

Mel Martinez

1946–

UNITED STATES SENATOR 2005–2009
REPUBLICAN FROM FLORIDA

After fleeing Cuba in 1962 to escape an outbreak of violence in his hometown, Mel Martinez settled in Florida. He served in local government and in President George W. Bush's Cabinet before being elected the first Cuban American to serve in the U.S. Senate. While staunchly conservative on many issues, he was a moderate voice in support of comprehensive immigration reform. "Bringing people together is my nature," noted Martinez, the only immigrant among his Senate colleagues. "There is nothing I'd rather do in the United States Senate than work to reach a consensus, build a bridge, seek and maintain common ground."¹

Melquiades R. (Mel) Martinez was born October 23, 1946, in Sagua la Grande, Cuba, to Melquiades and Gladys Ruiz Martinez, who raised their three children in a devout Roman Catholic family. Melquiades, Sr., was a veterinarian.² In the face of the Castro regime's increased hostility toward Catholics, Martinez's parents sent him to the United States in 1962 through Operation Pedro Pan, a program organized by the U.S. government and the Catholic Church.³ Martinez was placed with a foster family in Orange County, Florida, until his parents arrived in the United States in 1966. He earned a bachelor's degree in international affairs from Florida State University in 1969 and a law degree from that institution in 1973. He worked in private practice for nearly two decades and was president of the Florida Academy of Trial Lawyers from 1988 to 1989. He also chaired the Orlando Housing Authority and served on the board of directors of the Orlando Utilities Commission. Martinez met his future wife, Kitty, while they were students at Florida State. The couple raised three children: Lauren, John, and Andrew.⁴

Initially affiliated with the Democratic Party, Martinez switched his allegiance to the Republican Party when President Ronald W. Reagan took office. In 1998 he won

election as Orange County chairman. Martinez also took an active role in the 2000 presidential campaign as co-chairman of the Florida operation of Republican nominee George W. Bush. After the election, President Bush nominated Martinez as Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and he was unanimously confirmed by the U.S. Senate on January 23, 2001. As Secretary, Martinez was a forceful advocate for homeownership and for the advancement of public-private initiatives with faith-based and community services. At HUD he established a \$1.7 billion tax credit program for investors building affordable housing and a \$1 billion program to help 650,000 low-income families make down payments.⁵

In 2003 three-term incumbent Democratic Senator Bob Graham of Florida announced his intention to not seek re-election in 2004, setting off a scramble in both parties to recruit candidates. At the urging of President Bush and Senate Republicans, Martinez resigned his position at HUD on December 12, 2003, to run for the open seat.⁶ In the Republican primary, he faced 10-term U.S. Representative Bill McCollum.⁷ After prevailing in the primary with 44.9 percent of the vote, Martinez faced Betty Castor, a former state legislator, state education commissioner, and president of the University of Florida, in the general election. The candidates differed on virtually every issue, from abortion to the Iraq War.⁸ Martinez won, with 49.4 of the vote versus Castor's 48.3 percent.⁹ "Only in America can a 15-year-old boy arrive on our shores alone, not speaking the language—with a suitcase and the hope of a brighter future—and rise to serve in the Cabinet of the President of the United States. And only in America can that same boy today stand one step away from making history as the first Cuban-American to serve in the United States Senate," Martinez said.¹⁰

Mel Martinez was sworn in as a Member of the 109th Congress (2005–2007) on January 4, 2005, and



acquired seats on the committees on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs; Energy and Natural Resources; and Foreign Relations. He also served on the Select Committee on Aging, and later secured seats on the Armed Services Committee and the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee.¹¹

On national issues, he attempted to forge agreement with Senators of both parties. “You get things done by reaching for the middle,” Martinez said.¹² On energy policy, for instance, he took a middle position on opening up more offshore areas for deep drilling, though he noted that such expansion was only a “component . . . of a comprehensive energy policy.”¹³ Martinez supported drilling in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) on the condition that Florida’s Gulf Coast would be sheltered from oil and gas exploration. He introduced a measure to permanently ban drilling in the outer continental shelf off the Florida coastline, adding, “I can clearly state that [Floridians] do not want drilling now, and I do not see a scenario anywhere on the horizon where we would change that position.”¹⁴

An issue on which Senator Martinez cast himself as a centrist was immigration reform. His childhood experiences shaped his approach, which differed from his party’s opposition to the establishment of a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.¹⁵ He opposed efforts to build a 1,500-mile-long wall along the U.S. border with Mexico. “What the wall symbolizes is not what we want—the face of America we want to show,” Martinez said.¹⁶ In 2005 and 2006, he teamed up with Senator Barack Obama of Illinois to advance legislation using provisions for border enforcement and a guest worker program to address the issue of illegal immigration “in a realistic fashion without providing amnesty.”¹⁷ Among the proposals Martinez supported was an initiative that was introduced in the Senate as early as 2001. The purpose of the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was to provide a path to education and permanent citizenship for the minor children of undocumented immigrants. “I’m very empathetic towards giving opportunity to children who have lived in this country all their lives . . . to reach their dreams and not be held back in any way,” Martinez said.¹⁸

While a comprehensive version of the immigration reform bill eventually passed the Senate, competing proposals in the House prevented its enactment into law.

At the opening of the 110th Congress (2007–2009), after Republicans had suffered heavy losses in the 2006 elections, President Bush nominated Martinez for chairman of the Republican National Committee, with responsibility for fundraising and communicating the party’s message to the public. Political observers viewed the appointment partly as an effort to court Hispanic voters. Martinez was elected to the post in early 2007, but some Republicans opposed him because of his position on immigration. His goal was to “deliver a message that conveys to the American people that we are a party that has renewed itself and that has answers to their everyday problems.” To allow Martinez to continue performing Senate duties, his post as chairman of the Republican National Committee was structured so that he could serve as general chairman while a directing chairman ran daily operations.¹⁹ Ultimately, however, Martinez served only 10 months. Announcing his decision to leave the post on October 19, 2007, Martinez insisted he had rebuilt the party and its fundraising capacity, noting, “It was probably a good moment to get back to my main job, my real obligation and passion.”²⁰

In December 2008, Martinez announced his intention to not seek re-election to the U.S. Senate in 2010. Then, in August 2009, he announced he would resign as soon as a replacement could be appointed, citing a desire to return to Florida and his family.²¹ “This is of my own free will,” Martinez said, “only my desire to move on and get on with the rest of my life.”²² Martinez retired September 9, 2010, after Florida governor Charlie Crist selected his chief of staff, George S. Lemieux, to complete the term. Delivering his farewell address, Martinez stated, “Having lived through the onset of tyranny in one country and played a part in the proud democratic traditions of another, I leave here today with a tremendous sense of gratitude for the opportunity to give back to the Nation that I love—the Nation not of my birth, but the Nation of my choice.”²³



FOR FURTHER READING

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Martinez, Mel, with Ed Breslin. *A Sense of Belonging: From Castro's Cuba to the U.S. Senate, One Man's Pursuit of the American Dream* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008).

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NOTES

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- Martinez spoke often on the Senate Floor about immigration reform. See for example, *Congressional Record*, Senate, 109th Cong., 2nd sess. (29 March 2006): S2519–S2520; *Congressional Record*, Senate, 109th Cong., 2nd sess. (7 April 2006): S3371–S3372; *Congressional Record*, Senate, 109th Cong., 2nd sess. (17 May 2006): S4672; *Congressional Record*, Senate, 109th Cong., 2nd sess. (24 May 2006): S5087; *Congressional Record*, Senate, 110th Cong., 1st sess. (28 June 2007): S8647–S8648.
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