

UCLA

**Latino Policy &
Politics Institute**

HOW LATINO REPUBLICANS UNDERSTAND THEIR PARTISAN ALIGNMENT:

**EVIDENCE FROM
SOUTH TEXAS**

Rodolfo Solís, Efrén Pérez

SEPTEMBER 2026



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

UCLA LPPI acknowledges the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Tovaangar (the Los Angeles basin and So. Channel Islands). As a land grant institution, we pay our respects to the Honuukvetam (Ancestors), 'Ahihirom (Elders), and 'Eyoohiinkem (our relatives/relations) past, present, and emerging.

Rodolfo Solis gratefully acknowledges Amada Armenta, Chris Zepeda-Millán, and Matt Barreto for their guidance and thoughtful feedback throughout the broader dissertation project from which this report draws. Their insights have helped sharpen the questions, arguments, and interpretation of the evidence presented here.

ABOUT LPPI

The UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute addresses the most critical domestic policy challenges facing Latinos and other communities of color through research, advocacy, mobilization, and leadership development to expand genuine opportunity for all Americans.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the University of California, Los Angeles, as a whole. The authors alone are responsible for the content of this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Latino voters are often treated as a politically unified group. However, recent elections show growing variation within the Latino electorate, including increased support for Republican candidates—despite Republican rhetoric and policies that many observers view as hostile toward Latino communities. These shifts have generated widespread debate because they appear to contradict expectations that anti-immigrant rhetoric and restrictive immigration policies should push Latino voters away from the Republican Party.¹ This tension is especially visible in South Texas, where heavily Latino counties with long Democratic histories have shifted toward Republican candidates in recent elections.²

This report examines how Latino Republican voters themselves explain their political choices. It combines national survey data from the American National Election Study (ANES) from 2012–2024 and 85 in-depth interviews conducted between 2020 and 2025 across five Latino-majority South Texas counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata. The analysis identifies four primary findings about recent Latino political change and how Latino Republican voters in South Texas understand their identities, values, and partisan alignment.

1. Republican gains are concentrated among Latino conservatives, not among Latino voters as a whole.

National survey data show that recent increases in Republican identification are concentrated among Latinos who identify as politically conservative. Latino liberals remain overwhelmingly aligned with the Democratic Party. Rather than reflecting a broad shift among Latino voters, these trends point to growing ideological and political differentiation within the Latino electorate.

2. Latino Republican voters often maintain strong ties to Latino identity and immigrant experiences.

Contrary to common assumptions, participants rarely described their political alignment as a rejection of their ethnic background or immigrant roots. Many expressed pride in their Latino identity, maintained close ties to immigrant family histories, and viewed those experiences as central to their sense of self. The evidence suggests that Republican affiliation among these voters is generally not associated with detachment from Latino identity or immigrant communities.

3. Political alignment is often understood as an expression of longstanding values rather than a change in personal beliefs.

Participants consistently described their political views as rooted in values they regarded as enduring, including religion, family, personal responsibility, public safety, and national belonging. Rather than portraying themselves as becoming more conservative over time, many described recognizing that the Republican Party more closely reflected values they believed they had held throughout their

lives. Political realignment was therefore often interpreted as a change in partisan attachment rather than a change in personal beliefs.

4. Latino identity is often reinterpreted rather than abandoned.

Participants generally did not view Latino identity and Republican affiliation as incompatible. Instead, many described ways of reconciling the two by redefining the relationship between ethnicity and politics. Some linked Latino identity to socially conservative values, while others emphasized that ethnic background should not determine political preferences. These dynamics were especially visible in discussions of immigration, where participants often distinguished between support for immigrants and support for immigration enforcement, legality, and border governance.

Taken together, these findings show that recent Latino Republican alignment is not simply a story of detachment from ethnoracial background. Rather, it reflects how some Latino voters interpret politics through values and come to see one party as better representing those commitments.

INTRODUCTION

How can Latino voters support a party widely associated with restrictive immigration policies and rhetoric often understood as hostile to Latinos? This question has become more pressing as Republican candidates have made notable gains among segments of the Latino electorate, including in South Texas, where heavily Latino counties with long Democratic histories have shifted toward Republican candidates.

South Texas provides a particularly informative setting for examining this question. The five counties studied here—Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata—are overwhelmingly Latino, remain closely connected to immigrant communities and cross-border family histories, and have long been associated with the Democratic Party. Yet each has also experienced substantial movement toward Republican presidential candidates in recent elections. This combination makes the region a revealing setting for examining how Republican alignment develops in communities where Latino identity and immigrant-linked experiences remain central to everyday life.

Public discussion often turns to two explanations. One is that Latino Republicans must have weak ties to Latino identity.³ The other is that they are distant from immigration-related experiences.⁴

The evidence presented here points in a different direction. Many Latino Republicans in South Texas describe strong ties to their ethnic background, family immigration histories, and local communities. Rather than asking whether these attachments exist, this report examines how they are understood politically and how Latino Republican

voters themselves make sense of the relationship between identity, values, and partisan affiliation.

By combining national survey trends with in-depth interviews, the analysis shows that Latino political behavior is not uniform and cannot be reduced to a single issue or explanation. Instead, it reflects variation in how individuals interpret political conflict, evaluate the parties, and connect those evaluations to values they see as central to their lives and identities.

DATA AND APPROACH

This report combines national survey data with in-depth interviews. The national analysis comes from the 2012–2024 American National Election Study (ANES), which tracks Latino partisan identification and issue attitudes over time.

The interview component includes 85 semi-structured interviews conducted between September 2020 and August 2025 across five South Texas counties. The sample includes 75 Latino Republicans, 5 Latino Democrats, and 5 White Republicans. These additional interviews provide comparative context for interpreting how Latino Republicans describe their political views. Participants varied in age, education, income, and nativity. Table 1 in the Appendix provides further details about the sample.

The goal of the interviews is not to produce a nationally representative sample, but to understand how Latino Republican voters explain their political choices. Participants were asked about their upbringing, identity, and views on issues such as immigration, religion, and public safety. The analysis focuses on recurring patterns in how participants interpret politics, evaluate the parties, and describe their values.

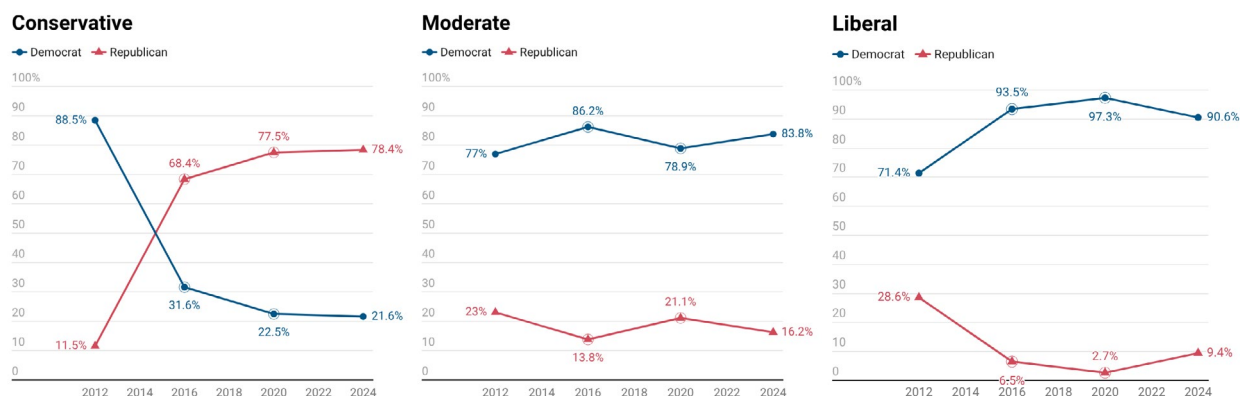
FINDINGS

Finding 1: Latino Republican Growth Reflects Increasing Ideological Differentiation Within the Latino Electorate

Recent shifts in Latino political behavior are substantial, but they are not uniform across the Latino electorate. Instead, recent Republican gains are concentrated among Latino voters who identify as politically conservative.

National survey data illustrate this pattern. Figure 1 shows that among Latinos who identify as conservative, Republican identification increased sharply between 2012 and 2016, rising from roughly 12% to over 60%. During the same period, Democratic identification among this group declined substantially. By contrast, Latino liberals remained overwhelmingly aligned with the Democratic Party.

Figure 1: Ideology and Partisan Identity Among Latino Voters Over Time, 2012–2024

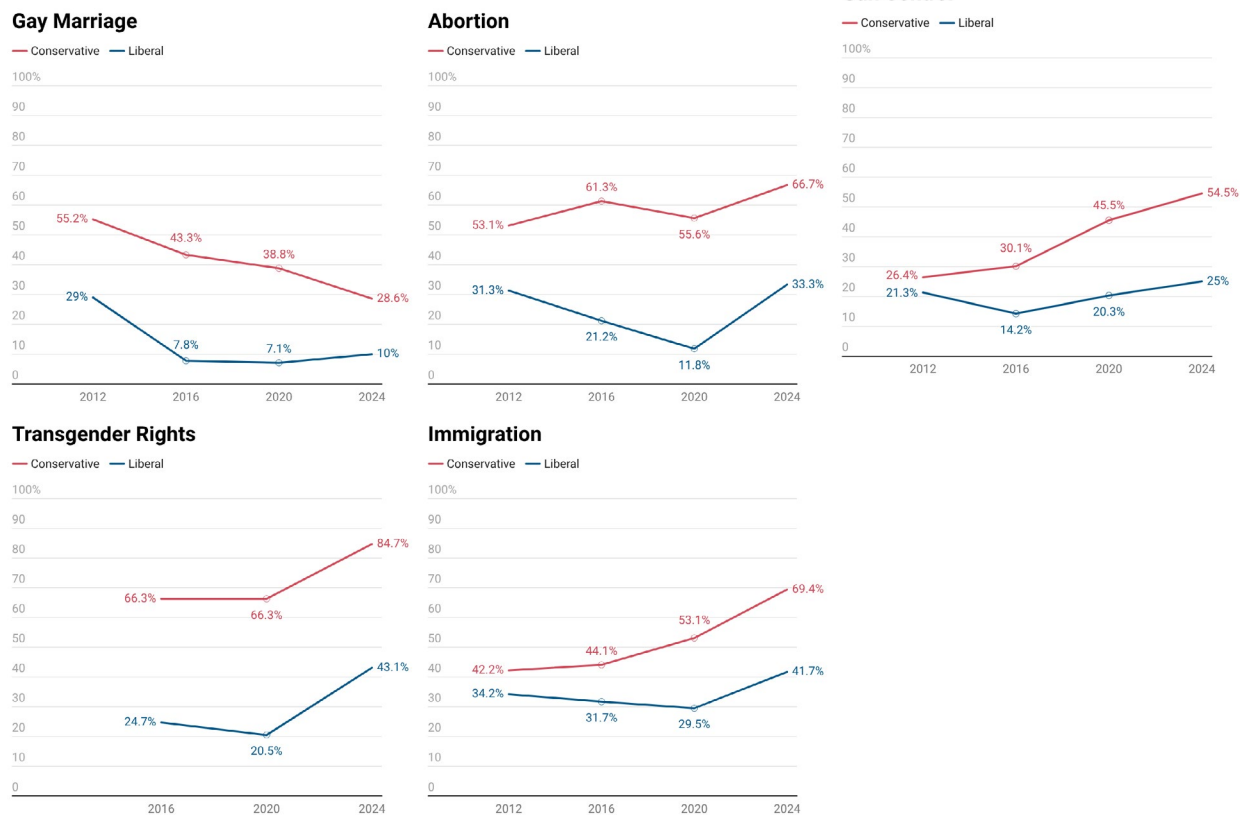


Source: Authors' analysis of ANES 2012, 2016, 2020, 2024 weighted data.

These patterns indicate that recent Latino Republican growth is not a broad movement across the Latino electorate. Instead, it reflects increasing ideological differentiation within Latino communities.

Figure 2 shows similar variation across political issues. Latino conservatives' and liberals' views differ across multiple issues—including immigration, gun policy, abortion, and LGBTQ rights—rather than on a single issue. The interview evidence that follows examines how this broader pattern of ideological differentiation is understood and experienced by Latino Republican voters in South Texas, providing insight into how national trends are interpreted in a region that has experienced substantial recent Republican gains.⁵

Figure 2: Shifts in Social and Political Issues Among Latino Voters by Ideology, 2012–2024



Source: Authors' analysis of ANES 2012, 2016, 2020, 2024 weighted data.

Finding 2: Latino Republican Alignment Does Not Require Abandoning Identity or Immigrant Ties

Latino Republican voters in this study did not typically describe their political alignment as a rejection of Latino identity or immigrant experience. Many participants expressed strong connections to their ethnic background and referenced personal or family migration histories as central to how they understood themselves.

Participants often described identity in layered terms that combined national, ethnic, and familial elements. This pattern is especially notable among participants with direct migration experience. César Cortinas (70), who was born in Mexico, explained, "I'm an American of Mexican descent...I also say that I am Hispanic," emphasizing that he speaks Spanish "with great pride." Martha Torres (37), who was also foreign born, similarly described shifting between labels depending on context: "Sometimes I say [that I am] Latina...sometimes [I say that I am] Mexican American...sometimes I say that I'm an American because I am." By contrast, Monica Villanueva (25), who was third generation, framed her identity primarily in national terms while maintaining ethnic reference points: "I prefer Hispanic...because I was born here...in America."

At the same time, participants consistently rejected the idea that identity should determine political affiliation. As Andy Valdez (20) explained, “Just because you’re Hispanic doesn’t mean you have to think a certain way.” Another described frustration with the expectation that “you’re supposed to vote one way,” rejecting that assumption as unfounded.

Taken together, these accounts show that Latino identity and immigrant ties remain meaningful for many participants. What changes is not participants’ attachment to their ethnoracial background, but how they understand the role that background should play in politics.

Finding 3: Political Alignment Is Grounded in Longstanding Values and Partisan Differences

Participants consistently described their political alignment as rooted in values they experienced as longstanding, including religion, family, personal responsibility, public safety, and national belonging. Participants did not present these values as recently adopted or as products of their partisan alignment. Instead, they described them as originating in upbringing, family life, and everyday experience.

Alfredo Ortiz (54) articulated this continuity clearly: “I’ve never deviated. I’ve always held my values, and I continue to hold those values today... I’ve always been a Catholic... I believe in the sanctity of marriage... the sanctity of life... being fiscally responsible... I am conservative... The only thing I changed is the party I align with.” Martha expressed a similar trajectory: “My values haven’t changed... I just wasn’t informed before. But once I started paying attention, I realized the Democratic Party doesn’t align with what I believe.” César framed this even more directly: “I have always been the same guy... I didn’t leave the Democratic Party—the Democratic Party left me.”

These accounts reflect a common pattern. Participants do not describe themselves as becoming more conservative. Instead, they describe recognizing that their values—understood as stable and prior to partisan attachment—align more closely with one party than the other.

This process is closely tied to how participants perceive the parties. Across interviews, respondents described the differences between Democrats and Republicans as clearer, sharper, and more consequential than in the past. These differences were not framed narrowly in terms of policy details. Instead, they were experienced as broader conflicts over morality, religion, social order, and the direction of the country.

Alfredo described a moment of reevaluation: “That was when I started thinking, ‘That’s the party that I claim to be part of?’” Martha similarly explained that when she compared party positions, she found that Republicans had “a lot more in common with my values... the way I was raised.” César described the contrast more sharply: “Democrats are trying to regulate and control everything... pushing for abortion, open borders... [and] to take our guns.”

Partisan alignment therefore reflects how participants interpret differences between the parties and come to see one party as better representing commitments they describe as longstanding.

Finding 4: Latino Identity Is Often Reinterpreted Rather Than Rejected

A central pattern across interviews is that participants do not experience Latino identity and Republican alignment as inherently incompatible. Instead, many describe ways of making them fit together by redefining how identity relates to politics.

In some cases, participants explicitly connect Latino identity to conservative values. Martha explained, “Our [Latinos’] values are very, very aligned with the Republican Party... most of the Hispanic community is pro-life, hardworking, very conservative.” Here, Latino identity is not positioned in opposition to conservatism, but as a source of it.

In other cases, participants describe a more complex process of distinguishing between identity and political obligation. Monica responded to criticism by clarifying: “It’s not that I’m racist... I am not Mexican... I was not born in Mexico. So I am Hispanic.” This reflects an effort to define identity in a way that is consistent with her political views.

These dynamics are especially visible in discussions of immigration. Participants consistently distinguished between immigrants as people and the rules governing immigration. Rather than framing their views as opposition to immigrants, they emphasized fairness, legality, and order.

Martha explained, “Democrats say Republicans are anti-immigrant, but the truth is we’re for legal immigration and against illegal immigration... We want the good people coming here the right way.” She also emphasized fairness: “What about the people waiting in line?”

Others framed enforcement in terms of protection or governance rather than punishment. Monica described detention practices as “sad,” but explained them as part of a process intended to “protect” children. César expressed ambivalence about specific policies, including the border wall and separating immigrant children from their families at the border, while still emphasizing the importance of maintaining order and state authority.

Across these accounts, identity is not abandoned. It is reinterpreted—sometimes by aligning it with conservative values, sometimes by redefining its boundaries, and often by separating it from expectations about how one should vote. Immigration provides a clear example of how this reinterpretation operates in practice.

CONCLUSION

Recent Latino Republican growth in South Texas cannot be understood only through the lens of weak identity or diminished immigrant ties. National survey trends show a sharp increase in Republican identification among Latino conservatives, especially between 2012 and 2016. The interviews show that many participants interpret this alignment not as a break from who they are, but as a reflection of values they see as longstanding and central to their lives. Religion, family, public safety, social order, and national belonging were recurring themes through which participants made sense of politics, while many continued to describe meaningful ties to Latino identity and immigrant family histories.

The core contribution of this report is straightforward. Latino Republican alignment in South Texas is often narrated not through the abandonment of ethnoracial background, but through the reinterpretation of identity, belonging, and partisan fit. Understanding this process is essential to making sense of contemporary Latino politics and the growing diversity of political views within Latino communities.

More broadly, these findings demonstrate that Latino political behavior cannot be understood through assumptions of uniformity, but must be examined through the diverse ways Latino voters interpret identity, belonging, and partisan conflict.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of In-Depth Interview Sample

Category	Response	N
Ethnic / national-origin background	Mexican-origin Latino	79
	Puerto Rican Latino	1
	Non-Latino White	5
Sex	Male	54
	Female	31
Generational status (Latino Repub. only)	First generation	21
	Second generation	28
	Third+ generation	26
County	Cameron	9
	Willacy	2
	Hidalgo	66
	Starr	3
	Zapata	5
Education	High school diploma to graduate degree	
Age	18–70	
Partisanship	Republican	74
	Democrat	5
	Independent	6
Partisan Realignment	Democrat → Republican	34
	Ind./disengaged → Republican	12

Note: Latino participants are primarily of Mexican origin (79 of 80), reflecting the demographic composition of the South Texas counties where interviews were conducted. Generational status refers to immigrant cohort. Education and age are reported as ranges. Partisanship reflects self-identified party affiliation. Partisan realignment figures are unique for Latino Republicans.

ENDNOTES

1. Shaun Bowler and Gary M. Segura, *The Future Is Ours: Minority Politics, Political Behavior, and the Multiracial Era of American Politics* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011); Marisa Abrajano and R. Michael Alvarez, *New Faces, New Voices: The Hispanic Electorate in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
2. Texas Secretary of State, "Election Results Archive," accessed April 10, 2026, [available online](#); "2008 Presidential Election Results Map," *New York Times*, 2008, accessed April 10, 2026, [available online](#); Matthew Bloch, Larry Buchanan, and Kevin Quealy, "An Extremely Detailed Map of the 2016 Election," *New York Times*, 2016, accessed April 10, 2026, [available online](#); "Election Results 2012 by State and County," *Politico*, 2012, accessed April 10, 2026, [available online](#); "Joe Biden Has Been Declared the Winner, Toppling Donald Trump after Four Years of Upheaval in the White House," *Politico*, 2020, accessed April 10, 2026, [available online](#); "Presidential Election 2024: Live Results," *Wall Street Journal*, 2024, accessed April 10, 2026, [available online](#).
3. I. Cuevas-Molina and Tatishe M. Nteta, "Finding the Missing Link? The Impact of Co-Ethnicity, Pan-Ethnicity, and Cross-Ethnicity on Latino Vote Choice," *Political Research Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2023): 337–47; Lisa García Bedolla, "The Identity Paradox: Latino Language, Politics and Selective Dissociation," *Latino Studies* 1, no. 2 (2003): 264–83; Carleen Basler, "White Dreams and Red Votes: Mexican Americans and the Lure of Inclusion in the Republican Party," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008): 123–66.
4. Lawrence Miller, Jerry L. Polinard, and Robert D. Wrinkle, "Attitudes toward Undocumented Workers: The Mexican American Perspective," *Social Science Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (1984): 482; Lisa García Bedolla, *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
5. See note 2.
6. U.S. Census Bureau, "QuickFacts: Cameron County, Texas; Hidalgo County, Texas; Starr County, Texas; Willacy County, Texas; Zapata County, Texas," accessed April 10, 2026, [available online](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Rodolfo Solís is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at UCLA whose research examines U.S. Latino politics, political behavior, partisan alignment, and the relationship between identity and social belonging. Drawing on 85 in-depth interviews conducted in South Texas, his dissertation explains how Latino Republicans come to see their partisan alignment as fitting with their ideological commitments and social identities while maintaining meaningful ties to Latino identity and the immigrant experience. His research on ideological sorting among Latino Republicans has been published in Political Research Quarterly.



Efrén Pérez is a Full Professor of Political Science and Psychology at UCLA. His scholarship centers on political psychology, with specific interests in intergroup politics, language and political thinking, implicit political cognition, and the measurement of political concepts.

He has published numerous articles in leading political science, psychological science, and general science journals, including Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics, Social Psychological and Personality Science, Political Behavior, and Political Psychology. He is also the author of four books, including Diversity's Child: People of Color and the Politics of Identity (Chicago University Press) and Voicing Politics: How Language Shapes Public Opinion (Princeton University Press). In addition to his research, Efrén directs the Race, Ethnicity, Politics, and Society (REPS) Lab at UCLA.

Efrén Pérez received his Ph.D. and M.A. in Political Science from Duke University. He obtained his B.A. in Political Science and Spanish from the University of San Diego.

UCLA

**Latino Policy &
Politics Institute**



UCLAlatino



UCLAippi



UCLAlatino



UCLAlatino



UCLAippi