

Are Cubans Conservative?

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Cubans are an anomaly among U.S. Latinos. In part this is because they are demographically distinct. Nearly six-in-ten Cubans (59%) in the United States are foreign-born compared with 37% of all Hispanics. More than half of Cuban immigrants arrived later than 1990, and approximately 18% naturalized. Among those who arrived between 1980 and 1990, 60% are citizens while 18% of those who arrived after 1990 naturalized (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). Nationally, over 40% of the Hispanic population was foreign-born in 1994, 18% of whom naturalized (Motel and Patte, 2012a). Mexicans naturalize at a rate of 15%, while 20% of Dominicans and El Salvadorians do so compared to over 50% of foreign-born Cubans (Bueso, 2010).

At 40, their median age of Cubans is considerably higher that of other Hispanic groups but about the same as non-Hispanic whites (40). The median age of those who migrated before 1980, the generation that set the anti-Castro political foundation on which all Cuban-American politics was based and that dominated the political agenda of the Cuban community for decades, is 63. Their advanced age, combined with the end of the Cold War and an evolving national political environment, has displaced that original leadership and given way to new generations who seem to be broadening their paths to power.

Cubans' socioeconomic status (SES) is also much higher than that of other Hispanics. Cuban Americans are more proficient in English than other Latinos: 58% speak the language proficiently, compared to 35% of the overall Hispanic population. They are more educated: 24% of Cubans ages 25 and older have obtained at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 13% of the total Hispanic population. Their average annual income is \$25,000, higher than the median earnings for the overall Latino population, which is \$20,000. Cubans are far more likely than other Hispanics to identify themselves as white when asked about their race. In the 2004 Census

data, about 86% of Cubans said they were white, compared with 60% among Mexicans, 53% among other Central and South Americans, and 50% among Puerto Ricans.

With almost half of their 1.89 million persons living in the Miami-Dade county area, Cubans are the most concentrated Latino nationality. Unlike most Hispanic groups, they are the only nationality the federal government recognizes as refugees even though immigration specialists argue that the same factors stimulating Cuban migration also cause emigration from countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. The benefits accruing to this status have contributed significantly to their economic prosperity and help explain why, with only 5% of the U.S. Hispanics, Cuban Americans have slightly more than half of Hispanic-owned wealth.

Cubans boast of their cultural allegiance, even though their second- and third-generation citizens are more likely to be bilinguals and English dominant as are their peers from other Latin American countries (Alba et al., 2002). They identify in terms of their nationality and are much less likely to make reference to their immigrant history as Mexican Americans, Colombian Americans and other Hispanic Americans do. Indeed, scholars who specialize in the study of the Latino community criticize “Cubans” for their aloofness vis-à-vis other Latino nationalities and their disdain for being labeled as Latinos.

Despite such attitudes, Cuban Americans have arguably been the most politically influential nationality even though they attained this status after changing their partisan identity from the Democratic to the Republican Party, which since the 1950s has been notoriously unreceptive to ethnic and racial minorities. Their switch reflected a sense of betrayal by the Democrats following President Kennedy’s unwillingness to provide military assistance during the Bay of Pigs invasion. This switch was cemented with President Reagan’s enthusiastic support for the Cuban-American cause, which culminated in his visit to Little Havana wearing a

guayabera and declaring *Viva Cuba Libre. Cuba sí, Castro no.* Republican leaders cite the Cuban-American community's high rate of naturalization among those eligible to become citizens as evidence of the authenticity of Cuban-American support for the nation's democratic values and norms. Their willingness to use terrorism in efforts to overthrow Castro and his supporters raises questions about the sincerity of that commitment, however.

Moreover, prior to the switch, Cuban Americans were staunch Democrats. Lincoln Díaz-Balart, a key figure in Miami's political evolution, was raised in a Democratic household. He served as president of the Dade County Young Democrats, the Florida Young Democrats, and as a member of the Dade County Democrat Executive Party. More noteworthy was his role as head of the Ted Kennedy 1980 campaign. He became a Republican in 1985. This history suggests that, as is true for political entrepreneurs in general, political ambitions and opportunities may have motivated his and the community's Republicanism at least as much as did their support of Republican values (Alba et al., 2002).

A cursory review of these characteristics suggests that Cuban conservatism transcends their anti-Castro ideology. Instead it appears that their political orientation is driven by their not surprising defense of their support of anti-Castro foreign policy, class interests, and the political opportunities available to them through Republican institutions in Miami and across the nation. However, the extent to which more recent generations of Cubans are concerned about domestic policy rather than the overthrow of Castro may be seen as an indicator of the generational evolution of Cuban Americans that characterizes Mexican Americans and other immigrant and minority groups. Moreover, the number of first-generation Cubans who have reached the age at which their concerns regarding specialized health care and income maintenance become major family issues may push them toward support for the Democratic Party, whose policy agenda is

more supportive of providing this type of assistance than are Republicans. If Cuban Americans follow this pattern, then their conservatism can be better explained situationally rather than as rooted in “Cubanness.” Unlike mainstream voters, in other words, Latino policy preferences affect partisanship more than SES does (Alvarez and García Bedolla, 2003), suggesting that even if they experience upward mobility, Republicans are unlikely to maintain or increase the support they have received from Cuban-American voters, unless the Republican agenda clearly supports Cuban-American policy priorities.

The next section of this paper uses a variety of statistical and conceptual methods to determine if Cubans are more conservative than other Latino nationalities. To accomplish this we utilize multivariate statistical techniques, which allow us to hold constant acculturation levels, subjective identification, and the standard control variables scholars have identified as control variables of policy preferences, e.g., SES, partisanship, ideology gender, etc.

We begin by measuring acculturation using a scale that fuses three variables indicating the extent to which an individual is likely to be socialized into mainstream U.S. society. We label this construct “probability of being Americanized” (POBA). The three variables we fuse are language ability, the percentage of life an individual has lived in the U.S. and an individual’s immigrant generation. Language ability, the principal vehicle through which a community’s traditions, history, and values are passed on across generations (see Barnard, 1969; Mandelbaum, 1949), is the best measure of the extent to which an individual shares a culture’s principal characteristics and is often used to suggest levels of cultural integration (Huntington, 2004; Branton, 2007). We rate language ability on an 8-point scale of Spanish/English-speaking

proficiency.¹ Depending on their levels of Spanish-English bilingualism, individuals are likely to have different worldviews which could influence how they evaluate their environment and how they would change it, i.e., their public policy preferences.

The latter two components of the scale refer to the extent to which an individual is likely to have been socialized into the U.S. mainstream. The first of these is the percentage of their life that individuals have lived in the U.S., which suggests the degree to which they have experienced and been influenced by U.S. institutions, customs, and mores. It varies from .01 to 1.0 (or 100%), i.e., from the most recent arrivals to the native born.² Given that 68.5% of our sample was born outside the U.S.,³ this is a potentially extremely significant characteristic that must be acknowledged. Most studies of immigrant incorporation use nativity, measured categorically as an indicator of Americanization, i.e., the foreign-born score 0 and the native born 1. In other words, if you arrived at the age of three months and have lived in this country 50 years, you are categorized as being as incorporated as the individual who arrived during his fiftieth year. Clearly, labeling both as foreign-born is misleading despite its accuracy. Our scale is designed to be sensitive to changes across time. Thus, the recent arrival would receive a score of .1, the

¹ Respondents who chose to do the interview in English were asked, “How good is your spoken Spanish? Would you say you could carry on a conversation in Spanish (both understanding and speaking) very well, pretty well, just a little, or not at all?” (n=3291) Respondents who chose to do the interview in Spanish (n=5343) were asked the same question about their English. This allowed us to create an 8-point scale, ranging from 1 (Spanish interview/Speak English “not at all”) to 8 (English interview/Speak Spanish “not at all”). The mean of this 8-point scale is 3.54 points (in between 3=Spanish interview/Speak English “pretty well” and 4=Spanish Interview/Speak English “very well”).

² The modal value of 1.0 (34.3% of the valid weighted sample) (n=7902) are respondents who were born in the U.S.

³ 31.5% of respondents reported being born in the mainland U.S., 3.9% were born in Puerto Rico, and 64.7% were born in “some other country.” For our purposes, we distinguish between U.S.-born and non U.S.-born.

immigrant who arrived at the age of 1 would score .98, and the native-born would score 1. We would predict that the latter two are virtually equally incorporated, which should affect their policy views.

Our third component, immigrant generation, describes an individual's family history. It captures the probability that a respondent was raised in a primarily Latino vs. a U.S. mainstream social milieu. To that end it is measured in terms of the following 5-point scale:

1st generation: Respondent (R) is Foreign-Born and both parents are Foreign-Born
(57.1% of sample)

1.5 generation: R is Foreign-Born but at least one parent born is Native-Born⁴ (11.4% of sample)

2nd generation: R is Native-Born, but both parents are Foreign-Born (13.1% of sample)

2.5 generation: R is Native-Born, and one parent is Native-Born (7.4% of sample)

3rd generation: R is Native-Born, and both parents are Native-Born (11.1% of sample)

We used a series of statistical techniques to construct POBA. Having found that the 8-point language dominance scale, the percent lived in U.S. measure, and the 5-point generation scale were all highly correlated,⁵ exploratory factor analysis extracted a single common factor

⁴ The category of 1.5 generation includes foreign-born respondents with one or both parents born in the U.S. This generation represents 11.4% of the weighted sample. In general, all countries of ancestry groups are represented in this generation category in proportion to their proportion in the overall weighted sample.

⁵ The correlation between language scale and percent lived in U.S. is .712, between language scale generation scale .645, and between percent lived in U.S. and generation scale .724.

with all three components loading highly.⁶ A reliability analysis indicated a Cronbach's alpha of .704 for the three item POBA index.⁷ These results support using the POBA score, which varies from 0.0 to 100.0⁸ as a valid objective measure of acculturation.

Our theory is that POBA predicts policy preferences. Although higher POBA scores indicate increased probabilities of being socialized into core U. S. society, it is important to note our theory does not predict the relationship between POBA and policy views to be strictly linear, monotonic, or ideologically consistent. That is, as we elaborate below, we hypothesize that higher values of POBA may yield both linear and nonlinear results as well as “liberal” vs. “conservative” policy preferences.

It is essential to note that our analysis begins by focusing on Latino ethnicity, which is a pan-ethnic construction that incorporates all Spanish-origin nationalities and does not distinguish among specific national-origin group, e.g., those of Mexican or Dominican nationality. We define all individuals of Latin American or Spanish origin as Latino ethnics. We use our conceptualization to measure the extent to which “Latino-ness” predicts policy preferences. Our analysis then attempts to measure the effect of acculturation on policy preferences. This is followed by examining the extent to which Hispanic nationalities as traditionally defined, i.e., in

⁶ With factor loadings of .883 (generation scale), .913 (percent lived in U.S.), and .879 (language dominance scale).

⁷ POBA is an additive index composed of the language and generation scales, and the percent of life lived in the U.S. measure, with each of the three items weighted equally. The generation and language dominance scales were rescaled to fall between 0 and 1.0 (percent lived in the U.S. was already scaled between 0 and 1.0), and these measures were summed. The resulting 0 to 3.0 index was divided by 3 and multiplied by 100, resulting in a POBA index ranging from 0.0 to 100.0.

⁸ POBA ranges from 0.0 (0.8% of the weighted sample) to 100 (1.6% of the weighted sample) and has a mean value of 42.6.

terms of country or origin, vary in their policy preferences. The result of this section of the analysis will suggest whether nationality matters, that is, *ceteris paribus*, are members of one nationality different from members of other nationalities relative to a specific characteristic? In our case, we ask, are Cubans more (or less) conservative than Latinos of other nationalities?

We test our theory that Cuban-American conservatism is situational rather than intrinsic to Cuban civic culture. The first (“general”) policy issue) includes six policies that were, to varying degrees, part of the nation’s core political agenda in 2006. The second includes three policies regarding economic safety-net issues. The third includes “ethnic” policies, that is, those that particularly affect Latinos. Specifically, respondents were asked the following 13 questions, which are taken from the 2006 Latino National Survey:

General Policy Issues

Iraq War (rroriraq01)

“Support keep(ing) US military troops in Iraq as long as it takes to stabilize their government”

(Y=1: “Support keeping troops in Iraq” versus “Oppose”)

Standardized Test Requirement (stdtests01)

“(Support) the use of standardized tests to determine whether a child is promoted to the next grade or graduates from high school”

(Y=1: “Support standardized testing” versus “Oppose”)

School voucher program (voucher01)

“(Support) provid(ing) school vouchers to pay for a portion of the cost to send children to private schools, even if that would take some money away from public schools”

(Y=1: “Support school voucher program” versus “Oppose”)

Schools Equal (schequal01)

“(Support) fund(ing) public education so that all school districts have about the same amount of money to spend per student”

(Y=1: “Support equal funds” versus “Oppose”)

Same Sex Marriage (samesex01)

“What is your view about same-sex couples? Should they be permitted to (Legally Marry/Enter into Civil Unions) or should they receive no legal recognition?”

(Y=1: “Favor gay marriage/civil unions” versus “No legal recognition”)

Abortion (abortion01)

“Generally speaking, do you think abortion should be always illegal (versus legal in all circumstances/most circumstances/only if life of mother at risk or rape or incest)”

(Y=1: “Always Illegal” versus all else)

Ethnic Policy Issues

Dream Act (dreamact01)

“Undocumented immigrants attending college should be charged a higher tuition rate at state colleges and universities (even if they grew up and graduated high-school in the state)”

(Y=1: “Support charging higher tuition to undocumented immigrants” versus “Oppose”)

English Immersion Education (immersn1)

“(Support) replace(ing) multi-year bilingual instruction in schools with instruction only in English after one year”

(Y=1: “Support English-only instruction after one year” versus “Oppose”)

Immigrants Are Good for America (immview01)

“Immigrants today strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents” versus
“Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing, and health care”

(Y=1: Choose “Immigrants strengthen our country” versus “Immigrants are a burden on our country”)

Immigration Policy/Amnesty (immpolicy1)

“What is your preferred policy on undocumented or illegal immigration: immediate legalization of current undocumented immigrants versus (two guest worker program policies and “seal or close off the border”)?

(Y=1: “Favor immediate legalization of current undocumented immigrants” versus all else)

Economic Safety-Net Issues

Government provides income support (incsupp01)

“Government should provide income support to those who need it”

(Y=1: “Support government income support” versus “Oppose”)

Government provides health care (health01)

“The current health-care system needs government intervention to improve access and reduce costs”

(Y=1: “Support government intervention” versus “Oppose”)

Guaranteed National Income (guarinc01)

“Government should provide income support to those who try to provide for themselves, but who cannot adequately do so”

(Y=1: “Support government income support” versus “Oppose”)

Having identified Latino policy preferences we can now ask if Cuban-American policy preferences are “more conservative” relative to other Latino national-origin groups. In order to test whether any significant differences in policy preferences exist, we use multivariate methods to account for systematic differences among Latino national origin groups in terms of our POBA measure (acculturation), primary subjective identification (as Latino versus national origin group versus “American”), and an extensive set of control variables (age, gender, married, education, religion, born again status, frequency of religious attendance, partisanship, ideology, employment status, and household income). The purpose of running these multivariate models is to better estimate differences among national origin groups relative to Cubans (the base category), while holding these factors constant. Overall, the differences in preferences regarding general policies indicate that Cuban Americans do not differ greatly from other Latin American national origin groups. Table 1 presents predicted probability differences in choosing the 1 versus the 0 category on each of the dichotomously coded general policy preference measures, holding all else constant. Only those predicted probability differences (relative to Cubans) associated with statistically significant logit coefficient estimates (.05 level) from our multivariate binary logistic regression models will be noted.

TABLE 1

CUBAN VS. NON-CUBAN SUPPORT FOR GENERAL POLICY ISSUES

	IRAQ WAR	STANDARIZED TEST	SCHOOL VOUCHERS	SCHOOLS EQUAL FUNDING	SAME SEX MARRIAGE	ABORTION
MEXICO	-12%	-	+11%	-	-	-
PUERTO RICO	-8%	-	-	-	-	-
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	-12%	-	+19%	-	-	-
EL SALVADOR	-7%	-	+18%	-	-23%	+12%
CENTRAL AMERICA	-	-	+25%	-	-	-
SOUTH AMERICA	-14%	+11%	+14%	-	-	-
SPAIN	-	-	-	-	-	-

As Table 1 shows, there are two general policy issues where Cubans are significantly different, relative to most other national origin groups: the issue of U.S. involvement in the Iraq War and the question of support for school vouchers. On the question of school vouchers, the predicted probability of favoring the “conservative” option (i.e., favoring school vouchers even if that would take money away from the public schools) is higher among most of the other Latin American groups (relative to Cubans)—often by substantial margins (holding all else constant). The other clear difference is that all Latin American groups are less supportive of the war in Iraq than are the Cubans, that is, Cubans are more conservative on the war. It is noteworthy that there is virtually no difference between Cubans and others regarding same-sex marriages and abortion given that these policies, especially abortion, strongly separate mainstream liberals and conservatives. When analyzing these general policy issues as a group, we are struck by the fact that (with the exception of Cubans being significantly more pro-war than other Latin American groups) Cubans do not hold more conservative positions relative to other Latin American groups on any issue. And the results on the question of school vouchers indicates that, in fact, Cubans hold more traditionally “liberal” views relative to non-Cubans, holding all else constant. Their position on the voucher issue may reflect the existence of strong private schools in Miami, which obviate their need of a voucher program.

Cubans differ from the other nationalities regarding ethnic policy preferences (see Table 2). Surprisingly, they are less supportive of charging higher in-state tuition to children of undocumented immigrants (i.e., they take a more “liberal” pro-ethnic position) than most Latino nationalities, including Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Central and South Americans. They are less supportive of English immersion policies (a traditionally “conservative” position) than Mexicans, Central Americans, and South Americans, and more given to supporting

legalization of the undocumented than are Puerto Ricans and hold views similar to those of all other Latino nationalities regarding their evaluation of the contributions immigrants make to society. In short, there is no evidence that, once we account for POBA, primary subjective identification, and our extensive set of control variables, Cubans are any more “conservative” on ethnic policy issues. If anything, Cubans demonstrate a more liberal (“pro-ethnic”) position relative to other major Latin American groups on the issues of English-only instruction after one year, charging children of undocumented immigrants higher in-state tuition, and support for legalization (amnesty) for undocumented immigrants.

TABLE 2

CUBAN VS. NON-CUBAN SUPPORT FOR PRO-ETHNIC POLICIES

	DREAM ACT	ENGLISH IMMERSION	EVALUATION OF IMMIGRANTS	IMMIGRATION POLICY
MEXICO	+5%	+12%	-	-
PUERTO RICO	+14%	-	-	-10%
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	+8%	-	-	-
EL SALVADOR	-	-	-	-
CENTRAL AMERICA	+12%	+14%	-	-
SOUTH	+9%	+17%	-	-

AMERICA				
SPAIN	-	-	-	-21%

Like almost all nationalities, Cubans also favor government-funded income support and a guaranteed national income, but like Mexicans and Puerto Ricans do not clearly favor guaranteed health care. On questions regarding the role of a “strong state,” then, we find that Cubans are not substantially more “conservative” relative to other national origin groups. And on the question of government involvement in health care, we find that Cubans are actually more pro-state (liberal) than Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Central Americans.

TABLE 3

CUBAN VS. NON-CUBAN SUPPORT FOR FEDERAL INCOME AND HEALTH SUPPORT

	GOVERNMENT INCOME SUPPORT	GUARANTEED HEALTH CARE	GUARANTEED NATIONAL INCOME
MEXICO	-	-5%	-
PUERTO RICO	+4%	-7%	-
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	-	-	-
EL SALVADOR	-	-	-15%
CENTRAL AMERICA	-	-15%	-
SOUTH AMERICA	-	-	-
SPAIN	+11%	-	-

Combining these results strongly suggests that Cubans are not conservative because of their political culture or Cubanness, that is, because of their shared historical values and more recent political experiences. Instead, their conservatism is situational. It can be explained as a rational response to opportunities and policy options. Initially, anti-Castro sentiments were so powerful that they masked the total context in which Cuban-American politics developed and evolved. As new generations matured, anti-Castro sentiments began eroding and a broad range of issues began dominating the Cuban-American agenda. This has now evolved to the point that a slight majority of Cuban-American voters turned out in support of President Obama in 2012.

This is potentially of great significance. To the extent that Cuban Americans are not conservative on social and moral issues and support government interventions designed to provide designed to provide national health insurance and guarantee minimum incomes for all families, Republicans will find it increasingly difficult to hold on to, much less increase, the support they have long received from Cuban Americans. If Democrats create political opportunities for Cuban Americans by reaching out to them as potential candidates and advocate policies Cubans support, Republicans will have little to offer Cuban Americans in exchange for their vote. Without Cuban Americans, Republicans will become an all-white party with a shrinking constituency and diminishing influence.

In conclusion, Cuban Americans are not intrinsically conservative, and it is reasonable to suggest that as their vote increasingly is cast in support of their policy preferences, they will hasten the bluing of America.

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