

# Americans Favor New Approach to Cuba: Lift the Travel Ban, Establish Diplomatic Relations

April 14, 2009

[Audio of the 4/15/09 event at the Inter-American Dialogue](#)

[Questionnaire/Methodology \(PDF\)](#)

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A majority of Americans feel that it is time to try a new approach to Cuba, according to a national poll by WorldPublicOpinion.org. More specifically, the public favors lifting the ban on travel to Cuba for Americans and re-establishing diplomatic relations as well as other changes.

By a wide margin the American public believes that increasing trade and travel will lead Cuba to become more open and democratic rather than having the effect of strengthening the Communist regime.

These are among the findings of a new national poll of Americans on the subject of Cuba policy conducted March 25 - April 6, 2009 among 765 adults (margin of error +/- 3.7 percentage points).

## Time for Changing US Policies

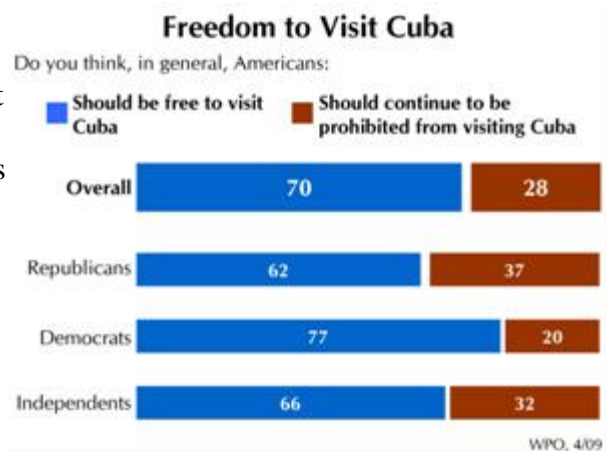
A majority (59%) of the American public endorses the view that it is "time to try a new approach to Cuba, because Cuba may be ready for a change". Thirty-nine percent of Americans endorsed the opposing position on this issue, that "the Communist Party is still in control; therefore the US should continue to isolate Cuba."

A clear majority of Democrats (71%) favor trying a new approach while Republicans are divided with 52 percent favoring continued isolation and 47 percent favoring a new approach. Independents are also divided (50% - new approach, 45% continued isolation).

The public, by a large majority, feels that US government leaders should be ready to meet with Cuban leaders. Overall 75 percent of those interviewed feel that US leaders should be willing to meet their Cuban counterparts; only 23 percent feel this is a bad idea. On this issue, partisan groups agree. A majority of Republicans (66%), independents (64%), and Democrats (86%) all have the view that US leaders should be ready to meet with Cuban leaders.

## Travel to Cuba

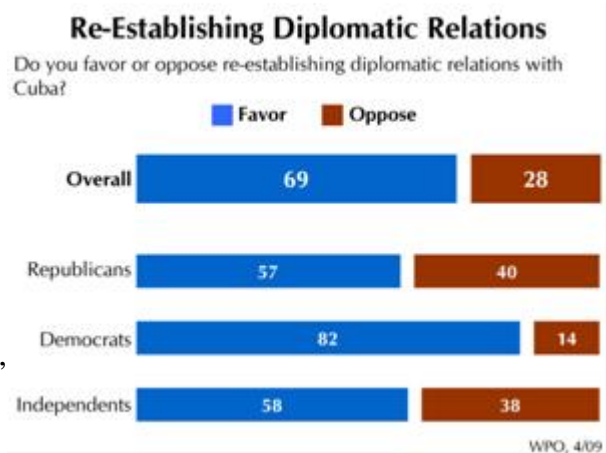
The American public (70%) feels that in general Americans should be free to visit Cuba, and only a minority (28%) feels that Americans should be prohibited from visiting the island. Freedom for Americans to visit Cuba is broadly supported by Republicans (62%), by independents (66%), and by Democrats (77%). Lifting the prohibition on visiting Cuba would require a change in US policy that has been in place since 1963.



The public by a very large majority approves of this Obama Administration policy announced on March 11, 2009 which relaxed restrictions on travel to Cuba for the purpose of visiting relatives (79% approve, 19% disapprove). Republicans show substantial majority support (71%) even though the policy change is clearly linked in the question and in press treatments to the new Democratic president. Independents (70%) and Democrats (90%) by large margins also support the policy change.

## Diplomatic Relations

Americans likewise favor re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba by a clear majority - 69 percent favor, only 28 percent are opposed. All partisan groups support re-establishing diplomatic relations, though Democrats do so in larger numbers (82%) than Republicans (57%) or independents (58%).

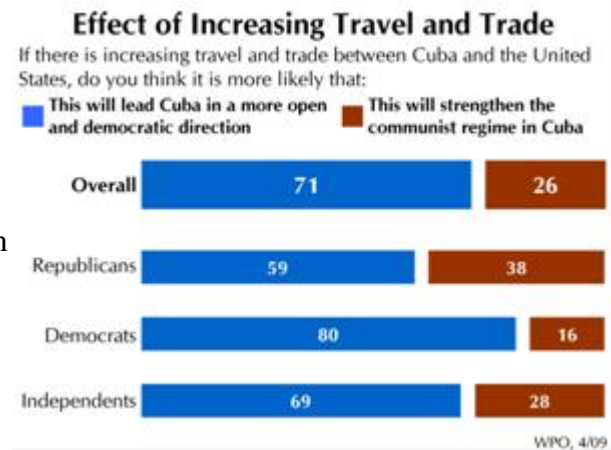


To understand trends in American opinion, the diplomatic relations question was drawn from a question used by the Gallup organization in 2002, 04, 06, and 08. Over this period, the proportion of Americans which favors re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba has increased from 55% (2002, 2004), to 67% in 2006, 61% in 2008 and currently 69%. The Program on International Policy Attitudes asked a quite similar question in 1998 and found that 56% of Americans supported re-establishing relations. Other organizations (CNN, Associated Press) have also reported that a majority of Americans support diplomatic relations with Cuba, and the trend favoring diplomatic relations seems to be increasing.

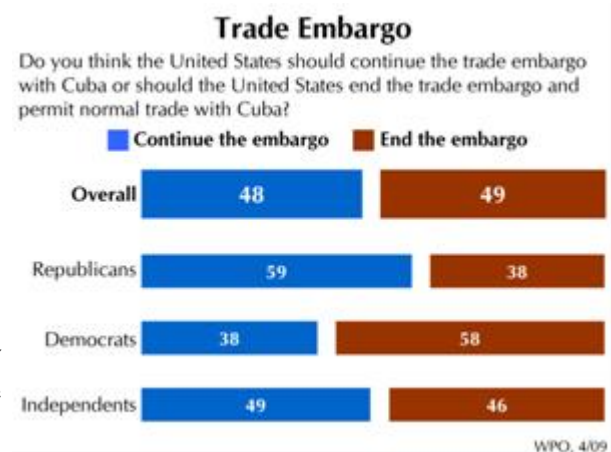
## Impact of US Travel and Trade

One of the core arguments in Cuba policy is whether increasing all kinds of contact between the US and Cuba - travel, trade, diplomacy - will strengthen the Castro regime or will have a liberalizing effect on the system.

Americans feel, by wide margins, that increasing travel and trade between Cuba and the United States is more likely to have the effect of leading "Cuba in a more open and democratic direction" (71%) than to "strengthen the Communist regime in Cuba" (26%). Clear majorities of Democrats (80%), independents (69%) as well as Republicans (59%) share this view.



The public is almost evenly divided, however, when asked specifically about the desirability of continuing the US trade embargo of Cuba or ending the embargo: 48% favor continuing the embargo and 49% favor ending it. Underlying this division is majority Democratic support (58%) for ending the embargo, independents who are divided (46% end the embargo, 49% continue), and majority support for continuing the embargo on the part of Republicans (59%).



Differences between partisan Democrats and Republicans on some aspects of Cuba policy should not be surprising in that they reflect central tendencies within the parties. While Cuba policy was not one of the major issues of the 2008 presidential campaign, the platforms of the two parties, and the positions of the candidates, differed on Cuba. The Democratic platform supported unlimited family visits and remittances; the Republican platform largely reiterated the policies of the Bush Administration. Obama-Biden campaign materials and comments by Senator McCain during the campaign tended to reflect these differences and were generally consistent with their respective party platforms.

The Associated Press - IPSOS poll posed an identical question on lifting the trade embargo in 2007 and found that 40 percent of the public favored ending the embargo. The 49% support for ending the embargo in the current 2009 study is a statistically significant increase from 2007. It appears that American public opinion is trending towards support for lifting the embargo, though it is not presently a majority view.

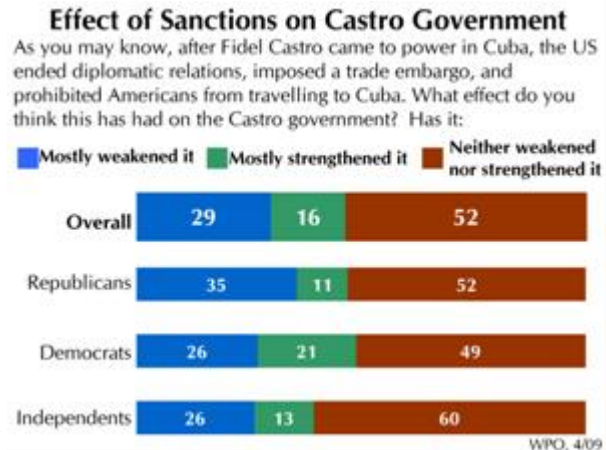
## Appraisal of the Cuban Threat and American Policy

Few Americans feel that Cuba is a very serious threat (7%) to the United States, or even a moderately serious threat (27%). The majority sees Cuba as just a slight threat (33%) or no threat at all (30%) to the US.

This assessment is common across partisan groups: 51 percent of Republicans think Cuba poses little danger to the US, labeling it as "just a slight threat" or "no threat at all" and a clear majority of independents and Democrats (both 70%) see Cuba as being either a slight threat or no threat.

To gauge the public's assessment of the impact of US Cuba policy, respondents were told, "after Fidel Castro came to power, the US ended diplomatic relations, imposed a trade embargo, and prohibited Americans from traveling to Cuba" and were asked what effect they felt these policies have had on the Castro government. Only 29 percent of Americans overall feels that these policies have weakened the Castro government. About half of all Americans (52%) say the policies "neither weakened nor strengthened" the Castro government, and another 16 percent say that the policies have strengthened the government.

The assessment that US policies towards Cuba have been ineffective, that is, the policies have neither weakened nor strengthened the Castro government, or that they have strengthened it, is by far the most common view across each partisan group - Republicans (63%), Democrats (70%), and independents (73%).



US policies towards Cuba, particularly the embargo and the associated Helms-Burton Act which subjects to legal action non-US companies who trade with Cuba, have provoked ill feelings and criticism in Europe and among friendly countries in the Americas.

Americans are divided on whether lifting restrictions on trade and travel with Cuba will affect the image of the US. While 42 percent say that lifting such restrictions would have mainly a positive effect on America's image in the world, 46 percent say it would have neither a positive or negative effect. Only 10 percent say it would have a mainly negative effect. Democrats are more likely (57%) to say lifting these restrictions would have a mainly positive effect than independents (31%) or Republicans (29%).

Among demographic variables, the respondent's education has the largest and most consistent effect on attitudes. People with more education (a bachelor's degree or higher vs. less than a bachelor's degree) are significantly more likely to favor a new Cuba policy 77 percent with a bachelor's degree or higher support re-establishing diplomatic relations, and 65 percent with less education. Similarly, 62 percent of the most educated favor ending the trade embargo and only 44 percent do so with less education.

A similar education effect appears in the public's views that: Cuba is just a slight threat or no threat to the US (rather than a serious threat); it is time to try a new approach to Cuba; it is a good idea for US leaders to be ready to meet with Cuban leaders; Americans in general should be free to visit Cuba; increasing travel and trade will lead Cuba in a more democratic direction; relaxing restrictions on travel and trade with Cuba will have a mainly positive effect on America's image in the world. The impact of higher education on attitudes about Cuba policy is consistent and fairly robust; those with more education show greater support for change and liberalization.

### **Overview of Partisan Differences and Similarities on Cuba Policy**

Cuba policy has been an issue where the political parties have sometimes clashed. In this study, on nearly all questions one can observe statistical differences in views between Republican and Democratic partisans. Republicans do oppose lifting the trade embargo, whereas, Democrats favor ending it. However, on most of the other issues polled concerning Cuba policy, the majority of Republicans and the majority of Democrats agree.

- US government leaders should be ready to meet with Cuban leaders (Republicans 66%, Democrats 86%).
- The Obama Administration's relaxation of Cuban American travel restrictions are supported (Republicans 71%, Democrats 90%).
- Americans in general should be able to visit Cuba (Republicans 62%, Democrats 77%).
- Diplomatic relations with Cuba should be re-established (Republicans 57%, Democrats 82%).
- Increased travel and trade will lead Cuba in a more open, democratic direction (Republicans 59%, Democrats 80%).
- Cuba is "just a slight threat" or "no threat at all" to the US (Republicans 51%, Democrats 70%).

While issues related to Cuba are deeply felt and polarizing for some Americans, there appears to be a broad consensus in favor of more normal relations with the island.

The findings in this study are based upon a nationwide survey conducted March 25 - April 6, 2009 among 765 American adults (margin of error +/- 3.7 percentage points). This WorldPublicOpinion.org study was fielded by Knowledge Networks using its nationwide online panel. This panel is randomly selected from the entire adult population and Internet access is provided to households that need it. For more information about this methodology, go to [www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp).

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