

CUBA'S 1950 MIDTERM ELECTIONS: THE ISLAND'S LAST DEMOCRATIC POLL

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In 1950, with midterm election campaigns already in high gear, Cuba's premier pollster, Raúl Gutiérrez Serrano published a survey measuring the "political sympathy" for Cuba's primary movers and shakers.¹ The questionnaire guru asked respondents who, among Carlos Prío, Ramón Grau, Guillermo Alonso Pujol, Fulgencio Batista and Eduardo Chibás, they believed was "most beneficial" for Cuba.² Despite an uneven record, Prío topped the list with 23.86 percent. Chibás was next with 20.74 percent. Batista registered 17.17 percent and Grau followed in fourth place with a mere 12.82 percent. Alonso Pujol had the worst showing by far, rating an embarrassing 0.67 percent nationwide and zero in the province of Pinar del Río. Prío's relative popularity was in marked contrast to that of his government. In a different query, where Cubans were asked to judge his administration, 23.19 percent replied that it was "good," 29.71 percent said it was "bad" and 35.06 percent answered it was "average."³ The most notable finding was that Grau, who had been so revered in 1944 and whose smile still tickled the masses in 1948, had seen his standing sink lower than Batista's. This owed much to the sensational revelations of José Manuel Alemán's vast and varied shopping spree with state funds. If Pelayo Cuervo's Lawsuit 82

against Grau and those who sacked the treasury during his term seemed somewhat abstract or politically motivated, as *El Viejo* himself liked to believe, there was no facile explanation for the seemingly endless possessions of his favorite minister. The columnist Francisco Ichaso styled these a "new and forceful blow to Grau's solar plexus," adding that the former physiology professor could no longer claim: "It wasn't me."⁴

The timing of this poll may have appeared curious since, among all these figures, only Chibás was seeking elective office in 1950. At the same time, they were fixtures of Cuban politics and each one was running a proxy in the pivotal Havana mayoral race. Antonio Prío's demoralizing experience in the *Palacio de los Deportes*, where he had been mercilessly booed, had sketched the limits of his brother's boosterism. The only question was whether he could buy off his unpopularity or frighten *Habaneros* into voting for him. In advertisements, Antonio promised to build a "true" aqueduct, suggesting his proximity to the president would facilitate this project. His slogan was thus, "Whatever Havana Needs, Havana Will Have." Also, having failed to lure the Communists himself, he derided his rival Nicolás Castellanos for accepting their support. One poster showed a pair of

1. Raúl Gutiérrez, "En Un Survey Nacional el Pueblo Opina Sobre el Gobierno, el Nuevo Rumbo, Grau, Batista y Chibás," *Bohemia*, April 2, 1950: 87.

2. *Ibid.*, 86.

3. *Ibid.*, 88.

4. Francisco Ichaso, "La Opinión Pública Brinda Escaso Apoyo a los Liberes de la 'Coincidencia,'" *Bohemia*, April 9, 1950: 90.

children praying at their bedside under a portrait of the Virgin Mary while the ominous shadow of Joseph Stalin hovered above them. Castellanos remained the frontrunner despite being supported by two men, Grau and Alonso Pujol, who were held in low public esteem. Most importantly, he relied on incumbency and the fact that he was not Antonio Prío. His campaign emphasized all manner of “tangible achievements,” including renovated day care centers, improvements in city hospitals and new schools. Hence, Castellanos proclaimed himself, “A Mayor Who Shows the People His Works.” Lastly, there was the well meaning but grayish Manuel Bisbé. He boasted the moral stature of Chibás sans charisma, but this was not an auspicious formula according to polls. His candidacy would test whether Cubans were willing to vote for the upright but often bland figures proposed by *Ortodoxo* fanatics in major elections. Bisbé’s announcements stressed his revolutionary credentials, including expulsions from teaching jobs by Machado and Batista. They also lionized the fact that his current position at the University of Havana had been gained through an “open competition” rather than favoritism. Moreover, he was touted as an industrious congressman who proposed numerous bills, and a man of principle, who had spent seven hours combating the president’s foreign loan. His motto declared: “His Clean and Useful Life Guarantees That He is the Best Candidate.”

On April 16, Bisbé was featured in a *Bohemia* series called “Twenty-four Hours in the Lives of the Mayoral Candidates.” Readers of the magazine and potential balloters were offered a photo essay of Bisbé at his steady best. As such, he was shown inscribing Greek phrases on the blackboard of his university

classroom, sitting with sympathizers at his campaign headquarters and chatting with colleagues who were also respectable *Ortodoxos* such as Herminio Portell Vilá, Vicentina Antuña and Roberto Agramonte.⁵ While these portraits portrayed a decent man who associated with an honorable crowd, Bisbé’s main liability was highlighted by something missing in the captions. Pictured next to Chibás in one frame and José Pardo Llada in another, his companions were both described as “popular” while Bisbé was attached to laudatory but less handy adjectives like “honest” and “trustworthy.”⁶ In fact, the 25-year-old Pardo Llada was shaping up as the party’s newest superstar, having built his following, like Chibás, through a popular radio show and charismatic, scandal-mongering style. Pardo Llada first drew national acclaim in 1944 with his commentary on the vastly destructive hurricane that wrecked Havana harbor and killed an estimated 300 people. Like Chibás, he championed causes dear to the island’s rural and urban working classes. For example, he advocated higher salaries for sugar workers and denounced a rise in bus fares. While Pardo Llada was far from unique in espousing these stands, he also possessed what the journalist Walfredo Vicente called a “contagious popularity.”⁷ This was reflected in the top ratings of his daily afternoon broadcast, which outperformed all other news shows of its kind.⁸ In addition, he could neither walk nor drive through Havana without being stopped and effusively greeted by people of every sort. His run in with former Police Chief Caramés notwithstanding, even officers of the law happily paused and chatted with him. Aside from his magnetism, Pardo Llada’s background as a schoolteacher’s son and generally modest personal habits pleased

5. Herminio Portell Vilá was a University of Havana professor and one of Cuba’s most notable historians. He was also running for Havana city council on the *Ortodoxo* ticket. Vicentina Antuña was a Latin professor and officer in the *Ortodoxo* Women’s Wing. Aside from being his cousin’s ex vice presidential candidate, Roberto Agramonte was head of the *Ortodoxo* provincial assembly for Havana and a sociology professor.

6. Eduardo Hernández, “24 horas con los candidatos a Alcalde: Manuel Bisbé,” *Bohemia*, April 16, 1950: 44, 46.

7. Walfredo Vicente, “El Pardo Llada que Usted no Conoce,” *Bohemia*, May 14, 1950: 32.

8. In Cuban Advertising Association surveys tracking radio listeners in Havana and the neighboring municipalities of Marianao, Regla and Guanabacoa, Pardo Llada’s show regularly appeared first in the category of “news shows lasting four minutes or longer.” Between February 2 and February 19, 1950, his broadcast drew a 9.52 rating, beating out CMQ’s news program, which tallied an 8.50 share. See “El Ultimo ‘Survey,’” *Bohemia*, March 19, 1950: 58.

Ortodoxo moral guardians.⁹ His closeness to Chibás, who he saw nearly every day, also stood him in good stead. Although still quite young, the party astutely nominated him to run for congress and the enthusiasm aroused by his candidacy was second only to that of the man he so consciously emulated. With no need for a political machine, Pardo Llada gathered tremendous momentum using his radio popularity, the genuine affection of Havana residents and endorsements from respected men like the independence hero Enrique Loynaz del Castillo and Cuba's foremost public intellectual, Fernando Ortiz.

In this too, Pardo Llada was treading a path previously blazed by Chibás. For the party's established luminary, however, this would be a different campaign given his very considerable physical limitations. Ecstatic rallies culminating with leaps into the arms of his aficionados were out of the question. Nor could Chibás tour the numerous towns and villages of Havana province to personally state his case. The *Ortodoxo* leader still had his wits about him though and on April 9 delivered a blistering contumely against his two opponents. In his first live and complete radio address since February, Chibás recalled that Virgilio Pérez, the erstwhile judicial policeman, had arrested him in April of 1929 and sent him to prison for four months, thereby rendering a valuable service to President Gerardo Machado. He also accused Pérez of raiding Cuba's Institute of Coffee and agriculture ministry to the tune of five million *pesos*. Moreover, just as Pérez had succeeded José Manuel Alemán as *Auténtico* party boss in Havana, he also desired to replace him in the senate using the same methods favored by the late education minister—namely via “large scale bribery.”¹⁰ Chibás referred to

his second opponent as “Mister William Belt.” This was a reference to his American roots as the grandson of John Benjamin Belt, who had settled in Cuba after the United States Civil War. In this vein, Chibás wondered whether Belt aspired to represent Cubans or “Boston aristocracy.”¹¹ Continuing with this theme, Chibás recalled that as Havana's mayor in 1933 Belt had betrayed the revolution by “screaming for American intervention.”¹² In the end, Belt did boast one Cuban trait, although it was the rather disappointing one of opportunism. Hence, in 1935, now serving as Batista's appointed mayor of Havana, he placed a medal of honor around the neck of Pedro Pedraza after he had suppressed the mass strikes of that year.

Besides returning to the airwaves full time, Chibás also took up his pencil.¹³ As always, his friend Miguel Ángel Quevedo happily ceded him space in the island's most popular magazine—which was already running regular pro *Ortodoxo* columns by Jorge Mañach and Carlos Márquez Sterling. On April 23, Chibás published an article entitled “Message to the Cuban People,” which reiterated and amplified his earlier criticisms of Virgilio Pérez and Guillermo Belt. Apart from painting Pérez as a pro-Machado stooge and abuser of public office, he provided an embarrassing anecdote. Chibás related that after Machado was ousted and angry mobs sought revenge against government agents, Pérez had “hidden behind the skirts of female family members and friends” who begged revolutionary leaders to pardon his “wickedness.”¹⁴ Chibás lacked similar juicy details about “Mr. William Belt,” dismissing him instead as an “unconditional servant” of Wall Street who would feel more at home in Washington's Capitol than Cu-

9. Pardo Llada shared a simple apartment in the La Sierra district of Havana with his wife, María Luisa Alonso, who was a dentist.

10. “En Cuba, Política: ‘El Partido me ha Señalado un Puesto de Combate,’” *Bohemia*, April 16, 1950: 78.

11. *Ibid.* Chibás' suggestion that Belt was not really Cuban scored political points but also contained a fair bit of hypocrisy. After all, Eddy's father, Eduardo Justo, was naturalized as a United States citizen in 1891 at a court of Quarter Sessions in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he had been working as a civil engineer.

12. *Ibid.*, 79.

13. Chibás wrote the first drafts of his articles and radio speeches in pencil, usually while chain smoking, after which they were typed by his secretary Conchita Fernández.

14. Eduardo R. Chibás, “Mensaje al Pueblo Cubano,” *Bohemia*, April 23, 1950: 71.

ba's *Capitolio*.¹⁵ Finally, Chibás reserved some harsh words for a newcomer—the Communist Anibal Escalante. Unlike Pérez, who he deemed a crook and Belt, who he called a lackey of United States bankers, Chibás considered Escalante a flunky for Moscow's "despotic" empire—which he termed "the most dangerous and bloodthirsty" of the current century.¹⁶ In presenting his own case for election, Chibás recycled choice bits of rhetoric from his presidential campaign. Paraphrasing his classic speech from 1948, he asked, "What are we counting on to win Havana's vacant senate seat?"¹⁷ Rather than a political machine or money, Chibás answered, "My history as an incorruptible combatant during a quarter century of incarcerations, persecutions and constant sacrifices."¹⁸ He reminded readers that the Prío family, Nicolás Castellanos, Virgilio Pérez and Alberto Inocente Álvarez had all enriched themselves in public office. Conversely, he had refused to "exchange shame for money" and was now measurably poorer.¹⁹

Chibás also reprimanded the government for abetting an epidemic of "siblingism" in Cuban politics. This began at the top with Carlos Prío's imposition of his younger brother Antonio as the *Auténtico* mayoral candidate of Havana, his sister Mireya as a congressional hopeful from Oriente and his sister-in-law's brother, Tino Fuentes, as a prospective representative from Las Villas.²⁰ Those who followed suit included Tony Varona, who had his brother Roberto nominated to run for mayor of Camagüey; Virgilio Pérez, who tabbed his brother Gerardo to fill the

congressional seat he was vacating; Diego Vicente Tejera who lined up a congressional bid for his brother Titi in their home province of Matanzas; Octavio Rivero Partagás of Pinar del Río, whose brother César was up for re-election as a representative; and the infamous Rolando Masferrer, who placed his brother Kiki on the congressional ticket in their native Oriente. On the other hand, Chibás was not entirely immune from the tendency toward nepotism—which was pervasive in all of Cuba's political parties. He conveniently neglected to mention that his cousin Roberto Agramonte had been elected *Ortodoxo* party boss in Havana at his behest and the two delegates who had raised charges of favoritism had been expelled.²¹

As Chibás pressed on in characteristic style, the *Auténtico* senator and Prío confidante Lomberto Díaz described a different though no less captivating panorama. While Chibás railed against the status quo from outside, Díaz detailed the thinking of those who ruled the island. Having invited a *Bohemia* reporter to his country house in Pinar del Río province, Díaz spoke frankly, assisted by several drams of *guayabita*, a local guava infused liquor. Among other things, he stated that Carlos Prío rather than party assemblies would choose the *Auténtico* presidential candidate for 1952. As a consequence, legislators loyal to the president were anxious to modify the electoral code and eliminate the veto currently wielded by provincial bodies over party nominees. Apart from being anti-democratic, this change would cause con-

15. Ibid., 93. Chibás was far from the only one to poke fun at Belt's American origins. For example, the political satirist Niko published a cartoon in which two men of obvious American appearance are walking down a Havana street. Off to the side, one Cuban tells the other, "To tell the truth, I don't know whether they are tourists or political sergeants of William Belt." See Niko, "Confusión," *Bohemia*, April 30, 1950: 77.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 70.

18. Ibid., 70–71.

19. Ibid., 71.

20. Of course, Carlos Prío's older brother Paco was already a senator from Pinar del Río while his brother-in-law Enrique Henríquez occupied a congressional seat from Oriente province.

21. They were Segundo Abreu and Baltasar Arroyo, both of whom abstained from voting out of protest. See Conte Agüero, *Eduardo Chibás*, 654.

siderable rifts within the party—particularly among followers of Miguelito Suárez Fernández.²² As to whom Prío would actually select, Díaz said the president was awaiting the midterm election results. If Antonio were to win the Havana mayoralty “by an ample margin,” as many in the party expected, he would be the standard bearer in 1952.²³ In the event that Antonio lost, the field would be more wide open. Díaz claimed Carlos Hevia would have the inside track as the president held him in “great esteem.”²⁴ However, circumstances were still fluid. For instance, if Virgilio Pérez upset Chibás at the polls, he could reasonably expect the party's laurels although Díaz recognized the *Ortodoxo* leader was a “fearsome” opponent and would probably emerge victorious.²⁵ Even in the likely event of his defeat, Pérez was “lending a great service to the government” because no one else had been willing to challenge Chibás.²⁶ In fact, for an *Auténtico* nabob, Díaz offered a surprisingly nuanced assessment of his party's bête noire. The standard *Auténtico* appraisal portrayed Chibás as an irresponsible rabble rouser who was unfit for high office and a ruinous influence on the nation. On the contrary, Díaz allowed that Chibás alone among opposition figures “had something to say.”²⁷ Alternatively, Grau, Batista and Alonso Pujol were “washed up” and “electoral cadavers.”²⁸

If his campaign advertisements were any indication, Chibás was saying the senate was a den of iniquity and vowed to construct a wall against “vile exploiters of the people” if elected.²⁹ He thus urged voters to “place their brick” by marking their ballots for him. Another poster limned a battle scene and proclaimed that Chibás would be the people's “trench.”³⁰ As there were no *Ortodoxos* in the senate and only two open seats there, he would have scarce opportunities to introduce any bills. However, as a party chief and future presidential candidate, the press was understandably interested in his legislative proposals. One afternoon a reporter stopped by the Agramonte residence to ask Chibás about his program and found him still in pajamas. Smiling, the *Ortodoxo* leader related that he had attended a rally in Cárdenas (75 miles east of Havana) the night before and gone to bed at 4 a.m. This had not been a campaign stop as Cárdenas was in neighboring Matanzas province and nobody there could vote for him. Rather, he had felt obliged to support a local *Ortodoxo* candidate and made the trip despite violent objections from his doctor Pedro Iglesias Betancourt. Chibás answered the journalist's questions with gleeful good humor and offered, with consummate showmanship, to pose at the desk where he wrote his Sunday radio speeches. At one point, he turned on the radio and said, “Permit me listen to Virgilio (Pérez) so I can amuse myself.”³¹ Soon enough, Chibás dived into a lecture

22. Díaz mentioned that the *Auténtico* party chief in Matanzas, Diego Vicente Tejera, “doesn't content himself with the trust of Carlos (Prío) but rather wants to keep the knife of the veto in his hands for his defense.” See “En Cuba, Entrevista: ‘La Mayoría Votará por Chibás...,’” *Bohemia*, April 23, 1950: 80.

23. *Ibid.* The fact that Díaz and other *Auténticos* believed Antonio Prío could handily win the mayoralty despite his obvious unpopularity was a testament to their nearly unlimited faith in the party's political machine and the government's resources.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.* Díaz reserved his highest praise for the *Ortodoxo* leader's campaign skills, saying “any other candidate would need three months to gain the ground Chibás could cover in 30 days.” This may have been hyperbolic but only slightly. Chibás was far and away the best campaigner in Cuba.

28. *Ibid.*

29. “¡Ponga su piedra...!,” *Bohemia*, April 30, 1950: 25.

30. “La Trinchera del Pueblo Debe Ser...,” *Bohemia*, May 19, 1950: 81.

31. Antonio Perdomo, “Mi Programa Legislativo Responde a las Necesidades Morales y Políticas del Pueblo Cubano,” *Bohemia*, April 30, 1950: 69.

on nepotism, as he explained that all four Pérez brothers were elected officials or state employees and dishonest ones at that.³² Regarding his legislative agenda, Chibás mentioned passage of the 1940 constitution's complementary laws. He was especially keen on imperatives that would curb corruption such as a general accounting law, establishment of a national comptroller's office and an act that would establish defined standards for state employees. Chibás also wished to tinker with the electoral code so that senators would be elected based on majority vote rather than by coalition. His most ambitious scheme was a crowd pleaser and hoary campaign staple that involved handing "thieving functionaries" over to the courts for prosecution and devising legislation that would recover stolen funds and invest them in "urgent" projects including aqueducts, hospitals, country roads and rural schools.³³ This project was timelier than ever in the wake of Alemán's lavish accoutrements but had no chance in an *Auténtico* controlled senate.

Shortly after this interview, Chibás began feeling the effects of his ill advised trip to Cárdenas. Besides staying out until the wee hours, Chibás had insisted on delivering a speech and passing through the gigantic crowd on foot, accompanied by José Pardo Llada. Within days, Chibás began vomiting after meals and required regular infusions of saline, blood and plasma. Moreover, his weight plummeted since he could not digest any solid food. On April 27, he had planned to commemorate the first anniversary of his incarceration by addressing an *Ortodoxo* throng next to the *Castillo del Príncipe*. That morning, however, Chibás fainted multiple times. Pedro Iglesias Betancourt told him to stay home, warning he could die in the middle of his speech otherwise. Chibás

spent the afternoon in his room pondering the counsel of his friend and doctor but by 7 p.m. he had decided to forsake sound medical advice yet again. This seemed foolish, particularly as Chibás threw up twice before leaving the house and three more times as he waited his turn at the pulpit. When the *Ortodoxo* leader finally stood to address the multitude, he was interrupted by concerned voices begging him to stop. Chibás marveled that never before had "his people" asked him not to speak.³⁴ Later on, having safely returned to the Agramonte residence, he asked his cousin's wife, "Don't you think the Cuban people, who are so good, deserve what I just did?"³⁵

On April 30, the Havana senate contest swerved in a highly unexpected direction. That evening, Chibás offered breaking news to his Sunday audience. Shortly before he began broadcasting, Cuba's Superior Electoral Tribunal had disqualified Virgilio Pérez from running because of an erroneous coalition agreement. Specifically, he had sought to be listed on the *Auténtico*, Democratic and Liberal ballots but the Liberals had never formally nominated him and the pact was thus invalid according to the island's electoral code. Upon learning the verdict, Prime Minister Tony Varona announced over the radio that the court had initiated a "coup" and claimed, with notable indelicacy, that it "could not do this to a government party."³⁶ The ornery Varona thus expressed officially what most *Auténticos* had long assumed—namely, that they were entitled to rule and the law was a useful cudgel against opponents but did not apply to them. Virgilio Pérez echoed the belief that Cuba's courts were a government plaything by wondering how the judges had dared to "rebel against the president of the republic."³⁷ For his part, Carlos Prío telephoned one of the magistrates and accused him

32. On the other hand, Eddy's younger brother Raúl directed the Havana Military Academy—a private high school for boys.

33. Antonio Perdomo, "Mi Programa Legislativo Responde a las Necesidades Morales y Políticas del Pueblo Cubano," *Bohemia*, April 30, 1950: 69.

34. Conte Agüero, *Eduardo Chibás*, 671.

35. *Ibid.*

36. "En Cuba: Tribunales: 'Esa Sentencia es Justa...,'" *Bohemia*, May 7, 1950: 73.

37. *Ibid.*

of “negligence” for not clarifying the rules pertaining to special elections.³⁸ This was a disingenuous gripe since the electoral code had not changed one iota. Further, Pérez had been the only candidate to run afoul of the regulations. The real problem was that he had trusted his bungling advisor and lawyer, Rigoberto Ramírez, to submit the paperwork. Chibás, who was no stranger to legal disputes, convened the *Ortodoxo* executive committee for a consultation. In a dig at Varona, the party conveyed “support” for the electoral tribunal’s decision to “apply the same legal precepts to the government parties as those that oblige everyone else.”³⁹

The government, of course, was not inclined to stand pat and submitted an appeal that was considered on May 2. Judge Eloy Merino, who had been extensively lobbied by the president, seemed ready to change his mind. He argued the court had created “public anxiety” and urged his peers to grant an extension allowing the *Auténtico*, Democratic and Liberal parties to put their pact in order.⁴⁰ His revised criteria drew a strenuous and verbose objection from the court’s *Ortodoxo* observer, Joaquín López Montes. Speaking for 90 minutes, López Montes denied the existence of any public anxiety—claiming the only citizens suffering unease were the prime minister and friends of Virgilio Pérez. He concluded darkly that, “A state of public anxiety will reign only if the people, who have respectfully accepted the Supreme Electoral Tribunal’s egalitarian sentence, now contemplate its retraction and thus lose faith in the courts.”⁴¹ Regardless, Judge Merino and Judge Aurelio Álvarez Maruri reversed course and their votes swung the majority in favor of repeal. Weighing in as a “responsible citi-

zen,” Chibás deplored the government’s “brutal coercion” and pronounced himself “profoundly ashamed” by this turnabout.⁴² At the same time, he had relished the prospect of “soundly defeating” Pérez and confessed to feeling a certain “personal satisfaction” that the race would continue. Chibás repeated and expanded on these thoughts in a subsequent *Bohemia* article. The *Ortodoxo* leader asserted that he was “sure” Cuba’s Court of Constitutional Guarantees would invalidate Pérez if given the chance.⁴³ However, his party had decided to forego this route

because everything that the *ex porrista* Virgilio Pérez represents—stolen money, political machinery, vote buying, fraud, shady political deals—all this corruption is going to be swept from public life in the six provinces, not by means of legal appeals but through the clean and incorruptible votes of the Cuban people, in an avalanche of ballots without precedent in Cuban history.⁴⁴

The obsession of Chibás and the *Ortodoxos* with public dishonesty, particularly in terms of vote buying, seemed to be gaining traction not only among hard core followers but also for the island’s shapers of opinion. During the second week of May, the theme was taken up by Francisco Ichaso in *Diario de la Marina*, Rafael Estenger in *Alerta*, Carlos Lechuga in *El Mundo* and Prío’s minister without portfolio Ramón Vasconcelos. A *Bohemia* correspondent quipped that even sleazy politicians were none too happy with the situation as the price of purchasing their positions was becoming onerous.⁴⁵ Buying votes had not always been part of Cuba’s electoral process, but the practice boasted a long and varied history—dating from at least 1914, when two unpopular politicians

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 74. The *Bohemia* reporter observing this case was convinced that Judge Merino had been tampered with, noting that he lacked his “habitual composure” while citing his new, pro-government line. The journalist added that, “Those familiar with the judge’s habitual eloquence suspect something strange is happening with him.” See Ibid.

41. Ibid., 75.

42. Ibid.

43. Eduardo R. Chibás, “Sangre y Cien,” *Bohemia*, May 14, 1950: 70.

44. Ibid., 71. The *porra* was slang for members of President Gerardo Machado’s security forces.

45. “En Cuba, Política: El Dinero en la Política,” *Bohemia*, May 14, 1950: 74.

found success by bribing those who marked ballots for illiterate citizens. In those days, they tore 100 *peso* bills down the middle and provided one half to their accomplices prior to elections and the other once victory was assured. Given the multitude of choices on each ballot, including candidates for congress, provincial government and town or city council, voters could opt to sell their votes in bulk (a ploy known as the pineapple) or keep one or more for themselves. In Havana, such machinations eventually gave rise to an early political vehicle known as the *Cenáculo* or Circle, which entrenched Liberals in the city's bureaucracy and elective offices. During Gerardo Machado's presidency this operation was centralized and positions were auctioned from the presidential palace, often costing up to 100,000 *pesos*. With the advent of BAGA in 1946, a joint venture between José Manuel Alemán and Francisco Grau Alsina to help them capture senate seats snowballed into the most powerful political machine in Cuba's history—capable of co-opting entire municipal assemblies. BAGA's essentially unlimited funds, siphoned directly from Cuba's treasury, provided Carlos Prío with approximately 30 million *pesos* for his 1948 election campaign. Alemán spent an estimated 10 million *pesos* on his senate seat. This infusion of money raised the ante for everyone else, including fellow *Auténticos*, some of whom had paid upwards of 300,000 *pesos* for places in congress.⁴⁶

Alemán's demise and the dissolution of his political apparatus did not diminish the preeminence of mammon. On the contrary, costs inevitably climbed. This was nowhere more evident than in the Havana mayoral race. Aside from trying to buy the city's hostile denizens, Antonio Prío also needed to appease his coalition partners and other useful individuals with cash inducements. With habitual indiscretion, he ad-

mitted to shelling out 350,000 *pesos* for Liberal support. The amount paid for continued Democratic fealty was less well publicized but undoubtedly substantial as well. Panchín Batista, the governor of Havana province and an erstwhile mayoral candidate himself, was also lured to the *Auténticos* through a generous cash reward. Moreover, Antonio supplemented his budget by distributing an endless supply of lottery tickets—which served as a form of cash. While the precise extent of his expenses remained unknown, he bragged to an adherent of Nicolás Castellanos that, "The money I'm spending resembles a tale from *A Thousand and One Nights!*"⁴⁷ Needless to say, the legislative races involved similar tactics. Alberto Inocente Álvarez, the *Auténtico* senate contender for Pinar del Río told the press he expected to spend a million *pesos* on his campaign. Moreover, the average bid for an *Auténtico* congressional seat, which often surpassed 900,000 *pesos*, required only slightly more modest outlays.⁴⁸ A *Bohemia* reporter blamed these swelling prices on candidates who "brilliantly" manipulated the "bribery industry" including Edgardo Buttari, Prío's ex labor minister; Armando Da'Lama, a venal treasury ministry official; Gerardo Pérez, brother to the unscrupulous Virgilio; and Guillermo Ara, who employed UIR gangsters along with Cuba's dubious political sergeants to harvest votes.⁴⁹

Although vote buying proved phenomenally successful over the years, Cubans had usually been willing to forgo the extra lucre if they felt strongly about a candidate. Hence, the sports journalist Victor Muñoz topped the list for Havana city council in 1920 because he was adored by the island's myriad baseball fanatics.⁵⁰ Ramón Grau San Martín achieved the same result in Cuba's constituent assembly elections of 1939 by riding a wave of popular emotion and messianic fervor. The man who placed second in that

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 75.

50. Victor Muñoz wrote for *El Mundo* and was the first Cuban baseball chronicler to substitute Spanish equivalents for the game's original English terminology. He turned "home run" into *jonrón* and "hit and run" into *corrido y bateo*. As a city councilman, he is best remembered for proposing a law to celebrate Mother's Day—which was approved in 1928, six years after his death.

contest, Eduardo Chibás, was currently headlining what a *Bohemia* reporter called “an historic duel between opulence and civic-mindedness.”⁵¹ A public survey by Raúl Gutiérrez, published on May 14, suggested most Cubans would vote their consciences rather than selling them—at least in his case. The poll indicated that 33.14 percent of Havana residents preferred Chibás, while 20.11 percent favored Virgilio Pérez. Third place belonged to the Communist Anibal Escalante with 8.25 percent and Guillermo Belt of the ad hoc *Coincidencia*, who lacked both riches and devoted followers, placed last with 4.10 percent.⁵² These statistics, while not encouraging for Pérez, nonetheless implied that vote buying was having an impact. This was especially true in rural parts of Havana province, where Pérez led Chibás by more than seven percentage points. Pérez, whose policies as agriculture minister had proved disastrous for coffee farmers, was no darling of country dwellers. Rather, poverty and desperation inclined them to sell their votes more than wealthier urban inhabitants. In fact, every candidate except for the well heeled Pérez counted less support in bucolic areas.⁵³ Then again, this advantage was offset by Pérez's unpopularity within his own party and coalition partners. Only 37.64 percent of *Auténticos* showed a willingness to vote for him and 27.01 were prepared to mark their ballots for Chibás. Among Democrats, Chibás led Pérez by more than ten percentage points. Liberals also opted for Chibás by a lesser but still decisive margin of almost five percentage points.⁵⁴

While Chibás was among the handful of Cuban politicians whose popularity could surmount a well financed pro-government opponent, his friend Manuel Bisbé lacked the same crossover potential. Unlike the *Ortodoxo* leader, Bisbé encountered no significant backing outside his party. According to the public

survey of May 14, only 4.95 percent of *Auténticos* intended to vote for him. Bisbé registered similarly dismal figures with every other political grouping except his own—never surpassing single digits for any of them. Even worse, 26.51 percent of *Ortodoxos* preferred Nicolás Castellanos.⁵⁵ Bisbé was not entirely without appeal, given his election to Cuba's chamber of representatives, but he was in no way capable of overcoming the municipal machine of Castellanos or prodigal spending of Antonio Prío. Bisbé did not blame his projected third place finish on either of these things, however. Rather, he irascibly accused Raúl Gutiérrez of distorting the results and claimed his numbers would improve if he could afford to pay for his own research. If anyone had the resources to co-opt Cuba's premier pollster, it was Antonio Prío, but his second place showing, more than 22 points behind Nicolás Castellanos, implied his wallet was being utilized elsewhere. In many respects, he resembled Virgilio Pérez given his huge war chest and meager likability. Even as he bought votes and slowly rose in the polls, the distaste many Havana residents harbored for Antonio was a poor omen. Since the last public survey in March, his overall rating had increased from 20.53 percent to 26.32 percent.⁵⁶ This reflected the unwillingness of *Auténticos* and members of pro-government parties to back him uniformly. For instance, 40.09 percent of *Auténticos* and 38.70 percent of Democrats favored Castellanos. Most embarrassing was that 58.82 percent of Liberals preferred Castellanos even though the party hierarchy had been bought off by the government.⁵⁷

With election day looming, the moment for eleventh hour surprises was at hand. Despite his comfortable lead in the polls and uncooperative diaphragm, Chibás set to work on a new *Bohemia* piece featuring sensational revelations about Virgilio Pérez. From

51. “En Cuba, Política: El Dinero en la Política,” *Bohemia*, May 14, 1950: 75.

52. Raúl Gutiérrez, “Tercer Survey Sobre la Alcaldía y Primero Sobre los Senadores,” *Bohemia*, May 14, 1950: 84.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, 82.

57. *Ibid.*, 84.

back issues of *Diario de la Marina*, *El Crisol*, *Información* and *El País*, he reconstructed a lurid incident from March 19, 1934 in which Pérez shot and wounded his vaudeville actress girlfriend during a lovers' quarrel and then murdered a man who crossed his path as he fled through Old Havana's streets. Pérez was accordingly arrested and tried in the city's Instructional Court, where his defense lawyer happened to be Miguelito Suárez Fernández. Chibás declared that "enormous pressure" had been exerted on the judges to absolve Pérez and they duly complied. He also found it "curious" that Pérez's file had been subsequently "robbed" from the court's archives. Chibás concluded that, "Anyone who does not believe what I am saying about Virgilio Pérez can visit any public library, request the newspapers I referred to in this article and verify the truth for themselves."⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, Pérez was livid. He threatened violent reprisals against the magazine's director, Miguel Ángel Quevedo, its staff and even their premises. Pérez also denounced *Bohemia* before Cuba's Association of Journalists, albeit to little effect. The following week, *Bohemia* ran a defiant editorial stating it would not be "frightened" by "boasts" of an "ex servant of Machado and modern 'revolutionary' millionaire."⁵⁹ On the other hand, Carlos Lechuga, writing in *El Mundo*, upbraided Chibás for exposing Pérez's former paramour to unwarranted scrutiny. The woman, whose full name and home province had been furnished by Chibás, appeared to agree. She published an insulting public letter to him in a wide swath of Havana's newspapers. Undaunted, the *Ortodoxo* leader charged Pérez with having ghost written the abusive missive and forcing his old sweetheart to

sign or forfeit her government job. In fact, so many rumors emerged regarding this affair that Chibás felt compelled to refute some of the more scurrilous ones. He acknowledged that people were saying his article had ruined the woman's marriage, that her husband had vowed to kill him and her small grandchildren were crying desolate tears. In a last *Bohemia* column before the elections, Chibás explained the lady was actually single and childless. The incessant hearsay, he averred, was nothing more than a government sponsored "farce."⁶⁰

As the campaign drew to a close, Chibás continued to exasperate his doctors. On May 30, he attended an event honoring him in the *Hotel Inglaterra* but was so weak he could hardly say more than a few words. Since his diaphragmatic hernia was diagnosed in February, Chibás had dropped 50 pounds from a frame that had never been stout to begin with. Twenty-four hours before the polls closed, looking wan and ghost-like, he toured Havana's neighborhoods with Manuel Bisbé and planned last minute strategies with *Ortodoxo* candidates for congress and city hall. Dressed in a white *guayabera* and bowtie, he contemplated updated surveys by Raúl Gutiérrez indicating his polemic with Virgilio Pérez had damaged his case but still showed him ahead "by a nose."⁶¹ Pérez's gains, which may have been the result of frenzied ballot buying as well, were not enough to carry him past Chibás—who won by just over 17,000 votes.⁶² Chibás blamed the closer than expected result on concerted attacks by the Communists, who were fairly strong in Havana and barely mustered a peep against Pérez. The *Ortodoxo* leader allowed that he disagreed with the Communists on international

58. Eduardo R. Chibás, "Virgilio Pérez: Porrista, Homicida y Otras Cosas; William Belt, Machado y Pedraza," *Bohemia*, May 21, 1950: 143.

59. "Poniendo las Cosas en su Lugar: Independencia y Verdad," *Bohemia*, May 28, 1950: supplement. 1.

60. Eduardo R. Chibás, "¿Acaso Virgilio Pérez Representa a la Mujer Cubana?," *Bohemia*, May 28, 1950: sup. 11.

61. Conte Agüero, *Eduardo Chibás*, 676. Chibás, who devoted obsessive care to his personal appearance, had not worn a *guayabera* by accident. This was a traditional shirt and quintessential symbol of Cuba. Carlos Prío had incited howls of outrage a few years earlier by banning it from the presidential palace in favor of suits. Conversely, during a visit to Cuba in 1948, President Harry Truman had earned plaudits for donning a *guayabera*. As for Guillermo Belt, who had spent the previous two months being called "William," he emphasized his Cuban bona fides by wearing one to the voting station.

62. The official vote totals were as follows: Eduardo Chibás: 200,287, Virgilio Pérez: 183,220, Guillermo Belt: 93,143 and Anibal Escalante, 73,359. See: Conte Agüero, *Eduardo Chibás*, 676.

matters but noted his vigorous protest when Jesús Menéndez had been murdered. "Do they believe Virgilio would have done the same as me?" he asked. "(Virgilio) would have supported the government against any transgression against our democracy."⁶³ At the same time, Chibás obtained an unexpected boost from Mayor Francisco Orúe of Marianao, who gladly accepted cash from Pérez to deliver votes but ordered his constituents to support Chibás instead. Commenting on Eddy's victory in *Diario de la Marina*, Francisco Ichaso wrote,

Electoral machines and money are losing the dominance they once possessed. The *Ortodoxo* candidate has won on the basis of his superior personality, his influence with the masses (and) the respect his behavior has awakened...The people see in Chibás an implacable critic, a prosecutor who fearlessly attacks shamelessness and iniquity wherever he finds them. In a sphere where silence, dissimulation and complicity are the norm, he represents an exception.⁶⁴

The government's reach absorbed an even greater blow when Nicolás Castellanos was re-elected as Havana's mayor by a margin of 16.5 percentage points. While Virgilio Pérez was amply assisted by the *Auténtico* apparatus and his own personal affluence, he was not a member of Carlos Prío's inner circle nor had he been the president's preferred choice to succeed Alemán. By contrast, the administration spared neither expense nor effort to elect Antonio Prío. Ignoring polls that predicted a distant second place finish, *Auténtico* operatives fancifully viewed a landslide victory in the offing.⁶⁵ When the bad news became evident, Carlos and Antonio Prío covered assorted advisors with epithets.

These prominent setbacks notwithstanding, electoral bribery continued to yield fruit more often than not. Despite losing in Havana, and also in Camagüey, Cuba's third largest city, where Tony Varona's brother Roberto was defeated, the *Auténticos* snagged more than 100 mayoralties.⁶⁶ Some of these were won by genuinely popular candidates such as Luis Casero in Santiago de Cuba, but many others resorted to shady methods. The government also added to its congressional majority. In Las Villas province, the *Auténticos* spent approximately 500,000 *pesos* to elect six representatives. One of these, the president's brother-in-law Tino Fuentes, was accused of funding his campaign with government checks meant for road construction and selling pardons to criminals via the justice ministry.⁶⁷ The midterm elections thus offered consolation along with dollops of bitterness for each of the island's political groupings. Guillermo Alonso Pujol and Ramón Grau San Martín reveled in the victory of their protégé, Nicolás Castellanos, who retained Cuba's second most powerful political office. However, Castellanos, who had been an obscure Havana city councilman before the suicide of Manuel Fernández Supervielle, won because he was not the president's brother. Other *Coincidencia* nominees such as Guillermo Belt and René Benitez, who ran for senate in Pinar del Río, finished poorly in their respective races. As for the *Ortodoxos*, they regained a presence in the senate after a two year hiatus and Chibás, who had conducted a heroic campaign, showcased his presidential bona fides for 1952. *Ortodoxos* advanced in the lower house as well. In particular, José Pardo Llada provided a spectacular boost by collecting

63. "En Cuba, Elecciones: La Lección del Primero de Junio," *Bohemia*, June 11, 1950: 77.

64. *Ibid.*

65. Each of Havana's mayoral candidates was unhappy with the various polls taken by Raúl Gutiérrez. Castellanos complained they underestimated his popularity, Antonio Prío pretended not to notice them and Manuel Bisbé whined that surveys reflected the whims of those who paid for them. However, the May 31 questionnaire proved highly accurate. Castellanos was favored by 53.85 percent of respondents and won 53.36 percent in actuality. Antonio Prío was chosen by 34.35 percent and garnered 36.88 percent on election day. Lastly, Manuel Bisbé was named by 11.80 percent and came away with 9.76 percent.

66. Roberto Varona lost despite outspending his opponent, the incumbent Francisco Arredondo, by a 10 to 1 margin or 500,000 *pesos* to 50,000. The prime minister's brother was also given 2000 government jobs to distribute where necessary. See Conchito del Río, "La 2nda Zafra de Cuba: 63 Millones Costaron las Elecciones," *Bohemia*, June 18, 1950: 38.

67. "En Cuba, Elecciones: La Lección del Primero de Junio," *Bohemia*, June 11, 1950: 76. Then again, José Ramón Fernández, who was a protégé of Education Minister Arturo Sánchez Arango, engaged in similar shenanigans and was defeated.

72,000 votes—more than any congressional candidate in Cuba’s history. He thus established himself as the island’s most dynamic young politician. Pardo Llada represented a new generation that had neither fought in the independence war nor tussled with Machado and the ensuing military flavored governments. His credibility derived from being a Chibás-style muckraker who was always, in the words of a *Bohemia* reporter, “risking his life in daily combat for the public benefit.”⁶⁸ *Ortodoxo* fixtures such as Luis Orlando Rodríguez and Millo Ochoa were also elected. While these men embodied the *Ortodoxo* ideal of relative poverty, not all the party’s winners fit this profile. In Las Villas, an *Ortodoxo* coffee baron named Aurelio Nazario Sargent rode to victory on a flotilla of jeeps that crisscrossed the countryside and blared his message. Even more enterprising was the prosperous Gerardo Vázquez, who accrued the highest vote total in Camagüey by hiring a dozen airplanes to spread *Ortodoxo* slogans across the skies. These successes were tempered by the poor showing of Manuel Bisbé, who could not muster even 10 percent of the vote in a party stronghold.

With the elections over, Chibás acquiesced to his doctors finally and remained inactive for nearly all of June. His devotees, however, busied themselves with letters of congratulations. A “great admirer” from Panama who read Chibás’ articles in *Bohemia* and commended his “righteous conduct” requested an autographed photo.⁶⁹ A 30-year old sugar worker from Las Villas province who had previously shown negligible interest in politics wrote that he was now

enthusiastic about campaigning for him. A Cuban man residing in New York City related that, “I pray for the triumph of (your) party and your ideals and also for your personal health, knowing that you are my country’s salvation.”⁷⁰ Ricardo Pareja Lodosa, a member of the Young *Ortodoxos* in Matanzas, claimed Chibás was bound by a pact “with the entire nation and our martyrs to care for your well being.” He added that, “You must not abandon your health and cannot forget that you are the only and supreme hope of the entire Cuban people, which trusts in you alone.”⁷¹ Chibás read these missives and others with great satisfaction, underlining as always his favorite passages with a red pencil. He was further gratified by a fresh opinion poll published on June 25 that confirmed him as Cuba’s leading presidential contender. Asked who they preferred in the island’s highest office, 26.25 percent of respondents chose Chibás. His nearest rival, Fulgencio Batista trailed in second place by nearly eight percentage points. The third place candidate, Miguelito Suárez Fernández, was just over 12 points behind. In addition, Chibás led in five of Cuba’s six provinces, including the three most populous ones, Havana, Oriente and Las Villas. Chibás was also undoubtedly pleased that his erstwhile adversary, Virgilio Pérez, gleaned a measly 0.84 percent.⁷² Asked by a journalist for his view, Chibás said, “This clearly indicates that in Cuba space is being cleared for shame in the face of political machines and the government’s corruptive money.”⁷³

68. *Ibid.*, 79.

69. Fondo Eduardo R. Chibás. Legajo 38, Expediente 1129: 30, ANC.

70. *Ibid.*, 50.

71. *Ibid.*, 55.

72. Raúl Gutiérrez, “El Pueblo de Cuba, Opina Sobre las Pasadas Elecciones, El Gabinete de Prío y los Posibles Presidentes,” *Bohemia*, June 25, 1950: 84.

73. “En Cuba, Survey: Los Presidenciables Opinan,” *Bohemia*, July 2, 1950: 75.