

Democrats in no hurry to change Cuba policy

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WASHINGTON --

After Democrats seized control of Congress in November last year, the Bush administration's tough policies on Cuba appeared in trouble. Not any more.

Since the elections, more than a dozen bills were introduced to ease the U.S. sanctions, from relaxing or lifting travel restrictions to making it easier to export agricultural goods.

But the new Democratic leadership -- whose Republican predecessors had helped ensure no anti-sanctions initiatives reached Bush's desk -- has not pushed those bills and is unlikely to do so soon, Democratic congressional staffers and activists on both sides of the issue say.

The reasons range from more pressing priorities like Iraq and immigration reform to an unusually early start of the presidential campaign, with Florida figuring prominently given its early primary date. Plus, many Democrats prefer to wait for the political picture in Havana to clear before moving to change policy, the staffers and activists say.

"We started this year with high hopes that there would be some concrete and significant changes to a policy that we long felt has been wrong, immoral, failed," said Mavis Anderson, an advocate with the liberal Latin America Working Group. "The bills that have been introduced are good, but so far they're just sitting there."

One Democratic staffer said restrictions on U.S. citizens' travel to the island are especially unpopular among Democrats. One bill lifting all the restrictions proposed by Reps. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., and Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., has garnered 108 co-sponsors.

But the staffer, who asked for anonymity to talk freely on a delicate issue, said any quick changes were unlikely because many lawmakers are waiting for the post-Fidel Castro transition to unfold.

"There is some sort of transition under way [and] nobody wants to predict how that's going to play out," the staffer said. "Moving on any real initiative is probably not wise at this moment because we don't know what Cuba is going to look like four, five months from now."

Florida presidential politics are also weighing in, the staffer added. Although polls suggest Cuban-American attitudes toward the sanctions are changing, a majority of those who arrived in the United States prior to 1984 -- and are more likely to vote -- still oppose any concessions to Cuba.

This summer, the House is expected to engage what has become an annual ritual: voting on a bevy of amendments to spending bills that attack all angles of Cuba policy, from cutting funds for TV and Radio Martí to stopping funding for U.S. efforts to enforce the travel sanctions.

But even if these amendments pass the House, they face big hurdles. Approval in the Senate is less likely in part because of procedural matters and in part because Senate leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., is a supporter of a tough line on Cuba.

"Here, there is no talk about Cuba," said one Senate aide on the Democratic side who asked for anonymity because he was not authorized to comment on Cuba.