

# Teresa Martinez: Understanding the True Meaning of Democracy, Florida

As told by Teresa Martinez  
Bartow, Florida

In early 2020 (just weeks before the pandemic), Smithsonian staff and their storytelling partners at the Peale, Baltimore, traveled to multiple states in the U.S. to ask residents of those states about voting experiences, the current state of American democracy, what issues brought them to the polls, how they made a difference in their communities, and what Americans' civic responsibilities were, among other complex questions.

Story Narrative:

**Teresa Martinez:** I am Teresa Martinez. I'm originally from Cuba. And now I live in Lakeland.

(00:08) And democracy. What does it mean to me? It's a big word. It's freedom, the freedom to express yourself, to be whatever you want to be, to own whatever you can, to have the freedom to be yourself.

(00:24) Coming from Cuba, this was not something that we were able to experience. I grew up in Cuba from the time that Castro was there in 1959 through 1970, so I was able to experience what democracy is not. Having that experience living in the communist regime, then you really realize what democracy is. Democracy is the right, the God-given right to be free.

(01:01) I remember when Castro took over the Batista government. It was December 31st, 1959, and the whole country was rejoicing because Castro had won, and we were going to have freedom. And the next day, he went all through the country to the central road of the island, and people were just screaming his name.

(01:27) But it wasn't too long after that, that we realized, "Uh-oh. We made a mistake, here." Because he declared that he was communist and took over the country, private property, the right to express yourself, the freedom of speech, even religion. Everything changed. And from then on, it was communism. We never had a chance to vote or have a say. If you did have a say, it could cost you your life.

(02:05) I don't think that Americans, North Americans, let's say, really realize how lucky those of us who live in the United States of America, we really are. When you have an experience what democracy is not, then you don't know what you have. For example, what would happen to you if you simply expressed that you didn't like this government, that you didn't like the president, were not in agreement with his opinion, and that was that. Would

you go to jail for that? In other countries, you do. In other countries, you don't have the ability to be yourself, to express, to have that freedom of expression that is so precious to everybody. I think that we should be doing everything we can to maintain that democracy and to give back, to make sure that we build this country, because this country is blessed.

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