

# New Congress emboldens Cuban Democrats

**A new generation of Democrats is working to lure Cuban Americans away from the Republican Party they have supported for decades.**

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By her own account, Susana Betancourt earned her anti-Castro cred by helping to represent Bacardi in its trademark fight over Havana Club Rum against the Cuban government -- and winning.

At 37, she's a successful and politically active Gen-Xer, a rising star in Miami's contentious political scene, working to lure Cuban Americans away from the Republican Party.

With Democrats in control of Congress and Raúl Castro running Cuba the past six months as his brother Fidel remains ailing, some believe change is on the horizon. Last week, a bipartisan group, including Arizona Republican Rep. Jeff Flake, and New York Democrat Charles Rangel, once again introduced a bill in the U.S. House to allow travel to Cuba.

If Democrats act as a catalyst for change, Cuban Americans from their party will be in a position that could present both opportunity and political peril.

'There is this ongoing presumption that if you're Cuban you're automatically a Republican, and when you tell people you're Democrat, it's almost like the old guard looks at you and says, 'I didn't realize you're a communist,' " said Betancourt, president of the Miami-Dade Democratic Hispanic Caucus.

Betancourt is counting on disillusionment with President Bush's Cuba policy to attract younger Cuban-American voters, in particular, to the Democratic camp. "You've had a Republican president and you've had a Republican-controlled Congress," she said. "What changes have we seen?"

## **SOLD OUT?**

Joe Garcia, vice president of the New Democrat Network, said the Bush administration hobbled the Republican Party by "selling itself out to the ultra-right."

"What I think you are going to find from Democrats is they are going to look to engage the Cuban-American community for the solution," Garcia said.

Republicans point out that Cuban-American voters tend to be more conservative on Cuba policy than more recently arrived exiles, who may favor easing restrictions on travel and remittances.

State Rep. David Rivera, a Republican who led a group three years ago that lobbied the Bush administration to tighten the embargo, said Democrats have to tread carefully.

"Any Democratic presidential candidate that tries to embrace a more liberal approach toward Cuba policy does so at their own peril," Rivera said. "Because they are trying to appeal to a group of individuals who are not as relevant to the political process as they may be led to believe."

Seventy-two percent of Cuban-American voters are registered Republicans, according to a recent poll conducted by Bendixen & Associates, a polling firm closely aligned with the Democrats. Only 11 percent are registered Democrats.

Those statistics don't discourage a group outnumbered almost 7-1. They recall how Democrat Bill Clinton made inroads when seeking reelection in 1996, garnering 40 percent of the vote in predominantly Cuban-American precincts.

This younger generation of Democrats is carrying on a torch kindled decades ago by former Hialeah Mayor Raul Martinez, former Florida state Rep. Annie Betancourt (no relation to Susana Betancourt) and others. Many exiles say U.S. policy toward Cuba is too harsh.

## **GENERATION GAP**

Conducted several weeks after Fidel Castro ceded power to Raúl, the poll found that Cubans who arrived from the island before 1980 toed a harder line on sanctions than those who arrived afterward. That makes sanctions -- such as limiting travel to visit family in Cuba to once every three years -- a potential wedge issue.

Bendixen's poll showed that 49 percent of Cuban Americans favored the 2004 sanctions and 45 percent opposed them. Cuban exiles who arrived after 1980 opposed sanctions 55 percent to 41 percent; those who came before 1980 favored restrictions 63 percent to 29 percent.

A similar poll conducted in September for U.S. Rep. Lincoln Díaz-Balart found Cuban Americans in his district backed current sanctions, although younger voters were less likely to support the embargo. In that poll, 80 percent of the Cuban Americans interviewed arrived before the Mariel boatlift.

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen said softening the embargo will not help bring democracy to Cuba. "I would hope that regardless of how the Cuban Democrats approach the overarching policy, that we agree on the end goal, which is helping the Cuban people to establish freedom," she said. "We disagree on how best to get there."

Like Republicans, Democrats don't have a consensus on Cuba. Some Democrats, such as New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez, back sanctions. Some pro-trade Republicans have joined liberal Democrats to push for U.S. travel to Cuba and increased contacts they believe can help lead to democratic reform.

Key Democrats say they won't press to change U.S. policy while Castro is likely on his deathbed; they're waiting to see what leadership emerges.

## **BIDING THEIR TIME**

Democrats likely won't get enough votes to overturn a veto, which Bush has promised for any bill that attempts to soften the embargo and travel ban.

Nevertheless, Cuban-American Democrats see a chance to move the debate -- and, eventually, the White House -- in another direction.

Coral Gables City Attorney Elizabeth Hernandez, a Democrat, said Cuban Americans are split over the embargo.

"I always believe in destiny, and it's very ironic that the Democrats are in power the year we are hoping with sufficient amount of prayer that Fidel will meet his maker," Hernandez said. "I am hoping that the Democratic Party, which is the one that really planned for the reentry of Cuban exiles into Cuba when this first happened, will be at the helm when, hopefully, we are back in Cuba."

