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U.S. Said to Plan Easing Rules for Travel to Cuba

By [GINGER THOMPSON](#)

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration is planning to expand opportunities for Americans to travel to [Cuba](#), the latest step aimed at encouraging more contact between people in both countries, while leaving intact the decades-old embargo against the island's Communist government, according to Congressional and administration officials.

The officials, who asked not to be identified because they had not been authorized to discuss the policy before it was announced, said it was meant to loosen restrictions on academic, religious and cultural groups that were adopted under President [George W. Bush](#), and return to the "people to people" policies followed under President [Bill Clinton](#).

Those policies, officials said, fostered robust exchanges between the United States and Cuba, allowing groups — including universities, sports teams, museums and chambers of commerce — to share expertise as well as life experiences.

Policy analysts said the intended changes would mark a significant shift in Cuba policy. In early 2009, [President Obama](#) lifted restrictions on travel and remittances only for Americans with relatives on the island.

Congressional aides cautioned that some administration officials still saw the proposals as too politically volatile to announce until after the coming midterm elections, and they said revisions could still be made.

But others said the policy, which does not need legislative approval, would be announced before Congress returned from its break in mid-September, partly to avoid a political backlash from outspoken groups within the Cuban American lobby — backed by Senator [Robert Menendez](#), Democrat of New Jersey — that oppose any softening in Washington's position toward Havana.

Those favoring the change said that with a growing number of polls showing that Cuban-Americans' attitudes toward Cuba had softened as well, the administration did not expect much of a backlash.

"They have made the calculation that if you put a smarter Cuba policy on the table, it will not harm us in the election cycle," said one Democratic Congressional aide who has been working with the administration on the policy. "That, I think, is what animates this."

Mr. Menendez, in a statement, objected to the anticipated changes. “This is not the time to ease pressure on the Castro regime,” he said, referring to President [Raúl Castro](#) of Cuba, who took office in 2006 after his brother, Fidel, fell ill. Mr. Menendez added that promoting travel would give Havana a “much needed infusion of dollars that will only allow the Castro brothers to extend their reign of oppression.”

In effect, the new policy would expand current channels for travel to Cuba, rather than create new ones. Academic, religious and cultural groups are now allowed to travel under very tight rules. For example, students wanting to study in Cuba are required to stay at least 10 weeks. And only accredited universities can apply for academic visas.

Under the new policy, such restrictions would be eased, officials said. And academic institutions, including research and advocacy groups and museums, would be able to seek licenses for as long as two years.

In addition, the administration is also planning to allow flights to Cuba from more cities than the three — Miami, New York and Los Angeles — currently permitted. And there are proposals, the officials said, to allow all Americans to send remittances or charitable donations to churches, schools and human rights groups in Cuba.

Some analysts said the measures were partly a response to pressure from an unlikely alliance of liberal political groups and conservative business associations — led by Senator [John Kerry](#), head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — who have been pushing Congress to lift all restrictions on travel to Cuba.

Others described it as a nod to President Castro’s stunning decision last month to begin releasing dozens of political prisoners.

“It’s a way of fostering greater opening and exchange without a bruising battle with a much-needed political ally in an election year,” said Christopher Sabatini, senior policy director at the Council of the Americas. “But it can still be legitimately couched as a way of supporting democracy and human rights by allowing independent exchange and thought.”

As with everything concerning Cuba, the new policy seems fraught with complications. President Obama, who came to office promising to open new channels of engagement with Cuba, has so far had limited those new openings to Cuban-Americans, partly because of political concerns, and also because his administration’s attention had been focused on more pressing foreign policy matters, including two wars.

“I don’t think the administration believes this will produce palpable change in the short term,” said Julia Sweig of the [Council on Foreign Relations](#). “But it’s a way over the long term to allow Americans and Cubans to have contact, even as their governments continue to hash out a lot of seriously thorny issues.”

High on the United States’ list of issues is winning the release of an American contractor who was detained in Cuba nine months ago when the authorities said they caught him distributing

satellite telephones to Jewish dissidents. The contractor, Alan P. Gross, had gone to Cuba without the proper visa as part of longstanding program by the organization [Usaid](#), in which development workers conduct activities aimed at strengthening groups that oppose the Castro government.

“We’re dealing with a relationship that’s so contorted, it would take another 50 years of incremental steps to pull it apart and reassemble it in a constructive way,” said Robert Pastor, a professor of international relations at American University. “Even then, we’re having trouble taking baby steps, when what we need is a giant leap.”