

The 2013 Election Results in Cuba and U.S. Desire for Regime Change

By Arnold August, December 2013

The elections to the Cuban Parliament, or the National Assembly of People's Power (ANPP), took place on February 3, 2013. The voting trends, tendencies and weaknesses in the electoral system as analyzed in *Cuba and Its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion* (published in January 2013, before the elections in February) have been confirmed by the February 2013 voting results. It has also been pointed out by specialists in the field, both in Cuba and elsewhere, that *Cuba and Its Neighbours* is the only publication in any language or any country to actually publish and analyze detailed voting trends on the island. The pursuit of this endeavour is worthwhile, especially in light of the disinformation and misinformation disseminated by supporters of "regime change" for Cuba across the spectrum (from the so-called "left" to the right), replacing facts, figures and a balanced analysis with clichés and ignorance.

One of the most important voting results to take into account is the slate vote (whereby citizens can vote for the entire slate of candidates in their municipality) versus the selective vote (whereby citizens can vote in a secret polling booth for one or more candidates, but not necessarily all of the candidates on the slate). See "The Slate vs. Selective Vote: A Rejection of the Government" in Chapter 7 of the book for further information and a review of election trends from 1993 to 2008, the last elections before the publication of this work (national elections are held every five years). Detailed statistics can be found in Table 7.9. In those election years, the government, the parliament presidency, the party, the mass organizations and the press appealed very strongly for the slate option, or *voto unido*. However, the slate vote ballots declined from 95.06 percent in 1993 to 90.90 percent in 2008. *Ipsa facto*, the selective vote increased substantially from 1993 to 1998 – more than double, as Table 7.9 indicates.

With regard to this trend, at the time and as part of my fieldwork in 2007–09, several specialists from the academic world were interviewed and their views collected, and the key interpretations are cited in the book. For example, University of Havana political scientist Emilio Duharte Díaz points to weaknesses in the composition of the candidacies commissions responsible for drawing up lists of candidates to be nominated and offers some suggestions for improvement. Specifically concerning the voting pattern cited above, slate versus selective vote, he

considers the election trend as a reflection of the “critical revolutionary vote,” meaning that the citizens are not going beyond the boundaries of the Revolution and the Cuban political system, but rather expressing their discontent with some important aspects of it, with the goal of improving it. If the candidacies commissions are not expanded and further perfected, Duharte Díaz points out, when it comes time to vote, citizens will feel that they are caught up in an “electoral straitjacket.” Another political system specialist, Jesús García Brigos, reveals a concrete example of how the candidacies commissions, if not improved, can lead to negative consequences. As for Rafael Hernández, editor of the critical review *Temas*, he calls for a change in procedure for the candidacies commissions as well as its composition; otherwise, people will consider that the list of nominees has gone through a filtering process (*proceso de filtraje*). University of Havana law professor Martha Prieto Váldez also calls for drastic expansion of the nomination procedures and rights of citizens.

While only a small proportion of the voting data and comments are highlighted and summarized in this article, they are exposed fully in the book and, in a way, they foretold the results of the 2013 elections. In 2013, there was a major shift in the official policy. For the first time since elections to the Cuban parliament were held, there was no call at all for a slate vote, or the *voto unido*. Thus, the voting patterns and concerns by political specialists that I had written about predicted the outcome: the call for a slate vote was abandoned and thus, in the 2013 elections, the floodgates fully opened up. The decrease in slate votes, already in decline since 1993, plummeted from 90.90 percent in 2008 to 81.29 percent in February 2013. Likewise, the selective vote doubled from 9.10 percent in 2008 to 18.07 percent in 2013.¹ The “critical revolutionary vote” and the desire to break out of the electoral straitjacket were asserted even further in 2013.

Voter turnout was also affected by the perception of weaknesses in the political system, as indicated above by Cuban colleagues. Voter turnout, always very high in Cuba even though voting is not compulsory, incrementally but steadily declined, as Table 7.9 indicates. It went from 99.57 percent in 1993 to 96.89 percent in 2008.² However, in 2013, it plummeted to 90.88 percent, a major change in Cuban terms.

Another voting trend is analyzed in the book for the first time anywhere. There is much speculation inside and outside of Cuba about the percentage of votes deputies get over the years. What do the voting patterns indicate? Is it worthwhile compiling and analyzing these voting patterns? In order to get to the heart of the matter, I invented my own categories, as can be seen in “One

Candidate for Election per ANPP Seat: Talking Figures,” Table 7.10 in Chapter 7. Each bracket consists of the number and percentage of elected deputies of the total number of deputies. One grouping consists of the number and percentage of deputies gathering from 91–100 percent of the vote; another lot compiles the figures for the 81–90 percent bracket; and the last one, 71–80 percent. A noticeable voting trend immediately surfaced. While the top bracket (i.e. the maximum number of votes 91–100 percent) remained stable from 1993 to 1998 (99.50 percent of the total number of deputies), the percentage of deputies falling into this category began to decrease in 2003 to 95.93 percent and further in 2008 to 93.54 percent of the deputies. However, with the opening of the floodgates of “free voting” without the *voto unido*, and other factors touched upon above, the February 2013 elections showed a very substantial drop from 93.54 percent in 2008 to 35.78 percent in February 2013. That is, the top bracket plummeted by almost two-thirds from the time the book was published to the February 2013 elections. On the other hand, as expected by the sheer force of figures, the percentage of deputies falling into the second grouping of 81–90 percent of elected deputies rose, from a virtually insignificant proportion of 4.68 percent in 2008 to 59.97 percent in 2013. Likewise, the third category of 71–80 percent witnessed an increase, from an extremely insignificant 0.81 percent to a small percentage of 3.92 percent, but an approximately fivefold increase nonetheless. A bracket not included in Table 7.10, that is 61–70 percent, because no candidate had ever fallen into this category, went from zero deputies to two deputies in 2013, a very small proportion of 0.33 percent, but something new.

The next step in the Cuban electoral system after the elections of the deputies consists of the deputies then electing the parliamentary officials and the Council of State, including its current president, Raúl Castro. However, before delving into this phase of the electoral process, it is useful to analyze the voting trends that led to the formation of the new parliamentary legislature and what this may mean to promoters of regime change for Cuba.

In the 2013 elections, compared to the previous elections, there has occurred a notable decline in the slate vote, the voter turnout and the popular votes for candidates. Does this mean that U.S. democracy promotion is making headway? Is there a move by the grass roots away from Cuba’s political system while looking for an alternative that would end up being more to the liking of the U.S.?

Several factors converged at the same time, resulting in the radical change of the voting trend from 2008 to 2013. The

tendency was a continuation of what was occurring from 1993 to 2008, but in a far more conspicuous manner. Serious analysts of the Cuban political and electoral system saw it coming.

First, at the time of the 2012–13 general elections, Cuba was (and still is, at the time of writing) in a period of flux, uncertainty and apprehension. Will the updating of Cuba’s model work? Will the new measures designed to vastly improve the economic and social situation of the people be able to overcome the bureaucrats and the corrupt individuals found in strategic positions? In this sense and in a general manner, the 2013 negative voting results reflect a Cuban society in movement – not in disarray, but in a situation of ambiguity. Raúl Castro has said on many recent occasions, and cited in Chapter 6 of the book, that Cuban society is at the edge of a cliff; if Cuba cannot leap over it, the Revolution will sink into the abyss. This is true and thus, during the 2012–13 elections, this perplexity had its effects on the voting patterns.

Second, even though it was not explicitly expressed, by following a new policy against unanimity and listening to the voices of the grass roots, for the first time the Cuban state abandoned the slate vote. “Vote as you like” is what it really meant. A voter who held a candidate in high regard could vote for that nominee and not vote for candidates considered inappropriate. There was no call for unanimity, which the slate vote really conveyed in electoral terms. This had an effect not only on the further rapid decline in 2013 in slate voting in favour of selective voting, but in the even more radical drop in popular vote. In the latter, the highest bracket of 91–100 percent was converted into only a shadow of itself.

Simultaneously, a groundswell of critical attitude has been developing over the years with regard to how the nomination procedure by the candidacies commissions operates, as reflected in the commentaries by Cuban colleagues published in my book. Thus, this is nothing new. However, the fact that there had not been any improvements made to the system by 2013 or, at least, a move in the direction of change, some voters refused to take the nomination procedure seriously and allowed this feeling to manifest itself at the polls.

On the positive side are the spoiled ballot results. I had personally witnessed on many occasions, in the polling stations when the votes were counted, the most virulent opponents to the political system and the constitutional order express themselves through emphatically explicit spoiled ballots. Many were defaced with decidedly hostile slogans or caricatures. However, in the 2013 elections, the null ballots increased slightly, from 1.04 percent in 2008 to 1.21 percent in 2013 – virtually no change. In fact, this

1.21 percent was lower than the percentage of defaced ballots in the 1993 and 1998 elections. However, does the radical drop in voter turnout mean that some real opponents of the system have turned to boycotting the elections rather than spoiling their ballots? Or does the abrupt decline in voter turnout reflect a certain amount of despair among the voters with regard to the tenuous situation in which Cuban society finds itself? Does this anguish among a sizable minority of the voters remain within the confines of the Revolution whose electoral system is in need of renovation? This is difficult to judge. It will only manifest itself in the next general elections in 2017–18, especially if no updating of the electoral system is carried out by then. It seems that Duharte Díaz’s analysis of the “critical revolutionary vote” is the dominant feature of the new voting trends that were manifesting at the time I was carrying out the research for my book and during the 2013 elections. The pro-American organized opposition remains an insignificant number of individuals and has very little to do with the recent voting trends. When reviewing the election trends, readers should keep in mind that the Cuban people and political culture are characterized by patriotism and pride in their national sovereignty. Thus, it is one thing to feel that the political system has to be improved; it is entirely another kettle of fish to find solace in the U.S. democracy promotion programs that seek to install a political system that can be manipulated by Washington in order to annex Cuba once again, as it has done in the past. The basic thinking, based on my field research since 1997, is that while Cubans may be frustrated with many aspects of the electoral and political system, it is *their* system and it is up to them to improve it. The weak link in this chain of events looking toward a positive outcome in the electoral system’s improvement, as exposed in the book, is the role of the “left” dissidents in eating away at some vacillating sections of the youth, intellectuals and artists.

There is one feature of the latest voting trend that, while negative as far as the Cuban political system is concerned, also has its positive side. Unlike most countries in the West, a Cuban deputy must garner at least 50 percent of the votes in order to be elected. This is entirely overlooked by some circles, especially those opposing Cuba’s political system and constitutional order. Instead, they focus on the fact that there is only one nominee per seat in the Parliament. However, I indicate in my book that this condition for being elected *is* indeed relevant, even based on the voting trends up to and including 2008. With the 2013 results, the number of deputies hovering close to the 50 percent requirement is increasing. More than 4 percent of the elected deputies obtained only 61–80 percent of the votes, while two deputies fell into the 61–70 percent bracket for the first time. If the system is not

changed, some candidates may get less than 50 percent in the next elections, in 2018. Of course, there would be another election based on another nominee put forward by the candidacies commissions. However, how would the electorate view this? All of these complex and seemingly contradictory trends are part of a democracy in motion. Cuba has brought about changes in the electoral law and constitution before, such as in 1992.

Once the elections are terminated, the Cuban parliament constitutes a new legislature based on the freshly elected deputies. In 2013, this took place on February 24, 2013. At that time, the Parliament (ANPP) officials and the Council of State are elected from among the elected deputies. The procedure in 2013 is the same as in 2008, and is described in “Elections: ANPP Officials, Council of State and Its President, Raúl Castro” in Chapter 7.

One of the most debated questions in the international arena is the role of “the Castros” in the Cuban political system and the future of the Revolution. This focus tends to completely obliterate how the president of the Council of State and the other members of the Council of State, including its first vice-president, are elected. On February 24, 2013, Raúl Castro was elected as president of the Council of State, and not as president of Cuba, since the country does not have a presidential system. Rather, it has a collegial Council of State leadership responsible to the Parliament. This is his last term in office as a result of new rules being enacted to limit terms to two. His mandate will therefore not be renewed in 2018. The parliament elected Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, 52 years of age at the time of the elections, as first vice-president.³ He is expected to be elected president in 2018 if the course of political events continues as is. Since his election in February 2013, he has been in the forefront of striving to bring about change in the course of a process of further democratization in the face of the old habits and mentalities resulting from the highly centralized state. Thus, while the system for electing deputies has exhibited its weaknesses in the 2013 elections results, the structure appears to be working very well for one of its most important challenges since the 1959 Revolution, that is, the renewal of the leadership while simultaneously striving to radically bring about changes in the economic system. These economic changes are political as well, and they are bound to have repercussions on the political system and the need for perfecting it, as is being discussed by people in different spheres of the Cuban political scene as well as on the grass-roots level. It is worthwhile to note that, in the context of the abrupt across-the-board decline in the 2013 popular vote, Raúl Castro held his own and got 98.04 percent voter approval. In the previous elections, in 2008, Raúl Castro received 99.37 percent,⁴ a

decline of only about 1 percent. The new first vice-president, Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, obtained 93.53 percent in the 2013 elections.⁵

In addition to the new legislature electing the Council of State, it also elects the president, vice-president and secretary of the ANPP. The former president, Ricardo Alarcón, was no longer in the picture as far as the parliament is concerned. The newly elected president is Esteban Lazo Hernández, born in 1944, 69 years of age at the time of his election.⁶ He appears to be contributing toward bringing in freshness and renewal to many aspects of the political system, from the top to the grass roots. The new vice-president, Ana María Mari Machado (born after the 1959 Revolution), was elected by the deputies for the first time as part of the reconstitution of the new parliament, even though she had been nominated and elected in mid-term on July 24, 2012, when the vice-president had to resign for health reasons. The secretary (Miriam Brito Sarroca), also young, was elected for the first time to this post, in 2008. Thus, starting with the 2008 elections to the 2013 voting, the entire leadership of the parliament had been renewed.

Taken together, the voting trends for the elections of the deputies in February 2013 as outlined above, and the elections of the new Council of State and officials of the Parliament indicate that the situation is in flux, as is the entire Cuban society. It is part of a democracy in motion whereby once again the Cuban Revolution seeks to redefine itself in all aspects. This movement by its very nature blocks any aspiration of the U.S. and its allies inside and outside of Cuba for regime change through democracy promotion programs. The concluding chapter in the book, “The Future of Democratization: Facing the Tests,” has been very much applicable since the February 2013 elections.

¹ *Diario Granma*, February 8, 2013, vol. 49, no. 33.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Granma Internacional*, February 28, 2013, vol. 48, no. 9.

⁴ *Diario Granma*, January 30, 2008, vol. 44, no. 25.

⁵ *Diario Granma*, op. cit. (2013)

⁶ *Granma Internacional*, op. cit.