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# The Political Incorporation of Cuban Americans: Why Won't Little Havana Turn Blue?

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## Abstract

This article examines the political implications of the changing demographics of the Cuban American community. Over the past decade, pundits have predicted a massive shift in Cuban American voting behavior owing to demographic changes in the community. The authors find evidence that the attitudes of Cuban Americans have undergone significant changes, driven largely by the increased number of post-Mariel (1980) immigrants. The authors also find, however, that these dramatic changes have not yet been reflected at the ballot box, nor are they likely to be soon, owing to the slow process of immigrant political incorporation.

## Keywords

public opinion and political participation; race; ethnicity; politics

## Introduction

As the largest and fastest growing ethnic group in the United States, scholars have increasingly come to recognize the important role that Latinos play in American politics (e.g., Abrajano, Alvarez, and Nagler 2009; Kaufmann 2003; Pantoja and Gershon 2006). Between 1990 and 2008, the Latino population increased from 9 percent to 15.1 percent, and is expected to reach approximately 18 percent of the U.S. population by 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau 2008a). Even more importantly, Latinos are concentrated in some of the most competitive states (e.g., Florida, New Mexico), and their continued growth is expected to make other states more competitive in the near future (e.g., Texas).

Within this growing community, Cuban Americans are an exceptional case. Despite sharing similar cultural, social, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, Cuban Americans are distinctive among Latinos in their staunch support for the Republican Party. Cuban Americans routinely vote for Republican presidential candidates at rates exceeding 65 percent (Goodnough 2004), turn out to vote at very high rates compared to other Latinos (Garcia Bedolla 2009), and are disproportionately concentrated in Florida, arguably the most important presidential battleground state.

Having observed dramatic demographic changes in the Cuban community over the past decade, during each of the last two presidential campaigns scholars and pundits have

predicted that Cuban Americans would abruptly turn and vote Democratic (e.g., Goodnough 2004; Reiff 2008; Silva 2007). By the year 2000, for instance, the community was about equally split between immigrants who arrived before and after the Mariel boatlift of 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Unlike earlier political refugees, post-1980 immigrants tend to be economic refugees who lack the anti-Castro fervor that characterizes earlier émigrés' political views (e.g., Bendixen 2009). Consequently, their ties to contemporary Cuba are much stronger, and they tend to hold more moderate political preferences, especially on questions of U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba.

Predictions of dramatic change in the attitudes and behavior of the Cuban American electorate are grounded in a distinguished literature on voting behavior that holds that social psychological attachments like partisanship and predispositions toward key actors and about central issues strongly influence vote choice (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960). From this perspective, the changing demographics that are

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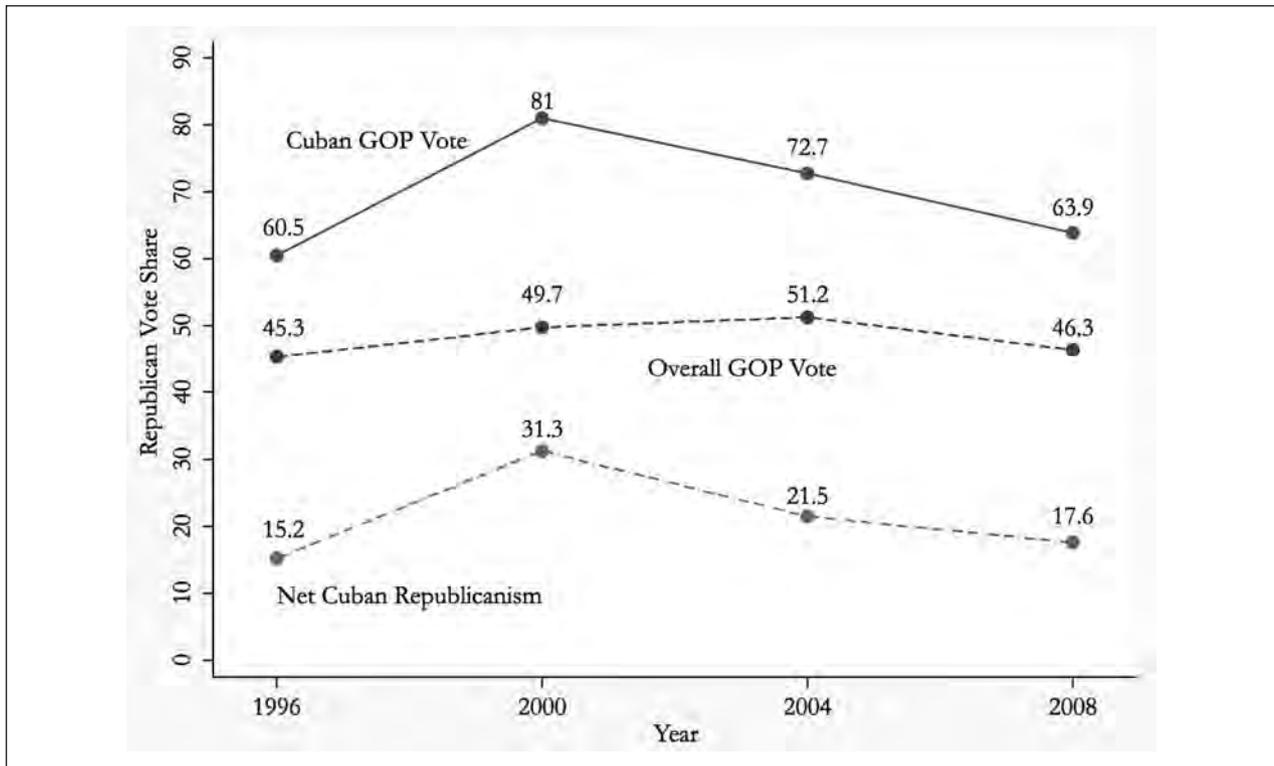
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**Figure 1.** Republican presidential vote share among Cuban-Americans in Miami Dade County, 1996-2008

Source: Data for 1996 from FIU Cuba Poll (Grenier and Gladwin 1997); 2000 data from Goodnough (2004); 2004 data from 2004 exit poll of voters in Miami Dade County (Bishin and Stevens 2004); 2008 data from 2008 exit poll of voters in Miami Dade County (Bishin and Klostad 2008).

occurring portend potentially dramatic change in voting patterns due to the increased numbers of post-Mariel immigrants and native-born Cuban Americans who are creating an electorate that is less staunchly Republican and less fiercely anti-Castro.

While the logic of rapid change in Cuban Americans' vote choice is theoretically compelling, recent elections have evinced little support for the claim that the Cuban American electorate is becoming more progressive. The electorate's continued strong support for the GOP is perhaps most clearly seen by examining Cuban American support for Republican presidential candidates.

The top line in Figure 1 shows the proportion of Cuban Americans who voted for the GOP in Miami Dade County in the last four presidential elections, while the middle line depicts the proportion of all voters who voted for the GOP.<sup>1</sup> The bottom line of the graph shows the difference between overall GOP support and Cuban American support for the GOP. This line allows us to see whether changes in support for Republicans among Cuban Americans are an artifact of changes in overall support for Republican candidates. While the 2008 election saw the continuation of a trend of decreased support for the GOP among Cuban Americans since 2000, John McCain still garnered about 64 percent of the vote, a figure better than the 60.5 percent obtained

by Bob Dole in 1996. Moreover, when one considers the extraordinary circumstances of the Elian Gonzalez affair, the 2000 election seems likely to represent a high-water mark for Cuban American support of Republicans.<sup>2</sup> Given this context, the pattern is difficult to identify, but to the extent that a decline is occurring, it appears more gradual than sharp.

While these results run contrary both to pundits' prognostications and expectations of voting behavior studies, they are much more consistent with the implications of decades of research on political incorporation. Research shows that political incorporation tends to occur gradually as an individual's resources, English fluency, age, education, generations in the United States, and most importantly, the amount of time a person has been in the United States all develop relatively slowly over time (e.g., Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1989; DeSipio 1996; Wong 2000; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Eckstein 2004; Ramakrishnan 2005; Bloemraad 2006). Consequently, the predictions of the research on political incorporation contradict the expectations implied by traditional accounts of voting behavior, which seldom account for immigrants.

This article examines the attitudes and behavior of Cuban Americans in light of the large demographic changes that have occurred over the past thirty years and is motivated

by a simple question: Why do Cuban Americans still overwhelmingly support Republican candidates at the ballot box? Our results suggest that contrary to both pundits' predictions and the expectations of traditional models of voting behavior, Cuban Americans' behavior is better explained by research on political incorporation. As the foreign-born population constitutes a large and growing proportion of the U.S. population—in 2009, 12.5 percent of residents were foreign born, up from 4.7 percent in 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010)—theories of incorporation have become increasingly important to understanding American political behavior.

Our assessment of Cuban American voting behavior begins with a description of recent changes in the makeup and attitudes of the Cuban American community. We then offer an explanation for why Cuban Americans' voting behavior has not changed despite these shifts. Specifically, we argue that owing to their differing socializing experiences, those who immigrated after the Mariel boatlift of 1980 tend to hold different attitudes than those who immigrated before. Moreover, consistent with the literature on political incorporation, post-Mariel immigrants' relatively low socioeconomic status, and the differing incentives provided by the U.S. government at the time of their arrival, leads to their dramatic underrepresentation in the voting electorate relative to pre-Mariel immigrants. The differences in attitudes that map from the two different immigration experiences to contemporary behavior both explain why Little Havana refuses to turn blue and illustrate how the political incorporation of Cuban immigrants has been influenced by traditional explanations of voting behavior (e.g., individual resources) as well as the institutional contexts that they left in Cuba and to which they arrived in the United States.

### **The Growth and Change of the Cuban American Community**

Over the past thirty years, the makeup of the Cuban American community has undergone a striking change. Before 1959, few Cuban Americans lived in South Florida as Tampa, Florida, and Union City, New Jersey, were the primary destinations for Cuban immigrants. Following the overthrow of the Batista government, however, South Florida became the primary destination for Cuban immigrants such that by 2000, 58.9 percent of the approximately 1.3 million Cuban Americans living in the United States resided in Miami Dade (656,751), Broward (53,150), or Palm Beach (26,157) counties (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). By 2007, the population had increased such that 69.4 percent of Cubans living in the United States resided in Florida (U.S. Census Bureau 2007), with only 5.2 percent in California and 5.5 percent in New Jersey. Moreover, of those Cubans who immigrated after the Mariel boatlift

(i.e., those who immigrated since 1980), 80.5 percent reside in Florida, with only 3.3 percent residing in New Jersey, 3 percent in California, and less than 2 percent residing in New York (U.S. Census Bureau 2007).

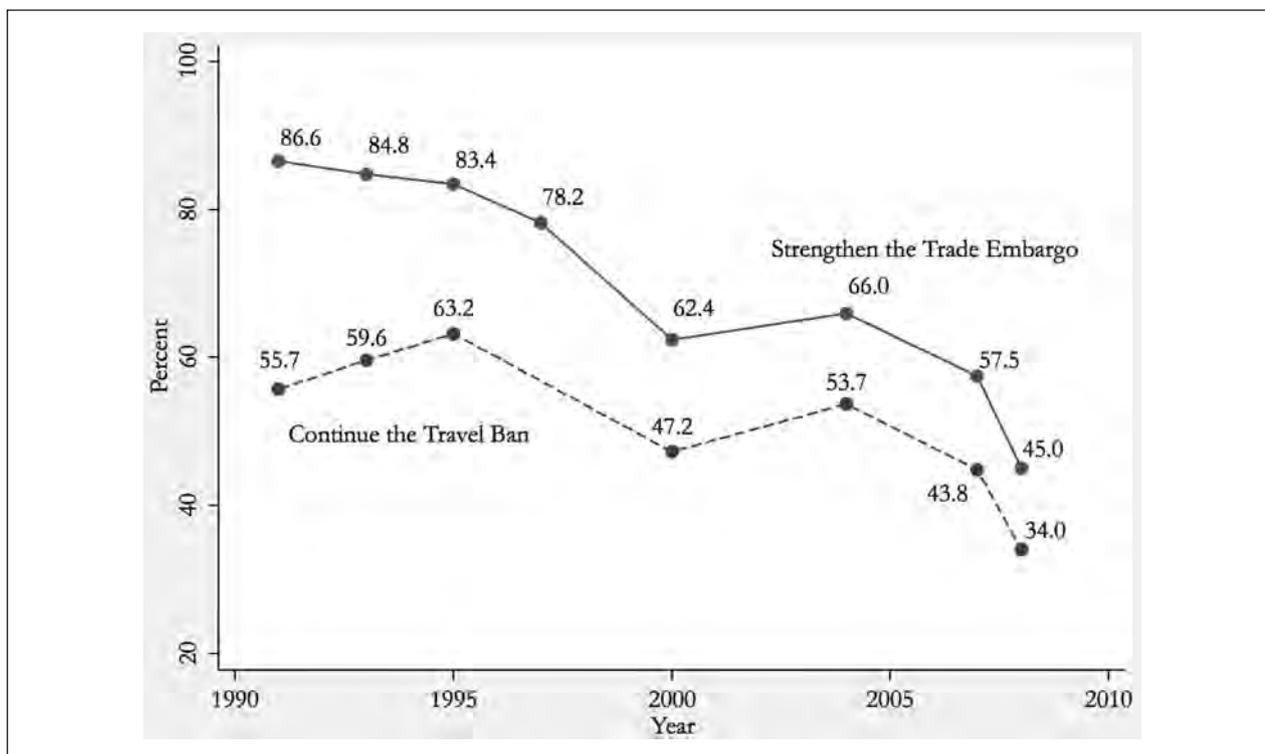
Paralleling the changes immediately following the Cuban Revolution, the magnitude of the influx of post-Mariel immigrants has been striking. In 2000, pre- and post-Mariel immigrants constituted about equal portions of the Cuban American population (37.6 percent vs. 37.4 percent) in the State of Florida while the native born accounted for the remainder. By 2007, these trends were reflected nationally as post-Mariel immigrants constituted a majority (52.8 percent) of foreign-born Cuban Americans and 32.4 percent of the Cuban American community while pre-Mariel immigrants constituted 31.3 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2007).

### **The Political Importance of Mariel**

In the spring of 1980, following the Cuban government's siege of the Peruvian embassy in Havana with thousands of asylum-seeking Cubans inside, Fidel Castro temporarily allowed all those who wanted to leave Cuba to do so. This policy fostered the boatlift from the port of Mariel, which occurred from late April through September of 1980. As these émigrés had to find their own way out of Cuba, and owing to South Florida's proximity, it became the logical destination for many of these refugees. About 125,000 Cubans immigrated to the United States during this period (Card 1990).

Mariel is significant not just for the large number of people who left Cuba, but perhaps most importantly because it signaled the arrival of a new type of émigré. In general, those who left prior to Mariel were political refugees who flourished in Batista's Cuba but struggled with the Revolution. These immigrants tended to hold higher skilled jobs (Eckstein 2004) and were more likely to have had property seized and relatives persecuted, imprisoned, or tortured at the hands of the Castro government. In addition, upon arriving in the United States, these immigrants were able to avail themselves of a variety of "Great Society" programs that would help foster their economic success (e.g., Eckstein 2004).

Today, these pre-Mariel refugees are devoutly Republican, a phenomenon that stems from two primary sources. First, this group's support for the GOP emanates from the party's strong anti-communist stand as well as their perception that the Democratic Party has repeatedly bungled U.S. Cuba policy. The disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, the inadequate response to the shoot-down of humanitarian rescue planes by Cuban Migs in 1996, and the repatriation of Elian Gonzalez in 2000 are just a few examples of how, on the issues important to Cuban Americans, Democrats have repeatedly opposed them. Reinforcing this Republican



**Figure 2.** Foreign policy attitudes among Cuban American community over time  
Source: FIU polls of Cuban Americans in Miami Dade County 1991-2008 (Gladwin 2008).

affiliation, Cuban Americans' economic success has made them receptive to Republicans' pro-business and small government platforms.<sup>3</sup>

Post-Mariel immigrants, in contrast, were socialized in Revolutionary Cuba and tend to have had little experience with Batista's Cuba (Eckstein 2004). Unlike the pre-Mariel immigrants, their motivation to emigrate was less political and more directly tied to the desire for increased economic opportunity. They were less likely to be economically well off while living in Cuba (Eckstein 2004) and are more likely to have close ties to people who remain on the island (e.g., Bendixen 2009). Moreover, given their very different life experiences, post-Mariel immigrants living in the United States earn about 50 percent less (\$14,194 vs. \$22,638) and are less likely to have a college degree (18.8% vs. 26.9%) than are the pre-Mariel immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau 2003).

The surge of post-Mariel Cubans into the United States and especially Florida is potentially quite important because to the extent that we see a shift in attitudes in the Cuban American community, they may be driven by these groups' very different life experiences, socioeconomic circumstances, and opportunities both in Cuba prior to their leaving and in the United States once they arrived (e.g., Eckstein 2004; Hill and Moreno 1996).

## The Evolution of Cuban American Attitudes

Presumably, the dramatic changes in the voting behavior of Cuban Americans that pundits have predicted should be preceded by changes in the community's attitudes. Historically, the defining issue for the Cuban American community has been U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba, as this issue speaks directly to this community's feelings about the Castro regime. Studies show that Cuban Americans are much more strongly opposed to trade with and travel to Cuba than are non-Cuban Americans (Bishin 2009). Consequently, perhaps the best place to look for change in the community's political attitudes is on these issues.

The data in Figure 2 summarize attitudes toward the travel ban and trade embargo by Cuban Americans in South Florida between 1991 and 2008.<sup>4</sup> These data illustrate a substantial shift, suggesting that attitudes in the community have gradually become more moderate over time. Support for further tightening trade restrictions has diminished from a high of 86.6 percent in 1991 to the point that by 2008, a majority no longer supported tightening the restrictions.<sup>5</sup>

A similar trend is seen on attitudes toward the travel ban. Traditionally, attitudes toward the travel ban have been

more moderate than those toward the embargo. Where the embargo is seen as most directly punishing the Castro regime by cutting off funds—with the hope of leading to its collapse—the travel ban engenders more permissive attitudes because travel does not appear to directly enrich the regime, and many Cuban Americans still have family they wish to visit on the island. Nonetheless, Figure 2 shows a similar pattern of opinion change over time on the travel ban. Whereas just under 56 percent favored continuing the ban on travel to Cuba in 1991, by 2008, only 34 percent favored continuing the travel ban.

Along with issue attitudes, data on partisanship also suggest a shift in the leanings of the Cuban American community. A large literature suggests that party identification is among the most important factors influencing political attitudes and behavior (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960). While research suggests that partisan identification is less susceptible to change than are attitudes (e.g., Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), the most recent evidence suggests that an abrupt change in party identification has occurred.

Evidence depicting Cuban American partisanship in Miami Dade County over time suggests that party identification was fairly constant until 2008, when we see a ten-point increase in Democratic identification from 17.6 percent to 27 percent concomitant with a sixteen-point decrease in Republican identification, from 68.5 percent to 52 percent (Gladwin 2008). It seems plausible that dissonance in the Cuban American community between attitudes on U.S. Cuba policy and the positions the parties take on these issues may have finally resulted in a large-scale shift in partisanship.<sup>6</sup> While it is difficult to parse competing explanations for this change, a significant shift in Cuban Americans' party identification is evident.

## Explaining Attitude Change

Given the large changes in the demographic and socioeconomic makeup of the Cuban American community, it seems quite possible that the changes in public opinion previously described are driven by the influx of post-Mariel immigrants with more progressive attitudes. Recall that these immigrants are primarily economic rather than political refugees. They are also more likely to have close family remaining in Cuba, and as such may see the trade embargo and travel restrictions as hurting their family financially and impeding their ability to visit their relatives (Bendixen 2009). Not surprisingly, among voters in 2004, post-Mariel immigrants were more likely than were pre-Mariel immigrants to list U.S. policy toward Cuba as one of their two most important issues (39.2 percent to 24.8 percent) (Bishin and Stevens 2004).

While it is difficult to definitively test the role of the Mariel cohort effect relative to the time in country effect

as the two variables are highly correlated, data necessary to examine the differences in issue attitudes by cohort are available by employing the 2009 Bendixen and Associates National Survey of Cuban Americans.<sup>7</sup> Examination of these national-level data largely confirms the results from South Florida seen in Figure 2 and suggest that regardless of when one emigrated from Cuba, support for repealing the travel ban is much greater than for ending the embargo.<sup>8</sup> On the travel ban, 60.5 percent of Cuban Americans who immigrated before Mariel support its cessation, as opposed to 82.3 percent of those who immigrated after. Similarly, 46.6 percent of pre-Mariel immigrants support ending the trade embargo while 57.9 percent of post-Mariel immigrants support this same position. The differences we observe are in the expected direction, and while they are significant only for the travel ban ( $p < .01$ ), the data on the trade embargo are suggestive ( $p = .15$ ).<sup>9</sup>

It is also interesting to note that whereas in 1991 a majority of the entire community opposed ending the travel ban (see Figure 2), now well over 50 percent of the *pre*-Mariel group supports ending it.<sup>10</sup> This finding is especially significant because it suggests that changes in the attitudes of the community as a whole are not solely the result of recent immigrants diluting the voice of these early immigrants but, to at least some small degree, the result of the traditionally "hardline" community softening its views somewhat on this issue. Taken together, these results are highly consistent with the idea that the changing composition of the Cuban American community is driving the overall community's attitude change, although the source of this change is more complex than commonly recognized.

A second explanation for attitude change in the community is generational. Although they were unable to examine attitudes among members of the later generations, since even today they do not yet constitute a large proportion of the community, Kevin Hill and Dario Moreno (1996) find that while opinion differences between generations vary across issues, no significant generational differences emerged on questions of U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba.<sup>11</sup> Their results are based on data from 1989, however, and may not fully reflect the generational differences that exist today.

A more contemporary view of the generational hypothesis posits that the children and grandchildren of the original exiles are coming of voting age, and tend to hold increasingly progressive views on trade with and travel to Cuba, less antipathy toward the Castro regime, and decreased identification with the Republican Party. But, while they are more progressive in their attitudes toward U.S.-Cuba foreign policy (as well as other attitudes), having been raised in staunchly Republican households, they tend to vote the party line. This generational attitude change

**Table 1.** Attitudes and Partisanship of Cuban American Voters by Time of Arrival and Generation, 2008 (Percentage)

	Generation		Difference	Time of arrival		Difference
	First	Second+		Pre-1980	Post-1980	
Eliminate trade sanctions	19.0	25.5	6.5	7.4	43.5	36.1***
Eliminate travel ban	24.4	32.9	8.5	11.9	50.6	38.7***
Republican	62.5	54.9	7.6	73.0	40.2	-32.8***

Source: 2008 exit poll of voters in Miami Dade County.

\*\*\* $p < .01$ .

is trumped by the influence of their parents' (and grandparents') partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960).

We can examine the plausibility of this argument by investigating whether second- and third-generation Cuban Americans (i.e., the native born) exhibit more lenient attitudes toward foreign policy with Cuba and stronger identification with the Republican Party. The data presented on the left-hand side of Table 1 separately summarize variation in attitudes and partisanship across generations (i.e., native vs. foreign born) and between immigrant cohorts (i.e., pre- and post-Mariel). Unlike the data presented earlier that examined the Cuban American community nationally, these data examine only the attitudes and behaviors of Cuban American voters in South Florida as they are the best available data that allow for examination of Cuban Americans' foreign policy attitudes across generations (Bishin and Klofstad 2008).<sup>12</sup>

The patterns presented in Table 1 are remarkably consistent across each of the items. In every case, as expected, first-generation (i.e., foreign born) Cuban Americans exhibit the most conservative and Republican attitudes, although these differences are never statistically significant. Consequently, while these data are in the expected direction, the absence of a statistically significant attitude difference among voters makes it unlikely that these generational differences can explain Cubans' failure to vote for Democrats.

The rightmost columns in Table 1 present data on voters' attitudes and party identification by date of immigration. In contrast to the differences by generation seen in the first three columns, the differences between pre- and post-Mariel immigrants are large and, in every case, statistically significant. The pre-Mariel immigrants exhibit more hardline positions as well as dramatically increased Republican identification.

While the results presented in Table 1 are more consistent with a cohort effect driven by differences in the socialization of those who immigrated before and after Mariel, it is also plausible that alternative factors may drive these differences. Perhaps the biggest challenge to the cohort hypothesis is that resource differences between

the groups stemming from income and socioeconomic status drive differences in attitudes and behavior.

To test these competing explanations, we conduct multivariate statistical analyses examining the attitudes of foreign-born (i.e., first generation) Cuban Americans on the trade embargo, travel ban, and partisan identification.<sup>13</sup> If different socializing experiences (i.e., cohort effects) rather than differences in socioeconomic status and levels of education explain these gaps, the pre-Mariel variable will be negatively associated with reduced restrictions on trade and travel but positively associated with Republican identification. Similarly, we examine the generational hypothesis and expect first-generation immigrants to be negatively disposed to reducing travel and trade restrictions, but more likely to identify as Republican. The results of both the cohort and generational tests are seen in Table 2.

Consistent with the previous results, the ordered probit analyses depicted in the first three columns of Table 2 show that those who immigrated before the Mariel boatlift are significantly less likely to support reducing restrictions on trade and travel, even after controlling for the effects of income and education. Moreover, the finding that those who immigrated before Mariel are significantly more Republican is especially important, as research consistently shows that party identification is the most powerful predictor of an individual's vote choice (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960). To the extent that these groups exhibit large differences in the strength of their attachments, the results seem likely to hold important implications for Cuban Americans' voting habits.

In contrast to the results examining generational effects seen in Table 1, the results for the generational hypothesis, seen in the last three columns (4-6) of Table 2 suggest that after controlling for income and education, first-generation immigrants are statistically significantly more conservative in both their issue attitudes and partisanship than are the native born.

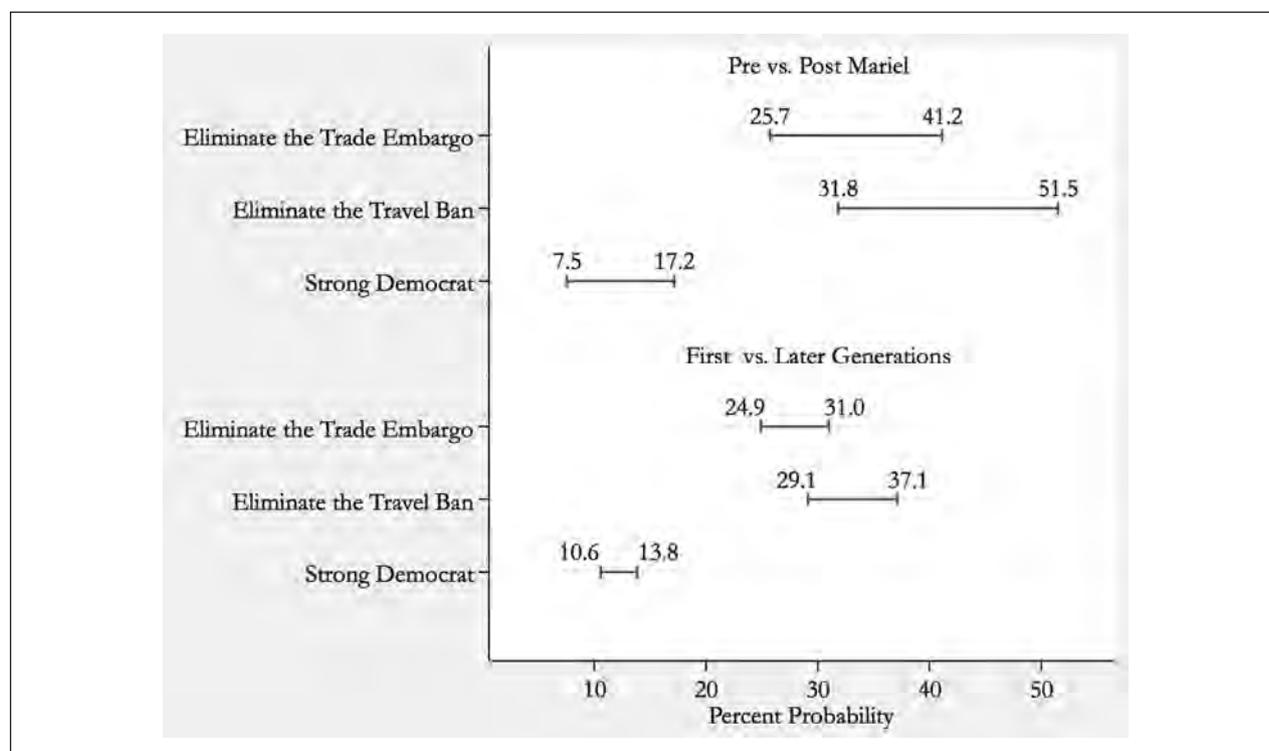
While the statistical results described earlier suggest that both time of immigration and generational effects are related to Cuban Americans' foreign policy attitudes and

**Table 2.** Ordered Probit Analyses of Cuban Americans' Attitudes on Trade with and Travel to Cuba as Well as Party Identification by Date of Immigration and Generation

	Cohort Effects			Generational Effects		
	Trade	Travel	Party Identification	Trade	Travel	Party Identification
Pre	-0.56*	-0.55*	0.81***			
Mariel	(0.29)	(0.28)	(0.23)			
First				-0.25*	-0.28**	0.26**
Generation				(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.13)
Income	-0.03	-0.10	-0.00	0.00	-0.05	0.09***
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Education	-0.01	0.10	-0.07	0.01	0.09*	-0.04
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Observations	107	106	109	543	548	555

Source: 2008 Exit Poll of Voters in Miami Dade County. Standard errors in parentheses. Cut points suppressed.

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .



partisanship, they tell us little about their relative magnitudes. To assess the impact of these various influences, we conduct simulations using Clarify (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 1999) to examine how opinion and partisanship change with shifts in immigration cohort and generation. Specifically, holding all other independent variables constant at their medians, we examined how the probability of supporting the elimination of the trade and travel

embargoes and the propensity to identify as a strong Democrat shift with a change in immigration cohort from pre- to post-Mariel and from first to later generations. The results of these analyses are seen in Figure 3.

The results depicted in Figure 3 are consistent with expectations as support for the more progressive policy position and party attachment is higher among those who immigrated after than before Mariel. Similarly, support

**Table 3.** Probit Analysis of Support for George W. Bush among Cuban Americans in 2004

	Cohort Model	Generational Model
Constant	-2.33*** (0.65)	-1.89*** (0.57)
Party Identification	1.29*** (0.31)	0.90*** (0.20)
Pre Mariel	0.67** (0.26)	
First Generation		0.41 (0.25)
Income	-0.12 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.06)
Education	0.05 (0.08)	-0.05 (0.07)
Church Attendance	0.17* (0.10)	0.24*** (0.09)
Observations	155	211

Source: 2006 Latino National Survey (LNS). Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

for progressive policy positions and partisan attachments are higher among later generations than among the first generation. Perhaps the largest difference, however, is in the magnitude of the shifts. As indicated by the longer lines, the change in the probability associated with shifting whether one immigrated before or after Mariel is greater on each indicator than is the change associated with generational differences.

### Why Won't Little Havana Turn Blue?

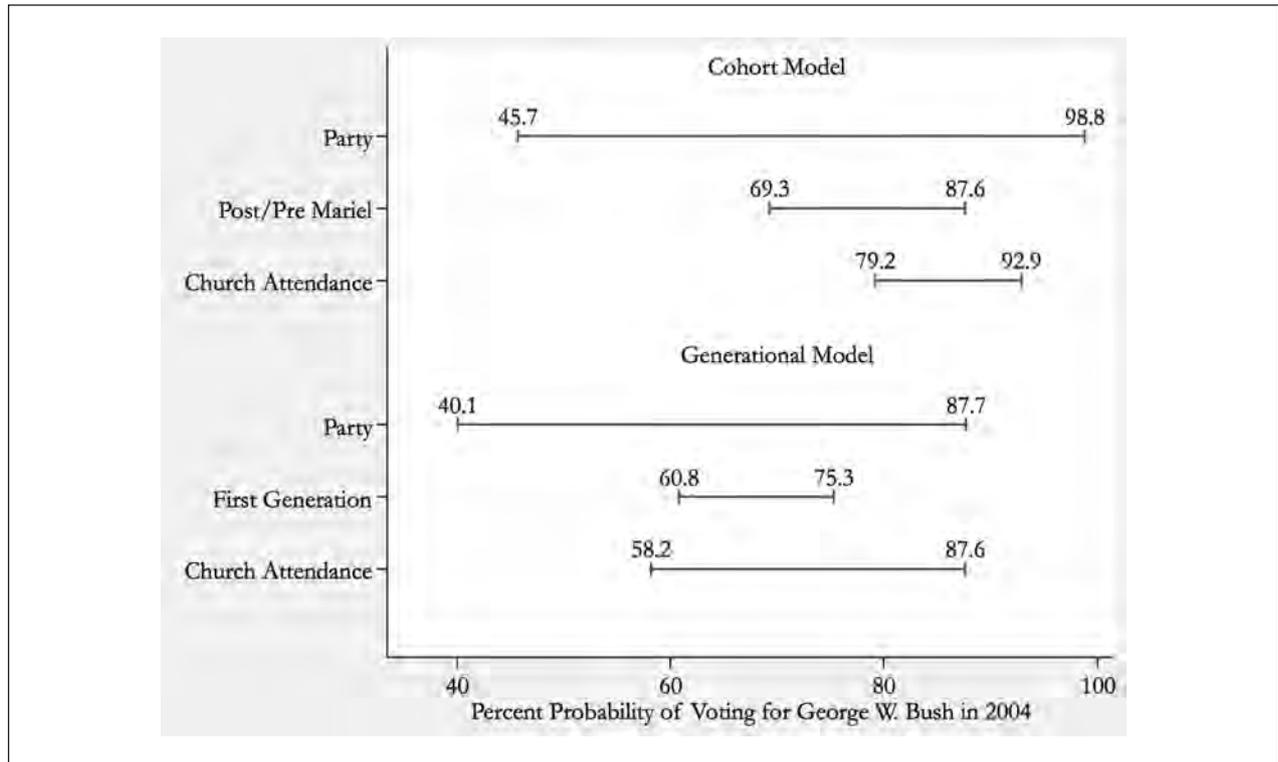
The remarkable change in the demographic composition and attitudes of the Cuban American community over the past twenty years leads one to question why we don't see more support for Democratic candidates among Cuban American voters. While one might be inclined to view the 2008 presidential election as a new benchmark for Democrats as John McCain "only" won 63.9 percent of the Cuban American vote, this total is still large relative to the 60.5 percent garnered by Bob Dole in 1996. Moreover, in each of the three 2008 South Florida congressional races in which Cuban American Republican incumbents (i.e., Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Mario Diaz-Balart, and Lincoln Diaz-Balart) were challenged by Cuban American Democrats, the Republican won handily. In the races for the seats held by Mario and Lincoln Diaz-Balart, the Republican candidates won despite the Democratic Party recruiting strong challengers and providing substantial financial support.

Predictions of change stem from the observation that the changing demographics will alter the political makeup of the Cuban American community; however, several factors seem to portend moderation in Cuban Americans' voting behavior. First, members of the second and third generations are increasingly entering the community and electorate. Conventional wisdom suggests that having not experienced communist Cuba, these native-born voters may not feel the passion for the issues that relate to it. As one person we spoke with noted, "To my kids Castro is just a guy dad tells stories about."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as we saw in the previous section, once resource differences are considered, we observe significant generational differences in attitudes and partisanship. Second, because of the influx of new immigrants and the passing of the older exiles, demographic trends depict a community that increasingly consists of post-Mariel immigrants. As with the generational effects, these cohort differences are also manifest in attitude and partisan differences.

While the results to this point are suggestive, we have yet to present any direct evidence that cohort or generational effects are associated with Cuban Americans' vote choice. While national surveys examining Cuban Americans' attitudes and behavior are seldom conducted, data assessing Cuban Americans' voting patterns in 2004 are available in the 2006 Latino National Survey (Fraga et al. 2006).<sup>15</sup> These data are especially valuable because in addition to providing a snapshot of voting patterns for Cubans nationwide, they also allow for the assessment of the degree to which Cuban Americans' vote choice is influenced by resource, cultural, or cohort effects.

We begin by summarizing the differences between cohorts and across generations in the support for George W. Bush in 2004. The results indicate significant differences across both cohorts and generations.<sup>16</sup> While 85.8 percent of those who immigrated before the Mariel boatlift supported Bush, a rate 22.5 ( $p < .01$ ) points higher than those who immigrated after, 73.8 percent of first-generation Cuban Americans supported Bush, a rate 22.6 points higher (63.4 percent) than did later generations ( $p < .01$ ). These differences in vote choice seem consistent with the attitudinal and partisan differences depicted in Table 2.

To better account for alternative explanations of the vote, we estimate a probit model of respondent preference for George Bush among Cuban Americans in the 2004 election. We test the cohort hypothesis with a dummy variable, called *pre Mariel*, indicating whether the respondent immigrated before the Mariel boatlift. Similarly, we test the generational hypotheses in separate analyses, as combined analysis is not possible (see note 13), by employing a variable called *first generation*. We also control for *party identification*, a three-point scale in which higher values indicate increased Republican identification, as well as frequency



**Figure 4.** Influence of key variables on the probability of voting for George W. Bush in 2004

of *church attendance* as past research shows that these variables are strongly associated with Republican vote choice (e.g., Claassen and Povtak 2010), and may provide an alternative mechanism through which other cultural differences among Cuban Americans may affect their political behavior. Religion may play an especially important role as Castro closed many churches and declared Cuba an atheist state, facts that might have encouraged immigration. As a consequence, it is possible that some of the differences we observe in the attitudes and behavior of pre- versus post-Mariel immigrants are driven by religiosity. Finally, as in the opinion models, we control for respondents' income and levels of education.

The results of the multivariate analyses are seen in Table 3 and suggest that *party identification*, *church attendance*, and the *pre Mariel* variable are correctly signed and significant predictors of a respondent's vote choice. These results provide a powerful corroboration of the cohort hypothesis given that they control for the most direct and obvious rival explanations for the results seen in the preceding tables. They also suggest that religiosity, an often overlooked influence, may play an important role above and beyond the role of party and immigration cohort. The results are slightly less consistent with the generational hypothesis, however, as while the coefficient for first

generation is correctly signed, it is not quite significant ( $p = .101$ ). Overall, these differences imply that we can be highly confident that immigration cohort helps explain the disjuncture between attitudes and behavior, even after accounting for resource based arguments.

To get a better sense of the magnitude of the influence of partisanship, religiosity, and immigration cohort, we employ simulations to estimate how changes in each of the statistically significant variables from the statistical analyses affect the probability of voting for George W. Bush in 2004. The probabilities that result from shifting party identification, immigration cohort, religiosity, and generation from their minimum to their maximum values, while holding all other variables at their medians, are seen in Figure 4.

The results depicted in Figure 4 show that while each of these variables has a relatively large impact on the propensity to vote for George W. Bush, only shifting one's partisanship (from Democrat to Republican) is powerful enough to lead one to change their vote. It is worth noting, however, that among the first generation (i.e., immigrants), the effect of shifting religiosity (from never attending church to attending more than once a week) is slightly smaller than the shift that is attributable to immigrating before versus after the Mariel boatlift. Among all Cuban Americans,

the role of religiosity is roughly twice the size of the shift from being a first- versus later generation Cuban American. These results suggest that behavioral change in the community is unlikely to be mainly driven by the growing population of second- and later generation Cuban Americans.

### The Community Versus the Electorate: Socioeconomics and Institutions

While these differences in date of immigration go some distance in helping to explain the disjuncture between policy attitudes, partisanship, and the vote, by themselves they do little to explain why Little Havana refuses to turn blue. Given the roughly equal populations of pre- and post-Mariel immigrants in the Cuban American community, and their opposing views seen in Table 1, we might expect lower levels of support for McCain and Bush and higher levels of support for eliminating the travel ban and trade sanctions.

One explanation for this puzzle might stem from differences in the composition of the Cuban American community versus the Cuban American voting electorate. More specifically, if post-Mariel immigrants were underrepresented at the ballot box, then we might expect to see higher levels of support for McCain among voters than among the community as a whole.

An examination of the proportion of Cuban American voters in South Florida who immigrated before and after 1980 suggests that there is likely some merit to this argument. Despite post-Mariel immigrants constituting a majority of foreign born Cubans in the community, in both 2004 and 2008, 78.6 percent and 71.7 percent of the Cuban American *electorate* consisted of pre-Mariel immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau 2004, 2008b). Moreover, while the increase in participation among post-Mariel immigrants between 2004 and 2008 (from 21.6 percent to 28.3 percent) is far too small to explain the entire gap, it is also consistent with the decreased support for John McCain compared to George Bush as the proportion of post-Mariel immigrants that voted increased by about 6 percent between 2004 and 2008.

What explains the fact that the Cuban American electorate continues to be dominated by pre-Mariel immigrants? Research on political incorporation frequently emphasizes the role that formal (i.e., government policies) and informal (e.g., competitive elections) institutions play in facilitating immigrant political incorporation (e.g., Bloemraad 2006; Ramakrishnan 2005). Others studying the incorporation of Cubans find that the institutional contexts from which the migrants left and to which they arrived both affect the ease of incorporation in society (Eckstein 2004).

Perhaps the most plausible explanations for this stunning gap in voter turnout between pre- and post-Mariel immigrants can be attributed to institutional and socioeconomic factors that may disproportionately inhibit post-Mariel immigrants.

Institutionally, the unique immigration policy that allows Cuban immigrants who make it to U.S. soil to stay and work is scarcely different than that faced by pre-Mariel immigrants under the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966. This policy holds that once in the United States, Cubans need not rush to obtain citizenship as virtually all Cubans are eligible for permanent residency after residing in the United States for one year. Owing to these conditions, attitude differences between pre- and post-Mariel Cuban immigrants are more likely to be rooted in other institutional and socioeconomic circumstances.

The U.S. government's receptivity toward new immigrants has decreased since the 1960s, and especially since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 (Bloemraad 2006). Owing to the less generous welfare state policies, post-Mariel immigrants face a less welcoming social context in which the state takes a much more *laissez faire* role in assisting immigrant assimilation when contrasted with the experience of earlier Cuban immigrants (e.g., Eckstein 2004). The less welcoming context, combined with the lower socioeconomic background of post-Mariel immigrants, may serve to increase the costs of political participation by implicitly limiting who can receive the right to vote by becoming a citizen.<sup>17</sup> As the process of obtaining citizenship can be very expensive, the financial incentives are such that post-Mariel immigrants are effectively discouraged from voting, in contrast to the earliest Cuban refugees who, despite facing similar institutional hurdles, tended to enter the United States with greater resources and at a point in history that was more accommodating of their circumstances (Bloemraad 2006).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, even those post-Mariel immigrants who want to bear the costs of becoming citizens must endure the torpid citizenship process, which under the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act takes about five years (Eckstein 2004). Immigrants who have not been in the United States this long are ineligible for citizenship and thus unable to vote.

To what extent do these institutional factors impede the participation of more recent immigrants? To answer this question, we use American Community Survey data from 2007 to compare the proportion of each of these immigrant groups that are qualified to vote (i.e., they are eighteen years old and citizens) from the pool of those who are theoretically eligible for citizenship by having been in the United States at least five years. The results show a dramatic gap: while about 90 percent of those who immigrated before Mariel are qualified, less than 46 percent of those who immigrated after 1980 are similarly qualified.

Similarly, we can also look to see if the participation rate among those who are qualified to vote (i.e., those who are over age eighteen and are citizens) is higher for those who immigrated before 1980 than for those who immigrated after. While the data on Cuban American immigrants from the 2008 American Community Survey November Voting Supplement are limited ( $N = 191$ ), the results are consistent with expectations. Of those who immigrated before 1980, 80.5 percent reported having voted, as compared to the 62.1 percent of the post-1980 immigrants who reported having done so.<sup>19</sup>

Even absent the interactions with the institutions we describe earlier, socioeconomic factors by themselves seem likely to play a role as well since post-Mariel immigrants have lower socioeconomic status than do earlier Cuban immigrants (e.g., Portes and Mozo 1985). As socioeconomic status is strongly associated with the ability to pay the costs of voting, we would expect them to vote at lower rates, even if obtaining citizenship were costless and immediate (Campbell et al. 1960; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Finally, Eckstein (2004) points out that these more recent immigrants were less likely to have been politically active in Cuba, and since political activity is habit forming (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), they are less likely to participate once in the United States.

## Conclusion

An often repeated joke in Miami holds that Democrats' best bet for making inroads in the Cuban American community lies in sending immigration lawyers to South Florida to help post-Mariel immigrants obtain citizenship. Our results suggest that while there may be some truth to this logic, the factors affecting Cuban Americans attitudes and behavior are far more complex than such folk wisdom suggests. Examining the political implications for the changing demographics of the Cuban American community, we find substantial evidence that attitudes of Cuban Americans have undergone significant change driven largely by the introduction of post-Mariel immigrants, who hold more progressive attitudes, into the community.

Consistent with past research on immigrant political incorporation, but contrary to the expectations of traditional models of voting behavior, we also find that these changes have not yet been reflected at the ballot box, nor are they likely to be soon, owing to the interplay between the distinct socioeconomic and institutional barriers that post-Mariel immigrants face. Not only do post-Mariel immigrants tend to lack the resources and social psychological attachments emphasized in traditional voting models, they also tend to be of lower socioeconomic status and, consequently, can less well afford the costs of citizenship and political participation. Overall, post-Mariel immigrants face greater hurdles in order to afford the costs of citizenship.

We also find some less conclusive evidence to suggest that generational differences will help make the community more progressive with time. While the impact of nativity (being a first vs. being a second or later generation) was not a statistically significant predictor of the vote ( $p = .15$ ) in Table 3, the coefficient was large and signed correctly. Moreover, generational differences in attitudes were evident in the multivariate analysis (Table 2). Taken together, these results suggest that generational effects may occur indirectly—perhaps through party identification and attitudes. Clearly more research is needed as these generational effects could be quite important since a plurality of the Cuban American community is now native born.

We present substantial theoretical and empirical evidence to validate the existence of cohort effects based on whether one immigrated before or after the Mariel Boatlift of 1980. This finding introduces an alternative to dominant explanations of political incorporation that emphasize individual resources (e.g., Ramakrishnan 2005), duration of time in the country (e.g., Uhlaner, Cain, and Kiewiet 1999; Wong 2002; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; Ramakrishnan 2005), generational differences among immigrant groups (e.g., Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001), and the openness of the country to immigrants and the ease with which it facilitates incorporation (e.g., Bloemraad 2006; Eckstein 2004). While the small size of the Cuban American community limits the data available to simultaneously test for both cohort and time in country effects, our evidence suggests that cohort effects persist even after controlling for individual resources and religiosity and are larger and more consistent than are generational effects.

These results suggest that scholars of political incorporation might benefit by considering the potential importance of cohort effects. The influence of cohort effects, however, seems unlikely to be limited to Cuban Americans. Differences in individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and outlook seem especially likely among immigrants from countries that experience major social or political upheaval. Immigrants from countries like Iran and Viet Nam might, upon closer inspection, exhibit characteristics similar to those exhibited by Cuban Americans. Consequently, scholars should consider the possibility that shared experiences among cohorts might affect group attitudes.

Our results also suggest that several trends will affect Cuban Americans' behavior in the future. Continued growth in the native-born Cuban American population (e.g., members of the second and third generations) seems likely to diminish support for the embargo, the travel ban, and Republican candidates. In addition, as the number of more recent immigrants in the electorate slowly increases, the electorate's views will become more diverse as the most recent (post-1980) immigrants hold the most progressive views on U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba. Finally, as the

pre-Mariel immigrants age, and ultimately pass away, both the community as a whole and the electorate will increasingly consist of post-Mariel immigrants and the native born, both of whom hold more moderate views. Consequently, while the community is becoming less extreme, and hence more fertile for Democratic politicians, there is little evidence that a shift is imminent.

It is also worth noting the limits of our data. Our evidence about political attitudes and partisanship is largely drawn from studies of Miami Dade County—home of the largest concentration of Cuban Americans in the United States. In contrast, our examination of Cuban American voting behavior is largely drawn from national surveys. While we believe that these results provide the most complete portrait of the incorporation of Cuban Americans currently available, the extent to which our findings are generalizable is dependent on the limited data available.

To the extent that all of these factors portend at least slightly more progressive political preferences, and consistent with past research on political incorporation, these trends suggest that Cuban American voters' strict allegiance to the GOP and strident support of bans on trade and travel will likely fade only gradually with time. It is important to note, however, that the process is occurring more slowly than pundits suggest. Staunch anti-Castro Republicans are not being replaced by either post-Mariel immigrants or later generations that are strong Democrats.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, to the extent that their allegiances fade, presumably new political ties will develop based on issues that are not especially salient today. Candidates' battles over these issues will likely determine how Cuban Americans vote in the future.

These policies have important normative implications as well. As we have seen with Cubans, one effect of this policy may be to systematically dissuade particular groups with low levels of resources from participating in politics. In essence, these policies serve to deny voice not just to Cubans, but to many of the least fortunate among us. Given that those with fewer resources have different needs from the government (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), this consequence of immigration policy, in at least some small way, diminishes representative democracy in the United States.

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### Notes

1. All data are available on request from the authors of those studies. Coding for replication is available from the authors. While 49.5 percent of Cuban Americans reside in Miami Dade County (U.S. Census Bureau 2008a), national data on the Cuban American vote are unavailable.
2. Guns drawn, officers removed the boy from his relatives' home in Miami to return him to Cuba.
3. As Eckstein (2004) notes, this group also benefited from social programs promulgated by Democrats during the "Great Society" (e.g., small businesses loans), which helped foster their economic success and ironically led to a pro-business outlook that favored Republicans. The post-Mariel immigrants came to the United States after these programs had largely been dismantled.
4. These data are taken from frequency tables in reports on the Florida International University Cuba Study Polls (1-8). See: <http://www.fiu.edu/orgs/ipor/IPORpastProjects.htm> (accessed March 26, 2009). Unfortunately, neither the raw data nor attitude data on social issues are available.
5. The figures combine those who "strongly" and "mostly" favor or oppose the policies.
6. Alternatively, this shift could reflect the poor economic climate in November 2008.
7. To ensure the representativeness of this small survey ( $n = 403$ ), we employed weights based on nativity and state of residence from the 2007 American Community Survey (ACS).
8. These results are corroborated by the 2008 FIU Cuba Policy Poll and the 2006 Latino National Survey (Fraga et al. 2006).
9. To further examine this, we employed the 2008 CPS November Voting Supplement (U.S. Census Bureau 2008b) and the 2006 Latino National Survey (LNS) (Fraga et al. 2006). Both samples are limited by small numbers who meet the necessary criteria (e.g., in the LNS, pre- and post-Mariel immigrants leave us with 127 and 47 cases, respectively, a number too small to disentangle collinear concepts). In the CPS data, both time in the United States and the *post-Mariel* variable are significant in models explaining naturalization.
10. As results from the Bendixen (2009) survey refer to national data, while Figure 2 refers to South Florida, the results are not directly comparable. Re-estimating by restricting the Bendixen data to Florida respondents, we find that 54.1 percent of pre-Mariel émigrés oppose the travel ban. Comparable data from South Florida are unavailable.
11. If members of third or later generations are those who, along with both parents, were born in the United States, then only 6.1 percent of Cubans qualified in 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008a).

12. These results are replicated using the national Bendixen (2009) study.
  13. Unfortunately, it is not statistically possible to test cohort and generational effects in the same model as the *pre-Mariel* indicator variable, which refers to when one immigrated, is a linear function of the *first generation* variable, pertaining only to first-generation immigrants.
  14. Interview with a Cuban American activist on October 6, 2008, in Coral Gables, Florida.
  15. Despite inclusion of a Latino oversample, the 2009 National Election Study includes only twenty-six Cuban Americans while the 2008 General Social Survey polled only fifteen. Consequently, the 2006 LNS are the only national-level data available for answering this question.
  16. To ensure the representativeness of Cubans in the LNS (N = 391), we employ weights based on nativity, year of immigration, and state of residence (from the 2005 ACS).
  17. Obtaining citizenship usually requires an attorney. The poor are less able to afford attorney's fees, and owing to current policy, the failure to pursue citizenship does not preclude them from working.
  18. While data for Cubans are unavailable, the proportion of naturalized immigrants (in the United States for five years) has decreased by half between 1950 and 2000 (from 80 percent to 40 percent) (Bloemraad 2006).
  19. Similarly, in 2004 (N = 87), the figures were 79.7 percent and 62.5 percent, respectively.
  20. Democrats' lack of effective political organization in the Cuban American community further inhibits their ability to mobilize these post-Mariel immigrants once they do enter the electorate.
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