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Castro Touches Bottom

Doubtless Congressman Miller will give it a try, but nevertheless it is difficult to fathom how Fidel Castro can be turned into a plausible campaign issue for the Republican Party. A few days ago, the Cuban regime was dealt a crushing blow when the Christian Democrats won the presidential election in Chile. And this has been followed by Uruguay's decision to sever diplomatic relations with Premier Castro, leaving Mexico as the only Latin American country to maintain an embassy in Havana.

In a broad sense, both events have vindicated the general lines of United States policy in dealing with Cuba. This country took the lead in urging hemisphere republics to isolate Castro diplomatically. And in an affirmative sense, Washington has looked favorably on the non-Communist left in Latin America to counter the revolutionary appeal of Havana. First in Venezuela and now in Chile candidates espousing this view have prevailed at the polls.

But there is a special significance in the triumph of Sen. Eduardo Frei, a Christian Democrat, over the Communist-supported Sen. Salvador Allende, a Socialist. Mr. Frei is the first Christian Democrat to win a presidential election in Latin America. In 1958, his party won only an insignificant fraction of the vote. What accounts for the swift rise of the Christian Democrats in Chile, a country with a strong anticlerical tradition?

A major factor was the change wrought by the late Pope John in popular attitudes to the Catholic Church. The Church in Latin America has always had the potential of offering a formidable ideological alternative to Marxism. But in years past, the hierarchy was often associated with the oligarchy that in varying degrees has dominated politics in Hispanic America. Pope John gave vitality and respectability to the reformist tradition within the church in Latin America; Senator Frei's victory is a measure of the new strength of social-minded Catholicism.

In a negative sense, Uruguay's break in diplomatic relations is bad news for Castro. But the

emergence of the Christian Democrats as competitors in Latin American politics could be worse news—especially in light of the disarray and division in the world Communist movement.