

# Fidel Castro's Death: Implications for Cuba and U.S. Policy

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The [death](#) of Cuba's former long-time ruler Fidel Castro on November 25, 2016, raises questions regarding Cuba's economic and political situation and the future of U.S. policy toward Cuba. The revolutionary leader overthrew an unpopular dictatorship in 1959, but ended up imposing a communist regime that led to some social progress yet also resulted in severe human rights abuses and a feeble economy. For a small island nation, Cuba played an oversized role in international affairs under Castro's rule through its support for revolutionary movements abroad and its strong opposition to the United States.

While Fidel Castro's historical legacy is significant—regardless of whether one views him positively or negatively—he has not held formal power since he stepped down in 2006 for health reasons and was succeeded by his brother Raúl Castro, Cuba's long-time defense minister. Raúl has concentrated on making changes to Cuba's economic model by introducing some market-oriented reforms, but he has kept tight control over the political system.

Even after stepping down, Fidel continued to author [essays](#) published in Cuban media that cast a shadow on Raúl's rule. Many Cubans reportedly [believe](#) that Fidel encouraged so-called hardliners in Cuba's Communist Party (PCC) and government bureaucracy to slow the pace of reforms. With Fidel's passing, some Cuban entrepreneurs hope that the pace of reforms might accelerate.

Fidel's death points to the generational change that has already begun in the Cuban government and a passing of the older generation of so-called *históricos* of the 1959 revolution. Raúl's government imposed two five-year term limits for top officials. Accordingly, Raúl has said that he will step down as president in February 2018 at the end of his second term when he would be 86 years of age. Most observers believe that current First Vice President [Miguel Díaz-Canel](#) (currently aged 56), a former minister of higher education, will succeed Raúl as president, marking a transition to the first Cuban government not headed by a Castro in 62 years.

## U.S. Policy Implications

Upon Fidel's passing, President Obama issued a [statement](#) extending condolences to Fidel's family and extending "a hand of friendship to the Cuban people." He said that "history will record and judge the enormous impact of this

singular figure on the people and world around him." The President acknowledged that while the United States and Cuba have had profound political disagreements, his Administration has "worked hard to put the past behind us, pursuing a future in which the relationship between our two countries is defined not by our differences but by the many things that we share as neighbors and friends...." Opponents of the Obama Administration's [policy of engagement](#) with Cuba, including some Members of Congress, [criticized](#) the President's statement, maintaining that it disregarded the significant human rights abuses under Castro. While the Administration has been pursuing a policy of engagement and normalization of relations, it has not refrained from speaking out on human rights. During his March 2016 trip to Cuba, the President asserted in a [televised speech](#) that "citizens should be free to speak their mind without fear."

Statements from President-elect Trump suggest that he might reverse some of the Obama Administration's Cuba policy changes. After Fidel's death, the President-elect issued a [statement](#) referring to Castro as a "brutal dictator who oppressed his own people for nearly six decades." This was followed by a longer [message](#) on November 28 maintaining: "If Cuba is unwilling to make a better deal for the Cuban people, the Cuban/American people and the U.S. as a whole, I will terminate [the] deal." At this juncture, it remains unclear what actions might be taken by the incoming Administration. During the electoral campaign, candidate Trump said he would [cancel or reverse](#) President Obama's policy on Cuba unless Cuba took action to improve political and religious freedom and free political prisoners.

Since President Obama's policy shift on Cuba was done largely by executive action, President-elect Trump could reverse many of those policies, which have included the reestablishment of diplomatic relations (July 2015), the rescission of Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism (May 2015), and an increase in travel and commerce with Cuba. This third step involved a series of regulatory changes to the economic embargo by the [Treasury](#) and [Commerce](#) Departments. The Administration could decide to reverse some or all these changes or to ease or tighten other aspects of the embargo regulations. The Administration also could make changes to other aspects of bilateral [government-to-government cooperation and dialogues](#) that have occurred under the Obama Administration. These include a variety of agreements and dialogues on such issues as telecommunications, science and technology, U.S. property claims, environmental protection, human rights, migration, law enforcement, civil aviation, and maritime borders.

Opinion polls have shown that the policy of engagement has largely been [popular](#), including within parts of the [Cuban American community](#) in South Florida, which could make it difficult for the incoming Administration to reverse the U.S. policy completely. Burgeoning U.S. business linkages, particularly in the travel industry and telecommunications sectors, also could make it difficult to reverse current policy. Given that much of the economic embargo on Cuba remains in place (and can be lifted only by Congress), the Administration could choose to let the changes that have already been made remain, but refrain from approving any additional easing of restrictions pending economic or political changes in Cuba.

Historically, Congress has played an active role in shaping policy toward Cuba, including the enactment of legislation strengthening and at times easing U.S. economic sanctions. Looking ahead, the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress may continue to maintain an active oversight and legislative interest in Cuba, with some Members advocating continued engagement and normalization of relations and others advocating tightening or introducing new economic sanctions. The human rights situation in Cuba is likely to remain a key concern.

For more on Cuba, see CRS In Focus IF10045, [Cuba: President Obama's New Policy Approach](#); CRS Report R43926, [Cuba: Issues for the 114th Congress](#); CRS Report R44119, [U.S. Agricultural Trade with Cuba: Current Limitations and Future Prospects](#); CRS Report RL31139, [Cuba: U.S. Restrictions on Travel and Remittances](#); and CRS Report R43888, [Cuba Sanctions: Legislative Restrictions Limiting the Normalization of Relations](#).