

Hillary Clinton to call for lifting Cuba embargo

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Miami: Leading 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton on Friday will call on Congress to end the trade embargo the United States has imposed against Cuba since 1962.

The position, which Clinton already outlined in her 2014 book "Hard Choices," puts Clinton in line with President Barack Obama, who moved in December to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba and has called for normalized trade relations.

Perhaps more importantly, it draws a sharp contrast with two top Republican presidential contenders from Florida, Sen. Marco Rubio and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, at a time when younger Cuban-American voters in Florida are softening their stance on the matter. The Republican-led Congress is unlikely to allow such a change in U.S.-Cuba relations anytime soon.

"The time has come for us to continue down the path of engagement that has been laid out by President Obama," Clinton said Thursday after a campaign meeting with labor leaders in Maryland. "It's something I worked on as secretary of state, something I strongly recommended to (Obama) that he consider in his second term."

Clinton's campaign says she will frame her Republican rivals as backing "failed policies of the past."

U.S.-Cuba relations have long been a flashpoint in Florida politics. The generations of Cuban-Americans who were born in Cuba and fled shortly after the Castro-led revolution in the late 1950s generally supported a hard line, including the embargo that keeps American businesses from trading with Cuba and blocks Americans from traveling in the country and spending money there as tourists.

For decades, South Florida politicians and presidential candidates vying for the state's crucial electoral votes reflected those views, regardless of party. Clinton's husband was among them, even as he quietly attempted to engage Fidel Castro in the 1990s.

Now, says Florida pollster Fernand Amandi, an expert on Cuban-American public opinion, that once solid voting bloc is "a community in transition," giving Clinton an opening that "wouldn't have been possible not very long ago."

U.S-born Cuban-Americans, Amandi said, are consistently more supportive of normalized relations than their Cuban-born parents or, even if they aren't, the younger voters are less likely to consider themselves one-issue voters.

There also has been an influx of Cuba-born immigrants in the last few decades, Amandi explained. "They lived under the sanctions and concluded that it just emboldened the Castro regime," he said. "So think after 55 years of failure, it's time for something else."

Beyond the Cuban-American community, a majority of adults in the U.S. support normalizing relations with Cuba. A Pew Research Center survey conducted July 14-20 found that nearly 73 percent of Americans approve of establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba while 72 percent support ending the trade embargo, both double-digit percentage increases from January, immediately after Obama's decision.

Pew found the same trends even among Republicans, with 56 percent of Republican voters backing a diplomatic bond and 59 percent supporting an economic relationship.

Rubio remained unmoved Thursday, releasing a statement ahead of Clinton's visit.

"Unilateral concessions to the Castros will only strengthen a brutal, anti-American regime 90 miles from our shore," Rubio said.

- AP