

## **Cuba's New Figurehead**

**Author:** [Rafael Gordo](#)

Despite elections, real political change remains as far away as ever.

On April 18, Cuba's National Assembly of People's Power will announce the country's new leader. President Raul Castro is not seeking re-election, but this does not herald a historic transfer of power. According to Cuba's complex electoral system, there are no direct presidential elections and thus the public have not and will not be consulted.

There is only one formal space in Cuba's tangled political set-up where citizens at least have the right to ratify members of the sole state entity approved by the people. Elections were held for the National Assembly on March 11 to approve the 605 delegates nominated by the National Candidature Commission for the country's 168 municipalities. It is this Assembly that will convene on April 19 to choose a new leader.

But since 1976 - when the socialist constitution established that all government decisions should be made by the 31-member Council of State - the National Assembly has restricted itself to merely rubber stamping this Council's decisions twice a year.

The far more powerful Candidature Commission which selects the nominees is made up of members of political groupings (although nobody knows all of its constituents) that include the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, the Young Communist League, the National Association of Small Farmers and the Federation of Cuban Women.

This is a control mechanism designed to fill the Assembly with ministers, heads of large state businesses, members of the Politburo, high-ranking military and the leaders of mass organisations. In other words, where the real power lies.

Thus Cuban diversity is not represented by its parliament, although there are quotas regarding men and women as well as various ethnic backgrounds.

There are no delegates who publically identify as LGBTI, and none who have taken a position on vital issues such as ending the dual currency system or introducing new media laws to guarantee plurality. Only three delegates have come out in support of the self-employed entrepreneurs, known as *cuentapropistas*, who represent almost one million workers in the formal and informal sectors.

Hidden from media scrutiny, the Commission have been able to construct an assembly committed to maintaining their discourse and interests, without any possibility of the reforms demanded by many other voices.

Approximately 302 future delegates were allocated municipalities despite the fact that they may have never set foot in the area and have made no commitment to advocating for the local residents, who must vote for them without knowing who they are.

This system made it possible for the current vice-president of the Council of State, Salvador Valdés Mesa, to run for Güines in Mayabeque province despite being from Santa Cruz del Sur in Camagüey and living in

Havana. Similarly, tourism minister Manuel Marrero ran for Gibara in Holguín, regardless of the fact that he is not from there and is not a resident.

There is a high-turn out in elections because, essentially, people vote to conform. To question the status quo means identifying yourself as threat to your family and community. People also vote because it is a day to socialise, to enjoy the wait and while queuing laugh at the usual daily woes: the rotten mortadella from the local store, the bread and (no) butter of everyday life.

But even this is changing. During the long wait to issue the final results, the National Electoral Commission acknowledged a five per cent fall in participation, with some 1.2 million eligible voters having failed to turn out.

But an 85.65 rate of participation will still be used by the government to prove its legitimacy. The state press will respond to the announcement of the new Cuban leader by applauding popular support for so-called socialist democracy and favourably compare the rate of suffrage with other countries in the area. However, these newspaper articles, dreamed up in an office of the ideological department of the Communist party's central committee, will not truly explain the nature of power.

There is data to challenge the impression of universal popular support. The so-called "united vote" - a method for selecting all of the candidates with a "X" in a gigantic circle on the top of the ballot - has long been encouraged. But on March 11, there were 1,366,328 selective crosses, showing that many people are no longer willing to passively accept all nominees put forward by the Candidature Commission.

This was also the first time that many voters decided to vote against the main candidate. In Habana Vieja and Céspedes, Camagüey for example, no one gained the once-standard 100 per cent of the vote.

There is also variation regarding turn-out that is clearly linked to socio-economic status. In Havana, around 79.5 per cent of the electorate actually votes. Residents of big cities are less likely to vote because they have more contact with national and international independent media as well as enjoying higher incomes and more internet access. In contrast, in the more deprived eastern provinces, around 87-89 per cent of people vote.

And the fact that people have limited knowledge about how the intricate political system works is a net gain for the current structure's continuity. The elections represent a system in which a dominant class distributes power with the Communist party's blessing. On April 19, we will bear witness to the creation of a new political figurehead, not the establishment of a new government.

**Rafael Gordo Nuñez is an IWPR-trained journalist and contributes to a wide range of independent media in Cuba.**

**Location:** [Cuba](#)

**Topic:** [Elections](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/cubas-new-figurehead>