DEMOCRACY STILL IN MOTION: THE 2013 ELECTION RESULTS IN CUBA

Arnold August
Author for Zed Books (UK), Fernwood Publishing (Canada) and Ciencias Sociales (Cuba)

Abstract

This paper considers the significance of the 2013 results of the elections to Cuba’s National Assembly in the light of trends identified in the author’s recent book, Cuba and its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion (August, 2013). Particular attention is paid to the longer-term trajectory of decline in the solidity of the ‘united’ or slate vote. Other aspects of change are noted in a process characterised as Cuban ‘democracy in motion’, rather than as a drift towards the liberal democratic model demanded by the U.S. ‘regime change’ objectives, and by other critics of Cuba’s constitution.

Keywords: democracy, elections, voto unido, national assembly, ANPP, Cuba

Introduction

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 identified in my recent book-length study of elections from 1993–2008 have been confirmed by the 2013 voting results (August, 2013).\(^1\) This kind of detailed endeavour, although virtually unique, is worthwhile, especially in light of the disinformation and misinformation disseminated by supporters of ‘regime change’ in Cuba across the spectrum from the so-called ‘left’ to the right, who replace facts, figures and a balanced analysis with clichés and ignorance.

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\(^1\) This paper is a modified version of the online article published on the author’s website (December 2013) to supplement the sections of his book that deal with democracy in the U.S. and democracy promotion. See www.democracyintheus.com
One of the most important voting results to take into account is the ‘united’ or slate vote (\textit{voto unido}). This refers to the voting system used in national and provincial elections, in which citizens can vote for the entire slate of candidates in their municipality, as opposed to exercising a selective vote for one or more, but not all, of the candidates in multi-seat municipal constituencies (August, 2013: 174–78; Table 7.9). In the elections from 1993 to 2008, the government, the parliament presidency, the party, the mass organizations and the press appealed very strongly to citizens to vote for the whole slate, for the \textit{voto unido}. However, the proportion voting for the slate vote declined from 95.06 per cent in 1993 to 90.90 per cent in 2008. \textit{Ipso facto}, the selective vote increased substantially from 1993 to 1998 – more than doubling (August, 2013: Table 7.9).

The \textit{voto unido} in 2013

With regard to this trend, at the time and as part of my fieldwork in 2007–2009, several specialists from the academic world were interviewed and their views collected. 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’. (August, 2013: 171-73, 180). Another political system specialist, Jesús García Brigos, reveals a concrete example of how the candidacies commissions, if not improved, can lead to negative consequences (August, 2013: 173). As for Rafael Hernández, editor of the critical review \textit{Temas}, he calls for a change in procedure for the candidacies commissions as well as its composition; otherwise, people will consider that the

\footnote{2. In Cuban elections to the provincial and national assemblies, candidacies commissions, chaired by a trade union representative and consisting of representatives of Cuba’s mass organisations, select and propose a slate of candidates equal in number to the number of seats in the constituency. Before the 1992 electoral reforms, the Communist Party chaired these candidacies commissions. This contrasts with the procedure in municipal elections, in which open meetings of citizens in the constituencies nominate candidates directly, and elections are competitive in the sense of there being more candidates than seats to be won. For details see chapter 7 of August (2013).}

In 2013, there was also 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, by the institutions noted above, for a slate vote, a *voto unido*. Thus the voting trends, and concerns expressed by political specialists, were borne out in 2013: the call for a slate vote was abandoned and the floodgates fully opened up. The proportion of citizens exercising the slate vote, in decline since 1993, now plummeted from 90.90 per cent in 2008 to 81.29 per cent in February 2013. Conversely, the selective vote doubled from 9.10 per cent in 2008 to 18.07 per cent in 2013 (*Granma Internacional*, 8 February 2013). The ‘critical revolutionary vote’ and the desire to break out of the electoral straitjacket were asserted even further in 2013.

**Turnout and deputies’ share of vote**

Voter turnout also reflected weaknesses in the political system, as indicated above by Cuban colleagues. Turnout, always very high in Cuba, even though voting is not compulsory, had incrementally, but steadily declined: from 99.57 per cent in 1993 to 96.89 per cent in 2008 (August 2013: 178, Table 7.9) However, in 2013, it fell much more steeply than the historic trend line, to 90.88 per cent, a major change in Cuban terms (*Granma Internacional*, 8 February 2013).

Another voting trend, analyzed in the book for the first time anywhere, and about which there is much speculation inside and outside of Cuba concerns 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 have tabulated results and ranked candidates in this respect, grouping deputies who gathered, respectively, 91–100 per cent, 81–90 per cent, and 71–80 per cent of the votes. (August, 2013: 179–80; Table 7.10). A noticeable voting trend immediately surfaced. While the top bracket (i.e. the maximum number of votes 91–100 per cent) remained stable from 1993 to 1998 (99.50 per cent of the total number of deputies), the percentage of deputies falling into this category began to decrease in 2003 to 95.93 per cent and further in 2008 to 93.54 per cent of the deputies. However, with the opening of the floodgates of ‘free voting’ without the official call for the *voto unido*, and other factors touched upon above, the February 2013 elections showed a very substantial drop in the 91–100 per cent grouping, from 93.54 per cent of deputies in 2008 to 35.78 per cent in February 2013. That is, the top bracket
plummeted by almost two-thirds. On the other hand, as expected by the sheer force of figures, the percentage of deputies falling into the second grouping of 81–90 per cent of elected deputies rose, from a virtually insignificant proportion of 4.68 per cent in 2008 to 59.97 per cent in 2013. Likewise, the third category of 71–80 per cent witnessed an increase, from an extremely negligible 0.81 per cent to a small percentage of 3.92 per cent, but an approximately fivefold increase nonetheless. A 61–70 per cent grouping, not previously included in my analysis, because no candidate had ever fallen into this range, went from zero deputies to two deputies in 2013, a very small proportion, but something new.

**Encouragement for regime change advocates?**

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 during the debates on change, that Cuban society is at the edge of a cliff and if Cuba cannot leap across the abyss, the Revolution will sink into it (cited August, 2013: 143). This is true and thus, during the 2012–13 elections, this perplexity had its effects on the voting patterns.

Secondly, 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 other candidates on the slate for the municipality whom they considered inappropriate. There was no call for unanimity, which the slate vote now reflected 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 per cent 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 (August, 2013: 168-73). Thus, this is nothing new. However, because there had not been any improvements made to the system by 2013 or, at least, a move in the direction of change, some voters apparently refused to take the national and provincial candidate nomination procedure seriously, and allowed this feeling to manifest itself at the polls.

On the positive side are the spoiled ballot results. In the polling stations when the votes were counted, I had frequently witnessed 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. In the 2013 elections, the null ballots increased only slightly, from 1.04 per cent in 2008 to 1.21 per cent in 2013 – virtually no change. In fact, this 1.21 per cent 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 as yet. It will only manifest itself in the next phase of general elections in 2017 and 2018, 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, it should be kept 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. What is fundamental, based on my field research since 1997, is that while some 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 (August, 2013: 137–42).

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 in the West, a Cuban deputy must garner at least 50 per cent 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 commission-nominated candidate per seat in the Parliament. This condition for being elected is indeed relevant, even in considering voting trends up to and including 2008. With the 2013 results, however, the number of deputies hovering close to the 50 per cent requirement is increasing. More than 4 per cent of the elected deputies obtained only 61–80 per cent of the votes, while two deputies fell into the 61–70 per cent bracket for the first time. If the system is not changed, some candidates may get less than 50 per cent in the next elections, in 2018. Of course, there would then be another election for that seat, 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.

**Electing the Council of State and succeeding the Castros**

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 National Assembly (ANPP) officials and the Council of State are elected from among the elected deputies. The procedure in 2013 was the same as in 2008 (see August, 2013: 191–94).

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 by
the National Assembly deputies to serve 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 Assembly. 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 (Granma Internacional, 28 February 2013). 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: 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 per cent voter approval. In the previous elections, in 2008, Raúl Castro received 99.37 per cent, a decline of only about 1 per cent (Granma Internacional, 30 January 2008). The new first vice-president, Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, obtained 93.53 per cent in the 2013 elections (Granma Internacional, 8 February 2013).

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 (Granma Internacional, 28 February 2013). 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 previous 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.
Conclusions

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 February 2013 results thus reflect my conclusions about the evolution of the political system (August, 2013: 228–32).

Bibliography