



House of Representatives II

US-Cuba Relations

By Brenda Maldonado

Introduction

US-Cuba relations have been fraught with tension and mistrust for the better part of the past 50 years. The 1959 communist revolution in one of the United States' closest neighbors in the midst of the Cold War led the US to adopt an aggressive foreign policy stance that continues to this day. In the past half-century, the US has employed embargoes, travel restrictions, and other non-military measures in an attempt to isolate—and thereby weaken—Cuba's communist government. Despite producing little to no change in the Cuban government, these measures have remained largely in place even since the end of the Cold War nearly two decades ago. Recently, however, many anti-Cuba laws have come under scrutiny and debate, a fact reflected by many of the bills currently pending in the 111th Congress.

Recent Developments

HR 874: Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act

Currently in committee in the 111th Congress, this bill would not only end the current ban on travel to Cuba, but prevent the President and Executive Branch from restricting travel by US citizens to the island nation, except when there exist national security or public health concerns. Though it has not been passed or voted on by the full House of Representatives, this bill, introduced by Rep. William Delahunt (D-MA), has 181 co-sponsors, reflecting its overall popularity, especially to Democrats.

HR 2272: United States-Cuba Trade Normalization Act of 2009

This bill takes a more liberal stance on US-Cuba relations, lifting not just the travel ban, but also the trade embargo and myriad of other restrictions, including bans on mail service and telecommunications between the US and Cuba. As might be expected, this bill enjoys much smaller support than HR 874, and is still being debated in committee. Additionally, it is a much more partisan piece of legislation, as all cosponsors are Democrats. It does, however, enjoy some support among pro-business interest groups, who are often in favor of free trade.

Partisan Approach

Liberal View

The liberal stance on US policy toward Cuba favors openness and a more productive encouragement of democracy in the country. The platform of the Democratic Party advocates building ties and advancing Cuban freedoms by allowing unlimited family visits and remittances to the island. This stance is certainly progressive.

Nevertheless, fearful of appearing soft on the Castro regime, Democrats make their objectives clear. In its platform, the party advocates “presenting the Cuban regime with a clear

choice: if it takes significant steps toward democracy, beginning with the unconditional release of all political prisoners, we will be prepared to take steps to begin normalizing relations.” Certainly those who crafted such a statement want to give the impression that they are amenable to concessions, but not for nothing. Still, this appears to be just an image, as Cuba has neither demanded nor received anything specific in return for the latest relaxations of US policy.

Conservative View

While the Republican Party’s official stance is very clear on the issue of Cuba, the conservative voice is not as unified as the liberal population. The GOP cites the “anachronistic regime in Havana” as a great impediment to peace and progress within Latin America, and believes that limiting trade with and travel to Cuba is the most effective means to promote democracy in the country. Republicans also support efforts to admit Cubans who have fled the Communist regime of their homeland into the US through a safe and legal process.

But while the GOP’s take on the matter is clear-cut, there are blocs of conservatives who oppose these policies. For example, libertarians, who have historically sided with the Republican Party over the Democratic, favor a policy of non-intervention. In this case, they oppose intervening in another sovereign nation’s domestic affairs, and libertarians especially oppose disrupting free market trading with embargoes.

Presidential View

Delivering on his campaign promises, President Obama announced in April 2009 that he was directing the Secretaries of State, Treasury, and Commerce to drastically alter the current restrictions on access to Cuba. His measures, under an initiative dubbed “Reaching Out to the Cuban People”, include lifting all restrictions on family visits to Cuba, removing restrictions on remittances, authorizing greater telecommunications links with Cuba, and revising gift parcel regulations. President Obama hopes that these progressive changes will ultimately result in the common goal that most aspire to: “a Cuba that respects the basic human, political and economic rights of all its citizens.”

Questions to Consider

In addition to determining what solution you feel is necessary, it is important to consider the potential responses of other actors. How will the President and the Executive Branch respond to proposed legislation? The Executive Branch plays a large—some would even say the largest—role in setting US foreign policy. Consequently, its interests and goals must be kept in mind, especially when discussing bills like HR 874, which restrict the power of the President to set foreign policy with regard to Cuba.

Additionally, you must take into account the Cuban government’s response to any action, whether it ultimately tightens or relaxes restrictions on US-Cuba relations. Undoubtedly, one goal of policy changes must be to move Cuba towards democracy and capitalism, and, consequently, peaceful and productive relations with the United States.