

Abbott's Trip Shows New Politics of U.S.-Cuba Relations

by [Patrick Svitek](#) and [Aman Batheja](#)

Nov. 25,
2015

| [24 Comments](#)

Comment

Republish

Email

Tweet

Recommend



When President Barack Obama moved last year to normalize U.S. relations with Cuba, a chorus of Republicans, including many in Texas, decried the decision, saying it would lend legitimacy to a repressive regime.

"Fidel and Raul Castro have just received both international legitimacy and a badly needed economic lifeline from President Obama," said U.S. Sen. **Ted Cruz**, now a presidential candidate. "But they remain in control of a totalitarian police state modeled on their old state sponsor, the Soviet Union."

Absent from the chorus was Cruz's mentor, Gov. **Greg Abbott**. Nearly a year after Obama's decision, Abbott is heading to Havana on Monday for a three-day trip, hoping to leverage the renewed relationship between the two countries into an economic boon for Texas, among Cuba's top trading partners in the United States.

The disconnect, according to experts on Cuba, is the latest example of how much the politics of U.S.-Cuba relations have changed as a Cold War mentality fades away and the U.S. develops robust relations with other communist countries including China and Vietnam.

"It's notable when you have a Cuban-American Republican from Texas running for the presidency — that the governor of the same state is choosing to directly defy that person's position on Cuba," said Julia Sweig, a senior research fellow at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Policy at the University of Texas at Austin. "That's the statement of the economic and future-oriented calculus that we're seeing reflected in the country, not just Texas, in the Republican Party."

"There's a huge tectonic shift among the Republican Party, and I think Greg Abbott is squarely within that new consensus," added Sweig, a supporter of normalization between the two countries.

In a statement announcing the trip, Abbott steered clear of politics but made clear he sees economic opportunity in visiting the country post-normalization.

"With a new era of eased trade and travel restrictions between the U.S. and Cuba — and as the 12th largest economy in the world — Texas has an opportunity to capitalize and expand its economic footprint at home and abroad," Abbott said. "Opening the door to business with Texas will expand free enterprise and the freedom that flows from it. I look forward to expanding business opportunities for both Texas and Cuba."

In recent years, U.S. policy toward Cuba has increasingly been viewed as outdated and counterproductive. A New York Times poll from 2014 found **60 percent** of Americans supported re-establishing ties with the country.

Abbott will be the third governor to visit Cuba since Obama announced he was normalizing relations with the communist country last December. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, and Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson, a Republican, made trips to Cuba in April and September, respectively.

Cuomo, in particular, drew some criticism for his decision to make the trip. At the time, the New York Republican State Committee released a statement from the head of its finance committee, Arcadio Casillas, calling Cuomo's decision to make the trip "an amoral disaster."

"In 2015, Cuba is still a police state, political dissidents are imprisoned and tortured, and the Castro regime has suppressed Cubans and created poverty and disharmony," Casillas, a Cuban-American, said. "We urge the governor to rethink this adventure in light of his constituents and of its far-reaching negative implications."

At least initially, most critics of Obama's efforts in Cuba weren't ready to pounce on Abbott's trip. Neither Cruz nor Rubio responded to requests for comment. Nor did a number of Republican members of the Texas congressional delegation who had criticized Obama on the issue.

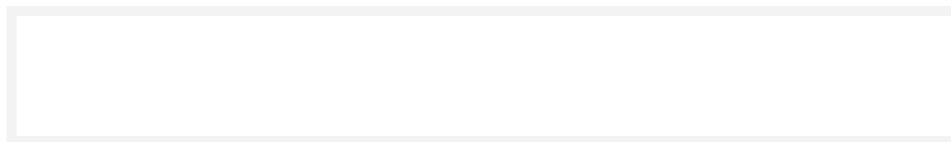
State Rep. **Bill Zedler**, R-Arlington, **tweeted** in August that Obama's Cuba policy "does nothing more than

empower a communist tyrant & enrich a communist regime." Reached on Wednesday, Zedler said he wanted to learn more about Abbott's trip before commenting on it.

The governor's office said Wednesday that Abbott will be joined on the trip by business representatives from the ports and the agricultural industries, as well as members of the governor's staff. No other statewide officials or members of the Legislature will be joining Abbott on the trip.

TexasOne, a quasi-governmental agency funded by private donations, is chartering the plane to Cuba and paying for all expenses for the trip except for security, which will be provided by the Texas Department of Public Safety. **Cynthia Thomas, president of TriDimension Strategies**, a Dallas-based consulting firm that focuses on the Texas-Cuba trade relationship, was hired by TexasOne to help organize the trip.

"It's been in the works for several months," Thomas said. "This'll be my 39th trip to Cuba since 2000."



Currently, the only flights between the United States and Cuba are private charter flights from a handful of states, not including Texas. The Cuban government made an exception to let Abbott's plane fly from Austin to Havana, Thomas said.

Thomas also helped organize a Texas delegation's trip to Cuba in 2008, led by then-Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples. The tenor of Abbott's trip will likely be markedly different, she said.

"We're moving closer to engagement with Cuba and, with that, it just changes the tone of the conversations," Thomas said. "I think both sides are seeing the potential of what's to come, and there's excitement with that."

This is Abbott's second international trip as governor. In September, he [traveled to Mexico City](#) and met with Mexican officials. TexasOne paid for most of the costs for that trip as well.

Abbott ended his Mexico trip with two signed agreements intended to promote infrastructure and energy projects between Mexico and Texas. Thomas said achieving such accomplishments in Cuba will be more challenging.

"You're dealing with a completely different business structure with Cuba than you are Mexico," Thomas said. "For this trip, the hope is really to introduce and learn about the potential possibilities. Anything else would be gravy."

Cruz was not the only Texas elected official to criticize Obama's Cuba policy. Several Texas members of Congress, including U.S. Reps. [Michael McCaul](#) and [Kay Granger](#), also accused Obama of undermining efforts to improve human rights in Cuba.

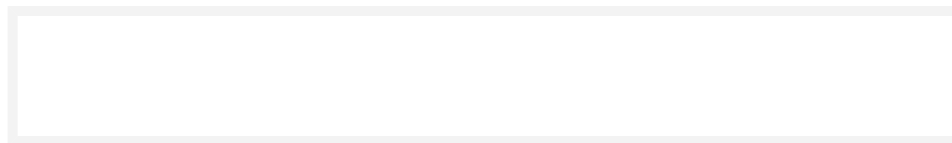
"Once again, with the stroke of the pen, President Obama has upended this longstanding bipartisan policy toward one of the most oppressive regimes on the planet with very little to show in return," McCaul said in December.

Among the most vocal proponents of normalizing U.S.-Cuba relations has been the business community, which sees more trade with Cuba as a no-brainer for economic growth. That could be especially true for Texas, regularly ranked as the No. 1 state in America for exports.

"In general, Republicans have tended to be free traders, and I think it's a mistake for them to turn their backs on

trade. Trade means jobs for Texans,” said Bill Hammond, president of the Texas Association of Business. “I think it’s short-sighted on those who didn’t want to normalize relations.”

Disclosure: The Texas Association of Business and the University of Texas at Austin are corporate sponsors of The Texas Tribune. A complete list of Tribune donors and sponsors can be viewed [here](#).



Comment

Republish

Email

Tweet

Recommend

[Back To Top](#)