

REPUBLICAN CUBA: A PRELIMINARY POLITICAL EVALUATION

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In *La Democracia Republicana en Cuba, 1940–1952*, Rodríguez Arechavaleta (2017, 21) laments that Cuban history has been “caricatured, simplified, and stereotyped” in an official teleology that sees the revolution of 1959 and the Castro regime that followed as its natural or inevitable outcome. Two decades earlier, Ameringer (2000, 1), had observed that historians studying 20th century Cuba “generally divide it into three periods: the Plattist Republic, 1902–33, the era of Fulgencio Batista, 1934–58, and the rule of Fidel Castro.” Ameringer noted that overlooked in that survey is a period of democratic governance that ran from 1940 to 1952, “the Auténtico Years.” Both authors then proceeded to set the record straight, examining that era with particular care. Taken jointly, their work suggests that despite corruption, demagoguery, and political gangsterism or *pistolero* (in which Fidel Castro was a willing participant), the epoch was one of competitive elections, respect for civil liberties, and absolute freedom of the press,² qualities which at the time were in scarce supply in most of the world.

Inspired by those efforts, here I offer a preliminary, partial evaluation of the nearly half-century long Cuban Republic.³ It is partial, in that I evaluate only the electoral system, assessing it in terms of competitiveness, comparing Cuba both contemporaneously with two of its peers, Chile and Costa Rica, and across a larger set of democracies from around the region and the world⁴. It is preliminary because it is my first, tentative foray into the republican era, all my previous writings on Cuba having been concerned with the Castro regime.⁵ Like a student pilot who may need several approaches to the runway before landing his aircraft safely, it will no doubt require me to revisit this subject more than once to get it right.

DATA ANALYSIS

In previous articles, I have identified five patterns that characterize competitive electoral systems, be they parliamentary or presidential (Cuzán 2015, 2017, 2019). Labeled “laws of politics,” these are summarized in Table 1.

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics for a number of measures reflective of the aforementioned “laws,” calculated with different sets of elections. The first col-

1. Many thanks to Josep Colomer, Jorge Domínguez, Yvon Grenier, Gary Maybarduk, Silvia Pedraza, Enrique Pumar, Carlos Manuel Rodríguez Arechavaleta, Jaime Suchlicki, María Werlau, and Eduardo Zayas-Bazán for their feedback or encouragement. Thanks, as well, to Mathew Leight and Yamisle Roca for their help in gathering or proofreading much of the data. Finally, I am grateful to the University West Florida for their generous support and benign academic environment. The usual disclaimer applies: I am solely responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation.

2. It was also a time of economic growth (Cuzán 2018, Devereux 2019).

3. By “republic” I mean a commonwealth wherein the executive and legislative arms of the government are filled by means of competitive elections informed by a free press.

4. For data, sources, and method, see the Appendix.

5. See items listed in the bibliography.

Table 1. Five Laws of Politics and their Indicators

Law	Variable(s)
All governments are minority governments	Incumbent vote as a percent of the total electorate is around 1/3.
Incumbent advantage	Reelection rate, consecutive terms in office, victory margin relative to that of the opposition when it wins.
Shrinking support	Incumbents lose support from term to term.
Alternation in office	Parties or coalitions take turns in office about half the time, or once per decade.
The 60% ceiling	It is rare for any party to win more than 60% of the vote in competitive elections.

Source: Cuzán (2019).

Table 2. Indicators of Electoral Competition

Variable (%)	Developed Democracies ^a	Presidential ^b	Latin America 1951–2018 ^c	Chile ^d	Costa Rica ^e	Cuba ^f
	Mean (S.D. of population)			Medians ^g [average]		
Turnout	78 (12)	71 (13)	72 (13.3)	76	66	71
Support Rate	32 (9)	28 (11)	27 (12.2)	44	31	36
Incumbent Vote	41 (10)	41 (15)	38 (16)	50	43	47
Incumbent Winning Vote	44 (8)	50 (9)	49 (9)	60	52	54
Incumbent Vote Change	-2.7 (7)	-6.6 (13.1)	-9.0 (12.6)	-11 [-7]	-12 [-10]	-12 [-9]
Outcome (Reelection Rate)	.64 (.48)	.50 (0.52)	0.44 (0.49)	1 [0.64]	1 [0.55]	1 [0.63]
Terms	2.6 (2.2)	1.8 (1.1)	1.6 (0.96)	1 [1.6]	2 [2]	2 [1.7]
Reign (years)	9 (8)	8 (5)	7 (5)	6 [7.3]	7.5 [7.5]	5 [6.6]
Opposition Winning Vote	42 (9)	43 (11)	42 (11)	49	57	55

a. Developed Democracies: Countries=19; Elections=506; Outcomes=480; Incumbent Vote=483

b. Countries=32; Elections=292; Outcomes=254; Incumbent Vote=248

c. Countries=16; Elections=145; Outcomes=125; Incumbent Vote=119

d. Elections=14; Outcomes=12 Incumbent Vote=7

e. Elections=13; Outcomes=11; Incumbent Vote=9

f. Elections=12; Outcomes=8; Incumbent Vote=6

g. The median is a more accurate measure of central tendency when the N is small and includes outliers. Unless otherwise indicated, that is what is shown in these last three columns.

umn displays the estimates obtained with 500 elections held according to a variety of rules in 19 developed democracies, most of which are of the parliamentary type. The span of the series is long, stretching from the 19th century to the present, although most of the elections take place since World War II (see the Appendix in Cuzán 2019). The second and third columns show the values for two overlapping subsets, one each for presidential systems (which include cases from Africa and Asia) and Latin America, respectively, almost all of them from 1951 on. Finally, the last three columns exhibit single country values, those of the republics of Cuba, Chile,

and Costa Rica during the first half of the 20th century.

In the first three columns of Table 2 one observes remarkable uniformity in the means of most of the variables: differences in the quality of democracy, or type (presidential vs. parliamentary) or region notwithstanding, there is little variation in Turnout, Support Rate, Incumbent Vote, Incumbent Winning Vote, Terms, Reign, or Opposition Winning Vote. Only two indicators show substantial difference across type or region: Incumbent Vote Change (higher in presidential systems, particularly in Latin America) and Outcome (highest in the developed de-

Figure 1. Turnout and Win Vote, Incumbent and Opposition, 1900-1950

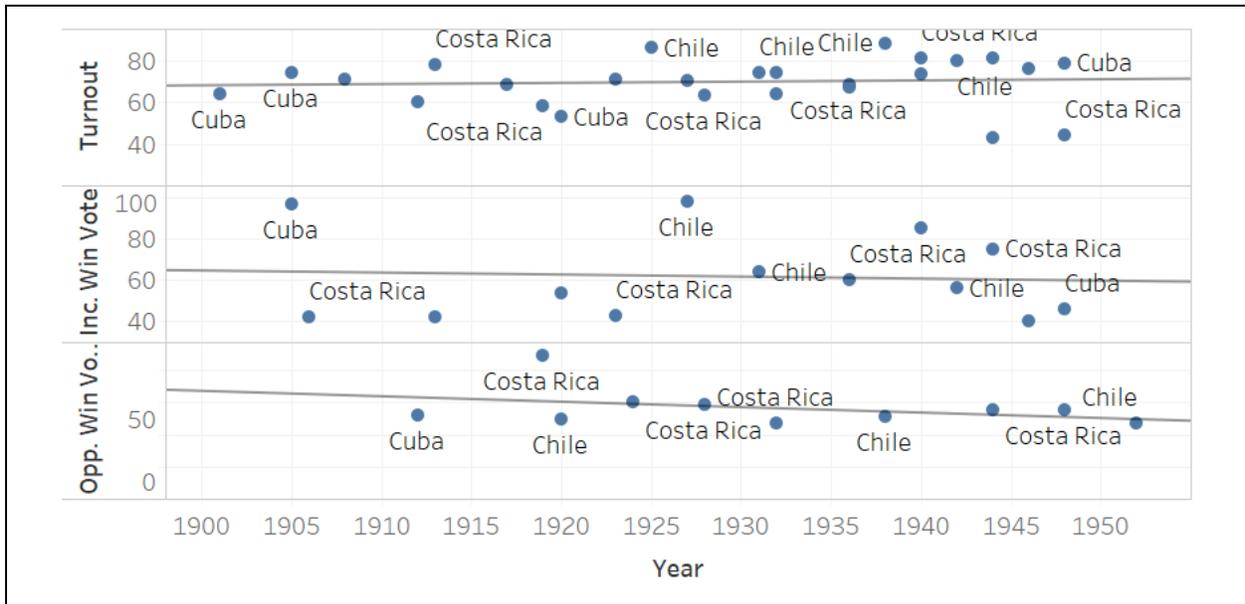
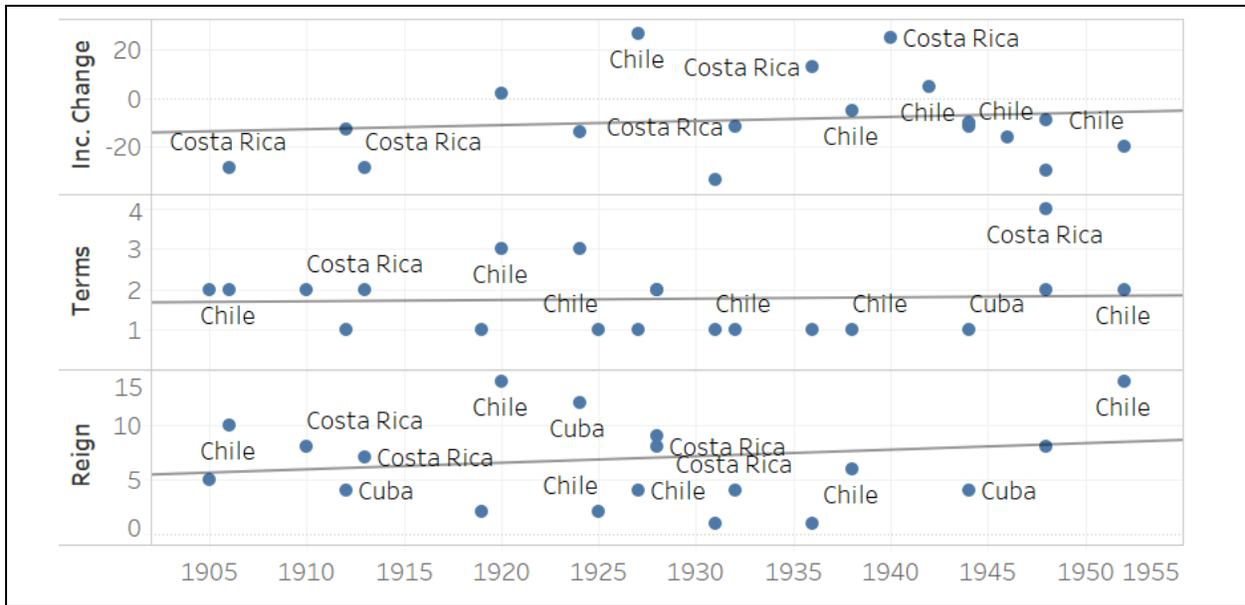


Figure 2. Incumbent Change, Terms and Reign, 1900-1955



mocracies, lowest in Latin America). Note that, when reelected, the in-party generally captures a larger percent of the vote than when the opposition emerges victorious, and once in office they retain it an additional term. Such is the nature of the modest “incumbent advantage.” On average, alternation between parties or coalitions occurs once per decade.

Observe, too, that on most measures the Cuban Republic and its peers do not deviate radically from the

other sets or from each other. Like the developed democracies, incumbents in all three, even as they lost support while in office, nevertheless managed two consecutive terms. Also, as in all other systems, parties or coalitions alternated in office once per decade.⁶ Where they do differ is on Incumbent Vote, Support Rate, Outcome, and Opposition Winning Vote (all higher). The higher Support Rate is a function of the larger Incumbent Vote. It may or may not

be a true value, for the figure may have been inflated by fraud, a frequent charge in Cuba, and in Costa Rica in 1948. On the other hand, Opposition Winning Vote is also higher (a result perhaps less likely to result from ballot-stuffing),⁷ so much so that in Costa Rica and Cuba it wiped out the incumbent advantage as measured by this variable. Incidentally, as Figures 1 and 2 show, plotting the values of these variables for all three countries across all available years shows hardly any change except in the case of Opposition Winning Vote, which drifts downward. These trends are consistent with the patterns observed in the developed democracies, only among them Incumbent Winning Vote also declines, and at a higher rate than that of the Opposition (Cuzán 2019). Also to be noted in the figures is that there is no observable discontinuity in the Cuban data throughout the entire era, the 1930s caesura notwithstanding.⁸

On three aspects Cuba does stand apart from its peers. One is Reign. As shown in Table 2, Cuba's value is the lowest, although not by much. But it is worth noting that Conservative Party's Mario Menocal was the only president who managed both to get reelected *and to complete* a second full term. And he won it only in a process so tainted by charges of fraud that it provoked the Liberal Party, led by the president who preceded and the one who succeeded him, respectively José Miguel Gómez and Alfredo Zayas y Alfonso, to organize a violent revolt. The situation became so perilous that the U.S. government, worried about war with Germany, had to exercise considerable pressure *in situ*, in the person of General Enoch Crowder, to prevent its getting out of hand. So, if anything, it is very possible that in the absence of fraud the actual value of Reign would be lower. For some reason, in those days the Cuban electorate

had a relatively high rate of incumbent fatigue. Perhaps this was due to the allegations of venality continuously lobbed against *el gobierno de turno* during the entire republican period. However, until it can be demonstrated that corruption was comparatively higher in Cuba than elsewhere, a healthy skepticism is in order.

Another feature differentiating Cuba from its peers is the number of repeated candidacies by the same individual, namely Menocal. As seen in Table 3, during a span of three decades he sought the presidency five times, more than any other politician in the peer republics. Two possible explanations may be advanced for that state of affairs. It could be that there was a dearth of alternatives; the other, that Menocal simply obdurately refused to let go of the reins. My money is on the latter explanation, for it is a phenomenon all too common in Latin America.⁹ In any case, Menocal's obstinacy, if that is what it was, may have contributed to the weakening and eventual disappearance of one of the two major political parties of the early Republic.

Lastly, Cuba and its peers did not differ on the frequency of institutional interruptions, but on their extent. As shown in Table 4, the constitutional caesura caused by the revolution of 1933 lasted longer than any other. Furthermore, the revolution seeded the polity with personalities and practices that in time proved fatal to the Cuban Republic—but that is a subject for another day.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis of some electoral aspects of the Cuban democratic era suggests that, as Ameringer and Rodríguez Arechavaleta affirm, it is one that deserves scholarly attention in its own right. To which I would add two caveats. One is that the Cu-

6. Alternation in office is the *sine qua non* of democracy. No alternation, no democracy (Przeworski et al., 2000).

7. However, this may not always be necessarily so. Meyer (1930, 140), discussing the inflated number of votes cast in the 1916 Cuban presidential election, averred, "there is every reason to believe that both sides were about equally guilty of fraud in conducting the campaign."

8. Jorge Domínguez pointed out that on two other variables there was discontinuity: after 1940 the political parties became more programmatic and fraud declined.

9. In contrast to General McArthur's saying about old generals, I like to say that "In Latin America, old political leaders never fade away—they only die."

Table 3. Interruptions in Institutional Order: Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, 1900–52

	Year	Events that broke constitutional continuity and set in motion other extra-institutional events	Length in Years
Chile	1924	Coup d'état against President Alessandri. Five "presidents" within one year.	1
	1925	New constitution; General Ibáñez dictatorship	4
	1931	Following Ibáñez's resignation, four "presidents" within one year.	1
	1932	Coup d'état against President Montero. Short-lived Socialist Republic. Five "presidents" within one year.	1
Costa Rica	1917	Federico Tinoco coup d'état.	1
	1948	Rebellion against second administration of Calderón Guardia; José Figueres provisional government. New constitution.	2
Cuba	1905	Rebellion against Estrada Palma; second U.S. Occupation.	3
	1933	Revolution against Machado. 10 "presidents" (one a collective "pentarchy") in seven years. Chief of the Armed Forces	7
	1933	Fulgencio Batista's indirect rule.	
	1952	Batista's coup d'état against president Prío. End of the Cuban Republic.	

Table 4. Repeated (more than twice) presidential candidacy by the same individual in Chile, Costa Rica, and Cuba: 1900–1952

	Candidate	Years
Chile	Arturo Alessandri	1920 ^a , 1931, 1932 ^a
	Carlos Ibáñez del Campo	1927 ^a , 1942, 1952 ^a
Costa Rica	Máximo Fernández Alvarado	1902, 1906, 1913
	Ricardo Jiménez Oreamuno	1910 ^a , 1923 ^a , 1932 ^a
Cuba	Mario García Menocal	1908, 1912 ^a , 1916 ^a , 1924, 1936
	Alfredo Zayas y Alfonso	1912, 1916, 1920 ^a

a. Won election.

ban democratic experience is not limited to the *Auténtico* years. It began in 1900, not 1940. I find no discontinuity in the values of the chosen variables between the two periods divided by the revolution and disorders of the 1930s. The other is that Republican Cuba needs to be studied comparatively. As I

hope to have shown, Cuba, along with its peer republics Chile and Costa Rica, flawed as they surely were, experienced a level of political competition comparable to that of the developed democracies of today. Not a small feat, that.

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Appendix DATA, SOURCES, AND METHOD

The Wikipedia serves as the source for elections data. Upon publication of this paper, they will be available on my webpage in UWF Department of Government or the UWF Library Institutional Repository. For some variables, some values are missing or not easily deciphered. Some ambiguous cases called for judgment. For example, when in 1920 Zayas quit the Liberal Party to form his own Popular Party and García Menocal, whom he had battled 1916, threw his support behind his presidential candidacy, I scored Zayas' victory as one for the incumbent. On the other hand, when four years later Zayas did the same for Machado, I called it a defeat for the incumbents. Subtle differences in the historical context of the two cases persuaded me that that was the correct call. In other cases a military man assumed power, e.g., Tinoco Granados in Costa Rica or Ibañez in Chile, arranged to win a basically uncontested elec-

tion with more than 95% of the vote, yet was forced by circumstances to resign before his term was up. In the case of the former, a small remnant of "Pinoquistas" contested the next election, taking in a small fraction of the vote. I did not count that as a legitimate incumbent loss and thus left it blank. But in the case of Ibañez, who did leave successor in place, I did. I remain open to correction of these as well as of every other call made on ambiguous cases. Also, there were so many interruptions in constitutional continuity (see Table 3) that it was difficult to discern who was the incumbent or whether there was an incumbent at all. In those cases, I simply treated the election as an open one and started a new series in the same country. Finally, in some cases we know the Outcome but there was no data on the vote. Thus the different totals for Elections, Outcomes, and Incumbent Vote (see Table 2).