

Ideological Sorting Helps Explain the Galvanization of Latino Republicans in Contemporary U.S. Politics: Qualitative Evidence From In-Depth Interviews

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journals.sagepub.com/home/prq**Rodolfo Solís¹**  and **Efrén Pérez^{1,2}** 

Abstract

Latino Republicans have long comprised about one-third of the Latino electorate, yet their support for the GOP has intensified at a time when it is publicly championing policies and candidates that are perceived as hostile to Latinos and other people of color. Available research traces Latinos' resurgent Republican partisanship to weakened pan-ethnic identity or diminished ties to immigrants. We consider another plausible but ignored possibility: ideological sorting in a polarizing political system. We accomplish this by drawing on 85 in-depth interviews with Latino Republicans from five Latino-majority counties in south Texas, which shifted dramatically toward the GOP after 2016. Our analyses reveal that participants (re-)interpret their longstanding commitments—rooted in family histories, religious beliefs, and orientations toward social order—through salient culture war issues (e.g., immigration, abortion, and LGBTQ rights), which increasingly differentiate Republicans from Democrats. Thus, participants interpret their Republican partisanship as the product of recognizing which party is a better steward of their personal commitments. Crucially, participants articulate this reasoning while also expressing meaningful and positive attachments to their Latino identity and immigrant heritage, thus complicating theories that attribute Latinos' Republican partisanship to dis-identification with their pan-ethnic group or immigrant peers.

Keywords

Latino partisanship, ideological sorting, in-depth interviews

The Latino population's rapid growth over the last 50 years has made Latinos increasingly central to U.S. politics, especially debates over immigration (Valentino et al. 2013). This spotlight intensified in 2015, when Republican Donald J. Trump launched his presidential bid by remarking: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best...They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Gabbatt 2019). Given this rhetoric, research would predict Latinos to strongly back Democrats, consistent with evidence on anti-immigrant threats and heightened Latino support for this party (Bowler and Segura 2011; Pantoja et al. 2001). Yet, Latino support for Democrats dipped in the 2016 presidential election, while support for the GOP intensified, rising to 42 percent by 2024 (Wakefield et al. 2025). This is a major increase from the roughly one-third of Latino voters who regularly identify as Republican since high-

quality surveys of this population began in the 1980s (Pérez and Cobian 2024).¹

Why are more Latinos supporting the Republican Party precisely when the GOP is championing policies and candidates that are hostile to Latinos and other people of color? Prior work highlights weakened Latino identity and frayed ties to immigrants as major culprits (Binder et al. 1997; Branton 2007; de la Garza et al. 1993). Yet, fledgling evidence suggests that many Latinos supported Donald Trump and the GOP *despite* maintaining a

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positive Latino identity, strong ties to immigrants, and sometimes being immigrants themselves (Cadena Jr. 2023; Cortez 2021; Wakefield et al. 2025), which renders these explanations incomplete.

Our paper yields new conceptual insights about Latino Republicans by drawing on a rich set of in-depth interviews with members of this population ($N = 85$). This qualitative approach lets us examine how participants reason about and (re-)interpret their partisanship, which is difficult to capture through closed-ended questions that characterize large- N surveys of Latinos (cf. Cadena Jr. 2023; Jones-Correa 1998; Parker 2009; Ternullo 2024). Specifically, we analyze a sample of Latino ($n = 80$) and White ($n = 5$) adults with varying partisanship. All participants are from five majority-Latino south Texas counties—Cameron, Willacy, Hidalgo, Starr, and Zapata—which sharply shifted to the Republican Party in 2016 (cf. Seawright and Gerring 2008). This context is especially useful in ruling out weakened panethnic identity and immigrant ties as explanations for heightened Latino Republican partisanship, since these characteristics are highly prevalent in these counties. Latino Republicans in our sample ($n = 75$) supported GOP candidates in the 2016, 2020, and/or 2024 general elections. Many of them described themselves as longtime Republicans, while ($n = 46$) participants reported previously identifying as Democrats or Independents before aligning themselves with the GOP around 2016. In contrast, Democratic participants consistently described backing Democratic candidates in these elections. Our interviews occurred over a broad period (2016–2025), thus reflecting partisan (re-)alignments at the time of a person's interview and their recollections of prior vote choice and political decision-making.²

We find that Latino Republicans articulate their partisan alignment with the GOP by (re-)interpreting their general orientations toward the world (i.e., postures) *through* perceived inter-party differences, describing the Republican Party as a better steward of these personal views than Democrats. Consider Ernie Partida, a life-long Hidalgo County resident and former Democrat, who explained his 2016 vote for Donald Trump by noting: “I did vote Republican [for the first time]... [because] I’m a very big supporter of the second amendment, and religious values [and] I feel the Republican Party more closely aligns with my views and my morals, my way of thinking and who I am.” Ernie’s account—and those of others in our sample—illustrate a specific psychological process: participants characterize their core postures as durable, perceive the parties as sharply divergent, and justify their Republican partisanship as recognition of the party that best represents

these core postures. We interpret this pattern as a manifestation of ideological sorting in a polarizing party system (Levendusky 2009).

Our interviews illustrate that participants make sense of partisan conflict through core postures rooted in religion, family, social order, and national belonging—issues often associated with contemporary culture war debates (O’Brian 2024). These culture war issues function less as election-specific drivers of Latino vote choice and more as interpretive resources that allows Latino adults to distinguish the two major parties and choose which one better represents them (Green et al. 2002; Winter 2010). Thus, while other short-run factors (e.g., prevailing economic conditions) may influence Latino vote choice in specific elections (Fraga et al. 2025), culture war issues allow Latinos to reason about, articulate, and justify their partisanship: a durable orientation in U.S. politics (Hopkins et al. 2023; McCann and Jones-Correa 2020; Pérez et al. 2025).

In Search of an Explanation for Latino Republicans Today

Despite Latino Republicans’ resurgence, pioneering research characterizes Latino partisanship as generally weak and unstable (e.g., Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Alvarez and Bedolla 2003; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Jones-Correa 1998). Consider that compared to Black Americans—for whom Democratic identification is highly robust (White and Laird 2020)—Latino partisanship is more heterogeneous, with higher rates of Independent identification (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Hajnal and Lee 2011). This suggests Latinos’ partisanship formation may be less influenced by expectations from their co-ethnics, making their “defections” from the Democratic Party—roughly 66 percent of Latino adults (Pérez and Cobian 2024)—less costly in social terms. From this angle, shifts in Latino support for a visibly nativist GOP imply that Latinos, as a pan-ethnic group, are less socially constrained than Black Americans in choosing to (re-)align themselves with a party that embraces issues and candidates that harm some of their co-ethnics, such as undocumented Latino immigrants (Pérez et al. 2024).

One explanation for the recent galvanization of Latino Republicans focuses on weakened pan-ethnic identity (e.g., Basler 2008; García-Bedolla 2005). This research suggests that some Latinos dis-identify with their co-ethnics, making them feel less encumbered about self-identifying with a party that only a minority of their co-ethnics support (Marsh and Ramírez 2019). Here, thinning pan-ethnic ties reduces the salience of shared political interests with other Latinos, allowing appeals to

individualism, economic mobility, and traditionalism to resonate more sharply with Latinos inclined to identify as Republicans (e.g., [Alamillo 2019](#); [Hickel et al. 2020](#)).

Consistent with this, some research highlights the rising influence of non-ethnic identities—particularly American identity—on Latino political behavior ([Schildkraut 2011](#); [Silber Mohamed 2017](#)). Psychological research suggests that racially stigmatized individuals may dis-identify with their group to prioritize a national identity ([Tajfel and Turner 1979](#)). Indeed, among Latinos, perceived threats to their American identity prompt some of them to support conservative politics ([Hickel et al. 2020](#)) and express anti-Black prejudice ([Pérez et al. 2023](#)). We leverage this work to explore how other forms of identity may intersect with, rather than supplant, Latino identity (e.g., [Corral and Leal 2024](#); [Saavedra Cisneros 2016](#)). Amid rising partisan polarization, the social categories, symbols, and group cues—ranging from church attendance to ideology, race, and class—that individuals mentally associate with each party have been substantially reconfigured (e.g., [Pérez et al. 2025](#); [Westwood and Peterson 2022](#); [Zhirkov and Valentino 2022](#)), such that Latino voters may increasingly interpret the Republican Party as representing traditional family structures, religious values, and stricter immigration enforcement, while viewing Democrats as reflecting causes such as racial justice, gender equality, and LGBTQ + rights ([O'Brian 2024](#)).

A second explanation for invigorated Latino support for Republicans focuses on loosened ties to the immigrant experience—which is plausible given that, today, two out of three Latinos in the U.S. are native-born ([U.S. Census Bureau 2023](#)). As more Latinos set down firmer roots in U.S. society, many of them adopt restrictionist immigration preferences, focusing more on personal, rather than pan-ethnic, interests ([Binder et al. 1997](#); [Branton 2007](#); [de la Garza et al. 1993](#); [Hood et al. 1997](#); [Pedraza 2014](#)). However, recent work combining survey and administrative data ([Fraga et al. 2025](#)) challenges the link between acculturation and Latino support for the Republican Party. Between 2016 and 2020, Trump's largest gains occurred among foreign-born Latinos. This suggests some Latino Republicans maintain strong immigrant ties—or are immigrants themselves—while still supporting the GOP, complicating explanations attributing contemporary Latino Republicanism to frayed immigrant connections.

These tensions have prompted qualitative researchers to examine how Latino Republicans reconcile pan-ethnic identity and immigrant-linked attachments with Republican partisanship. [Cadena Jr. \(2023\)](#) illustrates how Latino Republicans defend their partisan identification amid accusations of a racially exclusionary GOP by engaging in colorblind reasoning, which aligns with work

on some Latinos denial of racism as a social force ([Alamillo 2019](#)). Our objective is to examine an earlier, “upstream” stage in this process, namely, how Latino Republicans themselves account for alignment with the Republican Party in the first place. We piece this puzzle together by centering on Latino Republicans in south Texas counties with dense Latino populations where pan-ethnicity and immigrants are widely prevalent, making it an analytically exacting case for explanations that trace Latino Republicanism to these factors. If those explanations are sufficient, they should emerge here ([Seawright and Gerring 2008](#)).

Rethinking Latino Republicans: Ideological Sorting?

We argue that heightened Latino self-identification with the GOP is better understood within the context of an increasingly polarized party system, where the Republican Party has become more ideologically conservative and the Democratic Party more liberal, leaving less meaningful overlap between both parties on this dimension (e.g., [Mason 2018](#); [Westwood and Peterson 2022](#); [Zhirkov and Valentino 2022](#)). In this environment, Latino adults may increasingly see one party as more consistent with their core postures as partisan distinctions become clearer and more salient. For individuals who view themselves as socially conservative, for example, the Republican Party may appear to more closely reflect these commitments (e.g., [Downs 1957](#)). This process is known as *ideological sorting* ([Levendusky 2009](#)).

Although our interviews do not measure this process directly, we observe how voters articulate and justify their reasons for arriving at their partisan identity in an era of increased polarization. We are therefore less curious about whether one party has objectively transformed more than the other and more interested in how Latino Republicans construe party differences ([Pérez et al. 2025](#)). Specifically, we examine how participants interpret the social groups, values, and identities they associate with each party and how these interpretations inform the evaluation of partisan alternatives ([Green et al. 2002](#); [Winter 2010](#)). We then analyze how these understandings are used to make sense of partisan alignment amid competing attachments, including Latino identity and immigrant connections. This lets us speak more directly to the similarities and differences in Latino reactions to polarization compared to other people of color (e.g., [White and Laird 2020](#)) and White adults, many of whom are engaged in backlash against immigration and other culture war issues ([Abrajano and Hajnal 2017](#)).

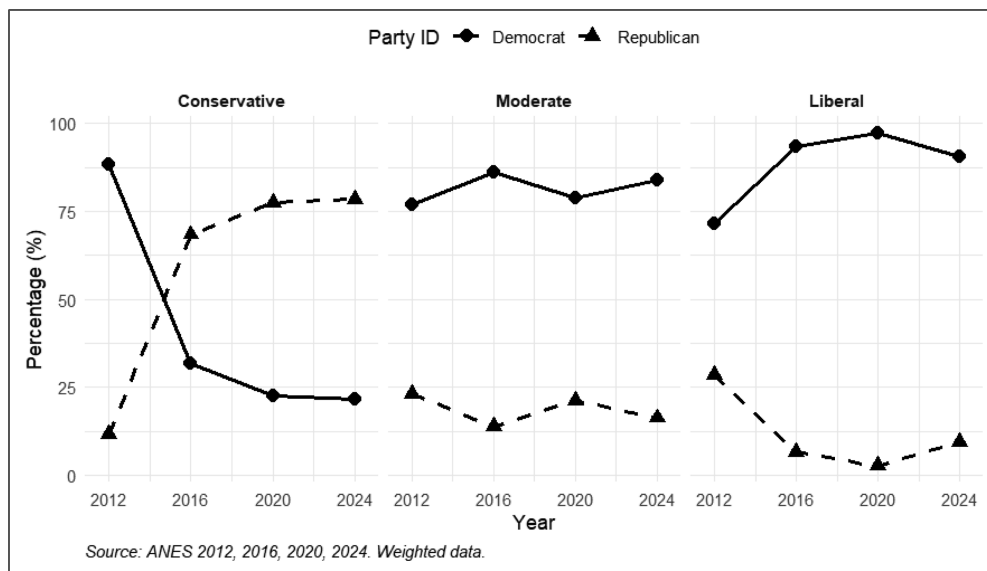


Figure 1. Ideology and partisan identity among Latino voters over time (2012–2024).

We first highlight Figure 1 (ANES 2012–24), which depicts a sharp shift in partisan identification among Latino conservatives. Republican partisanship rose from about 12 percent in 2012 to over 60 percent in 2016, with a comparable decline in Democratic identification. These shifts happened when partisan conflict over issues like immigration and national belonging became more prominent (McCarty et al. 2016; O’Brian 2024), crystallizing inter-party distinctions. Alas, many of our interviewees described these two issues as central to differentiating Republicans from Democrats.

These patterns imply that, beyond the one-third of Latino voters who generally identify as Republican (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010), some conservative Latinos now perceive the GOP as better representing their longstanding postures, in line with ideological sorting (Levendusky 2009). Survey data from the 2012–24 Cooperative Election Study (CES) corroborates this trend (Figure 2),³ although the shift there is clearer in 2016 and after. These differences between datasets can be reasonably attributed to nuances in sampling design and variability, plus the composition of available Latino respondents in each survey series. Still, these trends suggest that this partisan shift among Latino conservatives is not unique to a single dataset, even if its precise timing differs.

Since the 1980s, research has documented strong Latino support for issues touching on family values, religion, and social order among substantial portions of this population (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Pérez and Cobian 2024). What we think is changing is the broader political environment in which Latinos are articulating these general postures and connecting them to

Republicans and Democrats. Partisan conflict has increasingly centered on culture war issues, including abortion, immigration, and LGBTQ rights. We use the term “culture war issues” to refer, not to a fixed policy list, but to broader disputes over social order, moral authority, and national belonging that increasingly structure party competition (O’Brian 2024). Thus, Latino voters may now find it easier to interpret their own beliefs in relation to a political system characterized by two major parties that are more ideologically distinguishable (e.g., Green et al. 2002).

Ideological sorting has deep roots in the U.S., emerging during the civil rights era when socially conservative Southern Democrats began shifting toward the Republican Party in response to the Democratic Party’s embrace of racial progressivism (O’Brian 2024). What began as a regional realignment over race gradually evolved into a national “culture war” encompassing issues distinct from, but related to, racial conflict—such as immigration, LGBTQ rights, and gender relations (Levendusky 2009; Westwood and Peterson 2022; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022). As racially conservative Whites gradually joined the GOP after passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, these voters brought with them conservative views about immigration, abortion, gun control, and other social issues (O’Brian 2024), helping establish them as central axes of partisan conflict (McCarty et al. 2016; Valentino and Sears 2005).

Although some research construes Latinos as weakly partisan (Hajnal and Lee 2011; Jones-Correa 1998), more recent work with extensive panel and experimental data points to greater stability in Latino partisanship (Hopkins et al. 2023; McCann and Jones-Correa 2020). This means

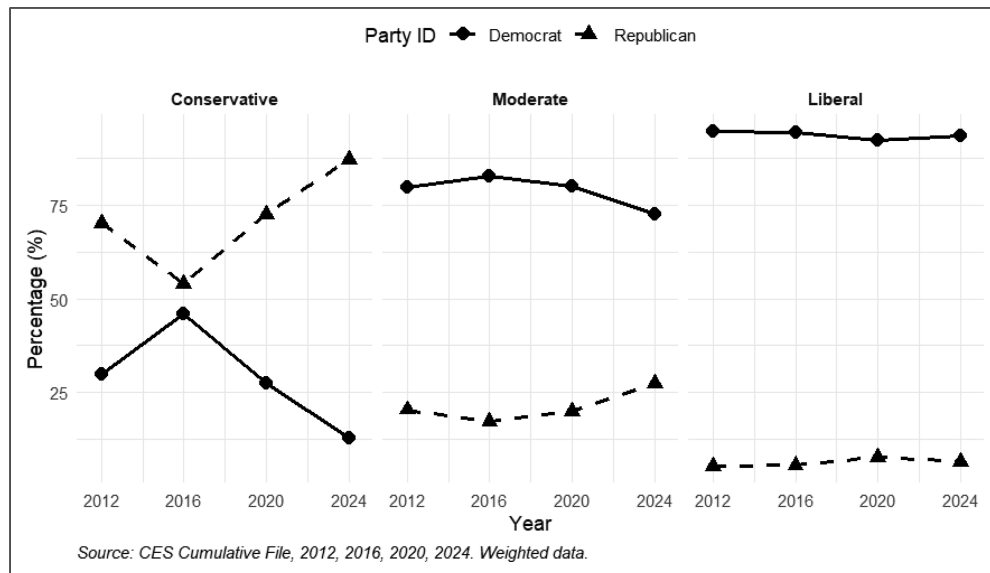


Figure 2. Latino partisan identification by ideology over time (2012–2024).

that processes commonly associated with partisan polarization and ideological sorting—usually among White voters—may also be reshaping Latino partisanship, albeit in ways that have received less attention and that unfold alongside, rather than in place of, pan-ethnic identity and immigrant ties.

Consider Figure 3, which compares issue positions among Latino conservatives and liberals over time.⁴ Latino conservatives are consistently more conservative across all issue domains, but the trajectories vary. On immigration—and to a lesser extent gun

control—conservative attitudes shift rightward more than those of liberals, widening the gap. By contrast, attitudes on transgender rights move rightward for both groups between 2016 and 2024, with similar increases, though conservatives remain steadfast. Abortion attitudes are comparatively stable, while gay marriage shows the opposite pattern, with conservatives moving in a more liberal direction and narrowing the gap. These patterns do not indicate uniform issue divergence. Instead, differences persist across domains, with the extent and direction of change varying

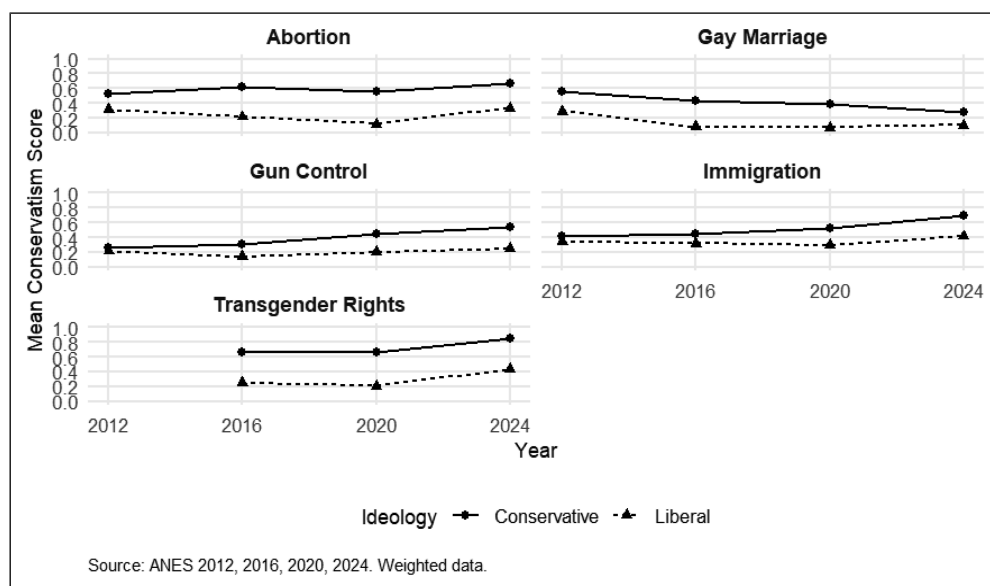


Figure 3. Latino conservatives and liberals on culture war issues 2012–2024.

by issue. We treat these patterns as supplementing the descriptive trends in Latino partisanship presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Although these aggregate trends provide some evidence that Latino (Republican) partisanship is structured by broader dynamics of ideological sorting, they cannot show how Latinos articulate this choice, especially since many of the issues dividing both parties sometimes place their larger pan-ethnic group (i.e., Latinos) at odds with the GOP. We dive into these processes using in-depth interviews with Latino Republicans in south Texas. The core postures that many interviewees express—based on faith, family, immigration, moral authority, and the social groups they associate with each party—have been theorized and anticipated by many strands of political behavior research. For example, studies of *imported ideology* suggest individuals develop some of their core postures before migrating to the U.S. (Wals 2011, 2013), where they re-interpret them in light of perceived inter-party differences. Other postures are anticipated by studies of religious realignment, as well as party images and social-group schemas (Campbell et al. 2020; Green et al. 2002; Winter 2010). Moreover, important work on the cognitive representation of political parties among Latinos explains how they understand the associations between social groups, values, and issue positions across parties (Saavedra Cisneros 2016), which motivates us to focus on the meaning-making processes behind Latinos' self-identification as Republicans. Finally, we recognize the key nuances between *symbolic* and *operational* ideology (Ellis and Stimson 2009) and entertain how these might manifest among Latino adults, with the symbolic form reflecting a choice of ideological label

(e.g., "I'm conservative") and its operational form reflecting preferences about government spending (e.g., policy mood).

Research Design: In-Depth Interviews With Latino Republican Voters

We endeavor to better understand how Latinos choose to self-identify as Republicans in the current era, focusing on how they narrate and explain their understanding of their core postures and their relations to Democrats and Republicans.⁵ We treat this evaluative step as an instance of ideological sorting.

Although general population surveys are widely used to study U.S. mass politics, the decline of probability-based sampling (Bailey 2024) means that in a survey of 1,000 U.S. adults, respondents, fewer than 300 of them will be Latino—and only about 100 of these will be Republican. This raises concerns about generalizability and representativeness. One could pool these subsamples of Latinos across available surveys, but this compounds the same non-random biases that are inherent in smaller subsamples of Latinos (Fan et al. 2014). A purposive sample of in-depth interviews lets us focus on cases from a context strongly implicated in the recent intensification of Latino Republicanism (Flick 2009). True, we cannot generalize to the larger Latino population, but these interviews let us more deeply probe the meaning-making processes that Latino Republicans in south Texas engage in, which is our primary empirical goal.

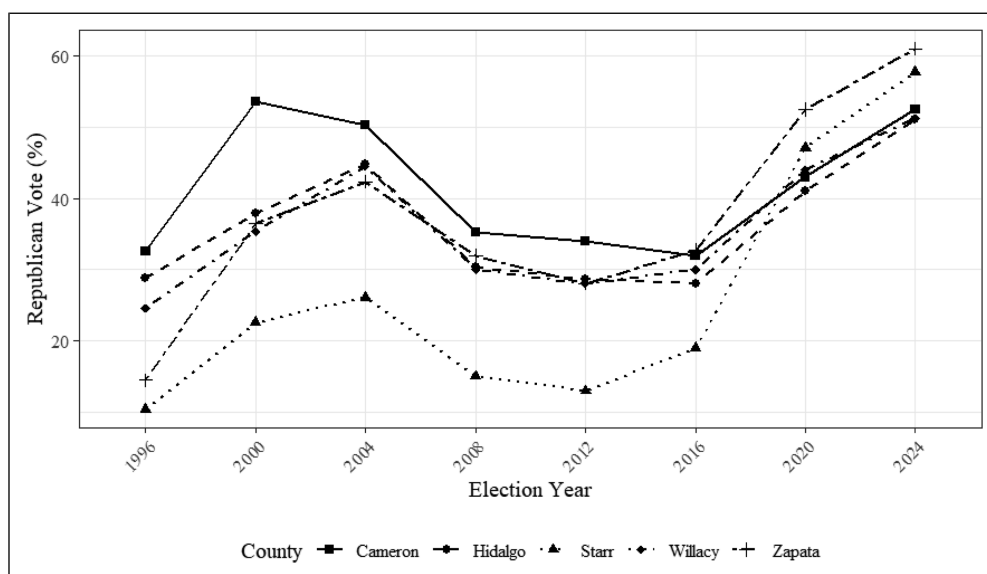


Figure 4. Republican vote share in South Texas by County, 1996–2024.

We use in-depth interviews because standard measures of Latino partisanship, like those in the ANES, assume that survey item(s) mean the same thing to respondents from heterogeneous populations (i.e., measurement equivalence). Yet, psychometric work generally cautions against taking for granted that concepts are quantitatively measured with the highest fidelity among Latinos, who are *not* the primary target of those samples (e.g., [Saavedra Cisneros et al. 2023](#)). Thus, a more nuanced approach is needed, one capturing how Latinos explain their partisanship in their own words.

We selected our five south Texas counties using two criteria. First, despite a long history of Democratic dominance, these counties have experienced notable Republican gains since 2016 ([Figure 4](#)).⁶ Second, these counties have among the highest proportions of Latino and foreign-born residents in the U.S. ([Figure 5](#)),⁷ ensuring wide variation in Latino identity and immigrant ties. The emergence of substantial Latino Republican support in these counties can clarify whether ideological sorting emerges *despite* varying levels of known correlates of Latino partisanship.

The Latino population in these counties is overwhelmingly of Mexican origin, so our cases primarily reflect Mexican-origin Latino communities. Indeed, Mexican Americans comprise 58 percent of all U.S. Latinos ([Pérez and Cobian 2024](#)). We use the term *Latino* because this was the label most participants used during interviews and because our analysis engages the broader literature on Latino partisanship.

Our total analytic sample comprises $N = 85$ (54 men), including 75 Latino Republicans, aged 18–78, and diverse in education, income, and occupation. By nativity and generation, among our Latino Republican participants, 28 percent are first-generation (foreign-born),

37 percent second-generation (U.S.-born with foreign-born parent [s]), and 35 percent third-generation or higher. For comparisons' sake, we also interviewed five ($n = 5$) Latino Democrats and five ($n = 5$) White Republicans. [Table 1 in the Supplemental Material \(SM.1\)](#) provides additional sample details.

Participant Recruitment

Our interviews occurred between September 2020 and August 2025. We recruited participants by collaborating with leaders of local conservative grassroots organizations, conducting independent fieldwork in community and partisan settings, and referrals from prior interviewees ([Weiss 1994](#)). Of the 75 Latino Republican participants, 30 were recruited through leaders of grassroots conservative organizations (e.g., County Trump Trains) and subsequent referrals within those networks. Some interviews ($n = 24$) were completed virtually rather than in-person because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged when this research initially started. The remaining 45 Latino Republican participants were recruited via fieldwork and snowball sampling, including contacts made at local rallies, GOP meetings, and Trump Train events leading to the 2024 general election. The first author attended these gatherings to recruit, not to engage in participant observation.⁸

Although some participants were recruited at partisan events and some were more politically engaged than others, many described their involvement as occasional or as their *first* political activity beyond voting, providing sample variation in political interest and activism. After informed consent, participants were interviewed in English ($n = 83$) or Spanish ($n = 2$) based on their language preference.

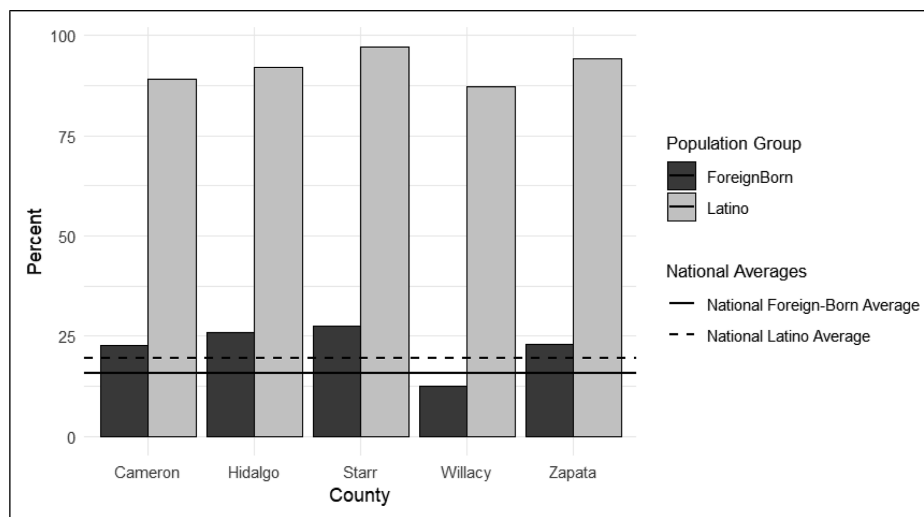


Figure 5. Latino and foreign-born population by County.

Interview Procedure

Our semi-structured interview protocol invited participants to reflect on their upbringing, family histories, sense of self, ideological orientations, and experiences with co-ethnics (Rubin and Rubin 2011; Weiss 1994). Special attention was given to how participants interpreted contemporary political conflicts surrounding immigration, abortion, law enforcement, and national belonging—issues that frequently arose in participants' accounts of their partisan alignment and that have been amplified by partisan elites (O'Brian 2024). In this way, our study harnesses an earlier tradition of studying political meaning-making (Lane 1962), which is attracting new interest among political scientists (García-Bedolla 2005; Parker 2009; Ternullo 2024).

Interviews were exclusively conducted by the first author, who is originally from south Texas. They approached these interviews reflexively by considering how interpersonal dynamics, question framing, and researcher assumptions might influence the narratives participants offered and the meanings drawn from them (Berger 2015; Charmaz 2014). These reflections informed the conduct of subsequent interviews and the evaluation of coded material during theme development. For example, after early interviews, the first author refined probes to better elicit how participants compared party positions to their core postures.

Thematic Analysis

We analyzed the interviews using an abductive, iterative thematic approach to identify recurring reasoning patterns used by our participants (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). Coding followed Deterding and Waters' (2021) flexible approach, which separates the analysis into an initial stage of index coding that organizes interview material by topic, followed by an analytic stage identifying recurring interpretive patterns across the indexed material. Interview recordings were transcribed via *Dedoose* for coding and analysis (Burla et al. 2008; Campbell et al. 2013).

We first created provisional index codes from our interview guide and existing Latino politics research. These codes included family background and socialization, immigration experience, religious upbringing and practice, ethnic and national identity, political identity and ideology, immigration policy views, party perceptions, and electoral behavior. Index codes organized the data by topic rather than interpretation, grouping segments in which participants discussed similar domains across interviews. Index codes were applied when participants spoke to a specific domain in their accounts. For example, segments were coded as "immigration

experience" when participants described their own or their families' migration histories, and as "party perceptions" when they characterized what Democrats or Republicans represent or whom they serve. This dataset allows systematic comparisons of interviews.

We then conducted analytic coding by retrieving the segments grouped under each index code and comparing them within and across interviews. This identified recurring ways participants interpreted their beliefs and explained their partisan alignment. Analytic codes captured patterns in how participants connected different elements of their accounts—for example, linking religious commitments or family socialization to evaluations of political issues, describing changes in party positions, and connecting their own postures to the parties. Some interviews included familiar partisan formulations, but our analysis centered on how participants incorporated such formulations into broader narratives about identity, upbringing, and partisan fit.

We also examined how analytic codes co-occurred within and across interviews. In many cases, codes capturing core postures—for example, moral beliefs, experiences with immigration—appeared alongside codes capturing comparisons between these postures and perceived party positions. Examining these co-occurrences allowed us to identify sequences in participants' reasoning, in which individuals articulated prior commitments, evaluated party differences in relation to those commitments, and described aligning with the party they understood to better represent them. Codes that consistently appeared together across interviews were grouped into broader analytic categories that formed the basis for theme development. We treated a pattern as thematic when it reflected a shared interpretive logic across multiple interviews and among participants with varied backgrounds and partisan histories.

We identified ideological sorting in interviews when participants articulated (1) longstanding postures that precede partisan identification, (2) recognition of inter-party differences in relation to these postures, and (3) judgment of one party better representing these postures. Religion, family socialization, values, and immigration experiences regularly served as core postures through which this process manifested.

Memo-writing during data collection and coding tracked emerging interpretations and guided subsequent analysis (Weiss 1994). These memos recorded preliminary themes, theoretical reflections, and potential alternative explanations for participants' partisan alignment. As patterns emerged, we searched for disconfirming cases—accounts where partisanship was explained *without* the reasoning sequence described above. Memos also documented how the first author's familiarity with

the area facilitated rapport with participants while requiring ongoing attention to analytic distance, particularly in distinguishing participants' interpretations from assumptions that might otherwise be treated as self-evident given shared social and cultural context.

The first author coded all interview transcripts. Both authors regularly reviewed coded excerpts and discussed emerging interpretations to ensure that themes remained grounded in participants' accounts. Coding was an iterative and interpretive process, whereby codes were refined through sustained engagement with the data. Because this approach treats coding as an ongoing process rather than the application of fixed categories *a priori*, intercoder reliability metrics are not employed (Campbell et al. 2013).

Theme 1: Pan-Ethnicity Is a Valued Component of Latino Republican Partisanship

One explanation for Latino Republican partisanship highlights weakened pan-ethnic identity or diminished immigrant connections.⁹ Our interviews suggest a more complex phenomenon. Among the 75 Latino Republican interviewees in our sample, 54 (72 percent) expressed some degree of attachment to Latino identity. Some participants described this identity as central to how they understood themselves, while others incorporated it as part of a broader constellation of identities that include national, religious, or ideological affiliations, often describing themselves in layered terms such as "Mexican American," "Hispanic," or "American with Mexican heritage." In fact, some participants construed their Republican partisanship as advancing the interests of their pan-ethnic community. Only seven participants (9 percent) rejected Latino identity entirely, offering statements such as "I am American, nothing else." These patterns indicate that Latino Republicans in our sample often incorporate Latino identity in their self-understandings rather than actively distancing themselves from it.

Participants also frequently described connections to the immigrant experience. Forty-nine Latino Republicans (65 percent) referenced personal or familial migration histories when discussing their political views. Twenty-seven participants (36 percent) were the children of immigrants, while 21 (28 percent) were themselves foreign-born. In many interviews, these migration histories formed part of broader narratives about family effort, work, and opportunity in the U.S. Rather than indicating detachment from immigrants, participants often emphasized how these connections shaped their understanding of responsibility, morality, and belonging. Still, some participants were critical of their immigrant

co-ethnics, differentiating those they see as law-abiding from those they consider deviants. Some of these participants characterized unauthorized immigrants as violating rules or undermining the efforts of others. These distinctions do not reflect an absence of immigration ties; they show how participants (re-)interpret them through lenses like legality, deservingness, and social order.

Theme 2: Interpreting Partisan Alignment Through Ideological Sorting

The previously discussed patterns complicate theories of Latino Republican partisanship that trace it to pan-ethnic dis-identification or diminished ties to the immigrant experience. So, how *do* participants explain their Republican partisanship? Across interviews, participants frequently described their partisanship through an interpretive sequence. Participants began by describing their longstanding postures *prior* to choosing a party, which they grounded in faith, family upbringing, value orientations, migration experiences, occupational identities, or broader understandings of "how I have always been." They then described the parties as diverging in ways that made those commitments politically (not just socially) consequential. This sequence emerged repeatedly in our interviews and it shows how varied elements highlighted by prior research are used by participants to inform their partisan choices, including imported ideology (Wals 2013), religion (Campbell et al. 2020), party images (Green et al. 2002; Saavedra Cisneros 2016), and ideological manifestations (Ellis and Stimson 2009). Rather than adjudicating between these theories, we focus on how participants configure these elements into their justification for their partisan choices. It is this comparative, interpretive step we believe is the essence of ideological sorting among Latino Republicans.

The account offered by Alfredo Ortiz (54), a college-educated former U.S. Border Patrol officer from Starr County who identified as a Democrat until 2016, illustrates this process. Alfredo described his partisan shift as emotionally difficult—"like divorcing my family, literally"—while stressing that his underlying postures had not changed. He portrayed his decision as arising from the realization that the party he had long supported no longer represented fundamental elements of his personal worldview:

Why am I going to stick with a party that doesn't represent me anymore?... I've never deviated. I've always held my values, and I continue to hold those values [today]. ... I've always been a Catholic, so I believe in the sanctity of marriage, meaning that it's between a man and a woman, and in the sanctity of life... I believe in procreation, ... being

fiscally responsible, ... I am conservative, [and] I believe in protecting our [Mexico-U.S.] border. ... [So] I made the switch, [but] they [the Democratic Party] left my values, they left me. The only thing I changed is the [political] party I align with.

Partisan alignment here is not framed as a change in belief but as the outcome of reassessing where those beliefs fit within a changing party system. This orientation is reinforced by the conditional nature of his attachment: he explained that he would “switch again if they [the Republican Party] stopped representing what I believe.” In his account, partisan attachment is contingent on perceived fit. His account also reflects religious realignment insofar as his Catholic faith helps explain why the current Democratic Party feels increasingly distant (Campbell et al. 2020). Yet, those commitments become politically consequential only when Alfredo links them to the inter-partisan differences he sees.

Alfredo's reasoning is also affected by how he interprets each party's coalition (Green et al. 2002). When describing his perceived distance from the Democratic Party, he referenced conflicts surrounding law enforcement and Black Lives Matter (BLM):

They [the Democratic Party] went from having some conservatives [politicians] ... to advocating for the killing of policemen. That was when I started thinking [to myself], “That's the party that I claim to be part of? They're advocating for groups [Black Lives Matter] that are wanting to see me dead.”

This dimension of his interview resembles what research on party images and schemas has identified: partisan alternatives are perceived through the various social groups publicly associated with each party (Green et al. 2002; Saavedra Cisneros 2016; Winter 2010). Yet, these social groups do not, on their own, explain partisan alignment. In Alfredo's description, they become politically consequential only once he evaluates and reconciles his worldview with what each party seems to offer. His interview also clarifies why our argument does not depend on participants articulating fully elaborated ideological worldviews (Ellis and Stimson 2009). He describes himself symbolically as “conservative,” while grounding that identification in concrete positions on marriage, abortion, fiscal restraint, and border enforcement. Thus, we infer ideological sorting, not from labels alone, but from the process of justifying one's choice of party through longstanding postures one embraces.

A large segment of our 75 Latino Republican participants ($n = 59$, 79 percent) engaged in a comparable sequence of reasoning, though participants varied in how explicitly they articulated each element of that sequence.

Consider Martha Torres (37), a college-educated former Democrat from Tamaulipas, Mexico, who described her partisanship as rooted in longstanding postures she held prior to choosing a party: “I'm...all about family...and also pro-life... [So] I vote based on my religious views, my conservative values, and my traditional family values.” She explained her earlier Democratic support not as reflecting different beliefs but as a product of limited political awareness: “I voted Democrat before... because I wasn't informed; then I realized that they are against my values... My values haven't changed, [so] I just walked away.”

As she became more attentive to politics, Martha re-evaluated the positions she associated with each party in relation to her more durable postures. She interpreted the Democratic Party as increasingly at odds with her religious and value orientations while viewing the Republican Party as more consistent with them, explaining: “When I look at the Republican Party's platform, it just has a lot more in common with my values... the way [that] I was raised.” Her account aligns with research on religious realignment (Campbell et al. 2020), where one's faith-based commitments influence one's judgment of both major political parties. However, Martha narrates her conversion to the GOP, not as automatically driven by religious preferences, but as the result of actively comparing both parties on dimensions she deems highly important.

Martha also displays some of what Sergio Wals (2011, 2013) calls imported ideology, noting that her general orientations predate her migration to the U.S. “My values haven't changed... they're not gonna change just because I crossed the [Mexico-U.S.] border.” However, Martha does not simply import her prior beliefs; she actively maps them onto a changing (i.e., polarizing) party system. Thus, her imported postures are *ingredients* to the reasoning process behind her partisan choice.

César Cortinas (70), a college graduate born in Tamaulipas and raised in Brownsville, Texas, also described himself as conservative, emphasizing low taxes and limited government. He recalled remaining a Democrat in earlier periods because “the Democratic Party used to have conservatives... ‘Blue Dog Democrats’... moderate-conservatives,” but later interpreted the party as having moved away from those positions, describing Democrats as “trying to regulate and control everything... pushing for abortion, open borders, [and] to take our guns.” According to César: “I have always been the same guy... I didn't leave the Democratic Party—[they] left me.”

César's interview also displays markers of symbolic and operational ideology (Ellis and Stimson 2009). He symbolically labels himself a conservative while informing his partisanship with durable stances on

operational matters, such as taxation, the role of government, and abortion. He also compares his core beliefs with the programmatic differences he perceives between Democrats and the GOP. The “glue” connecting these components is the active interpretive steps he catalogs in his interview.

Similar reasoning appeared among participants without prior partisan attachments. Monica Villanueva (25), who had not voted before 2020’s general election—“because I wasn’t that into politics... it didn’t matter who was president to me”—described being raised “very traditional” and “taught to do right by the Bible.” As her attention to politics developed, she judged partisan differences through these postures, describing Democrats as going “against what I believe” and the GOP as better aligned with her beliefs. Her first Republican vote followed from this process.

Monica’s account also meshes with research on religious realignment (Campbell et al. 2020). She grounds her newfound partisanship in longstanding religious commitments, but these only become politicized when she interprets them in light of what she perceives each major party standing for. Indeed, unlike participants who indicated leaving one party for another one, Monica’s partisanship emerges by connecting her pre-political postures to her perceived differences between parties. This means the interpretive process we have identified does not depend on party switching.

Theme 3: Re-Interpreting, Not Rejecting, Pan-Ethnic and Immigrant Ties

While this article’s main focus is on how Latino Republicans account for aligning with the Republican Party in the first place, our interviews also show that this alignment—often described through the interpretive sequence outlined previously (see Theme 2)—unfolds alongside attachments that are often assumed to sit uneasily with Republican affiliation. Although a minority of Latino Republicans ($n = 7$ of 75, 9 percent) completely disavowed pan-ethnic identity when describing their sense of self, they nonetheless met the study’s inclusion criteria based on screener identification, and most continued to view Latino identity as central or as an important dimension of their broader identity ($n = 54$ of 75, 72 percent), while others described more ambivalent or less central attachments to Latino identity. Even among those who identified primarily as American ($n = 63$ of 75, 84 percent), this identity did not replace their pan-ethnic one. Rather, most participants ($n = 49$ of 63, 78 percent) detailed a layered sense of self through which pan-ethnic, immigrant, and national attachments are highly compatible, not conflictual.

The analytic significance of this insight is that pan-ethnic and immigrant ties persist alongside Republican partisanship. Indeed, participants generally described these attachments as *not* being in tension with conservatism in the first place. They voiced different ways of relating these attachments to their partisan commitments. In some accounts, Latino identity was narrated as already congruent with conservative commitments; in others, participants described a more effortful process of working through how these attachments fit together. Read this way, these patterns mesh with Beltrán’s (2010) claim that *Latinidad* is not a fixed or settled identity, but a contested and open-ended category whose meaning is continuously reproduced through politics.

Although participants often characterized the Republican Party as most closely aligned with their socially conservative views, their positions on immigration also frequently defied straightforward categorization. On issues where they expressed restrictionist views—such as support for a border wall—they often framed these positions in terms of protecting children, public safety, fairness, or community stability rather than simple hostility toward immigrants as such.

Consider Martha, who immigrated legally to the U.S. at 13 years old. She expressed a layered sense of self that bridged her immigrant roots and sense of national belonging. “I always prefer a combination [of social categories]. I don’t mind Latina. I sometimes use the term Mexican American because I was born in Mexico, [so] my roots are there [in Mexico]... Sometimes I say that I’m an American because I am.” Her foreign-born status and flexible use of pan-ethnic and national categories make her connection to the immigrant experience and Latino heritage unmistakable.

Martha’s connection to her pan-ethnic identity was a recurring theme in her interview. In recalling reactions she faced for supporting the GOP, she asserted: “If you knew, our [Latinos’] values are very, very aligned with the Republican Party... [because] most of the Hispanic community is pro-life, ...hardworking, ...[and] very conservative.” This formulation is analytically important. Martha does not present herself as resolving a contradiction between being Latina and conservative. Instead, she refracts her Latino identity through a set of conservative postures. From her angle, there is no contradiction to resolve; she already understands her *Latinidad* in these terms.

To further understand this theme, the first author asked about her response to Donald Trump’s 2015 anti-Latino campaign rhetoric. Rather than rejecting her pan-ethnicity or distancing herself from the targeted groups, Martha responded: “Look, I agree that he shouldn’t have used this rhetoric, but he wasn’t talking about all of us; he didn’t say all Mexicans.” She further distinguished between co-

ethnics who committed crimes and the broader Latino population: “Not all people crossing the border from Mexico are good people. Yes, there are great people coming to our country who want to work, [they] want to hustle. ...But there are also people who are coming to commit crimes, sell drugs, you name it.” Her distinctions do not reject Latinidad, but they do articulate which individual members are less desirable (see also [García-Bedolla 2005](#)).

Martha’s reasoning about immigration follows the same logic: “Democrats often say that Republicans are anti-immigrant, but the truth is that, as an immigrant myself, I can say that we [Republicans] are for legal immigration and against illegal immigration.” This nuance affirms her immigrant background while specifying criteria for “good” versus “bad” immigrants. Support for legal immigration, in her words, “ensures that the good people are coming here legally” and that those “waiting in line” should not be overlooked. Thus, Martha does not wiggle her way out of her immigrant and pan-ethnic attachments; she (re-)interprets them in relation to her partisanship.

Like Martha, César maintained a strong connection to the immigrant experience, having immigrated legally to the U.S. at age four. “I mean, when people ask [how I describe my sense of self], I tell them that I’m an American of Mexican descent...I also say that I am Hispanic,” and he emphasized this continuity by noting, “I speak Spanish very well and I carry that with great pride.” Yet, his reasoning differs in one key respect. Whereas Martha speaks as though no contradiction exists to begin with, César’s signals more visible strains. For example, although he opposed constructing a border wall—stating he “thought that [the border wall] was a mistake from day one”—he judged family separation as “a tough call,” saying that authorities must verify that children are with their parents, while also insisting that “once you conclude that they are the parents...we should not separate them.” His reasoning displays an effort to hold together competing considerations rather than the absence of tension. Partisan alignment, here, is achieved through a more ambivalent process. Thus, Martha’s and César’s cases illustrate two variants of this interpretive process observed across interviews: sometimes participants narrated their pan-ethnic identity and immigrant connections as already congruent with their conservative postures, others engaged in a more effortful process of working through competing considerations.

Although Alfredo was one of the few participants to describe his sense of self exclusively as American, his fourth-generation background helps explain this emphasis on national identity. Yet, even with this generational distance, he intimated enduring ties to the Latino

community, having grown up speaking Spanish and situating himself within this broader community, even if he prioritizes his national identity (cf. [Hickel et al. 2020](#); [Perez et al. 2025](#)). His immigration views similarly reflect this duality, expressing support for border enforcement, while also acknowledging that large-scale deportation is impractical and that some form of legalization is likely necessary.

Monica, a third-generation immigrant, also described her sense of self in terms combining national and pan-ethnic identification: “I prefer Hispanic...because I was born here...in America.” In response to criticism that she was rejecting her background, she clarified: “It’s not that I’m racist... I am not Mexican... I was not born in Mexico. So I am Hispanic.” Her account reaffirms group belonging while specifying its terms. This positioning is further reflected in her continued engagement with Spanish language use, bilingual education, and her local community.

Monica’s immigration views followed an intricate pattern. She expressed support for border security and concern about crime and drug trafficking, while actively characterizing these positions as free of any racial bias. For example, in terms of family separation policies at the southern U.S. border, she stated: “It’s sad...These kids are in cages because they’re being DNA tested...It’s not like, ‘Oh, they’re Mexicans...they should be in cages.’ No, it’s just...they’re being protected.” Monica also opposed a pathway to citizenship, explaining that those who entered illegally “should be sent back,” while still acknowledging that immigrants seek better lives for their families. Her reasoning situates these immigration views in a broader understanding of “color-blind” fairness and responsibility, where racial bias plays no role (cf. [Alamillo 2019](#)).

Implications

Our effort here has thrown rare light on how Latino Republicans understand their partisan alignment in our contemporary, polarizing political system. Across interviews, participants do not describe their partisanship as the result of weakened pan-ethnic identity or attenuated ties to the immigrant experience. Instead, they narrate arriving at partisan alignment through a clear interpretive process: they describe personal, longstanding commitments they use to navigate their world; they perceive sharp inter-partisan differences on these commitments; and they judge one party as better representing these postures. This suggests that the observed increase in Republican identification among Latino conservatives around 2016 and after reflects, in part, participants’ descriptions of recognizing the GOP as a better steward of their worldview. Ideological sorting, then, appears to

operate among Latinos in a setting where identity-based explanations would predict a recoiling—not an embrace—of the contemporary Republican party.

The present findings also speak to broader processes through which polarization is experienced beyond Latino Republicans. While scholarship on partisan polarization has focused primarily on White partisans (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al. 2002; Niemi and Jennings 1991), our evidence indicates that some Latino voters interpret their political attachments through comparable dynamics reshaping the larger party system. Participants frequently characterized Democrats not merely as political opponents, but as morally misaligned, politically subversive, and threatening to foundational values. This implies that Latino voters are not insulated from polarization's downstream effects on the U.S. mass public, even if these have taken longer to reach them. This has implications for Latino politics and U.S. democracy. As partisan identities continue to harden, the prospects for cross-party dialogue and compromise become weaker (Mason 2018), with the greater incorporation of Latino voters into this divisive structure helping to cement, rather than blunt, these forces. More broadly, these dynamics suggest that similar processes of partisan reappraisal may extend beyond Latino voters, particularly among groups whose religious and moral commitments have become more clearly sorted across party lines.

Our results also hold relevance for political scientists and political strategists. Among the former, they invite closer reconsideration of how a positive and valued sense of Latino identity can coexist with Republican partisanship, even if the latter is hostile to key segments of the larger Latino population. At minimum, this gives rise to the possibility that there are varieties of Latino identity, rather than a unitary and uniform one (Beltrán 2010). In turn, for political practitioners, our results highlight the importance of recognizing how narratives of belonging, morality, and cultural threat shape Latino political engagement across partisan contexts, which stand to complicate current outreach strategies that treat this pan-ethnic group as a primarily progressive and unitary voting bloc (Pérez and Cobian 2024).

Of course, our study is not without limitations. While our sample includes diverse Latino Republicans across age, gender, generation, and political history, it is not nationally representative, and qualitative inferences cannot establish causal relationships. A better way to judge our contribution here, we think, is on conceptual grounds. By uncovering evidence of ideological sorting animating Latino Republican partisanship, our insights encourage reinvigorated efforts to update and deepen our understanding—both theoretically and empirically—the politics of a major pan-ethnic group, with increasingly sharp ideological

contours, and whose continued growth matters for the direction our national politics take in the near future.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We use pseudonyms to uphold participant confidentiality. We value inclusivity and gender sensitivity but use the term *Latino* to reflect how participants described themselves to us.
2. Thus, in-depth interviews share at least one major feature with large-N surveys, that is, self-reports of opinions that can be retrospective, contemporaneous, or prospective (Tourangeau et al. 2000).
3. Figures 1 and 2 are based on respondents' self-reported partisanship and ideological identification measures.
4. Issue items were rescaled from 0 to 1, with higher scores reflecting more conservative attitudes.
5. The qualitative interview data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to Institutional Review Board (IRB) restrictions and the need to protect participant confidentiality. De-identified excerpts are included in the manuscript and supplemental materials. Additional information about the research design, interview protocol, coding procedures, and analytic approach is also provided in the supplemental materials.
6. Figure 4: Data from the Texas Secretary of State (1996–2004), *The New York Times* (2008), Bloch et al. (2016), *Politico* (2012, 2020), and *The Wall Street Journal* (2024).
7. Figure 5: Data from the United States Census Bureau's July 2024 population estimates. See U.S. Census Bureau, *Annual Estimates of the Resident Population*, July 1, 2024.
8. Participants were included in the analytic sample if they (1) self-identified as Latino or Hispanic, (2) reported voting for a Republican candidate in at least one of the 2016, 2020, or 2024 general elections, and (3) resided in one of the five South Texas counties selected for this study (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, or Zapata).

9. References to Latino identity, immigrant experience, and immigration-related positions were coded based on participants' own narratives during the thematic analysis described in the methods section.

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