

# William M. LeoGrande

## Updating Cuban Socialism: The Politics of Economic Renovation

“EITHER WE CHANGE COURSE—BECAUSE WE NO LONGER HAVE TIME TO keep on skirting around the precipice—or we will sink,” President Raúl Castro warned. “It is the life of the Revolution that is at stake.” Castro minced no words in his address to Cuba’s National Assembly in December 2010, just months after unveiling his comprehensive program for “updating” the Cuban economy. The old model of central planning adopted from the Soviet Union had stifled productivity to the point that the agriculturally well-endowed island had to import more than 70 percent of its food, a large percentage of state enterprises operated in perennial deficit, and the state itself faced a chronic shortage of capital to finance investment and of hard currency to finance essential imports (Sánchez Egozcue 2015).

Castro’s campaign to move the Cuban economy toward a more market-friendly model of socialism represented the last major project of *“los históricos”*—the historic generation that founded the revolutionary regime in 1959. By 2010, many of the old guard—including Fidel Castro himself—had succumbed to the march of time. But a handful, concentrated in the Cuban “cupola”—the top decision-making institutions of the state and Communist Party—remained in charge. It was their duty, Raúl explained, to correct the errors they had made over the previous half-century and hand the next generation a socialist system that was “prosperous and sustainable” (Castro 2012).



## UPDATING THE ECONOMY

The Cuban economy was neither prosperous nor sustainable when Raúl Castro assumed the presidency after his brother Fidel fell gravely ill in July 2006. Cuba had never fully recovered from the “Special Period”—the deep depression that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent loss of \$3 billion in annual aid. Although the economy grew gradually over the ensuing decade and a half, the gains were concentrated in tourism and medical services (exported primarily to Venezuela in exchange for cheap oil). The actual production of goods on the island had not regained 1989 levels. Hard currency earnings, even when supplemented by some \$3 billion in annual remittances, were hardly enough to cover essential imports of food and energy.

Raúl Castro wasted no time before unleashing a barrage of sharp, candid criticism of the economy, placing the blame for its failures squarely on Cuba’s own policies rather than on the US embargo. The central problem, he said bluntly, was low productivity. “No country or person can spend more than they have,” he reminded his comrades. “Two plus two is four. Never five, much less six or seven—as we have sometimes pretended” (Orsi 2011). Cuba needed to “untie the knots holding back the development of the productive forces,” starting with excessive state regulations (Castro 2011a).

Once Raúl had been elected president in his own right in 2008, he proceeded to eliminate a number of prohibitions that ordinary Cubans found especially exasperating. The government legalized the sale of computers and cell phones, and eliminated rules against Cubans staying in tourist hotels. In 2011, it legalized private real estate and automobile markets, allowing Cubans to buy and sell houses and cars directly with one another, without the state acting as middleman. In late 2012, the government eliminated the *tarjeta blanca*, the exit permit required whenever a Cuban wanted to travel abroad. These changes by themselves were not economically strategic, but their popularity built political capital for the government to carry out a much more profound reorganization of the Cuban economy—with its attendant social disruption.



The blueprint for “updating” the Cuban economy—the *Guidelines of the Social and Economic Policy of the Party and the Revolution*—was unveiled in November 2010, and after five months of discussion in grassroots meetings of the Communist Party and mass organizations, a revised version of the *Guidelines* was approved in April 2011 by the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba (Partido Comunista de Cuba 2011). Perhaps the most important change articulated in the *Guidelines* was philosophical: the “nonstate sector” (private enterprises and cooperatives) was cast as a permanent and dynamic part of the economy, not just a barely tolerated ancillary appendage. The Communist Party, in preparing its political strategy to sell the guidelines, emphasized the importance of “leaving behind prejudices against nonstate sectors of the economy”—an imperative aimed as much at its own cadre as at the population generally.

The *Guidelines* were comprised of 313 specific proposals for changes in economic policy. They represented a clear move away from the antiquated model of centralized planning that Cuba adopted from the Soviet Union in the 1970s toward some form of market socialism modeled on Vietnam and China. But the *Guidelines* lacked an overall conceptualization of what sort of market socialism Cuba’s leaders aspired to build. The end-state of the economy Cuba’s leaders envisioned was unveiled in 2016 at the Seventh Party Congress in a document entitled *Conceptualization of the Cuban Economic and Social Model of Socialist Development* (Partido Comunista de Cuba 2016). Presenting it to the delegates, Raúl Castro described it as outlining “the theoretical bases and essential characteristics of the social and economic model which we aspire to create through this updating process” (Castro 2016a).

Reaching agreement within Cuba’s political elite on the contours of the model was apparently no easy task. Discussion began five years before the Seventh Party Congress, and the document went through eight drafts as a result of discussions within the Communist Party Political Bureau and Central Committee, and the Council of Ministers (Castro 2012).<sup>1</sup> Unlike the *Guidelines* adopted at the Sixth



Party Congress, the *Conceptualization* was not discussed at the grassroots level prior to the Party Congress in part because, according to the party's daily newspaper, *Granma*, completing it "required more time than initially supposed" (*Granma* News Staff 2016a), suggesting that the leadership was debating the finer points of it right up until the Congress convened.

The lack of public discussion prior to the Congress produced public complaints by party members about the undemocratic character of having delegates approve plans for Cuba's future that the public had not even seen.<sup>2</sup> "The base of the party is angry, and rightly so," wrote scholar Esteban Morales on his blog. "We've gone backward in terms of democracy in the party, because we've forgotten about the base" (Rodriguez and Weissenstein 2016). The uproar was serious enough that *Granma* published an editorial trying to explain the lack of discussion. In his report to the Congress, Castro announced that the *Conceptualization* document would only be approved provisionally until the public had an opportunity to debate it and suggest revisions. It was essential, he said at the close of the Congress, to "forge a consensus" about plans for the future (Castro 2016a and 2016b).

The *Conceptualization* began with a frank assessment of Cuba's economic shortcomings: inadequate supplies of goods and services due to low productivity and poor planning, decaying infrastructure and obsolete technology due to inadequate investment, social inequality arising from the dual currency system, and the fact that state sector wages were not meeting basic needs. Such problems required profound economic change centered on raising productivity. In fact, the future of the system itself depended on it: "the consolidation and sustainable development of our socialism is only possible by ... increasing productivity in a way that increases wealth for its just distribution" (Partido Comunista de Cuba 2016, paragraph 29).

While the *Conceptualization* document laid out both the problems and the essential solution clearly, it nevertheless reflected the tensions within the political elite about how the goal of increased productivity could be achieved, particularly the tension between the



desire to retain the socialist character of the system and the recognition that markets and private property needed to play a greater role. For those who might worry that the reforms were the leading edge of capitalist restoration, the document repeatedly asserted the primacy of “socialist property of all the people in the fundamental means of production” as the dominant form of ownership (¶ 63) and “backbone of the whole system” (¶ 123), and the primacy of socialist planning as “the principal avenue for directing the economy” (¶ 67).

But that reassurance was invariably paired with the assertion that the new model required “recognizing the heterogeneity of forms of property and management” (¶ 47) and “the objective existence of the market” (¶ 212). The vision of Cuba’s economic future laid out in the document was one in which the commanding heights of the economy (the “fundamental” means of production, “strategic sectors,” and “axes” of development) remained under state control. Markets would set most prices, but within limits established by state policy (¶ 240–43). Private property would exist, including foreign direct investment, and private businesses might even manage state property, but private enterprise would be strictly regulated. Foreign investment would not come at the expense of national sovereignty (¶ 86) and the state would not allow the emergence of a new class based on the “concentration of property and wealth” (¶ 176).

For the general citizenry worried about what the economic reforms would mean for their standard of living, the document offered another set of reassurances. It reiterated the regime’s commitment to provide healthcare, education, social security, employment, citizen security, decent housing, and “state subsidies for families whose economic situation requires it” (¶ 69, 70, 277). Echoing what Raúl Castro had said on numerous occasions, the document promised there would be no “shock therapy” (¶ 315) and “no one will be left helpless” (¶ 71). Nevertheless, it also acknowledged that the reforms would produce a degree of inequality: there would be “differences in the income among those who work, depending on the quantity, quality, and complexity of their work and results” (¶ 302).



By the government's own estimate, as many as a million workers in the state sector held jobs that were unnecessary and would be eliminated. An initial plan in 2010 to lay off 500,000 in just six months was indefinitely postponed because there was no place for them to go. Although the government pledged to maintain elements of the collective welfare system—for example, free healthcare and education—other state subsidies for consumers would be phased out, including the ration card, which Raúl called “an unbearable burden” on state finances (Orsi 2011). Inevitably, such a far-reaching reorganization of the economy would have profound social and political repercussions.

### **THE POLITICS OF ECONOMIC RENOVATION**

“Economists frighten me,” Fidel Castro said in 1993. “If they are going to propose something that technically may be good, but politically catastrophic, our mission is to stop them” (Gunn 1994). Examples abound of Fidel's insistence on putting politics in command, even when the result was bad economics: the 1968 “Revolutionary Offensive” that nationalized small businesses, the 1986 Rectification campaign that rejected the limited market initiatives of the 1970s, the 1998 pull-back from the reforms of the Special Period (Mesa-Lago and Pérez-López 2013). Distrustful of markets and the social inequality they produced, Fidel Castro was not willing to steer Cuba down the road taken by China and Vietnam, even after the Soviet Union collapsed. In one of his last major political speeches, at the University of Havana in November 2005, he warned of the dangers to the revolution posed by creeping capitalism. The idea that “socialism could be constructed with capitalist methods,” he said, was “one of the great historical errors” (Castro, F. 2005).

Nevertheless, during his retirement Fidel did not publicly question the economic transformation that his brother set in motion, even though it went far beyond the limited reforms he himself had rejected when he was in charge. In a 2010 interview with journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, Fidel acknowledged the need for change, remark-



ing, “the Cuban model doesn’t even work for us anymore” (Goldberg 2010). But Fidel’s blessing of Raúl’s economic policy notwithstanding, his recognition that economic change could have dangerous political consequences remained sound.

Raúl Castro’s plans to modernize Cuba’s economy faced political challenges from both above and below. Within the political elite, resistance came from people who, like Fidel, feared that concessions to the market were a slippery slope leading to capitalist restoration or even regime collapse, as happened in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. “The main obstacle we have faced ... is the issue of outdated mentalities, which give rise to an attitude of inertia or lack of confidence in the future,” Castro reported to the Seventh Party Congress. “There also remain ... feelings of nostalgia for the less difficult times in the revolutionary process, when the Soviet Union and socialist camp existed” (Castro 2016a).

Eight months later, Castro (2016c) reported that “frequent, excessive delays” in the bureaucratic approval of proposed foreign investment projects were crippling the search for foreign capital. In the two and a half years since the new foreign investment law was adopted, only \$1.3 billion in foreign direct investment had been approved—far short of the \$2.5 billion per year goal (Marsh 2016). “It is necessary to overcome, once and for all, the obsolete mentality of prejudices toward foreign investment,” Castro insisted. “We must rid ourselves of unfounded fears of foreign capital; we are not heading toward nor will we head toward capitalism, this is totally ruled out.” The next day, *Granma*’s headline read, “Raúl: ‘We are not going back, nor will we go back, to capitalism.’”

For some, ideological concerns were reinforced by self-interest. If state sector economic management was decentralized and nonstrategic economic activity devolved to the private sector, the role of the central government bureaucracy would be much diminished. Already, a number of state firms have been separated from ministerial control and operate as independent corporations. At the same time, the party bureaucracy has been directed to stop giving orders to government



officials and focus on building the regime's political support. As central administrative structures contract, so will the number of bureaucrats and the perquisites available to those who remain.

Even for bureaucrats whose jobs are not at risk, it must be galling to see the growing prosperity of private entrepreneurs benefiting from the reforms while government salaries remain inadequate. In the armed forces, where discontent would present a unique danger, the government has tried to minimize it by expanding benefits, especially housing (Cave 2014). But civilian bureaucrats have received no such relief from the effects of increasing inequality.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Castro has had difficulty getting the bureaucracy to move expeditiously to implement the *Guidelines*. In 2011, he warned recalcitrant bureaucrats that he would not tolerate inaction: "We shall be patient but also persevering in the face of the resistance to change, whether these are conscious or unconscious. I warn that any bureaucratic resistance to the strict fulfillment of the Congress agreements, massively supported by the people, is useless" (Castro 2011b). Five years later, as he reported to the Seventh Party Congress, only 21 percent of the 313 guidelines adopted in 2011 had been fully implemented. The process of rationalizing state enterprises, which still produced about three-quarters of GDP, was hampered by managers who still had "the habit of waiting for instructions from above" instead of "encouraging initiative and entrepreneurship." Despite these "obstacles and contradictions," Castro did not waver, declaring: "we have continued advancing at a secure pace, without haste, but without pause" (Castro 2016a).

### **MASS-ELITE RELATIONS: IT'S "THE ECONOMY, STUPID"<sup>3</sup>**

Compounding the problem of elite division over the pace and depth of the economic reforms, Cuba's leadership also faced serious popular discontent over the dysfunctional state of the economy and, at the same time, popular fear of an uncertain future as the reform process transformed economic relations between citizen and state.





The rationing system no longer provided sufficient sustenance, and state sector wages were too low to make up the difference. To make ends meet, most state sector workers had to have something on the side—“*a la izquierda*”—such as selling pilfered state supplies on the black market or working a second job in the informal economy. The pervasiveness of the black market, generally tolerated by the government because the economy could not function without it, normalized illegality and eroded the state’s legitimacy (Ritter 2006). The dual currency created labor market distortions, referred to as the “inverted pyramid,” that made unskilled work in the tourist sector far more lucrative than highly skilled work by state-employed professionals, producing an internal brain drain. Opportunities for self-employment were closed off for most professions, leading many young, educated Cubans to emigrate.

Anecdotes about Cuban public opinion abound, but the dearth of systematic polling data makes gauging it a challenge. A number of polls have been conducted by foreign organizations acting without authorization. Since Raúl Castro assumed the presidency, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has sponsored nine opinion surveys, Freedom House has conducted four, Gallup conducted one in 2006, Bendixen & Amanti International conducted one in 2015, and NORC (formerly the National Opinion Research Center) at the University of Chicago conducted one in 2016. Given the clandestine nature of these endeavors, they inevitably have methodological limitations, but they nevertheless provide some systematic data to compare to the anecdotal impressions of journalists and visitors.

Between 2007 and 2013, the IRI asked Cubans about general economic conditions, personal economic conditions, attitudes toward reform, and political attitudes toward the government and opposition.<sup>4</sup> IRI’s Cuba programs were funded by the US government, and IRI described them as intended to “expand support to civil society and prodemocracy groups and sustain and reinforce democratic progress in the future.” This partisanship crept into the wording of some questions, promoting response bias critical of the status quo.<sup>5</sup> With that



caveat in mind, one virtue of the IRI polls is that many of the same questions were asked repeatedly, providing longitudinal data on how Cuban opinion has changed in the decade since Raúl Castro became president.

In almost every poll that asked about the biggest problem facing Cuba, the economy led the list by a wide margin. In the IRI polls, respondents consistently cited the high cost of living and low salaries, followed by the existence of the dual currency—an issue that became increasingly prominent over time, mentioned by less than 1 percent of respondents in 2005, but by 16 percent in 2012 (Table 1). This increase may reflect concerns about the growing inequality between Cubans with access to convertible pesos (CUC) from remittances or private employment and those whose income is limited to *moneda nacional* (CUP) earned in state sector jobs—pesos worth just one twenty-fifth of the CUC. In the 2016 NORC poll, people were asked “should incomes be made more equal, or are larger income differences okay as incentives for people to work harder?” Respondents were split almost evenly on this, with 42 percent saying incomes should be more equal and 49 percent approving large differences (NORC 2017).

Other economic issues—food scarcity, dilapidated housing, poor transportation, and shortages of medicine—were also mentioned in the IRI polls. Together, complaints over economic conditions accounted for two-thirds of responses in 2007, growing to more than four-fifths in 2012. One IRI poll, in 2010–11, asked people whether their salary was sufficient to cover basic needs. Only 3 percent replied that it was largely sufficient, and 15 percent said it was barely sufficient; 45 percent said it was not sufficient, and another 37 percent said it was not at all sufficient.

Not surprisingly, economic discontent colored people’s perceptions of how well the country was doing. In most of the IRI polls, nearly half of respondents described the situation as bad or very bad, and a fifth said very bad (Table 2). Until 2011, less than 10 percent said very good, and only about 15 percent said good. However, in the two IRI polls following the announcement of the Sixth Congress of the



**Table 1.** IRI Polls: “What do you think is the biggest problem in Cuba?”

	Dec 2005	Oct 2007	Apr 2008	Nov 2008	Aug 2009	Feb 2011	Jul 2011	Mar 2012
Low Salaries / High Cost of Living	31	43	43	43	40	61	61	51
Double Currency Standard	0	2	14	8	12	11	18	16
Food Scarcity	15	12	7	13	20	13	4	13
Lack of / Dilapidated Housing	7	4	2	8	1	5	1	1
Poor Transportation Infrastructure	10	4	4	5	2	0	0	2
Health / Lack of Medicines	2	0	4	3	2	1	1	2
Total of Economic Issues	65	65	74	80	77	91	85	85
Lack of Freedom / Political System	2	18	9	7	10	1	1	1
Drugs, Crime, Corruption	3	1	3	2	0	0	2	3
Embargo / Isolation	26	5	9	6	9	4	3	4
Other/No answer	5	11	5	5	4	4	9	12

Note: Numbers are percentages of respondents. Totals may be more/less than 100 due to rounding.



Communist Party, which approved plans for economic reform, people were a bit more optimistic; those reporting that the situation was bad or very bad fell from 45 percent to 39 percent, and those reporting that the situation was good or very good increased from 18 percent to 24 percent.

Another cause for optimism was an increase in the number of people reporting that their family's economic situation had improved recently (Table 3). Although a majority reported no change, the percentage reporting improvement jumped from just 6 percent in 2009 to 23 percent in 2013 in the IRI polls. Similarly, the percentage reporting that their family's situation was worse fell from 40 percent in 2009 to just 10 percent in 2013. The 2016 NORC poll reported similar results: 18 percent of respondents reported their family's economic situation as good or excellent, 57 percent as fair, and 24 percent as poor or very poor. But 26 percent reported that their situation had improved over the preceding three years, and only 6 percent said it had gotten worse. Looking ahead three years, 26 percent expected improvement, only 4 percent expected decline, and 57 percent expected no change.

In the Freedom House studies,<sup>6</sup> Cubans cited the same economic problems: inadequate salaries, high prices, food scarcity, poor housing, inadequate transportation, and the dual currency. Most respondents reported having to find additional sources of income to supplement their salaries in order to make ends meet (Freedom House 2008, 4). In early 2011, 59 percent of respondents cited economic issues when asked what was the main problem in their daily life (Freedom House 2011a, 26); later that year, the number had increased to 66 percent (2011b, 33). Young people were "the most disillusioned" segment of the population, seeing Cuba's economic problems as blocking their future opportunity, but they were also the "most apolitical." Having come of age during the Special Period, people under 30 tended to see the regime as incapable of producing prosperity. They disdained politics, held low expectations that the regime could change for the better, and focused instead on "opportunities for personal and



**Table 2. IRI Polls: How Well Are Things Going?**  
 "Generally speaking, would you say things in Cuba are going very well, well, so-so, badly, or very badly?"

	Dec 2005	Oct 2007	Apr 2008	Nov 2008	Aug 2009	Feb 2011	Jul 2011	Mar 2012
Very well	5	10	2	4	2	2	5	5
Well	15	15	14	16	15	16	27	19
Very well/Well	20	25	16	20	17	18	32	24
So-so	29	34	35	31	29	35	24	37
Badly	30	20	27	30	31	33	33	31
Very badly	20	20	21	18	22	12	9	8
Badly/Very Badly	50	40	48	48	53	45	42	39
No answer	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	0

Note: Numbers are percentages of respondents. Totals may be more/less than 100 due to rounding.



**Table 3.** IRI Polls: Family Situation

Overall, would you say your family's economic situation has gotten worse, improved, or stayed the same from two years ago?

	Aug 2009	Feb 2011	Jul 2011	Mar 2012	Jan 2013
Improved	6	2	18	23	23
Same	52	53	62	58	66
Worse	40	44	18	17	10
No answer	2	1	2	2	1

Note: Numbers are percentages of respondents.

professional advancement and fulfillment.” A high percentage hoped to emigrate. In the 2016 NORC poll, when asked “would you like to leave Cuba and live in another country,” 79.8 percent of respondents under age 30 said yes.<sup>7</sup>

In the 2015 Bendixen & Amandi poll, 79 percent of Cubans expressed dissatisfaction with the economy: 36 percent were not at all satisfied and 43 percent not very satisfied; 18 percent were somewhat satisfied and only 1 percent very satisfied. When asked what the Cuban people needed most, respondents answered that they needed an improved economy (48 percent) and an improved quality of life (24 percent). The other main response was a more open political system (24 percent). Asked what main thing they would like the government to do to improve things over the next five years, 54 percent said to improve economic opportunities and another 7 percent said to improve the quality of life; 29 percent cited political reform.

The 2016 NORC poll's results were similar. Rather than asking an open-ended question about Cuba's problems, interviewers gave respondents a list of 10 to choose from, two of which were economic: unemployment (cited by 29 percent as very serious or extremely serious) and poverty (cited by 41 percent).<sup>8</sup> Asked to rate the country's economic condition, only 13 percent rated it good or excellent, whereas 46 percent rated it poor or very poor. An overwhelming majority (95 percent) said that economic growth was a very important or extremely important goal for the coming decade; only 1 percent said it was not. The second most often cited goal was maintaining stability (87 percent).



With such widespread and persistent discontent with the economy, it is no surprise that many people had a low opinion of the government's performance and were pessimistic about its ability to solve the country's problems. Although the political system was rarely mentioned as Cuba's biggest problem in the IRI polls, that did not reflect confidence in the government's capabilities. By a wide margin, most Cubans doubted that the government would be able to solve the biggest problem "in the next several years." In 2007, 71 percent of respondents in the IRI poll said it would not be able to and only 19 percent said it would, numbers that remained unchanged through 2012. The public's lack of faith in the efficacy of government may have reflected how little impact thus far the economic reforms have had on most people's standard of living, a lag Cuban leaders acknowledged (*Granma News Staff* 2016b).

In the Freedom House studies, respondents expressed a desire for greater freedom of expression and doubts about the government's ability or willingness to solve the country's economic problems, but, as in the IRI polls, few cited the political system as one of their top concerns. Moreover, many respondents worried about the uncertainty and insecurity that might accompany significant change. Despite the hardships of everyday life, most Cubans described themselves as generally happy, crediting Cuba's free healthcare and educational systems and the high level of citizen security. Interviewers found little knowledge of, or support for, Cuban dissidents, who were seen as opportunists collaborating with the United States. Respondents "overwhelmingly" expected any change to come from within the existing regime (Freedom House 2008, 21).

The NORC poll also found a surprising degree of happiness in light of Cuba's economic problems: 57 percent of respondents described themselves as happy or very happy and only 11 percent as somewhat or very unhappy. Moreover, 53 percent said the country was "headed in the right direction," compared to 36 percent who said it was going in the wrong direction. The NORC poll revealed a sharp generational difference, however. While 71.4 percent of those over



age 60 thought the country was headed in the right direction, only 42.9 percent of those under 30 agreed.

Various polls recorded widely different levels of general support for the government. Not surprisingly, the more partisan polls tend to find less support than the nonpartisan ones. In 2006, two months after Fidel Castro fell ill and Raúl became acting president, Gallup asked an urban sample of Cubans in Havana and Santiago whether they “approved of the country’s current leadership.” Respondents were split, with 47 percent approving, 40 percent disapproving, and 13 percent not responding (Gallup 2006).

The IRI polls regularly asked respondents whether they would “vote to change from the current political system to a democratic system,” and “vote to change from the current system to a market economy, with economic freedoms” (Table 4). The skewed question wording likely elicited response bias against the status quo. Majorities supported both political and economic change, but the support for economic change was deeper. Over the years 2008 to 2012, on average, 71 percent said they would vote for political change, whereas 85 percent said they would vote for economic change.

The most striking result, however, was the sharp generational divide. Among respondents under 30, support for political change ranged from 70 percent to almost 90 percent, whereas those over 60 were far more likely to support the political status quo, sometimes by a plurality. The smallest gap between the age groups was 13 percentage points in 2009, and the largest was 47 percentage points in 2012 (Table 5).

Two IRI polls in 2008 asked respondents whether they would vote for Raúl Castro as president or an unnamed leader of the opposition. Among those under 30, support for the opposition was 70 percent, whereas among those over 60 years of age, 60 percent supported Castro. The IRI did not ask that question again.

The Bendixen & Amandi (2015) poll found similar results. Asked how satisfied they were with the political system, 53 percent of respondents replied unsatisfied and 39 percent satisfied. Asked if Cuba





**Table 4. IRI Polls: Support for Political and Economic Change**

	Oct 2007	Apr 2008	Nov 2008	Aug 2009	Feb 2011	Jul 2011	Mar 2012
<b>Vote for democracy?</b>							
Yes	76	62	63	75	78	76	69
No	14	25	32	6	9	11	15
No answer	10	14	5	19	13	14	16
<p>2007: When you think about political changes that might transform the current system into a real democracy—with multiparty elections, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression—do you believe that those changes will improve, worsen, or have no effect on your life?</p> <p>2008–2012: If you were given the opportunity to vote to change from the current political system to a democratic system—with multiparty elections, freedom of speech, and freedom of expression—would you vote in favor of, or against, that change?</p>							
<b>Vote for a market economy?</b>							
Yes	83	82	86	86	91	89	80
No	10	11	13	3	4	2	8
No answer	7	7	1	11	5	10	13
<p>2007: When you think about economic changes that might transform the current system into a market economy—with economic freedoms, private property, and the possibility of Cubans having their own businesses—do you believe that these changes would improve, worsen, or have no effect on your daily life?</p> <p>2008–2012: If you were given the opportunity to vote to change from the current system to a market economy—with economic freedom, private property, the possibility for Cubans to own their own businesses—would you vote in favor of, or against, that change?</p> <p>Note: Numbers are percentages of respondents. Totals may be more/less than 100 due to rounding.</p>							



**Table 5.** IRI Polls: Support for Political Change, by Age

	Apr 2008			Nov 2008			Aug 2009		
	All	Under 30	Over 60	All	Under 30	Over 60	All	Under 30	Over 60
Vote for democracy									
Yes	62	69	44	63	73	44	75	77	64
No	25	18	47	32	24	50	6	7	13
No answer	14	13	9	5	4	6	19	17	24
Age gap in percentage points			25			29			13
Vote for democracy									
Yes	78	93	47	76	83	61	69	88	41
No	9	0	24	11	6	21	15	2	33
No answer	13	7	29	14	11	18	16	10	26
Age gap in percentage points			46			22			47

For question wording, see Table 4. Totals may be more/less than 100 due to rounding.

should have more than one political party, 52 percent said yes, 28 percent said one party was enough, and 20 percent did not respond. Support for multiple parties was higher among younger respondents: of those under age 50, 59 percent said yes, and 23 percent said no. But those over age 60 narrowly favored the single party system, 38 percent to 37 percent.

Asked their opinion of Raúl Castro, respondents were evenly divided, 47 percent positive, 48 percent negative. But here, too, the generation gap was wide. Cubans under 50 were more critical, with 52 percent holding a negative opinion of Castro, and 44 percent a positive one, whereas Cubans over 60 rated Castro favorably by a wide margin, 53 percent positive to 39 percent negative.

Clearly, the near-euphoric enthusiasm of the revolution's early years left a lasting mark on those who lived through it, providing the regime with a base of support and legitimacy among that generation. But just as clearly, the regime faces a legitimacy deficit, if not a legitimacy crisis, among later generations who played no role in the regime's founding and who are withholding their support because of the state's poor performance, especially in economic affairs.

## **THE POLITICAL APPARATUS**

In the years after 1959, the Cuban regime's capacity to mobilize support lay in the principal mass organizations—the trade unions, women's federation, student federation, and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, which included the vast majority of adult citizens. The Communist Party remained relatively weak and underdeveloped compared to its fraternal parties in other socialist countries, comprising less than 1 percent of the Cuban population until the mid-1970s (LeoGrande 2015). Nevertheless, having been selected at work centers by their peers, party members tended to be relatively well respected as individuals and hence, influential (Dilla, González, and Vincentelli 1992).

The economic crisis of the Special Period inflicted serious damage on these political arrangements (Dominguez 2012). Not only did



it cause an erosion of popular faith in the government and in socialism as an ideology (a spiritual crisis that produced a resurgence of the Catholic Church), but it also weakened the institutional infrastructure of the state. The mass organizations, dependent at the grassroots on volunteer participation, began to wither away as people were forced to focus on economic survival. Cubans spent hours getting to work because the public transportation system, never good, deteriorated for lack of fuel and spare parts. They spent hours more searching for food and other staples (Ritter 2006). The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución, CDR) largely ceased to function. Otherwise law-abiding citizens had no alternative but to deal in the black market to make ends meet, and CDR block captains were no exception. “The militants are too busy trying to keep themselves alive like everybody else to bother much with denouncing anyone,” one Cuban explained (Suro 1994).

Organizations that had once served not only as the leadership’s eyes and ears at the grassroots but also as its arms and legs, carrying out government policy and fixing problems on the spot, no longer had the capacity to serve as “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 2010). The elected local government assemblies, begun in the mid-1970s, were a prime example. Local delegates were required by law to report to their constituents periodically and to introduce to the municipal assemblies any proposals approved in their constituency meetings (“Assemblies for Rendering Accounts”). However, the economic crisis of the 1990s stripped local government of resources, so while delegates could identify local problems, they could rarely do much about them (Bengelsdorf 1994, 155–65).

The 2014 documentary film *Canción de Barrio* followed singer Silvio Rodríguez’s concert tour to some of Havana’s poorest neighborhoods, where residents were interviewed about their lives. While the residents displayed admirable ingenuity in dealing with their harsh conditions, “*las organizaciones*” (state, party, and mass organizations) were noticeably absent and unresponsive. People in the barrios felt like they were on their own—“excluded people,” as one woman described herself and her neighbors.



The Communist Party has also faced organizational problems since the Special Period. Leadership at the provincial level has struggled, not always effectively, to cope with the political strains of the crisis. With economic recovery key to regime stability, the party gave in to the temptation to usurp management responsibilities from provincial and local government—“bossiness,” Raúl Castro called it at the Communist Party’s First National Conference in 2012. In so doing, it neglected its political task of cultivating regime support at the grassroots (Castro 2012).

The National Conference laid out a number of other problems with party work. Its endless meetings had degenerated into “formalism,” in which no real criticism was ever voiced and very little was accomplished, thereby “spreading dissatisfaction and apathy” among the membership (Partido Comunista de Cuba 2017). Five years later, the way in which the party carried out the popular discussion on the *Conceptualization* document indicated that little had changed. The dense 32-page document was not particularly accessible, and there was no apparent effort to summarize it or focus on its key points to facilitate discussion. By the end of 2016, the grassroots discussion process had concluded without fanfare.

Party cadres too often lacked creativity, failed to take the initiative in problem solving, took a lax attitude toward “violations and indiscipline,” and sometimes fell prey to corruption themselves. The party’s “rapid promotion of immature and inexperienced cadres” had produced serious policy errors and failures (Partido Comunista de Cuba 2012). Finally, the party had failed to promote women, Afro-Cubans, and youth into leadership positions based on their merits—so much so that Castro had to impose term limits to avoid the sclerosis of leadership that affected the Soviet Union in its final decades.

These shortcomings hurt the party’s image with the public. In the Bendixen & Amandi poll (2015), 58 percent of respondents rated the party negatively, and only 32 percent positively. Younger Cubans were the most critical, with 65 percent rating the party negatively, and only 28 percent positively, although their elders were evenly di-



vided, 43 percent positive and 43 percent negative. Another indicator of the party's tenuous standing was an 18 percent decline in membership from 2011 to 2016—the first decline since the party was founded in 1965 (Castro 2016a).

The state's relationship with the public was changing in other ways as well. The leadership's admission that the old model of socialism Cuba had pursued for half a century was fatally flawed inevitably touched off debate among Cuba's highly educated population about what the future ought to look like. Raúl Castro himself gave it his blessing, calling on more than one occasion for vigorous debate as the best way to solve the nation's problems. In 2006, he told university students, "sometimes people fear the word 'disagree,' but I say the more debate and the more disagreement you have, the better the decisions will be" (Boadle 2006). In 2012, speaking to the party cadre at the Party Conference, he returned to the theme of open debate, denouncing "false unanimity." "We need to accustom ourselves to expressing truths face to face, looking each other straight in the eye, to disagree and argue, to even disagree with what leaders say, when we believe that we are in the right" (Castro 2012).

Cuban intellectuals accepted this invitation and launched spirited discussions, at first in print journals and magazines like *Espacio Laical*, *Vitral*, and *Palabra Nueva*, produced by the Catholic Church, and *Revista Temas*, a journal of social and cultural criticism that technically belonged to the Ministry of Culture, but nevertheless tackled sensitive topics like inequality, racial discrimination, the role of religion, and the nature of socialist democracy. Even the official newspaper, *Juventud Rebelde*, began conducting investigative reports of official corruption and malfeasance.

As Internet access and cell phone availability expanded on the island, more and more Cubans had access to new sources of digital information and connected with one another via social media. Blogs appeared—dissident, *officialista*, and everything in between—carrying out debates and polemics in the evolving digital town square (Henken and der Voort 2015). As Ted Henken describes in his article in this is-



sue, independent journalists have colonized the digital public sphere, launching digital magazines and news services. And for Cubans who still lack Internet access, “el paquete” (literally, “the package”) offers a weekly smorgasbord of digital content at affordable prices distributed nationwide by enterprising young people via portable hard drives and thumb drives.

## UPDATING POLITICS

Fidel Castro’s death on November 25, 2016, prompted an outpouring of emotion among ordinary citizens, thousands of whom lined up well before dawn and stood for hours just to pause for a few seconds to pay their respects in front of a 1950s photograph of Castro as a guerrilla in the Sierra Maestra mountains. Thousands more lined the route to salute Castro’s ashes as a caravan carried his remains the length of the island to Santiago, retracing the triumphal march he made in January 1959 after the fall of the Batista regime. Despite how discontented many Cubans were over their government’s anemic economic performance, the state still seemed to retain significant legitimacy. As Raúl Castro remarked, the founding generation still enjoyed some “power of moral authority” based on their historic role (Castro 2010).

But Raúl Castro was slated to step down as president at the end of his second term in 2018 and as first secretary of the Communist Party in 2021. Because of the new term limits, the other members of the generation that won the revolution in 1959 would also be retiring over the next few years. The new generation that steps into their shoes will face a number of political challenges: a leadership that is not of one mind about the pace and depth of the social and economic changes underway; a public that is impatient for economic improvement and has little faith in the government’s ability to deliver it; an expanding public space for critical debate; and political institutions beset by serious weaknesses.

Without the legitimacy that comes from having founded the regime, Cuba’s new leaders will have to establish their right to rule by superior performance—first and foremost by completing the re-



structuring of the economy and delivering on the promise of economic growth and a living wage. They will have to assure, as Raúl has repeatedly promised, that no one is left behind and that the state will somehow cushion or limit the growth of inequality. The new leaders will need to demonstrate to Cuba's disaffected millennial generation that there is a future for them on the island at least as bright as their prospects abroad.

As Saxonberg (2012) notes, communist systems typically undergo a transition from legitimacy based on the ideological fervor of a revolution's early years to a more practical legitimacy based on economic performance. That transition entails political risk, given the shortcomings of centrally planned economies. Centeno (2017) argues convincingly that Raúl Castro's economic restructuring is aimed at making that transition while retaining the essentially socialist character of the Cuban system, rather than restoring capitalism *de facto*, as has arguably happened in China.

Successfully navigating this legitimacy transition may also require updating the political sphere to rebuild and reinvigorate the relationship between Cuba's political leaders and their fellow citizens, first and foremost by giving ordinary Cubans a greater sense of efficacy. Local government and local branches of Cuba's various mass organizations need to reconnect with communities and win back their confidence by acting as effective advocates for their interests and deploying resources to solve problems at the grassroots.

Decentralization means a reduction in central control, not just in economic management but in the public sphere as well. As the Cuban public becomes more heterogeneous and income differences expand with the growth of a private sector, the views and interests of different groups will diverge. As the public sphere expands through the growth of Internet access, social media, and digital journalism, the Cuban state will need to adapt to this unfamiliar landscape of conflicting interests and cacophonous voices, resisting the instinct to control or suppress them in the name of national security. For Cuba's new leaders, updating politics will be just as urgent and challenging a task as updating the economy.





## NOTES

1. The first mention of the drafting process appeared in 2012 (Barrios and Rodríguez Gavilán 2012).
2. See, for example, the open letter sent to Castro by prominent journalist and gay rights activist Francisco Rodríguez Cruz (2016) and posted on his blog.
3. During the 1992 US presidential election, Bill Clinton's campaign manager James Carville posted a sign in campaign headquarters reading, "The economy, stupid," to remind everyone what issue the voters cared most about.
4. The first IRI poll was conducted by one of its grantees, the Spanish nongovernmental organization Solidaridad Española con Cuba (2005). The Spanish group did not acknowledge IRI sponsorship of the 2005 poll, but IRI's funding of the group for the purpose of conducting "scientific public opinion research" was revealed in IRI documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (Eaton 2012).
5. For example, one question asks Cubans whether they would vote for a "market economy system," which is described as offering "economic freedoms, including opportunities for Cubans to own property and run businesses." The strong positive valence of terms like "freedoms" and "opportunities" is likely to promote response bias toward a favorable answer.
6. The Freedom House polls were the most methodologically suspect. Between 2007 and 2011, Freedom House conducted four qualitative opinion studies in Cuba, interviewing about 150 people for each. Like the IRI polls, the Freedom House studies covered attitudes about general economic conditions, politics, and reforms. Responses were not generalizable to the population as a whole, however, and the first two studies did not report quantitative results. Interviews were open-ended and semistructured, conversational in style. Not every respondent was asked every question, nor were question wordings consistent. Moreover, respondents were not selected randomly, interviews were conducted in only about a third of Cuba's provinces,



and the samples significantly overweighted people below the age of 30 and underweighted people above the age of 50. The systematic overweighting of youth at twice their percentage in the population produced an antigovernment bias, since we know from other polls that young people have been the most disaffected age cohort, and the elderly have been the most supportive of the government. Freedom House, like the IRI, has also been a recipient of US government funding to promote democracy in Cuba (in fact, it was the first such recipient in 1995). The reports from its opinion studies unabashedly offer advice on communications strategy to Cuban dissidents, based on the attitudes revealed by the surveys. Nevertheless, the broad conclusions from the Freedom House studies are consistent with those of more representative polls.

7. Thanks to Jennifer Benz at NORC for providing their survey results broken out by age groups.
8. As in the other polls, people generally expressed satisfaction with the health and education systems; only 4 percent cited them as serious problems. However, 51 percent cited crime as a serious problem, a sharp contrast to the IRI polls, in which crime was very rarely mentioned. It is unclear whether this represents a real increase in crime or is an artifact of the difference between the IRI's open-ended question and NORC's close-ended one.

## REFERENCES

- Barrios, Margarita and Agnerys Rodríguez Gavilán. 2012. "El País Continúa Avanzando de Forma Ordenada en la Implementación de los Lineamientos." *Juventud Rebelde*, July 24.
- Bendixen & Amandi International. 2015. *National Survey of Cubans Living in Cuba, April 2015*. Miami: Bendixen & Amandi International.
- Bengelsdorf, Carollée. 1994. *The Problem of Democracy in Cuba: Between Vision and Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Boadle, Anthony. 2006. "Raúl Castro Calls for More Policy Debate in Cuba." Reuters, December 20.



- Castro, Fidel. 2005. "Speech at the Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of His Admission to University of Havana, in the Aula Magna of the University of Havana, on November 17, 2005." <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2005/ing/f171105i.htm>.
- Castro, Raúl. 2010. "Speech during the Closing Ceremony of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Legislature of the National People's Power Assembly, December 18, 2008." <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/rauldiscursos/2010/ing/r181210i.html>.
- . 2011a. "Central Report to the 6th Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba." *Granma*, April 16.
- . 2011b. "Cuba's Raúl Castro Addresses Parliament: Breaking the Psychological Barrier." *Havana Times*, August 2.
- . 2012. "Our Responsibility Is to Promote Greater Democracy in Our Society, Beginning by Providing an Example within the Ranks of the Party." *Granma*, January 30.
- . 2016a. "The Development of the National Economy, along with the Struggle for Peace, and Our Ideological Resolve, Constitute the Party's Principal Missions," *Granma*, April 18.
- . 2016b. "The Construction of a Prosperous, Sustainable Socialism in Cuba Demands that the Principles of Justice and Equality, Which Have Served as the Revolution's Foundation, Be Preserved," *Granma*, April 29.
- . 2016c. "Fidel, Undefeated, Has Left Us, but His Spirit of Struggle Will Permanently Remain in the Conscience of All Revolutionaries," *Granma*, December 28.
- Cave, Damien. 2014. "Cuba's Reward for the Dutiful: Gated Housing." *The New York Times*, February 11.
- Centeno, Ramón I. 2017. "The Cuban Regime after a Decade of Raúl Castro in Power." *Mexican Law Review* 9 (2): 99–126.
- Dilla, Haroldo Alfonso, Gerardo González, and Aba T. Vincentelli. 1992. "Cuba's Local Governments: An Experience Beyond the Paradigms." *Cuban Studies* 22: 151–72.
- Dominguez, Jorge. 2012. "Can Cuban Rulers Rule?" *Cuba in Transition* 22, Papers and Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Meeting



- of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, Miami, Florida, August 2–4.
- Eaton, Tracey. 2012. “USAID in Cuba: Discreetly Secret.” *Along the Malecón*, November 3.
- Freedom House. 2008. *Change in Cuba: How Citizens View Their Country's Future*. September 15.
- . 2009. *Another Special Period in Cuba? How Citizens View Their Country's Future*. March 20.
- . 2011a. *Real Change for Cuba? How Citizens View Their Country's Future*. June 9.
- . 2011b. *Change Comes to Cuba: Citizens' Views on Reform After the Sixth Party Congress*. October 21.
- Gallup World Poll. 2006. *The Gallup Organization's Cuba ThinkForum*. Princeton, NJ: The Gallup Organization.
- Goldberg, Jeffrey. 2010. “Fidel: ‘Cuban Model Doesn’t Even Work for Us Anymore’.” *The Atlantic*, September 8.
- Granma News Staff. 2016a. “Party Congress Less than a Month Away.” *Granma*, March 28.
- . 2016b. “Raúl Presents Central Report to Congress.” *Granma*, April 17.
- Gunn, Gillian. 1994. *Balancing Economic Efficiency, Social Concerns, and Political Control*. Cuban Studies Program Briefing Paper, Georgetown University, no. 5, March.
- Henken, Ted A. and Sjammevan der Voort. 2015. “From Cyberspace to Public Space? The Emergent Blogosphere and Cuban Civil Society.” In *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: The Revolution Under Raúl Castro*, edited by Philip Brenner, John Kirk, Marguerite Rose Jiménez, and William M. LeoGrande. New York: Rowman-Littlefield, 99–110.
- International Republican Institute (IRI). 2007. *Cuban Public Opinion Survey, September 5–October 4, 2007*.
- . 2008. *Cuban Public Opinion Survey, March 14–April 12, 2008*.
- . 2009. *Cuban Public Opinion Survey, November 8–30, 2008*.
- . 2009. *Cuban Public Opinion Survey, July 4–August 7, 2009*.
- . 2011. *Cuban Public Opinion Survey, January 28–February 10, 2011*.



- . 2011. *Cuban Public Opinion Survey, June 30–July 13, 2011*.
- . 2012. *Cuban Public Opinion Survey, February 29–March 14, 2012*.
- . 2013. *Cuban Public Opinion Survey, January 20–February 20, 2013*.
- LeoGrande, William M. 2015. “After Fidel: The Cuban Communist Party on the Brink of Generational Change.” In *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: The Revolution under Raúl Castro*, edited by Philip Brenner, John Kirk, Marguerite Rose Jiménez, and William M. LeoGrande. New York: Rowman-Littlefield, 59–71.
- Lipsky, Michael. 2010. *Street-Level Bureaucracy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marsh, Sarah. 2016. “Cuba Says Wants to Speed Up Foreign Investment Drive.” Reuters, October 31.
- Mesa-Lago, Carmelo and Jorge Pérez-López. 2013. *Cuba under Raúl Castro: Assessing the Reforms*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- NORC. 2017. *A Rare Look inside Cuban Society: A New Survey of Cuban Public Opinion*. NORC, University of Chicago.
- Orsi, Peter. 2011. “Raúl Castro Proposes Political Term Limits in Cuba” Associated Press, April 16.
- Partido Comunista de Cuba. 2011. *Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución*, April 18.
- . 2012. *Objetivos de Trabajo del Partido Comunista de Cuba Aprobados por la Primera Conferencia*, January 29.
- . 2016. *Conceptualización del Modelo Económico y Social Cubano de Desarrollo Socialista*, no date, released June 15.
- . 2017. *Primera Conferencia Nacional: Proyecto Documento Base*, no date, released January.
- Ritter, Archibald R. M. 2006. “Economic Illegalities and the Underground Economy in Cuba.” *Focal*, RFC-06-01, March.
- Rodríguez, Andrea and Michael Weissenstein. 2016. “Unusual Dissent Erupts inside Cuban Communist Party.” Associated Press, March 31.
- Rodríguez Cruz, Francisco. 2016. “Carta abierta a Raúl Castro o Aplazar hasta julio el VII Congreso del Partido,” paquitoeldecuba, <https://paquitoeldecuba.com/2016/03/28/carta-abierta-a-raul-castro-o-aplazar-hasta-julio-el-vii-congreso-del-partido/>.



- Sánchez Egozcue, Jorge Mario. 2015. "Challenges of Economic Restructuring in Cuba," in Philip Brenner, John Kirk, Marguerite Rose Jiménez, and William M. LeoGrande (editors). *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: The Revolution under Raúl Castro*. Rowman-Littlefield, pp. 125–38.
- Saxonberg, Steven. 2012. *Transitions and Non-transitions from Communism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Solidaridad Española con Cuba. 2005. *Primera Encuesta de Opinión Pública en Cuba*. December 5.
- Suro, Roberto. 1994. "With Cubans Desperate for Change, Castro Takes New Look at US." *Washington Post*, August 28.



Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.