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<sup>152</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 372-3.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>154</sup> Quoted in LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 373.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 295.

<sup>157</sup> Marc Caputo, “Poll: Obama got big share of Cuban-American vote, won among other Hispanics in Florida,” *Miami Herald*, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article1944391.html> (Accessed April 13, 2018).

<sup>158</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 398.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>160</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 397-9; Sweig, *Cuba*, 292-4.

holding up nominations and threatening to filibuster must-pass legislation in order to block any new initiative.”<sup>161</sup> Thus, midway through Obama’s second term, they concluded that “the same forces that prevented Obama from taking a truly new approach to US-Cuban relations ... were still operative” and that he “had yet to free himself from the core assumptions that had locked US-Cuban relations into an impregnable pattern of mutual ... animosity.”<sup>162</sup> For that reason, it was not obvious that any broad shift in US policy toward Cuba would arise. As they noted, “Real change ... would require vision and courage” – even despite political trends within the Cuban-American community.<sup>163</sup>

In hindsight, the Obama administration did have a vision for advancing breakthrough with Cuba – though it was a secret at the time. Soon after his re-election, Obama tapped Ricardo Zúñiga, previously acting director of the State Department’s Office of Cuban Affairs, to join the National Security Council as senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs.<sup>164</sup> Restrepo, Obama’s previously-discussed advisor on Latin America, notes that Cuba-expert Zúñiga’s placement on the National Security Council was “not by accident.”<sup>165</sup> Zúñiga, together with Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, initiated the administration’s then-clandestine project to negotiate with the Cuban government. As will be discussed further in this paper, the covert nature of the negotiations itself points to the political sensitivity surrounding engagement with Cuba.<sup>166</sup> In June of 2013, Zúñiga and Rhodes met for the first time with representatives of the Cuban government.<sup>167</sup>

In conclusion, Obama’s campaign commitments and presidential policy decisions related to Cuba demonstrated a unique willingness to alter the status quo of US-Cuba relations (though this willingness met certain obstacles). Importantly, that willingness coincided with notable opinion shifts within the Cuban-American community.

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<sup>161</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 398.

<sup>162</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 401.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 397-9.

<sup>164</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba”; Katie Zezima, “Who is Ricardo Zúñiga, the man who helped broker the White House deal with Cuba?” *The Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2014/12/22/who-is-ricardo-zuniga-the-man-who-helped-broker-the-white-house-deal-with-cuba/?utm\\_term=.9d9fb11dc490](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2014/12/22/who-is-ricardo-zuniga-the-man-who-helped-broker-the-white-house-deal-with-cuba/?utm_term=.9d9fb11dc490) (Accessed April 13, 2018).

<sup>165</sup> Zezima, “Who is Ricardo Zúñiga, the man who helped broker the White House deal with Cuba?”

<sup>166</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba”; Zezima, “Who is Ricardo Zúñiga, the man who helped broker the White House deal with Cuba?”

<sup>167</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

## Reform Processes within Cuba

On October 19, 2007, months after then-presidential candidate Barack Obama asserted that the United States must “advance peaceful political and economic reform” within Cuba, the International Republican Institute (IRI) released its first-ever Cuban Public Opinion Survey.<sup>168</sup> The survey, conducted through personal interviews with 584 Cuban adults from fourteen of Cuba’s fifteen provinces, provides a unique look at Cuban citizens’ perspectives on a number of political and economic questions.<sup>169</sup> 25.2 percent of respondents indicated that “things in Cuba” were going well or very well. 33.7 percent indicated that things were going so-so. 39.8 percent indicated that things were going badly or very badly.<sup>170</sup>

The survey gave respondents an opportunity to describe challenges associated with life in Cuba. The largest share – 42.5 percent – indicated that Cuba’s biggest problem was “low salaries and a high cost of living.”<sup>171</sup> Respondents were asked whether they thought the Cuban government would be able to resolve the country’s biggest problem “in the next few years,” regardless of what they thought that problem was.<sup>172</sup> 21.4 percent indicated that the government would succeed in doing so, whereas 78.6 percent indicated that it would not. These results indicate a notable lack of confidence in the Cuban government’s capacity to improve conditions on the island.

Regarding opinion of potential reforms, 75.6 percent of respondents expressed that a transition to democracy – one with “multi-party elections, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression” – would improve their lives.<sup>173</sup> 14.2 percent indicated that such a transition would worsen their lives, and 10.2 percent indicated that it would have no effect. 83 percent of respondents indicated that a transition to a market economy featuring “economic freedoms, private property and the possibility of Cubans having their own businesses” would improve their lives.<sup>174</sup> 9.6 percent indicated that that

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<sup>168</sup> Obama, “Our Main Goal: Freedom in Cuba.”

<sup>169</sup> International Republican Institute, “Cuban Public Opinion Survey,” October 19, 2007, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2007%20October%2019%20Survey%20of%20Cuban%20Public%20Opinion,%20September%205-October%204,%202007%20--%20English%20version.pdf> (Accessed April 24, 2018). The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus four percent.

<sup>170</sup> 2007 IRI Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

transition would worsen their lives. 7.4 percent indicated that such a change would have no effect. As such, the 2007 survey depicted a Cuban population largely open to significant reforms within the Cuban system.

It is important to consider the context surrounding IRI's 2007 survey. As Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López explain, when "Raúl assumed power in 2006," Cuba's "economic and social situation was unsustainable."<sup>175</sup> The roots of this economic turmoil are multifaceted. "Dreadful economic results" stemming from a period of highly ideological policies and "worsened by the global financial crisis ... brought about a slowdown of Cuban GDP growth," along with a slew of other challenges.<sup>176</sup>

Economic decline in Venezuela, a country that had long provided financial assistance to Cuba, also contributed to the country's challenges.<sup>177</sup> Put another way, "Castro ... inherited a bad economy at a bad time."<sup>178</sup> As a result, almost immediately after officially becoming president in February of 2008, Castro announced that he would initiate "a number of modest and moderately paced measures" designed to bolster the Cuban economy.<sup>179</sup> As Sweig explains, "Some would address a bloated ... administrative bureaucracy; some would crack down on corruption ... others would help improve the lives of the Cuban people."<sup>180</sup> Notably, Castro made clear "that with the reduction in the size of the state would come the introduction of more market mechanisms."<sup>181</sup>

Raúl's reforms were initially small-scale. He eliminated "some of the more onerous restrictions on Cuban citizens, giving them the right to own computers and cellphones" and "tackled one of Cubans' most common complaints by eliminating prohibitions on citizens' access to hotels ... and ... tourist facilities," for example.<sup>182</sup> Though Castro and his government discussed Cuba's wider-scale economic and social challenges, most notably the dual currency system that has created significant disparities in the salaries of government and non-government employees, they only

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<sup>175</sup> Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López, *Cuba Under Raúl Castro*, 25.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>177</sup> Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuban Economic and Social Development: Policy Reforms and Challenges in the 21st Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>179</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 215.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>182</sup> Anderson, "A New Cuba"; Sweig, *Cuba*, 215.

initiated more limited reforms during the first years of Castro's presidency.<sup>183</sup> Critics, including those within the Bush administration, claimed that these reforms were superficial.<sup>184</sup>

Reforms grew in scope over time. Castro "lifted the ban on farmers buying their own supplies and equipment and initiated a process through which ... unused state lands would be turned over and leased to independent farmers and cooperatives" – moves in line with Obama's calls for bolstered opportunities for self-sufficiency within the Cuban population.<sup>185</sup> Further, the Cuban government accelerated "the process through which some occupants were granted title to their residential property."<sup>186</sup> By 2009, the government "announced it would issue new taxi licenses for the first time in many years" and implement additional "policies aimed at decentralization."<sup>187</sup> These reforms were more substantive and, presumably, better able to deliver notable impacts on the lives of the Cuban people.

Between June of 2008 and November of 2009, IRI published three additional Cuban Public Opinion Surveys. Because the results of these three surveys are relatively constant, analysis will proceed with averages across the three surveys (as opposed to a separate discussion of each survey).<sup>188</sup> On average, 17.6 percent of respondents across the three surveys indicated that "things in Cuba" were going well or very well – down from 25.2 percent in the 2007 survey.<sup>189</sup> 31.8 percent of respondents indicated that things were going so-so, and 49.7 percent of respondents indicated that things were going badly or very badly. These results reveal a less sanguine view of conditions in Cuba than the 2007 survey – most notably, the percentage of respondents who indicated that things were going badly or very badly increased by nearly 10 percentage points. Again, while these results may to some extent reflect the polls' margins of error, they are notable in that they do not depict growing optimism in response to Castro's reform initiatives. It is also important to note that these polls were conducted during and

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<sup>183</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 217.

<sup>184</sup> Anderson, "A New Cuba"; Sweig, *Cuba*, 216.

<sup>185</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 216.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>188</sup> International Republican Institute, "Cuban Public Opinion Survey," 2008-2009, <http://www.iri.org/news-and-resource?type=1&country=755> (Accessed April 25, 2018). The June 2008 survey and the January 2009 survey have margins of error of plus or minus four percent. The November 2009 survey has a margin of error of plus or minus five percent.

<sup>189</sup> 2008-2009 Cuban Public Opinion Surveys.

immediately following the 2007 and 2008 economic crisis, which likely would have depressed accounts of national public opinion in any country.

The three surveys offer notable insights regarding Cuba's economic conditions, the central focus of Castro's reforms. In all three of the 2008-2009 surveys, the largest share of respondents – an average of 42.7 percent across the polls – reiterated that Cuba's gravest challenge was “low salaries and a high cost of living.”<sup>190</sup> 68.4 percent of respondents expressed a belief that the Cuban government would not succeed in “solving Cuba's biggest challenge” over “the next few years” – a decrease from 78.6 percent in the 2007 survey.

The 2008 and 2009 surveys also reveal continued demand for broad economic and political reform within Cuba. An average of 84.6 percent of respondents across the three surveys expressed that they would favor “chang[ing] ... the current economic system to a market economy system ... with economic freedoms, including opportunities for Cubans to own property and run businesses.”<sup>191</sup> An average of 66.6 percent of respondents expressed that they would vote in favor of “chang[ing] the current political system to a democratic system ... with multi-party elections, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression.”<sup>192</sup> It is important to consider why an average of 12.4 percent of respondents across the three surveys might have chosen not to answer this question. The notion of upending Cuba's long-held system of autocratic governance is a sensitive one. Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López note that Fidel had previously “criticized supporters of reform within Cuba, calling them disaffected, defeatists, pseudo-revolutionaries, and traitors.”<sup>193</sup> It is thus understandable that Cubans might hesitate to answer such questions.

It is worth highlighting one specific question from the November 2009 Cuban Public Opinion Survey. Respondents were asked to rate their families' “economic situations” relative to two years prior – roughly the moment at which Castro committed Cuba to broad economic reforms.<sup>194</sup> 5.6 percent of respondents indicated that their economic situation had improved, while 40.3 percent

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<sup>190</sup> 2008-2009 Cuban Public Opinion Surveys.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López, *Cuba Under Raúl Castro*, 15.

<sup>194</sup> International Republican Institute, “Cuban Public Opinion Survey,” November 17, 2009, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2009-November-17-Survey-of-Cuban-Public-Opinion-July-4-August-7-2009.pdf> (Accessed April 25, 2018).

indicated that their situation had deteriorated. 52.1 percent expressed that there had been no change. Thus, although Castro had begun to implement significant changes to the Cuban economic model by 2009, IRI's surveys point to a lack of clear benefits to the Cuban public.

Obama was himself skeptical about the breadth of Cuba's reforms during this period. During a press conference in April of 2009, Obama indicated that he would like to see more substantial reform within Cuba. He argued that the Cuban government "could release political prisoners. They could reduce charges on remittances ... That would be an example of cooperation where both governments are working to help Cuban families and raise standards of living in Cuba."<sup>195</sup> Thus, Obama again emphasized that reforms should bolster the quality of life for all Cubans.

By most scholarly accounts, Cuba's reform process accelerated in 2010. In perhaps the most substantive reform to date, the Cuban government "announced its intention to lay off more than 500,000 state employees and transfer them to an expanded 'self-employment' sector."<sup>196</sup> As Castro indicated in 2007, Cuba would rely on market mechanisms – including this expanded private sector – to fill the void once occupied by centralization and state employment.<sup>197</sup> Over the next year, "Cubans were given the right to buy and sell their own homes and cars, to start an expanded range of businesses, and to travel freely – all of which had been allowed only with the permission of the government."<sup>198</sup> These changes certainly resonate as reforms that could directly benefit the Cuban people.

Shortly thereafter, "the Cuban Communist Party unveiled new economic proposals for discussion at the ... Sixth Party Congress" scheduled for April of 2011.<sup>199</sup> That the Party Congress would take place at all was itself significant – it would be the first since 1997.<sup>200</sup> The Congress would present a unique opportunity to more fully institutionalize the market-based mechanisms that Castro had begun initiating years earlier. As such, the event would mark "the first time in a half-century when

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<sup>195</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, "Press Conference by the President in Trinidad and Tobago, 4/19/2009," April 19, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/press-conference-president-trinidad-and-tobago-4192009> (Accessed April 25, 2018).

<sup>196</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 218.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>198</sup> Anderson, "A New Cuba."

<sup>199</sup> Domínguez, *Cuban Economic and Social Development*, 10.

<sup>200</sup> Anderson, "A New Cuba." Domínguez, *Cuban Economic and Social Development*, 3.

Cuba's top leadership seem[ed] ready to choose a market-related 'updating' of its economic model."<sup>201</sup> It is thus evident that Castro was spearheading a process of unprecedented economic reform within Cuba.

Following the announcement of the Sixth Congress, Freedom House released a report examining Cuban opinion regarding Castro's reforms.<sup>202</sup> The report, based on personal interviews with Cuban citizens, reveals significant skepticism about the reforms' impacts. It argues, "Despite hopes that the reforms will benefit Cuba, many do not believe they will personally benefit" – a concern in line with previously discussed IRI Cuba Polls.<sup>203</sup> Many respondents indicated "fears that the reforms would make basic goods even more expensive while ... lowering wages," another reflection of the economic challenges highlighted in IRI's polling.<sup>204</sup> The report also notes that "more than half of Cubans interviewed believed that Cuba is 'estancado' (stuck), neither progressing nor regressing," while "approximately a third of respondents believed that Cuba is regressing."<sup>205</sup> Thus, despite the historical significance of the calling of the Sixth Party Congress and the reform process it accompanied, Cubans remained skeptical about the prospects for practical change.

Regarding political reform, the Freedom House report indicates that "respondents were divided."<sup>206</sup> While "some believed a complete political liberalization was necessary, ... others believed strongly in the current political system and did not want to see any political changes."<sup>207</sup> Respondents also expressed more moderate viewpoints. Many Cubans indicated support for socialism with "some reforms and liberalization."<sup>208</sup> Given this variation in responses, the report contends that support for economic reforms and freedom of expression was more ubiquitous than support for broader political reform.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Domínguez, *Cuban Economic and Social Development*, 11.

<sup>202</sup> Alejandro Moreno, Matthew Brady, and Kira Ribar, "Real Change for Cuba? How Citizens View Their Country's Future," Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/RealChangeForCuba.pdf> (Accessed April 25, 2018), 3.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

Overall, the Freedom House report concludes that Cuba “ha[d] yet to undergo a transformation” in the run-up to the Sixth Party Congress and that “the switch from Fidel to Raúl Castro ... meant little for ordinary Cubans other than a new face at the podium.”<sup>210</sup> This criticism is particularly notable given Obama’s emphasis on improving conditions and opportunities for all Cubans.<sup>211</sup>

IRI released its next Cuban Public Opinion Survey on April 14, 2011 – less than a week before the start of the Sixth Congress.<sup>212</sup> 18.4 percent of respondents expressed that “things in Cuba” were going well or very well.<sup>213</sup> 35 percent indicated that things were going so-so.<sup>214</sup> 45.4 percent indicated that things were going badly or very badly. While these numbers represent a slight improvement relative to the average of the surveys from 2008 and 2009, the difference can be accounted for by the surveys’ margins of error. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that responses to this question did not shift in any significant way.

The majority of respondents – 60.7 percent – again indicated that low salaries and a high cost of living were Cuba’s biggest problem. 13.7 percent expressed a belief that the Cuban government would “succeed in solving Cuba’s biggest problem in the next few years,” regardless of the problem itself.<sup>215</sup> Thus, skepticism regarding the Cuban government’s ability to effect substantial change remained high.

The 2011 survey paints a relatively pessimistic picture of Castro’s reform process. Only 2.4 percent of respondents indicated that their “family’s economic situation” had improved over the previous two years.<sup>216</sup> 44.1 percent expressed that the situation had deteriorated, and 52.7 percent indicated that it had not changed. Both Obama and Castro had earlier noted that substantial changes to Cuba’s long-held economic model would “not happen overnight.”<sup>217</sup> The 2011 survey affirms that prediction – and its practical consequences.

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<sup>210</sup> Moreno, Brady, and Ribar, “Real Change for Cuba,” 33.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> International Republican Institute, “Cuban Public Opinion Survey,” April 14, 2011, <http://www.iri.org/resource/iri-releases-survey-cuban-public-opinion-1> (Accessed April 25, 2018). This survey has a margin of error of plus or minus five percent.

<sup>213</sup> 2011 Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Press Conference by The President in Trinidad And Tobago, 4/19/2009.”

The survey also affirms Sweig's claim that "hope for greater reforms" built on itself over time.<sup>218</sup> 90.7 percent of respondents indicated that they would vote in favor of a "change from the current economic system to a market economy" featuring more substantial "economic freedoms."<sup>219</sup> 78.2 percent of respondents expressed that they would vote in favor of a "change from the current political system to a democratic" one featuring "multi-party elections, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression."<sup>220</sup> These results thus demonstrate high support for accelerated political and market-based reforms.

The Sixth Party Congress occurred in April of 2011. The event marked a crucial development in Castro's reform processes. As noted, the calling of the Congress – a rare occurrence within Cuba – demonstrated Castro's awareness of the gravity of Cuba's economic situation. Indeed, despite the fact that "other issues in Cuban public life deserved attention," Castro "determined that serious economic challenges required a focused and undivided attention" and thus "limited [the Congress's] agenda to a discussion of economic topics."<sup>221</sup> The Congress thus illustrates that Castro took the need for profound reforms within the Cuban system seriously.

The Congress also had meaningful political implications.<sup>222</sup> As Domínguez explains, "It was an opportunity for the generation of the party's founding leaders ... to assent publicly to a new path for the future of the Cuban economy."<sup>223</sup> Obama later discussed this notion, pointing out, "My impression ... is that Raúl recognizes that any substantial change to [Cuba's] economic system ... if not their full political system ... requires him to do the downfield blocking. If a younger generation tries to pull this off without the revolutionary credentials, there will be too much pushback."<sup>224</sup> In other words, the Congress would serve as the ultimate expression of Castro's personal willingness to shift Cuba's revolutionary trajectory, an official stamp of approval on the profound changes emerging within Cuba.

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<sup>218</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 216.

<sup>219</sup> 2011 Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> Domínguez et al., *Cuban Economic and Social Development*, 1.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> Quoted in Anderson, "A New Cuba."

The participatory process leading up to the Congress was also significant. Sweig notes that “in the planning for the Sixth Party Congress, Castro and others promoted a far more open form of discourse and a much greater exchange of ideas” than was expected in Cuba.<sup>225</sup> She and Bustamante explain, “the [Cuban] government convened an unprecedented series of assemblies ... to hear citizens’ grievances and proposals for change and to discuss Castro’s agenda.”<sup>226</sup> This discourse was in many ways restricted, however. Discussion was limited “within broadly ‘socialist’ conceptual parameters,” for example, and no steps were made toward more lasting political reform.<sup>227</sup> Nonetheless, the process “allowed for widespread and often contentious public debate” – a notable development within Cuba’s closed political system.<sup>228</sup> In this regard, the pre-Congress political discourse reflects the broader nature of Castro’s reform process – historic and noteworthy, yes, but also inherently limited.

On April 16, 2011, Castro delivered the Congress’s Central Report establishing the goals and defining features of relevant Cuban reforms. Castro argued that the Congress’s “linamientos” – or “guidelines” – would “update [Cuba’s] economic and social model” to protect not only “the continuity and irreversibility of socialism,” but also Cuban “economic development” and “living standard[s].”<sup>229</sup> Put another way, the Congress would align Cuban socialism with the country’s economic realities. It would do so by creating a “decentralized system where planning will prevail,” but where “current market trends” would not be ignored.<sup>230</sup> Thus, Castro did not stress reform for reform’s sake, but to ensure the longevity of the Cuban socialist system.

With that said, Castro explicitly emphasized the need for lasting reforms. Alluding to the fleeting nature of earlier Cuban reforms, he stated that “whatever we approve in this Congress cannot suffer the same fate as ... previous agreements, most of them forgotten and unfulfilled.”<sup>231</sup> He emphasized the need to implement, not just discuss, reforms, arguing, “It is not enough to issue a good

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<sup>225</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 223.

<sup>226</sup> Julia E. Sweig and Michael J. Bustamante, “Cuba After Communism: The Economic Reforms That Are Transforming the Island,” *Foreign Affairs* 92 no. 4 (2013): 110.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> Raúl Castro Ruz, “Central Report to the 6th Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba,”

<http://en.cubadebate.cu/opinions/2011/04/16/central-report-6th-congress-communist-party-cuba/> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

regulation .... Let's not forget that the worst law is that which is not enforced or respected."<sup>232</sup> As such, he was attentive to considerations that had previously prevented more substantive reforms within Cuba.

Castro also highlighted several topics relevant to the day-to-day well-being of the Cuban people. He discussed low wages, the “‘reversed pyramid’ phenomenon” that creates a “mismatch between salaries and the ... importance of the work performed,” – an allusion to the fact that Cuban engineers and doctors can earn higher incomes driving taxis than working in their official capacities, for example – and the challenges associated with Cuba’s dual currency system.<sup>233</sup> Noting the process of citizen participation discussed above, Castro stated that “these problems came up often in the contributions made by the citizens.”<sup>234</sup> He discussed “the growth of the non-public sector of the economy,” but specifically denounced characterizations of self-employment as a “privatization of ... social property.”<sup>235</sup> Thus, he reiterated that reform efforts were means of maintaining, not fundamentally re-organizing, the existing Cuban system.<sup>236</sup>

On the political front, Castro eagerly emphasized the Congress’s “democratic” nature. He described the run-up to the Congress as “a truly extensive democratic exercise” in which “the people freely stated their views” and “expressed their dissatisfactions and discrepancies.”<sup>237</sup> According to Castro, the process “exposed the capacity of the [Communist Party] to conduct a serious and transparent dialogue with the people on any issue, regardless of how sensitive it might be.”<sup>238</sup> This analysis is dishonest, however, given that – as Castro himself acknowledged – “some opinions were not included .... because they openly contradicted the essence of socialism.”<sup>239</sup>

In conclusion, the Sixth Party Congress was significant in two major ways. It witnessed Castro doubling down on support for lasting and widespread reform within Cuba’s economic model. On the other hand, it witnessed Castro denying that his reforms were an effort to fundamentally alter

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<sup>232</sup> Castro, “Central Report to the 6th Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba.”

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

the wider Cuban system. On the contrary, he touted the reforms as effective mechanisms for guaranteeing the well-being of the Cuban system moving forward. For that reason, it is difficult to contend that the Obama administration could interpret the Congress as a straightforward testament to the depth of reform within Cuba.

Soon after the Sixth Party Congress, Freedom House released another report to gauge Cubans' "perceptions and experience of change" and "expectations for the future."<sup>240</sup> This report, based on personal interviews with nearly 200 Cuban citizens, strikes a much more optimistic tone than Freedom House's pre-Congress assessment. It finds that "79 percent of respondents ... noticed changes in the country over the last six months, particularly the higher number of *cuentapropistas* (self-employed people)."<sup>241</sup> Further, it finds that 63 percent of Cubans "have a favorable view of the reforms" and that "there is a growing sense of optimism," with 41 percent of respondents indicating that "the country is making progress."<sup>242</sup> As such, the report indicates that the Sixth Party Congress effectively inspired optimism in many Cubans.

With that said, not all of the report's results are so sanguine. The report hints at the substantial economic barriers preventing many Cubans from equal opportunities at self-employment. One respondent explained, "I would like to be a *cuentapropista* [self-employed], but the problem is that I don't have any money to start with."<sup>243</sup> The report thus sheds light on novel challenges within Cuba's economic reform process.

The Freedom House report also indicates a desire for more substantial political reform within Cuba. It contends that "a growing proportion of Cubans want civil liberties," particularly "increased freedom of expression."<sup>244</sup> As such, while the report paints a generally positive picture of the Sixth Party Congress and its implications for reform within Cuba, it identifies significant limitations regarding Cuba's political system.

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<sup>240</sup> Alejandro Moreno and Daniel Calingaert, "Change Comes to Cuba: Citizens' Views on Reform after the Sixth Party Congress," Freedom House [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline\\_images/Change%20Comes%20to%20Cuba.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Change%20Comes%20to%20Cuba.pdf) (Accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>243</sup> Quoted in Moreno and Calingaert, "Change Comes to Cuba," 4.

<sup>244</sup> Moreno and Calingaert, "Change Comes to Cuba," 4.

Several months later, Obama expressed his view that the Cuban government had not done enough to warrant a change in the US-Cuba relationship. In a September 28, 2011 interview, Obama reiterated that he would “always be prepared to change our Cuba policy if and when we start seeing a serious intention on the part of the Cuban government to provide liberty for its people.”<sup>245</sup> Despite the measures taken leading up to and during the Sixth Party Congress – and increased optimism within the Cuban population regarding prospects for the future – Obama sharply criticized the Cuban government’s progress: “What we haven’t seen is the kind of genuine spirit of transformation inside of Cuba that would justify us eliminating the embargo.”<sup>246</sup>

Obama also highlighted what he saw as the fundamental interconnection between economic and political reform within Cuba. He noted, “It’s very hard to separate liberty from some economic reforms. If people have no way to eat other than through the government, then the government ends up having very strict control over them, and they can be pushed in all sorts of ways for expressing their ... opinions.”<sup>247</sup> Surprisingly, Obama continued, “There is a basic ... recognition of human rights that includes [the] right to work, to change jobs, to get an education, to start a business .... Right now, we haven’t seen any of that [in Cuba].”<sup>248</sup>

It is true that Cuba’s reforms were fundamentally limited in scope. To assert that there had been no movement in Cubans’ ability “to work, to change jobs, ... to start a business,” is not an accurate assessment of the select reforms that had been implemented, however. Further, it is difficult to claim that the Cuban system does not respect the right “to get an education.” Indeed, as Domínguez explains, the Cuban revolution was “built on ... education,” and “social policy has been and remains a bright jewel of the Cuban experience.”<sup>249</sup>

IRI released its next Cuban Public Opinion Survey on November 1, 2011. The survey was the first since the Sixth Party Congress.<sup>250</sup> 31.9 percent of respondents indicated that “things in Cuba” were

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<sup>245</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President in an ‘Open for Questions’ Roundtable.”

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Domínguez et al., *Social Policies and Decentralization in Cuba*, 1.

<sup>250</sup> International Republican Institute, “Cuban Public Opinion Survey,” November 21, 2011, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2011%20November%2021%20Survey%20of%20Cuban%20Public%20Opinion,%20June%2030-July%2013,%202011%20--%20English%20version.pdf> (Accessed April 29, 2018). This survey has a margin of error of plus or minus four percent.

going well or very well – an increase of 13.5 percentage points relative to the results published less than a year earlier (the combined margin of error of the two surveys is plus or minus nine percent).<sup>251</sup> 24.1 percent indicated that things were going so-so, while 42.3 percent indicated that things were going badly or very badly. Consistent with previous surveys, the majority – 60.7 percent of respondents – indicated that low salaries and a high cost of living were Cuba’s biggest challenge.

Regarding the effect of already-implemented reforms, 18.2 percent of respondents indicated that their “family’s economic situation” had improved since the previous year.<sup>252</sup> 18 percent said the economic situation had deteriorated, and 61.7 percent said it had stayed the same. Thus, while the survey reveals a substantial improvement relative to the previous IRI survey, it is difficult to claim that this represents a fundamentally new chapter in Cuban economic life – 79.7 of respondents were no better off, or even worse off, despite the Cuban government’s reform initiatives.

Notably, the survey specifically probed Cuban opinion regarding Castro’s reform process. When asked if “actual reforms” were occurring following “discussion on the part of Cuba’s leaders,” 26.9 percent of respondents indicated that reforms were indeed occurring.<sup>253</sup> 52.6 indicated that they were not occurring, and 21.5% did not know or did not answer. Among those that did see reform occurring, the largest share – 31.2 percent, indicated that “licenses for business” was the reform they found most beneficial.<sup>254</sup> 28.6 percent indicated that “economic opening” more broadly was the most beneficial reform.<sup>255</sup>

Regarding attitudes toward additional reform, 88.5 percent of respondents expressed that they would “vote to change from the current system to a market economy.”<sup>256</sup> 75.5 percent of respondents indicated that they would “vote to change from the current political system to a democratic system.”<sup>257</sup> Lastly, regarding the interconnection between political and economic reform, the majority – 59.2 percent of respondents – indicated that they did not “believe that substantial

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<sup>251</sup> 2011 Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

economic progress in Cuba is possible without changes to the political system.”<sup>258</sup> Thus, while reforms appeared to have had some effect in bolstering Cubans’ well-being and expectations for the future, a substantial appetite for further reform persisted.

Shortly after the release of the November 2011 survey, Ben Rhodes and Dan Restrepo hosted a press conference ahead of the 2012 Summit of the Americas. For the first time, a member of the Obama administration publicly acknowledged the reform processes underway in Cuba. Asked about the possibility of “Cuba participat[ing] in the Summit of the Americas” in the future, Restrepo responded, “The economic changes that you’ve seen in Cuba today – a lot depends on the implementation of those. They create the possibility of greater economic independence for the Cuban people from Cuban authorities. If that comes to pass, that would be a good thing. But fundamentally today, Cuban authorities continue to deny the Cuban people their universal rights.”<sup>259</sup>

Restrepo’s answer demonstrates a level of nuance not evident in Obama’s earlier statements regarding the need for reform within Cuba. Restrepo called attention to the reforms’ shortcomings – most notably a continued lack of political reform – but acknowledged that reforms had indeed been initiated. Of course, this nuance is not surprising given that Restrepo was a Latin America policy specialist and “Cuba was not so urgent or acute that it demanded” the president’s constant attention.<sup>260</sup> Nonetheless, Restrepo’s response is worth highlighting given that it demonstrates a high-level administration official accurately noting the characteristics of Cuba’s reform processes.

IRI published its next Cuban Public Opinion Survey on June 5, 2012.<sup>261</sup> 24 percent of respondents indicated that “things in Cuba” were going well or very well. 37 percent indicated that things were going so-so, and 39 percent indicated that things were going badly or very badly. These results suggest a degree of stagnation in the effects of Cuba’s reform processes. The majority – 51 percent

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<sup>258</sup> 2011 Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

<sup>259</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Press Briefing by Ben Rhodes and Dan Restrepo to Preview the President’s Trip to the Summit of the Americas,” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/11/press-briefing-ben-rhodes-and-dan-restrepo-preview-presidents-trip-summi> (Accessed April 29, 2018).

<sup>260</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 372.

<sup>261</sup> International Republican Institute, “Cuban Public Opinion Survey,” June 5, 2012, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2012%20June%205%20Survey%20of%20Cuban%20Public%20Opinion%2C%20February%2029-March%2014%2C%202012%20--%20English%20version.pdf> (Accessed April 29, 2018). This survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

of respondents – again indicated that low salaries and a high cost of living were Cuba’s biggest problem.

The survey found relatively constant sentiment regarding the capacity of the Cuban government. 19 percent of respondents indicated their belief that the Cuban government would “succeed in solving Cuba’s biggest problem in the next few years,” regardless of what they thought that problem was.<sup>262</sup> 70 percent indicated that it would not, and 12 percent did not know or did not answer. Thus, the survey does not indicate a particularly substantial level of optimism about the Cuban government.

23 percent of respondents indicated that their “family’s economic situation” had improved over the past year.<sup>263</sup> 17 percent of respondents expressed that the economic situation had deteriorated, and 57 percent indicated that it had not changed. When IRI asked this question in its November 2009 Cuban Public Opinion Survey, only 5.6 percent of respondents indicated that their economic situation had improved, whereas 40.5 percent indicated that the situation had deteriorated. Thus, while the share of respondents who experienced bolstered economic circumstances remained limited, it was significantly higher than the share before the initiation of Castro’s reform processes.

14 percent of respondents indicated that they had “directly benefitted” from the reforms that Castro had initiated over the past several years – another indication of the reforms’ limited scope.<sup>264</sup> 85 percent expressed that they had not personally benefitted. Of the group that did benefit, the majority – 83 percent – named “licenses for businesses” as the reform from which they had benefitted.<sup>265</sup>

Regarding prospects for future reform, 55 percent of respondents indicated that “substantial economic progress in Cuba” would not be possible without “changes to the political system.”<sup>266</sup> 31 percent indicated that it would be possible, and 14 percent did not know or did not answer. 80 percent of respondents indicated that they would vote “to change from the current system to a market economy” with bolstered individual economic freedoms. This response indicates a small

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<sup>262</sup> 2012 Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

drop from 89 percent and 91 percent support for such a change in IRI's previous two surveys, even when margins of error are taken into consideration.

Regarding political reform, 69 percent of respondents indicated that they would vote in favor of a “change from the current political system to a democratic system” with more substantial individual liberties.<sup>267</sup> Again, it is necessary to consider why some individuals might choose not to answer such a question. For example, in the 2012 IRI survey, 40 percent of respondents estimated that zero out of ten Cubans “would express their dissent publicly” if they “had an opinion different from the government’s.”<sup>268</sup> Only 8 percent of respondents indicated that more than five out of ten Cubans would publicly express a dissenting view.

IRI released another Cuban Public Opinion Survey on May 23, 2013 – just weeks before the United States and Cuba began clandestine negotiations in Canada.<sup>269</sup> While the survey’s questions diverge slightly from those in prior surveys, they nonetheless suggest important takeaways regarding conditions within Cuba. 46 percent of respondents expressed that, “in general, the quality of life in Cuba” was good or very good.<sup>270</sup> Conversely, 54 percent of respondents indicated that quality of life in Cuba was bad or very bad.<sup>271</sup> 52 percent of respondents indicated that “the economic situation of [their] family” was good or very good, while 48 percent indicated that it was bad or very bad.<sup>272</sup>

Reflecting over the preceding year, 23 percent of respondents indicated that “the economic situation of [their] family” had improved.<sup>273</sup> 10 percent indicated that the situation had deteriorated, and 66 percent indicated that the situation had not changed. This result again illuminates that economic reform within Cuba, though notable in a historical perspective, had failed to deliver benefits to the bulk of Cuban citizens. Looking forward, 45 percent of respondents indicated that they expected “the economic situation of [their] family to improve over the next year.”<sup>274</sup> 10 percent indicated an

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<sup>267</sup> 2012 Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> International Republican Institute, “Cuban Public Opinion Survey,” March 23, 2013, <http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2013%20May%2024%20Survey%20of%20Cuban%20Public%20Opinion,%20January%2020-February%2020,%202013%20--%20English%20version.pdf> (Accessed April 29, 2013). This survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.7 percent.

<sup>270</sup> 2013 Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

expectation that the situation would deteriorate, and 35 percent indicated an expectation that the situation would remain constant. 10 percent indicated that they did not know.

The survey also explicitly examined experiences related to Castro's reform processes. A large majority – 79 percent of respondents – indicated that “the reforms undertaken by the Cuban government over the [preceding] six years” were “important” or “very important.”<sup>275</sup> 11 percent indicated that the reforms were of “little importance,” while 6 percent indicated that the reforms were “not important at all.”<sup>276</sup> 34 percent of respondents indicated that they had themselves benefitted from “the recently enacted reforms.”<sup>277</sup> Of that 34 percent, a significant majority – 64 percent – listed “licenses for businesses” as the reform from which they had benefitted.<sup>278</sup>

This survey was the last published before the Obama administration began negotiations with the Cuban government. Its results, together with the above-described White House statements, indicate that the Obama administration entered negotiations aware that Castro had initiated important reform processes within Cuba, but unimpressed with those processes' range and effects.

This mixed assessment is unsurprising. As Domínguez et al. noted in 2012, “not all signs pointed in the direction of useful change.”<sup>279</sup> Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López noted that “while ... the Cuban government had implemented numerous positive measures, the road ahead was long and winding.”<sup>280</sup> Domínguez et al. specifically asserted that “prospects for self-employment as a means to create non-state activities are quite limited,” a particularly relevant criticism given that Cubans repeatedly emphasized the importance of the non-government sector in their lives.<sup>281</sup> Moreover, self-employment is an obvious means of empowering individual citizens – an explicit goal of Obama's policy toward Cuba. Thus, while Castro did embark on important reforms during this period, their scope was limited.

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<sup>275</sup> 2013 Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Domínguez et al., *Cuban Economic and Social Development*, 12.

<sup>280</sup> Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López, *Cuba Under Raúl Castro*, 25.

<sup>281</sup> Domínguez et al., *Cuban Economic and Social Development*, 12.

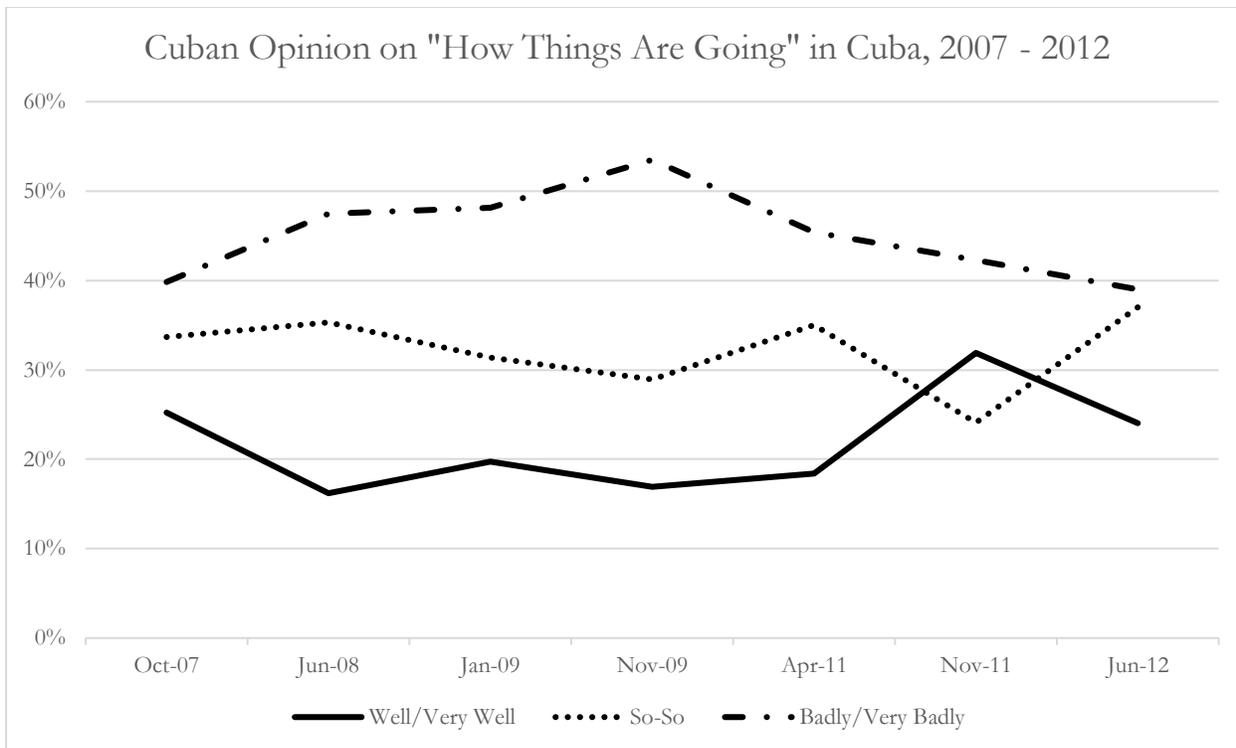


Figure 5. Source: International Republican Institute Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

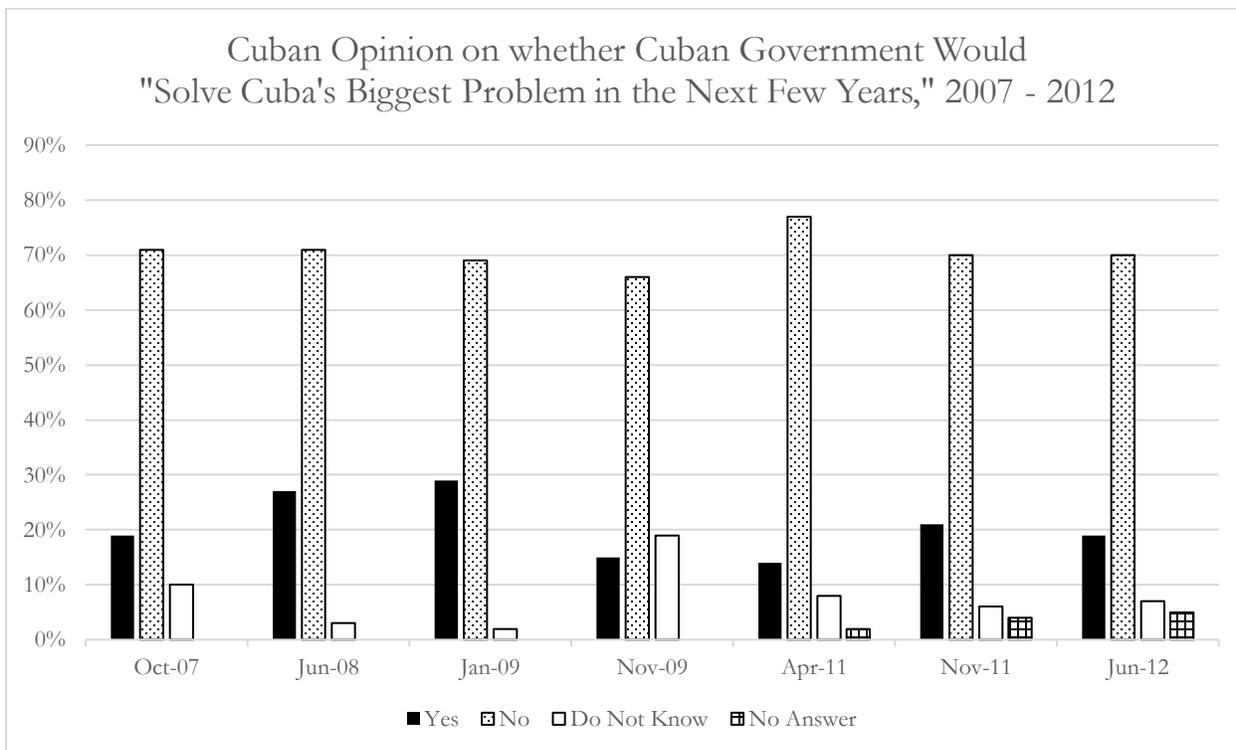


Figure 6. Source: International Republican Institute Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

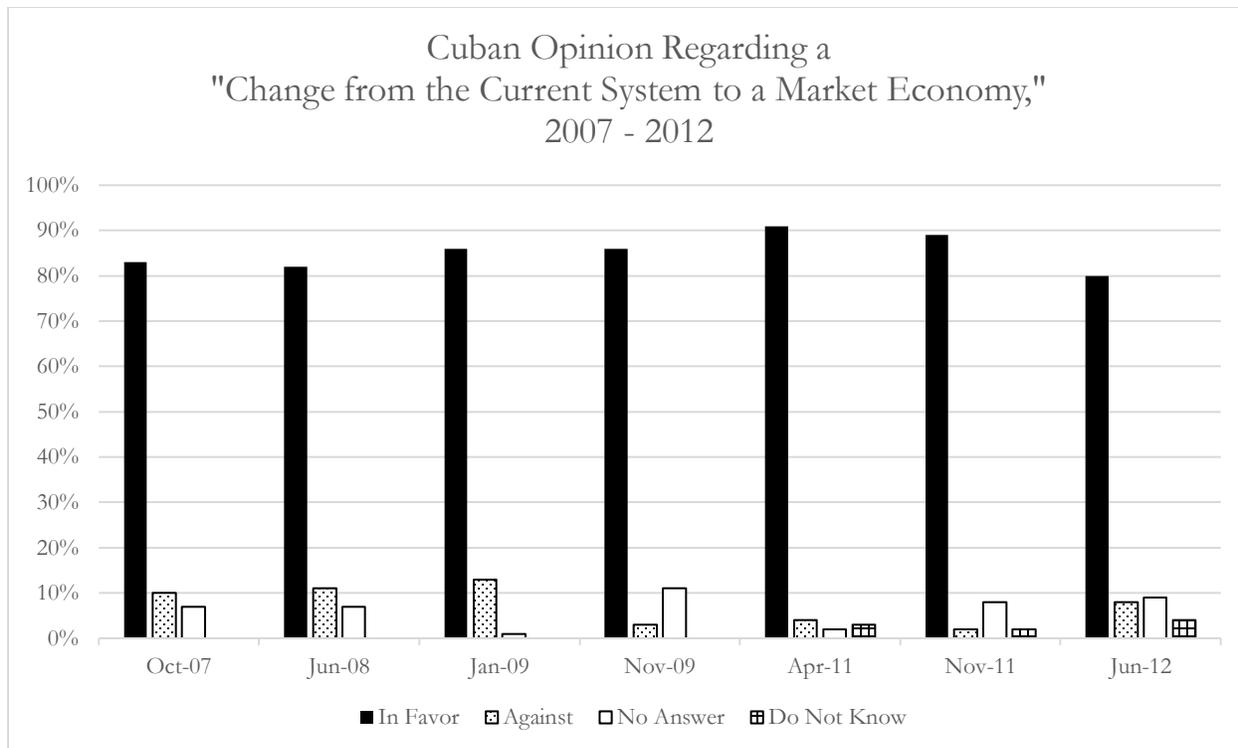


Figure 7. Source: International Republican Institute Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

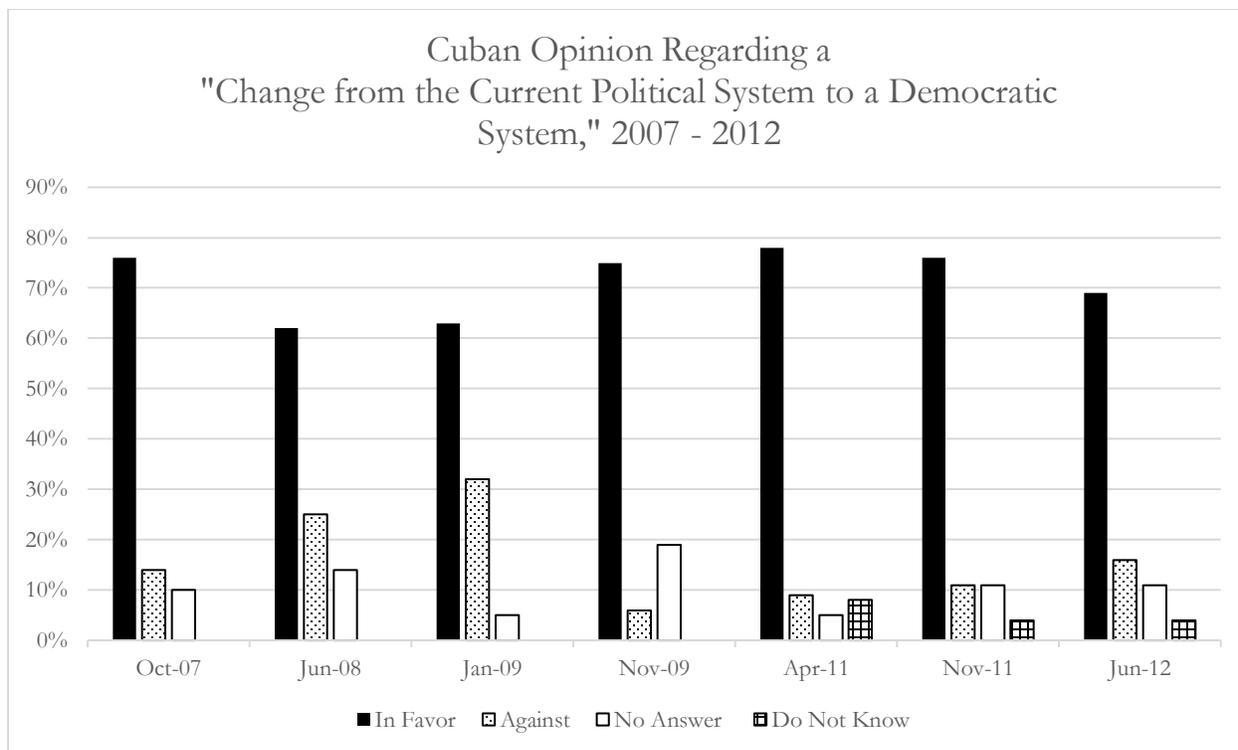


Figure 8. Source: International Republican Institute Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

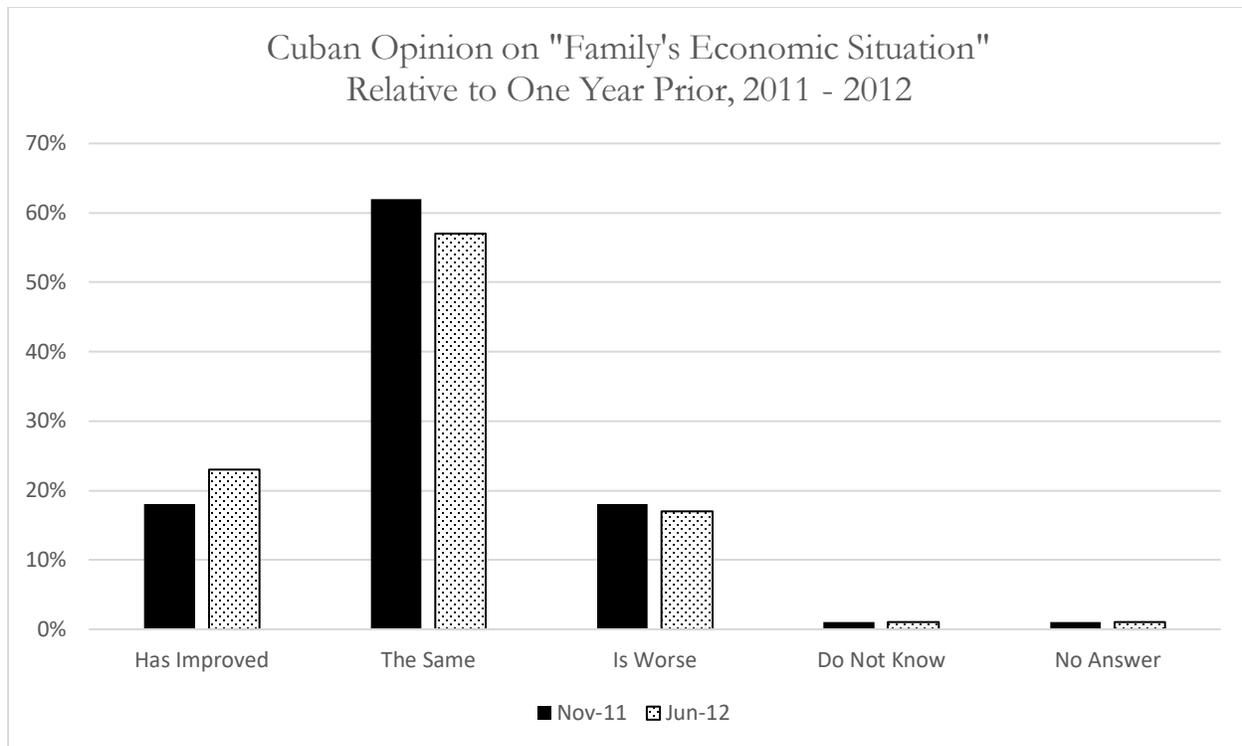


Figure 9. Source: International Republican Institute Cuban Public Opinion Survey.

## Bilateral Trust

As noted previously, Obama expressed a willingness to reform the US-Cuba relationship even before securing the presidency in 2008. Then, once in the White House, he moved quickly to loosen his predecessor's stringent policies toward Cuba, particularly as they related to rights for Cuban-Americans. In addition, Obama authorized more substantial activity on the island by US telecommunications companies.<sup>282</sup> He argued that these measures would help "decrease dependency of the Cuban people on the Castro regime and ... promote contacts between Cuban-Americans and their relatives."<sup>283</sup> These measures would also provide significant economic benefits to the Cuban government, however.<sup>284</sup> Increased travel to the island would bolster tourism revenue, and the Cuban government could tax a more substantial flow of remittances from the United States.<sup>285</sup>

<sup>282</sup> "US Office of the Press Secretary, "Memorandum: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in Cuba"; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 369.

<sup>283</sup> "US Office of the Press Secretary, "Memorandum: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in Cuba."

<sup>284</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 412.

<sup>285</sup> Anderson, "A New Cuba."

Obama's early moves on Cuba did not cease with the loosening of these regulations. The Obama administration also ordered the shutdown of a "streaming electronic news billboard" located at the US Interests Section in Havana, something that had long drawn the ire of the Cuban government.<sup>286</sup> Further, the administration "moved to restore the cultural and academic linkages that the Bush administration worked so assiduously to sever."<sup>287</sup> Though relatively small-scale, these moves demonstrated a practical willingness to establish a new approach to bilateral relations. The moves were also symbolically significant: The billboard at the Interests Section could plainly be interpreted as a mechanism to undermine the Cuban government, and the cessation of cultural linkages could be understood as an institutionalized lack of respect for Cuban culture. By targeting those specific programs, Obama communicated a new, more cooperative attitude toward US-Cuba relations.

These early moves are also striking in that they demonstrate an act of "unilateral accommodation."<sup>288</sup> As defined by Kupchan, unilateral accommodation arises when "one party makes an initial concession to the other as an opening gesture of good will."<sup>289</sup> By loosening the regulations and norms shaping the US government's approach to Cuba, Obama thus signaled his good will toward Havana. Obama himself noted as much, arguing, "The steps we took ... were constructive in sending a signal that we'd like to see a transformation [of Cuba policy]."<sup>290</sup> Regarding expectations for the future, he noted, "We're going to explore and see if we can make some further steps."<sup>291</sup> In response, he continued, "there are some things the Cuban government could do."<sup>292</sup> Thus, it is clear that Obama sought reciprocity – the emergence of a process of mutual accommodation – in his dealings with Cuba.<sup>293</sup>

Obama's moves did seem to resonate with the Cuban government, if only slightly. The Cuban Foreign Ministry agreed to "resume midlevel diplomatic contacts with the Interests Section" and recommence "bilateral consultations on migration" that had been halted by the Bush administration.<sup>294</sup> In September of 2009, Dagoberto Rodríguez, Cuba's deputy foreign minister, told

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<sup>286</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 370.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 35; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 410.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, "Press Conference by The President in Trinidad And Tobago, 4/19/2009."

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 35; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 413.

<sup>294</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 370

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Bisa Williams that the “unprecedented access” she received on her official trip to Cuba reflected a “willingness to move forward in [the US-Cuba] relationship,” though the continuity of that willingness would require additional “confidence building.”<sup>295</sup> Thus, Obama’s early policy moves on Cuba were effective in signaling a desire to play ball – and the Cuban government indicated a willingness to play along.

With that said, further “rounds of mutual accommodation” between the United States and Cuba did not arise during the earliest stages of the Obama presidency.<sup>296</sup> This fact likely reflects Obama’s interpretation of what he had given and what he had received. According to LeoGrande and Kornbluh, “Obama regarded lifting restrictions on Cuban-American travel as a major concession to Havana .... He wanted to see some significant Cuban response before doing more.”<sup>297</sup> Obama even turned to a back channel – Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos – to urge Castro to “take steps” so that additional cooperation between the two nations could arise.<sup>298</sup>

Cuban officials believed Obama was demanding too much. An important reason for their hesitation was a lack of trust in Obama’s motives in altering Cuban-American travel and remittance policy to begin with. Indeed, “ending restrictions on Cuban-Americans was seen as a campaign debt he owed to Miami, not as a signal of goodwill toward Havana.”<sup>299</sup> That suspicion is not particularly difficult to understand, especially given the way the Obama administration marketed those policy moves – moves that would “promote contacts between Cuban-Americans and their relatives.”<sup>300</sup> Still, it is reasonable to expect that Cuba might have taken into consideration the political dimensions of Cuba policy within the United States. Cuba’s suspicion thus betrays a wider truth in US-Cuba relations. The Cuban government has long “discount[ed] US gestures that serve US interests.”<sup>301</sup> Trust had never come easily between the two countries, and that lack of trust was impeding additional cooperative gestures.

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<sup>295</sup> Quoted in LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 370-1.

<sup>296</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 35.

<sup>297</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 373.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>300</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Memorandum: Promoting Democracy and Human Rights in Cuba.”

<sup>301</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 411.

The potential establishment of trust was further complicated by decisions within the US government that contradicted Obama's rhetorical willingness to reform relations with Cuba.<sup>302</sup> For example, the Cuban government looked upon a US preoccupation with bolstering internet access on the island with great suspicion. Specifically, they saw "Washington's plans to create secure telecommunications networks among dissidents" and support for Cuban bloggers, efforts that began under President George W. Bush but continued under Obama, as "the latest variation in Washington's fifty-year project to destabilize the [Cuban] government."<sup>303</sup> Castro thus came to believe that Obama's earlier rhetoric had been a "huge propaganda campaign staged to confuse the world."<sup>304</sup>

It is not untrue that dissident networks were considered means of political destabilization during the Bush presidency. Nonetheless, as LeoGrande and Kornbluh point out, it was important to recognize "that bureaucratic momentum carries established programs forward despite changes in administrations."<sup>305</sup> In a diplomatic environment devoid of trust, such considerations are easily missed.

The 2009 arrest of Alan Gross again shuttered the limited window of cooperation that emerged early in the Obama presidency. He was arrested after "surreptitiously provid[ing] advanced satellite communications technology, laptop computers, flash drives, and cell phones ... to independent non-governmental organizations" on the island.<sup>306</sup> Though the program under which Gross worked was a legacy of the Bush administration's more stringent approach to Cuba, the Obama administration inherited a political and moral obligation to commit itself to Gross's swift liberation.<sup>307</sup> As such, "Washington insistently denied that Gross had done any wrong and declared that no further progress in US-Cuba relations could be made until he was released."<sup>308</sup>

When it looked like a diplomatic resolution was possible shortly thereafter, political considerations forced the Obama administration's hand – and thus the continuation of Gross's disruptive detention. After the US and Cuban governments agreed to free Gross "in exchange for

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<sup>302</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 415.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>304</sup> Quoted in LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 375.

<sup>305</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 415.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 376-7.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*

restructuring” the USAID program under which Gross had operated, Senator Robert Menendez, a Democratic Cuban-American hardliner, “called the White House demanding that the Cuba program be left intact.”<sup>309</sup> Fearing the political consequences of defying a key Democratic senator, Obama scrapped the plan.<sup>310</sup> This series of events would have lasting repercussions, as it caused the Cuban government to “conclud[e] that the Obama administration’s word could not be trusted.”<sup>311</sup> Thus, the lack of trust between the two countries did not only represent historical considerations. At a moment in which the United States and Cuba might have continued to signal a willingness to cooperate, they instead moved toward a highly adversarial showdown. This development thus sheds light on the continued relevance of domestic political challenges in shaping the Obama administration’s approach to Cuba.

The slowdown in bilateral momentum caused by Gross’s detention did not prevent other governments from advancing diplomatic pursuits with the Cuban government, however. On the contrary, the period bore witness to a crucial diplomatic development related to Cuba. In partnership with the Spanish government, Cardinal Jaime Ortega of Havana began negotiations with the Cuban government regarding the status of political prisoners on the island.<sup>312</sup> Before long, Ortega, Castro, and Spanish Foreign Minister Moratinos struck a deal. Soon thereafter, the Cuban government freed 127 political prisoners, “including almost everyone classified by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience.”<sup>313</sup>

Cardinal Ortega’s prisoner deal is notable for two primary reasons. First, it allowed the Vatican to establish itself as a serious diplomatic partner capable of effecting significant movement within Cuba. As LeoGrande and Kornbluh note, quoting Ortega in part, “the [Cuban] government had ‘recognized the role of the Church as an interlocutor’ ... in a way that it never had before.”<sup>314</sup> Ortega’s diplomacy was particularly important given that it dealt with prisoners – the precise issue that had thrown a wrench into the trust-building process.<sup>315</sup> As such, the move effectively set the stage for future Vatican participation in US-Cuba diplomacy.

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<sup>309</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 379.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 382; Sweig, *Cuba*, 290.

Ortega's deal also stands out in that the Cuban government specifically agreed to the prisoner release to rebuild momentum in bilateral cooperation.<sup>316</sup> Despite the fact that "the United States played no role in the discussions that led to the prisoner release, Spanish diplomats and Cardinal Ortega kept Washington well-briefed" on their progress.<sup>317</sup> Moreover, "Cuban officials felt that the ... prisoner release was a major concession, and they expected some reciprocal action."<sup>318</sup> As such, the Cuban government's attitude closely matched Obama's after the updating of Cuban-American travel and remittance regulations: There was an expectation of mutual accommodation.<sup>319</sup>

In a testament to Ortega's eagerness to bolster the US-Cuba relationship, the Cardinal "traveled quietly to Washington to meet with administration officials and members of Congress" and urge them to pursue additional cooperation with the Cuban government.<sup>320</sup> Thus, Ortega demonstrated his belief that "everything should be step by step," that "the most important thing" was to continue taking "steps in the process" toward friendlier relations.<sup>321</sup> He also demonstrated the Vatican's capacity as an intermediary between the two governments.

Nonetheless, the trading of cooperative signals again burned out rapidly. Despite attempts by back channels to reignite the spark of cooperation and trust building, the United States and Cuba remained unable to reach common terms regarding appropriate next steps in reconstructing a diplomatic relationship.<sup>322</sup> From the US perspective, that Gross remained in Cuban custody made serious momentum unattainable. From the Cuban perspective, the burden of action rested with the United States, especially given that Obama had "fail[ed] to respond to the Cuban government's dialogue with the Catholic Church and the release of more than one hundred political prisoners."<sup>323</sup> Moreover, in response to calls for more substantial economic and political reform within Cuba, the Cuban government expressed that it would not "negotiate its internal affairs with anyone."<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 382.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends*, 35.

<sup>320</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 382.

<sup>321</sup> Quoted in LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 382.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 384-5.

<sup>323</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 385.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

It was around this time that the Cuban government drew a limited connection between the detention of Alan Gross and that of the “Cuban Five” – a group of Cuban intelligence officers who were arrested after infiltrating Cuban-American organizations in Miami during the 1990s.<sup>325</sup> From a Cuban perspective, it was logical to point to similarities between the detention of a USAID contractor working to distribute communications technology within Cuba – an activity that can arguably be linked to US espionage efforts – and the detention of Cuban operatives spying on exile groups within the United States.<sup>326</sup> Still, the Cuban government did not explicitly link the two situations, arguing only that it would be important to see “progress on both fronts simultaneously.”<sup>327</sup> Though it would take time, that notion would eventually grow in meaningful ways.

While several years would pass before the next breakthrough in bilateral trust building, a number of small-scale advances primed that breakthrough.<sup>328</sup> For one, the two countries cooperated on a humanitarian mission following the 2010 Haitian earthquake.<sup>329</sup> They also coordinated national responses to the BP oil spill that occurred the same year.<sup>330</sup>

The Obama administration escalated its signals to the Cuban government at the start of the president’s second term. Specifically, “the Department of Justice dropped its opposition to allowing René González, a member of the Cuban Five, to serve out his probation in Cuba rather than forcing him to remain in Miami” – a move that recognized the tremendous value that the Cuban government placed on the Cuban Five’s detention.<sup>331</sup> Perhaps in direct response, “Cuba granted Alan Gross’s request to be examined by his own doctor.”<sup>332</sup> Thus, the two governments seemingly identified a means of cooperation that expressly dealt with the problem preventing more substantive diplomatic movement – the prisoner situation.

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<sup>325</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 183; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 386.

<sup>326</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 184-5; Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>327</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 385.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*

Unsurprisingly, breakthrough in trust-building also related to prisoners. That breakthrough was an artificial insemination deal crafted by Senator Patrick Leahy and foreign policy aide Tim Rieser in February of 2010 and supported by the Obama administration.<sup>333</sup> Sweig describes the deal, which discreetly allowed imprisoned Cuban Five member Gerardo Hernández to send a vial of sperm to Cuba so that his wife could be artificially inseminated, as “the first, if highly unconventional, confidence-building measure” between the two countries.<sup>334</sup> As this chapter argues, there were earlier confidence-building measures; they were simply interrupted frequently. It is true that the artificial insemination deal was perhaps the trust-building measure that led directly to bilateral negotiations, however. Indeed, shortly after the agreement was fulfilled, “secret talks commenced ... in Ottawa.”<sup>335</sup> Trust is forged in unusual ways.

In sum, the first four years of the Obama presidency largely witnessed fairly uncoordinated efforts by the US and Cuban governments to signal to each other a willingness to cooperate. Given the persistent lack of trust between the two nations, that process was impeded early and often. Even when the process shuddered with the arrest of Alan Gross, the two governments continued to prod for potentially useful gestures. The US and Cuban governments identified the sweet spot in 2013. Effective signals would relate to the foreign prisoners that each country was holding. Once identified, the exchange of sufficiently consequential signals led to the arrangement of a bilateral meeting centered on those prisoners. With time and the fostering of additional trust, the meeting would “evolve into an ambitious bid to open up Cuba’s closed system.”<sup>336</sup>

The period was also significant in that it delivered a powerful act of diplomacy on the part of Cardinal Ortega and the Vatican. As previously indicated, this precedent would prove extremely beneficial during the second term of the Obama presidency.

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<sup>333</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 292.

<sup>334</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 292; Anderson “A New Cuba.”

<sup>335</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 292.

<sup>336</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

## **The Clandestine Negotiation Period**

## Domestic Politics within the United States

Ben Rhodes and Ricardo Zúñiga, the aforementioned State Department Cuba specialist named senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs on the National Security Council during Obama's second term, met with Cuban negotiators for the first time in June of 2013. The clandestine nature of negotiations points to the persistent domestic political sensitivity of continued momentum toward US-Cuba policy change. Rhodes and Zúñiga kept their plan to engage with Cuba close to the chest, even within the National Security Council, to preserve "flexibility and political space."<sup>337</sup>

This secrecy reflected US Congressional politics more than it reflected politics within the Cuban-American community, however.<sup>338</sup> Anderson notes, "If the news of negotiations leaked to opponents of reconciliation in Congress, they could easily [have been] scuttled."<sup>339</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh add, "For the foreseeable future, any US president who contemplates changing relations with Havana will have to pay a political price, in Congress if not in Florida."<sup>340</sup> Cuba's negotiators proved helpful in this regard, "agree[ing] to reveal the talks to only a few trusted people in their own government."<sup>341</sup> Cuba's reciprocal secrecy points to the fact that engagement with the United States was a similarly tricky political issue within Cuba – and to Cuba's understanding of the domestic political context within the United States.<sup>342</sup>

The limited scope of negotiations also reflected their political sensitivity. According to Rhodes, the initial message sent to the Cuban government indicated that talks would be limited to "issues relating to counterterrorism and prisoners."<sup>343</sup> As he put it, "Who wouldn't want to talk about counterterrorism and getting Alan Gross home?"<sup>344</sup> In other words, it would be tricky for Republicans to criticize Obama solely for attempting to free a US citizen imprisoned within Cuba. These two considerations – the limited group with which information was shared and the limited

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<sup>337</sup> Quoted in Anderson, "A New Cuba."

<sup>338</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 414.

<sup>339</sup> Anderson, "A New Cuba."

<sup>340</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 414.

<sup>341</sup> Anderson, "A New Cuba"; Sweig, *Cuba*, 295.

<sup>342</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 414.

<sup>343</sup> Quoted in Anderson, "A New Cuba."

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

scope of the talks – help demonstrate that re-election by no means made Cuba a political home run for the Obama administration.

It is worth noting that not all US senators and Congress members were opposed to engagement with the Cuban government. Senator Pat Leahy – who had taken the lead on the already-discussed artificial insemination deal – in 2013 “brought a team of concerned congressmen” to press Obama on the need to continue reshaping US policy toward Cuba, unaware that bilateral negotiations were already underway.<sup>345</sup> The key takeaway is that policy toward Cuba remained a relevant, contested political issue, even during Obama’s second term.

Nonetheless, once underway, it did not take long for the scope of US-Cuba negotiations to expand. In an attempt to bolster cooperation and motivate the Cuban government to release Gross, Rhodes and Zúñiga in autumn of 2013 “put everything on the table ... normalization, diplomatic relations, regulatory changes – all the way through to elections,” and told the Cubans that “Obama would like to do as much of this as he can.”<sup>346</sup> In a private conversation with the author, Rhodes indicated that by late 2013 it was clear that the Cuban government was interested in doing something big. For that reason, the Obama administration considered investing time and energy into continued negotiations worthwhile. Rhodes also noted that previous presidents had come close to reaching agreements with Cuba only to see them break down at the last minute, however. Nothing was guaranteed.

The 2014 FIU Cuba Poll, conducted between February and May of 2014, revealed continued Cuban-American support for a new US-Cuba relationship.<sup>347</sup> 68 percent of respondents expressed that they favored the US re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba – a 10 percent increase since the last poll in 2011 (the combined margin of error of the two polls is plus or minus 10 percent).<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>346</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>347</sup> Cuban Research Institute, “2014 FIU Cuba Poll,” Florida International University, <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/2014-fiu-cuba-poll.pdf> (Accessed April 29, 2018). “The 2014 FIU Cuba Poll was conducted between February and May 2014. It was administered to a random sample of 1,000 Cuban-American residents of Miami-Dade County, age 18 and over. The sample was generated from telephone exchanges using standard random-digit-dialing procedures to ensure that each phone number has an equal chance of being chosen for the sample. Interviews were conducted with respondents who have both landline phones and cell phones. Bilingual interviewers conducted the survey in Spanish and English, depending on the respondents’ preference. The countywide margin of error is plus or minus 3.1% at the 95% confidence level.”

<sup>348</sup> 2014 FIU Cuba Poll; 2011 FIU Cuba Poll.

Thus, the Obama administration approached the announcement of intention to restore diplomatic relations with broad Cuban-American support for such an initiative (see Figures 10 and 11).

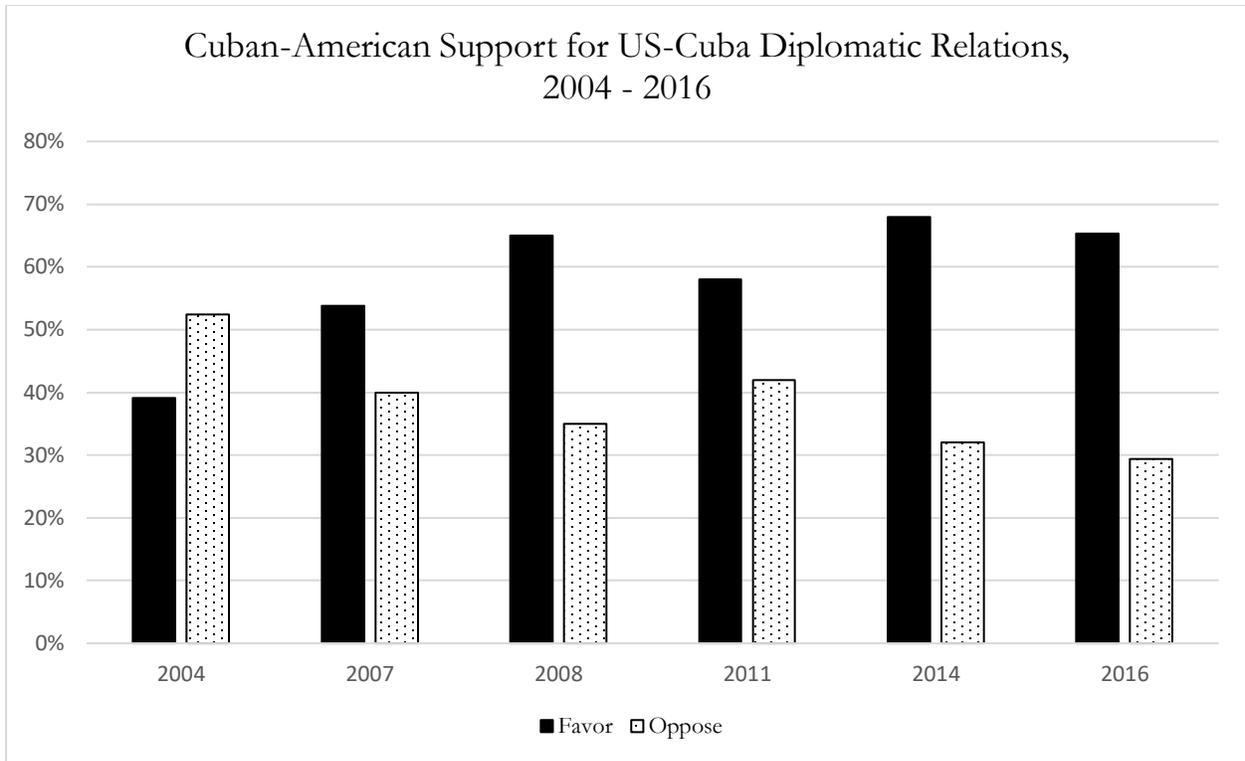


Figure 10. Source: Florida International University Cuba Poll.

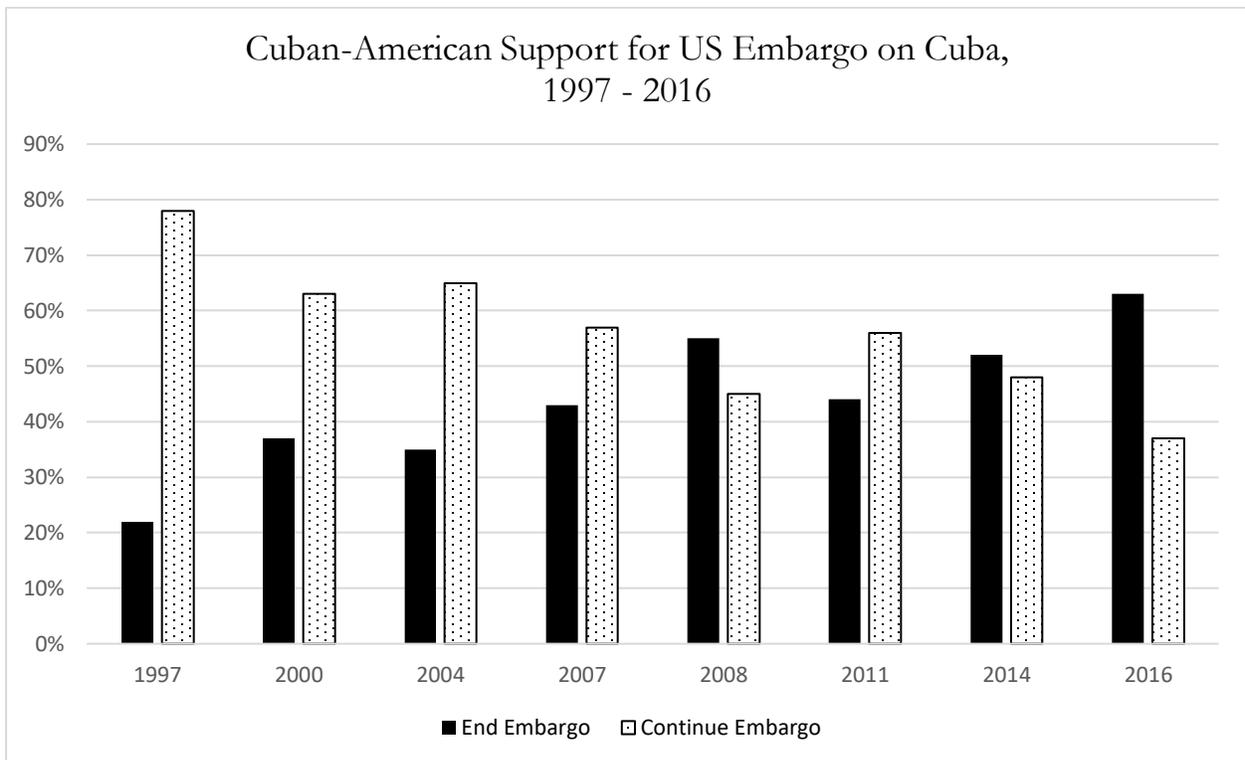


Figure 11. Source: Florida International University Cuba Poll.

## Reform Processes within Cuba

The negotiation period witnessed fewer substantial developments regarding reform within Cuba than the pre-negotiation period. Clandestine negotiations lasted only until December 17, 2014, at which point Obama and Castro announced that they had reached an agreement to begin normalizing relations. For that reason, there was not as much time for reform developments during the negotiation period as there was during the pre-negotiation period.

Nonetheless, once initiated, negotiations could have broken down at any moment and for any reason. It is therefore reasonable to presume that significant disruptions to Castro's reform processes might have shifted Obama away from a willingness to rekindle relations. Similarly, substantial movement toward liberalization within Cuba likely would have bolstered Obama's willingness to re-engage. Thus, it is worthwhile to continue considering trends in Castro's reform initiatives.

IRI did not release any Cuban Public Opinion Surveys during this period. Relevant scholarship suggests a continuation of slow but significant reform, however. As clandestine negotiations began, Sweig and Bustamante argued that "serious obstacles in [Cuba's] quest for greater economic vitality" persisted despite the "modest successes" that reform processes had delivered.<sup>349</sup> While the number of self-employed Cubans had increased "154 percent since ... liberalization ... began in October 2010," for example, fundamental limitations on the rights of cuentapropistas remained.<sup>350</sup> Indeed, though Castro's government discussed "ensuring that 50 percent of Cuba's GDP be in private hands within five years," the "181 legal categories for self-employment" were "concentrated almost exclusively in the services sector, including proprietors of independent restaurants, food stands, and bed-and-breakfasts."<sup>351</sup>

Nonetheless, Sweig and Bustamante insisted that a "lack of swiftness" in Cuba's reform process "should not be taken as a sign that the government has simply dug in its heels or [was] ignoring the political stakes."<sup>352</sup> Instead, they argued that Cuba's reform trajectory suggested that the country

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<sup>349</sup> Sweig and Bustamante, "Cuba After Communism," 103.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-4.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-3.

would “continue on [a] gradual path toward a more open, pluralistic society.”<sup>353</sup> Thus, Castro’s reform processes, though important, were not delivering any rapid, fundamental shift within the Cuban system.<sup>354</sup>

## **Bilateral Trust**

Diplomatic signals involving Alan Gross and the Cuban Five were effective in prompting the United States and Cuba to initiate clandestine bilateral negotiations at the onset of Obama’s second term. Unsurprisingly, these initial negotiations witnessed a distinct lack of trust.<sup>355</sup> This lack of trust reflected not only long-term considerations previously discussed, but also a more immediate factor – the negotiators representing the United States. Though Rhodes was one of Obama’s closest aides, he was a relatively new figure in Washington, so the Cubans lacked information on which to judge him.<sup>356</sup> Zúñiga was experienced, but not in a way that would elicit trust from the Cubans. Anderson, quoting Rhodes in part, explains that Zúñiga “had been the human-rights officer at the US Interests Section, ‘so they had a file on him ... that was a mile long.’”<sup>357</sup> Indeed, Zúñiga had been directly – and harshly – criticized by *Granma*, the Cuban government’s official newspaper, earlier in his career.<sup>358</sup> The result, in Rhodes’ own words, was that “they didn’t really trust us.”<sup>359</sup>

Still, the Cuban government soon sent an important trust-building signal. After Edward Snowden leaked National Security Administration secrets and fled the United States, the Obama administration became concerned that Snowden would find haven in Cuba – a development that would surely prevent a blossoming trust between Obama and Castro.<sup>360</sup> Rhodes expressed as much to the Cubans, and the Obama administration was pleased when Cuba did not offer Snowden asylum. Rhodes specifically notes, “With the Cubans, you’re always looking for smoke signals, and I took it as a signal that they didn’t take Snowden,” a decision that was “important for building confidence.”<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Sweig and Bustamante, “Cuba After Communism,” 103.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>355</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>359</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>360</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>361</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

Clandestine meetings thus continued. The meetings fostered more regular communication between the United States and Cuba, therefore creating opportunities for the two nations to send signals, make concessions, and forge trust. The United States proved amenable during negotiations, allowing the Cubans to repeatedly “address ‘the whole bill of goods from the Bay of Pigs on’” – in other words, to air their “historical grievances against the United States.”<sup>362</sup> Rhodes and Zúñiga were following Obama’s lead – years earlier, observers at the 2009 Summit of the Americas noted Obama’s willingness to listen patiently as leftist Latin American leaders “went on ... long rants against the United States.”<sup>363</sup> Obama commented on the intentionality of this decision, saying, “I didn’t walk out ... I let them have their say.”<sup>364</sup> In doing so, the Obama administration demonstrated an awareness that diplomatic patience was essential to the establishment of bilateral trust.

Administration officials had not been so patient in earlier instances. In 2010, then-Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela met with Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez in New York City. Like the Cuban negotiators in Canada, Rodríguez began the meeting “with a lengthy recitation of Cuba’s historical grievances against the United States.”<sup>365</sup> Valenzuela, unlike Rhodes and Zúñiga, was unwilling to entertain this recitation. He instead attempted “to shift the focus toward the future.”<sup>366</sup> The meeting ended without progress.

In accommodating the Cubans’ tendency to revisit the historical US-Cuba relationship, Rhodes and Zúñiga signaled respect for the Cubans experience and a quiet acceptance that the United States had not always been virtuous in its dealings with Cuba.<sup>367</sup> This notion reflects Bar-Siman-Tov et al.’s argument that nations must “openly address painful questions of past conflict” to establish trust and “build a foundation for normal peace relations.”<sup>368</sup>

These signals thus helped bolster the cooperative tone that the two leaders were establishing. Shortly thereafter, the Obama administration expressed a willingness to go further – as Rhodes put it, “to

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<sup>362</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba”; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 383.

<sup>363</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 383.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Goldberg, “The Road to Havana.”

<sup>368</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*, 4.

put everything on the table.”<sup>369</sup> To be clear, much work was needed before any agreement was finalized. That negotiations expanded in such a fundamental way, however, is itself evidence of the profound impact of trust building.

The next major trust development came at Nelson Mandela’s funeral in December of 2013.<sup>370</sup> Upon arrival, President Obama broke with modern presidential precedent by greeting and shaking hands with Raúl Castro. The historic nature of the gesture was immediately evident.<sup>371</sup> CNN International anchor Christiane Amanpour exclaimed, “This is a moment of reconciliation for Mandela. ... [Mandela] is a man ... who brought people together in life, and he continues to bring people together in death.”<sup>372</sup> Chief national correspondent John King similarly remarked, “This is a moment of reconciliation ... You shake hands out of respect for the moment.”<sup>373</sup> Noting the political implications of the gesture, he added, “Will President Obama get some criticism for that brief handshake? ... Yes, he will.”<sup>374</sup> King thus captured the meaningful nature of the public handshake. Its political element – the willingness to accept domestic criticism related to Cuba that it demonstrated – affirmed Obama’s practical desire to forge a new US-Cuba relationship.

The handshake was also significant in that it broached the historical solidarity between Cuba and Africa’s anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movement – and the historical division between the United States and Cuba. In 1975, the Cuban government sent hundreds of military advisors and approximately thirty-six thousand troops to support the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola in its armed struggle against “two rival movements ... both supported by the United States and [apartheid] South Africa.”<sup>375</sup> Mandela himself commented on the solidarity between Africa’s anti-apartheid movement and Cuba’s revolutionary project. In a 1991 speech in Havana, Mandela remarked, “The Cuban people hold a special place in the hearts of the people of Africa. The Cuban internationalists have made a contribution to African independence, freedom, and justice.”<sup>376</sup> Thus,

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<sup>369</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>370</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>371</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 402.

<sup>372</sup> CNN, “Obama shakes Raul Castro’s hand,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qteNMu0wziY> (Accessed April 16, 2018).

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 145.

<sup>376</sup> Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro, *How Far We Slaves Have Come! South Africa and Cuba in Today's World* (New York: Pathfinder), 20.

Rhodes notes, “Whatever you think of the Cuban government, they supported the anti-apartheid movement; they fought side-by-side with the [African National Congress]; the Castros had a relationship with Mandela.”<sup>377</sup> President Ford and President Carter had seen things differently – they considered Cuba’s involvement in Africa to be a diplomatic affront, an insurmountable blockade to friendlier relations with the United States.<sup>378</sup>

Obama’s signal thus came at a meaningful moment – the celebration of the legacy of a man deeply revered by the Cuban leadership.<sup>379</sup> Rhodes described Mandela’s funeral as “kind of a home game” for the Cubans, and Obama had again demonstrated a willingness to play ball.<sup>380</sup> The move proved impactful. According to Anderson, “At the next meeting in Ottawa, the Cubans were considerably warmer.”<sup>381</sup> Obama’s personal involvement in the anti-apartheid movement as a college student was also important. Rhodes points out that the Mandela handshake led to “the first discussion we had about history that wasn’t contentious. We ... had a whole discussion about Africa, and Angola, apartheid, and Obama’s history in the anti-apartheid movement. They had read ‘Dreams from My Father,’ and had studied his role in the disinvestment movement. They had done their homework.”<sup>382</sup> The Mandela episode thus illustrates the profoundly personal nature of the trust that the two leaders were constructing.

These interpersonal trust-building developments still fell short of enabling the United States and Cuba to commit to a bilateral agreement – a testament to the scope of the hostility that the two countries needed to overcome. Even when the Central Intelligence Agency alerted the White House to the existence of Rolando Sarraff Trujillo, a former double agent imprisoned in Cuba, thus unlocking a potential spy-for-spy swap (Cuban Five member Gerardo Hernández in exchange for Trujillo), the Cubans declined.<sup>383</sup> Later, “when the White House agreed to put full commutation of the Cuban Five’s sentences on the table as part of a package deal,” the Cubans still did not agree.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Goldberg, “The Road to Havana.”

<sup>378</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 146, 158.

<sup>379</sup> Goldberg, “The Road to Havana”; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 403.

<sup>380</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>381</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>384</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 292; Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

The intervention of Pope Francis proved pivotal in enabling the two countries to reach a sufficient level of trust to forge an agreement. Anderson notes, “The Cubans had ... been uncertain whether to proceed, and the Vatican diplomacy helped them decide.”<sup>385</sup> The Pope’s diplomatic intervention points to three considerations worth addressing. The first is the broad nature of Vatican diplomacy. The second is the Vatican’s specific interest in serving as a diplomatic intermediary between the United States and Cuba. The third is the idiosyncratic characteristics that made Pope Francis particularly well suited to establish a workable trust between Obama and Castro.

Papal engagement in diplomacy is a unique phenomenon in contemporary international affairs.<sup>386</sup> Graham contends that “the thoughtful observer cannot fail to be impressed by the fact that papal diplomacy is very much alive and modern” – a claim that resonates in the US-Cuba context.<sup>387</sup> With that said, it is not wholly surprising that the Vatican has established effective diplomatic protocols after “a millennium and more of eminence and even predominance in the affairs of Europe.”<sup>388</sup>

The Pope is a particularly adept diplomatic actor given the dual nature of his position.<sup>389</sup> He is not only “a temporal sovereign and by that title alone ... entitled to enter into diplomatic intercourse with ... nations,” but also the leader of a powerful religious organization.<sup>390</sup> The religious (as opposed to realist) roots of the Pope’s prowess in international relations are self-evident. It is not the case that “dominion over a few acres in the heart of Rome” can explain the clout that the Vatican has in interstate matters, after all.<sup>391</sup>

The Vatican’s diplomatic efforts frequently deal with the facilitation of dialogue between other nations. This role reflects the Vatican’s long reach, its “relationship with third countries and to the international community in general.”<sup>392</sup> Given this third-party tendency, Graham defines Vatican diplomacy in part as a “science and art” that “tend[s] constantly to the advancement of the interests of the Holy See” while also “promot[ing] and preserv[ing] peaceful relations between ... two

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<sup>385</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>386</sup> Robert A. Graham, S.J., *Vatican Diplomacy: A Study of Church and State on the International Plane* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 14, 392.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 158.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 338.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

powers.”<sup>393</sup> As such, the US-Cuba context closely aligned with the broader nature of Vatican diplomacy.

If Vatican diplomacy “tend[s] constantly to the advancement of the interests of the church,” it is necessary to identify the Vatican’s specific interest in bolstering trust between the United States and Cuba. The interest is relatively straightforward: advancing global peace – or, in the words of Monsignor Giovanni Montini, strengthening “the universal brotherhood of men.”<sup>394</sup> The contemporary relationship between the United States and Cuba is not one of war, but neither is it one of straightforward peace. Before Obama delivered greater stability to US-Cuban relations, for example, President George W. Bush regularly pushed the limits of peaceful relations by actively considering regime change in Cuba. Indeed, “shortly after Raúl Castro assumed the presidency,” Bush’s “State Department established a ‘war room’ to plan for the Cuban collapse.”<sup>395</sup> Thus, by facilitating cooperation between the two nations, Pope Francis could help prevent a resumption of decaying relations and diminish the risk of an eruption of hostilities.

The broad characteristics of the Vatican and its diplomatic efforts thus made Pope Francis a strong candidate to advance the trust-building process between the United States and Cuba. The idiosyncrasies of his person and papacy made him even better suited for the role. That Francis was the first Latin American pope was itself powerful, especially given Cuba’s historical attentiveness to regional solidarity.<sup>396</sup> Mannion also notes the unique papal perspective that Francis’s Latin background gave him: “He came out of a formative context . . . where abject poverty is a more pressing and daily concern,” for example.<sup>397</sup> For that reason, Pope Francis’s background made him accessible – a pope in touch with relevant regional considerations, not a detached elite unconcerned with the preoccupations underlying Cuba’s socialist system.

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<sup>393</sup> Quoted in Graham, *Vatican Diplomacy*, 10.

<sup>394</sup> Graham, *Vatican Diplomacy*, 32.

<sup>395</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 67.

<sup>396</sup> Jim Yardley and Gaia Pianigiani, “Pope Francis Is Credited with a Crucial Role in US-Cuba Agreement, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/18/world/americas/breakthrough-on-cuba-highlights-popes-role-as-diplomatic-broker.html> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>397</sup> Gerard Mannion, *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism: Evangelii Gaudium and the Papal Agenda* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 9.

Pope Francis's identity as a Jesuit was also important, as was his focus on social justice and his spiritual grooming within the context of Latin American liberation theology. Liberation theology introduced a bold re-conception of the role of the church in violent, corrupt, and unjust society.<sup>398</sup> Andrade defines liberation theology as “a discourse built around ... a preferential choice for the poor, a critique of market idolatry and structural sin, and the prescient denunciation of injustice” – critiques closely aligned with those of the Cuban revolution.<sup>399</sup> The movement thus represented a dramatic departure from the church's historical role in colonial Latin America, one in which “the church was closely allied with the military and governmental powers” and where church leaders “occupied a privileged economic position.”<sup>400</sup>

Mannion contends that Pope Francis “owe[s] a great deal to the fundamental tenants of classical liberation theology.”<sup>401</sup> He stresses the symbolic weight of the Pope's chosen name, an homage to Saint Francis of Assisi, who “sought to bring the church back to its radically transformative roots,” a name “that signifies humility, dedication to the poor, to peace, to dialogue.”<sup>402</sup>

Pope Francis' vision for the church extends beyond his name. Mannion argues that Francis has “made justice for the poor and wider questions of social justice both his own and the church's key priority.”<sup>403</sup> It is not surprising that these papal priorities would resonate with the Cuban government. Chomsky identifies social justice as one of the Cuban revolution's “fundamental goals” and notes that the Cuban government worked to eliminate “poverty and inequality” leftover from colonial dominance.<sup>404</sup> Even before Fidel Castro declared Cuba's revolutionary government to be socialist in 1961, he “believed strongly in social justice and craved to see Cuba's full potential realized after decades of persistent inequality.”<sup>405</sup> Thus, there are notable similarities between the ideologies that guided Pope Francis and the early Cuban revolution. For that reason, Pope Francis was uniquely situated to serve as a trust broker, a “channel of peace,” a “true bridge builder.”<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Mannion, *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism*, 110.

<sup>399</sup> Luis Martinez Andrade, “Liberation Theology: A Critique of Modernity,” *Interventions* 19 no. 5, 621.

<sup>400</sup> Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 12.

<sup>401</sup> Graham, *Vatican Diplomacy*, 111.

<sup>402</sup> Mannion, *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism*, 5.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 110.

<sup>404</sup> Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 7-8.

<sup>405</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 41, 49.

<sup>406</sup> Mannion, *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism*, 6.

In August of 2014, Pope Francis did just that. After learning from Obama that the clandestine negotiations between the United States and Cuba were gridlocked, the Pope penned letters to both Obama and Castro offering his assistance.<sup>407</sup> Cardinal Ortega traveled to Washington, “ostensibly to accept an invitation ... to speak at Georgetown University,” but was secretly brought into the White House, where he personally gave Obama the Pope’s letter.<sup>408</sup> Ortega delivered a letter to Castro shortly thereafter.<sup>409</sup> The effect was nearly immediate. At the next bilateral meeting in Canada, the Cubans expressed that “they’d be interested in working with [the United States] on the economy, social development, and the internet.”<sup>410</sup> The Cuban government, who had for decades blasted the United States for sabotaging the Cuban economy, fostering an unjust domestic society, and using digital tools to encourage regime change within Cuba, was now willing to work with the Obama administration on those specific topics.<sup>411</sup> With this development in mind, it is difficult to overstate the impact of the establishment of a working level of trust – and the critical boost that Pope Francis provided the trust-building process.

The United States accepted Cuba’s proposition and responded in turn. The Cubans’ willingness to cooperate evidently assured Obama that he could better enable reform within Cuba by working alongside the Cuban government.<sup>412</sup> As such, Rhodes and Zúñiga expressed a desire “to announce a process of normalization that would include the establishment of diplomatic relations.”<sup>413</sup> The Cubans agreed, and the pace of negotiations escalated. So, too, did the Vatican’s role as trust broker. Both countries “asked the Vatican to act as a guarantor,” an impartial and trustworthy third party that could ensure that both sides stayed honest and did not renege on an agreement.<sup>414</sup> According to Rhodes, “By agreeing to go to the Vatican and make ... commitments, you’re sort of on the hook.”<sup>415</sup>

The agreement reached between the two countries was far-reaching and multifaceted. For one, the two nations exchanged the high-level prisoners that had been central to negotiations – Alan Gross,

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<sup>407</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>411</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>412</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes.”

<sup>413</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>414</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

Rolando Sarraff Trujillo, and the remaining Cuban Five prisoners. The Cuban government went further by releasing an additional “fifty-three political prisoners.”<sup>416</sup> The deal also made broader, more significant changes to the US-Cuba relationship. For the first time since 1961, the two countries would have official diplomatic relations. As such, Obama directed his administration to “immediately begin discussions ... to make the agreement to restore diplomatic relations a reality.”<sup>417</sup> To assist in that process, he announced that the State Department would “review ... Cuba’s inclusion on the US government’s list of state sponsors of terror,” which had long been a point of contention between the two governments.<sup>418</sup> Lastly, Obama announced that he would begin to roll back the embargo using his executive authority, though entirely lifting the embargo would depend on Congress.<sup>419</sup>

Remarkably, the Vatican was not fully aware of the scope of the deal that it had fostered until it was finalized. Rhodes notes that Vatican officials present were “shocked” to learn that the agreement would extend beyond a high-level prisoner exchange and would even include the re-establishment of diplomatic relations.<sup>420</sup> Just three weeks later, on December 17, 2014, President Obama stood at the podium in the White House Cabinet Room to make an announcement: “Today, the United States of America is changing its relationship with the people of Cuba.”<sup>421</sup> The two nations had reached diplomatic breakthrough.

This breakthrough, which stood persistently out of reach for decades prior, points to the vast importance of the establishment of a working trust between Obama and Castro. Either side could have walked away from the agreement due to concerns that its terms or essence would not be honored. One side could have refused to release the high-value prisoners so integral to the deal. Castro could have refused to release additional political prisoners. Obama could have refused to take action to begin rolling back the embargo or restarted US efforts to foster Cuban regime change. That is not what transpired. A sufficient level of trust emerged to allow both sides to commit.

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<sup>416</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba”; Sweig, *Cuba*, 290.

<sup>417</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 290.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>420</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>421</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes.”

Had the two nations not sent the signals they sent, had they not subtly communicated a willingness to cooperate and change the adversarial tone that had long dominated the bilateral relationship, there would have been no space for diplomatic breakthrough.<sup>422</sup> Political developments within the United States were helpful, but Obama nonetheless faced pressure from Cuban-American hardliners within Congress.<sup>423</sup> Economic reform within Cuba was useful but was occurring extremely slowly and was inherently limited.<sup>424</sup> Had Obama not come to trust that Castro was willing to continue taking strides in a good direction, there would have been no incentive for him to take action on Cuba.<sup>425</sup> Had Castro not come to trust that Obama was not interested in fomenting regime change within Cuba, there would have been no sense in improving relations.

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<sup>422</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 410.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 414.

<sup>424</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 293-4.

<sup>425</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 410.

## **The Post-Announcement Period**

## Domestic Politics within the United States

Following the announcement, certain obstacles to the formal re-establishment of diplomatic ties remained.<sup>426</sup> Public opinion did not stand out among them. Indeed, Sweig argues that “with scarce, few exceptions, reactions to the deal ... were positive worldwide,” and “editorial opinion across the country, with rare exception ... applauded the move.”<sup>427</sup> Discussing the Cuban-American community in particular, Sweig notes, “Many Cuban-Americans felt energized by the decision, determined to take advantage of the new moment by leveraging connection and dollars over conflict.”<sup>428</sup>

The next, and most recent, FIU Cuba Poll was conducted between July and August of 2016. The majority of respondents – 69 percent – indicated that they favored the US re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba.<sup>429</sup> 64.3 percent of respondents indicated their support for the “new policies taken by the US government toward Cuba” more generally.<sup>430</sup> 81.5 percent expressed that the embargo had worked not very well or not at all.<sup>431</sup> Thus, at the tail-end of the Obama presidency, the restoration of US-Cuba relations stood out as generally popular within the Cuban-American community. Of course, many Cuban-Americans were upset with Obama’s decision – more than one-quarter of the Cuban-American community remained opposed to the restoration of ties, after all.<sup>432</sup> Hardliners within Congress labeled Obama the “Appeaser-in-Chief.”<sup>433</sup> Obama specifically addressed this group in announcing his new policy toward Cuba: “To those who oppose the steps I’m announcing today, let me say that I respect your passion and share your commitment to liberty and democracy. The question is how we uphold that commitment.”<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 300.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>429</sup> Cuban Research Institute, “2016 FIU Cuba Poll,” Florida International University, <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/2016-cuba-poll.pdf> (Accessed April 29, 2018). “The 2016 FIU Cuba Poll was conducted between July 11 and August 12, 2016. It was administered to a random sample of 1,000 Cuban-American residents of Miami-Dade County, age 18 and over. The sample was generated from telephone exchanges using standard random-digit-dialing procedures to ensure that each phone number has an equal chance of being chosen for the sample. Interviews were conducted with respondents either by landline or cell phones (329 by landline, 671 by cell phone). Bilingual interviews conducted the survey in Spanish and English, depending on the respondents’ preference (81% of the interviews were done in Spanish. The countywide margin of error is plus or minus 3.1% at the 95% confidence level).”

<sup>430</sup> 2016 FIU Cuba Poll.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>432</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 298.

<sup>433</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>434</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes.”

It is worthwhile to consider the 2016 presidential election in assessing the domestic political popularity of Obama's moves on Cuba. There is modern precedent for substantial electoral backlash to a president's policy toward Cuba – even in the context of a second-term presidency. In November of 1999, five-year-old Elián Gonzalez arrived in Florida after a “disastrous crossing from Cuba that drowned his mother and stepfather and eight others.”<sup>435</sup> Family members in Miami quickly embraced Elián, but his father, who remained in Cuba, “claim[ed] that the boy was kidnapped and demand[ed] that he be returned.”<sup>436</sup> Backing Elián's father, “high-ranking officials in [Fidel] Castro's government [threatened] a worsening of already bad relations between the United States and Cuba if the boy [was] not allowed to return.”<sup>437</sup> Thus began a months-long diplomatic crisis that pitted Miami's Cuban-American community against the Cuban government. The Clinton administration eventually sent federal agents to remove Elián from his family members in Miami and return him to his father.<sup>438</sup>

The Clinton administration's move enraged the Cuban-American community. *The New York Times* pointedly noted that “in politically charged Miami, anything to do with Cuba, even a child, can become the rope in a tug of war between the politically powerful Cuban exile community and its nemesis, the government of Fidel Castro.”<sup>439</sup> Carlos Saldrigas contends that Cuban-Americans “got their revenge on the Democratic Party by voting for Bush over Gore in 2000.”<sup>440</sup> Indeed, Gore (Clinton's vice-president) “lost Cuban-American votes by a [wide] margin, winning just under 20 [percent] ... a more than 15 [percent] decline relative to the Democrats' win in 1996.”<sup>441</sup> The Elián crisis thus exemplifies why Obama's predecessors were unwilling to challenge Cuban-Americans' electoral prowess in Florida. It also helps demonstrate that even a second-term president is not entirely immune to domestic political pressures. The nature of the two-party electoral system in the

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<sup>435</sup> Rick Bragg, “Cuban Boy Is Smiling, But No One Else Is,” *The New York Times*, [https://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/04/us/cuban-boy-is-smiling-but-no-one-else-is.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FGonzalez%2C%20Elian&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=239&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/04/us/cuban-boy-is-smiling-but-no-one-else-is.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FGonzalez%2C%20Elian&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=239&pgtype=collection) (Accessed April 22, 2018).

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba”; Rick Bragg, “The Elian Gonzalez Case: The Overview; Cuban Boy Seized by US Agents and Reunited with His Father,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/23/us/elian-gonzalez-case-overview-cuban-boy-seized-us-agents-reunited-with-his-father.html> (Accessed April 22, 2018).

<sup>439</sup> Bragg, “Cuban Boy Is Smiling, But No One Else Is.”

<sup>440</sup> Quoted in Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>441</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 170.

United States incentivizes a president to help elect a successor from his or her party – and therefore to avoid moves that could provoke political backlash.

If Obama’s presidency “changed the domestic political dynamics” of US policy toward Cuba, one would expect to see Miami’s new political reality reflected in the 2016 presidential election.<sup>442</sup> In the run-up to the election, 64.5 percent of respondents in the 2016 FIU Cuba Poll indicated that a candidate’s position on Cuba was either very important or moderately important in determining their vote, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of the issue.<sup>443</sup> Moreover, Secretary Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump had expressed divergent policy views on Cuba during the 2016 campaign, thus presenting a new opportunity for Cuban-Americans to flex their electoral power in shaping US policy toward Cuba.

Clinton’s role as Obama’s secretary of state established a clear link between her and the administration’s Cuba policy. Though diplomatic breakthrough did not occur until John Kerry had taken over at the State Department, Clinton contributed to earlier policy moves that set the stage for the broader re-working of US-Cuba relations. Moreover, Clinton “urged President Obama to reconsider the embargo” during her tenure at the State Department.<sup>444</sup>

Clinton explicitly endorsed a continuation of Obama-style Cuba policies during the 2016 election. She argued that “the Cuba embargo needs to go, once and for all,” and promised to rely on executive authority to “further reduce travel restrictions to the island” in the absence of Congressional action.<sup>445</sup> Clinton’s stance on Cuba itself reflects shifting dynamics within the Cuban-American community. During the 2008 election cycle, for example, Clinton “said she opposed lifting the embargo on an undemocratic Cuba.”<sup>446</sup>

Trump did not share Clinton’s willingness to continue reforming the US-Cuba relationship. Though he argued early in the campaign that “the concept of opening with Cuba is fine” and put himself

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<sup>442</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 65.

<sup>443</sup> 2016 FIU Cuba Poll.

<sup>444</sup> Quoted in Council on Foreign Relations, “Clinton on the Issues,” <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/campaign2016/hillary-clinton/on-cuba> (Accessed April 17, 2018).

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*

“somewhere in the middle” in terms of Cuba policy, he later hardened his stance and promised to unravel “all of the concessions Barack Obama has granted the Castro regime ... unless the Castro regime meets our demands.”<sup>447</sup> Thus, Trump adopted a more traditional stance toward Cuba. As such, the 2016 election presented Cuban-Americans with a clear choice between two widely divergent approaches to Cuba policy.

According to the Pew Research Center and CNN’s 2016 election polls, Trump won a safe majority of Florida’s Cuban-American vote despite his antagonistic stance toward US-Cuba relations. Trump won approximately 54 percent of Cuban-American voters in Florida, while Clinton won approximately 41 percent.<sup>448</sup> Clinton thus fell short of matching Obama’s electoral performance among Florida’s Cuban-Americans during the 2012 election (he won at least 48 percent of the state’s Cuban-American vote). It is worth emphasizing that Clinton specifically struggled with the Cuban-American vote, not the wider Latino vote. Krogstad and Flores point out that Clinton’s 41 percent represented “a significant share of Cubans in Florida,” but the result “was far below the 71 percent of non-Cuban Latinos who backed the Democratic nominee.”<sup>449</sup>

Trump’s electoral performance among Cuban-Americans in Florida helps illustrate that US-Cuba policy continued to be a hotly contested political issue in the post-Obama period, even despite notable trends in public opinion during the preceding decade. In other words, Cuban-American public opinion did not shift so substantially that a loosening of diplomatic relations was the obvious policy decision for a president to make. For that reason, an attentiveness to other factors, most notably the establishment of a working trust between the United States and Cuba, is warranted.

It is worth addressing an alternative explanation for Trump’s performance among Cuban-American voters in the 2016 election. Sweig argues that “Cuban-American voters [are] no longer one-issue

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<sup>447</sup> Quoted in Eric Duvall, “Donald Trump threatens to end U.S.-Cuba relations without more Cuban freedoms,” *UPI*, [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/US/2016/09/17/Donald-Trump-threatens-to-end-US-Cuba-relations-without-more-Cuban-freedoms/5081474133272/?spt=sec&or=tn](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2016/09/17/Donald-Trump-threatens-to-end-US-Cuba-relations-without-more-Cuban-freedoms/5081474133272/?spt=sec&or=tn) (Accessed April 17, 2018); Marc Caputo, “Inside Marco Rubio’s campaign to shape Trump’s Cuba crackdown,” *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/06/15/marco-rubio-donald-trump-cuba-plan-239597> (Accessed April 17, 2018); Council on Foreign Relations, “Trump on the Issues,” <http://www.cfr.org/interactives/campaign2016/donald-trump/on-cuba> (Accessed April 17, 2018).

<sup>448</sup> CNN Politics, “Exit Polls,” <http://www.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls/florida/president> (Accessed April 17, 2018); Jens Manuel Krogstad and Antonio Flores, “Unlike other Latinos, about half of Cuban voters in Florida backed Trump,” Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/15/unlike-other-latinos-about-half-of-cuban-voters-in-florida-backed-trump/> (Accessed April 17, 2018).

<sup>449</sup> Krogstad and Antonio Flores, “Unlike other Latinos, about half of Cuban voters in Florida backed Trump,”

voters” – that is, their votes are not shaped solely by a politician’s approach to Cuba.<sup>450</sup> It follows that Trump’s electoral performance could reflect Cuban-American policy preferences unrelated to Cuba. With that said, only 35.5 percent of respondents in the 2016 FIU Cuba Poll expressed that “a candidate’s position on Cuba” was not very important or not important at all in determining their vote – less than the share that indicated that “a candidate’s position on Cuba” was very important. As such, it is difficult to claim that electoral performance during the 2016 election was wholly unrelated to Trump and Clinton’s divergent policy preferences toward Cuba.

### **Reform Processes within Cuba**

The post-negotiation period bore witness to a fundamentally different approach to US-Cuba relations. The United States would not just call for economic and political reform within Cuba. It would engage with Cuba to make those processes easier. Obama argued, “We can do more to support the Cuban people and promote our values through engagement.”<sup>451</sup> Rhodes noted the administration’s belief that “the Cuban people are going to be in a better position to determine their own future” given closer US-Cuba ties.<sup>452</sup> Thus, reform remained a relevant factor following the decision to begin normalizing diplomatic relations.

In announcing the new US-Cuba policy, Obama did acknowledge that Castro had implemented economic reforms within Cuba. He was quick to highlight the shortcomings of those reforms, however. He argued, “While Cuba has made reforms to gradually open up its economy, we continue to believe that Cuban workers should be free to form unions, just as their citizens should be free to participate in the political process.”<sup>453</sup> He stressed that he was “under no illusions about the continued barriers to freedom that remain for ordinary Cubans.”<sup>454</sup>

Obama argued that isolation from the United States did little to benefit the Cuban people, however. Because the United States was “calling on Cuba to unleash the potential of 11 million Cubans by ending unnecessary restrictions on ... political, social, and economic activities,” it did not make

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<sup>450</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 295.

<sup>451</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary. “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes.”

<sup>452</sup> Goldberg, “The Road to Havana.”

<sup>453</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary. “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes.”

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*

sense to maintain a policy that “denied Cubans access to technology” and “add[ed] to the burden ... that we seek to help.”<sup>455</sup> Obama vowed to “continue to implement ... programs aimed at promoting positive change” and to “encourage reforms in ... high level engagement with Cuban officials.”<sup>456</sup> Moreover, the United States would “provide ... support for growth of Cuba’s nascent private sector.”<sup>457</sup>

Shortly after relations were formally restored, Obama announced that he would personally travel to Cuba (this development will be discussed further in the bilateral trust section). While in Cuba, he explicitly endorsed further reform within the Cuban system. Again, Obama acknowledged the reforms that had already been initiated: “In recent years, the Cuban government has begun to open up ... more space for [Cuban] talent to thrive. In just a few years, we’ve seen how cuentapropistas can succeed while sustaining a distinctly Cuban spirit.”<sup>458</sup> And again, he pointed to the reforms’ shortcomings: “It should be easier to open a business here in Cuba .... Two currencies shouldn’t separate the type of salaries that Cubans can earn. The internet should be available across the island so that Cubans can connect to the wider world and to one of the greatest engines of growth in human history.”<sup>459</sup>

Less than a month after Obama’s visit to Cuba, the Cuban Communist Party held its Seventh National Congress. As Sweig notes, “Castro himself indicated that the ... Party Congress [would] advance ... a second round of reforms meant to continue and deepen those undertaken already.”<sup>460</sup> Castro addressed the Congress on April 16, 2016 and declared that the Congress would “focus on ratifying and continuing to advance along the lines agreed upon five years ago to update [Cuba’s] social and economic order.”<sup>461</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “FACT SHEET: Charting a New Course on Cuba,” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/17/fact-sheet-charting-new-course-cuba> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> Barack Obama, Speech to the Cuban People, Available at <http://time.com/4267933/barack-obama-cuba-speech-transcript-full-text/> (Accessed April 17, 2018).

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

<sup>460</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 311.

<sup>461</sup> Raúl Castro Ruz, “7th PCC Congress Central Report, presented by First Secretary Raúl Castro Ruz,” <http://en.cubadebate.cu/news/2016/04/18/7th-pcc-congress-central-report-presented-by-first-secretary-raul-castro-ruz/> (Accessed May 7, 2018), 2.

Castro's speech was noteworthy for several reasons. First, he enthusiastically re-emphasized the compatibility of Cuban socialism with market-based reforms. He argued, "The introduction of the rules of supply and demand is not at odds with the principle of planning. Both concepts can co-exist and complement each other for the benefit of the country, as has been successfully shown by China's reform process and the renovation process in Vietnam."<sup>462</sup> Moreover, as Domínguez notes, "For the first time ... in a revolution built on health care and education, a Communist Party leader actually celebrated a reduction in social expenditures."<sup>463</sup> Thus, Castro again demonstrated a willingness to challenge Cuba's ideological status quo.

Castro expressed an "inten[tion] to maintain and strengthen" private-sector opportunities within Cuba.<sup>464</sup> In addition, he asserted that "private enterprises are not in their essence anti-socialist or counter-revolutionary."<sup>465</sup> Taking a jab at the Obama administration's rhetoric, however, Castro contended that the Cuban government would not "ignore the aspirations of powerful external forces ... committed to what they call the 'empowerment' of non-state forms of management ... in the hope of putting an end to the revolution and socialism in Cuba by other means."<sup>466</sup> Castro thus affirmed the value of private enterprise within Cuba but re-emphasized that reform was meant to strengthen the existing Cuban system.

Castro also acknowledged the slow nature of Cuba's reform processes. He noted, "We knew that the process of implementing the guidelines approved by the Sixth Party Congress would not be an easy task ... an assessment which [sic] has thus far proven correct."<sup>467</sup> Qualitatively, Castro assessed that the Cuban government had "fully applied 21 percent of the 313 linamientos [guidelines]," begun to implement 77 percent, and not yet initiated 2 percent of proposed reforms.<sup>468</sup> Thus, Castro depicted a reform process very much still in progress. Castro did not shy away from noting the consequences of sluggish reforms: "Wages and pensions are still unable to satisfy the basic needs of Cuban families."<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Castro Ruz, "7th PCC Congress Central Report, presented by First Secretary Raúl Castro Ruz."

<sup>463</sup> Domínguez et al., *Social Policies and Decentralization in Cuba*, 2.

<sup>464</sup> Castro Ruz, "7th PCC Congress Central Report, presented by First Secretary Raúl Castro Ruz."

<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

Castro contended that “the main obstacle” to a more robust implementation of reforms was “outdated mentalities, which give rise to an attitude of inertia or lack of confidence in the future.”<sup>470</sup> He pointed to “a complete lack of a sense of urgency to deal with undesired results,” and warned that “the worst that could happen ... is fail[ure] to react to a problem.”<sup>471</sup> These claims help illuminate that other figures within the Cuban government did not share Castro’s willingness to forge ahead with the reform process. Perhaps to calm the fears of the most hardline Communists within the Congress, he noted, “Decisions made with regard to the Cuban economy will never, under any circumstances, mean a break with the ideals of equality and social justice of the revolution.”<sup>472</sup> Castro’s analysis of Cuba’s reform process was thus striking in that it was largely self-critical. Cuban reforms were occurring slowly and faced numerous obstacles.

### **Bilateral Trust**

Bilateral trust also remained relevant following the conclusion of clandestine negotiations and the announcement of intention to restore relations. For one, the announcement of intention was just that – an official restoration of ties would require additional diplomatic work. Moreover, a restoration of relations was only one step in a broader process of normalization.<sup>473</sup> Obama’s December 17, 2014 announcement made clear that he and Castro were only “begin[ning] to normalize relations.”<sup>474</sup> Both countries stressed that “full normalization” was “not likely to be achieved in the short term.”<sup>475</sup> Trust would naturally play a role in further steps toward normal interstate relations – neither country would face incentives to continue cooperating if they did not trust the intentions of the other side. This reality reflects the nature of the commitment problem in international relations.

The start of a “shift from confrontation to partnership” inevitably invited significant suspicion, however, especially among hardliners within Cuba.<sup>476</sup> It did not help that Obama had marketed his Cuba policy change as a means of ending “an outdated approach that ... failed to advance [US]

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<sup>470</sup> Castro Ruz, “7th PCC Congress Central Report, presented by First Secretary Raúl Castro Ruz.”

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>473</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 296.

<sup>474</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes.”

<sup>475</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 296.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

interests”<sup>477</sup> As a result, “some ... sectors of the island’s intelligentsia” doubted Obama’s intentions and “wondered whether the United States was not simply attempting to achieve ... regime change.”<sup>478</sup> In that regard, it is clear the working trust established between the United States and Cuba was largely specific to Obama and Castro. Cubans not as clued into their trust-building process did not have the same opportunities to begin trusting Obama – itself a reflection of that process’s significance.

Fidel Castro himself signaled the relevance of trust in his public response to the announcement of the agreement to restore diplomatic relations. Anderson quotes Fidel in asserting, “I do not trust the politics of the United States. I have not exchanged a word with them.”<sup>479</sup> As a result of the statement, “pretty much everyone in Cuba understood that he was unhappy with the deal.”<sup>480</sup> If a lack of trust would have barred Fidel from reaching the agreement, it follows that the establishment of a working trust was key to Raúl’s willingness. If Obama and Castro had not reached that level of trust, no agreement would have been possible.

The next substantial trust development came at the 2015 Summit of the Americas. The event was notable for several reasons. For one, Cuba was invited to the conference for the first time. Indeed, Cuba’s absence had long been a point of regional contention.<sup>481</sup> At the 2009 Summit, “Latin American presidents ... pressed [Obama], making Cuba a litmus test of [his] declared desire to forge a new ‘equal partnership’ in the region.”<sup>482</sup> At the 2012 Summit, Cuba-related tensions escalated further, and the conference “ended without a final statement of consensus ... after the United States and some Latin American nations remained sharply divided over whether to continue excluding Cuba.”<sup>483</sup> Thus, that the United States allowed Cuba’s attendance at the 2015 Summit marked a significant departure from precedent, another signal of Obama’s willingness to upturn the status quo on Cuba.

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<sup>477</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes”; Sweig, *Cuba*, 298.

<sup>478</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 298.

<sup>479</sup> Anderson, “A New Cuba.”

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>481</sup> Jackie Calmes and William Neuman, “Americas Meeting Ends with Discord Over Cuba,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/16/world/americas/summit-of-the-americas-ends-without-consensus-statement.html> (Accessed April 18, 2018).

<sup>482</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh p. 369.

<sup>483</sup> Calmes and Neuman “Americas Meeting Ends with Discord Over Cuba.”

The Summit was also notable in that it brought Obama and Castro together for the first time since the Mandela handshake. Obama's predecessors had long made a point of avoiding the Castros. Rather than downplaying the moment's significance, Obama went out of his way to highlight it. He argued, "The fact that President Castro and I are both sitting here today marks a historic occasion. It is the first time in more than half a century that all the nations of the Americas are meeting to address our future together."<sup>484</sup> As such, Obama let on a sense of enthusiasm about Cuba's participation in the Summit.

Castro, too, struck a relatively cooperative tone at the Summit. According to *The New York Times*, "Mr. Castro ... spoke in unusually warm tones about an American president," calling Obama "humble" and "brave."<sup>485</sup> While he did embark on a "50-minute inventory of Cuban grievances against US interventionism," Obama again "listened patiently," and Castro wrapped up "with an apology for going on so long and an acknowledgment that Obama had already vastly distinguished himself from his predecessors."<sup>486</sup> Both Obama and Castro used the historic occasion not to focus on the differences that remained between their countries, but to continue signaling their good will. The result, according to Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez, "was that these two governments ... know each other better. We have a better understanding of our common ground, a better idea of our mutual interests," and "better knowledge of the scope and depth of our differences."<sup>487</sup> This result is the essence of trust building between historical adversaries.

Major steps in the diplomatic relationship continued rapidly. Several days after the conclusion of the Summit of the Americas, the White House and the State Department recommended that Congress remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.<sup>488</sup> Several weeks later, Congress accepted the recommendation, and the US government removed Cuba from the list.<sup>489</sup> The White House released a statement saying, "We welcome today's announcement by the Secretary of State, which is

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<sup>484</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Randal C. Archibold, "Obama Meets Raúl Castro, Making History," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/world/americas/obama-cuba-summit-of-the-americas.html> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

<sup>486</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 302.

<sup>487</sup> Quoted in Davis and Archibold, "Obama Meets Raúl Castro, Making History."

<sup>488</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 302.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 302-3.

another step forward toward a more normal and productive relationship between the United States and the Cuban people.”<sup>490</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Obama “announce[d] that the terms for the formal restoration of diplomatic relations had been reached.”<sup>491</sup> Over the next several weeks, Cuban Foreign Minister Rodríguez and Secretary of State Kerry visited each other’s countries to fly national flags over their respective embassies.<sup>492</sup> Following this development, Obama remarked, “A year ago, it might have seemed impossible that the United States would once again be raising our flag ... over an embassy in Havana.”<sup>493</sup> Obama’s statement helps illuminate a critical point. If diplomatic breakthrough solely reflected shifting politics in the United States and reform processes within Cuba, the restoration of relations would not have been so unfathomable.

On February 18, 2016 Obama tweeted, “14 months ago, I announced that we would begin normalizing relations with Cuba - and we've already made significant progress ... Next month, I'll travel to Cuba to advance our progress and efforts that can improve the lives of the Cuban people.”<sup>494</sup> As Rhodes noted, Obama would “be the first American President since Calvin Coolidge in 1928 to visit Cuba.”<sup>495</sup> Rhodes also pointed to the vastly different tone that would mark Obama’s trip: “President Coolidge traveled to Cuba on a US battleship, so this will be a very different kind of visit.”<sup>496</sup> The trip also stood out in that First Lady Michelle Obama and the president’s daughters would be traveling to Cuba. A president does not bring his family on a trip to maintain adversarial relations or when he fundamentally mistrusts the intentions of the receiving country. Thus, as Rhodes noted, the trip would serve as “an important step forward in signaling [a] new beginning between our two countries and peoples.”<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>490</sup> Sweig, *Cuba*, 302-3.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>493</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on the Re-Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with Cuba” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/01/statement-president-re-establishment-diplomatic-relations-cuba> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>494</sup> Barack Obama, Twitter Post, <https://twitter.com/POTUS44/status/700320240022921216> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>495</sup> Ben Rhodes, “President Obama is going to Cuba. Here’s why.” *Medium*, <https://medium.com/@rhodes44/president-obama-is-going-to-cuba-here-s-why-41ecdc0586d8> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>497</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, 2/18/2016,” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/18/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-and-deputy-national-security> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

While in Cuba, Obama presented himself as a friend, a willing partner in a new bilateral relationship. He signaled his respect for Cuba and its culture. In a speech to the Cuban people, he quoted Cuban national hero Jose Martí: “Cultivo una rosa blanca.”<sup>498</sup> He noted, “Martí made this offering of friendship and peace to both his friend and his enemy ... Today, as the president of the United States of America, I offer the Cuban people el saludo de paz.”<sup>499</sup> He and Castro attended a baseball game between Cuba’s national team and the Tampa Bay Rays, a celebration of a sport loved in both the United States and Cuba.

Obama also used the trip to speak candidly with Castro, again illuminating the crucial interpersonal elements of diplomatic rapprochement. Anderson quotes Obama: “I said this directly to Raúl ... ‘It is not my objective to see Cuba turned into some tourist playground for the United States.’ There are genuine gains they made in health care and education that are worth preserving.”<sup>500</sup> Obama acknowledged the legitimate roots of Cuba’s anti-imperialist spirit and the ways in which revolutionary Cuba had delivered success.<sup>501</sup> Obama went further, telling Castro, “By opening up your economy, you can transform Havana in a way that really works for the economy and works for you ... You should find advisors – and they probably shouldn’t be US advisers – to think about a controlled, thoughtful development plan.”<sup>502</sup> This conversation is striking in that it resonates as one that could take place between friends, not between leaders of countries that had been pitted against each other for more than five decades. Obama thus demonstrated the nature of his new approach to Cuba: one that aims for meaningful reform, but that recognizes that the United States cannot and should not unilaterally impose that reform. He signaled that he was a trustworthy partner, not an adversary seeking to undermine. He said as much directly: “I believe my visit here demonstrates that you do not need to fear a threat from the United States.”<sup>503</sup>

Of course, as previously noted, Obama also used the trip to publicly advocate for further reform, both economic and political, and to meet with dissidents. He argued, “Even if we lifted the embargo

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<sup>498</sup> Obama, Speech to the Cuban People.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> Anderson “A New Cuba.”

<sup>501</sup> Goldberg, “The Road to Havana.”

<sup>502</sup> Anderson “A New Cuba.”

<sup>503</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Obama, in Havana Speech, Says Cuba Has Nothing to Fear From US,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/world/americas/obama-cuba.html> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

tomorrow, Cubans would not realize their potential without continued change here in Cuba.”<sup>504</sup> One might look at these calls for change and claim that Obama visited Cuba not to bolster diplomatic trust, but to subvert the Cuban government. Some Cubans had precisely this reaction. Cuban Foreign Minister Rodríguez called Obama’s trip “an attack on our history, culture and symbols ... He came to dazzle the non-state sector of the economy, as if he were a defender not of the big corporations but of hot-dog sellers.”<sup>505</sup> Anderson quotes another Cuban government official claiming that elements of Obama’s trip were “as subversive as the Bay of Pigs” – an attempted military intervention.<sup>506</sup> Thus, though bilateral trust grew in critical ways between Obama and Castro, it clearly remained broken in other sectors of the Cuban state.

Such an intense interpretation of the more critical elements of Obama’s trip overstates the extent to which these elements were unusual, however. As former White House press secretary Josh Earnest noted, “Whenever the president travels around the world, he looks for opportunities to visit with people, particularly when we’re in countries that ... haven’t observed the basic principles of democracy that we cherish in this country .... This is something that the president does frequently in other countries.”<sup>507</sup> Rhodes similarly asserted, “We’ve made clear to the Cuban government that we see who we want to see in other countries.”<sup>508</sup> Given this consideration, to focus only on the fact that Obama met with dissidents and advocated for continued reform and claim that the historic trip was not also a mechanism for fostering bilateral trust is shortsighted.

The president’s visit to Cuba thus culminated a delicate and deeply personal trust-building process between Obama and Castro. Like the handshake at Nelson Mandela’s funeral, the trip was a public display of Obama’s respect for the Cuban experience, an indication that he was not interested in inciting regime change on the island. As such, Obama demonstrated a stunning reversal of the attitude that dominated US-Cuba relations for decades prior. Together with significant opinion shifts within the Cuban-American community and important economic reforms within Cuba, this approach delivered diplomatic breakthrough.

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<sup>504</sup> Davis, “Obama, in Havana Speech, Says Cuba Has Nothing to Fear From US.”

<sup>505</sup> Anderson “A New Cuba.”

<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> US Office of the Press Secretary, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 3/18/2016,”

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/21/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-3182016> (Accessed May 7, 2018).

<sup>508</sup> Goldberg, “The Road to Havana.”

## Conclusion

Diplomatic breakthrough between the United States and Cuba has meaningful implications for the broader study of international relations. For one, the case affirms the value of a “complex, mutual learning process” in establishing diplomatic trust and bolstering cooperative relations.<sup>509</sup> As Boulding notes, this delicate process is often “communicated by nods, smiles, and raised eyebrows” – or, in this case, handshakes and diplomatic patience.<sup>510</sup> The working trust that emerged from “successive rounds of mutual accommodation” thus illustrates the vast consequence of thoughtful and tempered diplomacy – especially between historical adversaries.

The restoration of US-Cuba relations also points to the significance of domestic political considerations in the formation of contemporary foreign policy. As such, the case affirms Putnam’s conception of the profound “entanglements” that exist between domestic and international politics.<sup>511</sup> Domestic factors – shifting opinion within the Cuban-American community and economic reform processes within Cuba – were crucial in setting the stage for the trust-building process described above. The clandestine nature of US-Cuba negotiations also reflects relevant domestic political concerns, affirming Hoffman’s claim that restorations of interstate relations rely on cover from domestic criticism.<sup>512</sup> With that said, the case illustrates that bilateral trust remains relevant even given relatively favorable domestic political opinion regarding diplomatic initiatives.<sup>513</sup>

Lastly, the US-Cuba case demonstrates that sufficiently trustworthy actors within the international system can serve as effective trust-brokers between non-trusting parties. As such, the case illustrates the important third-party roles that even non-hegemonic states can play in international politics. The role of Pope Francis and Cardinal Ortega in the restoration of US-Cuba relations also illuminates the ongoing relevance of Vatican diplomacy in the contemporary international system.<sup>514</sup>

Recent developments in the US-Cuba relationship to some extent call into question the profundity of the factors explored in this thesis. This notion is worth exploring in detail. As noted, Donald Trump’s campaign-trail approach to Cuba policy and his electoral performance in Florida’s Cuban-

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<sup>509</sup> Boulding, *Stable Peace*, 17; LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 410.

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-9.

<sup>511</sup> Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics,” 433.

<sup>512</sup> Hoffman, *Building Trust*, 3-4.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>514</sup> Graham, *Vatican Diplomacy*, 7.

American community demonstrate that Cuba remains a relevant, contested political issue in contemporary US politics. Since assuming the presidency, Trump has forged ahead with “a number of measures rolling back key features of the incipient rapprochement” between the two nations.<sup>515</sup> If political change within the Cuban-American community incentivized and enabled a new approach to US-Cuba relations, why has Trump gone out of his way to curtail Obama’s steps in that direction?

Trump’s approach to Cuba largely reflects a preference for satisfying hardline Cuban-American members of Congress, not the Cuban-American community at large. As Piccone notes, Trump’s approach to Cuba “signaled the return of Florida’s pro-embargo faction, led by Senator Marco Rubio, at the helm of US-Cuba policy.”<sup>516</sup> While President Obama maintained secrecy in his dealings with the Cuban government to work around these Cuba-policy traditionalists, Trump has leaned on them to guide his policy – despite the fact that the majority of Cuban-Americans favor bolstered relations with the Cuban government.

It may be the case that other elements of Trump’s political platform would bar him from securing the majority of the young Cuban-American vote regardless of his stance toward Cuba. In that case, Trump would face incentives to bypass that group altogether and focus instead on older, more conservative members of the Cuban-American community. In either case, Trump’s approach to Cuba does not negate the substantial opinion shifts that have occurred within the Cuban-American community over the last two decades.

Notable developments have also taken place within Cuba. In December of 2017, the Cuban government announced new “restrictions on the private sector.”<sup>517</sup> This development undeniably marks something of a reversal in Castro’s reform initiatives. With that said, Miguel Díaz-Canel, who took over the Cuban presidency in April of 2018, has since “pledged to continue Raúl Castro’s

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<sup>515</sup> Ted Piccone, “US-Cuban relations are about to get worse,” Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/04/16/u-s-cuban-relations-are-about-to-get-worse/> (Accessed May 9, 2018).

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> Sarah Marsh, “Exclusive: Cuban draft rules propose curtailing fledgling private sector,” *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-economy-exclusive/exclusive-cuban-draft-rules-propose-curtailing-fledgling-private-sector-idUSKCN1G700I> (Accessed May 9, 2018).

vision, most notably his unfinished ‘updating’ of the economy.”<sup>518</sup> Thus, it is clear that reform within Cuba is not dead, though it has met significant new obstacles. It is impossible to determine whether the same developments would have occurred given a continuation of trust-building and cooperation between the US and Cuban governments.

The basic re-working of diplomatic relations was itself called into question following reports of “unexplained health incidents affecting US diplomats” in Cuba.<sup>519</sup> In response to these reports, the US State Department “ordered non-essential embassy personnel ... to leave Havana, arguing that the US could not protect them from unexplained illnesses” – a staff reduction made permanent in March of 2018.<sup>520</sup> The State Department then “ejected 15 Cuban diplomats from the United States.”<sup>521</sup> While the specific details and causes of these incidents remain murky, US perception of them has transformed in unusual ways. As LeoGrande notes, “US officials initially blamed some sort of sophisticated sonic weapon, but scientists have questioned whether sound waves alone could have produced the reported symptoms.”<sup>522</sup> Nonetheless, that explanation has gained serious traction within the United States.

To be clear, “unexplained health incidents affecting US diplomats” would cause alarm no matter the host country.<sup>523</sup> With that said, the characteristics of the US-Cuba relationship – most notably the near-absolute lack of trust between US and Cuban leaders in the wake of the Obama presidency – have allowed the incident to develop into a diplomatic crisis. It seems likely that events would have transpired differently in another interstate context. Indeed, as LeoGrande notes, Canada, which has historically enjoyed relatively strong relations with Cuba, “issued no travel advisory after its personnel were injured” in similar circumstances, “nor did its government withdraw Canadian diplomats from Havana or expel their Cuban counterparts.”<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> William M. LeoGrande, “Can Cuba’s Miguel Díaz-Canel Complete Raúl Castro’s Economic Revolution?” *Newsweek*, <http://www.newsweek.com/2018/05/11/can-cubas-miguel-diaz-canel-complete-raul-castros-economic-revolution-909711.html> (Accessed May 9, 2018).

<sup>519</sup> Piccone, “US-Cuban relations are about to get worse.”

<sup>520</sup> Josh Lederman and Matthew Lee, “US makes Cuba embassy cuts permanent after ‘health attacks,’” *Associated Press*, <https://apnews.com/30ed6ab17e59492b881d2ab42cb3c75d> (Accessed May 9, 2018); William M. LeoGrande, “Is Trump using ‘health attacks’ on US diplomats in Havana as an excuse to punish Cuba?” *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/is-trump-using-health-attacks-on-us-diplomats-in-havana-as-an-excuse-to-punish-cuba-85163> (Accessed May 9, 2018).

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>522</sup> LeoGrande, “Is Trump using ‘health attacks’ on US diplomats in Havana as an excuse to punish Cuba?”

<sup>523</sup> Piccone, “US-Cuban relations are about to get worse.”

<sup>524</sup> LeoGrande, “Is Trump using ‘health attacks’ on US diplomats in Havana as an excuse to punish Cuba?”

Given these developments – and new leadership in both the United States and Cuba – any future warming of US-Cuba relations will likely require a new process of cooperation and trust building. That process does not seem likely to emerge during the Trump presidency. Regardless, diplomatic breakthrough between the United States and Cuba at the end of the Obama presidency demonstrates the immense value of trust within the international system.

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