

The growing minority: readings from the Cuban elections

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Thirty-six years after passing the current Constitution, there have been fourteen municipal elections in Cuba and four elections for national representatives. The growing trend in null and blank votes seems to account for a dissent that is expressed within the limited existing mechanisms.

In Cuba, the Electoral Act (LE) in force dates from 1992. It instituted mechanisms to ensure the objectives established in the 1976 Constitution, and amended in 1992. The 1976 Electoral Act and its predecessor were, in reality, an analogy of the Political-Administrative Division and, in general, of the Soviet-style institutional order implemented since the 70s. Its study and that of the electoral processes developed under it, have suffered the impact of two extreme political and intellectual attitudes: a) they are accepted mechanically, interpreting “the percentages” and other numerical indicators as signs of popular backing for the government; or b) are ignored as a reliable indicator (given the nature of the political regime) to assess the preference of the citizens. In this text we rescued an open line of pre-existing studiesⁱⁱⁱ, seeking to study the institutions in context and, above all, the election results, qualitatively questioning their evidence and absences to understand current socio-political processes in the island.

In the 1959-1976 period, the Revolutionary Government was by legal and institutional nature, a provisional government. Power had been taken without reversing the work of the Batista dictatorship, which dealt a fatal blow to the short-lived Second Republic and its progressive Cuban Constitution (1940). Due to its new radical aspirations, the project of the Revolutionary Government clashed with the reformist and democratic philosophy that inspired the state of the Second Republic. The Fundamental Law of 1959 eliminated representative democracy and its formal branches (Congress, Senate, election of the President) and concentrated the executive and legislative powers in a cabinet headed by a prime minister. The figure of the president lost most of its powers to the point that its replacement (in 1959) was forced by a media coup of Prime Minister and was replaced by a *good man* appointed by the Council of Ministers. The real power rested in a combination *leader-people-revolutionary armed movement*, where decision-making capabilities were displaced and increasingly concentrated on the main factor of the equation: the *Commander in Chief*.

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This government perceived itself, and was seen by his numerous followers, as a *revolutionary democracy*, legitimized by the armed struggle (by a situation in which legality had been interrupted by the Batista regime and the ensuing civil war) and was accompanied by a program of redistribution and social justice that justified it. In the long provisional period, running from 1959 to 1976, in the absence of elections, participation was restructured under guidelines that can be heard even today: the place of ideologically diverse citizens bearer of political rights was occupied by militants integrated *into the process, committed to the project*. This meant participation in various mass organizations (this term and its political, psychological and sociological implications must be clearly understood) designed as transmission belts of the Communist Party and the tasks assigned to them by the top political leadership of Cuba^{iv}.

With this type of participation, which consisted in cheering, implementing and suggesting, but almost never making decisions and/or evaluating government agendas and actions beyond certain local processes, technical and very specific sectors, citizens who were limited in their civil and political rights, took the opportunity to be the beneficiary of redistributive policies. Participating in the processes of social mobility and gaining merits within revolutionary organizations served as a vehicle to solve their daily problems and to a lesser degree, moving up the power structure. With administrative positions coopted by figures appointed by the central government, economic and social problems of each region required the direct intervention of the national government, intervention that became the personal style of the Commander in Chief, without the possibility, real or formal, to be managed or controlled by the local communities. And although the 60s benefitted from the support of the massive enthusiasm of a population as young as its leadership, errors, inefficiencies and lack of planning affected the change in direction given to the institutionalization of the Soviet type of government, implemented in the 70s.

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Thus, the political regime formally founded in 1976—and retouched in 1992—sought to retain power by providing it with some organization, legality and mechanisms by *adding an institutional component to the revolution*. Changes to the Constitution abolished the presidency which was merged with the figure of the Prime Minister, established a Parliament and provincial and municipal assemblies. The Political and Administrative Division Act created new provinces and modified the municipalities, denoting an apolitical administrative intention. The electoral act of that year (1976) allowed direct local elections for the election of district delegates, which would be part of the Municipal Assembly

Most notable is that this electoral system was conceived according to the references and guidelines governing revolutionary participation,—practiced in the mass organizations, in the party and state mobilizations, which by that time were already incorporated in the population. The delegates, potentially the democratic component of the system, would be a *de-facto* mix of community activists and especially local representatives of the Government, and therefore would be subject to its control. The only formal political power of the Municipal Assemblies would be the ability to select from lists submitted by the Commissions of Candidates to the Provincial Delegates and Representatives. But it imposed a limit to participation that these delegates could have at higher levels (up to 50%) so that half or more of the deputies never undergo popular scrutiny.

In addition, there is a complicated nomination process with many filters that is controlled by the government and characterized by the simplicity of the absolute majority system. Some formal elements, such as the possibility of revocation, were almost never implemented (we know of only two recorded cases), and others, such as the citizen's initiative, were limited due to poorly disseminated regulations. In 1992, a new electoral law was adopted, in response to the demands of the people who wanted to elect provincial delegates and

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deputies. In essence, we introduced an additional confirmation step: a vote which could theoretically allow rejection of a candidate, but not to choose between several candidates, or propose one.

From the start, elections based on the new *socialist institutionalism* showed high rates of participation. The constitutional referendum had a participation rate of 98%, with 0.5% of voided ballots and 0.8% of blank ballots^v; but in the same year, only 95.2%^{vi} of the voters participated in the municipal elections. With regards to these indicators, the data on participation in elections for provincial delegates from 1981 to 2012 can be consulted.^{vii}

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According to figures from the National Bureau of Statistics, between 1981 and 2000, this participation remained between 98.7 and 97.1%. This high participation could be explained by several factors. One of them is the massive support for the government (evident during the first three decades of *revolutionary control*) but other causes, intimately related to the characteristics of those elections and the sociopolitical order that sustains them, were:

- **The mixture of overall insignificance and timely importance:** candidates had no programmatic differences, and were actually something that should be avoided in democratic elections: *cloned candidates*. However, in certain localities friendships or personal qualities made one candidate especially important for people and for their expectations.
- **The low cost of participation:** Very easy, registration is automatic, without waiting period, voting locations exists a few meters from each house, etc.
- **The negative impact of absenteeism:** voters were (and are, although less frequently) called door to door to see that they vote, they are told to go and vote, especially during the 80s and 90s for those that were publicly identified as counter revolutionaries, with all the negative repercussions.
- **The de-politicization:** despite all government claims that every election is a referendum on its work to defend the public welfare and national sovereignty, the fact is that political education in Cuba identifies elections as a task to be fulfilled. Voting went from being a political exercise of citizen empowerment, to a bureaucratic task (for who organizes it) and a show of loyalty (to who exercises it).

In 2002, however, there was a significant drop in voter participation, at 95.8%. Between 2002 and 2010 this was maintained between 95.8 and 96.7% (data from the NSO). In the last elections, for this year (2012), the indicator fell even further, to 91.9%^{viii}. Blank and null votes also follow a similar trend according to the data we have gathered. In 2007, the combined sum of blank and annulled ballots was 7.21%, in 2010, 8.89% and in 2012 it was 9.3%^{ix}. This shows that total abstentions, blank and null votes has increased in recent years (10.27% in 2007 to 16.64% in 2012) and not just that the way of expressing discontent has changed. Since in two and half years the composition of society has not changed dramatically, it does not seem right to attribute such behavior only to the incorporation of new voters and the elimination of others, but rather to a change in mentality and preference of the same actors .

While the increase in absenteeism in 2005 could be attributed to the long-term results of the agreements of the V Congress of the CCP (1997), which restricted the policy of reforms of the 90's and meant a real counter offensive of centralization, the even more pronounced increase of 2012 seems to be due to some frustration over the combined results of policies under Raul Castro, since 2008, expressed in the platforms of the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba in 2011 and the National Conference of 2012. This time, the reform policies have generated more expectations than have been fulfilled, which could explain the open break

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represented by the absenteeism. In contrast, the increase of the blank and null votes does seem to follow a continuous and growing trend in the years analyzed, which could correspond to exhaustion of the State model and the new awareness of the insignificance of the municipal elections in sectors that remain reluctant to open abstention.

The voting of representatives follows a slightly different trend. In the first elections (1993) the turnout was 98.71% and null and blank votes amounted to 7%.^x In 1998, the indicators were, respectively, 98.35 and 5^{xi}, in 2003, 97.64 and 3.85^{xii}, and in 2008, 96.89 and 4.73. After the initial novelty, apparently there was a tendency for voters of blank and null votes to abstain, a trend that appears to have stabilized in 2008, with a net increase of abstention and null votes, perhaps reflecting expectations generated by the absence of Fidel Castro as a candidate at the time.

For 2003 and 2008, processes that we can compare, abstention in the vote for representatives correlated with those for municipal elections, but with more invalid votes in the latter. If the vote of 2013 seems to predict a combination abstention/blank/null of around 16%, the actual breakdown could give an indication of the political consciousness of the sector. Rising blank/null votes in detriment of absenteeism could indicate a willingness to participate in political achievement, the rejection of a candidate in the polls, which has not happened in nineteen years voting for Congress. Increased absenteeism could indicate a loss of control mechanisms and the consolidation of open separation strategy.

Although we do not offer extensive case analysis of voting by provinces due to the extensive subject matter, the available data shows that Havana has been in all the municipal elections the area with the lowest participation, which remains consistently at around 2 percentage points below the national average. It has also been the city with the lowest attendance in voting for representatives, in 1998, 2003 and 2008, with between 1 and 2 percentage points below the average. The results of the last elections per provinces have not yet been published, which could mean that the electorate of Havana could have exceeded the symbolic barrier of 10% abstention. In contrast, the lowest vote received by a deputy was 70.2%, an electoral punishment for the management of the first secretary of the PCC in Isla de la Juventud^{xiv}, although she does not currently appear as representative in the Cuban Parliament's official site, and a new secretary has taken her place in the PCC, we could not find any evidence of revocation process or voting of representatives to justify this change. So the decision to revoke must have come "from above", regardless of the electoral system and government procedures.

In terms of quality, PCC control and the central government specific practices were documented to prevent the action of a municipal delegate, such as bullying, gerrymandering of his district and preventing supporters from exercising their vote^{xvi}. Stories of fraud, especially in order to prevent absenteeism, for example, urging voters to vote on behalf of absentee family members, have circulated in Cuba for years, but in recent times the victims have abandoned a permissive attitude and have reported these issues to the international community. It is difficult to assess the impact of these complaints within the country, but their influence on voting trends cannot be ruled out. Similarly, the work of the different opposition groups, both the right and the new left, has clearly low impact in the national totals, but probably did influence groups of citizens in the form of ideas and concepts that lead them to abstain, or vote void or blank ballots, given the numerous projects of these groups focused on the elections.

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Absenteeism trends and invalid votes have not yet reached numbers of concern for the government, which has even received recognition and approval from certain international agencies for Cuban elections, according to standards that have different meanings in competitive elections, held freely and fairly. Indeed, abstention, null and blank votes are not necessarily translatable into opposition, but their numbers indicate an expansion of the incidence of non-consensus of around one million people. These were previously unthinkable levels: 16% of voters are not a small group, and represent, in the hypothetical case that they could vote for other representatives and form their own block, about 98 representatives in the National Assembly, from a total of 614. Something is clear: it is a significant *minority*, which tends to increase, and in spite of some, it is increasingly less silent.

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- i. Cuban political scientist and historian. Specialist in history, sociology and Latin American political theory.
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- iii. As the previous studies made in socialist Cuba by sociologist Luis Suárez Salazar and other researchers from the now extinct Centro de Estudios sobre América, and the end of the decade of the 80s and middle of the 90s.
- iv. For a recent approximation with empirical results to the phenomenon see Armando Chaguaceda et al Community Participation in Cuba: Experiences from a Popular Council en International Journal of Cuban Studies Vol.4 Nos. 3 and 4: Special Issue, December, 2012. For a legal and political analysis of the institutionalism of the People's Power and its possible reforms we recommend the recent work of Cuban researchers Roberto Veiga and Julio César Guanche, published in magazines Espacio Laical and Temas.
- v. See <http://www.josemarti.cu/files/5-La%20Constituci%C3%B3n%20Socialista%20cubana.pdf> consultado 25-10-2012
- vi. See http://www.ecured.cu/index.php/Sistema_electoral_cubano, consulted 25-10-2012.
- vii. See http://www.one.cu/aec2010/esp/22_tabla_cuadro.htm—documento 22.1 (unloaded 24-10-12) and <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2012/10/23/nacional/artic09.html>, consulted 24-10-12.
- viii. See <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2012/10/23/nacional/artic09.html>, consulted 24-10-12. Later the National electoral committee increased the participation to 94.21%, maintaining the percentage of null and blank ballots. This shows a difference of almost 19,000 votes.
- ix. Calculations made from several publications: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/los-resultados-de-las-elecciones-municipales-de-cuba-notas-iniciales/?print=1>, <http://www.granma.cu/espanol/2010/abril/vier30/voto.html> y <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2012/10/23/nacional/artic09.html>
- x. See http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2079_93.htm
- xi. See http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2079_93.htm
- xii. See http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2079_03.htm; http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elecciones_legislativas_de_Cuba_de_2003
- xiii. See http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2079_E.htm

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xiv. See <http://www.cubaencuentro.com/cuba/noticias/raul-castro-recibio-mayor-respaldo-que-su-hermano-en-los-comicios-del-20-de-enero-66011>

xv. See http://www.parlamentocubano.cu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=179:isla-de-la-juventud&catid=56:biografia-de-los-diputados&Itemid=55

xvi. See <http://www.diariodecuba.com/cuba/12956-delegada-del-poder-popular-acude-la-prensa-extranjera-cansada-de-que-el-gobierno-la-ignor>; <http://www.diariodecuba.com/cuba/13158-castro-celebra-el-bicentenario-del-gerrymanderingyhttp://www.diariodecuba.com/cuba/13602-la-delegada-de-limonos-denuncia-que-las-autoridades-impidieron-votar-una-decena-de-sus-el>

xvii. If we added to this 16% another 10% from the Cubans who reside outside of the country (taking into consideration that approximately one half of them would accept the institutions and socialist system and could express their right to vote, which is not recognized today) we would be faced with a sizable group of electors with undoubted political weight.



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