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Making Sense of Latino Republican Alignment:

Partisan Sorting, Social Embeddedness, and Identity Reconciliation in a Polarized Party System

A dissertation in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

by

Rodolfo Solís

2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Making Sense of Latino Republican Alignment:

Partisan Sorting, Social Embeddedness, and Identity Reconciliation in a Polarized Party System

By

Rodolfo Solís

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Efrén O. Pérez, Chair

This dissertation examines how Latino Republicans make sense of their partisan alignment in a political environment in which such alignment is widely treated as incompatible with Latino and immigrant belonging. Existing scholarship often explains Latino Republicanism as the product of weakened ethnoracial identity or attenuated ties to the immigrant experience, offering insight into movement away from the Democratic Party but less into how Latinos come to align with the contemporary Republican Party. Drawing on (N = 85) in-depth interviews conducted in five majority-Latino counties in South Texas—Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata—this study examines how participants interpret their political commitments within a polarized party system. Participants describe arriving at Republican affiliation by relating longstanding commitments—especially around religion, family, and national belonging—to perceived differences between the parties. In these accounts, partisan alignment does not appear as a single decision, but as a process through which prior commitments and party identification

come to fit together. This alignment is reinforced through participants' everyday social environments, particularly within religious communities and understandings of American national identity, where Republican affiliation is experienced as fitting and appropriate. At the same time, participants confront claims that their partisan affiliation conflicts with Latino identity. Rather than abandoning those attachments, they describe when and how Latino identity and immigrant experience should matter for political judgment, allowing those ties to remain meaningful without leading them to reconsider their partisan alignment. By examining these patterns, this dissertation shows that Latino Republicanism is not best understood as the loss of identity-based ties, but as part of a broader shift in how people relate their values, identities, and party affiliation in a polarized political environment. Latino Republican alignment, in this sense, reflects how individuals come to see their political commitments as fitting together within their everyday lives.

The dissertation of Rodolfo Solís is approved.

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2026

Para mi madre, mi padre (q.e.p.d.), Sarabeth, Citlali, y mi hija Chabelita—por su apoyo constante y por acompañarme en cada etapa de este camino.

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input on my interview instrument and research design which contributed to the overall development of this project.

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This project would not have been possible without the people in South Texas who agreed to sit down with me—often for long stretches of time—to talk about their politics, views, and experiences. Many of these interviews required a level of openness and trust that I do not take for granted. Their willingness to speak openly about their experiences and beliefs, and to reflect on the reasons behind them, made it possible to craft the arguments contained in this dissertation.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

As Ernie Hernandez, 41,¹ and I spoke over Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic, he described a political trajectory he himself described as unexpected. His story did not begin with partisan conviction but with belonging. Raised by Mexican immigrant parents who worked in agriculture, Ernie grew up in a household where explicit discussions of political parties were rare, yet the social associations surrounding politics were clear. Conversations about immigration, workers' rights, and social justice were part of everyday life. These concerns were not presented to him as partisan choices so much as just part of the social worlds he inhabited. Within those environments, Ernie absorbed an assumption that felt less like a decision than an expectation: Latinos were supposed to vote in favor of the Democratic Party.

He recalled hearing throughout his youth, "Well, as a Latino, you know, you should be voting for Democrats." Looking back, he explained that, as a young adult, he simply believed Latinos should vote in favor of the Democratic Party because "it was part of my identity." Democratic affiliation, in this sense, was not merely a matter of policy agreement. It was bound up with how he understood who people like him were and where they belong politically. Yet Ernie would later become a Republican voter.

That shift did not occur because he rejected his family history, immigrant background, or ethnoracial identity. Rather, it began as he moved through new social environments. During his

¹ To protect participant confidentiality, I use pseudonyms when reporting interview material. Where analytically relevant, I retain descriptions of publicly observable candidacies or officeholding in a manner consistent with the study's consent and confidentiality procedures. Additionally, while I recognize the significance of inclusivity and gender sensitivity, I chose the term "Latino" to describe my participants in a manner that effectively reflects the language most participants used to describe themselves.

undergraduate years at Purdue University and later while working on oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, Ernie had interactions with colleagues and coworkers, which he described as helping to unsettle the assumptions he had long carried. He had previously imagined Republicans as socially distant from his own world— “for the rich and for White people,” as he put it. Republican identification therefore felt implausible not simply because of disagreement on issues, but because it seemed misaligned with the kinds of people among whom he understood himself to belong.

Those assumptions began to fray through ordinary conversations about religion, race, guns, and national identity. In those exchanges, politics did not appear primarily as abstract policy debate. It appeared as a way of making sense of everyday life and of locating oneself within a broader social order shaped by shared commitments. Ernie recalled leaving one such conversation thinking, “Wow, I think I have this all wrong.” Over time, he began reassessing his political attachments more deliberately. He described examining party positions on his own and coming to the conclusion that the Democratic Party no longer represented his personal commitments. In his account, “They are against fracking... they are attacking our Second Amendment... [and] don’t align with my religious values.” Eventually, he concluded, “I learned that the Democratic Party didn’t represent me or my interests.”

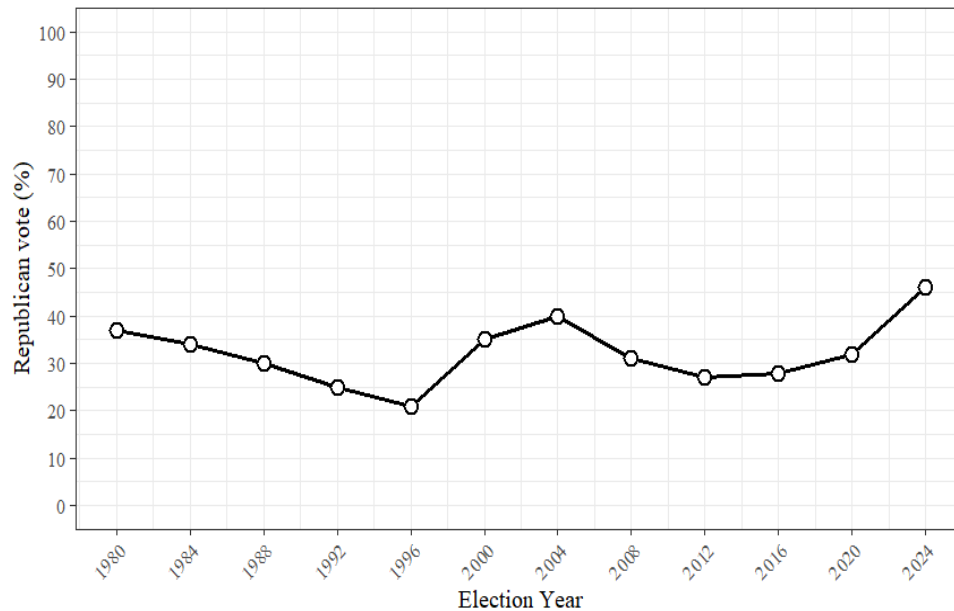
What is significant about Ernie’s account is that this shift did not involve the abandonment of the ethnoracial attachments through which he had long understood himself. Throughout our conversation, he continued to speak with pride about his upbringing, his family’s immigration experience, and the Latino community in which he was raised. These ties remained meaningful. What changed was not whether he considered himself Latino, but whether he understood that identity as dictating how he should evaluate political parties. He no longer

treated Latino identity as carrying an inherent political obligation to the Democratic Party, even while recognizing that others continued to interpret it in those terms.

Ernie's narrative brings into view the research puzzle at the core of this dissertation. Rather than simply asking why some Latinos support the Republican Party, this study asks how Latino Republicans understand their partisan alignment, especially in a political context in which the party is widely seen as exclusionary toward immigrants and Latinos. It also examines how that alignment is maintained alongside continued attachment to Latino identity and the immigrant experience, particularly in moments when those attachments are framed as politically incompatible with Republican partisanship.

Ernie's story is not an isolated case. Across the ($N = 85$) interviews collected and analyzed for this dissertation, participants described coming to see the Republican Party as better aligned with commitments they described as longstanding and central to their worldview. These commitments were often rooted in family histories, religious beliefs, views about social order, and understandings of American life. Participants explained how these commitments shaped their evaluations of issues such as immigration, abortion, guns, and LGBTQ rights—issues they described as increasingly dividing the two parties. What emerges from these accounts is not a single moment of partisan conversion, but a process through which participants relate prior commitments, social environments, and identity attachments to the differences they perceive between the parties. The chapters that follow show that this process cannot be reduced to policy preferences alone or explained by the weakening of Latino identity or immigrant ties. Instead, it reflects how people come to understand, justify, and maintain partisan alignment within an increasingly polarized political environment.

Fig 1: Latino Support for the Republican Party, 1996–2024



The Latino Republican Puzzle: Rising Support Under Adverse Conditions

Recent electoral patterns bring this puzzle into clearer focus. In the Donald J. Trump era (2016 and thereafter), Republican support among Latino voters increased, despite a political context marked by highly visible anti-immigrant rhetoric, restrictive immigration politics, and appeals widely understood as hostile to Latinos. As Figure 1 shows, the Republican share of the national Latino vote rose from roughly 25 to 33 percent in 2016 and 2020 (Sonneland and Fleischner 2016; Krogstad and Lopez 2016) to approximately 42 percent by 2024 (Wakefield et al. 2025). This marks a notable departure from the roughly one-third of Latino voters who have consistently identified as Republican since high-quality surveys of this population began in the 1980s (Pérez and Cobian 2024). These trends run counter to long-standing expectations in the literature on minority political behavior, which suggest that exclusionary rhetoric and punitive policy agendas should push Latino voters away from, rather than toward, the party associated with those positions (Dawson 1995; Pantoja et al. 2001; Bowler and Segura 2011; Zepeda-Millán 2017).

Those expectations are grounded in a long history of Latino political response to Republican-backed policy agendas widely perceived as threatening to immigrant communities. In California, Proposition 187 sought to deny undocumented immigrants access to public services, including education and health care (Bowler et al. 2006). Arizona’s S.B. 1070 expanded immigration enforcement in ways widely criticized as enabling racial profiling (Newman 2017). At the federal level, H.R. 4437 proposed intensified border enforcement, criminalized unauthorized presence, and penalized those who assisted undocumented immigrants, including teachers, clergy, and family members (Zepeda-Millán 2017). Policies of this kind have historically generated large-scale Latino mobilization and reinforced Democratic alignment (Pantoja et al. 2001; Ramakrishnan and Espenshade 2001; García-Bedolla 2005; Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Zepeda-Millán 2017).

These responses are consistent with general models of minority political behavior, which posit that perceived group threat leads to increased political activity and partisan cohesion (Schattschneider 1960). Hence, repeated exposure to restrictive immigration policies and racialized appeals should solidify Latino voters into the Democratic Party. If these expectations hold, Latino support for Democratic candidates should remain stable—or even increase—during periods of heightened anti-immigrant politics from the Republican Party.

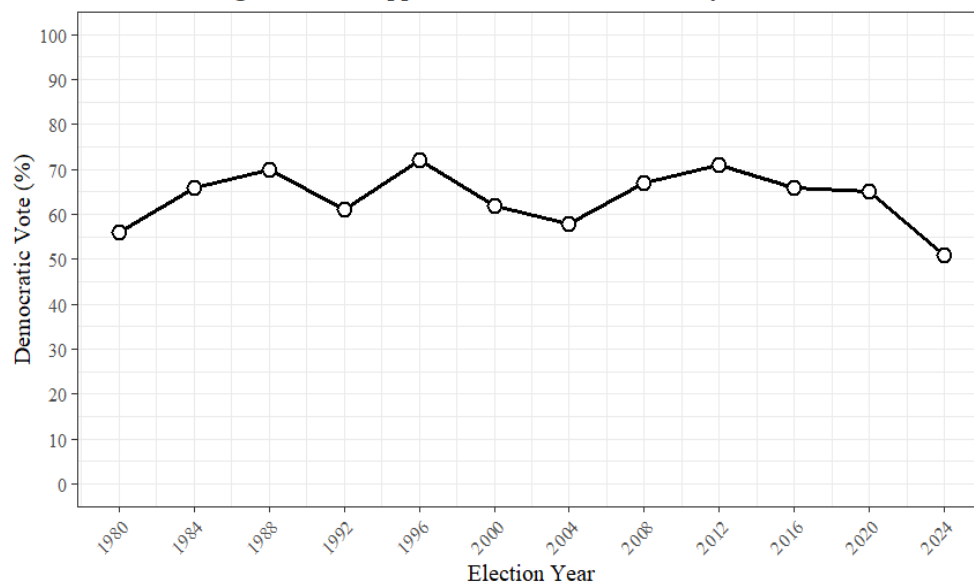
For much of the modern era, the electoral record was consistent with these expectations. As Figure 2 shows, Democratic presidential candidates won a majority of the Latino vote from 1980 through 2024.² Support reached particularly high levels during the Obama elections—67 percent in 2008 and 71 percent in 2012 (Lopez 2008; Lopez 2012; Zepeda-Millán 2017)—and

² Figures 1 and 2 are based on the same Latino presidential vote-choice series. Data for 1996 through 2012 come from the Pew Research Center’s analysis of national exit polls; data for 1980 through 1992 and 2012 through 2024 come from national exit poll data archived by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.

remained comparable in 2016, when Hillary Clinton received approximately 66 percent. For decades, Latino voting patterns were relatively stable: when Republican policies and rhetoric were seen as threatening to immigrant communities, they reinforced Democratic alignment.

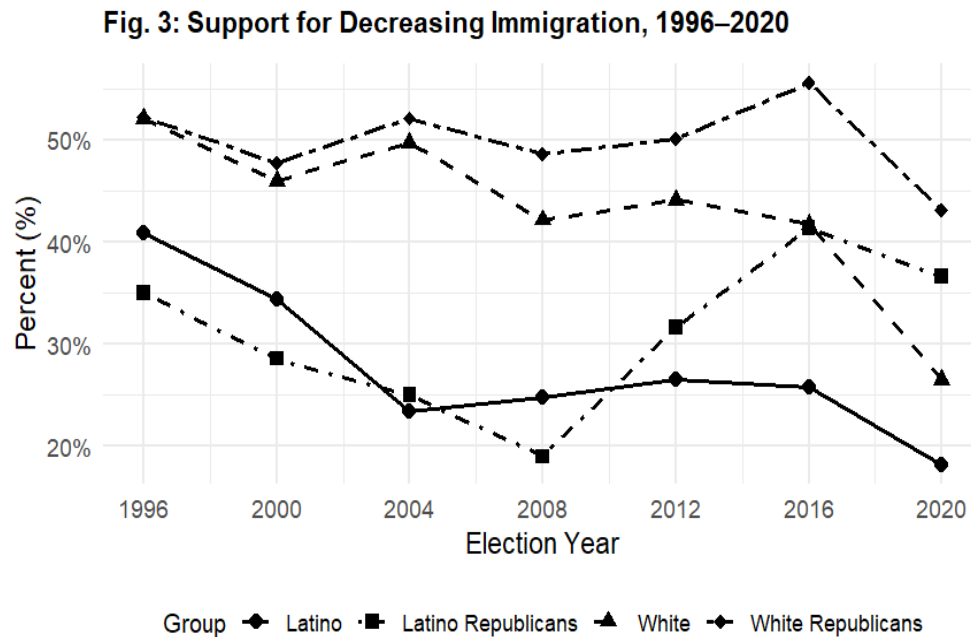
Recent elections, however, complicate this historical trajectory. As Figure 2 illustrates, Latino Democratic support leveled off at around 66 percent in 2020 and declined to about 52 percent in 2024, the lowest point in the modern time series. Although Democrats continue to receive support from a majority of Latino voters, this decline raises questions about whether existing explanations adequately account for contemporary Latino political behavior, especially given the political climate in which these shifts have occurred.

Fig 2. Latino Support for the Democratic Party, 1996–2024



One interpretation is that Republican gains reflect moderation or policy convergence. However, the available evidence provides little support for this explanation. George W. Bush’s relatively strong performance among Latino voters in 2004—roughly 40 percent, the highest Republican share prior to 2016—is widely attributed to comparatively inclusive immigration positions and targeted outreach to Latino communities (Binder et al. 1997; Varela 2015; Riley

2024; Cadava 2021). Recent Republican gains, by contrast, have occurred under markedly different conditions: a political environment shaped by highly visible anti-immigrant rhetoric and restrictive immigration policies.



Immigration attitudes are part of this story, but they do not exhaust it. As Figure 3 shows, descriptive ANES trends from 1996 to 2020 suggest that Latino Republicans are generally more supportive of immigration restrictions than Latinos overall, yet they do not simply mirror White Republicans.³ This pattern suggests that restrictive immigration attitudes may help explain some Latino Republican alignment, but not the political significance of that alignment. The question remains how Latino Republicans interpret immigration policy in relation to Latino identity, immigrant-linked family histories, and partisan belonging. This dissertation therefore treats immigration attitudes not as a complete explanation, but as one domain through which participants reason about the relationship between identity, party, and political judgment.

³ Fig. 3: Estimates are from ANES time series data. Groups are defined by ethnoracial identification and party identification. Higher values indicate greater support for decreasing immigration.

This interpretive problem becomes sharper in light of Donald J. Trump's rhetoric and policy agenda. In announcing his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump described Mexican immigrants as drug traffickers, criminals, and rapists (Gabbatt 2019). His campaign emphasized constructing a 2,000-mile border wall and later advanced policies such as family separation and expanded immigration detention, widely condemned for their humanitarian consequences (Valverde 2020; Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020). If perceived group threat drives partisan behavior, such rhetoric and policies should have reinforced Democratic consolidation among Latino voters. Instead, Republican support increased.

Taken together, these patterns identify the central paradox that animates this dissertation: Latino Republican alignment has intensified not during a period of Republican moderation, but during a period of heightened polarization, restrictive immigration politics, and highly visible anti-Latino rhetoric. Existing accounts of Latino partisanship—particularly those centered on group threat, immigration policy, assimilation, or weakened ethnoracial attachment—therefore offer only a partial explanation. The issue is not simply that Latino voters differ from one another, or that some Latinos hold conservative policy preferences. It is that existing frameworks provide limited insight into how Latino voters come to understand alignment under conditions that seem likely to make such alignment politically and socially difficult. The puzzle, then, is not only why some Latinos support the Republican Party, but how Latino Republicans make sense of that alignment, how they sustain it, and how they do so while continuing to describe Latino identity and immigrant experience as meaningful parts of who they are.

From Weakened Ethnoracial Ties to Partisan Alignment in a Polarized Party System

Existing scholarship has been most successful in explaining which Latinos move away from the Democratic Party and which are more likely to support Republican candidates. Much of this literature emphasizes weakened panethnic identity, diminished ties to the immigrant experience, acculturation, or distance from group-based threat as important correlates of Republican voting behavior among Latinos (de la Garza et al. 1993; Binder et al. 1997; Hood et al. 1997; Branton 2007; Basler 2008; Pedraza 2014; Hickel et al. 2020). These explanations identify meaningful sources of variation within Latino political behavior. Yet they often explain Latino Republicanism indirectly: Republican support appears primarily as the result of weakened Democratic attachment rather than as a form of partisan alignment requiring explanation in its own right. As a result, this work tells us more about why some Latinos move away from the Democratic Party than about how they come to align with—and remain aligned with—the contemporary Republican Party.

This dissertation addresses that gap by shifting attention from ethnoracial-based explanations to the structure of contemporary party competition. Over recent decades, partisan polarization has reorganized contemporary U.S. politics, producing party coalitions that are more unified and more sharply differentiated from one another. Party labels increasingly signal distinct commitments, social orientations and understandings of national belonging, shaping how individuals locate themselves within a polarized party system in contemporary U.S. politics (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Levendusky 2010; Mason 2018). Rather than treating Latino Republican support primarily as a departure from ethnoracial ties, this study examines how Latino voters interpret partisan differences and come to see the Republican Party as a better fit within this polarized environment, while maintaining attachments to Latino identity and the immigrant experience.

This dissertation shows that Latino Republican alignment unfolds through three related processes. First, partisan sorting refers to the broader process through which participants relate commitments they describe as longstanding to perceived differences between the parties and come to understand Republican alignment as fitting their worldview. Second, *social embeddedness* occurs as participants situate Republican alignment within everyday domains of belonging—especially religious communities and understandings of the American national community—where Republican affiliation is experienced as recognizable, appropriate, and socially reinforced. Third, *identity reconciliation* occurs as participants sustain Republican alignment alongside Latino identity and immigrant-linked ties by defining when those attachments should guide political judgment and when they should not. Together, these processes show how Latino Republican alignment takes shape and is maintained over time without requiring the disappearance of Latino identity or immigrant experience.

Rather than treating Latino Republican alignment as the result of weakened identity or diminished immigrant ties, this dissertation focuses on how Latino Republicans themselves understand and sustain their alignment with the Republican Party in contemporary U.S. politics. This shift reframes the problem: instead of focusing only on movement away from the Democratic Party, the analysis shows how participants align with—and remain aligned with—the Republican Party even when Latino identity and immigrant ties might seem to point in a different direction politically.

Data and Methods

To examine how Latino Republicans interpret and sustain partisan alignment in a polarized political environment, I draw on (N = 85) semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews conducted between September 2020 and August 2025 across five South Texas counties.⁴ Because the central questions of this project concern meaning, interpretation, and political self-understanding, in-depth interviews are especially well suited to these questions. Rather than measuring the distribution of attitudes, this approach allows me to reconstruct how participants themselves understand their political commitments, how they evaluate partisan differences, and how they relate those evaluations to broader forms of identity and belonging (Weiss 1994; Leech 2002; Rubin and Rubin 2011; Mosley 2013; Kvale 1996; Gerson and Damaske 2021; Lareau 2021; Brinkmann 2022).

Most studies of Latino political behavior to date have relied on large-N surveys and experiments, which have generated important insights at the aggregate level but do not capture the complex meaning-making processes that inform political identity and behavior at the individual level (Weiss 1994; Leech 2002; Rubin and Rubin 2011; Mosley 2013; Cadena Jr. 2023). Moreover, the literature remains disproportionately focused on Democratic-leaning or undecided Latinos (Hajnal and Lee 2011), rendering Latino Republican voices analytically peripheral (Jones-Correa et al. 2018; Pérez and Cobian 2024). This dissertation addresses these empirical and methodological limitations through in-depth interviews with Latino Republicans in South Texas—a region that has come to reflect broader partisan shifts among Latino voters. Through this interpretive lens, I examine how participants articulate and make sense of their

⁴ Throughout this dissertation, I use the term *Latino Republicans* as analytic shorthand for Latino participants who supported Republican presidential candidates during the period under study. This group includes respondents who explicitly identified as Republican as well as a small number who rejected partisan labels while repeatedly supporting Republican candidates. When the analysis specifically concerns Republican partisan identification, I distinguish self-identified Republicans from Republican-supporting independents.

alignment with the contemporary Republican Party. The goal is therefore to draw on participants' narratives to reconstruct how Republican alignment becomes coherent among participants whose identities and social contexts might appear, from existing theoretical perspectives, to make such alignment unlikely.

To investigate these questions, I conducted (N = 85) in-depth interviews with participants across five majority-Latino South Texas counties—Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata—where Republican vote share increased substantially in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential elections. These counties provide analytically valuable sites for examining Latino Republican alignment because they combine demographic conditions typically associated with Democratic support—high Latino population shares and strong immigrant-origin presence—with recent and sustained Republican electoral gains. As such, they serve as strategic cases for examining how partisan alignment is interpreted and sustained under conditions that prevailing accounts would expect to reinforce Democratic attachment (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

The interviews were open-ended by design, enabling participants to articulate their life histories, political development, and interpretive frameworks in their own words (Weiss 1994; Leech 2002; Rubin and Rubin 2011; Mosley et al. 2013; Billups 2021; Gerson and Damaske 2021; Lareau 2021). Participants discussed their family backgrounds, religious values, educational and occupational trajectories, and past and present partisan affiliations. They also reflected on contemporary political conflicts, especially around immigration, abortion, law enforcement, and national belonging—issues that have been amplified by partisan elites and are tied to broader struggles over cultural authority (Levendusky 2009; O'Brian 2024). While guided by a shared interview protocol, each conversation unfolded uniquely, shaped by individual experiences, worldviews, and value orientations (Kvale 1996; Mosley et al. 2013; Fujii 2018;

Brinkmann 2022). The interview instrument is provided in SM.1. Interviews ranged from one to four and a half hours, affording space for sustained reflection and the emergence of complex political narratives.

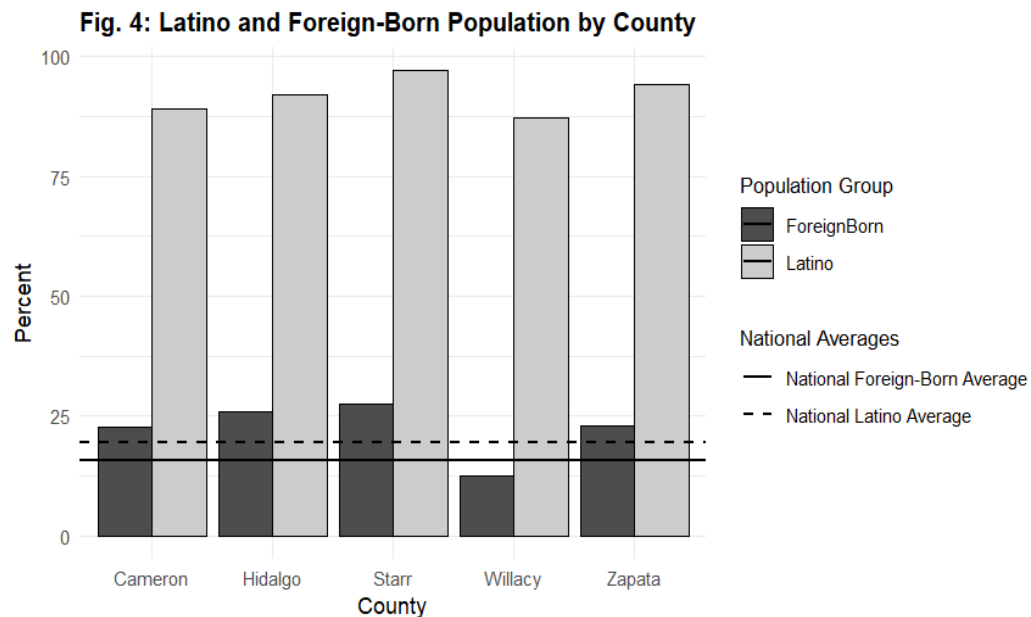
Case Selection: South Texas as a Strategic Site for Studying Latino Republican Alignment

I purposively selected Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata counties based on their empirical and theoretical relevance for examining Latino alignment with the contemporary Republican Party (Flick 2009; Bloomberg and Volpe 2012; Mosley et al. 2013; Billups 2021). These counties are overwhelmingly Latino, contain substantial immigrant-origin populations (see Figure 4), and are situated along or near the U.S.-Mexico border—a region long associated with Democratic electoral dominance but increasingly central to Republican inroads among Latino voters. While historically aligned with the Democratic Party, each of these counties experienced a notable shift toward the Republican Party across recent election cycles, culminating in Republican majorities in all five counties in the 2024 general election (see Figure 5).

Rather than treating these counties as independent observations, I approach them as a strategically selected set of deviant cases (Gerring 2008; Seawright and Gerring 2008). As sites that defy prevailing expectations about Latino political behavior, they allow me to examine increased Latino support for the Republican Party in contexts marked by ethnoracial homogeneity, historical Democratic dominance, and shared exposure to restrictive immigration politics. This case selection supports a close analysis of how Latino alignment with the Republican Party takes shape and is sustained in contemporary U.S. politics. A more detailed rationale for the selection of each county follows below.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the five counties at the center of this study exhibit exceptionally high concentrations of Latino residents, with population shares ranging from 87.2

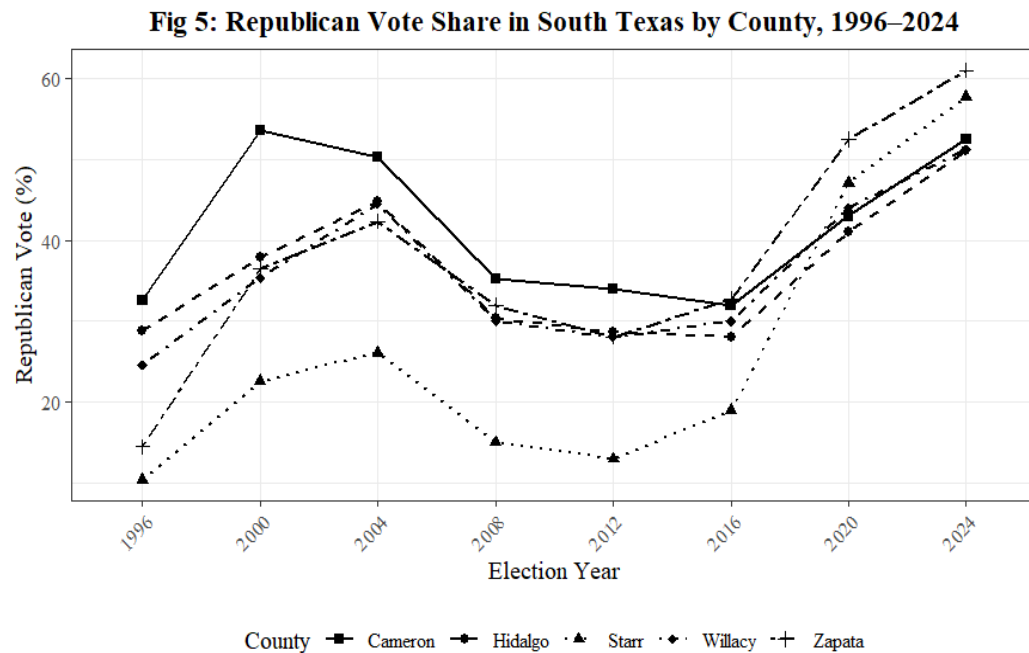
to 97 percent—far exceeding the national average of 19.5 percent.⁵ The overwhelming majority of these residents are of Mexican descent, reflecting deep-rooted patterns of Mexican-American settlement in South Texas. In four of the five counties, the foreign-born share also surpasses the national average of 15.6 percent, ranging from 22.7 to 27.5 percent; only Willacy County falls below this threshold, at 12.5 percent.



Theoretically, these demographic patterns are expected to reinforce a strong sense of ethnoracial identity and sustain group-based political alignments. According to the theory of *ethnic replenishment* (Jiménez 2010), the continual arrival of Latino immigrants—especially from Mexico—serves to revitalize ethnic identity among U.S.-born Latinos by preserving cultural practices, language use, and transnational ties. This process is thought to forestall the acculturative pressures that typically accompany intergenerational assimilation, thereby

⁵ Figure 4: Latino and foreign-born population shares are drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau’s QuickFacts profiles for Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata Counties and the United States. Because QuickFacts draws its measures from multiple Census Bureau programs, the data periods associated with each measure are reported as identified in the source.

reinforcing shared group consciousness and political cohesion. Along with prior findings that higher concentrations of native-born Latinos are associated with more pro-immigrant policy preferences (Rocha et al. 2011), this literature suggests that such communities should remain reliably aligned with the Democratic Party, particularly in light of the Republican Party’s increasingly restrictive and nativist stance on immigration in recent years.



As shown in Figure 5, which traces Republican presidential vote share in Cameron, Hidalgo, Willacy, Starr, and Zapata counties from 1996 through 2024, voting patterns in these South Texas counties remained largely consistent with prevailing scholarly expectations of entrenched Democratic dominance well into the 2010s. This persistence occurred even as the broader partisan landscape in Texas experienced a well-documented realignment—from Democratic to Republican—beginning in the late twentieth century. Temporary deviations from this trend emerged during the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, when Republican candidate George W. Bush carried Cameron and Hidalgo counties. These outcomes, however, were widely interpreted as the result of candidate-specific factors—particularly Bush’s culturally resonant

messaging and centrist policy appeals—rather than evidence of an emerging partisan shift. The subsequent reversion to Democratic support confirmed the temporary nature of these anomalies.

In contrast, the presidential elections of 2016, 2020, and 2024 complicate these historical patterns (Dallas Morning News Editorial 2021; Politico 2021; Neukam 2022). As Figure 5 illustrates, Republican vote share increased significantly and consistently across all five counties, culminating in an electoral shift by 2020 that persisted into 2024. Zapata County exemplifies this transformation sharply, moving from roughly 25 percent Republican support in the early 2000s to over 60 percent by 2024. Similar trends are evident in Cameron and Hidalgo counties—once emblematic of Latino Democratic loyalty—where Republican support has now reached or exceeded the 50 percent threshold. Willacy and Starr counties, likewise, show pronounced and sustained increases.

These partisan shifts are also evident in down-ballot contests. In 2022, Republican congressional candidate Monica de la Cruz secured a historic victory by winning Texas’s 15th congressional district—the first time a Republican has held this seat (Neukam 2022). She subsequently retained her seat in the 2024 election. Similarly, Javier Villalobos became the first Republican elected mayor of McAllen, Texas (Dallas Morning News Editorial 2021). Collectively, these developments illustrate that Republican gains in South Texas extend beyond presidential contests and reflect broader transformations in regional political dynamics.

Taken together, these trends suggest that the shifts across South Texas reflect more than temporary electoral fluctuation and point instead to a broader reconfiguration of partisan alignment in the region. That this transformation is occurring in overwhelmingly Latino and historically Democratic locales sharpens the central question of this dissertation: how have these longstanding Democratic strongholds become sites of growing Republican support? As this

dissertation argues, this pattern is not fully explained by demographic change or group-based accounts alone. It is better understood as taking shape within an increasingly polarized party system in which Republican affiliation has come to be understood by participants as fitting commitments they describe as central to who they are.

Recruitment and Interview Procedure

I began data collection in September 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, after relocating to Pharr, Texas. The primary analytic sample consisted of Latino participants aligned with Republican presidential candidates. Participants were recruited and screened according to three criteria: self-identification as Latino, residence in one of the five South Texas counties included in this study, and reported support for the Republican Party in at least one recent presidential election. For participants interviewed before the 2024 election, this referred to support for the Republican presidential candidate in 2016 and/or 2020; for participants interviewed after the 2024 election, it also included support in 2024. In the second phase of recruitment, I also conducted contrastive interviews with five White Republicans and five Latino Democrats residing in the same regional setting. These interviews were included not as a symmetrical comparison group, but to help clarify which interpretive patterns were distinctive to Latino Republicans and which reflected broader partisan reasoning or competing expectations about Latino political belonging.

Because Latino Republicans constitute a relatively difficult-to-access population in a region where Democratic affiliation has long been the prevailing political norm, recruitment required multiple complementary strategies. In South Texas, party affiliation is often intertwined with identity, community expectations, family histories, and local political norms. Relying on a single recruitment channel therefore risked capturing only the most visible or politically active

segment of the Latino Republican electorate. I designed recruitment to reach participants across different levels of political engagement, including party activists, regular Republican voters, newly engaged Trump supporters, and individuals whose Republican alignment was expressed primarily through voting rather than organized participation.

The initial phase of recruitment relied primarily on remote outreach because the COVID-19 pandemic substantially constrained opportunities for face-to-face fieldwork. I contacted local conservative and Republican organizations across Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata counties to introduce the study, request assistance circulating recruitment materials, and inquire about opportunities to connect with members. I also conducted targeted digital outreach in conservative-leaning regional social media groups and relied on referrals within local networks. These strategies helped establish initial access in a politically sensitive research setting, where trust and credibility are central to recruitment (Sapleton and Lourenço 2016; Gerson and Damaske 2021; Lareau 2021). Together, these efforts yielded an initial set of thirty interviews conducted between Fall 2020 and Summer 2021, all completed remotely by Zoom or telephone.

Remote interviewing posed some challenges for building rapport, particularly given the politically sensitive nature of the study. At the same time, it allowed participants to speak from familiar environments, offered greater scheduling flexibility, and enabled broader geographic coverage across the five counties during a period when field access was constrained.

After the first wave of interviews, fieldwork slowed and later paused between Fall 2022 and Summer 2023 because of my teaching apprenticeship responsibilities at the University of California, Los Angeles. This interval became analytically useful because it allowed me to review the initial transcripts and reassess the composition of the sample before beginning the next stage of recruitment. To avoid overreliance on a single recruitment stream and to capture

greater variation among Latino Republicans, I broadened recruitment beyond the initial digital and organizational networks (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). This adjustment allowed the second phase of fieldwork to include participants with more varied political orientations, levels of activism, and pathways into Republican support.

As COVID-19 restrictions eased, I implemented this revised strategy through more direct, in-person recruitment. I attended monthly meetings organized by local GOP chapters, weekly pro-Trump demonstrations, and events hosted by local Republican and conservative groups in the Rio Grande Valley. These settings were used primarily for recruitment. Although attendance generated limited contextual observations that helped situate the puzzle motivating the dissertation, the empirical analysis rests on interview data rather than systematically collected participant-observation fieldnotes. In-person recruitment allowed me to move beyond the initial online networks and reach participants with different degrees of political involvement. While some participants were contacted in explicitly partisan settings, many described their participation as occasional; for some, these events represented their first political activity beyond voting. This variation is important because it indicates that the sample is not limited to party elites or highly active Republican organizers.

Through this second phase, I conducted an additional fifty-five face-to-face interviews, including forty-five Latino Republicans, five White Republicans, and five Latino Democrats. This brought the total sample to eighty-five participants. By expanding recruitment in this way, the second phase strengthened the empirical foundation of the dissertation and allowed for a broader analysis of how Latino Republican alignment is understood, justified, and sustained across different kinds of participants.

Across both phases, data collection remained iterative. As I reviewed early interviews and continued conducting subsequent ones, it became clear that partisan polarization and culture war issues were central to how participants understood their political commitments. I therefore revised and expanded the interview protocol to probe these topics more directly. This adjustment reflects a core principle of qualitative interviewing: interview guides should remain consistent enough to sustain comparison across cases, but flexible enough to respond to emerging findings and the research context (Weiss 1994; Rubin and Rubin 2011; Lareau 2021). These refinements allowed for deeper exploration of how participants made sense of political conflict, connected national partisan debates to local life, and interpreted issues such as race, gender, religion, immigration, law enforcement, and perceived threats to American identity.

All participants received information about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality protections, and their ability to decline or withdraw before or during the interview. Before each interview, I reviewed the consent information, answered questions, and obtained informed consent. All research procedures were approved by the University of California, Los Angeles Institutional Review Board, and interview material is presented in accordance with the study's consent and confidentiality procedures.

Ultimately, the sample comprised ($N = 85$) participants, including thirty-one women and fifty-four men, ranging in age from eighteen to seventy-eight. Participants came from a range of educational and occupational backgrounds across the five counties. Among the Latino Republican participants, 28 percent were first-generation immigrants, 37 percent were second-generation U.S.-born Latinos with at least one foreign-born parent, and 35 percent were third-generation or higher. Although the study primarily focuses on Latino Republicans, the sample also includes five White Republicans and five Latino Democrats for contrastive purposes.

Among the eighty Latino participants, seventy-nine were of Mexican origin and one was of Puerto Rican descent. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on participants' language preference. Table 1 provides further details about the sample.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics of Interview Participants (N = 85)

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	18–78	
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.

The contrastive interviews sharpen the interpretation of the Latino Republican accounts without shifting the dissertation's central focus. Interviews with White Republicans provide context for understanding how Republican affiliation is narrated by non-Latino Republicans in the same political environment. Interviews with Latino Democrats help illuminate the expectations about Latino identity, immigrant belonging, and Democratic alignment that Latino Republicans often encounter, negotiate, and contest. These interviews therefore help distinguish patterns specific to Latino Republican alignment from broader forms of partisan reasoning in South Texas.

The sample is designed for analytic rather than estimative purposes. In-depth, context-rich interviews allow this dissertation to examine how Latino Republicans understand and articulate their alignment with the Republican Party (Lane 1962; Small 2009; Cramer 2016; Ternullo 2024). Purposive and snowball sampling carry limitations, including the risk of overrepresenting certain networks or viewpoints (Gerson and Damaske 2021). Yet these strategies are appropriate for studying populations that are underrepresented in large-N datasets and difficult to access through standard sampling procedures (Pérez and Cobian 2024). Unlike survey-based approaches, this qualitative design makes it possible to examine how participants narrate, justify, and reinterpret their partisanship—processes that are difficult to capture through closed-ended survey questions alone (Jones-Correa 1998; Parker 2009; Cadena Jr. 2023; Ternullo 2024).

Thematic Analysis

The central analytic task of this dissertation is to reconstruct how Latino Republicans make sense of their partisan alignment. Because this requires examining how participants organize meanings across their narratives, rather than measuring the prevalence of particular attitudes, I analyzed the interviews using an abductive, iterative thematic approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Timmermans and Tavory 2012; Bazeley 2013; Brinkmann 2022). Coding followed the flexible coding approach described by Deterding and Waters (2021), which distinguishes between an initial stage of index coding that organizes interview material by topic and a subsequent stage of analytic coding that identifies patterns within and across indexed materials. I transcribed the interview recordings and imported the transcripts into Dedoose for systematic coding and analysis (Burla et al. 2008; Campbell et al. 2013; Deterding and Waters 2021).

I first developed a provisional set of index codes derived from the interview guide and existing scholarship on Latino political behavior. These codes captured broad topical domains reflected in both the interview protocol and prior literature, including family background and political socialization, immigration experience, religious upbringing and practice, ethnic and national identity, political identity and ideology, immigration policy views, party perceptions, and electoral behavior. I used index coding as an organizational tool, grouping segments in which participants discussed similar domains across interviews. For example, I coded segments as “immigration experience” when participants described their own or their families’ migration histories, and as “party perceptions” when they characterized what the Democratic or Republican parties represent or whom they serve. This stage created a structured dataset that made systematic comparison across interviews possible.

I then conducted analytic coding by retrieving segments grouped under each index code and comparing them within and across interviews. At this stage, the analysis moved from identifying what participants discussed to examining how they connected different parts of their accounts. Analytic codes captured patterns in how participants linked religious commitments to evaluations of political issues, described perceived changes in party positions, situated Republican affiliation within religious or national communities, and explained when Latino identity or immigrant experience should matter for political judgment. In some interviews, participants drew on familiar partisan formulations (Saavedra Cisneros 2016), but the analysis centered on how they incorporated such formulations into broader narratives about identity, upbringing, belonging, and partisan fit.

Analytic claims did not emerge from the frequency with which a code appeared. Instead, I developed arguments by comparing how participants organized multiple themes within

individual narratives and then examining whether those interpretive logics recurred across interviews. Thus, the analytic focus was not on counting references to religion, immigration, identity, or party identification, but on understanding how participants connected these domains when explaining their partisan alignment. For example, immigration could appear as family history, as policy concern, as evidence of respect for law, or as a boundary through which participants distinguished their own families from more recent or unauthorized migrants.

I therefore examined how different elements of participants' accounts appeared together within the same narratives. In many cases, participants moved between discussions of longstanding commitments, party differences, social belonging, and perceived tensions between Republican affiliation and Latino or immigrant-linked attachments. Attending to these connections allowed me to reconstruct interpretive sequences rather than treating each topical domain as analytically separate. Discussions of religion, family upbringing, moral beliefs, immigration, and American identity often appeared not as isolated themes, but as connected elements through which participants explained what mattered to them politically, where they understood themselves to belong, and how they evaluated claims that their partisan affiliation conflicted with other parts of who they were. I treated a pattern as thematic when it reflected a shared interpretive logic across multiple interviews and among participants with varied backgrounds and partisan histories, rather than an isolated account.

Through this analytic process, I identified three interrelated but analytically distinct processes through which participants account for and sustain their partisan alignment: partisan sorting, social embeddedness, and identity reconciliation. These categories were not treated as fixed codes imposed at the beginning of analysis. Rather, they developed through iterative comparison among participants' accounts, existing scholarship on Latino political behavior and

partisan polarization, and the dissertation's emerging theoretical concerns. The resulting concepts therefore emerged through sustained comparison across cases rather than from any single interview or especially illustrative participant.

I identified *partisan sorting* when participants organized their accounts around perceived relationships between longstanding commitments and perceived differences between the parties. Across interviews, these accounts shared a common interpretive structure even when the specific commitments participants emphasized differed. Some participants narrated movement toward the Republican Party as they came to see it as better aligned with their religious beliefs, family socialization, views about work, immigration, or moral order. Others described Republican alignment as already established, but still explained their political judgments by relating important commitments to perceived partisan differences. I used this category to analyze participants' narrated political reasoning rather than to establish an objective causal sequence.

I identified *social embeddedness* when participants located Republican alignment within everyday domains of belonging. These domains included religious communities, family networks, local political spaces, occupational environments, and understandings of the American national community. I applied this category when participants described Republican affiliation as recognizable, expected, appropriate, or socially reinforced within the environments they inhabited. The analytic question was not simply whether participants belonged to churches, families, or civic networks, but how those spaces made Republican alignment appear socially intelligible and, at times, taken for granted.

I analyzed *identity reconciliation* by examining how participants addressed perceived tensions between Republican alignment and continuing ties to Latino identity and the immigrant experience. I identified this process through three recurring elements: whether participants

described Latino identity, Mexican-origin belonging, or immigrant-linked histories as meaningful; whether they encountered, anticipated, or articulated expectations that those attachments should imply particular political judgments; and how they reasoned through those expectations (e.g., acceptance, refusal, narrowing, or subordination). These patterns were especially visible in discussions of immigration policy, accusations that Republican affiliation conflicted with Latino belonging, and political rhetoric widely perceived as offensive. I employ this interpretive sequence to carefully examine whether attachments that have become politicized should carry political weight over their political judgments.

Throughout the analytic process, I used memo-writing to track emerging interpretations and guide subsequent analysis (Lareau 2021). Memo-writing provided a running analytic record of emerging interpretations, alternative explanations, conceptual revisions, and comparisons across interviews. These memos became the primary mechanism through which empirical observations were developed into broader analytic claims. As patterns emerged, I also searched for disconfirming cases—accounts that did not follow the dominant patterns—and examined whether alternative explanations provided a better account. This included cases in which participants described Republican alignment primarily through inherited partisanship, cases in which religious or national attachments did not map neatly onto Republican affiliation, and cases in which Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments appeared more politically consequential than the dominant patterns suggested. Attending to these cases helped refine the boundaries of the three analytic processes rather than treating them as universal across all interviews.

I coded all interview transcripts myself. Coding proceeded iteratively, with codes refined through sustained engagement with the data and systematic comparison across cases. Because

this study adopts an interpretive thematic approach, coding was treated as a process of analytic judgment rather than as the mechanical application of fixed categories. I therefore do not employ intercoder reliability metrics (Braun and Clarke 2022; O'Connor and Joffe 2020). Instead, analytic rigor is established through transparency about the coding process, consistency in how analytic categories were applied, attention to disconfirming evidence, and sustained grounding in participants' accounts.

Dissertation Overview

To understand the persistence and recent growth of Latino alignment with the Republican Party, this dissertation examines how Latino Republicans themselves understand and explain that alignment in a polarized political environment. Rather than treating Republican support as the result of weakened Democratic attachment, the chapters that follow show how participants come to see Republican affiliation as a better fit for their views, how that alignment becomes part of their everyday lives, and how they maintain it while continuing to identify with Latino identity and the immigrant experience. Throughout the dissertation, the focus is on how participants describe what matters to them, how they interpret the differences between the parties, and how they handle moments when their partisan affiliation seems to conflict with other parts of who they are.

Chapter 2, *Reconsidering Latino Partisanship*, lays the foundation for this argument. It reviews the main approaches used to explain Latino partisan alignment. I show that these literatures offer important insights, especially in explaining Democratic attachment and the role of perceived group threat, panethnic identity, and immigrant ties. However, when applied to Latino Republicans, these approaches tend to explain Republican alignment only indirectly—as the weakening of the forces that tie Latinos to the Democratic Party. Chapter 2 identifies this

limitation and shifts the focus to a different question: not just why some Latinos move away from the Democratic Party, but how they come to align with the Republican Party in the first place. To address this, the chapter situates Latino Republican alignment within a broader political environment shaped by partisan polarization and clearer differences between the parties.

Chapter 3, *Partisan Alignment as an Interpretive Process: Latino Republicans in a Polarized Party System*, shows how participants come to see Republican affiliation as a better fit. Drawing on interview narratives, the chapter traces how participants connect their longstanding commitments—such as religion, family, and views about social order—to the differences they see between the parties. The chapter shows that alignment is not described as abandoning Latino identity or immigrant ties, but as arriving at a sense that one party better reflects what they already believe. It also shows how, once established, Republican alignment can become a relatively stable standpoint through which participants interpret political issues over time.

Chapter 4, *Latino and Republican: The Social Embeddedness of Republican Alignment*, shows how Republican alignment becomes situated within participants' everyday domains of belonging. If Chapter 3 explains how participants come to see partisan fit, Chapter 4 shows how that alignment becomes reinforced in the settings they move through, especially religious communities and their understanding of what it means to be American. In these settings, Republican affiliation is not experienced as unusual. Instead, it is described as fitting with the expectations and values that structure these environments. This chapter shows how partisan identity becomes part of participants' social worlds, not just their political views.

Chapter 5, *Enduring Latino and Immigrant Ties: Reconciling Cultural Belonging with Republican Partisan Alignment*, shows how participants maintain Republican alignment while continuing to identify with Latino identity and the immigrant experience. The chapter focuses on

moments when participants are confronted with claims that their partisan affiliation conflicts with those identities. Rather than rejecting these attachments, participants explain when they should matter for politics and when they should not. It shows that identity reconciliation does not require the disappearance of Latino or immigrant-linked attachments, but instead involves defining the political limits of those attachments. This process recurs in participants' discussions of immigration and partisan rhetoric, where questions about group loyalty and belonging are invoked.

Chapter 6 concludes by returning to the broader implications of the argument. It shows how the South Texas case helps explain Latino Republican alignment more generally—not as the loss of Latino identity or immigrant ties, but as a process through which people relate those attachments to other commitments when making political judgments. Taken together, the chapters show how Latino Republicans come to see their partisan alignment as fitting with their commitments, how it becomes part of their everyday lives, and how they sustain it even when Latino identity and immigrant ties might seem to point in a different political direction.

CHAPTER 2

RECONSIDERING LATINO PARTISANSHIP

On a hot summer evening, I attended a pro-Trump demonstration in McAllen, Texas—one of many grassroots “Trump Train” rallies that emerged across south Texas in 2016 and thereafter, energizing voters in the region. This rally was held in an abandoned parking lot that once housed the city’s civic center, and drew several hundred participants, the vast majority of whom were Latino. Demonstrators lined the sidewalk along 10th Street and U.S. Expressway 83, waving pro-Trump flags as passing traffic produced competing reactions. Some drivers honked in support, raising their hands in approval; others responded with disdain, shouting insults such as “race traitors,” “fascists,” “White supremacists,” and “pinches pochos.”

One interaction stood out. As participants waved their Trump flags, a young Latina woman stopped at the red light beside the protest, rolled down her window, and yelled at one of the demonstrators, “Pendejos, just because you wave that [Trump] flag, it doesn’t make you white.” I witnessed this exchange during the demonstration, and the participant who had been targeted by the remark later recounted the same incident during our interview. For him, the exchange illustrated the kinds of accusations Latino Trump supporters often faced from other Latinos. The incident captured a broader assumption about Latino Republican identification: that aligning with the Republican Party involves distancing oneself from Latino belonging and affiliating with a political coalition widely understood as exclusionary toward Latinos and other communities of color. In this formulation, Latino Republicanism appears as a betrayal of group belonging and as something that should not be possible for people like them.

This exchange reveals a broader tension surrounding Latino Republican partisanship. The force of the accusation lies in the assumption that certain political alignments are incompatible

with particular forms of belonging. Latino Republican identification is often treated as evidence of distance from Latino identity, immigrant-linked solidarity, or coethnic political obligation. Yet despite this narrative, Latino support for Republican candidates has persisted and, in some notable contexts and electoral cycles, increased (Varela 2015; Sonneland and Fleischner 2016; Krogstad and Lopez 2016; Sonneland 2020; Corral and Leal 2024). The puzzle, then, is not only why some Latino voters support the Republican Party, but how they come to see that alignment as making sense and how they maintain it in the face of claims that it contradicts who they are.

This chapter reviews dominant frameworks used to explain Latino partisanship and political behavior in order to clarify what they illuminate and what they leave unresolved. I argue that these literatures offer important insights into Democratic attachment, group threat, panethnic identity, and immigrant-linked political incorporation. However, when applied to Latino Republicans, they often explain Republican alignment indirectly—as the weakening of forces presumed to tether Latinos to the Democratic Party—rather than as a partisan alignment that must be understood on its own terms. This chapter identifies that limitation and develops the conceptual foundation for a broader approach that situates Latino Republican alignment within a polarized party system.

The Puzzle of Latino Republicanism

For decades, scholarship on Latino political behavior has depicted Latino partisanship as weak, fluid, and contingent (Jones-Correa 1998; Uhlaner and Garcia 1998; Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Saavedra Cisneros 2016). Much of the literature treats Latino Democratic attachment as contingent rather than deeply partisan. Immigration politics, racialization, and socioeconomic position are often treated as the primary drivers (Jones-Correa 1998; Pantoja et al. 2001; García-Bedolla 2003; Michelson 2005). Variation in national origin,

citizenship status, class position, and acculturation has reinforced this view of Latinos as a constituency whose partisan attachments are shaped by context and political cues rather than by stable party identification (Uhlener and Garcia 1998; Alvarez and García-Bedolla 2003; Hajnal and Lee 2011).

The group-threat framework extends this logic by arguing that Latinos mobilize collectively when confronted with exclusionary politics. Anti-immigrant rhetoric and restrictive legislation, in this view, generate defensive solidarity that should strengthen Democratic identification and limit Republican appeal (Pantoja et al. 2001; Barreto and Woods 2005; Zepeda-Millán 2017). Historical cases such as California’s Proposition 187 (1994), the Sensenbrenner Bill (2006), and Arizona’s SB 1070 (2010) exemplify how nativist campaigns have historically consolidated Latino support for the Democratic Party and heightened political participation among immigrants and their descendants (Pantoja et al. 2001; Barreto and Woods 2005; Zepeda-Millán 2017).

These arguments point in the same direction: exclusionary immigration politics should strengthen Democratic alignment among Latino voters and weaken Latino Republican support. Yet the empirical record of the past decade complicates this logic. Despite the contemporary Republican Party’s embrace of exclusionary rhetoric and policy proposals, Latino support for Hillary Clinton in 2016, Joe Biden in 2020, and Kamala Harris in 2024 fell short of Barack Obama’s levels (see Figure 2 in Chapter 1). Meanwhile, Latino support for Donald Trump remained roughly one-third in 2016 and 2020—and rose to 42 percent in 2024 (Krogstad and Lopez 2016; Sonneland 2020; Gerbaud et al. 2024; see Figure 1 in Chapter 1).

Rather than consolidating around the Democratic Party, Latino alignment with the Republican Party has persisted and, in some contexts, expanded (Krogstad and Lopez 2016;

Sonneland 2020; Gerbaud et al. 2024). This is the Latino Republican puzzle. Despite expectations that racialized threat, immigrant-linked solidarity, and cultural pressures should reinforce Democratic attachment, a significant segment of Latinos maintains alignment with the Republican Party—even under conditions in which that alignment is widely portrayed as incompatible with Latino and immigrant belonging (Krogstad and Lopez 2016; Sonneland 2020; Hopkins et al. 2023; Gerbaud et al. 2024). Existing scholarship helps explain why some Latinos may move away from the Democratic Party, but it provides less insight into how Latino Republicans themselves understand Republican affiliation as fitting and how they sustain that affiliation over time.

In Search of an Explanation for Contemporary Latino Republicans

Political science has generated important insights into Latino political behavior, but Latino Republicanism has often been understood indirectly: as a departure from Democratic attachment rather than as a meaningful partisan formation that requires theoretical explanation. Within much of this literature, Democratic attachment is linked to racialized threat, group consciousness, immigrant-linked concerns, and collective interest (Pantoja et al. 2001; Sanchez 2006; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Pérez 2015b; Zepeda-Millán 2017). Republican support, by contrast, is often interpreted as evidence that these forces have weakened, failed to take hold, or carry less political weight (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Saavedra Cisneros 2016). This orientation has helped scholars identify pathways away from Democratic attachment, but it has left less developed how Latino voters come to understand Republican affiliation as fitting, meaningful, and durable.

Comparative work on racialized partisanship reinforces this interpretation. Black Democratic identification is widely understood as robust, socially enforced, and politically

expected (Dawson 1995; White and Laird 2020). Latino partisanship, by contrast, is often treated as more heterogeneous and less constrained by coethnic expectations (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Hajnal and Lee 2011). The point is not to treat Black and Latino partisanship as directly comparable, but to show how Latino Republicanism has often been interpreted through a logic of relative looseness: if Latino Democratic attachment is less socially anchored, then movement toward the GOP appears less surprising and less in need of explanation.

This perspective has generated valuable insight into why many Latinos align with the Democratic Party, but it offers less leverage for understanding the persistence—and recent growth—of Latino Republican alignment in a political environment marked by highly visible exclusionary rhetoric and policy agendas. By treating Republican attachment primarily as a departure from Democratic-aligned group identity, the literature directs attention toward pathways of exit while leaving less specified how Latino voters come to see Republican affiliation as a better fit and continue to support it over time. Latino Republicanism is thus often approached in negative terms: not as a partisan alignment with its own internal logic, but as the weakening of forces thought to tether Latinos to Democratic politics.

Reassessing this pattern requires a closer look at the dominant frameworks used to interpret Latino Republicanism. Two have been especially influential: explanations centered on the weakening of panethnic identity and explanations centered on declining ties to the immigrant experience. Each identifies important sources of variation in Latino political behavior. Yet both share a deeper analytic limitation. They conceptualize Latino Republicanism primarily as the absence or erosion of the factors presumed to sustain Democratic attachment. In doing so, they help explain why some Latinos may move away from the Democratic Party while providing less

insight into how Republican affiliation comes to fit with participants' commitments, social worlds, and continued attachments to Latino identity and the immigrant experience.

The discussion that follows critically assesses these frameworks, identifying where they illuminate and where they fall short. I then build toward a broader theoretical approach that situates Latino Republican alignment within the dynamics of the polarized party system. Rather than treating Latino Republicanism as simply movement away from the Democratic Party, this approach examines how participants come to understand Republican affiliation as a better fit, how that alignment becomes rooted in everyday social contexts, and how it is sustained alongside Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments that remain meaningful to them.

The Weakening of Pan-Ethnic Identity

One influential explanation for the recent growth of Latino Republicanism focuses on weakened panethnic identity (García-Bedolla 2003; Basler 2008; Cadena Jr. 2023; Cuevas-Molina and Nteta 2023). As panethnic solidarity is understood to erode through assimilation, generational distance from immigration, and geographic dispersion, Latinos are theorized to become less politically cohesive and more open to partisan realignment. In this view, a thinner sense of panethnic attachment reduces the salience of shared group interests, weakens the felt obligation to maintain political alignment with coethnics, and makes appeals organized around individualism, economic mobility, and social traditionalism more resonant among some Latinos (Marsh and Ramírez 2019; Hickel et al. 2020). Latino Republican growth is thus interpreted as the result of a weakening collective identity that once helped anchor Latino voters to the Democratic Party.

Much of this literature draws on foundational work on racialization and group consciousness. Scholars argue that Latinos occupy an ambiguous position in the U.S. racial

order, often constructed as outsiders and subject to differential inclusion (Sanchez 2006; Massey 2009; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Zou and Cheryan 2017). Within this line of work, the political significance of ethnoracial identity depends on the degree to which Latinos understand that identity as central to self-concept and collective interest. Pérez (2015b), for example, shows that Latinos for whom ethnoracial identity is central to self-understanding are more likely to engage in political behavior oriented toward protecting group interests. By contrast, Latinos for whom ethnic identity is less salient are often treated as more open to conservative appeals that deemphasize group-based claims.

Building on this insight, scholars have examined how Latinos navigate racial identity in partisan contexts. Basler (2008) shows that some Mexican Americans strategically aligned with conservative candidates to distance themselves from a stigmatized Latino identity, invoking Republican identity as a means of symbolic proximity to whiteness. Other work suggests that some Latinos downplay panethnic identification in favor of broader ideological or national commitments, including patriotism, assimilationist values, and social traditionalism (Hickel et al. 2020). Read together, these accounts suggest that diminished panethnic attachment can facilitate Republican alignment by weakening ethnoracial solidarity and loosening the social expectation that political behavior should follow shared group position.

At the same time, related scholarship suggests that what is often interpreted as weakened panethnic attachment may instead reflect the increasing political salience of other identities. Work on American national identity, for example, shows that national belonging can become politically consequential for Latinos, particularly when it is experienced as threatened or as normatively prior to group-based claims (Schildkraut 2011; Silber Mohamed 2017; Hickel et al. 2020). Other research similarly suggests that Latino political reasoning may be shaped by the

intersection of ethnoracial identity with national, religious, and ideological forms of belonging rather than by a simple substitution of one identity for another (Saavedra Cisneros 2016; Corral and Leal 2024). This distinction is important because it suggests that contemporary Latino Republicanism may involve a reordering of politically salient identities rather than the disappearance of panethnic attachment altogether.

That distinction matters for the present study. Evidence from my in-depth interviews complicates the idea that Republican alignment reflects the erosion of panethnic identity. Many participants continue to express pride in their background, speak positively about their families' immigration histories, and describe continued attachment to Latino communities. What changes is not whether they identify as Latino, but how they treat that identity when making political judgments. Participants often reject progressive racial politics or distance themselves from particular forms of ethnoracial claim-making while continuing to understand Latino identity as part of who they are. What appears in these accounts is not the disappearance of Latino identity, but a shift in how participants decide which identities and commitments should guide their evaluations of the parties.

A weakening of panethnic identity may help explain why some Latinos place less emphasis on group-based political claims, but it does not fully capture the pattern examined in this dissertation. Many participants do not describe themselves as having shed Latino identity. Rather, they place that identity alongside commitments to religion, law and order, social traditionalism, economic individualism, and American national belonging. Latino identity remains meaningful, but it is not always treated as the attachment that should determine partisan choice.

This distinction is especially important because recent Latino Republican growth is difficult to explain through slow-moving identity erosion alone. Latinos have long varied in values, religious commitments, and social outlooks. Those features, by themselves, do not clarify why Republican support has become more pronounced in the contemporary period. What recent patterns suggest is not simply the weakening of ethnoracial attachment, but the increasing political importance of other commitments and social alignments in how some Latinos evaluate the parties.

In sum, scholarship on panethnic identity illuminates an important dimension of Latino political life. But by treating Republican alignment primarily as the result of weakened ethnic attachment, it identifies one possible pathway away from Democratic identification while leaving underdeveloped how Republican affiliation comes to fit with participants' commitments, social worlds, and continued attachments to Latino identity.

Weakened Ties to the Immigrant Experience

A second influential explanation for Latino Republicanism centers on the loosening of ties to the immigrant experience. This argument is often framed as increasingly plausible given that roughly two-thirds of Latinos in the United States are now U.S.-born (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). As Latinos become more integrated into U.S. society through language acquisition, generational change, and adaptation to dominant norms, they are often theorized to adopt more conservative policy preferences, particularly on immigration. In this view, increased acculturation weakens immigrant-linked attachments and reduces the extent to which political judgments are organized around shared immigrant experiences, redirecting attention toward individual mobility, social incorporation, and one's own life chances within the United States.

Survey research has often been interpreted as consistent with this claim. Early studies in Latino politics suggested that English proficiency, later-generation status, and longer residence in the United States are associated with more restrictionist views on immigration and, in some cases, greater openness to Republican candidates (de la Garza et al. 1993; Hood et al. 1997; Binder et al. 1997). Later work developed more systematic measures of acculturation, often incorporating language use, generational status, and time in the United States, and found that more acculturated Latinos were more likely to support immigration restrictions than those more closely tied to immigrant communities (Branton 2007; Pedraza 2014). Taken together, this literature suggests that as Latinos become more oriented toward dominant U.S. society, they may adopt positions that reflect mainstream restrictionist preferences rather than coethnic solidarity.

This literature identifies an important mechanism through which some Latinos may move toward conservative or Republican-aligned positions. Yet it faces both conceptual and empirical limitations. First, the historical role of assimilation in Latino political life has not always been oppositional to collective advancement. As Gutiérrez (1995) shows, Latino civic organizations in the early and mid-twentieth century often promoted assimilation as a strategy to secure civil rights, mobility, and political legitimacy. In that context, incorporation into mainstream American life was not necessarily understood as a rejection of collective interests, but as one path toward protection and advancement.

Second, and more importantly for the present project, recent electoral patterns complicate the explanatory power of acculturation alone. Fraga et al. (2025) show that between 2016 and 2020, Republican candidates made their largest gains not among the most acculturated Latinos, but among foreign-born voters. This pattern runs counter to the expectation that distance from the immigrant experience should increase Republican support. It also highlights a temporal

mismatch in the literature: acculturation is generally a slow-moving, intergenerational process, whereas the growth in Latino Republican support has occurred over a much shorter and more recent period.

These tensions suggest that acculturation remains relevant but cannot, by itself, explain the contemporary pattern. Evidence from my in-depth interviews further complicates the assumption that Latino Republicans align with the GOP by shedding immigrant-linked attachments. Many participants—across generations and irrespective of language use—described enduring connections to family immigration histories and ethnoracial background. They did not narrate themselves as distant from immigrants. Rather, they often described their support for Republican positions on immigration as consistent with protecting legal immigration, maintaining social order, or safeguarding what they understood as broader national interests. In these accounts, immigrant-linked attachments are not absent. They are interpreted in ways that participants see as compatible with Republican alignment.

This pattern suggests that contemporary Latino Republicanism cannot be fully understood as the product of weakened ties to the immigrant experience. Instead, it often involves how participants interpret those ties and how they decide whether—and in what ways—they should guide political judgment. As Pérez et al. (2024) and Pérez and Vicuña (2024) suggest, these interpretations may involve redefining the boundaries of political community along ideological or civic lines rather than rejecting ethnoracial or immigrant-linked identity altogether.

This distinction also clarifies how this dissertation builds on existing qualitative work. Cadena Jr. (2023), for example, shows how Latino Republicans defend their partisan identification in the face of accusations that the GOP is exclusionary. That work is important

because it takes Latino Republican self-understandings seriously rather than treating them as merely derivative of survey predictors. This dissertation extends that approach by moving analytically upstream. Rather than focusing only on how participants respond to accusations of contradiction, it examines how Latino Republicans account for Republican alignment as fitting in the first place and how that alignment becomes sustained over time.

This distinction is especially important in the South Texas setting examined here. These counties are contexts in which Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments remain highly salient, making them an analytically demanding case for explanations that attribute Latino Republicanism to weakened ethnoracial or immigrant ties (cf. Seawright and Gerring 2008). If those explanations were sufficient, they should have considerable explanatory power here. Where they fall short, their limits become easier to identify.

In sum, acculturation remains an important part of Latino political development, but it provides only a partial account of contemporary Latino Republicanism. It helps identify one possible pathway away from Democratic attachment, yet it does not fully explain how Republican alignment comes to be understood as fitting, justified, and sustainable among individuals who continue to maintain meaningful ties to the immigrant experience.

The Field's Blind Spot

Taken together, the two dominant explanations reviewed above share a common analytic orientation. One treats Republican alignment as rooted in weakened ethnoracial identity and diminished panethnic consciousness. The other links Republican attachment to looser ties to the immigrant experience, often associated with generational distance, linguistic assimilation, and broader acculturation into U.S. society. Both perspectives illuminate conditions under which Democratic attachment may weaken.

Their limitation is not that they are wrong, but that they are incomplete. They are better equipped to explain movement away from Democratic attachment than movement toward Republican identification. They clarify why some Latinos may place less weight on ethnoracial solidarity or immigrant-linked concerns when making political judgments, but they leave less developed how Republican affiliation itself becomes understandable, socially reinforced, and durable over time. If Latino Republicanism primarily reflected weakened ethnoracial identity or diminished immigrant-linked attachment, Republican alignment should appear especially fragile during periods when the Republican Party embraces highly visible exclusionary rhetoric and restrictive immigration policies. Yet recent electoral patterns suggest otherwise: Latino Republican identification has persisted—and in some contexts expanded—even under conditions in which Republican rhetoric and policy agendas are widely framed as hostile toward immigrants and Latinos (Hopkins et al. 2023).

This limitation is especially important because recent Republican gains have emerged across generational and nativity lines rather than being concentrated only among the most assimilated Latinos. What recent patterns suggest, then, is not simply that some Latinos have become less attached to ethnoracial or immigrant-linked identities. They also suggest that the broader structure of partisan conflict has changed.

Over recent decades, partisan divisions in the United States have become increasingly organized around competing moral, cultural, religious, and national visions. As a result, the social categories, symbols, and group cues that voters associate with each party have also shifted, including associations tied to religion, race, class, ideology, immigration, and national belonging (e.g., Pérez et al. 2025; Westwood and Peterson 2022; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022). These shifts may make the Republican Party appear to some Latino voters as more closely associated with

traditional family life, religious values, social order, and stricter immigration enforcement, while the Democratic Party may appear more closely associated with racial justice, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and progressive social change (O'Brian 2024). Under these conditions, individuals may encounter a political environment in which partisan labels appear more closely aligned with commitments they already understand as central to who they are.

This distinction matters because partisan conflict is not experienced only through policy disagreement. It is also encountered through the social groups, symbolic boundaries, moral commitments, and ways of life that individuals come to associate with each party (Green et al. 2002; Winter 2010; Saavedra Cisneros 2016). As partisan polarization intensifies, these associations become more visible and more socially consequential, shaping how individuals interpret partisan difference and where they understand themselves to fit politically. Latino Republicanism therefore cannot be fully understood through Latino-specific accounts of identity erosion alone. It must also be situated within a broader party system in which partisan identities have become more ideologically differentiated, socially embedded, and politically meaningful.

Recognizing this limitation requires a broader analytic shift. Rather than approaching Latino Republicanism primarily as the weakening of Democratic attachment, this dissertation situates it within the wider transformations of the contemporary U.S. party system. The remainder of this chapter develops that move by turning to the literature on partisan polarization and related processes of partisan and social sorting. Doing so places Latino Republican alignment within the broader reorganization of partisan identity across the U.S. electorate while preserving the interpretive question at the center of this dissertation: how Republican affiliation comes to be understood as fitting, how it becomes socially reinforced, and how it remains sustainable alongside Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments.

Political Polarization in the United States and Its Impact on the Electorate

The broader party system helps clarify what prevailing explanations alone cannot fully explain. Over recent decades, partisan polarization has reshaped the meaning of party identification in U.S. politics (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Levendusky 2009; Westwood and Peterson 2022). Party labels now signal not only positions on policy, but broader commitments about religion, national belonging, social change, and competing visions of American life (Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018; Westwood and Peterson 2022; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022; Pérez et al. 2025). Approaching Latino Republicanism through this lens does not displace ethnoracial or immigrant-linked questions. Rather, it asks how those attachments are interpreted within a party system in which partisan identities have become more ideologically distinct and more socially consequential.

From the 1930s through the early 1960s, partisan conflict in the United States was structured primarily around economic issues related to the welfare state, labor protections, and the scope of federal intervention (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Levendusky 2009). During this period, both parties contained internally heterogeneous coalitions, and civil rights operated as a cross-cutting issue rather than a central axis of partisan division. This arrangement began to unravel in the early 1960s (O'Brian 2024). The 1964 presidential election marked a critical turning point: President Lyndon Johnson committed the Democratic Party to federal civil rights reform, while Republican nominee Barry Goldwater opposed the Civil Rights Act on constitutional and ideological grounds. In the process, civil rights moved from being an internal source of disagreement to a more central line of partisan conflict (Carmines and Stimson 1989).

These shifts were especially consequential in the South. White Southern conservatives, who had long remained within the Democratic coalition, increasingly came to view the national

Democratic Party as incompatible with their political commitments (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Levendusky 2009; O'Brian 2024). Republican elites appealed to these voters through emphases on states' rights, cultural traditionalism, and resistance to federally mandated social change. Over successive election cycles, these appeals facilitated a sustained migration of White Southern conservatives into the Republican Party, strengthening the party's ideological profile and helping nationalize these conflicts (O'Brian 2024).

What began as a regional realignment over race gradually became part of a broader national culture war involving issues distinct from, but related to, racial conflict—such as immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, gender relations, abortion, and gun politics (Levendusky 2009; Valentino and Sears 2005; McCarty et al. 2016; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022; Westwood and Peterson 2022). As these issues became more closely tied to partisan conflict, party labels came to signal broader moral, cultural, and national commitments (O'Brian 2024). This history matters for the present study not because Latino Republican alignment is identical to White Southern realignment, but because it shows how changes in party conflict can alter how voters interpret their partisan attachments. When parties become organized around commitments people view as central to who they are, older partisan attachments can become unsettled and new alignments can come to feel like a better fit.

Subsequent scholarship has documented a range of elite-level developments—polarized legislative behavior, strategic agenda setting, and increasingly nationalized political messaging—that widened the ideological distance between the parties (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Levendusky 2009). Whatever their relative weight, these developments contributed to a party system characterized by clearer ideological boundaries. Republican coalitions became increasingly associated with conservative positions, while Democratic coalitions became more

consistently associated with liberal ones. Within this environment, partisanship and ideology became more tightly aligned, a pattern Levendusky (2009) describes as partisan sorting. In a sorted electorate, Democratic identifiers more consistently support liberal candidates and policies, while Republican identifiers more consistently support conservative ones, even if individual issue positions do not always change dramatically (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018; Margolis 2018).

Partisan sorting explains how party identification and ideological commitments come into closer alignment. Social sorting explains a related but distinct process: how party identification becomes connected to the social cleavages people inhabit (Mason 2018). Scholars use social sorting to describe the alignment of partisanship with social identities such as religion, race, geography, and ideology (Roccas and Brewer 2002; Mason 2018). As these identities converge onto party lines, cross-cutting cleavages weaken, and partisanship becomes more deeply embedded in everyday life. Under these conditions, partisan identity is experienced not only as a set of political commitments, but as part of broader structures of belonging, recognition, and social life.

Taken together, *partisan* and *social sorting* provide a broader theoretical basis for understanding how partisan identities become more coherent and socially consequential in contemporary U.S. politics. I use *partisan sorting* to examine how participants come to see Republican affiliation as better aligned with commitments they describe as longstanding. I use *social embeddedness*, building on the social-sorting literature, to examine how that alignment becomes recognizable and reinforced within everyday domains of belonging, especially religious life and understandings of American national identity. The distinction matters: *partisan sorting* explains how Republican alignment comes to feel politically fitting, while *social embeddedness*

explains how that alignment becomes socially intelligible and reinforced. Framed this way, the Latino case is not anomalous. It is analytically revealing because it shows how broader dynamics of partisan reorganization are interpreted and lived in a setting where existing theories would have expected continued Democratic attachment.

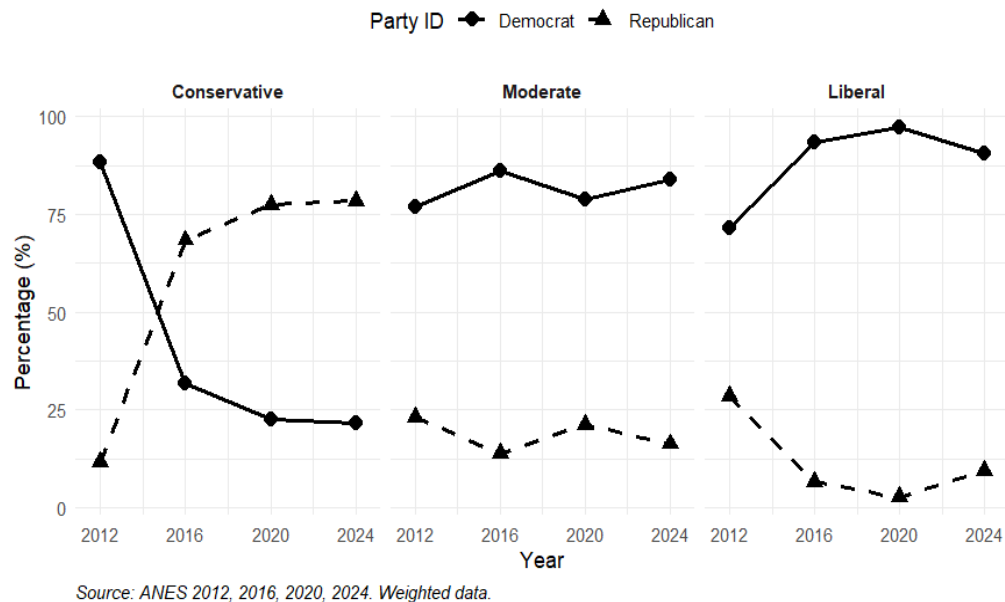
Latino Republicans and the Role of Partisan Polarization

I argue that Latino Republican alignment is better understood within a polarized party system in which party labels have come to signal more than policy positions. As the Republican Party has become more consistently associated with conservatism and the Democratic Party with liberalism, partisan differences have become easier for voters to recognize (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018; Westwood and Peterson 2022; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022). At the same time, party conflict has become increasingly organized around religion, national belonging, immigration, social change, and competing visions of American life. Under these conditions, party labels signal not only what each party supports, but also the commitments, communities, and ways of life people associate with them.

For Latino Republicans, this means that alignment with the Republican Party cannot be understood only by asking whether Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments have weakened. It also requires asking how participants interpret the differences between the parties and why Republican affiliation comes to feel like a better fit. Many participants do not describe Republican alignment as the abandonment of Latino identity or immigrant ties. Rather, they describe weighing those attachments alongside other commitments—especially religion, family, national belonging, social order, and views about moral authority—and concluding that the Republican Party better represents their broader longstanding commitments and the social cleavages that they inhabit.

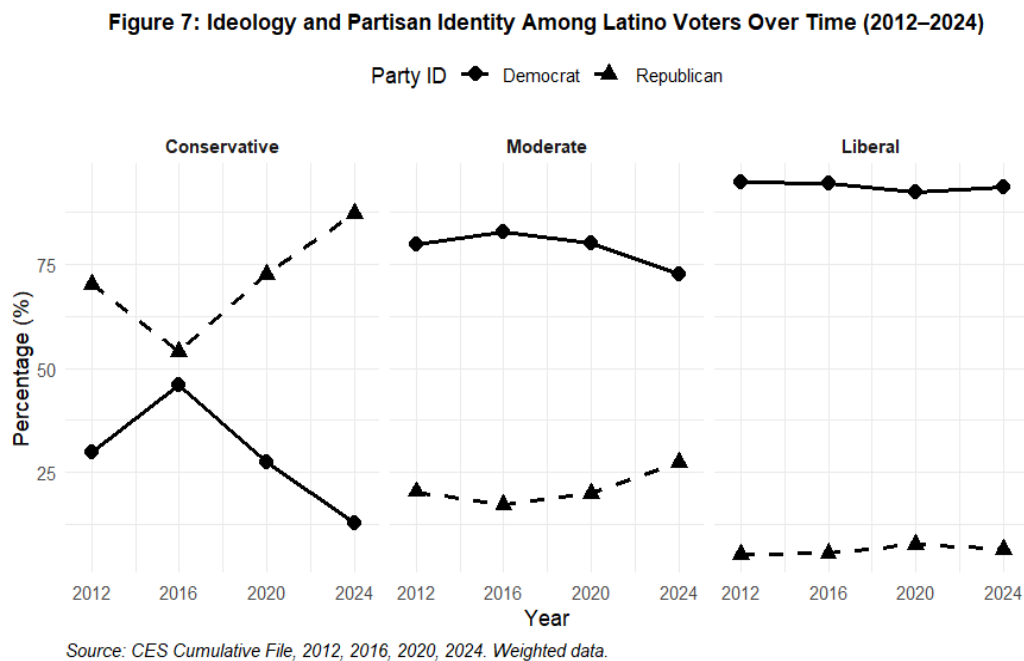
This dissertation develops that account through three related but analytically distinct processes. First, *partisan sorting* explains how participants bring partisan affiliation and commitments they describe as longstanding into closer alignment. Second, *social embeddedness* explains how Republican alignment becomes recognizable and reinforced within everyday domains of belonging, especially religious communities and understandings of the American national community. Third, *identity reconciliation* explains how participants sustain Republican alignment alongside Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments by defining when those attachments should shape political judgment and when they should not. Together, these processes explain how Republican alignment comes to make sense to participants, becomes part of their everyday lives, and persisted over time, despite the GOP’s growing embrace of policies and rhetoric many perceive as detrimental to Latinos and immigrants.

Figure 6: Ideology and Partisan Identity Among Latino Voters Over Time (2012–2024)



Patterns in Figure 6 provide contextual support for situating this argument within broader shifts in partisan identification. Using ANES data from 2012 to 2024, the figure shows a sharp increase in Republican identification among Latino conservatives after 2012, alongside a decline

in Democratic identification. These descriptive patterns do not establish causality, nor do they show how individual voters interpret their partisan attachments. They do, however, suggest that Latino conservatives increasingly came to identify with the Republican Party during a period when anti-immigrant rhetoric and restrictive policy proposals became more visible and politically salient (McCarty et al. 2016; O'Brian 2024). That pattern runs against expectations that group-threat frameworks would anticipate straightforward Democratic consolidation under such conditions (Pantoja et al. 2001; Bowler and Segura 2011).



The pattern is not confined to a single dataset. Figure 7, which draws on the Cooperative Election Study cumulative file (CES 2012–2024), shows a similar post-2016 increase in Republican identification among Latino conservatives, even though the magnitude and timing of the shift vary across surveys.⁶ These differences are consistent with known variation in sampling design and respondent composition. Together, the ANES and CES suggest the same underlying

⁶ Figures 1 and 2 are based on respondents' self-reported partisanship and ideological identification measures.

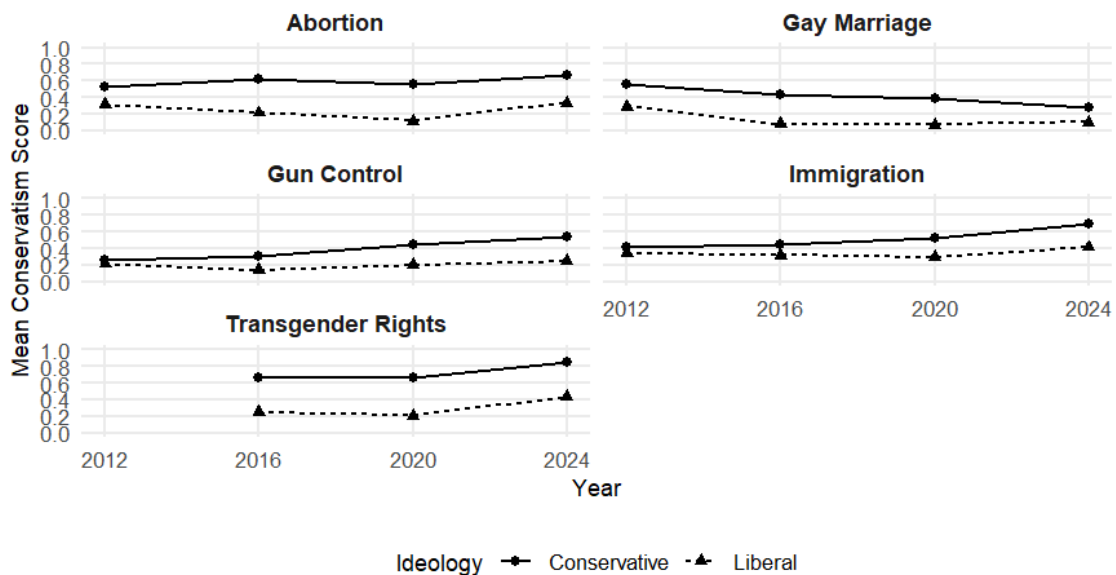
development: a portion of Latino conservatives increasingly identifying with the Republican Party during a time of intensified partisan polarization. The convergence of these patterns across independent data sources suggests that the shift is not simply an artifact of a single dataset.

These descriptive patterns are consistent with the possibility that some conservative Latinos increasingly see the GOP as better representing commitments they already held. Latinos have long exhibited variation in religious commitments, family values, social conservatism, and views about immigration (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Pérez and Cobian 2024). What appears to have changed is the party system in which those commitments are interpreted. Contemporary partisan conflict has become increasingly organized around culture war issues, including immigration, abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, religion, and national belonging. I use the term “culture war issues” not to refer to a fixed list of policy positions, but to broader conflicts over social order, ideas about right and wrong, and the boundaries of national belonging (O’Brian 2024). As partisan distinctions become clearer and more socially consequential, Latino voters may find it easier to understand their own commitments in relation to parties that appear more ideologically distinct (Green et al. 2002). In this sense, the observed shifts in partisan identification are consistent with partisan sorting. The interviews analyzed in the chapters that follow examine how participants narrate this process in their own terms.

At the same time, these broader patterns do not imply that all Latino Republicans are recent converts. A substantial minority of Latino adults have long identified with the Republican Party (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Pérez and Cobian 2024). For this reason, I do not treat partisan sorting as a single temporal sequence in which prior commitments always lead voters to adopt a new partisan identity. In the interview data, I reconstruct this alignment process through at least two related narrative pathways. For some participants, the process resembles *ideology-*

driven sorting, as I define below: they describe longstanding moral, religious, social, or political commitments and come to see the Republican Party as better representing those commitments. For others whose Republican alignment was already established, the process is better understood as *interpretive consolidation*: existing Republican identification shapes how political questions are interpreted, prioritized, and reinforced over time. As the contemporary Republican Party increasingly emphasizes cultural traditionalism, the defense of national community, and resistance to progressive social change, longstanding Latino Republicans encounter a partisan environment in which their existing commitments can become more tightly connected to Republican alignment. These pathways do not describe fixed types of people. They describe different ways Republican alignment comes to feel fitting within a polarized political environment.

Figure 8: Latino Conservatives and Liberals on Culture War Issues 2012–2024



Source: ANES 2012, 2016, 2020, 2024. Weighted data.

Figure 8 further situates these interpretive pathways within the broader issue environment by showing persistent differences between Latino conservatives and liberals across several culture-war issues, even as the magnitude and direction of those differences vary across issues

and over time.⁷ Compared to Latino liberals, Latino conservatives are generally more likely to hold restrictive or traditionalist positions on immigration, abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and gun policy, though the size and direction of these differences vary across issues and over time. These patterns do not settle the interpretive question at the center of this dissertation, nor do they suggest that issue positions mechanically produce partisan identification. Rather, they provide descriptive context for understanding how individuals encounter a party system in which certain issue cleavages have become more strongly associated with partisan difference.

Crucially, however, these aggregate patterns cannot show how individuals interpret these developments *in their own terms*. They suggest that partisan identification among Latino conservatives has shifted in ways consistent with partisan sorting, but they cannot show how participants understand party differences, how they connect those differences to their own commitments, or how they justify Republican alignment alongside Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments. That is the work of the interview evidence.

Partisan sorting helps explain how participants come to see Republican alignment as a better political fit, but it does not fully explain how that alignment becomes socially recognizable and reinforced in everyday life. Drawing on the social sorting literature, I use *social embeddedness* to capture this second dimension. It matters for the puzzle of Latino Republican alignment because participants are not only comparing parties as isolated individuals; they are also locating themselves within domains of belonging where certain political alignments appear more recognizable, appropriate, and morally grounded than others. For participants in this study, Republican alignment is frequently discussed in relation to religious communities and understandings of the American national community. In these settings, partisan alignment is not

⁷ Issue items were rescaled from 0 to 1, with higher scores reflecting more conservative attitudes.

experienced only as an issue position or private political preference. It becomes part of a broader account of community, values, and place in American life.

The central tension motivating this dissertation becomes most visible when participants confront the claim that Republican partisanship is incompatible with Latino identity or the immigrant experience. *Identity reconciliation* captures how they navigate that tension. Participants do not necessarily respond by abandoning Latino identity or distancing themselves from immigrant-linked attachments. Rather, they explain when those attachments should matter politically and when they should not. In this way, Republican alignment is sustained without requiring participants to reject Latino identity or the immigrant experience altogether.

By bringing *partisan sorting*, *social embeddedness*, and *identity reconciliation* together, this dissertation situates Latino Republican alignment within the broader dynamics of U.S. polarization while remaining attentive to how participants understand their own political commitments. Latino Republican alignment is not approached here as a deviation from expected political behavior. It is approached as a process through which Republican affiliation comes to fit with participants' commitments, becomes reinforced in their everyday social worlds, and is sustained alongside Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments. The chapters that follow develop this argument empirically by reconstructing how these processes appear in participants' accounts.

Conclusion

This chapter has reconsidered dominant explanations for Latino partisan alignment in light of contemporary patterns of Republican support. Prior scholarship has generated important insights into Latino political behavior, especially by highlighting the roles of ethnoracial identity, panethnic consciousness, and ties to the immigrant experience in sustaining Democratic

alignment. Yet these frameworks offer only a partial explanation for contemporary Latino Republicanism, particularly in a period marked by heightened polarization and a Republican Party increasingly associated with exclusionary rhetoric, candidates, and policy proposals.

The limitation of these accounts lies in their analytic orientation. They often conceptualize Latino Republicanism as the weakening or absence of forces presumed to sustain Democratic loyalty. In doing so, they identify routes away from Democratic attachment but offer less insight into how Republican attachment itself becomes meaningful, socially reinforced, and durable. This limitation is especially important because contemporary Latino Republican support has persisted and expanded under conditions that prevailing accounts would expect to reinforce Democratic consolidation.

To address this limitation, this chapter has situated Latino Republican alignment within the broader transformations of the contemporary U.S. party system. As partisan conflict has become more sharply organized around religion, national belonging, immigration, social change, and related culture-war issues, party labels have come to signal broader commitments and ways of life. The question, then, is not only whether Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments have weakened, but how Republican affiliation comes to be interpreted as fitting, socially reinforced, and sustainable alongside those attachments.

This framework does not treat Latino Republicanism as anomalous. Nor does it reduce Latino Republican support to a simple weakening of ethnoracial solidarity. Instead, it situates Latino partisan alignment within the broader dynamics of a polarized party system while remaining attentive to how Latino Republicans understand their own political commitments. The dissertation's contribution is therefore not to predict vote choice or assess the democratic consequences of polarization, but to explain how Republican affiliation comes to feel fitting,

becomes socially reinforced, and remains stable alongside Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments.

The chapters that follow develop this argument empirically. Chapter 3 examines how *partisan sorting* operates in participants' accounts, examining how longstanding commitments and partisan identification are brought into alignment within a polarized political environment. Chapter 4 develops the concept of *social embeddedness* by examining how Republican alignment becomes recognizable and reinforced within religious life and the imagined American national community. Chapter 5 then examines *identity reconciliation*: how participants sustain partisan commitments alongside enduring ties to Latino identity and the immigrant experience. Taken together, these chapters offer an interpretive account of Latino Republicanism that clarifies how Republican affiliation becomes rooted in everyday social life and remains stable even when other attachments might seem to point in a different political direction.

CHAPTER 3:

PARTISAN ALIGNMENT AS AN INTERPRETIVE PROCESS: LATINO REPUBLICANS IN A POLARIZED PARTY SYSTEM

On a sweltering September morning in 2024—just months before Starr County would cast its first Republican majority vote in over a century (Meurer 2024)—I sat across from Alfredo Ortiz, 54, a former Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer who, after a lifetime as a Democrat, came to align his partisan affiliation with the Republican Party in 2016. A native of Starr County, Alfredo was mounting a primary challenge against a 16-year incumbent entrenched in the local Democratic establishment. His account is not presented here as an isolated case. Rather, it offers a point of entry into a broader set of narratives through which Latino Republicans describe how their partisan alignments have taken shape in a political environment they understand as increasingly polarized.

South Texas provides a particularly demanding context for examining the central puzzle of this dissertation. The region's dense foreign-born and majority-Latino electorate (see Figure 4 in Chapter 1), its long history of Democratic dominance, and its recent increase in Republican vote share (see Figure 5 in Chapter 1) create a setting in which Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments remain highly salient. In such a context, explanations that attribute Republican alignment to the weakening of those attachments would be expected to travel especially well. Yet the persistence—and, in some cases, intensification—of Republican support suggests that these explanations do not fully capture how participants themselves understand their partisan alignment (Seawright and Gerring 2008). This chapter therefore asks a narrower question: how do Latino Republicans interpret perceived party differences in relation to

commitments they describe as longstanding and central to their worldview, and how do those interpretations make Republican affiliation or repeated Republican electoral support appear fitting and sustainable?

Existing scholarship has often approached Latino Republican alignment through accounts centered on weakened panethnic identity or attenuated ties to the immigrant experience (de la Garza et al. 1993; Hood et al. 1997; Binder et al. 1997; Branton 2007; Basler 2008; Alamillo 2019; Hickel et al. 2020). These perspectives help identify conditions under which Democratic attachment may loosen, but they fall short of helping us understand how Republican alignment itself is understood and sustained in contemporary U.S. politics. This chapter addresses that gap by examining how participants describe the relationship between perceived party differences, their own commitments, and alignment with the Republican Party.

Across interviews, participants repeatedly describe a political environment in which the major parties are sharply divided around issues tied to religion, family, national belonging, and social order, including immigration, abortion, LGBTQ rights, and guns. Within that context, they narrate partisan alignment as an interpretive process: they relate perceived party differences to commitments they describe as longstanding or central to who they are. I interpret these accounts as consistent with partisan sorting (Levendusky 2009), not as a causal mechanism imposed on the data, but as a way of characterizing reasoning sequences participants repeatedly articulate.

Drawing on the broader set of ($N = 85$) in-depth interviews, including ($n = 75$) interviews with Latino Republicans, this chapter identifies a recurring interpretive process through which participants explain Republican alignment within a polarized party system. Participants frequently describe commitments they understand as longstanding—often rooted in family histories, religious beliefs, occupational identities, economic orientations, and views about social

order—interpret the parties as differing in ways relevant to those commitments and narrate Republican affiliation or repeated support for Republican candidates as recognition that the GOP is a better steward of their personal commitments. I interpret this recurring sequence as *ideology-driven sorting*: a process through which participants relate commitments they portray as prior and enduring to perceived party differences. Not every participant who supports Republican candidates narrates alignment through this sequence as clearly; as the analysis shows, some accounts reveal adjacent routes to Republican electoral support that help clarify the limits of the primary pattern. At the same time, the chapter identifies a narrower process in which Republican alignment does not end with an initial recognition of fit. Once Republican affiliation is established, some participants describe political reasoning as becoming organized through a relatively stable Republican-oriented standpoint over time. I treat this pattern as *interpretive consolidation* after partisan alignment. Although less consistently articulated than ideology-driven sorting, it is analytically important because it helps explain how Republican affiliation, once established, can become a basis for interpreting later political conflict.

The chapter proceeds in four steps. I first clarify how partisan sorting is identified in the interview data and distinguish it from adjacent explanations. I then establish how participants perceive the contemporary party system as polarized around issues tied to religion, family, national belonging, and social order. The next section examines the primary interpretive sequence, ideology-driven sorting, through which participants describe alignment with the Republican Party as emerging from commitments they portray as longstanding. The following section then considers a related process of interpretive consolidation, in which Republican alignment, once established, becomes a relatively stable orientation from which participants describe organizing their views across issues. The conclusion clarifies how these processes help

explain Latino Republican alignment while setting up the distinct processes examined in Chapters 4 and 5.

Identifying Partisan Sorting in Latino Republicans' Accounts

Chapter 2 introduced partisan sorting (Levendusky 2009) as a process through which party identification and ideological commitments become more closely aligned within a polarized party system. In this chapter, I use that concept interpretively rather than as a survey-based measure of ideological constraint, party switching, or issue consistency. The analytic question is not whether participants became more conservative before becoming Republican, whether their issue positions perfectly match the Republican Party, or whether repeated Republican voting necessarily indicates Republican identification. Rather, the question is how participants narrate the relationship between commitments they describe as longstanding, the differences they perceive between the parties, and their own Republican affiliation or electoral support. I therefore identify ideology-driven sorting when participants describe Republican affiliation or repeated support for Republican candidates as fitting with commitments they portray as prior, enduring, and central to how they understand themselves politically. I use ideology-driven sorting in a broad interpretive sense, not to refer only to formal ideological self-placement or consistency across issue positions. The term captures how participants connect Republican alignment to commitments they understand as politically meaningful, including religion, family socialization, moral order, immigration, economic orientation, occupational experience, and national belonging. I identify interpretive consolidation more narrowly, where participants describe an already established Republican orientation as organizing how subsequent political questions are interpreted, prioritized, or connected. I also attend to cases that do not

fully follow the dominant sequence, since these accounts clarify the boundaries of the interpretive process identified here.

This chapter draws on the ($n = 75$) in-depth interviews with Latino Republicans conducted across five theoretically significant South Texas counties between 2020 and 2025. These interviews provide detailed accounts of political identity, values, perceptions of the party system, issue interpretations, and partisan trajectories. The central task is therefore to examine how participants themselves describe and interpret the development of their Republican partisan alignment. Consistent with the abductive and interpretive approach outlined in Chapter 1, the analysis focuses on recurring interpretive reasoning sequences through which participants narrate how commitments, perceived party differences, and partisan identification come into alignment. These patterns were identified through iterative comparison of interview segments within and across cases.

In the interviews, partisan sorting appears most clearly through two related narrative patterns. The first is ideology-driven sorting, understood here as an interpretive process rather than as a measure of formal ideological constraint. In these accounts, participants articulate commitments they portray as longstanding, describe the parties as differing in ways relevant to those commitments, and narrate Republican affiliation or repeated support for Republican candidates as recognition that Republican alternatives better reflect what they already value. Religion, family socialization, views of social order, migration experience, occupational identity, economic orientation, and understandings of national belonging frequently appear as the substantive commitments through which participants evaluate partisan alternatives.

The second pattern is interpretive consolidation after partisan alignment. In these accounts, participants focus less on movement toward Republican alignment than on political

judgment after a Republican orientation is already established. I use interpretive consolidation to describe the narrower pattern in which participants narrate Republican affiliation as a relatively stable standpoint through which later political issues are interpreted, prioritized, or connected across domains.

The distinction between ideology-driven sorting and interpretive consolidation builds on Levendusky's work on partisan sorting (2009), but I use these terms to describe patterns that emerged from participants' accounts, not fixed categories imposed on the interviews. These patterns are analytically related, but they are not fixed types or mutually exclusive categories. Ideology-driven sorting appears most clearly in narratives of movement toward the Republican Party, while interpretive consolidation appears most clearly in narratives of maintenance after Republican alignment is already in place. The purpose of the chapter is therefore not to classify participants into discrete groups, but to reconstruct how participants describe commitments, partisan identity, and political judgment as coming into relation within a polarized party system.

This formulation also clarifies the chapter's relationship to adjacent explanations. Some participant accounts are compatible with perspectives such as imported ideology (Wals 2011, 2013), religious realignment (Campbell et al. 2020), party images (Green et al. 2002; Saavedra Cisneros 2016), variation in how core political values structure attitudes across racial and ethnic groups (Saavedra Cisneros et al. 2023), social-group schemas (Winter 2010), or symbolic versus operational ideology (Ellis and Stimson 2009). These perspectives illuminate important aspects of what participants value, where those commitments come from, and the cues through which they understand the parties. My analytic focus, however, is on a more specific interpretive step that participants repeatedly describe: relating perceived party differences to commitments they understand as central to who they are and narrating Republican alignment in those terms.

This distinction matters because the argument is not that imported ideology, religious commitments, occupational identity, party images, or social conservatism are unimportant. Nor do I claim that partisan sorting replaces these explanations. Rather, I treat them as substantive materials through which participants make partisan differences meaningful. A participant's Catholic commitments, experience in law enforcement, migration history, or views about family and social order do not, by themselves, constitute partisan sorting. They become analytically relevant to partisan sorting when participants explicitly relate those commitments to perceived differences between the parties and narrate Republican alignment as a recognition of partisan fit. The chapter therefore does not adjudicate alternatives by excluding them; it specifies the interpretive step through which those elements are organized into an account of partisan alignment.

Latino Republicans' Perceptions of Partisan Polarization

Before examining the interpretive processes through which Latino Republicans describe their partisan identification and their longstanding commitments as coming into alignment, it is necessary to establish how participants themselves characterize the contemporary party system. Across interviews, Latino Republicans described the Democratic and Republican parties as sharply divided, often describing partisan conflict through issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration policy, national identity, gun regulation, and public education. Participants repeatedly described these perceived divisions as the context within which they evaluate partisan choices and make sense of their own political commitments. These accounts do not simply catalog policy disagreement. Rather, they indicate how participants themselves construct the terrain within which partisan differences are recognized, interpreted, and evaluated.

Within these accounts, partisan polarization is not described as a detached feature of the political system. Instead, participants describe it as the backdrop against which they make sense of their own political commitments and affiliations. Political identification, in this sense, is not narrated as a routine choice or an inherited label. It is described as emerging through engagement with issues participants understood as tied to religion, family, national belonging, and social order. Rather than reducing polarization to discrete policy disagreements, participants frequently describe partisan divisions as extending into questions they regard as deeply important in their lives. In these accounts, partisan division is treated as an enduring feature of political life—something participants orient themselves around and through which they make sense of politics.

Participants often situated these perceptions historically, describing earlier periods in which party boundaries were experienced as less rigid. In doing so, they emphasized what they understood as the prior ideological heterogeneity of the Democratic Party and its earlier capacity to accommodate socially conservative positions. Gerardo Cuevas, a 70-year-old retired banker, reflected, “Texas used to be a Democrat state for a long time... These people were called the ‘Blue Dog Democrats’ because they were moderate Democrats, conservative Democrats... They were pro-life, they supported our second amendment.” Similarly, Rey, a 78-year-old self-described former “Blue Dog Democrat,” framed his partisan trajectory in terms of changing party boundaries rather than personal ideological transformation: “I was a Democrat... because back then there were conservatives who were also Democrats. But now everything has changed. The Democratic Party no longer tolerates that diversity.” These reflections do not simply express nostalgia. They illustrate how participants interpret contemporary partisan polarization through contrast with what they describe as a prior period in which ideological diversity within parties was more visible or more acceptable.

Across interviews, participants repeatedly identified contemporary culture-war issues as central reference points through which they understood differences between the parties. Leti, a 67-year-old from Hidalgo County, described the Democratic Party as “pushing this extremist ideology that is targeting our children in schools... letting criminals and drugs through our borders.” Even participants who described longstanding Republican identification framed their partisan attachment as continually reinforced through their interpretation of these issues. This dynamic appears not only among those with uninterrupted Republican identification, but also among participants whose voting histories reflect earlier periods of Democratic dominance in local politics. Esmer Rodriguez, a 47-year-old Republican who consistently supported Republican candidates in general elections while occasionally voting for Democrats in local races during those earlier periods, explained, “I voted for some Democrats locally in some past elections, but I no longer can support a party that... allows child trafficking [and] drugs to come into our country....” In these accounts, the parties are not described simply as offering different policy platforms. They are interpreted as representing contrasting orientations toward social order, morality, and national belonging.

Taken together, these accounts describe a political landscape in which participants perceive partisan divisions as both sharp and consequential, and in which those divisions are organized around issues they understand as tied to longstanding commitments and ways of life. It is within this interpretive context that participants describe Republican alignment as making sense in relation to the commitments and partisan differences they perceive. The significance of these perceptions for the present analysis is not that they establish an objective measure of polarization, but that they indicate how participants themselves understand the structure of partisan conflict and the terms on which partisan alignment becomes meaningful.

This interpretive context sets the stage for the subsequent analysis. The next section examines the primary process through which participants narrate alignment as emerging from commitments they portray as prior to partisan identification. The subsequent section then considers a related process that appears after alignment has already taken shape: participants' descriptions of partisan attachment as a standpoint through which political issues are interpreted and made coherent over time. In both cases, the perception of a polarized party system provides the conditions under which these reasoning sequences take shape in participants' accounts.

Interpreting Partisan Alignment in a Polarized Party System

The preceding section established the interpretive terrain within which participants make sense of partisan alignment: a party system they understand as sharply polarized around religion, family, national belonging, and social order. I now turn from participants' perceptions of that terrain to the reasoning through which they locate themselves within it. The first subsection examines the dominant interpretive pattern in the interviews, in which participants narrate Republican alignment as fitting with commitments they describe as longstanding. The second examines the narrower pattern of interpretive consolidation, in which an already established Republican orientation becomes a standpoint through which later political questions are interpreted and prioritized.

Interpreting Alignment Through Prior Commitments

Participants' accounts often included elements emphasized in prior research—religious commitments, family socialization, migration experiences, occupational identities, economic orientations, perceptions of party constituencies, and broad ideological labels (Green et al. 2002; Winter 2010; Wals 2011, 2013; Campbell et al. 2020). These elements matter, but I do not treat them as separate explanations to be weighed against one another. Instead, I examine how

participants bring them together when explaining their partisan alignment. Across interviews, a recurring sequence appears: participants describe commitments they portray as longstanding, interpret the parties as differing in relation to those commitments, and articulate their Republican partisanship as the product of recognizing which party is a better steward of their personal commitments.

This approach also clarifies how the present analysis relates to distinctions in the literature between symbolic and operational ideology (Ellis and Stimson 2009). Participants sometimes invoke broad labels such as “conservative” or “traditional,” and at other times describe specific positions on issues such as abortion, policing, or education. These elements often appear together within the same narrative. Their analytic significance here does not lie in determining whether participants hold fully elaborated ideological belief systems or rely on symbolic identification alone. Rather, such labels and issue-specific commitments matter because participants relate them to perceived differences between the parties and evaluate them in those terms. In this sense, ideological labels, moral orientations, migration experiences, and perceptions of party constituencies are best understood not as rival explanations, but as elements participants bring together when making sense of partisan alignment.

Alfredo, who described himself as a “staunch Democrat until 2016,” provides a clear point of entry into how participants narrate this process. He described his decision to align with the Republican Party as “...a big deal in my head [because it was] ...like divorcing my family, literally,” underscoring the emotional and relational stakes he associates with that shift. His account is notable because, if Latino Republican alignment were primarily a byproduct of attenuated panethnic attachment, such a move might be expected to appear relatively unproblematic. Alfredo, by contrast, narrates it as consequential and difficult. 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. Alfredo's narrative also clarifies why this argument does not depend on participants articulating fully elaborated ideological worldviews (Ellis and Stimson 2009). I interpret this as ideology-driven sorting not because Alfredo uses the symbolic label "conservative," but because he links that label to concrete commitments around marriage, abortion, fiscal restraint, border enforcement, gun rights, and self-reliance, and then uses those commitments to explain why Republican affiliation came to appear as the better partisan fit. 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 alignment is narrated less as inherited loyalty or permanent attachment than as an ongoing judgment about whether a party continues to reflect the commitments he regards as central to his worldview.

Alfredo's narrative also reflects religious realignment insofar as his Catholic faith helps explain why the contemporary Democratic Party feels increasingly distant (Campbell et al. 2020). Yet those commitments become politically consequential only when he links them to perceived differences between the parties. Catholic commitments around marriage and abortion, fiscal responsibility, border enforcement, gun rights, and self-reliance become part of a broader

judgment about party fit. In this sense, religion does not operate as an isolated explanatory factor. It becomes one of the commitments through which Alfredo interprets the partisan landscape.

His reasoning is also shaped by how he interprets each party's coalition (Green et al. 2002; Winter 2010). When describing his distance from the Democratic Party, Alfredo pointed to debates around police reform and "defund the police" rhetoric as a direct affront to his experience as a former law enforcement officer: "They [Democratic politicians] were advocating to kill me... because of the uniform that I wear, because of my profession, not knowing anything about me." He also criticized portrayals of law enforcement as systemically racist and pointed to a staffing crisis in Austin, Texas, as evidence of what he viewed as Democratic mismanagement. These claims are not simply policy disagreements. They show how Alfredo reads party conflict through the groups, professions, and moral communities he associates with each party. The Democratic Party appears aligned with actors he sees as hostile to law enforcement, while the Republican Party appears aligned with law and order, self-reliance, border protection, gun rights, and Christian values. As he put it, Republicans "prioritize keeping our country safe... protect our right to bear arms... and empower us to work hard to sustain ourselves rather than living off [of] handouts from the government all of our lives."

Alfredo's narrative illustrates the broader pattern examined here. He portrays his commitments as longstanding, interprets the parties as differing in ways that bear directly on those commitments, and narrates partisan realignment as recognition that the Republican Party better reflects what he values. His account also shows how elements emphasized in prior research—party images and schemas, religious commitments, symbolic and operational ideology, and perceptions of party constituencies—are brought together within a broader process

of partisan interpretation (Green et al. 2002; Winter 2010; Saavedra Cisneros 2016; Ellis and Stimson 2009; Campbell et al. 2020).

This pattern was not unique to Alfredo. Based on my coding of the interviews, a substantial share of the ($n = 75$) Latino Republican participants articulated a comparable sequence of reasoning, though participants varied in how explicitly they described each element of that sequence. Similar sequences appeared across the sample, including among participants whose (re-)alignment with the Republican Party predates the culture-war flashpoints of the mid-2010s. César Cortinas, 70, a first-generation college graduate born in Tamaulipas, Mexico, and raised in Brownsville, Texas, provides a particularly instructive case. Though he became closely aligned with the Republican Party during the mid-2000s, César's political roots previously lay in the Democratic Party. He had long supported Democratic candidates and even ran for the position as a county judge in Cameron County as a Democrat in 2002 because, as he put it, "the Democratic Party used to have conservatives... 'Blue Dog Democrats'... moderate conservatives."

Reflecting on his realignment, César did not describe a sudden break or a single decisive issue. Instead, he narrated a cumulative recognition that the party he had long supported no longer reflected commitments he understood as enduring. Recounting his trajectory, he explained: "I switched parties somewhere around 2005. ... I ran for county judge as a Republican in 2006 and beat the incumbent [a Democrat] who had beat me four years prior. I won in '06, 2010, and 2014. [I am] the only Republican that won three times in a row in Cameron County, probably since [the] Reconstruction [Era], or a long time." When asked what prompted this shift, he emphasized the accumulation of disagreements, "There wasn't a single issue that broke the camel's back. It was the combination of things." He described the

Democratic Party as “trying to regulate and control everything... pushing for abortion in ways that conflicted with my own values, ...moving away from religious expression in public life, ...open borders, ...to take our guns, [and] embracing policies [on policing] that attack our law enforcement... that made me realize I no longer fit in the Democratic Party.” He summarized this recognition succinctly: “I have always been the same guy... I didn’t leave the Democratic Party—the Democratic Party left me.”

César similarly portrays his commitments as stable while describing partisan differences as increasingly important in relation to those commitments. His account contains both symbolic and operational elements of ideology (Ellis and Stimson 2009): he describes himself in broadly conservative terms while grounding that identification in concrete positions on abortion, taxation, government regulation, gun rights, policing, and border enforcement. The analytic point, however, is not simply that César held conservative views. It is that he compares those commitments to the differences he perceives between Democrats and Republicans and narrates partisan change as the recognition that he no longer fit within the Democratic Party. His account therefore shows how religion, views of state authority, and perceptions of party coalitions are articulated together within a cumulative narrative of partisan realignment that predates the Trump-era culture-war flashpoints emphasized in much contemporary discussion.

Martha Torres, 37, a college-educated former Democrat from Tamaulipas, offers a third example of how participants narrate partisan alignment through continuity in commitments rather than transformation in values. Her account is less elaborated than Alfredo’s or César’s, but that difference is analytically useful. Whereas Alfredo and César describe extended processes of partisan reassessment, Martha narrates alignment as a more direct recognition that the Democratic Party no longer fit commitments she understood as longstanding. These

commitments were grounded especially in family, faith, and opposition to abortion. As she explained, “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.”

Reflecting on her earlier Democratic support, Martha did not describe herself as having once held different beliefs. Instead, she explained that support as a product of limited political awareness: “I voted Democrat before [in 2008] because I wasn’t informed; then I realized that they are against my [conservative] values... because they’re far left, they’re pro-choice, [so] they don’t represent who I am. My values haven’t changed, so I just walked away and had no doubts in doing so.” She similarly described the Republican Party as the partisan formation that now best reflects those commitments: “When I look at the Republican Party’s platform, it just has a lot more in common with my [conservative] values [and] the way I was raised. [So,] I voted Republican in [the] 2016 and 2020 [general elections]... because I believed they best represented my values, [including] protecting our border, ... protecting the sanctity of life, ... supporting our Border Patrol [agents], [and] our children.”

Martha’s account aligns with research on religious realignment insofar as faith-based commitments shape how she evaluates both parties (Campbell et al. 2020). Yet she does not narrate Republican alignment as automatically produced by religious preference. Rather, she describes a process in which becoming more politically informed led her to compare the parties in relation to commitments she already held and to conclude that the Republican Party better represented those commitments. Her account also resonates with what Wals (2011, 2013) describes as imported ideology. As she put it, “My values haven’t changed... they’re not gonna change just because I crossed the [Mexico-U.S.] border.” But Martha does not simply import prior beliefs into U.S. politics in a direct or mechanical way. Those commitments become

politically consequential because she maps them onto the differences she perceives between Democrats and Republicans within a polarized party system.

Martha therefore reflects the same general sequence as Alfredo and César, but in a more compressed form: commitments are portrayed as prior, partisan differences are understood in relation to those commitments, and alignment is narrated as recognition of fit. Her account shows that ideology-driven sorting does not always require an extended narrative of party change or a dramatic break with a prior partisan identity. It can also appear when participants describe previously held moral, religious, or family commitments becoming politically activated as they come to see the parties as representing different positions on issues they understand as central to who they are.

This way of narrating partisan alignment also appears among participants who had not previously identified strongly with either party or who had remained largely disengaged from electoral politics. Monica Villanueva, 25, a third-generation patient health technician, described herself as having been raised within what she understood as a strongly conservative moral environment: “My dad’s very old school, and my grandma... [was] very, very old school [so] I grew up very, very traditional. I was always taught to do right by the Bible. [So,] I am very traditional, very conservative.” At the same time, she explained that politics had not previously occupied much of her attention: “I did not vote. I had never voted because I wasn’t that into politics.... It didn’t matter who was president to me.” By 2020, however, she cast her first vote and aligned with the Republican Party in response to what she viewed as the Democratic Party’s movement away from positions consistent with the commitments in which she had been raised: “They’re [Democratic Party] for abortion, for letting anyone cross the border, for things that go against what I believe.”

Monica's account is analytically important because it shows that this sequence does not depend on prior partisan attachment or party switching. Unlike Alfredo, César, or Martha, she does not narrate alignment as a departure from a party she once supported. Instead, she reconstructs Republican alignment as emerging when commitments that had previously remained largely outside electoral politics became newly salient in relation to perceived party differences. Her account also resonates with research on religious realignment insofar as religious commitments shape how she evaluates the parties (Campbell et al. 2020). But, as with the other cases, those commitments become politically consequential only when Monica interprets them in light of what she understands each party to represent. Here again, religious upbringing and family socialization matter because Monica connects them to her understanding of partisan difference.

Not every participant who supported Republican candidates narrated that support through the same sequence as clearly. William Reyes, a 78-year-old South Texas resident who identifies as independent rather than Republican, provides an important limiting variation. William described having voted Democratic "out of habit" when he was young, following the pattern of his parents and grandparents. He explained that this changed after he became self-employed in 1977 and began paying closer attention to taxation, government spending, and the financial obligations of supporting his family: "I changed to an issue-based voting when I became self-employed in 1977. ... I started paying attention to the issues." Over time, he also came to evaluate candidates through limited government, national defense, immigration, and economic policy.

William's account repeatedly leads him toward Republican candidates, but he does not narrate this alignment as Republican identification. "I'm not a party per se person," he explained.

“I just look at the issues.” Describing the 2024 presidential contest, he stated that, “From an issue standpoint, I mostly align on the Trump side... it’s not perfect, but it hits on points that are important to me.” William is therefore relevant not as a central illustration of the dominant ideology-driven sorting sequence identified above, but as a limiting variation: his account shows that repeated Republican electoral support can also emerge through issue-based judgments rooted in occupational and economic experience, even when participants do not describe a Republican partisan identity or narrate their alignment primarily through longstanding commitments.

Tom Saenz provides a closer analogue to the primary sequence while similarly resisting settled partisan identification. Although his electoral history included support for Democratic candidates, he voted for the Republican ticket in 2020 while continuing to insist, “I don’t consider myself a Republican or Democrat... I look at things, what are you [as a politician] gonna do?” He portrayed the Democratic Party as having become “too extreme,” particularly on abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and education—issues he regarded as tied to family, religion, and broader social change. Even while rejecting partisan labels, he therefore narrates electoral choice as grounded in the relationship between his commitments and what he understands the parties to represent. Tom is useful here as corroborating evidence of alignment through perceived fit; he later helps clarify the limits of interpretive consolidation because Republican-aligned issue positions alone do not establish that a stable partisan-oriented standpoint organizes political reasoning over time.

Across the core cases examined in this section, a recurring interpretive pattern becomes visible, though it is articulated with varying degrees of clarity and emphasis. Participants describe leaving longstanding Democratic identification or entering electoral politics for the first

time by evaluating party differences in relation to commitments they portray as longstanding and central to their worldview. Alfredo, César, Martha, and Monica each narrate Republican alignment as recognition that Republican alternatives better reflect commitments they understand themselves to have already held. Tom shows that a similar judgment of fit can appear even when a participant resists adopting a Republican partisan label. William, by contrast, identifies an adjacent route to Republican electoral support, organized more directly around occupational experience and issue-based evaluation than around the dominant narrative of continuity in longstanding commitments.

This distinction clarifies both the strength and the limits of the argument. Elements emphasized in prior research—such as religion, migration experience, family socialization, occupational identity, and perceptions of party constituencies—remain present throughout participants’ accounts. In the dominant sequence analyzed here, participants bring these elements together when explaining why Republican affiliation or Republican electoral support came to reflect commitments they describe as already central to who they are. I use ideology-driven sorting to name this recurring process of partisan fit, while recognizing that not every participant who supported Republican candidates narrated that support through precisely the same sequence. The next section examines a different and narrower pattern: how, for some participants whose Republican affiliation was already established, partisan orientation becomes a standpoint through which later political issues are interpreted and prioritized.

Interpretive Consolidation After Partisan Alignment

The previous section examined the dominant sequence through which participants describe Republican affiliation or repeated support for Republican candidates as emerging from the evaluation of party differences in relation to commitments they portray as longstanding,

while also identifying a limiting variation organized more directly around occupational experience and issue-based judgment. Some accounts, however, focus less on movement toward Republican alignment than on how political judgment is organized once a Republican orientation is already established. This pattern resembles what Matthew Levendusky (2009) describes as party-driven sorting, insofar as partisan orientation appears to shape how later issues are interpreted. Yet because the present analysis reconstructs participants' retrospective narratives rather than measuring whether party cues changed issue positions over time, I refer to this pattern as *interpretive consolidation* after partisan alignment. I identify interpretive consolidation when participants describe an already established Republican orientation as organizing how they interpret, prioritize, or connect subsequent political questions. This pattern is less consistently articulated than ideology-driven sorting in the interviews. I therefore treat interpretive consolidation as a narrower interpretive pathway rather than as a general sequence characterizing Latino Republicans in the sample. Because stable conservatism, religious commitment, professional experience, and political intensity may also organize participants' accounts, I identify this process only where participants themselves describe an established Republican orientation as connecting or prioritizing later political judgments. The cases examined below were selected because they make especially visible two forms through which this process appears: reasoning from within a long-standing Republican orientation and reasoning through a Republican orientation consolidated after an earlier partisan transition.

Perla Rezendez, 55, a retired educator from Willacy County and a long-standing Republican, illustrates the first form of interpretive consolidation: reasoning from within a Republican orientation she narrates as deeply established in her political life. Because she does not describe a moment of partisan transition, her account is especially useful for examining how

political reasoning is organized from within an already established Republican standpoint.

Republican identification is not articulated as something she arrived at through comparison or reconsideration. Instead, it appears as an enduring orientation through which political issues are interpreted and connected to one another.

Reflecting on her upbringing, Perla explained that her grandfather “raised [her] very conservative” and recalled watching Ronald Reagan’s speeches as a child because he would tell her, “Come here, sit down. This is the best president ever.” In her narrative, this early socialization provides the background through which she understands her later political judgments. She described political learning as something she absorbed through church attendance, biblical instruction, Reagan’s speeches, and conversations she heard while spending time in her grandfather’s barbershop. When asked what being American means to her, she linked national belonging to commitments she associates with conservatism, explaining that Americans should “love this country” and “have conservative values,” especially “freedom of speech” and “freedom of religion.” Early political socialization, national identity, and religious liberty do not appear in her account as separate influences. They become connected elements of the political standpoint from which she interprets later conflict.

Her discussion of public school education makes this structure especially visible. Perla does not treat school choice as a discrete policy question. Instead, she situates it within a broader interpretation of religion, parental authority, moral formation, and state power. Explaining why she chose her children’s school, she emphasized that “this is a school that they still pray at” and that it is “very conservative.” When discussing public education, she framed her position not as a technical disagreement over policy design, but as a question of value alignment: “I’m a public school teacher, I would love to go back, but not when they’re not aligned with my values.” Her

support for vouchers follows from this orientation. She presents them not as an abstract educational reform, but as a means of protecting parental authority and religious formation from what she regards as improper governmental influence over children's moral and political development.

Perla's broader account makes clear that this orientation is not only religious or ideologically conservative, but also partisan. She described herself as Republican, distinguished conservative commitments from what she understood Democrats to represent, and interpreted current political controversies through that partisan contrast. For example, she viewed Democratic support for expanded public provision, permissive immigration policies, public-school curricula, and restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic as manifestations of excessive government control. She likewise understood Republican politics as protecting religious liberty, parental authority, border enforcement, self-reliance, and the constitutional freedoms she associated with American life. In her account, Republican orientation functions as more than an electoral preference. It connects national belonging, religious liberty, educational authority, immigration, and opposition to state control within a common political understanding.

In Perla's account, schooling, religious liberty, parental authority, immigration, and government intervention are therefore not treated as isolated political questions. They are interpreted through a broader Republican-oriented standpoint that organizes how she relates political conflicts across domains. Republican identification does not replace prior commitments or early socialization. Rather, in her narrative, it provides the political orientation through which those commitments are connected to later issues and understood as part of a wider struggle over freedom, religion, national belonging, and state authority. What appears here is not a process of arriving at Republican alignment, but of reasoning from within it.

Gerardo Cuevas, a 70-year-old retired banker from Hidalgo County, illustrates a second form of interpretive consolidation: reasoning through a Republican orientation that became durable after an earlier partisan transition. Unlike Perla, who narrates Republican orientation as rooted in early political socialization, Gerardo describes an earlier period of Democratic voting followed by a shift into Republican alignment during his professional life. As discussed earlier, he interpreted the contemporary polarization of the parties against a prior period in which socially conservative “Blue Dog Democrats” remained visible in Democratic politics. His own trajectory followed this shift. Reflecting on his political history, he explained:

Up until my first two years in college, I voted Democrat, but after that, I turned Republican. I never really was that involved in politics until I got into banking. I saw how many regulatory issues that were Democrat-driven made it more difficult for us to extend our services to those who really needed it. So, I turned Republican, and I’ve been that way ever since I started in banking.

Gerardo’s significance for the present analysis lies less in explaining the initial transition itself than in showing how political reasoning is narrated after Republican alignment has become durable. He locates his movement toward the Republican Party in his professional experience with banking regulation and government authority. Decades later, however, his account extends across a much broader range of issues. He interprets debates about constitutional government, public spending, gun rights, immigration, border enforcement, media power, political corruption, and national security through an explicitly Republican-Democratic divide. Discussing Trump’s appeal, Gerardo emphasized “giving rights back to the people where they belong” and returning government to the Constitution, “where it’s for the people, by the people, not for the people by the government.” He also described himself as attempting to persuade people who were “on my side” and portrayed political conflict within his own family through distinctions between relatives who were “blue” and those who were “red.”

Gerardo's account also includes expansive claims about election fraud, media control, COVID-19, corruption, and the political forces he understood Trump to be confronting. I do not treat these claims as representative of Latino Republicans in the sample, nor as evidence for the factual accuracy of the claims themselves. Their analytic relevance here is narrower: Gerardo relates these otherwise distinct controversies through a durable Republican-oriented interpretation of political conflict. In doing so, his account makes visible how partisan affiliation can become a standpoint through which later political events are connected, prioritized, and assigned meaning.

Gerardo's account therefore illustrates interpretive consolidation after an earlier partisan transition. His initial movement toward the Republican Party is narrated through professional experience with regulation and government authority. Once that alignment is established, however, Republican orientation becomes part of the interpretive lens through which he understands subsequent political conflict. The central point is not that partisan identification eliminates independent judgment or produces complete issue consistency. It is that, in Gerardo's narrative, later political judgments are repeatedly organized through the Republican-Democratic division he has inhabited for decades.

Tom Saenz clarifies the boundary of both forms of interpretive consolidation. As discussed in the previous section, Tom's electoral behavior increasingly aligns with Republican candidates, and his views on abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and education often draw on interpretations associated with contemporary Republican discourse. Yet he explicitly resists adopting a partisan label: "I don't consider myself a Republican or Democrat... I look at things, what are you [as a politician] gonna do?" Tom narrates Republican electoral support as a judgment of fit between his commitments and what he understands candidates or parties to

represent, but he does not describe an established Republican orientation as organizing political reasoning across domains. Republican-aligned issue positions and repeated Republican electoral support, on their own, are therefore not sufficient evidence of interpretive consolidation.

Taken together, Perla and Gerardo make visible two forms through which interpretive consolidation appears in participants' accounts. Perla reasons from within a long-standing Republican orientation in which early political socialization, religious liberty, parental authority, national belonging, immigration, and skepticism toward state intervention are connected across political issues. Gerardo, by contrast, narrates an earlier transition into Republican alignment through professional experience with regulation and government authority and later interprets contemporary political conflict through a durable Republican-Democratic divide. In both forms, Republican affiliation is not simply the endpoint of an earlier judgment of partisan fit. It becomes part of the standpoint through which later political questions are connected, prioritized, and made meaningful.

An alternative interpretation is that these accounts reflect stable conservatism, religious commitment, professional socialization, or unusually intensive political engagement rather than partisan orientation itself. Those elements are plainly present and remain important. The claim is not that Republican affiliation displaces them or independently produces later political judgments. Rather, interpretive consolidation becomes visible where participants themselves organize otherwise distinct concerns through an already established Republican orientation. Perla connects religious liberty, parental authority, immigration, public provision, and state control through an explicitly Republican contrast with what she understands Democrats to represent. Gerardo connects constitutional government, border enforcement, media power, public spending, and political legitimacy through a durable Republican-Democratic divide. Tom clarifies the limit

of this interpretation: where Republican-aligned judgments are narrated as candidate or issue fit without an established partisan orientation organizing them, I do not treat the account as interpretive consolidation.

Interpretive consolidation therefore does not replace ideology-driven sorting or follow it in a uniform temporal sequence. It identifies a narrower pathway through which Republican alignment may be sustained: after Republican affiliation has become established, it can become part of the standpoint through which later political judgments are organized and sustained. This pattern helps explain why Republican alignment may persist beyond an initial recognition of partisan fit, even as participants encounter new issues, competing concerns, and changing political conflicts.

Conclusion

This chapter examined how Latino Republicans describe Republican affiliation or repeated Republican electoral support as becoming intelligible within a polarized party system. The analysis does not suggest that panethnic identity, immigrant-linked attachments, religion, family background, occupational experience, or policy preferences are irrelevant. Rather, it shows how participants relate these elements to the partisan differences they perceive between Democrats and Republicans when explaining their political alignment. Republican support is therefore not treated here simply as the product of weakened Latino identity or diminished ties to the immigrant experience. Instead, participants repeatedly describe alignment with Republican alternatives as emerging through an interpretive process in which they come to see those alternatives as better reflecting what they believe, value, and prioritize.

The chapter identified two related interpretive processes through which Republican alignment is narrated, one recurring broadly across the interviews and the other articulated more

narrowly. The first, ideology-driven sorting, appears in accounts where participants relate commitments they portray as longstanding to differences they perceive between the parties. I use the term broadly to capture participants' own accounts of politically meaningful commitments, not simply formal ideological self-placement. In these narratives, partisan movement or Republican electoral support is usually not described as a transformation in their underlying postures. Rather, participants describe recognizing that the parties differ around issues they regard as central to their personal commitments, including religion, family, immigration, public order, economic orientations, government authority, and national belonging. Republican affiliation or repeated support for Republican candidates is then narrated as a judgment that Republican alternatives better reflect those enduring commitments.

The second process, interpretive consolidation after partisan alignment, is narrower and less consistently articulated in the interviews. It appears where participants describe an already established Republican orientation as a standpoint through which later political conflicts are interpreted, prioritized, and connected across multiple domains. The analysis highlighted two forms through which this process becomes especially visible. In one form, illustrated by Perla, participants reason from within a long-standing Republican orientation rooted in political socialization, religion, national belonging, education, and state authority. In another, illustrated by Gerardo, participants describe an earlier transition into Republican alignment and later interpret contemporary conflict through a durable Republican-Democratic divide. Tom clarifies the boundary of this claim: repeated Republican support and Republican-aligned issue positions do not, by themselves, demonstrate interpretive consolidation when participants do not describe partisan orientation as organizing their judgment.

Taken together, these processes show that Latino Republicans do not simply drift away from the Democratic Party or mechanically adopt Republican positions. They interpret partisan conflict and locate themselves within it. Their accounts are often partial, uneven, retrospective, and, in some cases, politically intense. Yet they repeatedly return to a similar interpretive logic: participants describe commitments they regard as important, evaluate partisan differences in relation to those commitments, and explain Republican affiliation or Republican electoral support as a judgment of fit between their longstanding personal commitments and what they understand the GOP to represent. This helps explain how Republican alignment becomes understandable and sustainable to participants themselves, even within a political environment where Latino Republicanism is often framed as contradictory or paradoxical.

This argument also clarifies the place of Chapter 3 within the broader dissertation. Chapter 3 explains how participants come to understand Republican affiliation or Republican electoral support as aligning with commitments they describe as longstanding and, through a narrower pattern in their accounts, how established Republican affiliation can become a standpoint for later political judgment. Chapter 4 moves from interpretive fit to social embeddedness, examining how Republican alignment becomes recognizable and reinforced within domains of belonging such as religious life and American national identity. Chapter 5 then examines how participants sustain that alignment when it is challenged as incompatible with Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging. Read together, these chapters show that Latino Republican alignment is not best understood as the erosion of ethnoracial identity or immigrant attachment. Rather, it reflects how participants interpret partisan conflict, situate themselves within polarized political divisions, and sustain Republican support alongside attachments that remain meaningful parts of who they are.

CHAPTER 4

LATINO AND REPUBLICAN: THE SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF REPUBLICAN ALIGNMENT

Latino Republicans describe their partisan alignment not only as a political preference, but as a socially meaningful orientation situated within the domains of belonging through which they understand themselves and their place in the social world. Chapter 3 showed how participants interpret Republican alignment as fitting commitments they describe as longstanding. This chapter shifts to a distinct analytic focus: social embeddedness, or the process through which Republican alignment becomes recognizable, appropriate, or reinforced within valued social worlds. The chapter asks how participants come to understand Republican alignment not only as something they believe, but as something that fits the kinds of Americans, Christians, and community members they understand themselves and others to be.

Angel Arevalo, a 36-year-old self-employed contractor from Hidalgo County and founder of a local values-based civic organization, makes this process unusually explicit. The U.S.-born son of parents from Mexico, Angel described Republican alignment through the language of American national belonging: “To be a Republican is to be proud of being an American—it’s about being patriotic...protecting the freedoms that are provided to us by the U.S. Constitution.” His statement does not simply identify patriotism as a personal value or Republicanism as a policy preference. It presents Republican alignment as an orientation that aligns with his understanding of what it means to belong to the imagined American national community. Because Angel is an especially politically engaged participant, his account is not treated as representative of how directly all participants articulate this relationship. Yet it is analytically valuable because it overtly illustrates the connection this chapter examines across more direct

and more uneven forms: how Republican alignment can acquire a recognizable and appropriate place within Latino Republicans' valued domains of belonging.

The chapter examines two domains that were especially prominent in participants' accounts: American national identity and religious belonging. American national identity is narrated through patriotic expression, respect for law enforcement and institutions, self-reliance, contribution, and boundaries of legitimate national membership. Religious belonging is narrated through moral expectations, family and church relationships, and forms of social accountability. In both domains, participants describe social expectations through which Republican alignment can become more recognizable and appropriate.

The argument developed here is analytically distinct from those of the surrounding chapters. Chapter 3 showed how participants interpret Republican alignment as the product of recognizing it as the better steward of commitments they describe as longstanding. This chapter examines how that alignment becomes situated within valued domains of belonging. Chapter 5 then analyzes what happens when Republican alignment is challenged as incompatible with Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments.

Social Embeddedness as an Interpretive Extension of Social Sorting

Lilliana Mason's (2018) account of social sorting provides the theoretical foundation for this chapter. Social sorting refers to the increasing alignment of partisan identity with other social identities and cleavages, such that party affiliation comes to signal not only political preference but also social belonging. This perspective is especially useful for understanding a polarized party system in which Republican and Democratic affiliations have become associated with recognizable religious, racial, ideological, and cultural orientations (Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018; Westwood and Peterson 2022; Pérez et al. 2025; Solís and Pérez 2026). The

interview evidence analyzed here does not directly measure population-level social sorting. Instead, it shows how participants interpret, experience, and describe Republican alignment as socially recognizable and appropriate within domains of belonging they articulate as central to their broader sense of self. In the interviews analyzed here, these dynamics were especially visible in participants' accounts of American national belonging and religious life.

Social identity theory helps clarify why this interpretive dimension matters. Group identities provide categories through which individuals make sense of the social world, distinguish insiders from outsiders, and understand where they belong (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Brewer 1999). Individuals also do not necessarily experience multiple identities as separate or competing. They may understand them as overlapping, nested, or mutually reinforcing. Roccas and Brewer's (2002) account of social identity complexity is useful here because it shows that people subjectively organize the relationship among their multiple ingroups, including the extent to which those groups are perceived as sharing similar members, values, and norms. This chapter does not measure social identity complexity, nor does it claim that American or Christian identity causally leads to Republican alignment. Instead, it examines moments when participants describe Republican alignment as fitting within other meaningful domains of belonging. In those moments, partisanship becomes more socially coherent because it is experienced as consistent with the kinds of Americans or Christians participants understand themselves and others to be.

I use the term *social embeddedness* to identify this process across the interviews with Latino Republicans. Republican alignment is socially embedded when participants describe it as recognizable, appropriate, or reinforced within valued social worlds, especially religious communities and understandings of American national belonging. References to Christianity, patriotism, law and order, or self-reliance are not treated as evidence of social embeddedness

simply because participants mention them. They become evidence of social embeddedness when participants connect Republican alignment to religious or national belonging, describe political behavior as judged through the norms of those social worlds, or explain how those settings make Republican affiliation feel fitting, expected, or appropriate in everyday life.

The two domains examined here provide different kinds of evidence. Religious belonging is frequently narrated through direct interpersonal and institutional settings—churches, families, and faith-based relationships—in which political conduct can be challenged, corrected, or presumed to fit particular moral expectations. American national identity is expressed less through direct interpersonal accountability and more through civic rituals, national symbols, family socialization, publicly recognizable standards of contribution and loyalty, and boundaries around legitimate membership. The religious evidence therefore provides especially direct examples of social accountability, while the American national identity evidence shows how Republican alignment can become culturally recognizable within participants’ understandings of Americanness.

Several related interpretations capture meaningful portions of these accounts. Participants’ understandings of American national belonging may reflect bounded membership, assimilationist expectations, or respectability-based judgments of deservingness (Jones-Correa 1998; Schildkraut 2011; Cohen 1999; Beltrán 2010). Their accounts of religious life may reflect religious conservatism, moral socialization, or norm enforcement within valued communities (Wuthnow 1988; Margolis 2018; Cramer 2016). These interpretations are not rejected by the argument developed here. They help explain the norms participants value and the relationships through which those norms are communicated or enforced. The specific contribution of social embeddedness is to identify when participants connect these norms and relationships to

Republican alignment in ways that make that alignment recognizable and appropriate within valued domains of belonging. In these moments, Republican alignment is not only a policy preference; it becomes part of how participants understand what it means to be a certain kind of American or Christian.

American National Identity: Republican Alignment and Recognizable National Belonging

This section examines American national identity as a domain within which Republican alignment can become socially recognizable. It does not yet examine how participants use Americanness to manage perceived tensions with Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments; that interpretive work is addressed in Chapter 5. The focus here is narrower: how participants describe national belonging through expectations that make Republican alignment more recognizable, appropriate, or fitting within their everyday worlds.

In a recurring set of accounts, participants emphasized their sense of self as American, often positioning national belonging before racial, ethnic, or partisan identifications. Americanness operated as a central organizing social category through which participants understood belonging and situated themselves within recognizable boundaries of national membership. Everardo Luna, a 36-year-old electrician born in Indiana to Mexican immigrant parents and raised between Indiana and South Texas, most clearly exemplified this pattern. Although he grew up speaking Spanish with his parents and described their migration and naturalization histories in detail, he explained, “I mean, pretty much an American.... American first.... My family was from Mexico, but I mean I was born here.... Everything, all our lives, is here.” Andy Juarez, a 21-year-old apprentice electrician from a multigenerational South Texas family, articulated a related orientation. Although he stated that he was “proud of [his] Hispanic

descent,” he explained that he preferred to identify as “an American” and to put his “American bloodline before anything else.” For Andy, American identity broadened the community to which he belonged, while identifying primarily through Hispanic descent risked “isolat[ing] yourself as a group.”

These accounts establish the importance of Americanness in participants’ self-understandings, but American identification alone is not the central focus of this section. The question is how particular understandings of Americanness become linked to partisan recognition. Some participants explicitly connect national belonging to Republican alignment. Others describe the standards through which legitimate Americanness is evaluated—patriotic loyalty, respect for law and institutions, self-reliance, contribution, and boundaries of membership. Taken together, these accounts show the national norms through which Republican alignment can become culturally recognizable, even when that connection is articulated more directly by some participants than by others.

To examine how participants understood this national identity, I asked them to describe what it means to be an American and which values, behaviors, and norms they associated with legitimate national belonging. Their responses suggest that Americanness was experienced not simply as legal status or personal sentiment, but as a socially meaningful identity structured through recognizable expectations.

Some participants made the partisan connection explicit. Angel’s opening account stated this relationship directly by presenting Republicanism as an expression of patriotism and constitutional protection. Efraín, a 38-year-old entrepreneur born in South Texas to Mexican immigrant parents and raised in a Spanish-speaking household, similarly explained, “As a proud patriot and American, I just align more with the Republican Party.” These accounts provide

especially clear evidence of social embeddedness: Republican alignment appears not simply as an issue preference, but as an orientation participants understand to fit their conceptions of American national identity.

Chuck's account provides a more public and performative version of social embeddedness. Describing himself and his mother as "patriots" and "pro-Trump," he recalled displaying American flags after COVID restrictions eased because he wanted people to know, "we're Americans." He then described attaching a Trump flag to his car and driving through McAllen, Texas, where he received "a lot of honks," along with "a few middle fingers." His account shows how patriotic symbolism and Republican/Trump alignment could become publicly visible together, making partisan identity recognizable through the performance of national attachment.

Other accounts made the partisan connection less directly but identified the national norms through which Republican alignment becomes recognizable. Participants described Americanness through standards of symbolic loyalty, respect for law enforcement and institutions, self-reliance, contribution, and legitimate national membership. These standards do not mean that American identity automatically produces Republican alignment. Rather, they define the social world within which explicitly partisan accounts—such as Angel's and Efraín's—make Republican alignment appear recognizable and appropriate.

A first cluster emphasized symbolic national loyalty, expressed through patriotic affect and veneration for national symbols and civic rituals. This understanding of Americanness as symbolic loyalty recurred across participants' accounts. Participants described Americanness as rooted in affective attachment to the nation—attachments that were publicly recognizable and socially evaluated. Andy illustrates how this expectation could be articulated as visible conduct.

He explained that being American meant having “an undying love for your country” and “never letting that flag touch the ground—always waving it and being proud of that flag.” Amanda Arizmendi-Holt, a 55-year-old Zapata resident from a multigenerational border family, similarly framed Americanness in terms of ritualized conduct that signals proper national belonging, emphasizing displays of loyalty such as standing for the flag and reciting shared civic affirmations: “as Americans we should stand in honor of the stars and stripes...[and] hold our hand over our heart as we pledge allegiance to this great nation.” These examples illustrate the patriotic and ritual standards through which participants describe legitimate Americanness. They help identify the content of national belonging in these accounts; their partisan significance depends on the additional step, visible in more explicit accounts, through which such national standards are connected to Republican alignment.

Beyond symbolic loyalty, participants also narrated Americanness through expectations of rule of law, respect for authority, and proper conduct within social institutions. Tina Garzes, 68, who was born in McAllen, raised largely in California, and whose father had worked as a police officer in South Texas, illustrated the institutional dimension of this expectation. She explained that she was “brought up to respect law enforcement and our elected officials,” and although she supported Trump, she distinguished institutional respect from partisan loyalty, noting that her anger stemmed “not because it’s Trump, but because they’re disrespecting the [President’s] office.” Her account frames respect for law enforcement and elected office as part of what legitimate Americans are expected to display, regardless of immediate political preference. Francisco Zamora, 30, by contrast, emphasized the moralized dimension of lawful conduct. He described being American as “doing things the right way,” a phrase he used to contrast rule-abiding, orderly conduct with behavior he viewed as illegitimate. Taken together,

these accounts show that law-abidingness and deference to authority were not merely personal values. They were socially recognizable norms through which participants described proper American conduct and evaluated the legitimacy of conduct within the national community. These expectations structure how belonging is recognized, rather than how political preferences are formed.

A third dimension of Americanness centered on deservingness, contribution, and self-reliance. In several accounts, being American was described as something that must be demonstrated through tangible effort—working hard, being self-sufficient, and contributing to the national community—rather than assumed by legal status or passive claims. Amanda explained, “We’re not here to give handouts. We’re not here to receive handouts. We’re here to work and attain the American dream. You know, the American dream is to have your own car, your own house, have a job, be able to pay your bills, raise your kids, send them to college.” Her account shows that Americanness is not simply claimed but evaluated through socially recognized standards of conduct. Similarly, Esmer reflected on lessons of work, self-reliance, and limited dependence on government that she associated with her father: “He always used to say, ‘I don’t need anything from government. I don’t need food stamps, I can work hard, and I can make lots more than I can with the help of the government.’ ... There’s a lot of things my dad actually taught me without telling me we are a Republican family. Without speaking the language of politics.” This narrative shows how partisan meaning can circulate through everyday socialization without being named as political. Expectations about work, independence, and proper conduct are transmitted as common-sense understandings of how one ought to live, yet they later render Republican alignment recognizable within those same terms. Unlike accounts that identify national virtues without explicitly naming their partisan significance, this account

demonstrates how standards of self-reliance and independence from government acquire Republican meaning through everyday family socialization.

These accounts can also be read as evidence of respectability-based and deservingness-centered understandings of civic membership, in which work, self-sufficiency, and limited reliance on government distinguish legitimate contributors from those viewed as failing to meet valued standards of national membership (Cohen 1999; Beltrán 2010). That interpretation captures an important part of the evidence. Amanda's account defines Americanness through work and independence, while Esmer's account shows these same standards being transmitted within family life as a moral orientation. The additional point developed here is that, in Esmer's narrative, these standards are not merely criteria of deservingness: she retrospectively recognizes them as lessons about what it meant for her family to be Republican, even when partisan language was absent. Deservingness supplies the substantive standard through which contribution and self-reliance are evaluated; social embeddedness identifies how that standard acquires partisan meaning within an everyday domain of belonging.

Crucially, these norms did not operate merely as abstract ideals. Participants described how violations of these expectations marked some claims to Americanness as inconsistent with legitimate national belonging. Several respondents pointed to the public display of foreign flags as behavior that breached symbolic loyalty. Esmer expressed frustration with individuals proclaiming "Viva Mexico," interpreting such displays as a rejection of assimilation and a refusal to affirm allegiance to the United States. She clarified that her concern was not immigration status, stating, "I don't care if they came here legally or illegally," but rather a failure to demonstrate loyalty and gratitude toward the country. Similarly, Yasmin de Leon, 69, whose account of Americanness was shaped by her father's immigrant success story, work ethic,

rejection of welfare, and insistence on loyalty to the United States, characterized public displays of Mexican flags as “un-American,” explaining that “if you love Mexico so much, go back.” The point is not simply that participants value patriotism, but that they use visible conduct to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate belonging.

Esmer’s and Yasmin’s accounts are most directly evidence of bounded and assimilationist constructions of national belonging (Jones-Correa 1998; Schildkraut 2011). They define legitimate Americanness through visible loyalty, gratitude, and the rejection of public performances they interpret as foreign-national attachment. Such boundary-making is not, by itself, evidence that Republican alignment is socially embedded. Its relevance to this chapter is narrower: it identifies the boundaries of national membership within which explicitly partisan accounts, such as Angel’s and Efraín’s, make Republican alignment socially recognizable. Chapter 5 returns to related standards of national membership when examining how participants use Americanness to help organize the political weight of Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments.

The national identity accounts also reveal meaningful variation. Some participants placed Americanness at the center of self-understanding without defining national belonging through tightly bounded or explicitly partisan standards. These cases clarify the limits of the argument: American identification alone does not make Republican alignment socially expected. What matters is how participants construct national belonging and whether they connect that construction to partisan recognition or evaluation. They also clarify why the degree of perceived overlap matters: Americanness can remain central to self-understanding without being experienced as convergent with a single partisan alignment.

Other accounts articulated a broader understanding of national belonging, one that softened the boundary-drawing evident in other interviews. Celia Balderas, a 42-year-old business process analyst and artist from South Texas who described herself as “American with Hispanic heritage,” illustrates this alternative construction. Although she identified “American” as her primary identity, she defined Americanness less through compliance with tightly bounded standards than through inclusion, autonomy, cultural plurality, and shared belonging. When asked what it means to be American, she emphasized “choices... freedom... being able to... do whatever it is that I want to do, without breaking any laws, and being happy,” framing national identity in terms of individual opportunity rather than socially enforced standards of conduct. She also resisted drawing sharp boundaries around membership, explaining that “it’s not even about being here illegally or legally... it’s about being proud to be here and making this your home.” In contrast to accounts that treated symbolic loyalty, legal status, or rule adherence as criteria of belonging, Celia’s narrative emphasized incorporation and plurality, allowing for the maintenance of cultural difference within the national community. What distinguishes Celia’s account is not simply that it is more inclusive, but that it does not organize belonging through the same evaluative standards that render partisan alignment socially recognizable in other accounts. As a result, her formulation does not make any single partisan orientation appear socially required or taken for granted, loosening the connection between national identity and partisan meaning.

Ernie, who was born in the United States, raised in Nuevo León, Mexico, and later settled in Texas, offers a related but distinct form of variation. Like Celia, he articulated an expansive understanding of Americanness, but unlike Celia, his Republican alignment remained clearly present. When asked which identity label he preferred, Ernie answered, “I prefer just American,”

explaining that he lives, works, votes, and raises his family in the United States. At the same time, he did not understand American identity as requiring the rejection of Mexican heritage or cultural practice. His account therefore shows that national belonging can remain central to Republican-aligned self-understanding without requiring the stricter boundary-making evident in other participants' narratives.

Celia and Ernie clarify the limits of the argument. Americanness does not uniformly attach participants to Republican alignment, nor do all participants construct national belonging through the same standards of loyalty, contribution, or boundary-making. The relevant process is therefore not American identity alone, but the way particular understandings of national belonging can make Republican alignment feel recognizable, fitting, or socially appropriate.

Taken together, these accounts show that American national identity provides a domain within which Republican alignment can become socially recognizable, but not in a uniform or automatic way. The clearest evidence of social embeddedness appears when participants connect national norms to Republican alignment: Angel and Efraín explicitly link Republican affiliation to patriotic national belonging, while Esmer shows how lessons about work, independence, and limited reliance on government made Republican identification familiar within family life before it was named as politics. Celia and Ernie clarify the variation within this domain: Americanness can be central without generating a single partisan expectation, and Republican alignment can remain recognizable within a more expansive understanding of national belonging.

Religious Identity: Moral Accountability and Partisan Recognition

Religious belonging provides the clearest evidence of social embeddedness in the interviews because it is often narrated through direct relationships and institutional settings. Whereas American national identity usually appears through symbolic loyalty, family

socialization, civic rituals, and standards of legitimate membership, religious belonging is more frequently described through interpersonal accountability. Participants describe family members, church relationships, and faith-based communities as settings in which political conduct can be questioned, corrected, or presumed to fit particular moral expectations. The analytic claim is not that Christianity mechanically produces Republican alignment. Rather, religious belonging provides a social world in which Republican alignment can become recognizable as morally appropriate and, in some cases, expected.

Gabriel, 22, a McAllen resident raised Catholic and educated in Catholic school from first grade through graduation, articulated this especially clearly, not because his ordering was typical, but because it made explicit the layered structure of identity repertoires that was often implicit in other interviews. When asked how he identified himself, Gabriel explained, “I consider myself a Catholic first, then a conservative, then American, and a Republican in that order.” His account does not suggest a uniform hierarchy across participants. Rather, it shows how religious identity could be situated alongside national, ideological, and partisan identifications as part of a broader understanding of self. In this formulation, Catholic identity is not merely a belief system. It is a primary domain of belonging through which other identities are organized and made meaningful.

Andy’s account makes the partisan significance of religious belonging especially explicit. Describing himself as part of a predominantly Christian and conservative family and noting that he attended Church of the King, he presented religious belonging as directly connected to partisan fit. He explained, “That’s the problem—you can’t vote Democrat if you’re Jewish, Christian, or Catholic. It just doesn’t align. It’s like trying to fit two unmatched puzzle pieces.” Andy does not simply identify a religiously grounded position on a particular issue. He describes

Democratic affiliation itself as mismatched with religious belonging, making Republican alignment appear as the more recognizable partisan fit within that identity domain.

In several accounts, religious identity was not framed only as a private set of beliefs or theological commitments. Participants described it through shared practices, institutional participation, family expectations, and recognizable forms of belonging associated with Christian communities. Church attendance, religious routines, and congregational life provided common reference points through which participants oriented themselves and evaluated others. In this sense, religious identity functioned as a socially organized domain characterized by shared expectations, normative standards, and forms of recognition.

These expectations were often articulated through moments of social evaluation, where religious membership carried implicit obligations that extended beyond worship and into everyday conduct. Tom, for example, described tensions he observed within his own family and social circle:

Here in the Valley [Rio Grande Valley], I'm even seeing my own family and friends say, "I'm going to vote for this person," who support abortion and gay marriage. I tell them, 'Wait a minute—I thought you went to church.' They respond, 'Yeah, but that's up to them to make their own decision [on those matters].' And I say, 'No—if you go to church, those are the things that should matter when you vote.'

Tom's account illustrates how religious identity operates through direct challenge and attempted correction within close social relationships. His response to the voting decisions of family members and friends who attend church is not presented primarily as a policy debate or theological dispute. Instead, he invokes church attendance as a marker of belonging that carries obligations for public conduct. Voting behavior is evaluated against expectations of conduct Tom associates with membership in a religious community. In this way, religious identity

structures social accountability: it provides a basis for questioning, correcting, and evaluating political choices within a shared world of belonging.

Similar dynamics appeared in other accounts, where religious expectations surfaced through close relationships rather than explicit institutional instruction. Ramon, 41, who later came to align more closely with Republican politics after earlier Democratic voting, described an interaction with his younger sister following his vote for Barack Obama during the 2008 presidential election. Recalling the exchange, he explained that she asked him, “Why do you vote for abortion if you're Christian?” The question, posed by a close family member, was not framed as an abstract policy debate. It was an evaluative challenge. By linking Ramon’s partisan choice to abortion, his sister treated Democratic voting as difficult to reconcile with expectations associated with Christian identity. Although Ramon did not immediately reinterpret his political views, the exchange illustrates how religious norms circulate through family networks, activating social accountability and signaling which political alignments are recognized as appropriate within religiously grounded social worlds.

Horacio offered a related but distinct account that highlights how partisan expectations can be assumed within religious settings, even in the absence of explicit political discussion. Describing an interaction at church, he explained, “I went to church one day wearing red, and one of the ladies there was wearing red too. I said, ‘Hey, another Republican!’ She said, ‘No, I’m not a Republican.’ So I asked, ‘Do you support abortion?’ She didn’t say a word.” Rather than correction after a stated political choice, this interaction shows how a church setting can become a site in which a perceived partisan cue is tested through religiously salient moral expectations. Horacio initially reads the shared red clothing as a sign of Republican affiliation. When the woman rejects that interpretation, he does not respond by asking about party registration or

another policy domain; he asks about abortion. The exchange therefore does not establish that church membership automatically implies Republican identity. It shows how, within a religiously meaningful setting, partisan recognition can be evaluated through an issue Horacio treats as central to Christian belonging.

These accounts could be read as evidence of religious conservatism, moral socialization, or norm enforcement within valued religious relationships, especially around abortion and sexuality (Wuthnow 1988; Margolis 2018; Cramer 2016). Those readings capture important dimensions of the pattern, but they do not exhaust what participants describe. Participants are not only reporting policy disagreement or the acquisition of conservative moral beliefs. They are describing how religious membership carries expectations that are activated in family, church, and community settings. Tom's challenge—"I thought you went to church"—and Ramon's sister's question—"Why do you vote for abortion if you're Christian?"—do not operate simply as issue arguments. They are claims about the obligations attached to religious belonging. What distinguishes these accounts from issue-based religious conservatism alone is that disagreement is framed not only as holding the wrong view, but as failing to meet expectations attached to belonging within a religious community. In this sense, religious conservatism and moral socialization supply much of the substantive content, while social embeddedness identifies the relational process through which political choices become evaluated as more or less consistent with being a recognizable member of a religious community.

Other participants described the relationship between religious belonging and Republican alignment less as a moment of social correction than as an intuitive partisan fit. In these accounts, Republican alignment appeared recognizable within Christian identity without requiring the interpersonal challenge evident in Tom's, Ramon's, or Horacio's narratives.

Clarissa, 29, who was raised Catholic and later identified as nondenominational Christian, articulated this intuitive fit directly, explaining, “In my book, if you’re a Christian, then your morals align more with the Republican Party than it does with the Democratic Party.” Her phrasing does not frame partisan alignment as a political decision that must be reasoned through at length. Rather, Republican alignment appears as a recognizable extension of Christian identity—an orientation that fits within the expectations associated with religious belonging. Clarissa’s account is useful precisely because it makes explicit what appeared more implicitly elsewhere: religious identity can operate as a social world in which Republican alignment is recognized as appropriate before it is defended as a political choice.

Other participants described this alignment as operating beneath conscious deliberation. Alfredo, 54, a retired law-enforcement officer who grew up Catholic, attended Catholic school, and described daily prayer as part of family life, emphasized that his religious background shaped his political orientation in ways that felt foundational rather than actively reasoned through. Reflecting on the relationship between faith and politics, he explained that it was “not a conscious thing” he explicitly thought about, but instead something that formed “a strong base.” In his account, religious identity provides a background orientation through which Republican alignment becomes intuitive rather than something he describes as repeatedly reasoned through. Alfredo’s narrative is therefore less evidence of interpersonal accountability than of the settled fit that religiously grounded commitments can give partisan alignment. The point is not that religion mechanically determines his partisan identity. Rather, religious belonging provides a background world of expectations within which Republican alignment becomes recognizable as fitting.

Together, these accounts provide the chapter’s clearest evidence of social embeddedness. Andy and Clarissa state the perceived fit between religious identity and Republican alignment

explicitly. Tom, Ramon, and Horacio show how that fit can become socially activated through family and church relationships in which political conduct is questioned or evaluated through religious expectations. Alfredo shows a related but less relational pattern, in which religious commitments form a settled background orientation for partisan alignment. Religious conservatism explains much of the substantive content of these accounts, especially their emphasis on abortion and sexuality. Social embeddedness identifies the additional process through which that content is attached to membership, recognition, and accountability within a valued domain of belonging.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Latino Republican alignment becomes socially embedded within two valued domains of belonging: American national identity and religious life. Building on Chapter 3's analysis of partisan sorting, the chapter has focused on a distinct process: how Republican alignment becomes recognizable, appropriate, or reinforced within the social contexts through which participants understand membership, conduct, and belonging. The argument is not that Americanness or religious identity mechanically produces Republican alignment. It is that participants describe these identities as domains within which Republican alignment can acquire an ordinary and fitting place in everyday life.

The evidence differs across the two domains. In accounts of American national identity, participants describe Americanness through patriotic expression, respect for law and institutions, self-reliance, contribution, and boundaries of legitimate membership. Angel and Efraín explicitly connect national belonging to Republican alignment, while Esmer's account of paternal self-reliance shows how Republican meaning can be transmitted through ordinary family socialization without initially being named as partisan. Other accounts identify the standards

through which national belonging is evaluated without directly establishing their partisan significance. Celia and Ernie further show that Americanness does not uniformly attach participants to a single political orientation: national belonging can be constructed in more expansive ways that loosen or reconfigure its relationship to Republican alignment.

The religious evidence provides a more direct view of social embeddedness. Participants describe family and church relationships in which political conduct is evaluated through expectations attached to religious membership. Tom's challenge to family members and friends who attend church, Ramon's exchange with his sister, and Horacio's interaction in church reveal how political alignment can be questioned, presumed, or tested within religiously meaningful relationships. Clarissa and Alfredo then show how such expectations may become experienced as intuitive partisan fit, with Republican alignment appearing consistent with Christian identity without requiring continual political justification.

This interpretation does not displace plausible alternative explanations. Bounded Americanism, assimilationist nationalism, deservingness judgments, religious conservatism, moral socialization, and social accountability are all present in the interview material. The contribution of social embeddedness is narrower and complementary: it identifies when these norms and relationships situate Republican alignment within valued domains of belonging. Republican alignment is not simply defended through policy agreement; participants sometimes describe it as fitting the kinds of people they understand themselves to be and the communities within which they recognize themselves as belonging.

The chapter also clarifies the limits of this process. Social embeddedness does not eliminate tension with Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments, nor does it require all participants to construct Americanness or religious belonging in the same way. Rather, it helps

explain why Republican alignment can remain meaningful and defensible even when it is publicly challenged as incompatible with Latino or immigrant belonging. When partisan alignment is situated within valued domains of belonging, challenges to that alignment may implicate not only political preferences but also participants' understandings of legitimate membership and appropriate conduct.

Chapter 5 turns to those challenges directly. It examines how participants respond when Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments are invoked as reasons they should reconsider Republican alignment. If Chapter 3 explained how participants interpret Republican alignment as fitting their commitments, and this chapter has shown how that alignment becomes socially embedded within valued domains of belonging, Chapter 5 examines how participants organize the political weight of Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments when those ties are made politically consequential.

CHAPTER 5:

ENDURING LATINO AND IMMIGRANT TIES: RECONCILING CULTURAL BELONGING WITH REPUBLICAN PARTISAN ALIGNMENT

Chapter 3 showed how participants interpret Republican alignment as fitting with commitments they describe as longstanding. Chapter 4 showed how that alignment becomes socially embedded within important domains of belonging, especially American national identity and religious community. This chapter turns to a related but distinct problem: how participants sustain Republican alignment when other meaningful attachments that have become politicized in contemporary U.S. politics—especially Latino identity and immigrant-linked belonging—are publicly framed as reasons they should reject, reconsider, or feel conflicted about that alignment.

Partisan identity does not exist apart from other dimensions of self-understanding. Across interviews, participants invoked enduring ties to Latino identity and the immigrant experience, including family migration histories, intergenerational sacrifice, cultural background, Spanish language, cross-border ties, and continued embeddedness in Latino communities. Because the contemporary Republican Party has advanced policies and rhetoric widely perceived as hostile toward immigrants and Latinos, these attachments are often perceived to stand in tension with Republican affiliation. The question, then, is not only how Latino Republicans come to align with the Republican Party, but how they maintain that alignment when Latino identity and immigrant-linked belonging are perceived as politically relevant as sources of challenge.

I argue that participants manage these moments of perceived incompatibility through *identity reconciliation*: an interpretive process through which Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments remain culturally, biographically, and socially meaningful while participants

organize the political weight those attachments should carry. The relevant tension is not presumed simply because participants are Latino Republicans. It becomes analytically visible when participants encounter, anticipate, or themselves articulate claims that Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should require particular political judgments—such as Democratic loyalty, solidaristic immigration preferences, or rejection of rhetoric interpreted as hostile toward Latinos and immigrants. Participants do not simply abandon Latino identity or immigrant experience, nor do they uniformly deny that immigration policy and partisan rhetoric can carry consequences for Latinos and immigrants. Instead, participants reason through whether—and how much—those attachments should carry weight in their political judgments. Reconciliation, in this sense, does not mean that tension disappears. It names the interpretive work through which participants maintain enduring attachments that have become politicized while refusing or narrowing political claims made on the basis of those attachments, substituting other standards of evaluation for them, or subordinating them to considerations participants treat as more consequential.

This process becomes most visible in two domains that recurred across the interviews: immigration policy and partisan rhetoric. These domains matter not only because they are central to public debate about Latino Republicans, but because participants themselves returned to them when explaining, defending, or reflecting on the perceived tension between Republican alignment and Latino or immigrant-linked belonging. In immigration policy debates, participants often move political evaluation away from ethnoracial obligation and toward standards of national governance: legality, procedural fairness, institutional order, contribution, and state responsibility. In debates over partisan rhetoric, however, those standards are less available because the challenge is not only about what the state should do, but about what political

language appears to say about Latinos and immigrants as people. There, participants rely on a different set of interpretive moves: narrowing the meaning of contested language, reclassifying rhetoric as distorted or misrepresented, distinguishing individual prejudice from party identity, and limiting the political significance of offense.

The chapter proceeds in three steps. First, I establish the layered identity ordering through which participants position American national belonging, Latino identity, and immigrant-linked attachments in relation to one another. This section does not repeat Chapter 4's analysis of Americanness as a social world of belonging. Instead, it shows how Americanness functions as an ordering device that participants draw upon when deciding when Latino and immigrant-linked ties should become politically relevant. Second, I examine immigration policy debates, showing how participants reconcile Republican-aligned positions with immigrant-linked and ethnoracial attachments by relocating political evaluation to standards of law, procedure, and national governance. Third, I turn to partisan rhetoric, where governance standards alone are insufficient because the challenge is symbolic and identity-directed. In these moments, participants work to contain the political significance of contested rhetoric so that Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments remain meaningful without requiring partisan revision. The point is not that immigration and rhetoric generate identical forms of reconciliation, but that each domain reveals a different way participants organize the political weight of Latino and immigrant-linked attachments.

Identity Reconciliation as Interpretive Work

Social identities can provide belonging, community, clarity, and a sense of social location without automatically dictating political judgment (Turner et al. 1987). Social identity and self-categorization scholarship shows that group membership can help people understand who they

are, where they belong, and how they relate to others, while the attributes treated as defining an ingroup remain socially constructed and contextually contested (Turner et al. 1987). Politics is therefore not inherent to every meaningful identity.

Identities become politically consequential when group members understand shared status, interests, grievances, or collective standing as implicated in broader political conflict (Huddy 2001; Simon and Klandermans 2001). Parties, elites, movements, institutions, policies, rhetoric, and moments of conflict can connect group membership to expectations about what members should perceive, support, oppose, or owe to others (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Dawson 1995; Pérez 2015a; White and Laird 2020; Anoll 2022; Wamble et al. 2022). Yet these expectations are not self-executing. Group members may recognize that an identity has become politically implicated while still contesting whether the expectations attached to it should guide their own political judgments.

This distinction is particularly important for Latino politics. Immigration conflict, racialized party competition, experiences of exclusion, and political rhetoric widely interpreted as hostile toward immigrants and Latinos have made Latino identity politically available as a basis for expectations surrounding Democratic affiliation, immigrant solidarity, minority solidarity, and opposition to perceived group-directed threat (Pantoja et al. 2001; Sanchez 2006; Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Bowler and Segura 2011; Pérez 2015a; Zepeda-Millán 2017). These tendencies are politically important, but they should not be mistaken for a single or universally accepted political directive. Latino identity has long varied across national origin, region, generation, class, religion, racialization, migration history, and partisan context (Gutiérrez 1995; García-Bedolla 2005; Beltrán 2010). An identity can therefore become politically salient without producing agreement over what that identity should require.

I treat Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachment as analytically distinct, although they frequently overlap in participants' accounts and in the political expectations surrounding Latino Republicanism. Latino identity refers here to ethnoracial or panethnic belonging, whereas immigrant-linked attachment refers to biographical, familial, relational, or community ties to migration and immigrant experience. A multigenerational Latino may express strong Latino identification while having relatively distant ties to immigration, while a naturalized immigrant may describe migration as central to their biography without treating panethnic Latino identity as equally central to self-understanding. I examine these attachments together where participants or political conflict connect them, but I do not assume that one necessarily entails the other.

This chapter approaches Latino identity and attachment to the immigrant experience as interpretive resources whose political weight is actively organized by individual actors. Rather than asking only whether Latino or immigrant-linked attachments are “stronger” or “weaker,” I examine how participants invoke, narrate, and position those attachments when Republican alignment is framed as incompatible with ethnoracial or immigrant belonging. The central analytic distinction is between identity as meaningful belonging and identity as a basis of political obligation. By political obligation, I refer to the socially encountered, anticipated, or contested expectation that group membership should guide partisan allegiance, policy judgment, solidarity, political action, or responses to perceived group injury (White and Laird 2020; Anoll 2022; Wamble et al. 2022).

Across interviews, ties to Latino identity and the immigrant experience remain clearly meaningful. Participants routinely reference family migration histories, intergenerational sacrifice, cultural background, Spanish language, cross-border ties, and continued embeddedness in Latino communities, including when responding to challenges to their partisan alignment. The

persistence of these attachments is demonstrated through their continued availability as resources participants use to describe who they are, where they come from, and how they understand their families and communities.

The presence of these enduring ties is analytically distinct from reconciliation itself. I do not treat every expression of Republican support by a participant who also identifies as Latino or has an immigrant family history as evidence of identity reconciliation. Rather, reconciliation becomes analytically visible through recurring relationships among three elements: participants preserve Latino, Mexican-origin, or immigrant-linked attachments as meaningful; they encounter, anticipate, articulate, or are asked to consider expectations that those attachments should imply particular political judgments; and they respond to those expectations through refusal, narrowing, substitution, or subordination when explaining their own political alignment. These expectations may appear through direct accusations of betrayal, claims that Latinos should support Democrats or more inclusive immigration policies, or the expectation that anti-Latino or anti-immigrant rhetoric should require condemnation or partisan distance.

The expectations analyzed here became visible in different interactional contexts. Some participants spontaneously recounted direct accusations that they were betraying their culture, their people, or fellow Latinos by supporting Republicans. Others described encounters in which relatives, coworkers, acquaintances, or political opponents told them that Trump was racist or hostile toward Hispanics and questioned why they continued to support him. Still others reflected on the relationship between their own identities, family histories, and political judgments when that comparison became explicit during the interview itself. I do not treat an interview-elicited association as evidence that a participant independently experienced internal conflict. Rather, I examine how participants responded when an identity-based political expectation became

explicit in their own narratives, social encounters, or the interview exchange.

Identity reconciliation refers, then, to the interpretive work through which participants manage moments when Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging is made politically relevant as a potential source of challenge. This process does not imply that every Latino Republican feels torn between irreconcilable identities. For some participants, Latino identity, immigrant experience, American national belonging, and conservative commitments are narrated as already mutually compatible. For others, tensions are more explicitly acknowledged, especially in relation to immigration enforcement or rhetoric interpreted by others as hostile toward Latinos. What unites these accounts is not a uniform experience of conflict, but the interpretive question they make visible: whether—and how much—Latino and immigrant-linked attachments should carry weight in political judgment.

Across the interviews, reconciliation became visible through four overlapping interpretive moves: refusal, narrowing, substitution, and subordination. Participants engaged in refusal when they directly rejected the premise that Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should require a particular partisan or policy position. They engaged in narrowing when they restricted the domains, objects, people, or circumstances to which an identity-based expectation was understood to apply—for example, by distinguishing unauthorized entry from immigrants as a broader category or refusing to interpret contested rhetoric as a categorical statement about Latinos as a group. They engaged in substitution when they relocated political evaluation to alternative standards they treated as more legitimate, including legality, procedural fairness, institutional order, state responsibility, contribution, or patriotism. Finally, they engaged in subordination when they acknowledged an identity-linked concern, offense, or injury but assigned it less political weight than other considerations, such as leadership, policy, national

interest, or broader partisan fit. These moves are analytically distinguishable but frequently overlap within the same account.

Conservative policy reasoning, American national identification, ethnoracial boundary-making, media distrust, motivated reasoning, or the minimization of racism do not by themselves constitute evidence of identity reconciliation. A participant may support border enforcement because they hold conservative immigration preferences or defend a Republican leader because of prior partisan commitment. Those processes become part of identity reconciliation when participants use them to manage the relationship between meaningful Latino or immigrant-linked attachments and claims about what those attachments should require politically. Motivated reasoning may therefore help explain why participants favor interpretations that preserve an already meaningful partisan alignment, while scholarship on immigration and racial boundary-making helps explain distinctions between compliant and noncompliant immigrants, deservingness judgments, or efforts to narrow racism to individual prejudice rather than collective partisan identity (Lodge and Taber 2013; Vega 2014; Alamillo 2019; Cadena Jr. 2023). The argument here does not deny those processes. It asks what additional identity work they perform when participants use them to determine what their own Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should require of political judgment.

This analytic orientation clarifies the chapter's place within the broader dissertation. Chapter 3 showed how participants interpret Republican alignment as fitting with commitments they understand as central to who they are. Chapter 4 showed how that alignment becomes socially embedded within domains of belonging. Chapter 5 examines what happens when other meaningful attachments are invoked as reasons participants should reject, reconsider, or feel conflicted about that alignment. The answer is not that Latino identity or immigrant ties

necessarily fade away. It is that participants organize the conditions under which those attachments carry political weight, allowing them to remain culturally, biographically, and socially meaningful without necessarily becoming decisive standards for partisan judgment.

Identity-Based Expectations and the Conditions of Reconciliation

Before examining how participants reconcile Latino and immigrant-linked attachments with Republican alignment, it is important to establish how identity became connected to political obligation in participants' own accounts. The tension analyzed in this chapter is not inferred simply from the coexistence of Latino identity and Republican support. Participants described direct accusations, learned expectations, and social encounters in which Republican alignment was treated not only as political disagreement but as a failure to act in accordance with one's Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging. In this sense, identity-based expectations operated as a form of social accountability: group members and others could question, criticize, or sanction political conduct understood as violating what Latinos should support or oppose (White and Laird 2020; Anoll 2022; Wamble et al. 2022). These expectations became visible when participants were told that Latinos should vote Democratic, support immigrant inclusion, reject Republican candidates, or treat rhetoric interpreted as hostile toward Latinos and immigrants as grounds for political opposition.

Andy, a 21-year-old participant from Hidalgo County with deep multigenerational family roots in South Texas, encountered this expectation directly. He explained that being openly Republican in a historically Democratic and overwhelmingly Latino region meant that "you always tend to get looked down upon." At one political event, a Latina supporter of Joe Biden yelled that waving a Trump flag "doesn't make you white." Andy interpreted the accusation as reflecting a broader assumption in the region: "since it's mainly Hispanic, they think just because

you're Hispanic, you have to vote Democrat." Republican alignment, in this account, was read not only as a partisan choice but as a departure from an expected ethnoracial political orientation.

Importantly, Andy did not respond by denying Hispanic identity. He affirmed, "yes, I'm Hispanic, I come from a Hispanic bloodline." What he rejected was the conversion of that identity into an automatic claim on his vote. Democrats, he argued, "automatically think they deserve our vote, because we're a minority," whereas political support should instead be earned. The relevant interpretive move is therefore not ethnic disidentification. Hispanic belonging remains part of Andy's self-understanding, while the political obligation attached to that belonging is refused.

Sonia encountered an especially explicit form of social accountability through family conflict surrounding immigration and Republican support. She recalled being told that she had "drank the Kool-Aid" and was "voting against [her] own culture" and "against [her] own people." These accusations made the identity-based character of the political expectation unmistakable. Sonia's political choices were judged not merely as disagreements over candidates or policies but against a perceived standard of appropriate group conduct: because she belonged to the community invoked as her "own people," her critics treated that belonging as carrying political implications for what she should support or oppose. The criticism therefore did more than challenge her Republican affiliation. It questioned whether she was acting politically in accordance with who she was understood to be.

Sonia resisted that claim by returning to what she described as her "core values." Her response did not require rejecting Latino identity, denying immigrant-linked attachments, or insisting that immigration was politically irrelevant. Rather, she refused the premise that ethnoracial membership should automatically determine her partisan or policy commitments.

The relevant interpretive move, as with Andy, is therefore not the abandonment of Latino belonging but the refusal of the political obligation attached to it.

These accounts do not establish that every participant experienced Republican alignment as internally conflicted or socially contested to the same degree. Nor do they imply that Latino identity carries a singular political meaning. Across the broader interview corpus, identity-based expectations appeared not only through direct accusations like those described by Andy and Sonia, but also through learned narratives about which party cared for minorities and immigrants and inherited assumptions about where Hispanics belonged politically. The point is therefore more limited but analytically necessary: participants encountered recognizable claims about what Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should require politically, and those claims became objects of interpretation. Identity reconciliation begins at this point of contestation—when meaningful belonging is made politically relevant and participants respond by refusing or narrowing the expectations attached to it, substituting other standards of judgment, or subordinating identity-linked concerns to considerations they treat as more consequential.

Layered Identity Ordering: American, Latino Identity, and Immigrant Belonging

This section lays out the layered identity architecture that participants articulate when describing their broader sense of self. Across interviews, American national identity is typically foregrounded in these accounts. The central focus here, however, is not simply the prominence of American identity. Chapter 4 examined Americanness as a socially meaningful world of belonging. Here, I examine Americanness as an ordering device: a way participants position American, Latino, and immigrant-linked attachments relative to one another when deciding which identity claims should guide political judgment.

When I directly asked participants to describe their sense of self, they consistently articulated their identities in layered terms, with American national identity functioning as the primary frame of belonging. Participants did not dismiss Latino identity or the immigrant experience. Rather, they treated those attachments as meaningful aspects of who they are, while often positioning them as secondary to national belonging in everyday self-description. This ordering does not resolve the chapter's political tensions on its own. Instead, it provides the background organization of belonging that participants draw upon when deciding when—and in what ways—Latino and immigrant attachments become relevant for political judgment.

For this reason, I do not treat the prioritization of American national identity as sufficient evidence of identity reconciliation by itself. A statement such as “I am American first” establishes how a participant orders dimensions of belonging, but it does not necessarily show that the participant is managing an identity-based political expectation. The analytic importance of this ordering emerges when participants draw upon national belonging to adjudicate competing claims about what Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments should require politically. The distinction is essential: identity ordering provides the background architecture of belonging; reconciliation becomes visible when that architecture is used to manage a perceived claim, tension, or expectation bearing on political judgment.

Albert's account provides a clear entry point into this pattern. In response to an open-ended prompt about how he typically describes his self-conception, he explained: “Most of the time I say that I'm an American just because I was born and raised here... I mainly see myself just as [an] American.” Albert states this emphasis on American national identity as plain fact rather than as something he needs to defend or explain. In doing so, American identity operates as a taken-for-granted point of reference through which other dimensions of his broader sense of

self are named and understood.

This ordering became especially visible when Albert reflected on moments in which others probed him about his ethnoracial background. In those moments, he readily acknowledged his family's ties to Mexico, noting, “our last name’s [Mora] and we have family members that come from Mexico.” He also expressed uncertainty about whether his family was “still considered Latino from Mexico or... American people that have been here for a while.” This uncertainty is compatible with some degree of generational distancing, but the narrower point is that Mexican-origin family history remains available within Albert’s self-description even as American national identity functions as his primary frame of belonging. I therefore treat the passage as evidence of layered identity ordering rather than as proof that Latino attachment is either strong or weak.

Cesar articulated this same ordering more succinctly. When asked how he describes himself, he explained: “I tell them that I’m an American of Mexican descent... I also say that I am Hispanic, but I am American first.” Cesar’s formulation makes explicit what is implicit in Albert’s account: American identity functions as the primary claim of membership, while Latino or Hispanic identity is named as descent or heritage. His phrasing provides a compact illustration of the same layered ordering, in which national belonging serves as the primary frame through which ethnoracial background is acknowledged rather than displaced.

Other participants drew this boundary even more explicitly by distinguishing national belonging from ancestral background. Victoria, for example, emphasized, “I am American... and I am from a Mexican heritage.” She rejected the label “Mexican-American” as applied to her own identity, explaining that this category was more appropriate for her sisters who are naturalized citizens. In contrast, she understands herself as an “American with Hispanic

heritage.” Victoria’s account is a form of boundary work: it distinguishes national membership from heritage, reinforcing a broader pattern observed across interviews in which American national identity functions as the primary frame of belonging while Latino identity remains meaningful.

These accounts matter because they show how national belonging becomes the frame through which other attachments are sorted. Across these accounts, Latino identity is named as ancestry, heritage, culture, or family background rather than as the primary ground for political obligation. That distinction helps explain why participants can describe Latino identity as meaningful while resisting the claim that it should determine their immigration views or partisan judgments.

Importantly, this layered identity ordering does not imply a disavowal of the immigrant experience. Participants frequently narrated immigration as an intergenerational inheritance—something carried through family history rather than something that primarily defines their broader sense of self. Esmer’s account captures this dynamic. Describing her family’s trajectory, she explained: “My parents were born in Nuevo León. My dad came to the United States when he was sixteen on a work visa. He worked, saved money, and went through the legal process to bring his family. He believed it was important to live legally and not live in fear.” Although Esmer anchors her own self-understanding in American national identity, her account situates that belonging within a longer family history of migration, sacrifice, and legal incorporation. The immigrant experience remains meaningful, but it is narrated through a story of lawful incorporation into the national community.

Taken together, these accounts show that American national identity operates as a background frame through which other attachments are positioned and interpreted, rather than as

an identity that necessarily displaces Latino or immigrant belonging. The ordering visible in these accounts should not itself be equated with identity reconciliation. Rather, it establishes the architecture of belonging upon which subsequent reconciliation can draw. For some participants, positioning Latino or immigrant-linked attachments within a national frame makes those ties appear readily compatible with Republican alignment because immigration is narrated through lawful incorporation, work, family sacrifice, or membership in the national community. For others, the same ordering becomes politically consequential when immigration policy or partisan rhetoric is presented as a test of ethnoracial loyalty. In these moments, national belonging provides one basis for determining whether Latino or immigrant-linked attachments should govern political judgment. The following section turns to immigration policy, examining how participants refuse group-based political obligation and substitute nationally grounded standards of governance when accounting for positions others frame as incompatible with Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging.

Reconciling Immigration Policy Through National Standards of Governance

Immigration is commonly treated in public discourse and much of the scholarly literature as a domain in which shared Latino identity or immigrant experience should generate solidarity-based political judgments (Bowler et al. 2006; Newman 2017; Zepeda-Millán 2017). From this perspective, support for restrictive immigration policies—particularly those associated with deportation, family separation, border enforcement, or limits on citizenship—is assumed to place Latino Republicans in tension with their own ethnoracial or immigrant-linked attachments.

The interview accounts analyzed here complicate that expectation. Participants frequently acknowledged that immigration enforcement can produce harmful consequences for immigrants and Latino communities. What requires explanation, however, is not whether such consequences

were recognized, but how participants reconciled those recognitions with continued Republican alignment. Across the interviews, participants often interpreted immigration policy through nationally anchored standards of governance rather than treating shared ethnoracial or immigrant-linked belonging as sufficient to settle policy judgment.

Across interviews, this reconciliation took shape through a consistent reclassification of what kind of issue immigration is. Rather than treating immigration as a domain governed by shared ancestry, group loyalty, or immigrant-linked obligation, participants evaluated it through considerations associated with national governance: legality, procedural consistency, institutional order, contribution, deservingness, and state responsibility. This interpretive reclassification establishes the conditions under which participants engage immigration politics while sustaining Republican alignment without disavowing culturally meaningful ties to Latino identity or the immigrant experience.

Across this domain, identity reconciliation most often takes shape through refusal and substitution, although narrowing and subordination also appear in particular accounts. Participants refuse the premise that shared Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should, by itself, settle the immigration question, and they substitute other standards of evaluation—legality, procedural fairness, institutional order, contribution, deservingness, or state responsibility—that they treat as more legitimate bases for political judgment. In other accounts, participants narrow the people or circumstances to which an identity-linked concern is understood to apply or acknowledge such concerns while assigning greater weight to competing standards. These standards should not be understood as politically neutral or analytically interchangeable. They often reproduce exclusionary distinctions between compliant and noncompliant immigrants, deserving and undeserving claimants, or contributors and

noncontributors. Their significance for the present argument lies in the identity work they perform: participants use them to determine what shared Latino or immigrant-linked belonging should and should not require of their political judgments.

National Standards over Group-Based Obligation

In moments when immigration was framed—by others or by dominant political narratives—as a test of ethnoracial loyalty, participants relied on a recurring interpretive move: they declined to treat shared Latino identity or immigrant heritage as a legitimate standard for political judgment. Rather than accepting the premise that immigration should be evaluated through coethnic obligation, participants rejected the claim that being Latino entails inherent political responsibilities with respect to immigration policy. Crucially, this refusal did not require denying the salience of ethnoracial or immigrant-linked attachments. Instead, participants contested whether those attachments should serve as criteria for evaluating immigration-related political claims.

Andy's account illustrates this interpretive boundary clearly in the context of immigration-related discussions. When asked to explain his position during debates in which immigration was framed as a matter of ethnoracial obligation, Andy bluntly rejected the expectation that shared Latino identity should guide political judgment, exclaiming, "Just because I'm Hispanic doesn't mean you can't put your feelings aside and think logically [about] what's for the good of the country." In this formulation, Latino identity is explicitly acknowledged but bracketed as non-directive for policy evaluation, as Andy situates political judgment within a national frame oriented toward what he understands to be the broader interests of the country.

Andy's account shows the first movement in immigration-related reconciliation: refusal

of the premise that Latino identity should serve as a binding standard for policy judgment. The point is not that his Hispanic identity disappears from the account. On the contrary, he explicitly invokes it at the moment he rejects the political conclusion others might attach to it. By insisting that immigration should instead be evaluated according to what he understands as “the good of the country,” Andy shifts the relevant standard from shared ethnoracial membership to a nationally framed criterion of judgment. The sections that follow show how participants give substantive content to this substitution through appeals to legality, procedural fairness, membership, contribution, and state responsibility.

Equal Application and Procedural Fairness within a National Legal Order

Once ethnoracial obligation is set aside as the basis for judgment, participants frequently evaluate immigration policy through a shared standard of national governance: procedural fairness. Across interviews, fairness was defined in terms of the equal and consistent application of rules, the orderly sequencing of legal processes, and the credibility of the legal system itself. Participants reasoned about immigration by asking whether policies upheld these procedural standards, rather than by evaluating them through shared ethnoracial background or immigrant-linked obligation.

Amanda’s account shows why meaningful cultural attachment does not need to take the form of uncomplicated attachment to a panethnic label. When asked whether being Latina or Hispanic meant anything to her, Amanda initially answered, “No,” and elsewhere insisted that her nationality was American. Yet her broader account located her within a distinctly Hispanic cultural and racialized history. She recalled moving as a child to a community where “the white people didn’t like us because we were Hispanic, and the Hispanics didn’t like us because we couldn’t speak Spanish,” describing this as “the first time I realized, wow, I’m different.” Her

mother eventually called La Raza Unida to intervene after her older brother was bullied. Amanda also described what she called “a beautiful culture” with “really beautiful beliefs,” pointing to quinceañeras, baptisms, Día de los Muertos, and homemade tortillas passed down “by generations and generations.” Of these practices, she explained, “I feel like we’re preserving something.”

Against this background, Amanda did not evaluate family separation through a generalized obligation to immigrant families. Instead, she compared immigration enforcement to what she understood as ordinary law enforcement against citizens:

If you’re an American, and you’re breaking the law and you have your child with you, you’re gonna get arrested, and your child is going to be taken from you until somebody—your wife, your grandma, your mom—can come and pick up your child... There’s no difference. The same thing happens to you and me if we break [the law].

Amanda then made the comparison personal. If she drank at a party, drove home with her child, and exceeded the legal alcohol limit, she explained, authorities would arrest her and remove the child from her custody: “If I break the law while you have your child, they’re gonna take your child.”

The comparison is important. Amanda does not erase the cultural practices, racialized experiences, or family histories through which Hispanic belonging remains present in her account. But neither does she treat that background as the governing standard for evaluating enforcement. When she insists that “there’s no difference” between what happens to immigrant parents and what would happen to “you and me if we break” the law, she relocates judgment from shared background to equal application within a national legal order. The relevant boundary is between compliance and noncompliance, not between immigrants and citizens or between Latinos and non-Latinos.

Participants extended this fairness logic beyond enforcement to questions concerning the

terms of membership and legal inclusion, applying the same emphasis on procedural consistency and sequence. Martha's account makes the relationship between immigrant-linked belonging and procedural substitution especially explicit. A naturalized immigrant from Mexico, she did not step outside immigrant experience when evaluating immigration politics. Rejecting the charge that Republican restrictionism was inherently anti-immigrant, she explained: "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." The phrase "as an immigrant myself" is analytically important. Martha invokes immigrant experience at the very moment she rejects the political conclusion others might attach to it. She does not treat immigrant belonging as requiring unconditional support for legalization. Instead, she converts that experience into a procedural distinction between legal and unauthorized immigration.

This same reasoning appears in Martha's opposition to a path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants residing in the United States. Reflecting on such proposals, she emphasized the consequences they would have for existing legal pathways: "The process now is gonna take longer for those that are... doing it the legal way. The ones doing it legally are gonna be pushed to the back of the line."

Martha does not describe amnesty primarily as a question of whether unauthorized immigrants deserve belonging. Instead, she frames it as a change to how the immigration system operates. When she says that people "doing it legally are gonna be pushed to the back of the line," she is pointing to a disruption in the expected order of the process—one in which following the law is supposed to provide priority rather than generate disadvantage. Martha grounds this concern in her own experience with the immigration system, noting, "I have family... that have been waiting for a couple of years already in line." Immigrant ties are clearly

present in her account, but they appear as familiarity with waiting, delay, and legal procedure rather than as a claim that shared background should determine political judgment.

This concern becomes even clearer in the hypothetical scenario Martha offers. Imagining providing a pathway to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants who are already living in the United States, she asks, “Imagine if you’ve been in line for four or five years... [and you see unauthorized immigrants receive amnesty, you’re going to think], ‘What was the point of doing it legally if I’m still waiting?’” Her question is not about membership as such, but about how changes to the process would reorder legal pathways—specifically, whether those who complied with established procedures would be displaced within the system. For Martha, fairness depends on procedural consistency: whether complying with established legal pathways leads to meaningful progress rather than delay. If following the rules does not provide any clear benefit, or appears to disadvantage those who complied, then the legitimacy of the system itself is called into question.

These accounts demonstrate how participants rely on nationally anchored standards of procedural fairness to make sense of immigration policy across different domains. This reasoning is consistent with the layered identity ordering established earlier, in which national belonging provides the primary frame for interpreting questions of law, obligation, and governance. Immigration thus becomes a site where Latino identity and immigrant experience remain meaningful parts of who participants are, even as political judgment is guided by expectations tied to national governance.

These accounts could be read more narrowly as law-and-order conservatism or as a distinction between deserving and undeserving immigrants. That reading captures an important part of the evidence. Amanda’s comparison between immigrant parents and citizens who break

the law relies on a generalized enforcement logic, while Martha's concern with those waiting "in line" distinguishes immigrants according to procedural compliance. But treating these accounts only as policy conservatism would miss the identity work these distinctions perform. By defining fairness through equal enforcement, legal sequence, and procedural compliance, participants can acknowledge immigrant-linked attachments while limiting the political obligations that might otherwise follow from shared Latino or immigrant background. The boundary between compliant and noncompliant immigrants does not erase immigrant belonging. It reorganizes the terms under which that belonging becomes politically relevant.

Interpreting Inclusion Through National Standards of Membership

The same nationally anchored standards also organized how participants evaluated inclusion-oriented policies such as DACA and pathways to citizenship. Support emerged when such policies could be administered through clear, nationally applied procedures that preserved procedural order and legal credibility. In these cases, participants did not abandon the governance-based logic described above. They extended it to questions of incorporation, asking who should be included, under what conditions, and through what procedures.

Across interviews, participants who supported DACA described it as addressing the status of individuals already embedded in U.S. institutions and everyday life. DACA recipients were described as having grown up in U.S. schools, communities, and social systems, and as having organized their lives around continued residence in the United States. This classification mattered because it shifted DACA away from questions of illegal entry and toward questions of governance: how a legal system should handle the status of an existing population without undermining the credibility of its rules.

Angel's account makes the reconciliation sequence especially visible because his

Hispanic identity, immigrant-linked sympathy, and alternative standard of political judgment appear together. Even while endorsing residency for those brought to the United States as children, he emphasized the need to “draw the line somewhere.” “I as a Hispanic, of course, I have a soft heart to them,” he explained, but he immediately distinguished sympathy from policy obligation by insisting that political judgment “has to be [based on] merits, accountability.” Individuals brought to the United States as children were eligible for residency, in his account, because they had been “brought here without [their] will,” had “grown up here all [their] life,” been “educated in our schools by our tax dollars,” and completed high school or vocational training. The sequence is important: Angel does not deny that Hispanic identity generates sympathy. He acknowledges it directly, then limits what that sympathy is permitted to settle politically by substituting criteria of accountability, institutional formation, and participation.

Other participants extended this same governance-centered logic to inclusion without articulating the complete identity-reconciliation sequence as explicitly. Samantha, a 56-year-old administrator in special education, described documentation and formal incorporation as the relevant basis for inclusion. When asked whether individuals brought to the United States as children should be offered a path to citizenship, she responded without hesitation that “they don’t bother me at all” and that “they should be offered a path.” She explained that “when you become a citizen, you become a taxpayer,” and described documentation as a way for her students and their parents to enter recognized institutional systems. Asked about undocumented immigrants more broadly, she summarized her position succinctly: “Get them documented!” In Samantha’s account, inclusion is justified through entry into recognized legal, fiscal, and institutional systems.

Participants applied the same evaluative standards when discussing pathways to

citizenship. Support was most common when pathways were described as structured processes that applied criteria over time and produced determinate outcomes. Opposition emerged when legalization was described as disrupting procedural order—for example, by bypassing established channels or reordering who receives legal status first.

Ernie's account illustrates how this logic extends to proposals for large-scale regularization. He supported a pathway to citizenship only if it operated as a defined review process, describing a limited period in which cases would be evaluated according to specific criteria, including length of residence, work history, family ties, and the absence of serious criminal violations. In his account, authorization followed from meeting these criteria, while exclusion followed from not meeting them. Inclusion and exclusion were treated not as opposing moral claims, but as outcomes produced by the same rule-governed process.

Taken together, these accounts show that nationally anchored standards of governance can authorize inclusion as well as restriction. Participants who supported DACA or pathways to citizenship often justified those positions through documentation, institutional embeddedness, contribution, and rule-governed procedure. DACA and pathways to citizenship therefore do not sit outside the interpretive logic at the center of this chapter. They show how the same nationally framed standards can define the conditions under which inclusion is treated as appropriate within a national legal order.

Interpreting Restrictive Policies Under Conditions of Perceived System Strain

The preceding sections show that participants often evaluate immigration policy through standards of law, procedure, and national governance rather than treating ethnoracial or immigrant-linked obligation as sufficient to color political judgment. This logic becomes especially revealing when participants discuss policies they themselves describe as troubling or

severe. In these cases—such as restricting birthright citizenship or separating children from accompanying adults at the border—participants do not always deny harm. Instead, they interpret the harm through questions of system operation: whether membership rules are being used as intended, whether public benefits are tied to residence and contribution, whether authorities can verify guardianship, and whether the state can maintain order under conditions they describe as strained. The analytic point is not that these accounts eliminate the moral or political tension created by restrictive policies. It is that participants use governance-centered distinctions to keep that tension from becoming a reason to reconsider Republican alignment.

This pattern is visible when participants discuss restricting birthright citizenship. Participants who support limiting birthright citizenship frame the issue in terms of how membership rules operate in practice. In their accounts, birthright citizenship is treated as a rule that allows access to legal standing or public benefits in ways they understand as disconnected from residence, contribution, and participation in the systems that support those benefits.

Ricky's account makes the relationship between immigrant belonging and policy judgment especially explicit because the citizenship principle under discussion was directly connected to his own family history. Born in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Ricky came to the United States as a young child and later became a citizen through a process connected to his mother's U.S. citizenship. When the conversation turned to birthright citizenship, he acknowledged this connection directly. "In a way, even though I have benefited from it," Ricky began, before describing people who, in his view, "come over... have their baby here... they go back," and then receive benefits through the child. Later, when asked whether the policy should be changed, he returned to the same point: "Like I said, even though we [my family and I] benefited from it, I just see it [as]...too much out of control."

Ricky returned to this connection when explaining his support for the contemporary GOP: “We [my family and I] benefited from it, but I see a lot of people abusing it.” His own family history therefore remains present at the point of political judgment rather than disappearing from the account. Yet Ricky does not allow that history to settle his position. Instead, he evaluates birthright citizenship through criteria of residence, taxation, and contribution. “I have to pay taxes,” he explained, whereas the people he described “don’t pay those taxes. yet their kids... benefit from it,” leading him to ask, “Why should I be paying taxes for them [if] they don’t even live here?” The sequence is important because Ricky names his own family’s benefit from the policy repeatedly—“even though I have benefited from it,” “even though we benefited from it,” and “we benefited from it”—before turning to the standards he treats as more legitimate for political judgment. His immigrant-linked belonging remains present, but its political weight is subordinated to residence, taxation, and contribution.

Celia offers a more complex case. She explicitly resists being reduced to a panethnic category or stereotype, explaining, “I don’t like to be lumped into a box.” But she rejects the idea that this resistance implies ethnic disidentification. “I’m proud to be a Latina—very proud,” she exclaimed.

Her discussion of family separation likewise begins with explicit recognition of the harm caused by separating children from their parents. “I think that it’s horrible,” Celia exclaimed. “I think that is horrible, and I think that any logical person, whether conservative or liberal, could say that, and I hope so. I hope nobody told you it’s okay. Because it’s not okay.” Her account then turns on an explicit qualification: “However, if we want to talk about the undocumented children, those children are coming over here without their parents, literally.” She proceeds to distinguish children separated from their actual parents by the state from children who, she

argues, arrive with unrelated adults or without parents. “A lot of these children are being trafficked,” she explained, adding that critics “just want to keep it as, ‘Oh, these children are being taken from their parents when they come across the border.’ But, that isn’t true—they’re coming without their parents already.”

Celia does not retract her judgment that separating children from their actual parents is “horrible” and “not okay.” Instead, she narrows the set of cases to which that condemnation applies by distinguishing parental separation from what she understands as unaccompanied migration, uncertain guardianship, and trafficking. Ethnoracial pride remains explicit; harm remains recognizable; but the political meaning of the policy depends on how she classifies the situation before her.

I do not treat Celia’s account, by itself, as evidence that Latino identity generated an internal partisan conflict. Its analytic value is more specific: it shows how a participant who explicitly expresses ethnoracial pride can condemn family separation while simultaneously reclassifying contested enforcement practices in ways that limit the scope of that condemnation.

Ricky and Celia arrive at different positions through different forms of reclassification. Ricky explicitly acknowledges that his own family “benefited” from the citizenship principle he supports restricting, yet evaluates the policy through residence, taxation, and contribution. Celia calls family separation “horrible” and “not okay,” yet narrows the cases to which that condemnation applies by distinguishing parental separation from unaccompanied migration, uncertain guardianship, and trafficking. Neither account makes panethnic identity, immigrant belonging, or recognition of harm disappear. The interpretive work lies in determining what those attachments and recognitions are permitted to settle politically.

These distinctions are not politically neutral. Ricky’s account draws boundaries between

those who reside and contribute within the national system and those he understands as accessing benefits without fulfilling those obligations. Celia's account relies on a security-oriented narrative in which some instances described as family separation are reclassified as verification and protection. The point is not that these distinctions eliminate tension. It is that they organize the tension in ways that prevent immigrant-linked belonging, Latino identity, or recognition of harm from becoming decisive grounds for a different political judgment.

This form of reconciliation is specific to the domain of policy evaluation, where political disagreement can be organized around rules, procedures, and institutional operation. Because these standards rely on governance rather than symbolic meaning, they cannot fully account for how participants respond when partisan conflict takes the form of rhetoric that directly implicates ethnoracial identity. The limits of governance-based reasoning become most visible in these moments.

Containing the Political Significance of Symbolic Offense

Political rhetoric presents a distinct interpretive challenge because devaluing or xenophobic rhetoric can politicize ethnoracial identity by making collective dignity, belonging, and group standing salient and linking group attachment to political response (Pérez 2015a; Pérez 2015b). Immigration policy raises the question of whether shared Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should imply solidaristic policy judgment. Contested rhetoric raises a different question: whether perceived offense, devaluation, or symbolic attack directed toward Latinos or immigrants should require condemnation, partisan distance, or reconsideration of Republican alignment.

Unlike immigration policy, which participants often reinterpret through standards of law, procedure, membership, and state responsibility, anti-immigrant and anti-Latino rhetoric speaks

more directly to questions of recognition, dignity, threat, and group standing. When Republican leaders use rhetoric widely interpreted as hostile toward immigrants or Latinos, participants confront the possibility that their own Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments should make that rhetoric politically consequential. The question is therefore not simply whether a statement is offensive, but whether participants interpret it as harmful to people with whom they identify and, if so, how much political weight that injury should carry.

In these moments, reconciliation operates primarily through narrowing and subordination. Participants narrow what contested language is understood to mean, whom it is understood to describe, what it can legitimately be taken to indicate about the Republican Party as a whole, and what consequences offense should carry for partisan judgment. Some reclassify controversial remarks as distorted, selectively circulated, or taken out of context. Others individualize prejudice by distinguishing racist actors from party identity. Still others acknowledge that particular rhetoric is offensive or inappropriate while treating that offense as insufficient grounds for political realignment.

I do not treat every defense of Republican rhetoric as evidence of identity reconciliation. The relevant analytic sequence requires more than partisan defense alone. Reconciliation becomes visible when participants preserve Latino or immigrant-linked attachment as meaningful, encounter, anticipate, articulate, or are asked to consider the claim that contested rhetoric should matter because of that attachment, and then manage the political consequences of the rhetoric through refusal, narrowing, substitution, or subordination. This criterion distinguishes identity reconciliation from ordinary partisan rationalization while allowing motivated reasoning, media distrust, or the minimization of racism to operate as mechanisms within the process.

The interpretive moves analyzed here overlap with what scholars describe as motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber 2013) and, in some cases, the denial or minimization of racism (Alamillo 2019). Participants often approach contested rhetoric from within an already meaningful partisan alignment and interpret ambiguous or controversial language in ways that preserve that alignment. I do not treat this as a rival explanation that must be dismissed. Motivated reasoning helps explain why participants may favor interpretations compatible with prior commitments. Identity reconciliation identifies the identity work those interpretations accomplish: they limit what anti-immigrant or anti-Latino rhetoric is allowed to mean for participants' own Latino identity, immigrant-linked attachments, and Republican alignment. The question is not whether these are detached or unbiased readings of political language. It is how participants prevent contested rhetoric from carrying enough political weight to require partisan reconsideration.

Reclassifying Rhetoric as Distorted or Misrepresented

When Republican leaders use language that is publicly circulated as anti-immigrant or anti-Latino, participants often confront a potential tension between enduring ties to Latino identity and continued Republican alignment. Across interviews, one recurring interpretive response was to reclassify controversial remarks as distorted, selectively circulated, or taken out of context. Rather than disputing that the words had been spoken, participants contested what the language was about, whom it was meant to describe, and what it could legitimately be taken to indicate about the Republican Party's relationship to Latinos and immigrants as groups.

The full interpretive sequence is clearest in Alan's account because meaningful Hispanic attachment, an explicit social challenge to his Republican support, and his subsequent narrowing of contested rhetoric all appear within the same interview. Asked how he identified racially or

ethnically, Alan answered, “Myself as Hispanic. I mean, honestly, as Hispanic.” When asked what this identity meant to him, he explained, “I don’t think I would ever change my race, my culture,” adding, “as far as being me, myself, as Hispanic, I won’t change it. I won’t change it for nothing.” He described Hispanic culture through family, Catholicism, music, food, and what he saw as a particular emphasis on family unity.

This attachment became politically relevant when coworkers challenged his Republican support during the Trump era. Alan recalled being told, “they don’t like Hispanics, so why do you keep on still voting for them, and Trump’ a racist.” The criticism did not merely reject his partisan alignment or candidate preference. It connected his own Hispanic identity to an expected political response: if Trump and the Republican Party were hostile toward Hispanics, continued support required explanation. Alan responded by narrowing what Trump's controversial remarks were understood to mean and whom they were understood to describe:

If you go back and play the video again, he does say that, but he doesn’t say it in general. He just said it in the sense that we do have people coming that are rapists or drug dealers. He didn’t say all of them are rapists. But of course, the media are gonna twist things.

Alan’s emphasis that Trump “doesn’t say it in general” directly answers the claim that Trump and Republicans do not like Hispanics. He does not respond by rejecting Hispanic identity; earlier in the same interview, he described his race and culture as something he would not change “for nothing.” Instead, he restricts the rhetoric's target from Hispanics or immigrants as a whole to particular people he believes Trump was describing. Media distrust is therefore part of the account, but the interview material shows the identity work it performs: it helps Alan narrow whether rhetoric heard as anti-Hispanic should be treated as a categorical injury to people with whom he identifies and, therefore, as sufficient grounds for reconsidering his partisan support. His Hispanic belonging remains meaningful, the identity-based political expectation is made

explicit through his coworkers' criticism, and his response limits what that expectation is permitted to require politically.

Angel used a related form of narrowing, but through contextual reclassification rather than a direct interpersonal challenge to his partisan support. Reflecting on Donald Trump's 2015 presidential announcement speech, he emphasized that widely circulated clips omitted qualifying language and broader context. As he explained:

I understand what he said, and I'll go back and tell you he's not the best public speaker. And I saw this clip of Jorge Ramos from Univision—they [Univision] would always show it, but they wouldn't show the phrase where he [Trump] said that they [Mexico] do send great people. They [Univision] would just use that little clip. And he [Trump] said it many times, "Yes, they send rapists," which they do, "they send drug dealers," which they do, "but then they also send doctors." So they send a lot of great people as well. He didn't choose the best wording there, but nonetheless, it doesn't disqualify him as the best leader.

Angel does not deny that Trump used the disputed language or that his wording was objectionable. Instead, he recontextualizes its meaning by emphasizing selective circulation and omitted context. By pointing to Trump's reference to "great people," Angel limits the extent to which he treats the remarks as a categorical statement about Mexicans, immigrants, or Latinos writ large. The disputed rhetoric is recast as referring to some people crossing the border rather than as expressing generalized hostility toward an entire ethnoracial or national-origin group.

The final line of Angel's account makes the political consequence explicit: although Trump "didn't choose the best wording," the remarks did not "disqualify him as the best leader." Recognition of rhetorical excess is therefore separated from the judgment that such rhetoric should require partisan rejection. Angel does not have to establish that the remarks were unobjectionable. Instead, he limits what they are allowed to signify and, in turn, how much political weight they should carry. What might otherwise be interpreted as an identity-directed reason for rejecting Trump is narrowed through contextual reclassification before it can become

decisive for partisan judgment.

Lino offers a more assertive form of rhetorical narrowing, one made especially consequential by his own immigrant-linked and cultural attachments. Both of his parents were born and raised in Tamaulipas, Mexico, Spanish was the primary language of his childhood, and he identified himself as Hispanic. Asked what that identity meant to him, Lino explained: “It means like having Mexican roots, understanding my culture, but also... having my roots set here [in the United States].”

His family’s relationship to contemporary immigrants was also not abstract. Lino recalled that his father sometimes encountered migrants while working in rural areas and left food and water available for them. He explained that his father saw these migrants as “a fellow Mexican”: “My parents were born in Mexico, so it’s like, all right, I see them. I see the struggle they’re coming from. I understand where they’re coming from.” Lino agreed that people who encountered migrants in need of food or water should help them.

Yet Lino did not treat those immigrant-linked ties as grounds for interpreting Trump’s rhetoric as categorically hostile toward Mexicans or immigrants. When asked what he would say to people who considered Trump’s immigration positions racist, he answered, “Ignorance,” explaining that Trump “doesn’t sugarcoat things.” When confronted with Trump’s 2015 remarks about migrants bringing drugs, crime, and rape, Lino responded, “Well, he’s not wrong.” But his answer immediately narrowed the category at issue. “I do feel like there’s good people,” he continued, describing immigrants seeking the American dream, pursuing legal entry, or applying for asylum, while distinguishing them from people he associated with illegal entry, drug smuggling, and other criminal activity.

Lino’s account therefore does more than recast Trump’s language as blunt. He identifies

as Hispanic through “Mexican roots” and “understanding my culture”; describes his father seeing migrants as “a fellow Mexican”; and recognizes the hardship that can drive people to leave Mexico. But he does not interpret Trump’s rhetoric as applying to that broader category of people. Instead, he narrows its target to people he associates with illegality and criminal activity while recasting Trump’s rhetorical harshness as an unwillingness to “sugarcoat things.” In doing so, Lino preserves a distinction between immigrants with whom he and his family can identify and the people he understands Trump to be condemning.

Taken together, these accounts show different forms of the same interpretive move. Alan responds to an explicit social challenge to his Hispanic identity and Republican alignment by restricting Trump’s rhetoric from Hispanics or immigrants generally to particular individuals. Angel reclassifies the remarks as selectively circulated and incompletely contextualized, acknowledging poor wording while refusing to treat it as politically disqualifying. Lino draws on meaningful Hispanic and immigrant-linked attachments while narrowing the rhetoric’s target to those he associates with illegality and criminality. Across these variations, participants do not necessarily deny that the contested words were spoken. They contest what those words should be understood to mean, whom they should be understood to describe, and what political consequences should follow from them. In this way, narrowing limits whether rhetoric interpreted by others as hostile toward Latinos or immigrants becomes sufficient grounds for partisan reconsideration.

Narrowing Racism to Individuals, Not Political Alignment

Reclassifying rhetoric as distorted or taken out of context was not always sufficient to contain the political significance of contested language. In many interviews, participants acknowledged that racist or prejudiced language exists in American politics, including within the

Republican Party. In these cases, the interpretive challenge was not whether racism was present, but what its presence should be taken to indicate about partisan alignment. For Latino Republicans with enduring ties to Latino identity and the immigrant experience, this raised a distinct question: does recognizing racism require breaking with the Republican Party?

Across interviews, participants addressed this dilemma by distinguishing individual acts of prejudice from the Republican Party as a collective political project. Rather than treating racist or exclusionary rhetoric as evidence that the party itself is organized around hostility toward Latinos, participants located racism at the level of individual behavior. This interpretive move allowed participants to acknowledge the existence of racism while resisting the conclusion that Republican alignment was incompatible with their ethnoracial identity or immigrant-linked attachments.

Alan extends this narrowing from the meaning of rhetoric to what racism can indicate about party identity. Having already described coworkers telling him that Trump “doesn’t like Hispanics” and is “a racist,” Alan does not claim that racist people are absent from politics. Instead, he explains that “you’re always going to have racist people” while rejecting the conclusion that this means “the whole party is racist.” The distinction limits the level at which racism becomes politically diagnostic. Particular individuals can be racist without that racism defining the Republican Party as a collective political project.

Eduardo articulates a similar individualizing logic from direct experience, although his own relationship to Latino identity is more attenuated. He recalled that during military basic training, another man called him a “beaner” and “wetback” and told him to “go back to Mexico.” Eduardo does not deny the racism of the encounter. Instead, he refuses to generalize from the individual who targeted him to a broader racial collective:

I'm not saying that because he's black, all black people think like that. But it was just an individual person... I've learned that it's an individual problem. Racism is an individual thing. Not all white people are racists; not all black people are racists. It's individual problems, different racist people in different shapes and forms.

Eduardo's own relationship to Latino identity differs from Alan's. Elsewhere in the interview, Eduardo explains that he does not strongly identify with Latino, Hispanic, or Mexican labels and prefers American identity. I therefore do not treat his account as a standalone instance of the complete reconciliation sequence. Its analytic value is more specific: it demonstrates the individualizing logic through which racism can be recognized without being generalized to racial groups or partisan collectives.

Alan and Eduardo therefore converge on an individualizing interpretation of racism while arriving there from different relationships to ethnoracial identity. For Alan, who describes himself as Hispanic and says he would not change his "race" or "culture... for nothing," the distinction directly answers a socially encountered claim that supporting Trump conflicts with Hispanic belonging. For Eduardo, who expresses weaker attachment to panethnic labels, the same distinction reflects a broader resistance to collective identity claims. In both accounts, racism is recognized while its explanatory reach is bounded.

Limiting the Partisan Consequences of Symbolic Offense

Reclassifying rhetoric as distorted and narrowing racism to individual actors were not the only ways participants contained the political significance of contested language. Some participants acknowledged that Trump's rhetoric was offensive, inappropriate, or poorly chosen, yet still resisted treating that offense as politically disqualifying. In these accounts, the interpretive move is not to deny that symbolic injury exists. It is to limit what symbolic injury is allowed to do politically. Participants recognize that particular remarks may be troubling, but they subordinate that recognition to broader evaluations of leadership, policy, national interest,

border governance, or partisan fit. Symbolic offense is therefore acknowledged without being allowed to reorder partisan alignment.

Martha illustrates this move especially clearly because she is a naturalized immigrant from Tamaulipas with continued ties to Mexico and a strong sense of Latino and immigrant-linked belonging. Her account therefore does not fit an explanation in which Republican alignment is sustained because those attachments have disappeared. When reflecting on Trump's language, she acknowledged that she did not agree with some of his rhetoric but explained that she "put that aside" and looked at "the bigger picture." Her phrasing is analytically important because she does not reinterpret the remarks as harmless or irrelevant. Instead, she distinguishes between recognizing offense and allowing offense to become politically decisive. By "putting aside" rhetoric and looking to the "bigger picture," Martha relocates partisan judgment to a broader evaluative field that includes leadership, national direction, policy priorities, and the issues she treats as more consequential.

Martha's account also narrows what the rhetoric is allowed to signify. She acknowledged that Trump "shouldn't have used this rhetoric," but emphasized that "he didn't say all." Here, symbolic offense is not denied. It is bounded. Martha recognizes that the language was inappropriate, but she prevents it from becoming a categorical statement about immigrants, Latinos, or families like hers. The offense remains present, but its political implications are constrained. It does not become evidence that Republican alignment is incompatible with Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachment.

Taken together, these two moves—bounding what the rhetoric is understood to signify and subordinating acknowledged offense to other considerations—distinguish Martha's account from the more direct rhetorical narrowing visible in Angel, Alan, and Lino. Martha does not

simply reinterpret Trump's language as inoffensive. She recognizes that some of the rhetoric was inappropriate while refusing to give that recognition decisive political weight.

The distinction is central to the chapter's argument. Immigration policy is often reconciled by relocating judgment toward law, procedure, membership, contribution, and state responsibility. Contested rhetoric generates a different set of interpretive responses. Some participants narrow whom the rhetoric is understood to describe; others distinguish individual racism from partisan identity; still others, like Martha, acknowledge offense while subordinating it to considerations they treat as more consequential. These moves do not make Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachment disappear. They organize how much political weight those attachments and the injuries associated with them are allowed to carry.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Latino Republicans sustain partisan alignment while continuing to invoke Latino identity and immigrant-linked attachments that are often publicly framed as incompatible with Republican politics. The analysis has not treated these attachments as absent, weak, or merely symbolic. Participants repeatedly described family migration histories, cultural background, Latino community ties, Mexican-origin belonging, and immigrant-linked experiences as meaningful parts of who they are. The central question, then, is not simply whether these attachments persist, but what participants understand them to require politically.

I have argued that participants manage this problem through identity reconciliation: an interpretive process through which meaningful Latino and immigrant-linked attachments are preserved while participants organize the political weight those attachments should carry. Across the interviews, this process became visible through a recurring relationship among three

elements. Participants first preserved Latino, Mexican-origin, or immigrant-linked attachments as meaningful forms of belonging. They then encountered, anticipated, articulated, or were asked to consider expectations that those attachments should imply particular partisan, policy, or rhetorical judgments. Finally, they managed those expectations through overlapping forms of refusal, narrowing, substitution, or subordination.

This formulation is important because it distinguishes identity reconciliation from conservative political preference alone. A Latino Republican's support for border enforcement, emphasis on American national identity, distrust of the media, or defense of Donald Trump does not itself demonstrate reconciliation. These forms of reasoning become analytically relevant to identity reconciliation when participants use them to adjudicate what their own Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should require politically. The chapter has therefore focused not simply on what participants believe, but on the interpretive work through which they manage the relationship between belonging, political expectation, and partisan judgment.

The first part of the chapter established the layered architecture of belonging that informs this process. Participants often positioned American national identity as a primary frame through which Latino identity and immigrant-linked histories were named and understood. This ordering did not itself constitute reconciliation, nor did it necessarily mean that Latino or immigrant attachments had been displaced. Instead, it provided one background structure participants could draw upon when determining which identity claims should guide political judgment.

Immigration policy made these questions particularly visible because immigration is frequently treated as a domain in which shared Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should generate solidaristic political judgments. Participants often refused that premise directly. They rejected the idea that being Latino should, by itself, settle questions about enforcement,

legalization, citizenship, or the border. They then substituted nationally anchored standards of governance—including legality, procedural fairness, institutional order, contribution, deservingness, and state responsibility—as the criteria they treated as more legitimate for evaluating policy.

These substitutions were not politically neutral. Participants frequently drew distinctions between compliant and noncompliant immigrants, contributors and noncontributors, deserving and undeserving claimants, or legitimate family protection and necessary state enforcement. Such distinctions could reproduce exclusionary boundaries and security-oriented narratives. Yet treating them solely as law-and-order conservatism or deservingness judgments would miss the additional identity work they sometimes performed. Participants used these standards to preserve meaningful Latino and immigrant-linked attachments while limiting the political obligations they understood others to attach to shared background.

The analysis also showed that the same governance logic could authorize inclusion as well as restriction. Participants who supported DACA or conditional pathways to legal status often did so through criteria involving childhood arrival, institutional embeddedness, education, work, contribution, or rule-governed procedure. The relevant point is not that participants arrived at uniformly restrictive immigration positions. It is that both inclusion and exclusion were frequently evaluated through standards participants located within a national legal and institutional order rather than through an assumed obligation of coethnic solidarity.

Partisan rhetoric presented a different problem. Unlike policy, rhetoric implicated symbolic belonging more directly by raising questions about what contested political language said about immigrants and Latinos as people and groups. Here, reconciliation operated through several forms of narrowing and subordination. Participants reclassified controversial statements

as distorted or misrepresented, limited who or what the rhetoric was understood to describe, distinguished individual prejudice from the Republican Party as a collective political project, and acknowledged symbolic offense while denying that offense should be politically disqualifying.

These responses overlap with motivated reasoning, media distrust, partisan rationalization, and the minimization of racism. Those interpretations are not necessarily wrong. The argument of this chapter is that they do not exhaust what participants' accounts are doing. When participants use these forms of reasoning to manage claims that anti-Latino or anti-immigrant rhetoric should matter because of their own identities and family histories, those interpretations perform identity-reconciliation work. They prevent symbolic offense from acquiring sufficient political weight to require partisan reconsideration.

Taken together, these findings show that Latino Republicans do not necessarily sustain partisan alignment by abandoning Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments. Nor do they uniformly deny that immigration policy or political rhetoric can carry consequences for Latinos and immigrants. Instead, they negotiate what those attachments should require politically and how much weight they should carry in particular judgments. Some directly refuse identity-based obligation. Others narrow the people, objects, or circumstances to which an identity-based claim is understood to apply. Still others substitute alternative standards of judgment or acknowledge identity-linked concerns while subordinating them to considerations treated as more consequential. These moves do not make Latino or immigrant-linked belonging disappear. They organize what those attachments are permitted to settle politically.

This chapter completes the dissertation's empirical arc. Chapter 3 showed how participants interpret Republican alignment as fitting with commitments they understand as central to who they are. Chapter 4 showed how that alignment becomes socially embedded

within domains of belonging, especially American national identity and religious community. Chapter 5 has shown how participants sustain that alignment when other meaningful attachments are invoked as reasons they should reject, reconsider, or feel conflicted about it. Read together, the empirical chapters show that Latino Republican alignment is not best understood simply as the erosion of Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments. It is a process through which Republican alignment is recognized as fitting, reinforced within everyday social worlds, and reconciled with enduring forms of ethnoracial and immigrant-linked belonging.

The broader implication is that political identities should not be understood only through their presence, strength, salience, or disappearance. Meaningful identities also become objects of interpretation. Group members confront claims about what shared belonging should require, and they may refuse or narrow those claims, substitute other standards of judgment, or subordinate identity-linked concerns to considerations they treat as more consequential. In a polarized party system, partisan alignment can therefore remain sustainable not because competing attachments disappear, but because individuals actively organize how much political weight those attachments are permitted to carry in political judgment.

CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSION

This dissertation began with a puzzle. Latino support for the Republican Party has persisted and, in some places, grown during a period in which the party has become closely associated with restrictive immigration politics, rhetoric widely interpreted as hostile toward Latinos and immigrants, and broader cultural conflicts that many scholars would expect to reinforce Latino Democratic attachment. Existing explanations identify important sources of variation in Latino political behavior, particularly differences in panethnic identity, immigrant-linked attachments, acculturation, and perceptions of group threat. Yet these explanations tell us less about how Latino Republicans themselves understand alignment with the contemporary Republican Party, how that alignment becomes meaningful within their everyday lives, and how they sustain it when Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging is invoked as a reason they should reach a different political judgment.

The central argument of this dissertation is that Latino Republican alignment is not best understood simply as the disappearance of Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments. Across 85 in-depth interviews conducted in five majority-Latino South Texas counties, participants instead described Republican alignment through three related but analytically distinct dimensions. They understood Republican affiliation as fitting with commitments they described as longstanding and important to who they are. They situated that affiliation within meaningful domains of belonging, especially American national identity and religious community, where Republican alignment could appear recognizable, appropriate, and socially reinforced. And when Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments were invoked as reasons they should reject, reconsider, or feel conflicted about Republican alignment, participants

engaged in forms of identity reconciliation, interpreting whether—and how much—those attachments should carry political weight.

The central arc of the dissertation can therefore be stated in three terms: fit, belonging, and reconciliation. Chapter 3 shows how Republican alignment becomes intelligible through participants' perceptions that one party better reflects commitments they regard as important and longstanding. Chapter 4 shows how that alignment becomes situated within social worlds of belonging where it can appear recognizable and appropriate. Chapter 5 shows how participants sustain that alignment when other meaningful attachments are made politically relevant as potential sources of challenge. These processes do not appear uniformly across all participants, nor do they necessarily unfold in a fixed temporal sequence. Their collective importance lies in showing different dimensions of how Republican alignment becomes politically meaningful, socially embedded, and sustainable alongside other attachments that remain important to participants' self-understanding.

This argument shifts the analytic question posed by much of the existing literature. Scholarship on Latino politics has been especially successful at explaining which Latinos are more likely to move away from the Democratic Party or become open to Republican candidates. Because panethnic identity, immigrant-linked ties, perceptions of discrimination, and group threat are understood to strengthen Democratic attachment among many Latinos, Latino Republicanism has often been explained through the weakening or attenuation of these forces. Such explanations identify meaningful sources of variation. But they tend to explain Latino Republicanism indirectly—as movement away from Democratic attachment rather than as a form of partisan alignment requiring explanation in its own right. This dissertation instead asks how Latino Republicans come to see Republican affiliation as making sense, how it becomes

situated within the social worlds through which they understand themselves, and how they sustain it alongside attachments that may remain meaningful even when others frame them as politically incompatible with Republican support.

Chapter 3 established the first part of this arc by examining partisan alignment as an interpretive process. Participants did not generally narrate Republican affiliation as a sudden ideological conversion or as the abandonment of Latino identity. Instead, they described relating commitments they understood as longstanding—surrounding religion, family, moral order, immigration, work, guns, economic orientation, and national belonging—to differences they perceived between the parties. For some participants, this involved movement toward Republican candidates after concluding that Democratic positions no longer reflected commitments they regarded as important. For others whose Republican alignment was already established, the relevant pattern concerned how an existing partisan orientation became part of the standpoint through which subsequent political questions were interpreted. What united the strongest accounts was not a single issue, identical ideology, or common political trajectory, but a recurring logic of fit: participants described Republican alternatives as better representing what they believed, valued, and prioritized.

The significance of this finding is not simply that Latino Republicans hold conservative positions. Nor does the analysis claim that participants' retrospective accounts independently establish the objective causal sequence through which their political views developed. The contribution is interpretive. Participants repeatedly make sense of Republican alignment by connecting commitments they regard as prior and enduring to differences they perceive between the parties. Partisan polarization matters in this account because it changes the environment in which commitments become politically interpretable. As the parties become more differentiated

around religion, family, immigration, guns, national identity, gender and sexuality, and competing visions of social order, commitments that participants describe as longstanding can acquire clearer partisan implications. Many participants therefore do not narrate themselves as having become fundamentally different people in order to support Republicans. They describe coming to see the parties differently and, through that comparison, understanding Republican alignment as a more appropriate political expression of commitments they believe they already possessed.

Chapter 4 extended the analysis from political fit to social belonging. Republican alignment was not described only through issue agreement or evaluations of competing party positions. It also became situated within valued social worlds. Participants described American national identity and religious community as especially important domains in which Republican affiliation could become recognizable and socially intelligible. These domains did not operate identically. Religious communities provided some of the clearest evidence of interpersonal accountability and moral expectations linking faith to political judgment. Participants described family and church relationships in which political conduct could be questioned, presumed, or evaluated through religiously meaningful expectations. Other participants described the relationship between Christian identity and Republican alignment less through direct correction than through intuitive fit, with Republican affiliation appearing consistent with the moral worlds in which they understood themselves to belong.

American national identity provided a somewhat different and more varied form of embeddedness. Participants often described Americanness through patriotism, respect for law and institutions, self-reliance, contribution, military service, and understandings of legitimate national membership. In some accounts, these meanings were explicitly connected to Republican

affiliation; in others, they established standards of belonging without directly determining partisan identity. This variation is analytically important. The argument is not that American national identity or religion mechanically produces Republican alignment. It is that participants sometimes situate Republican affiliation within social worlds through which political alignment becomes recognizable as fitting the kinds of people they understand themselves to be and the communities in which they locate themselves. Social embeddedness therefore identifies how partisan alignment can acquire an ordinary and defensible place within everyday life without claiming that every participant experiences these domains in the same way.

Chapter 5 addressed the problem that runs most directly through the Latino Republican puzzle: what happens when meaningful Latino or immigrant-linked attachments are invoked as reasons participants should reject, reconsider, or feel conflicted about Republican alignment? The chapter did not assume this tension simply because participants were both Latino and Republican. Nor did it treat every expression of conservative immigration preferences, American national identity, media distrust, or support for Donald Trump as evidence of reconciliation. Identity reconciliation became analytically visible through a more specific relationship among three elements: participants preserved Latino, Mexican-origin, or immigrant-linked attachments as meaningful; encountered, anticipated, articulated, or were asked to consider expectations that those attachments should imply particular political judgments; and responded through refusal, narrowing, substitution, or subordination when explaining their own political alignment.

This distinction is central to the dissertation's broader argument. Participants did not necessarily manage perceived incompatibility by ceasing to identify as Latino, weakening family migration histories, or denying that political policies and rhetoric can carry consequences for Latinos and immigrants. Many continued to describe Mexican-origin culture, Spanish language,

family migration histories, immigrant sacrifice, and Latino community ties as meaningful parts of who they were. The interpretive question concerned what those attachments should require politically. Some participants encountered direct accusations that Latinos should vote Democratic, support more solidaristic immigration policies, reject Republican candidates, or treat rhetoric interpreted as hostile toward Latinos and immigrants as grounds for partisan opposition. Others confronted these expectations more indirectly or considered them when the relationship between identity and politics became explicit during the interview. Reconciliation occurred not because attachment disappeared, but as participants reasoned through whether—and how much—such claims should guide their own judgments.

The two major empirical domains in Chapter 5 revealed different forms of this process. In immigration politics, participants often refused the premise that Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should, by itself, settle questions about enforcement, legalization, citizenship, or the border. They substituted standards they regarded as more legitimate for political judgment, including legality, procedural fairness, institutional order, documentation, contribution, deservingness, and state responsibility. This same logic could authorize inclusion as well as restriction: participants who supported DACA, legalization, or conditional pathways to citizenship often did so through criteria involving childhood arrival, institutional embeddedness, education, work, documentation, contribution, or rule-governed procedure. In debates over partisan rhetoric, participants confronted a different problem because contested language implicated symbolic belonging and group standing more directly. Here, reconciliation operated especially through narrowing and subordination. Participants reclassified controversial remarks as distorted, selectively circulated, or taken out of context; limited whom the rhetoric was understood to describe; distinguished individual prejudice from the Republican Party as a

collective political project; or acknowledged offense while treating it as insufficiently consequential to require partisan revision. Across both domains, the central issue was not whether Latino or immigrant-linked attachments existed, but how much political weight participants allowed those attachments and the claims made on their behalf to carry.

Taken together, the three empirical chapters provide a cumulative answer to the dissertation's central puzzle. Participants make sense of Republican alignment by relating perceived partisan differences to commitments they regard as important. That alignment can become situated within broader domains of belonging where it appears recognizable and appropriate. Yet participants also inhabit other meaningful attachments that do not always carry the same political implications. When Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging is invoked as a reason they should reach a different political conclusion, participants interpret and organize the claims attached to those forms of belonging. Republican alignment therefore becomes recognizable through fit, socially situated through belonging, and sustainable amid potentially competing political expectations through reconciliation.

These are related but analytically distinct dimensions rather than universal stages through which every Latino Republican necessarily moves. Some participants provide especially clear accounts of partisan sorting. Others make social embeddedness within religious or national communities more visible. Some encounter explicit accusations that they are betraying their "own people" or voting against their culture; others confront identity-based expectations less directly. Not every participant exhibits the full interpretive sequence associated with identity reconciliation, just as not every participant experiences partisan alignment as equally socially embedded. The importance of these concepts lies in identifying recurring interpretive patterns

that clarify different dimensions of how Republican alignment becomes meaningful and defensible.

This argument contributes first to the study of Latino politics. Latino Republicanism is often approached through a deficit model: what has weakened, disappeared, or become less politically salient that allows a Latino voter to support the Republican Party? This dissertation does not deny that Latino Republicans may differ from Latino Democrats in the strength, salience, or political consequences of ethnoracial identity, linked fate, perceptions of discrimination, or immigrant ties. Nor does it deny the importance of acculturation, ideology, policy preferences, economic interests, or racial attitudes. Rather, it identifies an additional problem that these differences alone cannot resolve. When Latino or immigrant-linked attachments remain meaningful, what political role do individuals allow those attachments to play? The interviews show that an identity can remain culturally, socially, and biographically significant without functioning as a decisive guide to partisan judgment. The question is therefore not only whether Latino identity is present or absent, strong or weak, salient or peripheral. It is also what participants understand that identity to require politically and how much weight they permit it to carry relative to other commitments. More broadly, this finding suggests that people do not necessarily manage multiple attachments by abandoning one identity in favor of another. They interpret the political claims attached to different forms of belonging and determine which claims should guide judgment in particular contexts.

The dissertation also contributes to the study of partisan polarization and sorting. Much of the polarization literature has documented ideological sorting, affective polarization, and the increasing alignment of political and social identities. The Latino Republican case shows how these broader transformations are interpreted within the lives of voters whose ethnoracial

background has often been treated as creating a durable Democratic predisposition. The point is not that Latino Republicans are equivalent to White conservatives or that contemporary Latino partisan change simply reproduces earlier racial realignments. It is that polarization reorganizes the environment in which individuals interpret parties, commitments, and social identities. As the parties differentiate around competing moral, cultural, religious, and national visions, commitments that individuals understand as longstanding may acquire increasingly clear partisan implications. Republican affiliation can thereby become logical even among people who continue to possess attachments that existing theories might expect to point toward Democratic alignment.

The qualitative approach is essential to the dissertation's broader contributions. Aggregate data can identify changes in vote choice, party identification, ideological self-placement, and issue preferences. Surveys can show which Latinos are more likely to identify as Republican, how perceptions of discrimination vary across party identification, or where Republican electoral gains have occurred. But such approaches are less well suited to reconstructing how individuals connect different domains of experience within extended narratives: how religious commitments become related to perceived party differences, how partisan affiliation becomes recognizable within valued social environments, or how people reason through accusations that their politics contradict their ethnoracial identity or immigrant-linked background. The interviews analyzed here make those interpretive relationships visible. They show not only what participants believe, but how they relate commitments, social worlds, identities, and political judgments to one another.

South Texas provides particular analytic leverage for examining these processes. Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata counties are overwhelmingly Latino,

predominantly Mexican-origin, deeply shaped by immigrant-linked communities, and historically associated with Democratic dominance. The importance of this regional context does not rest on assuming that every resident—or every participant—possesses equally strong Latino identity or equally close ties to immigration. Rather, Latino, Mexican-origin, and immigrant-linked attachments remain socially available and deeply embedded in everyday regional life, while the interviews establish directly that many participants themselves continued to invoke cultural background, family migration histories, Spanish language, Mexican-origin belonging, and immigrant-linked experience as meaningful. Republican gains have nevertheless occurred within precisely this setting. South Texas is therefore analytically revealing not because it represents all Latinos across the U.S., but because it allows close examination of how Republican alignment becomes recognizable in a social environment where Latino and immigrant-linked attachments remain highly present.

The argument developed here also has important limits. This dissertation does not claim that all Latino Republicans arrive at partisan alignment through the same pathway, that partisan sorting, social embeddedness, and identity reconciliation appear uniformly across participants, or that they unfold in a fixed sequence. The study draws primarily on Mexican-origin Latino Republicans in South Texas, and its findings should not be treated as statistically representative of all Latino Republicans, all national-origin groups, or all regional contexts. Nor does the analysis estimate the prevalence of each interpretive process. Its purpose is interpretive: to reconstruct how participants themselves explain and organize the relationship among political commitments, partisan alignment, social belonging, and identity-based expectations.

These limitations also identify directions for further research. Future studies can examine whether and how similar processes appear among Latino Republicans outside South Texas,

among other Latino national-origin populations, and among Latino Democrats who encounter different combinations of partisan fit, social belonging, and identity-based obligation.

Comparative qualitative research could examine how the political meaning of Latino identity varies across local and regional contexts with different histories of partisan competition, immigration, racialization, and community organization. The concept of identity reconciliation may also travel beyond Latino politics wherever people confront claims that meaningful group membership should require particular political judgments—whether around race, religion, gender, class, nationalism, region, or other forms of collective belonging.

The larger implication is that partisan alignment should not be understood only through attitudes, policy preferences, or the relative strength of discrete identities. It is also a matter of interpretation. People come to understand political parties through commitments, relationships, communities, identities, and social worlds with which those parties become associated. They also interpret what different forms of belonging should require of them. In a polarized party system, these interpretive tasks become especially consequential because party differences increasingly implicate competing moral, cultural, religious, ethnoracial, and national visions. Partisan alignment can therefore become sustainable not because other meaningful attachments disappear, but because individuals actively organize the relationships among them and determine how much political weight different commitments and forms of belonging should carry.

Ernie's account, with which this dissertation began, brings this cumulative arc into view. Raised by Mexican immigrant parents, he grew up with the assumption that Latinos were supposed to vote Democratic because Democratic affiliation was “part of my identity.” Republicanism initially seemed socially distant—something associated with “the rich and White people.” Yet through new social environments and conversations about religion, race, guns, and

national identity, Ernie began to interpret the parties differently. He came to conclude that Democratic positions no longer represented commitments he regarded as central, telling me, “They are against fracking... they are attacking our Second Amendment... [and] don’t align with my religious values.” His movement toward Republican support became clear through a perceived fit between these commitments and what he understood Republicans to represent. At the same time, he did not describe cutting his ties to his Latino identity, abandoning pride in his upbringing, or forgetting his family’s immigrant history. What changed was whether he understood Latino identity as dictating his political allegiance.

Ernie’s story does not stand for every Latino Republican, nor does it by itself explain the broader transformation of Latino politics. But it captures the interpretive problem at the center of this dissertation. People inhabit multiple commitments and forms of belonging, and those attachments do not automatically carry fixed or identical political implications. Latino Republican alignment, in this sense, is not best understood simply as the erosion of Latino identity or immigrant-linked ties. It is one manifestation of a broader process through which individuals interpret partisan differences, locate political affiliation within meaningful social worlds, and negotiate what their other attachments should require of political judgment. The central lesson of this dissertation is therefore not that Latino identity has ceased to matter. It is that what an identity means politically—and how much political weight it should carry—is itself a matter of interpretation.

APPENDIX

Supplementary Materials (SM)

SM.1. Interview Instrument

The interviews were semi-structured and organized around participants' life histories, political development, identities, social environments, partisan attachments, and views on contemporary political conflict. The guide provided a common structure across interviews, but I employed it flexibly. The order and wording of questions varied depending on how each conversation developed, and not every follow-up question was asked in every interview. I generally began with open-ended questions and used more focused probes when participants raised a relevant topic or when clarification was necessary.

The interview protocol also developed over the course of the project. The initial interviews focused especially on family background, political socialization, identity, immigration experience, partisanship, and immigration policy. As I reviewed the early interviews and continued data collection, I expanded the use of probes concerning perceived differences between the parties, religion, American national identity, abortion, guns, gender and sexuality, law enforcement, partisan rhetoric, and accusations that Latino Republicans were voting against their community. The later follow-up domains described below were used to deepen emerging lines of inquiry; they were not administered as a standardized set of questions to every participant.

Core Interview Guide

1. Where were you born and raised?
 1. When you were a child, what did your parents do for a living?
 2. Can you tell me about your family's immigration history?
2. Growing up, what language(s) did you and your family speak?
3. Did you grow up attending Church?
4. Where do you currently live and what do you do for a living?
5. What is your current marital status?
 1. Do you have any children?
 2. What is your age?
6. What identity do you typically use to describe yourself? [e.g., Latino, Hispanic, Mexican-American, American] Why?
7. When thinking about the different political parties in the U.S., is there one you primarily identify with? Why or why not?
8. How would you describe yourself politically in terms of your political beliefs – conservative, moderate, or liberal? Why (e.g., issues, experiences, actors)?
9. Immigration is a major issue in American politics today; what are your opinions on this topic? Why?
 1. What do you think about separating children from their families while being held at immigration detention centers? Why?
 2. What do you think about the building of the border wall? Why?

3. What do you think should be done about immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children, often referred to as “Dreamers”? Why?
4. What do you think should be done about undocumented immigrants who are already here? Why?
10. Do you remember voting in the 2016 presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton? Who did you vote for and why?
11. What about the 2020 presidential election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden? Who did you vote for? Why?
12. Are you involved in political campaigns or organizations?
13. Before we finish, I’d like to make sure that we’ve covered all experiences that have been important influences in your life – especially when it comes to your decision to support former President Trump and his immigration policies. Is there an experience or person you haven’t already mentioned that has had an important influence on your past decisions, current beliefs, or plans for the future?

Follow-Up Domains

The following areas were explored through follow-up probes when they became relevant to a participant’s account.

Perceived differences between the parties

Participants were asked to explain what they believed the Democratic and Republican parties represented, which differences they considered most important, and whether those differences had become clearer or changed during their lifetimes. Follow-up questions also examined whether commitments participants described as important predated their Republican support and whether there was a point at which they concluded that one party better represented those commitments.

Religion and political judgment

Participants were asked about the relationship between religious beliefs and political views, whether political or social issues were discussed within their religious communities, and whether family members, clergy, or other members of those communities had affirmed or questioned their political choices. These questions also explored whether participants understood particular partisan positions as consistent or inconsistent with their religious commitments.

American national identity

Participants were asked what being American meant to them, how they understood the relationship between American and Latino or Hispanic identity, and whether they associated particular values or responsibilities with American belonging. Follow-up questions examined patriotism, citizenship, contribution, law, military service, and the relationship between national belonging and partisan affiliation.

Social and culture-war issues

Later interviews included more sustained discussion of abortion, guns and the Second Amendment, LGBTQ rights, gender roles, family structure, policing, and law enforcement. These questions were used to understand how participants interpreted differences between the parties and which issues they considered important to their political alignment.

Latino identity and perceived political expectations

Participants were asked to discuss what being a Latino meant to them, whether they believed Latinos experienced discrimination, whether they had personally encountered anti-Latino or anti-Mexican treatment, and whether others had assumed that being Latino or Hispanic should lead them to support a particular party or policy. When relevant, I asked participants to discuss experiences of being accused of voting against their “own people,” culture, or community and how they understood and responded to those accusations.

Partisan rhetoric

Participants were asked how they interpreted rhetoric by Donald Trump and other Republican figures concerning immigrants, Mexico, and Latinos. Follow-up questions examined whether they understood controversial remarks as applying to immigrants or Latinos generally or to narrower categories of people, whether rhetoric should affect how someone evaluates an entire political party, and how participants determined the political importance of language they regarded as offensive, poorly phrased, or misrepresented.

SM.2. Recruitment and Fieldwork Procedures

Eligibility

The principal analytic sample consisted of Latino adults residing in Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, or Zapata County who reported supporting a Republican presidential candidate in at least one recent presidential election.

Participants were screened according to three criteria:

1. they self-identified as Latino or Hispanic;
2. they resided in one of the five South Texas counties included in the study; and
3. they reported supporting, or aligning with, the Republican presidential candidate in at least one recent election.

For participants interviewed before the 2024 election, the electoral criterion referred to Republican presidential support in 2016 and/or 2020. For participants interviewed after the 2024 election, support in 2024 also satisfied the criterion.

Throughout the dissertation, I use Latino Republicans as shorthand for the principal population examined. This group includes participants who explicitly identified as Republican as well as a smaller number who described themselves as independent or resisted formal partisan labels while

repeatedly supporting Republican presidential candidates. When the analysis specifically concerns partisan self-identification, I distinguish self-identified Republicans from Republican-supporting independents.

Recruitment

Recruitment combined organizational outreach, digital outreach, direct fieldwork, referrals, and snowball sampling. Using several recruitment strategies helped broaden the sample beyond highly active party officials or members of a single organization.

The initial phase of recruitment occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when opportunities for face-to-face fieldwork were limited. I contacted Republican and conservative organizations in the five counties, introduced the project to organizational leaders, requested assistance distributing recruitment information, and conducted targeted outreach through regional political networks and online groups. Participants also referred other potentially eligible individuals.

As in-person fieldwork became possible, I broadened recruitment by attending county Republican meetings, local political demonstrations, Trump Train events, and gatherings organized by conservative groups. These settings were used primarily to identify and recruit potential interviewees. Although attending them provided background familiarity with the local political environment, the dissertation’s empirical analysis rests on interview data rather than on systematically collected participant-observation fieldnotes.

Recruitment during the later phase was designed to reach participants with different levels of political involvement. Some were active in campaigns, county parties, or conservative organizations. Others described their participation as occasional, limited largely to voting, or newly initiated. For some participants, the event where I first met them was their first political activity beyond voting.

Table SM.2.1 Data-Collection Timeline

Phase	Period	Primary mode	Interviews	Recruitment emphasis
Initial phase	September 2020– Summer 2021	Zoom and telephone	30 Latino Republicans	Organizational contacts, digital outreach, referrals, and conservative networks
Expanded fieldwork phase	Summer 2023–August 2025	Primarily face-to-face	45 Latino Republicans, 5 Latino Democrats, and 5 White Republicans	County meetings, political events, community settings, direct recruitment, referrals, and snowball sampling

Data collection slowed after the initial phase and later paused while I fulfilled teaching responsibilities at UCLA. During this period, I continued reviewing interviews, developing memos, and reassessing the composition of the sample. This review informed the decision to broaden later recruitment and expand parts of the interview protocol.

The completed interviews ranged from approximately one hour to four and a half hours. The recruitment message described an anticipated interview length of approximately 45–60 minutes, but many interviews continued longer when participants chose to elaborate on their political histories, identities, family experiences, and views.

Sample and Contrastive Interviews

The complete interview corpus includes 85 participants:

- 75 Latino Republicans or Republican-aligned participants;
- 5 Latino Democrats; and
- 5 non-Latino White Republicans.

Among the Latino Republican participants, 28 percent were first-generation immigrants, 37 percent were second-generation, and 35 percent were third-generation or higher. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 78 and varied by gender, education, occupation, income, nativity, county, political history, and level of involvement. Aggregate sample characteristics are reported in Table 1 in Chapter 1.

Because each contrastive group contains only five participants, these interviews were added solely for contextual comparison. The White Republican interviews helped clarify which accounts of conservative ideology, religion, national identity, and dissatisfaction with Democrats reflected broader Republican reasoning rather than dynamics unique to Latino Republicans. The Latino Democratic interviews helped illuminate the expectations concerning Latino identity, immigration, discrimination, and Democratic alignment that Latino Republican participants often encountered or contested. I used these interviews primarily in memo-writing and cross-case interpretation.

Example Recruitment Message

Hello, [Name]. My name is Rodolfo Solís, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at UCLA. I am conducting research involving in-depth interviews with individuals from South Texas, including the Rio Grande Valley and Zapata County, who identify as Republican and have Hispanic or Latino backgrounds. The goal of the study is to better understand how people in the region think about politics, their experiences, and the perspectives that shape their political views.

If you would be willing to participate, I would be happy to arrange a time to speak that is convenient for you. Interviews typically last about 45–60 minutes and can be conducted in person or by phone. Participation is entirely voluntary, and any information shared during the interview will be kept confidential and used only for academic research.

Consent and Confidentiality

Before each interview, participants received information concerning the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality protections, their ability to decline individual questions, and their ability to end participation. I answered questions and obtained informed

consent before beginning the interview. All research procedures were approved by the University of California, Los Angeles Institutional Review Board.

I use pseudonyms throughout the dissertation. I also omit or generalize identifying details when combinations of age, occupation, county, organizational role, officeholding, or family history could make a participant recognizable.

SM.3. Coding and Theme Development

This section provides additional detail about the thematic analysis described in Chapter 1. I analyzed the interviews using an abductive and iterative approach. Following Deterding and Waters' (2021) flexible-coding framework, I first organized the transcripts by broad topic and then compared passages within and across those topics to identify recurring interpretive patterns. I transcribed the interviews and imported the transcripts into Dedoose. Coding developed over the course of analysis. The tables below show the codes most relevant to the dissertation's final arguments; they are not an exhaustive record of every temporary or organizational label used during the project.

Index Coding

The first stage used index codes to organize passages by topic. Index coding identified what participants were discussing without treating the presence of a topic as evidence of a particular analytic process. Because a single passage could concern several areas at once, passages could receive more than one index code.

Table SM.3.1. Illustrative Index Codes

Index code	Description	Example of indexed material
Family background and socialization	Childhood environment, parental expectations, and early socialization	Participant describes parents emphasizing religion, discipline, family, work, or responsibility
Immigration experience	Personal or familial migration histories	Participant describes immigrating, parents' migration, legalization, cross-border ties, or immigrant relatives
Religious upbringing and practice	Religious socialization, belief, church participation, and faith communities	Participant discusses attending church or the influence of religious teachings
Latino, Hispanic, or Mexican-origin identity	Ethnoracial, panethnic, and national-origin self-description	Participant explains what being Latino, Hispanic, or Mexican American means
American identity and national belonging	American self-identification, patriotism, citizenship, and national membership	Participant describes being American first or discusses national obligations
Political identity and ideology	Party identification, electoral alignment, and ideological self-placement	Participant describes being Republican, independent,

Index code	Description	Example of indexed material
		conservative, moderate, or formerly Democratic
Party perceptions	Understandings of what Democrats and Republicans represent	Participant associates a party with particular issues, values, social groups, or ways of life
Electoral history	Vote choices and changes or continuity in partisan support	Participant explains votes in 2016, 2020, or 2024
Immigration policy	Enforcement, legalization, DACA, family separation, citizenship, and the border wall	Participant distinguishes legal and unauthorized immigration or discusses what the state should do
Social and culture-war issues	Abortion, guns, gender, sexuality, policing, and family roles	Participant connects an issue to personal commitments or party differences
Social environments	Family, church, workplace, military, organizations, and local political networks	Participant describes political agreement, disagreement, reinforcement, or accountability
Partisan rhetoric and discrimination	Rhetoric concerning immigrants or Latinos, racism, and group-directed harm	Participant discusses Trump's rhetoric, media interpretation, offense, or prejudice
Coethnic criticism and political expectations	Claims concerning what Latinos should support politically	Participant describes being accused of voting against their people, culture, or community

Analytic Coding

After indexing the transcripts, I retrieved passages grouped under each topical code and compared them within and across interviews. At this stage, I moved from identifying topics to examining relationships among participants' commitments, party perceptions, social environments, identities, and political judgments.

The three central processes—partisan sorting, social embeddedness, and identity reconciliation—were not fixed coding categories imposed at the start of the project. They developed through repeated comparison of interview material, memo-writing, engagement with existing scholarship, and revision of the emerging arguments.

Table SM.3.2. Analytic Processes and Evidence Examined

Analytic process	What I examined in participants' accounts
Partisan sorting	Relationships among commitments participants described as longstanding or important, perceived differences between the parties, and recognition that Republican affiliation fit those commitments

Analytic process	What I examined in participants' accounts
Social embeddedness	Accounts locating Republican affiliation within valued social environments where it appeared recognizable, appropriate, expected, reinforced, or subject to social accountability
Identity reconciliation	Meaningful Latino, Mexican-origin, or immigrant-linked attachment; an encountered, anticipated, articulated, or interview-elicited expectation that the attachment should imply a political judgment; and a response through refusal, narrowing, substitution, or subordination

Partisan Sorting

I identified partisan sorting when participants connected commitments they described as important or longstanding to differences they perceived between Democrats and Republicans and used that comparison to explain Republican fit.

The particular commitments varied. Participants discussed religion, abortion, guns, family, immigration, work, economic policy, law enforcement, national belonging, and views about social order. The analytic pattern did not depend on one particular issue. It depended on how participants related a commitment to a perceived party difference and then explained why Republican alignment fit that relationship.

Some participants narrated movement away from Democratic affiliation or prior political disengagement. Others had supported Republicans for longer periods and used an existing party attachment to interpret later political conflict. I therefore did not treat every account as evidence of the same chronological pathway. Chapter 3 distinguishes between accounts of movement toward partisan alignment and accounts in which an already established alignment organizes subsequent interpretation.

A conservative issue position or Republican vote was not sufficient by itself. I looked for an account linking the substantive commitment, a perceived party difference, and an interpretation of partisan fit.

Social Embeddedness

I identified social embeddedness when participants situated Republican alignment within a social environment that mattered to their sense of belonging and described that alignment as recognizable, expected, appropriate, reinforced, or taken for granted within that environment.

Chapter 4 concentrates on religious community and American national belonging because these domains appeared especially clearly across the interviews. Religious embeddedness became visible when participants connected political judgment to shared religious teachings, relationships, expectations, or accountability. National embeddedness became visible when Republican affiliation was associated with understandings of American membership, patriotism, law, contribution, military service, or legitimate belonging.

Religious identification, church attendance, American identity, or family agreement did not automatically count as social embeddedness. The relevant question was whether the social domain gave partisan alignment recognizable social meaning or reinforced its appropriateness. Cases in which participants belonged to churches that did not discuss politics, expressed American identity without linking it to partisanship, or described disagreement within families and communities helped define the limits of the argument.

Identity Reconciliation

I identified identity reconciliation through a recurring relationship among three elements. First, participants described Latino identity, Mexican-origin belonging, cultural attachment, or immigrant-linked histories as meaningful. Second, they encountered, anticipated, articulated, or were asked to consider an expectation that those attachments should imply a particular political judgment. Third, they responded to that expectation through refusal, narrowing, substitution, or subordination.

Refusal occurred when participants rejected the premise that Latino identity or immigrant-linked belonging should require a particular vote, partisan allegiance, or policy position.

Narrowing occurred when participants restricted the people, circumstances, or meanings to which an identity-based expectation applied. Examples included distinguishing some immigrants from immigrants generally or refusing to interpret contested rhetoric as a categorical statement about all Latinos or Mexicans.

Substitution occurred when participants relocated political evaluation to another standard they treated as more legitimate, including legality, procedural fairness, institutional order, contribution, accountability, state responsibility, national interest, or leadership.

Subordination occurred when participants acknowledged an identity-linked concern, offense, or injury but assigned it less political weight than considerations they treated as more consequential.

Latino identity combined with Republican support was not sufficient evidence of reconciliation. Nor were restrictive immigration views, American national identification, media distrust, deservingness distinctions, motivated reasoning, or the minimization of racism sufficient by themselves. These forms of reasoning became relevant to identity reconciliation when participants used them to manage a claim about what their own meaningful Latino or immigrant-linked attachments should require politically.

I also distinguished among expectations participants reported encountering in their social lives, expectations they themselves anticipated or articulated, and expectations made explicit through an interview question. An interview-elicited comparison does not establish that a participant independently experienced an internal conflict before the interview. It remains useful for examining how the participant reasoned when the relationship between identity and political judgment was made explicit.

Theme Development

Themes were developed through comparison within and across interviews rather than through code frequency alone. A topic did not become a dissertation finding simply because many participants discussed it. Immigration, religion, or national identity could perform different roles in different accounts. The analytic task was to determine how participants connected those topics to partisan fit, social belonging, or identity-based expectations.

I treated an interpretive pattern as thematic when a similar relationship appeared across multiple interviews and among participants with varied political histories and social backgrounds. I examined whether an interpretation depended heavily on one participant, one recruitment network, or one type of political involvement.

The three central processes do not necessarily appear uniformly or in a fixed sequence across all participants. Some interviews provide especially clear evidence of partisan sorting but little evidence of social reinforcement. Other interviews make religious or national embeddedness more visible. Some participants encountered direct identity-based accusations, while others did not display the complete sequence required for identity reconciliation. The concepts are therefore treated as related but analytically distinct dimensions of how Republican alignment becomes politically fitting, socially reinforced, and maintained alongside other meaningful attachments.

Memo-Writing and Alternative Interpretations

Memo-writing accompanied data collection, coding, and drafting. Memos recorded emerging interpretations, comparisons across cases, alternative explanations, possible disconfirming evidence, and questions requiring further examination. As the concepts developed, I repeatedly returned to the full transcripts to determine whether an interpretation was supported by the surrounding account rather than by an isolated quotation.

I considered alternative explanations throughout the analysis. Participants frequently invoked conservative ideology, inherited partisanship, religion, American national identity, economic concerns, distrust of Democrats, law-and-order reasoning, media skepticism, motivated reasoning, or boundaries surrounding deservingness. These explanations often captured important elements of their accounts.

The analytic question was whether those elements fully explained a passage or also performed the interpretive work examined in the dissertation. For example, I asked whether a conservative position was merely stated or connected to perceived party differences and partisan fit; whether religion or national identity was simply important or made Republican alignment socially recognizable; and whether legality or media distrust simply explained a policy view or helped a participant manage an identity-based political expectation.

Disconfirming and Limiting Cases

I searched for interviews that did not conform to the dominant patterns. These included participants who described Republican affiliation primarily as inherited, participants whose

religious or national identities did not map clearly onto Republican alignment, participants who rejected Latino identity, and participants who supported Republican candidates without discussing recognizable identity-based expectations.

I also examined accounts in which Latino identity or immigrant-linked attachments appeared more politically consequential than the dominant argument might suggest. These cases helped clarify the boundaries of the three concepts and prevented me from treating every Latino Republican account as evidence of sorting, embeddedness, or reconciliation.

Selection of Interview Excerpts

The excerpts presented in Chapters 3–5 were selected because they make recurring interpretive relationships especially visible. My intention is not to present them as statistically representative statements, and they were not selected only because they were unusually dramatic.

Where possible, I selected passages that allowed the reader to observe the elements supporting the analytic claim. In Chapter 3, this usually meant showing a commitment, a perceived party difference, and an interpretation of partisan fit. In Chapter 4, it meant locating partisan affiliation within a meaningful social relationship or domain of belonging. In Chapter 5, it meant showing attachment, an identity-based expectation, and an interpretive response.

Some excerpts serve a more limited supporting role and do not independently display every element of a complete analytic sequence. In those cases, I aimed to identify the narrower function of the evidence rather than treating it as a complete case of the broader process.

Coding Responsibility

I conducted the interviews, transcribed the recordings, and coded the transcripts. Because the dissertation uses an interpretive thematic approach, I do not report intercoder reliability statistics. Coding was used to organize material and support comparison, not to measure the frequency of fixed attitudes.

My committee and other scholars provided feedback on conceptual distinctions, chapter drafts, and the adequacy of the evidence presented. This feedback led me to revisit transcripts, narrow some claims, consider alternative interpretations, and clarify the boundaries of the concepts. It was not treated as independent coding or intercoder verification.

SM.4. Positionality, Reflexivity, and the Interview Relationship

I am originally from South Texas and entered the project with familiarity with the region's geography, Mexican-origin culture, language use, immigration context, local institutions, and political history. This familiarity was an important resource for recruitment and interviewing. Participants did not need to explain every local reference, place, organization, or cultural practice from the beginning, and shared regional knowledge often helped establish rapport.

Regional familiarity did not eliminate social distance between participants and me. Participants could interpret me in different ways: as someone from South Texas, a Latino researcher, a UCLA doctoral student, an academic, or a person whose own political views were uncertain. These understandings may have influenced what participants chose to disclose and how they presented controversial views. Some may have understood me as sympathetic to their experiences, while others may have anticipated disagreement or judgment.

I treat interviews as relational encounters rather than as transparent windows into an unmediated internal reality (Fujii 2018). Participants' accounts were shaped by the questions I asked, the rapport established during the conversation, the political context, and how they understood the purpose of the study. My questions also influenced which relationships became explicit. For example, asking how a participant connected Latino/Hispanic identity or family immigration history to Republican support could introduce a comparison that the participant had not spontaneously narrated.

For this reason, I distinguish between tensions participants reported encountering outside the interview and relationships made explicit through the interview exchange. I do not treat an interview-elicited comparison as evidence that a participant independently experienced internal conflict. I analyze the response as evidence of how the participant reasoned when the relationship among identity, attachment, and political judgment became explicit.

My regional familiarity also created a risk of treating shared terms as self-explanatory. Participants frequently invoked "family values," "legal immigration," "American," "Christian," "conservative," "the Valley," "law and order," or "traditional values." Although such terms were familiar, they did not necessarily carry the same meaning for every participant. I therefore used follow-up questions asking participants to explain what a term meant, how it related to an experience, and why it mattered politically.

During analysis, memo-writing and repeated transcript review helped identify places where I might have supplied an interpretation based on regional knowledge rather than participants' own accounts. I also looked for interviews that complicated emerging arguments, including participants who did not connect religion to politics, expressed American identity without clear partisan implications, rejected panethnic labels, supported more inclusive immigration policies, or treated anti-Latino rhetoric as more politically consequential.

The political sensitivity of the research posed additional challenges. Interviews covered immigration, race, abortion, guns, religion, policing, gender, sexuality, and Donald Trump. Participants may have had reasons to justify, moderate, intensify, or strategically present their views. Rapport did not eliminate these dynamics.

During interviews, I generally avoided signaling approval or disapproval of participants' substantive positions. I used requests for clarification and open-ended probes asking how participants reached a view or connected it to another part of their experience. My purpose was not to debate participants, verify every factual political assertion during the interview, or persuade them to adopt a different view. It was to understand how they organized their political accounts.

The inclusion of both remote and face-to-face interviews also shaped the research relationship. Remote interviewing made data collection possible during COVID-19 and allowed participants to speak from familiar environments, but it limited some contextual and embodied aspects of interaction. In-person interviews created different opportunities for rapport, follow-up, and contextual understanding. I do not assume that either mode produced inherently more authentic accounts. Comparing interviews across the two phases helped assess whether the central patterns were confined to the initial remote recruitment networks or continued to appear after recruitment broadened.

Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish according to participants' preferences. For Spanish-language material quoted in English, I translated the passages with attention to the participant's intended meaning and tone. Where a Spanish term or expression carried relevant meaning that was not conveyed fully through direct translation, I retained or explained the original language.

I use pseudonyms and remove or generalize identifying information when necessary. This is especially important in smaller counties and local political networks, where combinations of age, occupation, organizational position, family background, and political activity could make a participant recognizable. Ellipses in quotations indicate omitted material, while brackets clarify a pronoun, reference, or contextual detail. Excerpts were shortened where necessary for readability without intentionally changing their substantive meaning.

My position in relation to the field was therefore both an analytic resource and a source of responsibility. Familiarity with South Texas supported access, rapport, and contextual interpretation. It also required continued attention to assumptions arising from that familiarity and to the ways participants' accounts were shaped by the interview relationship.

The claims in this dissertation should be understood as interpretive understandings grounded in these relationally produced interviews. They do not establish the prevalence of the identified processes among all Latino Republicans, reveal an unfiltered political essence, or independently verify every causal history participants narrated. Their contribution lies in showing recurring ways participants themselves connect commitments, party differences, social belonging, Latino identity, immigrant-linked attachments, and political judgment.

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