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The most mind blowing aspect of my participating in this year's U.S. Women and Cuba Collaboration delegation was witnessing first-hand the vast juxtaposition of the US. and Cuba. Only ninety miles from the U.S., Cuba has struggled, and in many ways succeeded in building a high-functioning socialist democracy against tremendous odds. When contrasted with our own capitalist democracy, the differences are hard to miss. Turnout among the voter-eligible population in the U.S. was around 37-41% in 2010. By contrast, Cuba usually has about 98% voter participation. In the US, almost half of our Congress-people, and nearly 70% of our Senators, have a net worth of \$1 million or more. To even run a successful campaign in the U.S. you must be wealthy or have wealthy donors willing to back you financially. In Cuba, campaigning is illegal and there is no money in politics, as none is needed.

The U.S. was ranked 13th in education in the UN's 2009 Human Development Report. Cuba was tied for 1st place with adult literacy rates at 99.8% and school enrolments at 100%. Cuba has single-payer, universal healthcare, is on the frontlines of AIDS and cancer research, and is world-famous for their doctors and medical schools. By contrast, the U.S., while transitioning into the Affordable Care Act, far [outspends](#) any other nation on healthcare, yet still has millions of uninsured.

From an island six times smaller than Texas, Cuba has defended itself from outside attacks and has kept itself sovereign despite a crippling economic blockade from the U.S. The Cuban people are almost shockingly nationalistic, with signs and banners everywhere extolling the virtues of socialism, triumphs of the revolution and the national heroes that have led Cuba to where they are today. They have every right to be proud of what they have been able to achieve in the face of insurmountable obstacles and the tremendous pressure of the blockade.

Of all of the many, many things I learned on this delegation, the thing that strikes me the most is that I have just begun to scratch the surface of what Cuba really is. This social experiment in a collective identity, where the good of the group is more important than that of the individual, is admirable and intriguing. While Cuba still has much work to do, such as eradicating ingrained homophobia and machismo, the sheer speed at which Cuban society progresses on social issues is astounding, and there is much to be learned from the Cuban model.