ABSTRACT

While there is a strong recorded correlation between religiosity and Republican Party affiliation, Cuban Americans report low religiosity but strong support for the GOP (58% of Cuban Americans are affiliated with the GOP). This is only one way in which this community is an outlier: Cuban Americans do not behave like other Hispanics; do not vote like other religious groups; are more liberal than the average Republican voter; and have not experienced the religious revival often observed in citizens of former communist regimes. These particularities suggest that Cuban Americans’ reaction is very specific to the combination of their experiences in the U.S. and in Cuba, including the island’s feeble religious history. This article explores the ways in which Cuban American support for the GOP is divorced from religiosity, and proposes that Cuban American affiliation with the Republican Party is instead motivated by a strong rejection of socialism, support for “law and order” policies in the U.S., and a desire to use America’s foreign policy to produce change in Cuba.

INTRODUCTION

The Latino vote in the 2020 presidential elections made the headlines, encouraging a discussion about the fact that Latinos are not a monolith and have different motivations for voting. While recognizing this diversity is important, it is also important to note that the majority of Latinos, 70%, voted for President Biden (Latino Decisions, 2020). It seems as if despite differences, there are unifying factors in this population that result in similar political needs aligned with support for the Democratic party. Cuban Americans, however, stand out from other Latino groups and the overall average, showing majority support for the Republican party. By October of 2020, survey data showed that 58% of Cuban Americans were affiliated with the GOP, compared with only 32% of Non-Cuban Hispanics in the U.S (Krogstad, 2020). These numbers are comparable to the percentages of Latinos who voted for President Trump in the 2016 election. In fact, this has been the trend for years. Although there had been a steady if slow-moving decline in their Republican support until 2014, Cuban Americans have been a stronghold for the Republican party for decades, and after 2014, the trend reversed and numbers of Cuban Americans Republican voters reached levels not seen since the early 2000s (Krogstad, 2014, 2020).

Voting Republican is only one of many singularities that Cuban Americans exhibit when compared to the broader Latino population in the U.S. Most Cuban Americans are concentrated in Florida, potentially contributing to the continued status of the state as a “swing state.” In 2018, Cuban Americans, closely followed by Puerto Ricans, made up the largest Hispanic population eligible to vote. They have also traditionally shown the highest voter turnout among all Latino groups (Krogstad, 2020). These trends show high levels of political engagement from the Cuban American population and a bias for the Republican party.

Strong support for the Republican Party is often correlated with religiosity. Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s book American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us describes the rise and effect of the “God gap” in America. The “gap” refers to the correlation between religious people, in particular Christians, and the Republican party, mostly due to their shared conservative social views. Additionally, scholarly work on religious repression in authoritarian states reveals that this repression is often followed by religious revival: given Cuba’s communist government’s history of religious repression, it made sense that Cubans might fit this model, and might be likely to become more religious after escaping the restrictions of Cuba, aligning them with other religious Republican voters. Further study, however, quickly reveals that religiosity does not play a considerable role in Cuban Americans’ Republican support.

This article examines the complex relationship, or lack thereof, between religiosity and partisanship among Cuban Americans. It begins by offering a brief literature review; analyzes statistics and survey data; and engages with potential reasons for why strong Republican support divorced from religiosity continues to be prevalent among Cuban Americans. This paper proposes that the Cuban American vote is very particular and does not conform to the voting pattern of many other groups, such as the average Republican voter, other Hispanics, citizens of former religiously repressive states, and even Cubans who remain on the island. Cuban Americans exhibit very low
levels of religiosity, so it is not their socially conservative views that link them to the Republican party. Instead, their affiliation with the Republican party is motivated by traditionally loose religious ties, a strong rejection of socialism, and a desire to produce change in Cuba.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I. Religiosity and the Republican Party

Existing literature explores the strong links between religion and voting in the United States, as both the religious-secular spectrum and the Republican-Democratic spectrum become more polarized. In American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, Robert Putnam and David Campbell offer a comprehensive review of the many changes that have ultimately led to a rise of the religious Right. Between the 1950s and 1980s, Americans experienced a series of “shocks” and “aftershocks” that sent people to the secular or religious end of the spectrum. After the perceived moral decline of the 1960s, many people entered the religious end of the spectrum more committed than ever. The Republican party maximized this opportunity to consolidate support from an already organized group who shared their socially conservative values. Although it was not conceived as an explicitly political movement, it became one as abortion and homosexuality emerged as divisive questions for the Democratic and the Republican parties. Religious communities openly welcomed the association with the Republican party, and churches increasingly attracted supporters of the Republican party, giving rise to what Putnam and Campbell call “the God gap” (Putnam & Campbell, 2012). As the link between religion and partisanship intensified up to the early 1990s, so did the correlation between Republican ideology and attendance at religious services that continues today (Pew Research, 2014).

Latino Catholics played a significant role in this process in the late 1990s and early 2000s when a new secularist tendency conceived in response to the rise of the religious Right became visible. Many youths rejected the politicization of religion and embraced a secular lifestyle: the association of religion with Republican party conservative values, and its perceived incompatibility with the youth’s progressive views, made remaining religiously unaffiliated increasingly appealing. While the Catholic Church was near collapse during these years, strong continued affiliation from immigrant Latino Catholics kept it from disintegrating. The new arrivals offered a timely replacement for the American-born religiously disillusionsed youth; in return, the Church debatably became the only institution facilitating the integration of Latino immigrants into the larger society. In addition to the high levels of Catholicism already practiced by many Hispanics in their native countries, this may be a reason why strong links remain between the Catholic Church and the Latino population. As we will explore below, this trend does not extend to Cuban-Americans.

II. Religiosity and religious repression

As science and technology have developed globally, many have expected the fulfillment of the “secularization thesis,” which predicts the eradication of religion (Toft et al., 2011, p. 1). Contrary to expectations, however, religion has not disappeared. Between 1900 and 2000, the world population practicing Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism increased from 50 percent to 64 percent, and almost 80 percent claimed to believe in God (ibid). Toft et al. explore some of the major causes of this religious resurgence, including an ongoing quest for religious freedom from the state (Toft et al. 2011, pp. 13-14). History suggests that religious repression might have actually led to renewed religiosity. This was the aftermath of authoritarian regimes in Algeria, the Soviet Union, Romania, Bulgaria, China, and Iran, where the state aimed to ban or control religion. After these regimes’ collapse, however, religiosity rose sharply (Toft et al. 2011). The two nations with Communist regimes similar to Cuba’s share this trend: in the Soviet Union, there has been a return to the Orthodox Church since Communist collapse, and in China, a religious resurgence was observed post-Cultural Revolution. This pattern suggests that Cuban Americans, who depart a religiously oppressive communist regime to emigrate to the United States, might also experience religious revivals after they arrive in the U.S. and are able to practice religion more openly. The fact that Cuban Americans’ political repression on the island was not followed by a religious revival in the U.S. invites us to look more closely at the particularities of the experience and behaviors of this community. It is even more surprising when we examine historical evidence of religious repression in Cuba, and particularly when we consider that Cubans in Cuba have shown the predicted return to religiosity (Goldizen, 2009).

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA AND THE “CUBAN OUTLIER” IDENTITY WITHIN HISPANIC POPULATIONS

I. Political and Religious Profile

Cuban Americans appear to be an outlier among Republican voters due to their lack of religiosity and a limited alignment with the party’s position on social mores. As of 2013, slightly under half of Hispanics of Cuban origin in the U.S. identified as Catholic; 17 percent identified as Protestant; 26 percent self-reported as religiously unaffiliated, and the remaining percentage identified with other religions (López, 2013). Overall, about 65 percent of Cubans and Cuban Americans practiced Christianity, a smaller fraction than the 77 percent of non-Cuban Latinos who identified as Catholic or Protestant. In addition to having lower proportions of religious affiliation, Cuban Americans also have one of the lowest rates of regular attendance to religious services compared to Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Central Americans (Pew Research, 2006). Cubans are also less likely than other Hispanic groups to say that religion is the most important thing in their lives (ibid). As mentioned above, most Hispanics self-report as Catholics, and Hispanic Catholics consistently vote Democrat (Smith, 2020); meanwhile about half of Cuban Americans self-report as Catholics, but as previously explained, they overwhelmingly vote Republican (López, 2013). There is one caveat important to this comparison, which will be explored in more detail below: even though many Cuban Americans self-identify as Catholics, Cuban Catholicism is not the same one practiced by the rest of Latin America due to its fluidity and interrelation with other cultural influences of the island.
On topics like abortion and homosexuality, which have become so influential in political life (and toward which the Republican party takes a more conservative approach), Cubans show very liberal attitudes. Firstly, abortion is not a priority for them. According to a 2020 Pew research survey, only about two-fifths of Cuban Americans said abortion was very important to their decision to vote for a 2020 presidential candidate (Krogstad, 2020). This survey data also shows that Cuban Americans are less opposed to abortion than other Hispanic groups. Furthermore, there is substantial research documenting Cuban Americas’ pro-choice support. Cuban Americans are much more pro-choice than other Latinos, particularly Mexican Americans, who show the highest levels of opposition to abortion (Ellison et al., 2005). Furthermore, within Hispanic groups, just having Cuban origins increases the probability of supporting pro-choice policies (Bolks et al., 2000). Lastly, to demonstrate how deviant Cubans are from trends in the overall Hispanic population when it comes to these issues, we only need to look at the fact that researchers have concluded that the model of the person most likely to be pro-choice among Hispanics is a woman who has not had a born-again religious experience, does not have high regard for religion as an everyday guide, is not “very Catholic,” is feminist, has high levels of education and income, is ideologically liberal, and is Cuban rather than Mexican American (Bolks et al., 2000).

Although the data on attitudes toward gay marriage is more limited, Miami Dade exit poll data suggests that the majority of Cubans are not against gay marriage. In 2004, for example, almost 70 percent of Cuban Americans opposed the proposed constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage or had no opinion on the issue (Bishin et al., 2008). Even though Miami Dade tends to be more liberal than the overall Cuban American population, less than one in three Cuban Americans supported the ban. Opposition to the ban from this community was higher than the national numbers, which showed a 50 percent split. Cuban Americans’ support for gay marriage is not reflective of the still-strong opposition from Latino Republicans to gay marriage (Lopez & Cuddington, 2013). This liberal attitude may have historical roots dating back to the 1980 Mariel boatlift, during which thousands of Cubans—many of whom were homosexual and lesbian—escaped the repression on the island and came to America (Peña, 2013). The new arrivals, including the gay community, created their own culture that became part of the Cuban Exile identity of South Florida.

Overall, Cuban-Americans are a puzzling demographic. They do not adhere to the voting patterns of the general Hispanic population, nor do they adhere to those of the average Republican Party supporter. Researchers have concluded that the Cuban vote is a version of the controversial “fiscally conservative and socially liberal” attitude. Cubans vote very conservatively on issues related to political behavior and U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba but vote overwhelmingly liberal on social issues (Bishin et al., 2008).

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS: POTENTIAL FORCES INFLUENCING THE IDIOSYNCRASIES OF THE CUBAN VOTE**

How, then, can we explain why Cuban Americans are outliers not only in terms of their religious and social viewpoints and their relationship to the Republican Party, but also in relation to other people who experienced religious repression in communist regimes and turned to an increased religiosity once restrictions loosened? One thing is certainly clear: Cuban Americans are a unique community that, when compared with communities that share traits with it, does not behave as we might expect. In an attempt to understand this unique political identity, this section will explore some potential forces that may influence the Cuban American vote.

One factor to consider is Cuba’s enfeebled religious context before the 1959 Communist Revolution. This year marks the beginning of the Cuban exodus, and on the island, the beginning of increasingly restrictive policies regarding religious practice. Research suggests, however, that Cuba was already not very religious before this period. The Catholic Church was the dominant religious institution in Cuba, but even then, it was considerably weaker than in any other Latin American country; in 1959, it was certainly the weakest Catholic presence in the region (Crahan, 1985). Its frailty derived partly from the Church’s exclusive focus on the urban middle class, strong anti-Catholic sentiments as a consequence of the Church’s stance during the Cuban Independence War, and diverse cultural roots, which gave rise to the practice of santería, an Afro-Cuban religion (Crahan 1985, p. 321). This highlights another complexity of Catholicism in Cuba. Because religions that had been practiced by enslaved populations remained illegal and secret even after slavery was abolished, over time some Cubans merged them with Catholicism, syncretized their gods with saints, and adopted Catholic rituals like marriage and baptism (Goldenziel 2009, p. 183).

The combination of anti-Catholic colonial sentiments, weakly institutionalized religion, and “diluted” or syncretized forms of religion from the early 20th century onward produced low levels of religiosity in Cuba, even before 1959 when the Cuban American population in the States started to grow. Growing up in a communist society with this low baseline for religiosity could be one of the reasons why Cuban Americans are not religious even today (McCleary & Barro 2006, p. 62). This historically weak relationship with religion and the Church may explain their low church attendance rates and liberal views on issues such as abortion, unlike many Republican voters.

In the absence of the strong correlation that exists between religiosity and Republican affiliation, we need to consider other factors that may shape Cuban Americans’ political views. Of these, a strong rejection of policies that are perceived or presented as “socialist,” an interest in strong “law and order” legislation, and strong convictions regarding foreign policy seem the most significant.

Many Cubans openly report rejection of socialism as the primary consideration behind their affiliation with the Republican party despite their different social views. Cuba’s fate has predisposed Cuban Americans to view socialism, communism, and anything that resembles them with distrust and to fear of a slide into authoritarianism and impoverishment. A proposal perceived to promote free health care or free higher education, for example, “scares” them as a voting block (Sesin, 2020). They believe that the drawbacks of communism outweigh any potential benefits, and fear that in pursuing those perceived benefits, the U.S. will inevitably become
The Republican Party has long recognized this issue as a priority for Cubans (and more recently Venezuelans) and has tailored its outreach accordingly. The Trump campaign was able to capitalize on this fear of socialism by misrepresenting the Democratic party’s aspirations (Martin & Burns, 2020). President Trump pushed the narrative that all Democrats are radical leftist and anti-capitalist, responding to Cuban Americans’ fears and incentivizing them to vote Republican to protect against this political change (Licon, 2020). He also activated responses in this voter group by appealing to other priorities; for example, he juxtaposed the Democrats’ intent to defund the police with his promise to uphold law and order, which many Cuban Americans advocate for.

These data suggest that an interest in preventing their social and political history from repeating in the U.S., rather than religion, is what motivates Cubans to vote Republican. Recent arrivals’ voting patterns continue to reflect a persistent strong reaction against proposals that are seen to be aligned with socialism: over 75 percent of Cubans eligible to vote that arrived between 2010-2015 are registered Republicans (Grenier & Lai, 2020). Cubans’ negative history with socialism makes suppressing it in their new country very important for them—certainly more so than same-sex marriage or abortion. They vote for the Republican party because it explicitly campaigns on preventing America from becoming socialist, and they do so despite weak religious affiliations. This trend may be further reinforced by community ties; since most Cuban-Americans settle in Florida, recent immigrants may adopt the community’s existing political views, perhaps inspired by their shared experience, in search of help navigating their new country, or even out of fear of behaving against the norms of the group (including voting in ways that could lead to accusations of having communist leanings). While a shared political viewpoint is currently the norm, data suggest that in time, new arrivals may shift voting patterns in Cuban American populations. While older immigrants vote Republican largely due to political reasons, recent immigrants—who tend to be of a lower socioeconomic class—are motivated by the island’s decaying economy when they shape political views (Kelly, 2020).

Bishin and Klofstad propose that recent immigrants are responsible for modified foreign policy attitudes and decreased support for anti-Castro policies (Girard et al., 2012), among other developments, signaling a drastic shift in the Cuban American community party’s alignment, even if it will be a very long time before voting patterns reflect these changes (Bishin and Klofstad, 2012). Despite these divergent political views, the potential new trend supports the theory that experiences on the island, and fear related to those experiences, are a major factor in shaping Cuban Americans’ political identity. If and when experiences on the island change, Cuban Americans’ party affiliation may shift with them; at the moment, however, the established community’s fear of socialism continues to be a major motivating factor.

“A strong reaction to perceived socialist policies is not the only issue that helps maintain the affiliation between Cuban Americans and the Republican party. Other key issues include the economy, health care, violent crime, and foreign policy. These four came out on top when Cuban Americans were asked about “very important” issues that affected their vote in the 2020 presidential election (Krogstad, 2020). The economy and healthcare also came out as priorities for non-Cuban Hispanics, and so do not require extensive discussion in relation to our group of interest. Violent crime and foreign policy, however, are significantly more important to Cubans.

The importance of addressing violent crime may seem like a surprising finding: Cuban Americans’ support for a firm law and order approach, a government that strictly enforces rules, increased policing, and their belief in the American dream (which in their view can only thrive in a society that strictly controls violence and protects fair play), all prompt Cuban Americans to prioritize a strong stance against violent crimes among their political desires.

Cubans’ interest in foreign policy is more expected, not least because the strong anti-socialist stance discussed above may be closely linked to this. Specifically, Cuban Americans care about foreign policy toward Cuba, although as this has changed and the situation on the island has shifted, they have increasingly mixed feelings about it. For example, 60 percent of South Florida Cubans support the embargo. At the same time, there is robust support for engagement policies concerning the sale of food and medicines to the island, maintaining diplomatic relations, and fewer restrictions on airline travel to the island (Grenier and Lai, 2020). This apparent contradiction may stem from a desire to punish the Cuban regime while also protecting Cuban citizens and providing them with better services. Public opinion polls among Cuban Americans suggest there is cautious hope for some engagement, but for now (and potentially as a result of Trump’s targeted campaigning), Cuban Americans are siding with isolationist policies espoused by the Republican Party.

While the factors outlined above appear to be the most robust motivators for Cuban Americans’ continued vote for the Republican Party, it is important to mention that a relatively long history of voting this way has had multiplier effects. The long-standing affinity with the right, for example, means that most Cuban Americans
who choose to run for office do so as Republicans. This means that Cuban American voters looking to see themselves represented in a candidate are most likely to find those candidates affiliated with the GOP, creating a feedback loop of increasingly stronger links between the Cuban American community and the party.

Overall, Cuban Americans are not sure, “even after 60 years of experience, whether isolation or engagement will bring about change,” but having a party that is responsive to this need is a priority for them (Grenier and Lai, 2020). In summary, Cuban Americans (especially the hardliners) are relying on America’s foreign policy to shape the future of Cuba, so they vote for the Republican party, which they perceive as being aligned with them on this issue, even though they do not share many of the Republican party’s socially conservative values, or its religious leanings.

CONCLUSION

There is a humorous anecdote that summarizes the findings of this study: when a Cuban American is asked, “Do you vote Republican or Democrat?” she answers, “I vote Cuban.” Cuban Americans have developed a very unique political identity; they do not fit any stereotype. They are one of the least religious groups among Hispanics in the U.S. and consistently vote for the most religiously affiliated party. Additionally, they have two of the characteristics that tend to indicate higher levels of religiosity: they have suffered and escaped religious repression from the state, and they are Hispanics. While they do support very conservative political leaders, this support is not representative of a strong religious influence.

Further study is needed to provide a holistic explanation as to why Cuban Americans are such outliers in the Republican Party, but these findings offer a starting point. Additionally, Cuban Americans have created their own identity that is neither purely Cuban nor American, and have been here for over 60 years. Many aspects unique to the community they have constructed might not be able to be explained through a merely Cuban or American lens. While further research is required to fully map this political affinity, it is clear that several features of this group play a role in creating this unique political identity: Cuban Americans’ strong rejection of socialism; their relatively progressive social outlooks, and the influence of early LGBTQ immigrants; their loose religious ties counter to the trends observed in other Latin countries; their immigration experiences and biculturalism; America’s rising secularism as a whole; and social pressures within the community to support or reject a political ideology.

The findings of this study, while preliminary, support the importance of deconstructing the Hispanic monolith, and of addressing the singularities of any population with long-lasting support for a political party. They also stress the value of looking beyond major trends: while Republican support is often motivated by religiosity, Cuban Americans are unlikely to be the only voter bloc for whom this is not the case. The complex dynamics encountered during this research teach us that the categories on which we often rely when we describe political behavior are limited, and cannot describe everything about a population or its beliefs. Future research in this area can tackle questions of how Cuban Americans’ political beliefs are shaped both in the context of the U.S. and in the context of the community itself (for example, the religious resurgence experienced by Cubans residing in Cuba), and can constructively encourage us to consider the limitations of “groupings.” While religiosity is not currently a factor, this may change as future immigrant generations arrive in the U.S.; continued attention to the nuances of this political community will support researchers in understanding their dynamic and unique behaviors in the context of closely contested elections.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was originally submitted as the final assignment for PLSC 415 Religion and Politics, taught by Professor Katherine Baldwin, Ph.D, who was of great help. In revising this paper, I have also benefited from conversations with my colleague Maria del Mar Galindo.

REFERENCES


