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CUBAN COMMUNITY

Poll: Cuba's just one of many issues

A new poll reveals a diversity of issues important to Cuban Americans, challenging the conventional wisdom. Cuba, while still important, is not the top issue for exiles.

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The war in Iraq and terrorism are more important issues to Cuban Americans in Miami-Dade than Cuba and Fidel Castro, according to a new poll released Thursday that skews to Cuban Americans 60 and older and paints a more nuanced picture of the exile community.

The findings challenge conventional wisdom that the most important issue to older Cuban exiles is bringing democratic change to communist-ruled Cuba.

Asked what the most important political issue is for them personally, 33 percent of respondents said the war in Iraq and terrorism, 26 percent said Cuba and Castro, and 11 percent said the economy. The poll did not give respondents a choice of answers. Rather, they offered their own for that particular question.

The researchers conclude that national security issues will be more important for Cubans and Cuban-American voters in 2008 than U.S.-Cuba policy.

"I think what we are looking at is a much more complicated view of this community than we've seen in the past," said Jessica Lavariega Monforti, a political science professor at the University of Texas, Pan American.

"You have to engage this community on issues other than Cuba."

The poll questioned 600 Cuban exiles and U.S.-born Cuban Americans in Miami-Dade County Feb. 6-19, and has a sampling margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. The telephone survey, conducted during daytime hours, skewed toward older people, with 47 percent of registered voters questioned 60 or older.

Veteran Miami pollster Sergio Bendixen said that a typical sample of Miami's Cuban and Cuban-American community should have no more than 34 percent of respondents 60 and over. That would make it consistent with the U.S. Census, he said.

The survey was conducted by Lavariega Monforti and Lisa García Bedolla of the University of California at Irvine. Both are Cuban Americans but grew up outside Miami. They presented their results Thursday morning at an event organized by Florida International University's Metropolitan Center. García Bedolla and Lavariega Monforti focused their poll results on the registered voters interviewed, which accounted for 87 percent of the sample.

TRAFFIC AND TAXES

On the local front, transportation ranked as the top concern for Cuban Americans interviewed. One in five said traffic congestion and public transit were the most important issue, followed by taxes, crime and political corruption.

The researchers also indicated that Catholic Cubans "seem politically distinct" because only 49 percent identified as ideologically conservative. About three in four of the poll's respondents said they are Roman Catholic.

FIU Professor Damian Fernandez, head of the Cuban Research Institute, said "the social justice doctrine of the Catholic Church in Cuba" might explain why Cuban Catholics are less conservative than some might expect.

Columbia University Professor Rudy de la Garza warned not to underestimate the Cuba/Castro issue when it comes to Cuban-American voters.

"If you come out wrong on Castro, can you make it as a Cuban-American candidate in Miami? No," de la Garza said. "He is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for political life in Miami."

Lavariaga Monforti conducted the poll as part of a larger study she is pursuing on Miami's exile community. The poll also asked a series of questions about ethnic relations between Cubans and other groups.

RACE RELATIONS

A large majority of Cubans interviewed described local relations between white Cubans and African-Americans, non-Hispanic whites, other Hispanics and black Cubans as good or excellent.

They are also optimistic about their future. Forty-five percent of respondents felt their family's economic situation will be better three years from now and 36 percent said they expected it would remain ``about the same."

García Bedolla said the poll shows an interesting nuance on Cuban Americans in Miami.

"This is not a one-hit wonder community," she said. "I think people need to have concrete facts and not just make assumptions."