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New Americans and The New Right: Hispanic Voting Trends in the post-Trump Era of Politics

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May 1, 2023

### *Abstract*

In 2020, Donald Trump lost re-election to Joe Biden by around 4.5% nationally. Despite losing in his re-election bid, Trump was able to make surprising inroads with Hispanic voters, reaching the highest Republican totals with Hispanic voters in decades. This trend held true across nearly every Hispanic neighborhood in the country. From large Hispanic-majority cities such as Miami to isolated pockets of Hispanic voters in New England, there was a consistent rightward trend. Moreover, this trend largely continued into 2022, with most Republican candidates in the midterm elections matching Trump's numbers. This paper will take an in depth look at two case studies, Miami-Dade County and the Rio Grande Valley, to explore how national trends and local politics interact. Through this method, I seek to draw conclusions about some of the potential factors that may be contributing to Hispanic conservatism.

## *Introduction*

Over the past seven years— as some might call it, the “Trump age of politics”—, the United States has undergone a vast political shift. As we have seen discussed hundreds of times in the political sphere recently, white rural areas are growing more conservative while upscale suburbs are becoming more liberal. However, in the 2020 election cycle, one group’s shift was even more pronounced. While rural/suburban shifts continued, those shifts paled in comparison to the rightward lurch of Hispanic<sup>1</sup> voters. Perhaps no county is more indicative of this trend than the most Hispanic county in the United States: Starr County, Texas, a county of 65,000 in which 97.7% of residents identify as Hispanic, gave Joe Biden a narrow 52-47 victory just four years after backing Hillary Clinton by a 79-19 margin just four years prior (Park et al 2021). However, this trend goes far beyond just one county, with Hispanic counties and neighborhoods across the country crossing over to vote for a Republican President who had backed some of the harshest immigration policies in recent memory(Anderson 2022).

While previously Republicans have relied on heavy margins with white voters, in the past 20 years there has been a notable shift in Republican efforts with Hispanic (and other non-white) voters towards a newfound effort to invite new voters into the party. These efforts include increased numbers of minority candidates and more Spanish language campaigning, with the latter a growing effort since George W. Bush’s re-election campaign (De La Garza and Cortina 2007) However, prior to 2020, these efforts had mostly fallen flat. This brings about the question of what changed in 2020? Was there anything about Trump’s campaign that was special or was

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will be using the term ‘Hispanic’ as a blanket term to refer to people who are identified as ‘Hispanic’, ‘Latino/a’, or ‘Latinx’ by different scholars. I selected the term ‘Hispanic’ to use because my work only centers around voters with immigration histories from Spanish-speaking countries and Hispanic is the term which best reflects that focus.

he merely the beneficiary of a combination of local Republican outreach and lackluster Democratic party efforts?

To approach this question, I decided to utilize two case studies, Miami and the Rio Grande Valley. The two case studies were selected due to both areas having strong histories of Hispanic political leadership and engagement. In Miami, there is a long history of political engagement within the Republican party in the Cuban American community. Meanwhile, in the Rio Grande Valley, the same is true for Mexican Americans within the Democratic party. While previous research has intensely focused on either national trends or local histories, few studies have tied the two together. For this reason, the city case study approach in the coming chapters is extremely useful in helping cover some of the gaps in previous academic works by taking a closer look at how national political trends play out at the hyper local level. By tying the national and local together, I hope to avoid reductive narratives that generalize the Hispanic community. Instead, I intend to show that while overall national trends may be present, these trends play out in different ways based on the unique underlying circumstances of individual communities. With one chapter devoted to each of these questions, the case study sections will compose a significant portion of my paper.

Additionally, I use data from the 2020 American National Election Survey, which asks a number of questions about cultural and political views to prospective voters ahead of the election. Within this group, there is a subsample of around 800 Hispanic voters, which I isolated using the University of California Berkeley's Survey Documentation and Analysis program. I will then compare the results from this survey to the stories told through the case studies to make a central argument about the cultural and anti-establishment trends which led to the conservative shift.

Using data gathered from the case studies and survey data, I argue that there are two primary factors shaping current Hispanic voting trends. First, many Hispanic voters feel underrepresented, which has turned them away from more establishment political figures. Given Donald Trump's consistent framing of himself as a crusader against elites, he has been able to win over many establishment-skeptic voters. Secondly, I argue that Republicans have effectively targeted existing conservatism in the Hispanic community and integrated voters into the party through focusing on cultural similarities such as religious values. While both these trends are shown in both case study work and survey data, this list is by no means complete. The future of Hispanic voting behavior will likely depend on how well both parties react to the new issues which emerge in future election cycles, something that will only be done through more direct community outreach. Chapter 1 will summarize the existing literature, while chapters 2 and 3 will discuss the local case studies of Miami and the Rio Grande Valley, respectively. Chapter 4 will tie together the literature, case studies, and national data to make my central argument about Hispanic voting behavior.

## ***Chapter 1: The Slow Growth of Hispanic Conservative Potential***

Through literature past and present, a clear pattern emerges of conservatives shifting from apathy towards Hispanic voters towards new attempts to find common ground. This shift is necessitated by changing demographics. In Texas, for example, Republicans can no longer win an election while ignoring largely Hispanic populations in the Rio Grande Valley. However, while there have been many articles which focus on national trends with Hispanic voters as well as others which focus on the politics of specific regions, I aim to bridge the gap between these two fields by showing how city and national changes interact. I begin by exploring the existing literature in both of these categories.

This new attempt at courting non-white voters was especially effective in the 2020 election, when multiple largely Hispanic counties swung heavily to the right. This came after a barrage of pro-Trump advertising in Spanish language media under the slogan *Latinos Con Trump*. However, as many researchers such as NYU's Cristina Beltran argue, the Republican incitement of racial tensions against immigrants has not gone away. Rather, conservative politicians have created an in-group/out-group dynamic, where Hispanic Americans who assimilate are welcomed into the movement while those who do not are mostly ostracized (Beltran 2020). In this chapter, I discuss articles illustrating past community political engagement in Hispanic-majority cities as well as historical articles showing how conservative rhetoric has and has not changed in speaking about Hispanic communities. Altogether, I argue that the existing literature hints that the conservative shift among Hispanic voters is a reflection of how sectors of the Hispanic community and Republican politicians have met each other in the middle and focused on common ground, building a strong political alliance for the future focused on values such as religion and family. Additionally, I will argue that the Democratic party's

failures to adequately represent the Hispanic community have led more people to look to alternative means of representation.

While many in the political media were shocked by the rapid swing among Hispanic voters between 2016 and 2020, many in the Republican party have believed this was inevitable for years. Even 40 years ago, Ronald Reagan believed this, saying that Hispanics were conservatives who were yet to realize how aligned they were with Republican Party interests (Cadava 2016). The potential for a Hispanic conservative movement seemed most real after 2004, when George W. Bush made inroads with Hispanic voters in an unusual way for a Republican candidate by gathering up to 44% of the Hispanic vote by some estimates, a notable uptick from the previous year's number of around 40% (Suro et al 2005). In their 2007 paper entitled *Are Latinos Republicans But Just Don't Know It?* Rodolfo de La Garza and Jeronimo Cortina discuss how some members of the Republican Party believe social conservatism in the Hispanic community will lead to inevitable Republican voting patterns in the future as social issues, such as abortion, grow more important (De La Garza and Cortina 2007).

De La Garza and Cortina suggest that conservative trends among Hispanic voters in 2004 were more about turnout differentials than they were about voters turning from Democratic to Republican. Specifically, they find that there is a correlation between Democratic underperformance among Hispanic voters and low turnout in more Democratic-heavy Hispanic communities (De La Garza and Cortina 2007). Interestingly, De La Garza and Cortina find that between 1990 and 2004, Hispanic voters became less likely to identify as a member of either party. Democratic self-identification dropped 3 points among Hispanic voters, while Republican self-identification dropped 6 points (De La Garza and Cortina 2007). Thus, when studying the 2020 election, it is worthwhile to consider not just what Republicans are doing to win over



voters, but also what Democrats are not doing. This second piece may be crucial to discovering what may cause some voters to turn away from the party and become less politically engaged. Additionally, De La Garza and Cortina found no difference in demographics between Hispanic voters who shifted between parties, as both Democrats-turned-Republicans and Republicans-turned-Democrats were on average middle aged and lower middle class (De La Garza and Cortina 2007). This might indicate that any shift would be more visible on policy preferences than age or economic demographics.

While Republicans have been confident in future success for a long time, up until quite recently, a common viewpoint in academic circles was that the post-Bush Republican efforts to make inroads with Hispanic voters were unsuccessful. This was especially true in 2016, when two Hispanic conservative Senators, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, were passed over for the Republican nomination in favor of a man whose public statements often displayed animosity toward Hispanic Americans. After the 2016 election, where even in defeat Hillary Clinton still won massive margins among Hispanic voters, Geraldo Cadava was among many scholars to speculate that the Hispanic conservative movement was stuck in its tracks. Specifically, Cadava argued that despite historical trends of efforts to bridge the gap between the Hispanic community and the Republican party, that alliance would always be undermined by the rhetoric on immigration and race by the national party (Cadava 2016). Cadava's theories are useful considering how Republicans were previously failing to reach Hispanic voters before 2020.

Academic papers have not tackled the effects of most individual policy debates on Hispanic voting patterns, which is one area where my research adds to the body of research on the subject. However, there has been some focus on religion and Hispanic voting patterns. In a 2014 paper entitled *Tending The Flock: Latino Religious Commitments and Political*

*Preferences*, Ali Adam Valenzuela finds that Latino Catholics are more likely to lean left, while Latino Protestants are more likely to lean right (Valenzuela 2014). This is in line with a long history of literature, with multiple Bush-era studies giving similar insights (Kelly and Kelly 2005). These findings raise the question of whether the 2020 Hispanic shift towards conservative candidates is a part of broader national trends of significant political power for the evangelical movement in the Republican primary.

Valenzuela's study is of particular interest to my study in that he looks directly at not just nominal religious identity but also looks at how strongly people identify with their individual religions. He finds that the more intensely religious, or committed, someone is, the more strong their political beliefs are. Latino Catholics who are committed regular churchgoers are more likely to identify with Democrats and liberal policies on immigration than Latino Catholics who attend church less frequently (Valenzuela 2014). On the reverse side, Latino evangelicals who are committed regular churchgoers hold stronger conservative beliefs, especially on social policy, than less committed Latino evangelicals (Valenzuela 2014). Valenzuela argues that since church attendance has a positive correlation with the strengths of political convictions, it is clear that people gain policy preferences directly from the pulpit (Valenzuela 2014). This falls directly in line with conservative emphasis on increasing the footprint of religion in politics.

Additionally, it could also show where Democrats are losing ground, with less outward focus on religious-based messaging for Hispanic voters than for, say, Black voters in the South, where Democrats emphasize turning voters out through religious drives such as 'souls to the polls.'

Another point of discussion in past academic discourse is whether assimilation is a strong factor in what might drive Hispanic voters towards the conservative movement. De La Garza and Cortina argue that more than 57% of Hispanic voters live in areas where they are not the

majority, such as non-diversified suburbs and white rural areas, making it more likely they are surrounded by white Americans who lean towards the Republican Party (De La Garza and Cortina 2007). They also find some signs that Hispanic Democrats do have some understanding of Republican policy preferences, with a large number of self-identifying Hispanic Democrats feeling closer to the Republican party than the Democratic Party (De La Garza and Cortina 2007), leading to a bizarre question of why those voters did not just cross over to the party they most identify with. Some of this could be the local politics factor, with more moderate Democrats maintaining local power in the Rio Grande Valley and other similarly-Hispanic regions. These local politicians tend to have a much better pulse on the political culture of their constituents than national leaders.

Fortunately, other literature more recently has taken a deeper focus at the gaps between conservative-leaning Hispanic voters and the Republican party leadership. Crisitina Beltran argues in her 2020 book *Cruelty as Citizenship* that part of what keeps non-white, and especially Hispanic voters away from the conservative movement is extreme villainization of migrants (Beltran 2020). Cadava also discusses this point, arguing that despite Hispanic voters and the Republican party sharing opinions on economic issues and a focus on religion, unity will always be hard to come by due to fundamental disagreements on more personal policy debates such as immigration (Cadava 2016). Additionally, Beltran argues, there is an inherent social power dynamic which comes from white democracy, which she describes as the outsized power of white voices which forces non-white voters to give up part of their identity to have a role (Beltran 2020). This theory suggests that racial self-identity and assimilation are important potential factors to consider when looking at which Hispanic voters moved to the right.

In a later Washington Post article after the 2020 election, Beltran suggests that white democracy is being expanded to include a “multiracial whiteness” where select members of minority groups gain in-group status with white politicians and therefore, new power (Beltran 2021). Beltran uses Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio, a Cuban American, as an example of how this phenomenon leads to some Hispanic Americans finding acceptance in the conservative and far-right movements by becoming voices for extremism. In this way, Republicans did not have to give up the racial animosity towards immigrants to recruit new Hispanic American voters. Similarly, Rudy Alamillo found in a 2019 study that Hispanic voters who supported Donald Trump and Mitt Romney in the past two election cycles were more likely to deny elements of racism existing in American society (Alamillo 2019). This again shows how assimilation is potentially a crucial aspect to Hispanic political integration and how Republicans do not always need to tone down racialized rhetoric to appeal to Hispanic voters.

The last type of literature my paper considers is more in depth papers that focus on the distinct political dynamics of my two case study regions, Miami-Dade County and the Rio Grande Valley. In Marion Orr and Domingo Morel’s book *Latino Mayors*, there is a long focus on the historic power dynamics at play in Miami-Dade County. Specifically, the book focuses on longtime GOP efforts to build support among middle class Hispanic voters and has several anecdotes on media strategies. Additionally, they argue that the Miami Republican movement pitted Cuban American voters against other minority groups, specifically African Americans, in battles for representation (Orr and Morel 2018).

Another important topic to review in Miami is the history of political extremism in the Cuban American community. Alan McPherson looks at this extremism in a 2009 study through a comparative lens with the Taliban in Afghanistan. He finds that the two groups, both

predominantly exiles at the time, use similar tactics of intimidation on a global scale with the goal of influencing domestic policies (McPherson 2009). This is especially important to consider in relation to Beltran's idea of increasing political extremism in the Hispanic community among people who have been accepted into 'white democracy'. Specifically, Cuban Americans have often been at the forefront of predominantly white political movements, such as anti-communism and election denialism.

In the Rio Grande Valley, most research interest is more recent, with the area largely ignored in the academic context prior to its 2020 shift towards Donald Trump. The region is overwhelmingly Hispanic and increasingly lies at the heart of migration debates, as thousands of people arrive across the southern border every week. A recent 2022 study by Natasha Altama McNeely looks at how fears of deportation shape political views, taking a narrow look at just four counties in South Texas. McNeely's study surprisingly finds that the more concerned about deportation of an immediate family member or friend voters are, the less likely they are to be politically engaged (McNeely 2022). This seems like a surprising result, but makes sense if we consider that voters worrying about life-altering events such as deportation of family members are less likely to have the energy to focus on politics. Regardless, this is an interesting data point which helps show how low turnout can artificially create an Hispanic electorate which is less worried about immigration reform than the full population, which undeniably would benefit Republicans.

Overall, when combined together, the existing research prior to 2020 shows a common trend of Hispanic voters being increasingly in line with the Republican Party on many issues but not yet crossing partisan lines in voting patterns, making them potential swing voters. One of the most common themes across various areas of study is the idea of assimilation being a central

factor in Hispanic conservative movements. De La Garza and Cortina find that many Hispanic voters who live in non Hispanic-majority areas may be more open to changing their party affiliation to Republican (De La Garza and Cortina 2007). This is similar to the theory proposed by Beltran as well, who suggests that many Hispanic voters are being brought into more conservative circles (Beltran 2021). Additionally, on specific policy and demographic issues, Valenzuela's analysis shows a growing symmetry between Republican ideals and devout Hispanic evangelicals, while McNeely shows how more assimilated Hispanic immigrants who don't fear deportation have more time for political engagement (Valenzuela 2014, McNeely 2022).

These studies provide a window into some of the driving factors behind conservative voting patterns among Hispanic voters. Most notably, they show a consistent pattern of assimilation being a significant indicator of vote choice. Within this general theory of assimilation, religion is also seen as a major point of potential cultural familiarity between Hispanic voters and the predominant white culture. Finally, the literature also hints at a disillusionment with both parties among Hispanic voters. I will further elaborate on these same trends in the coming chapters.

## *Chapter 2: Miami: From Moderation to MAGA.*

### 2.1 Introduction

The Hispanic conservative movement is not a new phenomenon in some parts of the country. Miami is notorious for being a longtime bedrock of Republican politics among Hispanics with its sizable Cuban population gravitating towards a small-government, pro-business wing of the Republican Party. The quick integration of the Cuban immigrant population into the Republican party has proved very successful at gaining the community tangible institutional power. The Cuban middle class, largely made up of moderate conservatives with fairly recent family immigration history, is one of the most powerful and decisive political forces in the city. This stature is even more magnified when taking into account Florida's status as a crucial swing state (Gaffney 2020).

In exchange for helping decide elections, Republicans have offered Miami Cubans strong political representation. Since 1996, every Mayor of the city of Miami has been a Cuban American, with all but two being Republicans (Academic Dictionaries). Additionally, three of the last four Miami Dade County Mayors are Cuban American, along with US Senator Marco Rubio and three of the county's five members of Congress. This is especially notable considering the fact that according to the most recent census, while 71.5% of Miami residents are Hispanic, only half of that group is of Cuban descent, despite politicians being almost exclusively Cuban American (Miami Dade Matters). This demonstrates the clear success at political integration for Miami Cuban-Americans, with most of that power coming from the Republican Party. With all this in mind, one would assume that the political instincts of Cuban Americans would be moderate and institutionally inclined, as there is a feedback cycle where establishment figures have welcomed Cuban Americans, thus creating community power and representation in exchange for votes (Orr and Morel 2019).

However, while that is often true, history has also shown a secondary political dynamic of extremism within the Cuban American community in Miami. The most notable examples of this were El Poder Cubano and the Cuban Nationalist Movement, groups of anti-Castro paramilitary groups who frequently bombed targets they suspected of being Castro regime sympathizers in the 1960s and 1970s (McPherson 2019). In part due to the United States government's allegiance to the anti-Castro movement, these attacks were not highly publicized, but for a period of time El Poder Cubano was arguably the largest terrorist group in the world, accounting for 45% of all terrorist bombings (McPherson 2019). While this specific violent group has faded, remnants of that extremism remain an underbelly to the conservative movement in Miami.

This chapter discusses the past history of more extreme politics among Miami Cuban American voters and shows how gaining institutional power helped sweep in a calmer moderate trend among those same conservatives. Additionally, the chapter seeks to investigate the rise of a new wave of extremism among Cuban Americans, specifically looking at the origin of the Proud Boys extremist group's Miami roots. In doing so, I present an argument that using anti-communist rhetoric and interventionist foreign policy, the 2020 Trump campaign both riled up extremist groups and gained the trust of the Cuban American establishment, thus leading to an increase in support in the area. Both of these trends fall in line with what was observed in the existing literature. The rise in Trump support among Miami-based extremist groups ties into themes of anti-establishment feelings and disillusionment with government being part of recent Republican success with Hispanic voters. Likewise, the use of hardline Cuba policy to demonstrate an understanding of the desires of local voters shows a strong understanding of local cultural factors.



## 2.2 Recent and Historical Voting Trends in Miami-Dade County

### 1988-2020 Presidential Vote Share

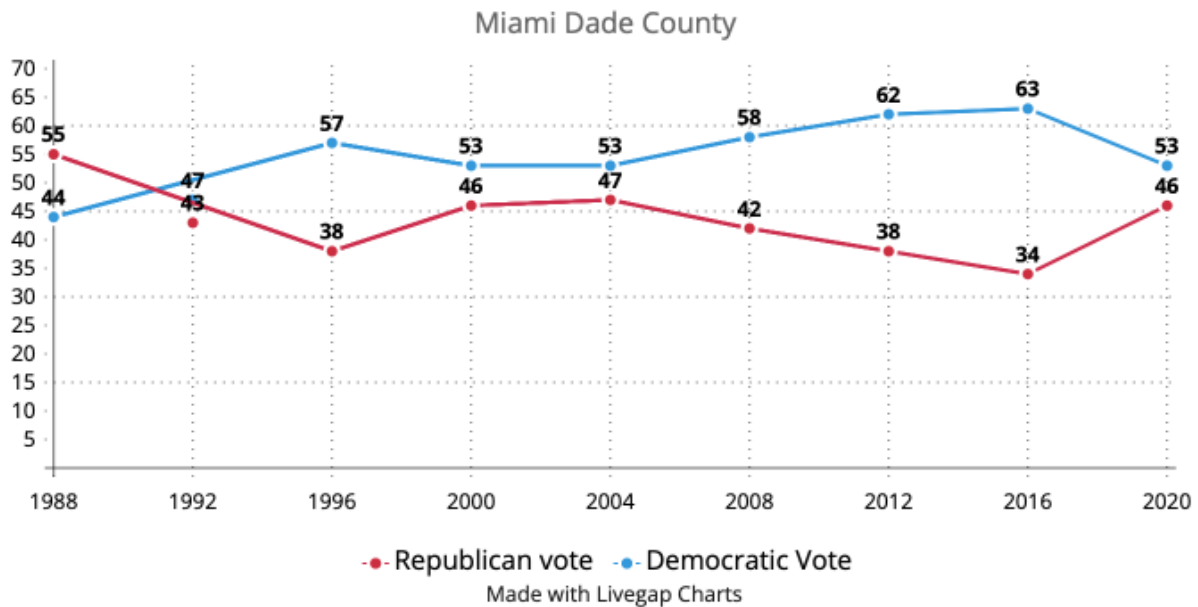


Figure 1: 1988-2020 Presidential Vote Share (Miami-Dade County)

Historically, Miami-Dade County's Presidential election voting patterns have followed the pulse of the nation as a whole. From 1928-1996, the county's voters backed the winning presidential candidate in every election except 1968, when Hubert Humphrey won the county by 10 points (Leip 2022). In the 1980s especially, Republicans made strong inroads into the county, in part due to powerful turnout operations in the Cuban American community. However, Bill Clinton was able to win back the county in both of his elections. However, in 2000, Miami-Dade finally broke its trend of voting for the winning candidate, with 53% of voters backing Democratic nominee Al Gore (Leip 2022). Despite strong efforts by George Bush to court Hispanic voters in 2004, this margin stayed exactly the same in that election. Barack Obama widened this margin in both of his elections, gaining 57% of the vote in 2008 and 61% in 2012 (Leip 2022). In 2016, things got even worse for Republicans as Hillary Clinton won Miami-Dade

county by a 63-33 margin (Leip 2022). However, Donald Trump unexpectedly held Joe Biden's margin to just 53-45 in 2020, resparking the idea of Miami-Dade County being a swing county. This was not unprecedented, as Biden received about the same number other Democratic candidates such as Gore and John Kerry had received.

This is not necessarily a disastrous result for Democrats at face value, as it is still better than recent performances in 2000 and 2004. However, there was at least an unshakeable feeling that the county's tide was turning again to the right. Just two years ago, Miami Democrats had won two seats historically held by Cuban Republicans. This represented a major breakthrough for Democrats, especially since they won both seats with non-Cuban candidates. In Florida's 26th Congressional District, Debbie Murcassel-Powell, an Ecuadorian-born immigrant, defeated incumbent Cuban-American Republican Carlos Curbelo, becoming the first member of Congress to be born in South America (Foran 2019). In Florida's 27th Congressional District, a white Democrat who does not even speak Spanish, Donna Shalala, won the seat which had been held by retiring Cuban Republican Ileana Ros-Lehithnen for almost 30 years. These results seemed to show that moderate Cuban Republicans like Curbelo and Ros-Lehithnen no longer ran Miami and it was becoming a solidly Democratic city. But in 2020, both Shalala and Murcassel-Powell unexpectedly lost their races, with Maria Elvira Salazar, the daughter of Cuban exiles, and Cuban-born Carlos Gimenez retaking the seats for their party (Acevedo 2020).

In 2022, the midterm elections painted an even bleaker picture for Democrats. Turnout differences helped lead Republican Governor Ron Desantis and Cuban American US Senator Marco Rubio to landslide victories, creating by far the brightest spot of a rocky midterm election for Republicans. Exit polling data indicates that Desantis won Hispanic voters by 10%, a monumental result even in a state with a high Cuban American portion of the Hispanic

community. This result shows how the continued struggles for Democrats with Florida's Hispanic voters, and further demonstrates how the 2020 pro-Republican shift among Hispanic voters, at least in Florida, is not dependent on Donald Trump's name being on the ballot. Exit polls showed Desantis and Rubio not only winning Cuban voters, as is typical for a Florida Republican, but also winning with Puerto Rican and South American voters, who typically are a central part of the state's Democratic coalitions (Cadava 2022). According to NBC News, "DeSantis won 58% of the Latino vote, including 68% of Cuban Americans, 56% of Puerto Ricans, and 53% of all other Latinos combined" (Sesin 2022).

### **2.3 Immigration Trends and Miami's Politics**

The story of Cuban American political movements begins in Havana rather than Miami. Specifically, an understanding of the migration patterns from the island goes a long way in seeing why Miami Cubans have defied the typical patterns of immigrant groups, particularly Hispanic/Latino ones, being left out of the political arena. In 1959, when Fidel Castro took power by overthrowing dictator Fulgencio Batista, many of Batista's supporters became the first Cuban asylees to travel to Miami, the nearest major US city to Cuba. These Batista backers were disproportionately members of the upper class in Cuba, and thus represented a particularly white-passing, pro-US group. They were also vehemently opposed to communism, and therefore were welcomed with open arms into the country. Asylum processes were fast and easy, and these early Cuban American refugees quickly became part of a growing middle class in Miami (Library of Congress).

This is important to consider in comparison to the story of other migrant groups in Miami. Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, for example, have virtually no political power in Miami despite making up similar amounts of the population. While Puerto Ricans, as US

citizens, face no difficulties to enter the country, migrants tend to be fleeing for economic reasons and thus represent a different type of immigrant group. With no existing wealth to build upon, social mobility has been harder to come by. Puerto Ricans find themselves extremely underrepresented in political office, with Florida sending just one Puerto Rican to Congress, and are far behind their fellow migrants from Cuba in measures such as net asset worth and home ownership rates (Aja et al 2019). This same dynamic of economic status differences also applies when comparing Mexican and Cuban immigrants.

### **2.3.1 Republican Attempts to Integrate Cuban Voters**

This Cuban migration into Miami fundamentally altered the landscape of the city. In 1960, the city of Miami was just 17% Hispanic. By 1970, that number had more than doubled to 44% (USA Facts). The vast majority of these migrants were Cuban refugees driven out either by political exile or economic desperation under the Castro regime. Given obvious language barriers, Cuban Americans stuck together in specific neighborhoods, creating a sense of community power. This even stretched beyond city limits, with many Cuban exiles beginning to settle in nearby Hialeah, creating a rapid influx of Cubans and making the city among the fastest growing in the state (City of Hialeah). Today, with a population of more than 200,000, Hialeah is the most Hispanic city in the United States outside Puerto Rico and represents a central building point of Hispanic power.

With these changing demographics, politicians began to realize they had no choice but to integrate Hispanic voters into their campaigns. It was no longer possible to win Florida statewide without performing well among Hispanic voters. This new strategy was especially important to Republicans who believed that their message of anti-communism and the importance of religion would resonate with new Cuban voters. According to Florida International University Professor

Guillermo Grenier, “Since the 1980s, Republicans have put boots on the ground [in Florida], they have organized Cuban Americans, they have supported Cuban American candidates, they have invested in them, [and often] left the Democratic Party in the dust” (Gomez-Upegui 2022). Thanks to Florida’s even political division and outsized impact on the electoral college tally, Cuban American politics in Miami and Hialeah have even impacted national policy, with both parties continuing advocating aggressive anti-Cuban government measures such as embargos well into the 21st century.

### **2.3.2 Trends with Non-Cuban Voters**

While Cuban voters have been largely integrated into the Republican party, other national groups of Hispanic voters have been conspicuously absent. These groups include Puerto Ricans, South Americans, and Mexican Americans. As a result, by default, the Democratic party has become the avenue of political power for those groups, as well as for any Cubans who for whatever reason are left out or disaffected by the Republican Party. In recent years, these non-Cuban groups have found success in the Florida Democratic party. For example, in 2016 Darren Soto became the state’s first Puerto Rican Congressman, representing Osceola County in Central Florida (Latimer 2016). In 2018, Debbie Mucarsel-Powell flipped a Republican-leaning Miami district, becoming the state’s first South American member of Congress (Foran 2019). However, these successes are minimal in comparison to those of Cuban Republicans, with nine Cuban Republicans being sent to Congress in the 21st century from Florida alone.

One reason for this is that while non-Cuban, and even some Cuban, Hispanic voters are a part of the local Democratic party in Miami, they are often forced to compete with Black voters to represent minority voices in the party. Black voters have an advantage in this regard. While Black Democrats are predominantly located in a few deeply Democratic neighborhoods,

Hispanic Democrats are more spread out, often the second most powerful group behind Hispanic Republicans or Black Democrats (BestNeighborhoods.Org). Thus, while there are areas where there are majorities of Hispanic Republicans, Hispanic Democrats do not have that same influence.

The other challenge for Democrats is that non-Cuban Hispanic voters are less likely to vote Democratic than in previous years. One of the groups turning towards conservative candidates are Venezuelan-Americans, one of the fastest growing pockets of Hispanic voters in the state. According to a study by NACLA, in 2020, “Doral, the city with the largest Venezuelan-born population in the country, showed a 41.4 percent swing toward Trump” (Riera 2021). This success for Trump with Venezuelan voters is fascinating, and helps point towards Trump’s anti-communist rhetoric being successful, considering the crisis surrounding Nicolas Maduro’s socialist Venezuelan government. Specifically, many Venezuelan voters saw Trump’s militaristic rhetoric about Venezuela and his embrace of opposition leader Juan Guaido as a positive. Guaido and Trump even had a meeting in Miami after a rally by Guaido for Venezuelan immigrants (Sesin 2020). According to a poll by the University of North Florida conducted prior to the election, 66% of Venezuelan voters in Florida, including 53% of Democrats, intended to vote for Donald Trump (Rodriguez 2020). While Venezuelan voters are a small pocket of the Hispanic population in Miami, that group beginning to vote like Cuban voters makes a big difference in a state where small margins often decide elections.

#### **2.4 Historical Extremism in Cuban American Political Movements**

While Cuban American political movements have been crucial to the moderate wing of the Republican party, there was also a time pre-incorporation efforts in which Cuban American politics were based in violence and a sense of vengeance against the Castro regime and those

who supported it. In the aftermath of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, many exiles, angered by the failure and subsequent feelings that the United States was giving up on ‘liberating’ Cuba, turned to terror as a new tactic (McPherson 2019). Specifically, many argued that Cuba would never be freed without widespread violence, including paramilitary group leader Orlando Bosch, who was quoted as saying, “There are times when you cannot avoid harming innocent people” (McPherson 2019). Bosch was later implicated in CIA documents in playing a major role in the bombing of a Cuban airline in Venezuela in 1976 (LA Times 2011). All of these groups were under the larger arm of the Cuban Nationalist Movement (CNM), which despite being based in New Jersey, was heavily bankrolled by donations from Cuban Americans in Miami, often encouraged by talk radio programs in the area (McPherson 2019). Some of these funds even went to the defenses of militants accused in extrajudicial killings of pro-Castro activists.

Overall, radical groups tied to the CNM like El Poder Cubano were tied to over 113 bombings in the United States, becoming one of the most prominent terror groups in the country at the time. In 1974, according to historian Alan McPherson, Cuban exiles committed 45% of the world’s terrorist bombings, showing the danger of the nationalist movement (McPherson 2019). However, these groups quickly became out of fashion in the 1980s as Cuban American institutional power grew in the Republican Party. In 1981, the CNM was disbanded and the primary nationalist movement became a Miami-based political organization called the Cuban American National Foundation (McPherson 2019). This movement sought to build political alliances with Ronald Reagan, who blamed Cuba for the spread of communist ideologies in Latin America (Hastedt 2004). In building partnerships with Reagan, the CANF helped restore some of the waning trust in government in the Cuban American community, limiting one of the most prominent causes of extremism.

However, despite reducing its violence, the group still was clearly deeply tied to Cuban American extremists. Many former members of the CNM continued to have notable roles in the CANF. For example, Orlando Bosch, the terrorist who said killing innocent people was necessary at times, began working in an administrative role for the organization in 1990. Just months prior, Bosch was due to be deported by the Justice Department as a terrorist. However, US Representative Ileana Ros-Lehiten (R-FL), a moderate Cuban American who was elected as part of the Republican party's efforts to recruit more Cuban American politicians, helped lead a public campaign which successfully lobbied for his freedom (LA Times 2011). When Bosch died in 2011, Ros-Lehiten released a statement saying, "He was a freedom fighter for Cuba and passed away without seeing his beloved homeland free of the Castro dictatorship" (LA Times 2011). This shows how even the Miami Cuban Republican establishment, widely considered extremely moderate, has hidden roots in backing extremism. While not all extremism is the same, there is a notable similarity between the anti-communist rhetoric employed by past extremists and Trump in his pitch to Hispanic voters.

### **2.5 Donald Trump and New Waves of Extremism and anti-Government Sentiment**

Despite the overall success of the alliance between the establishment wing of the Republican Party and Cuban American Nationalist leaders, there has been a growing trend of reversion to some of the past trends of extremism in the Miami area in the past few years. This was not the case in Donald Trump's first election in 2016, where Hillary Clinton overperformed past precedent with Cuban Americans, including moderate Republicans who could not stand voting for Trump. (Krogstad and Flores 2020). Those who refused to endorse Trump included several prominent Miami Cuban Republicans, including City Commissioner (and future Mayor) Francis Suarez and then-Congresswoman Ros-Lehiten (Barrow 2016). Some radio hosts on



Cuban stations such as Roberto Rodriguez Tejera even suggested that Trump's language about rigged processes and presidential power echoed the words of past Latin American dictators (Krogstad and Flores 2020).

However, perhaps the man who best exemplifies how the perception of Trump among Cuban Republicans shifted with regards to Trump is Senator Marco Rubio. Rubio ran against Trump in 2016 and was a frequent critic of Trump's rhetoric on the campaign trail, arguing that he was a con man who would be dangerous for the country (Raju and Contorno 2022). When Trump won the primary, Rubio very reluctantly stood by Trump's candidacy, in part to bolster his own re-election odds. This relationship unexpectedly changed, however, when Trump won the general election.

Specifically, Rubio began working closely with Trump on Latin America Policy, even becoming called the Secretary of State for Latin America by the New York Times (Rodriguez 2020). This allowed Rubio to push his own extreme anti-communist project on Cuba policy forward, advising Trump to reverse many of the previous normalization steps taken by Barack Obama. Rubio's influence created a dynamic where, as one state department official told POLITICO, "On Latin America policy Trump wasn't taking cues from career officials. He was taking cues from harder-line Cuba folks in Miami" (Rodriguez 2020). Rubio is the most prominent establishment-leaning Cuban American politician in Miami and has always been an electoral powerhouse in the city, consistently taking competitive vote shares in Miami-Dade County, showing the significance of Trump's olive branch in winning over previously skeptical establishment Cuban Republicans.

While Rubio's ties to the administration are a sign of Trump reaching out to the Cuban establishment, the ways Rubio's rhetoric has changed over the years show how much of the

Miami Cuban establishment have, in turn, embraced Trump's brand of politics. Despite not voting to overturn the election, Rubio has continued to support Trump even after the events of January 6 and has served as a strong critic of the January 6th Committee's investigation into the former President (Rodriguez 2020). Rubio also even rallied with Trump in November 2022 en route to a blowout victory in his re-election campaign.

Rubio's pivot to backing Trump is indicative of a response to a larger trend of more extreme positions in the Miami Cuban community. Many of these are directly tied to the rise of Trump and his normalization of far-right groups being part of the Republican party as long as they share his anti-leftist vision. The most prominent of these groups is the Proud Boys, a neo-fascist organization who advance far right ideologies through violence and intimidation tactics. The group has a strong footprint in the Miami-Dade area, and is even run by a Cuban American from Miami-Dade County named Enrique Tarrío. The choice of Tarrío, an Afro-Cuban man, to lead an organization which centers around white nationalist ideology is a fascinating one. In interviews, Tarrío often centers his identity as an American first, showing how assimilation can be a factor in accepting extreme ideologies (Vice 2019).

Tarrío is currently awaiting trial for his role in planning the January 6 insurrection, but many of his top associates have become central participants in the Miami-Dade Republican Party. A half dozen former and current Proud Boys now hold seats on the Executive Committee of the Miami-Dade Republican Party, showing the increasing erosion of the traditional Republican establishment in the county (Mazzei and Feuer 2022). This includes one former Proud Boy, Gabriel Garcia, who was charged with interfering with law enforcement officers on January 6 (Mazzei and Feuer 2022). Garcia has given media interviews about the Proud Boys organization, arguing that above all they are an anti-communist organization (Mazzei and Feuer

2022). The use of the goal of anti-communism to justify violence is disturbingly similar to the rhetoric used by groups like the CNM, showing how previous extremism in the Cuban American community is resurfacing.

However, Trump is not the only politician preaching a more extreme brand of conservative politics in Florida. Despite only winning his first election in 2018 by less than 1%, Florida Governor Ron Desantis has been at the forefront of many conservative culture war movements, beginning with his opposition to COVID lockdowns in the summer of 2020. This notably came at the time when much of Miami's establishment Republican leadership, such as Mayor Suarez, were in favor of continuing stay at home orders (Fox News 2020). Desantis was a frequent critic of public health and government overreach, stoking fears of authoritarianism overreach by the government, a message certainly in part attempting to reach Cuban voters with lasting fear of dictatorship and government overreach (Lewis 2022). Desantis has continued his targeted message of anti-communism in a more explicit way in education reform bills targeted at creating freedom of speech evaluations on campuses, arguing that reform is necessary because too many students are being taught that Che Guevara was a hero (Tribou 2021). Desantis embracing hardline anti communist messaging certainly paid off in his 2022 re-election campaign, as his strong 68% vote share with Cuban Americans helped propel him to a landslide victory (Anderson and Bustos 2022).

## **2.6 Conclusions**

Miami is the historical epicenter of the Hispanic conservative movement due to long standing Cuban American power in the Republican party. However, the Trump movement's success in the region is a sharp divergence from past Cuban conservative leadership, as on the surface level, his far-right and abrasive style is different from the moderate, consensus-building

approach of current Miami Cuban leadership. However, when one looks at the underbelly of the Cuban American conservative movement, a vast history of extremism with regards to Cuba shows how Trump's strongman anti-communist rhetoric has ignited old tensions and energized a silenced far right movement. Additionally, some of these trends have carried over to other groups with fears of socialist movements, particularly Venezuelan immigrants.

This has caused a substantial change in how establishment elected leaders view policy. For example, Congressman Carlos Gimenez, a Cuban American former County Mayor, went from backing Hillary Clinton in 2016 to being an election denier who voted against certifying election results in several key states (Mazzei 2020, Gimenez 2021). As the Miami Republican party leadership gets more Trumpified, previously elected officials like Gimenez will continue having to adapt in this way, or risk being left in the dust by a more extreme version of their party. I argue that by increasing anti-communist rhetoric against Joe Biden and Democrats and integrating establishment politicians into the Trump wing of the party, Republicans were able to find newfound success with Hispanic voters in Miami Dade County. This shows a strong understanding of how to use cultural histories of a community to make electoral inroads.

## *Chapter 3: Rio Grande Valley: Tejanos and Trumpism*

### 3.1 Introduction

In 2020, no area in the country swung further towards Republicans than the Rio Grande Valley. Taking up nearly 5,000 square miles along the US-Mexico border at the base of Texas, the Rio Grande Valley includes two mid-sized American border cities, Brownsville and McAllen, and the much larger Matamoros and Reynosa on the Mexican side. Moreover, it is the heartbeat of the much larger South Texas region, by far the most Hispanic region in the United States (Brown and Lopez 2013). The immigration dynamics are complex, with a complicated mix of recent immigrants and Mexican Americans whose families have been here for centuries. These families with long histories in the country dating back to the annexation of Texas often self-identify not as Mexican or American, but as Tejanos, forming a new cultural identity (Herrera 2020). While Tejano is often merely used as a catch-all term for any person of Hispanic/Latino descent in Texas, the term most commonly refers to community members who are deeply assimilated into the culture of the United States. This is not a new phenomenon. Historian Roberto Triviño writes that as early as the 1930s, “middle-class Tejanos asserted their Americanness and consciously distinguished themselves from the people and culture south of the Río Bravo” (Treviño 1991). This Tejano identity which combines Triviño’s idea of “asserting Americanness” and preserving past heritage by continuing to use the Spanish language is alive and well to this day and continues to be an integral part of shaping worldviews and therefore politics.

Unsurprisingly, the long integration of the Tejano community into popular US society has led to a great deal of institutional power in South Texas. However, unlike with Cuban Americans in Miami, the Tejanos have gained their power largely through the Democratic Party. On a local level, from the Civil Rights Era through 2022, the Rio Grande Valley’s Congressional districts

have been exclusively occupied by Mexican American Democrats (Ballotpedia 2022). However, these Democrats have always been very different from the modern day party, with a greater emphasis on religious values and cultural conservatism. In recent years, this disconnect between the conservative local Democrats and the national party platform has only grown. As this has happened, the establishment of Tejano moderate Democrats began to fall to pieces, both hated by younger liberals for pro-life views and blamed by more conservative voters for failing to halt the ‘socialism’ in DC. In 2022, Republicans finally broke through as Mayra Flores won a special election to fill a Congressional seat in the Rio Grande Valley.

The chapter explores the long history of Tejano political engagement and looks at how an entrenched establishment fell badly short of its goals leading to an opening for populist movements from both sides. I will also take a more in depth look at the successful Flores campaign and show how her out-group status as a Mexican-born woman in a male-dominated political establishment helped her better relate to populist trends. Additionally, Flores’ extremist views on the 2020 election and Q anon demonstrate the increase in conspiracy theories in Spanish language media and how that has helped drive Hispanic voters towards Trumpism. In this chapter, I will argue that Republicans have utilized points of cultural connection, such as religiously-based values, to make inroads with Hispanic voters. At the same time, Democrats have grown out of touch and failed to offer meaningful and diverse representation to the community, showing how disillusionment with establishment politics has also played a role in the Rio Grande Valley.

### **3.2 Historical Racial Conflict in the Rio Grande Valley**

The Rio Grande Valley represents the historical and present epicenter of United States-Mexico relations. After the Mexican-American War of 1848, the Rio Grande Valley

officially became incorporated into the United States as part of Texas. Most of the population were previously Mexican nationals who accepted US citizenship but continued living the same rural ranching and farming lifestyles they had experienced under Mexican rule (Sadasivam 2018). Land originally granted to poor laborers by the Spanish government was passed down through generations, keeping consistent Mexican-American control over farmland. However, gradually these generational Mexican-American farmers were pushed out of their land by conditions such as drought and increased property taxes. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Mexican citizens were forced to move north across the border due to the consequences of the Mexican Revolution. Many of these new immigrants settled in the Rio Grande Valley and sought work as farmhands, and at this point, it was the newer white-owned farms, rather than the more longstanding Mexican-American ones, who had the resources and land to support hiring new laborers. This created a power dynamic in which white citizens controlled the means of production (Sadasivam 2018).

Once this power dynamic took hold, leaders took drastic measures to keep the power structure in place. These measures included so-called “Juan Crow” laws, which enforced segregation between white and Hispanic citizens, along with suppressing Hispanic voting power (Sadasivam 2018). Not only did these measures limit power for Hispanic people in the Rio Grande Valley, they also created a culture of targeted violence against Hispanic activists who stepped out of line. For example, some Hispanic farmers who refused to sell their family’s land were forced to sell at gunpoint by local officials (Sadasivam 2018). According to the San Antonio Express, “finding the bodies of dead Mexicans had become so commonplace that it created little or no interest” (Smith 1986). This showed a rapid escalation in state violence and

further cemented dangerous ethnic hierarchies. These legacies historically limited cooperation between Mexican-Americans and white populations in the Rio Grande Valley.

### **3.3 Building Hispanic Political Power**

Despite hostility, migration from Mexico to the Rio Grande Valley continued in the several years, especially as the growth of farms outpaced labor supplies in the local community. However, prior to the civil rights movement, political participation was still limited among the Hispanic population. After World War II, the Rio Grande Valley only had one district for Congressional representation, the 15th district, which traditionally sent conservative Dixiecrats to Congress. Even on a more local level, representation was limited. However, population growth created a new State House district which was centered in the heavily Hispanic Hidalgo County. Kika de la Garza, a local Mexican American Korean War veteran, ran for this seat as a Democrat in 1952 and was elected, becoming the first Mexican American to represent the area in the State House (Subtropical Agriculture and Environments). De la Garza was re-elected for five more two year terms and was later joined by a few other Mexican-American representatives, but the glass ceiling remained unbroken at the federal level.

In 1964, the breakthrough at the federal level would finally come. Joe Kilgore, the white conservative Democrat who represented the 15th district in Congress, stepped aside, leaving an opening for de la Garza to run for his position. De la Garza won the Democratic primary for the district and then easily won the general election, becoming the first new Hispanic member of Congress in nearly two decades (US House of Representatives: De La Garza). De la Garza was a moderate within the party, but still cast crucial votes in favor of civil rights legislation, for example he supported the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, prohibiting housing discrimination (US House of Representatives: De La Garza). Kika de la



Garza ended up having a 32 year Congressional career from 1965-1997, spending fourteen of those years as Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. Towards the end of his career, he became a trusted ally of Bill Clinton, helping negotiate efforts to reorganize the USDA and lobbying for the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (US House of Representatives: De La Garza).

De la Garza's success set the tone for a consistent trend of Hispanic Democrats serving the Rio Grande Valley in Congress. In 1997, De la Garza was succeeded in the 15th district by Ruben Hinojosa, a Mexican-American who ended up serving for two decades, becoming a key voice in party leadership on immigration policy (US House of Representatives: Hinojosa). Meanwhile, consistent population growth in South Texas led to further opportunities for Hispanic representation. After the 1990 census, the 28th district was created, linking San Antonio with rural Hispanic communities to the south. The 28th district was won by Democrat Frank Tejada in 1992, and every subsequent representative since has been a Mexican-American Democrat (GovInfo). After the 2010 census, the Rio Grande Valley got another Congressional seat, the 34th district. Filemon Vela Jr, a Mexican-American Democrat, won the first election to the 34th district in 2012, and served in the seat until his resignation in 2021 (Livingston 2021). The days of Anglo power in the Rio Grande Valley were long gone as Democrats had successfully built strong coalitions to consistently guarantee the election of Hispanic Democrats in the Rio Grande Valley.

This newfound political power came as a result of many factors, but one of the most prominent was an assimilation process which integrated the Mexican identity and the Texan identity, with many Hispanic voters choosing to identify as 'Tejanos' rather than Mexican or American. All of these Hispanic elected officials had strong Texas roots, which made it easier to

find common ground with white voters. For example, of the seven Hispanic Democrats to serve the South Texas districts, only one, Mexican-born but Texas-raised Ciro Rodriguez, was born outside Texas (US House of Representatives: Rodriguez). Additionally, all seven were Roman Catholic men (Pew Research Center 2021). While Roman Catholics were the majority group, Hispanic evangelicals were largely left out. This pattern created a clear dynamic where a set demographic group of Mexican Americans with long roots in the community and higher economic status had a strong hold on power, emulating the past hold on power Anglo candidates had.

#### **3.4 Republican Resurgence**

Republicans never completely abandoned hope of success in the Rio Grande Valley, despite the decades-long Democratic dominance in the region. In 2004, George W. Bush made significant targeted attempts at Hispanic voters in his re-election campaign, resulting in an impressive 44% showing with that demographic according to the National Election Pool (Suro et al 2019). This marked an improvement of 10% from 2000 and George W. Bush was the first Republican since Reagan to win the county (Suro et al 2019). This improvement also translated to a strong performance in the Rio Grande Valley. Bush, who had deep roots in Texas, even managed to win Cameron County, home to the typically Democratic city of Brownsville, despite having lost the county by 9% in 2000 (Leip 2022).

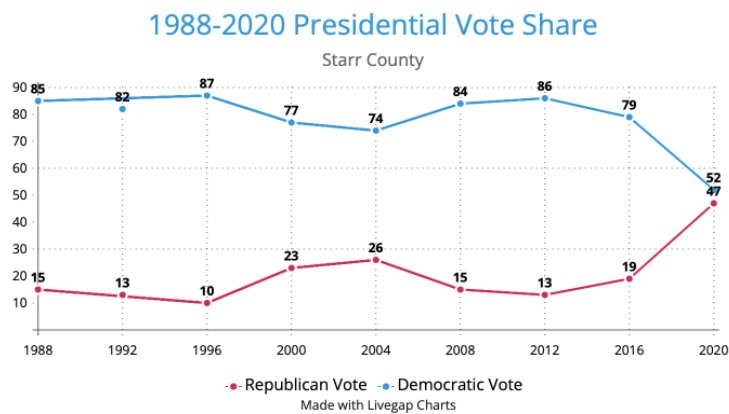
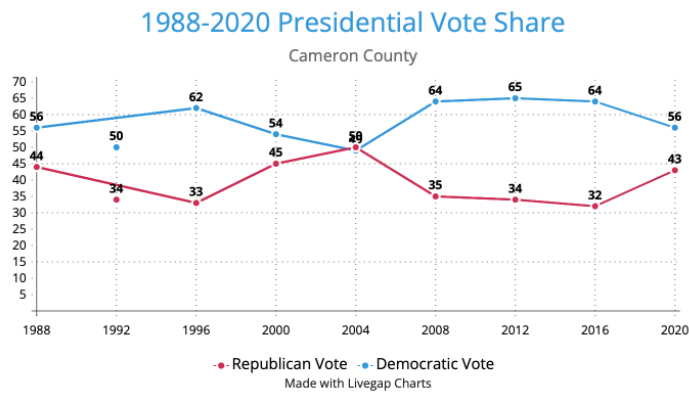
However, this momentum for Republicans at the national level was short lived. In 2008, Barack Obama not only reversed George Bush's gains with Hispanic voters, but also expanded Democratic margins past 2000 levels. For example, in Cameron County, Obama won by 29 points, a number matched only by Bill Clinton in 1996. In 2012, Obama did even better in the Rio Grande Valley, despite the national race being tighter, defeating Mitt Romney in Cameron County by 31%, the largest margin for a Democrat since Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1936.

Turnout was high for Obama, who had made targeting Hispanic voters by focusing on immigration policy a major goal in his re-election campaign (Preston and Santos 2012). This strategy undoubtedly paid off, as not only did Obama win by 44% nationally among Hispanic voters, he also did so with record high Hispanic turnout, with nearly half of Hispanic voters turning out to vote, something which political experts were skeptical of prior to the election (Preston and Santos 2012). Hillary Clinton won by an even greater 34% margin in 2016, prompting further predictions that Republicans would fail to keep pace in the Rio Grande Valley (Leip 2022).

In 2017, the three Representatives were Vicente Gonzalez in the 15th District, Henry Cuellar in the 28th District, and Filemon Vela Jr. in the 34th District. All three were on the conservative end of the Democratic party, with all three serving as part of the conservative Blue Dog Coalition of mostly rural Democrats (Blue Dog Coalition 2023). Cuellar in particular is an especially conservative member of the caucus. In 2016, Cuellar was one of only three remaining pro-life Democrats, a number which has since fallen to just himself (Grisales 2022). Additionally all three clearly represented the political in-group in the community, as all three were Texas-born Catholic men whose families had been in the country for generations (Bova 2022). However, when there is an ingroup in a community there inevitably must also be an out group, giving Republicans ample room to find disaffected voters.

Going into the 2020 elections, general perception was that it would be far from a normal election, with more widely accessible absentee voting due to the COVID pandemic driving increased turnout. After Democrat Beto O'Rourke nearly won a US Senate race in 2018, many observers speculated that Texas would even be competitive at the Presidential level in 2020, with the Biden campaign spending record amounts in Texas (Samuels and Svitek 2020). One of the

keys to this victory for Biden would have been continuing the past Democratic success with Hispanic voters in the Rio Grande Valley. However, Donald Trump’s campaign made a notable effort with Hispanic voters. One example of this is the Latinos por Trump ad, which featured a Spanish-language song encouraging Hispanic voters to back the incumbent President. The ad shows Hispanic populations of multiple different nationalities while highlighting several key areas in which Republicans can aid the Hispanic community such as family values and the economy (Trump Campaign 2020). The ad’s focus on national identity showed a level of awareness from the Trump campaign of the non-monolithic nature of the Hispanic voting block, as well as important issues, perhaps foreshadowing his campaign’s effective targeting in the Rio Grande Valley.



Figures 2 and 3: 1988-2020 Presidential Vote Share in Starr and Cameron Counties

Donald Trump lost significant ground in Texas overall in 2020, winning the state by just six points, yet was able to hold on in part due to a substantial overperformance along the Texas-Mexico border. For example, in 2020, Trump did 21 points better in Cameron County than in 2016. In other more rural counties, his overperformance was even more notable. For example, Trump won Zapata County, a 94% Hispanic county of 14,000, something no Republican had done in 100 years (Leip 2022). The last Republican to win the county before Trump was Warren G. Harding in 1920, an election which saw only 148 Zapata County voters participate. However, most notable was that Trump won even with higher turnout among Hispanic voters. Returning to Cameron County, in 2020, Joe Biden received just over 64,000 votes, which was actually 4,600 more than Hillary Clinton received in 2016. However, Donald Trump's total jumped from 29,472 to 49,032, making for an increase of nearly 20,000 votes (Leip 2022). Therefore, while the common narrative was of Democratic Hispanic voters crossing over to Republican candidates, Donald Trump also likely successfully converted thousands of Hispanic voters from non-voters to Trump supporters.

To answer the question of why non voters backed Trump and Republicans, it may be helpful to go beyond the 2020 elections and look at recent Congressional races in 2022. Even despite Republican success in 2020, all three Congressional Democrats in the Rio Grande Valley—Gonzalez, Vela Jr., and Cuellar—were re-elected. Therefore, all three were top targets for well-funded Republican opponents. The Republican establishment quickly coalesced around three candidates, Mayra Flores against Vela Jr in the 34th district, Monica De La Cruz against Gonzalez in the 15th, and Cassy Garcia against Cuellar in the 28th (Bova 2022). Republicans in the state legislature also gerrymandered Gonzalez's seat to be more competitive by adding more rural territory (Bova 2022).

When one digs deeper into this Republican slate of candidates, a clear strategy centered around identity becomes clear. We already previously established earlier in the chapter that all Democratic representatives in the Rio Grande Valley have followed similar patterns, with almost all being US-born, Roman Catholic men. Gonzalez, Vela Jr, and Cuellar all fall under this umbrella. However, of the three Republican candidates, all are women, non-Catholic Christians, and one, Mayra Flores, was born in Mexico and spent much of her childhood there (Bova 2022, Svitek 2022). Assuming the national backing of these candidates was intentional, Republicans had shown a desire to capitalize on the monochromatic Democratic establishment.

Flores was the first of the three to gain a national profile, running in a special election after Filemon Vela Jr. resigned in March 2022. Despite being in the bluest of the three Rio Grande Valley Congressional seats, Flores was immediately an extremely competitive candidate. She highlighted her identity frequently during the campaign, for example, saying in one speech, “They claim to be for immigrants. I am an immigrant. They claim to be for women. I am a woman. They claim to be for people of color. I’m someone of color. Yet, I don’t feel the love” (Stone 2022). Flores also made her Christian faith a huge part of her campaign, using evangelical churches across the district to turn out voters during campaign events that combined prayer and political speeches (Stone 2022). This all went along with her central message of “Dios, Familia, y Patria”, which translates to God, family and country (Stone 2022). With all this in mind, Flores would seem like the ideal conservative candidate and someone who could become a national star by rallying non-white and white voters around shared values of faith and family. However, despite her strong grassroots campaigning skills, she is also a conspiracy theorist and among the more extreme Republicans running for office. For example, she supported Trump’s claims of voter fraud, even going as far as to say that January 6 was a setup and “surely was caused by

infiltrators” (Kaczynski 2022). Even more damning is her past support of QAnon conspiracy theories in prior now-deleted tweets (Kaczynski 2022). This continues the pattern seen in Miami of the new age of Hispanic conservative leaders embracing right-wing extremism.

Flores went on to win her special election, defeating Democrat Dan Sanchez with 51% of the vote (New York Times 2022). In the previous election in the 34th district, Republican Rey Gonzalez received just 41.9% of the vote despite the favorable environment for Republicans. Flores’s victory was a watershed moment that showed that Trump’s performance in the 2020 election was not an outlier. In her victory speech, Flores again highlighted her ability to represent forgotten voices in the community, saying, “For over 100 years, we have been taken for granted. I will show you what real representation looks like” (Svitek 2022). Meanwhile, local Democrats sounded further alarm bells about their performance, with strong ire directed towards national Democrats. Dan Sanchez blamed national Democrats for not bothering to fund his campaign, saying, “Too many factors were against us, including little to no support from the National Democratic Party and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.” (Svitek 2022). These comments highlight the continuing disconnect between national Democrats and local Democratic leaders.

### **3.5 Leftwing Challenges to the Democratic Establishment**

The Democratic establishment in the Rio Grande faces not only external threats from Republicans, but also internal threats from younger Democratic activists. The most endangered of the Rio Grande representatives is Henry Cuellar due to his support for Republican positions on abortion and gun legislation (Bradner and Kreig 2022). In 2020, Cuellar was challenged from the left in a primary by Jessica Cisneros, a 26 year old immigration attorney who had previously served as a staffer to Cuellar. Cisneros held Cuellar to a 3.6% margin of victory in the 2020

primary in a race that was largely overshadowed by Super Tuesday's presidential contests, but vowed to challenge Cuellar again in 2022 (Fang 2022).

Cisneros's national attention grew in the 2022 race, with no other races to divide the attention of progressives. While much of Cisneros's campaign focused on being a more reliable vote for policies such as abortion rights and progressive immigration reform, a big part of her message was also representation. According to Cisneros, her time working in Cuellar's office helped her "to find out that was anti-labor, to find out he was anti-choice, to find out he had lobbyist after lobbyist after lobbyist go through his office, and never really hosted families that looked like mine" (Bradner and Kreig 2022). While they come from opposite ends of the political spectrum, this focus on representation is not dissimilar to Mayra Flores's message just a hundred miles away. Like Flores, Cisneros's family has a more recent history of immigration, as her family had moved to the United States just before she was born to seek medical care for her sister (Medina 2022).

The 2022 campaign ended up being a particularly nasty one, aided by the outside political figures backing both candidates. Cisneros saw the backing of progressive leaders such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders, while Cuellar was backed by Nancy Pelosi and other members of the House Democratic leadership (Medina 2022). Both sides were hit with scandals during the campaign as well. Cuellar's office was raided by the FBI in connection with business dealings in Azerbaijan, while Cisneros was accused of having an affair with a much older teacher. After being held to a runoff in the March primary, Cuellar ultimately prevailed by just 289 votes in the runoff (Svitek 2022). However, the news wasn't all bad for progressives. In the open 15th district, progressive Michelle Vallejo won the Democratic nomination by 35 votes,



giving Rio Grande Valley Democrats the opportunity to send a Democratic woman to Congress for the first time (Svitek 2022).

### **3.6 The Political Future of the Rio Grande Valley**

Unlike Florida, the 2022 elections in the Rio Grande Valley did not show Texas Republicans making further inroads beyond the 2020 highmark. Instead, the election largely showed that the Rio Grande Valley essentially held even with 2020, with Democratic Gubernatorial nominee Beto O’Rourke slightly outperforming Joe Biden in most South Texas counties despite losing by more than 10 points statewide. In fact, this was the only region where O’Rourke outperformed Biden. Additionally, Democratic candidates won two of the Rio Grande Valley’s three Congressional seats. Henry Cuellar was easily re-elected over Cassy Garcia in the 28th district, vastly outperforming Biden and running close to even with Hillary Clinton’s 2016 highmarks in rural counties such as Zapata and Starr (New York Times 2022). In even better news for Democrats, Vicente Gonzalez moved from the 15th district to the 34th district and defeated Mayra Flores, albeit underperforming Biden’s totals in that race (New York Times 2022). The one Democrat to lose was Michelle Vallejo, who lost to Monica De La Cruz in the 15th district, a district which was deliberately drawn to maximize Republican potential.

	% Hispanic	2022 House	2020 President	Post-midterm Representative	Pre-midterm Representative
15th District	81.90%	R+8.5	R+2.9	Monica De La Cruz	Vicente Gonzalez
28th District	78.50%	D+13.4	D+7	Henry Cuellar	Henry Cuellar
34th District	84.50%	D+8.5	D+15.5	Vicente Gonzalez	Mayra Flores*

\*Elected in a special election in May 2022. Previous incumbent was Filemon Vela Jr. (D)

However, these Congressional victories only came from aggressive, and often downright cynical, campaigning. Vicente Gonzalez, in particular, was not afraid to use racial tactics typically employed by Republicans. Specifically, Gonzalez was accused of paying a blogger who wrote negative articles about Flores calling her “Miss Frijoles” and a “cotton picking liar”

(Caputo 2022). While Gonzalez distanced himself from those comments, he frequently used less direct language with the same connotation when talking about Flores, saying “I wasn’t born in Mexico. I didn’t come here through chain migration, I didn’t come through asylum or amnesty or whatever” (Caputo 2022). Furthermore, his campaign also was accused of darkening Flores' skin in mailers (Caputo 2022). Meanwhile, Cuellar also ran an aggressive and bitter campaign against Cassy Garcia, as evidenced by his victory statement in which he addressed her by saying, “Looks like you'll have plenty of free time to audition for Narcos in the near future.” and recommended Rosetta Stone for her to improve on her Spanish (Schwab 2022). Regardless of people’s thoughts on cynical campaigning and negative messaging, this form of aggressive campaigning shows that Democratic candidates are no longer taking the Rio Grande Valley’s voters for granted. For now, it seems as though Democrats may have learned from their mistakes in the Rio Grande Valley and can hope to not bleed further votes in future election cycles.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

The story of the Rio Grande Valley is one of continuing fights for political representation and recognition. Initially, white migrants changed the landscape of the region by pushing indigenous and Mexican-American ranchers off their land, creating an unequal power structure dominated by a select group of wealthy white ranchers. Additionally, ‘Juan Crow’ laws were used to suppress the vote of the growing Hispanic population in the region well into the mid-20th century. Finally, in the 1960s, Hispanic Democrats were able to break through and gain representation for the Hispanic communities in the Rio Grande Valley.

Since then, nominal representation has only increased, but many communities remained left out by the in-group nature of the Hispanic political establishment. As a result, the moderate Democratic establishment has become increasingly vulnerable from both sides of the political

spectrum. In order to stop bleeding voters in Hispanic communities, Democrats will need to offer tangible representation that goes beyond running Hispanic candidates and actually tries to enter the 'out groups' who feel underrepresented and listen to their concerns. Mayra Flores and Jessica Cisneros both displayed strong understandings of the concerns of underrepresented communities and managed to overperform expectations despite being on the more polarized wings of their respective parties. Merely being moderate and part of the establishment is not enough to win elections for Democrats anymore, and in order to reverse trends in the region, Democratic candidates must get their boots on the ground and counter Republican outreach.

Similarly to other Republicans, Donald Trump capitalized on this anti-establishment sentiment by providing a different alternative to the weak Democratic establishment. Additionally, he also emphasized themes such as religion and patriotism in his outreach. I argue that in the Rio Grande Valley, Trump and other Republicans successfully took advantage of anti-establishment feelings by rallying support among groups that have been traditionally excluded from political power around shared cultural values.

## *Chapter 4: Central Factors in Overall Hispanic Voting Trends*

### 4.1 Putting Miami and the RGV together

Miami and the Rio Grande Valley both tell similar stories of unexpected Republican resurgences in recent years. However, based on increased turnout, these stories are not as simple as a large group of Hispanic Democrats suddenly voting Republican. While some longtime Democratic voters certainly voted Republican for the first time in 2020, there is a deeper story of previous disaffected low turnout voters feeling drawn to the modern conservative movement. Political journalists often discuss the way populists like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have been able to motivate disaffected white working class voters who feel establishment candidates do not work for their interests (Blanco 2020). I argue that the same is also true with the Hispanic working class.

Both Florida and Texas show us the ways in which the regional Hispanic political establishment wings who have dominated local politics for decades are at a moment of immense vulnerability. In Florida, even though the Miami Republican Party has seen some of its best results in almost two decades in 2020 and 2022, it has come at the expense of significant changes away from the local establishment's moderate leanings. Specifically, the local party establishment has begun to increase their acceptance of Trump and his extreme brand, with formerly anti-Trump politicians such as Congressman Carlos Gimenez and Senator Marco Rubio now standing by Trump even after the January 6 insurrection. This can only be seen as bowing to the extremists who have begun to infiltrate party leadership committees. Specifically, Cuban American Proud Boys continue to gain seats on the Miami-Dade County Republican Committee, showing that extremists are no longer effectively kept in check within the party structure. At the same time, some former moderate Cuban Republicans who do not want to stay with a more extreme party may leave the party, further complicating the question of how to move forward.

Similarly to the Miami Republican establishment, the Rio Grande Valley Democratic establishment is also facing significant vulnerability. However, unlike the Miami Republicans, South Texas's moderate Democrats are struggling to adapt to the newfound challenges from both their left and their right. As evidenced by the close recent primary races for Congressman Henry Cuellar, even among Hispanic Democrats, there is a large constituency that feels unrepresented by current leadership in the community. Additionally, there is the obvious threat from conservative candidates, who are seriously contesting the region's Congressional districts for the first time in recent memory. Interestingly, there are many parallels between the hardline conservative candidates and hardline progressive candidates who have challenged Latino moderates like Cuellar. Specifically, challengers regardless of ideology have tended to be Latina women from families with more recent immigration histories. These candidates are outsiders who do not fit the typical regional power structure which places US-Born Catholic Men in almost all positions of power. Thus, as outsiders, they have a natural ability to motivate turnout among disaffected voters looking for candidates who represent their less powerful backgrounds. These candidates have reached these voters by increasing campaigning in community spaces such as churches.

#### **4.2 Moving Outside the Case Studies**

While these case studies are illustrative of how trends among Hispanic voters are playing out at a local level, it is also crucial to consider the broader picture. On a national level, all across the country from New England to California, largely Hispanic neighborhoods trended towards Donald Trump and Republicans, indicating that this is beyond merely regional issues. However, there are still some Hispanic-majority areas which bucked this trend in 2020 and 2022, with outcomes ranging from slight Republican gains to slight Democratic gains. Briefly diving into

these communities and what they have in common may prove crucial to answering the question of what is driving changes in Hispanic voting trends.

#### **4.2.1 Where the Trend Does Not Quite Fit**

There are a few scattered Hispanic-majority counties where Republicans failed to make the type of inroads they made elsewhere in the country. There are two predominant types of communities where this happened. Firstly, there are isolated pockets of Hispanic voters in rural areas in several states with low overall Hispanic populations. For example, in Kansas, there are now four Hispanic majority counties. Joe Biden outperformed Hillary Clinton in all four, with two of the four, Finney and Ford Counties, representing two of his strongest showings in the state (Park et al 2021). Similarly, in Washington, there are three rural Hispanic-majority counties. Joe Biden outperformed Hillary Clinton in all three, with Trump underperforming his 2016 totals (Park et al 2021).

This question of why some rural Hispanic communities did not swing right is fascinating. In Texas, for example, largely rural isolated Hispanic counties across the state still swung right by significant margins. In Kansas, meanwhile, Biden's improvement in Hispanic-majority counties was larger than almost anywhere else in the state, with the exception of the wealthy Kansas City suburbs. Finney County, home to the largely Hispanic small city of Garden City, gave Biden his third highest improvement in the state, trailing only Johnson County in suburban KC and Riley County, home to Kansas State University (Park et al 2021). Trump, likewise, struggled in these Hispanic-majority counties.

Despite significant growth in the Hispanic population in Kansas, local power structures have not caught up to shifting demographics, with very limited political inclusion of the Hispanic community. While 18% of the Kansas population is Hispanic, only five state representatives (3%

of the chamber) and four elected municipal officials (0.11% of municipal officials in the state) are Hispanic/Latino (Condos 2022). Currently, a new generation of younger Hispanic leaders is working to change that, but it's without a doubt an uphill battle.

Social inclusion of Hispanic citizens is very common in rural Kansas communities such as Dodge City, Liberal, and Garden City, due to an understanding that without immigrants industry would not function and cause economic ruin (Fallows and Fallows 2021). However, as Hispanic immigrants gain citizenship and can participate in politics, that social inclusion does not always extend to politics, as local reports describe the strong pushback and scaremongering about immigration which non-white candidates, especially Latinas, have to face (Fallows and Fallows 2021). For example, in Liberal, the most Hispanic city in Kansas, Janeth Vasquez, who was running to be the first Latina member of the city commission, “regularly got aggressive calls on her cell phone from people accusing her of planning to bring more undocumented immigrants to town” (Fallows and Fallows 2021). This was despite the fact that no part of her campaign included immigration policy stances. She also was frequently encouraged to tone down references to her ethnicity if she wanted to win (Fallows and Fallows 2021). Vasquez ultimately was elected, showing the progress, albeit slow progress, of representation projects in rural Kansas.

Secondly, Republican inroads were not as strong in the Southwest, another largely Hispanic region. While Republicans did gain ground in Arizona's two majority-Hispanic counties, those gains were not nearly as drastic as those seen in other states such as Texas and Florida. Not losing more ground in Arizona was undoubtedly crucial to Joe Biden's victory in the state, as well as the election of Democrat Mark Kelly to the US Senate. The same was also true

of New Mexico, where Republicans made only marginal inroads in Hispanic-majority counties. The same was also true with Trump who only saw marginal overperformances in those states.

There is no clear recipe for what the Democratic Party is doing better in those states, or what the Republican Party is not doing as effectively, but one theory could be that Democrats have stronger and more representational local leadership in the Hispanic communities in those states, owing to longstanding grassroots efforts in both states. For example, there are currently four Democratic members of Congress from Arizona and New Mexico. These four do not represent the same consistent demographic profile seen by Congressional Democrats in the Rio Grande Valley. Only two of the four, Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) and Gabe Vasquez (D-NM), are Mexican American men. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ) is a Colombian-American man, while Teresa Leger Fernandez (D-NM) is a Mexican American woman. Even Grijalva and Vasquez do not have the same deep US roots that are a constant among Texas Democratic Representatives. Grijalva's father moved to the United States just three years prior to his birth, while Vasquez spent most of his childhood in Mexico.

Additionally, all four buck the idea that progressives are automatically out of touch with the desires of the community. Grijalva and Leger Fernandez are two of the most progressive members of Congress, and Vasquez managed to win a swing seat in 2022 despite running on a fairly progressive platform (Resendiz 2022). Gallego has recently announced plans to challenge moderate Senator Kyrsten Sinema, running against her from the left (Wallace-Wells 2023). Gallego and Fernandez managed to outperform Biden's 2020 performances significantly in 2022, providing further evidence that liberal vs. conservative ideology is not the sole factor in which campaigns are successful at rallying Hispanic communities and which are not.

#### **4.2.2 Survey Data**



Another way to move out of the case study approach is by looking at available national data. One strong resource is the American National Election Survey (ANES), a survey which asks hundreds of questions regarding policy and cultural topics to around 6,000 voters every presidential election cycle. In 2020, within this group, there was a subsample of 800 Hispanic voters, representing a significant potential data point for observing what issues are actually driving conservatism in the Hispanic community. Using the University of California Berkeley's Survey Documentation and Analysis database, I chose 19 questions from the 2020 edition of the ANES to investigate the demographic breakdown of responses. For each question, I both investigated how Hispanics voted in the 2020 election based on their responses on issue-based questions as well as the differences between how Hispanic voters and non-Hispanic voters responded to these questions. Based on the existing literature and case studies, my expectation going into this was that improved Republican outreach around cultural issues would be a central factor in vote shifts, along with general feelings of distrust in government.

One initial data point that I found surprising was that the ANES showed no evidence of the Republican party doing more to contact Hispanic voters than Democrats. Among Hispanic voters who reported being contacted by a political party, only 14.4% reported only being contacted by the Republican party, compared to 18.5% of non-Hispanic voters who said they were only contacted by Republicans. Additionally, when factoring in those who said they were contacted by both parties, 58.3% of Hispanic voters who were contacted by one or more parties were contacted by Republicans, compared to 65.7% of non-Hispanic voters. Furthermore, Hispanic voters were more likely to be contacted by any party, with 56.6% of Hispanic voters reporting being contacted, compared to 50.2% of non-Hispanic voters. Additionally, Republican messaging was not particularly effective. Just 18.6% of Hispanic voters contacted only by

Republican operatives ended up voting for Republicans. Therefore, while the operation was ineffective, Republicans did appear to show an interesting desire to contact and motivate Democratic Hispanic voters to turn out. Additionally, there is evidence that Republicans increased their overall outreach in 2020. In 2020, 58.3% of Hispanic voters reported being contacted by Republican operatives, compared to just 44.5% in 2016. Much of this increase was made up of voters who reported being contacted by both parties.

While there clearly are significant efforts to reach Hispanic voters, the ANES data also shows that Hispanic voters do not feel particularly represented by the government and political leaders. When asked to rank the importance of voting from 1-5 with 1 being the lowest importance, 31.4% of Hispanic voters selected 3 or lower, compared to just 27% of non-Hispanic voters who selected 3 or lower. For both groups, lower valuation of the importance of voting also was correlated with a greater likelihood of supporting Donald Trump. Additionally, 17.8% of Hispanic voters said there was no difference between the two parties, compared to 10.4% of non-Hispanic voters. Both Trump and Biden lost support among this group, as many of these voters chose 3rd parties.

On the topic of government skepticism, I also investigated the topic of COVID-19 and health rules, which was a very prevalent topic in November 2020. This yielded mixed results. On the one hand, Hispanic voters were more likely than non-Hispanic voters (36.1% compared to 24.2%) to say that the United States was reopening too quickly. On the other hand, just 67% of Hispanic voters supported vaccine requirements in schools, compared to 72% of non-Hispanic voters. In both cases, among Hispanic voters, being against COVID measures is associated with a higher likelihood of supporting Donald Trump. I also looked at economic concerns as a potential reason why some Hispanic voters would support a candidate who supported quickly

reopening. However, not only were Hispanic voters only very slightly more likely (62.2% vs. 61.6%) than non-Hispanic voters to say the economy had gotten somewhat or much worse, those who did feel the economy was getting worse were more likely to vote for Biden than those who felt it was getting better.

Finally, I also looked at many questions concerning issues of culture and media consumption. The most interesting results were in social media consumption. 32.2% of Hispanic voters reported checking Facebook “many times a day” compared to just 26.3% of non-Hispanic voters. 30.1% of that group of Hispanic voters who frequently check Facebook, compared to just 22% of the overall Hispanic group that responded to that question, ended up voting for Trump.

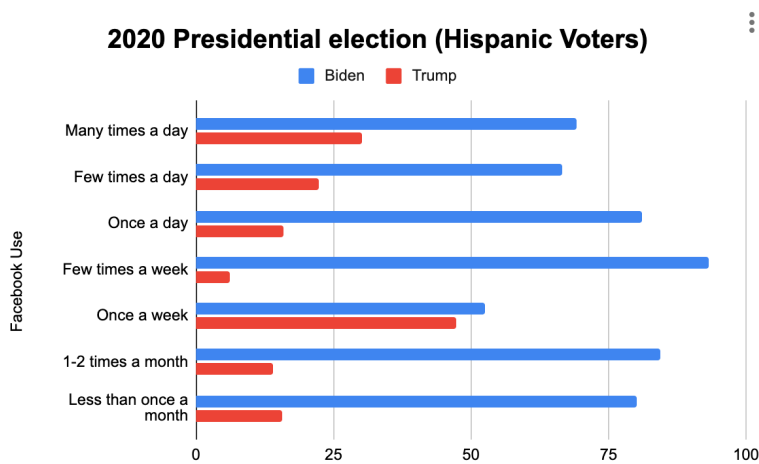


Figure 4: Facebook use and vote choice among Hispanic voters

Additionally, I also compared religion as an important indicator of culture. 68.4% of Hispanic voters said religion is at least a moderately important part of their lives, compared to 65.1% of non-Hispanic voters. Those who valued religion higher were likelier to vote for Donald Trump across both groups. 35% of Hispanic voters who said religion is extremely important voted for Donald Trump, compared to just 21.7% of the total sample of Hispanic voters. Meanwhile, 62.7% of non-Hispanic voters who said religion is extremely important voted for Trump, compared to 46.1% of the total sample. Therefore, when looking at rates of increase, religion

was a more important determinative factor for Hispanic voting preferences than non-Hispanic preferences. Within the Hispanic Christian population, there is also a fascinating Catholic vs. Protestant split. 28.9% of Hispanic Protestants surveyed voted for Donald Trump, compared to just 19.5% of Hispanic Catholics. Additionally, 50.3% of Hispanic voters said they were more conservative than liberal, indicating that there is ample room for the Republican party to grow.

Language use and national origin were also important variables for studying Hispanic voting trends in this past election cycle. Hispanic voters who spoke English more than Spanish were more likely to vote for Donald Trump. 22.9% of respondents who spoke English more backed Trump, compared to just 9.4% of those who spoke Spanish more often. This ties back to earlier theories of assimilation as seen in Chapter 1. Similarly, Hispanic voters who said that it is important to speak English in the United States were more likely to back Trump. The survey also showed a big split among national origin. Only 13.5% of respondents with Mexican heritage supported Donald Trump, compared to 30.5% of those without Mexican heritage. This implies Donald Trump was especially strong among Cuban and South American voters, as seen in the Miami chapter.

#### **4.3 What is Shaping Hispanic Voting Trends**

I propose that there are three primary factors that have shaped Hispanic voting trends in the past few election cycles. The first of these factors is that establishment political operations have lost some of their might, opening the door for insurgent more extreme candidates. While both parties face significant challenges in their respective establishment groups, I argue the Republicans have benefited from being the outsider party. Despite Republicans controlling the White House and Senate, in the 2020 campaign, Donald Trump still presented himself as an outsider who is fighting against political elites. This framing especially intensified with his

rhetoric on COVID issues and opposition to government shutdowns. The outsider anti-establishment narrative the Republicans have crafted has helped win over voters who may be skeptical of either party's ability to represent them, a dynamic which can be seen in both the ANES data and case studies.

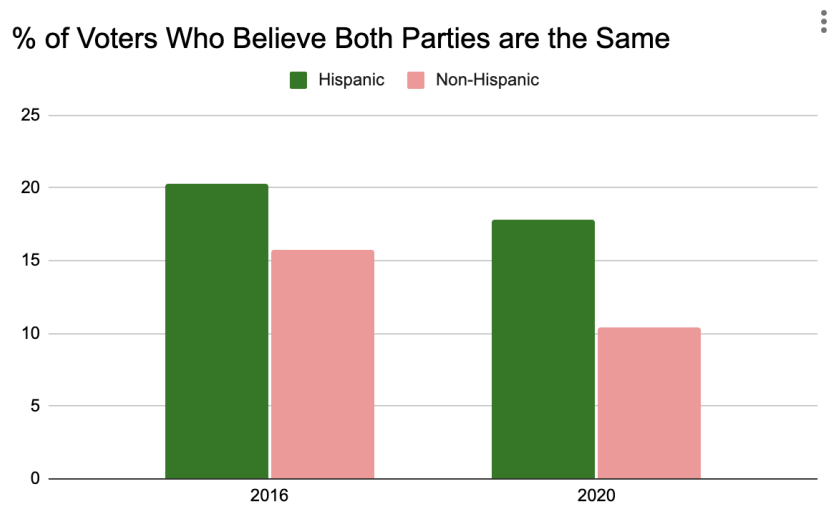


Figure 5: % of voters who believe both parties are the same by ethnicity (2016/2020)

The ANES data paints a clear picture of a population who do not believe they are represented by either party. Hispanic voters were more likely than non-Hispanic voters to feel that both parties are the same. Additionally, Hispanic voters were more likely than non-Hispanic voters to say that voting does not matter or only matters a little bit. Crucially, unlike among white voters, these feelings of disconnection with major parties did not decrease significantly between 2016 and 2020 among Hispanic voters. In both cases, those Hispanic voters who expressed skepticism for voting were more likely to vote for Donald Trump than those who believed voting does matter. Additionally, there are other ANES variables which show lower trust in government among Hispanic voters. A good example of this is that Hispanic voters were less likely than non-Hispanic voters to support vaccine mandates in schools. 67.2% Hispanic

voters supported these mandates compared to 72% of non-Hispanic voters. This view also shows how government-skeptic views have quietly crept into Hispanic political discourses.

Both case studies show many of the establishment Hispanic politicians who have previously dominated local politics under significantly more pressure than prior elections. Additionally, they also show how the openings left by the establishment are quickly filled in by extreme candidates. In Miami, the Cuban Republican establishment has survived through the alliances between people like Marco Rubio and Donald Trump, but this has come at the cost of letting in more extreme factions. This can be seen in the amount of power the Proud Boys have in local party dynamics. Additionally, in the case of Miami, there is an existing historic underbelly of violent anti-Castro extremists having roles within the more moderate political organizations. This has made it easier for Republicans to adapt and pivot more to the right, as doing so may in part be simply a reversion to the past. In the Rio Grande Valley, the Democratic establishment's weakness is shown by challenges from both extreme wings. Longtime moderate incumbent Henry Cuellar nearly lost his primary to a younger progressive woman, while Republicans won a special election in a Biden-won district with a candidate, Mayra Flores, who had expressed interest in Q-anon conspiracy theories. This shows both the polarization of the two parties and how Hispanic voters particularly have leaned towards more nontraditional politicians.

The other primary criticism of the establishment in both cities is that they are only representative of smaller in-groups. The Democratic establishment in the Rio Grande Valley are all Roman Catholic Mexican-American men, while the Republican establishment in Miami are all Cuban Americans. As a result, their opponents have often found surprising success when they have run candidates who represent demographics that are not part of those political in-groups.

The Republicans have had success running protestant women in South Texas, while the Democrats have had better success running non-Cuban candidates in Miami.

Both concerns of representation and distrust of longstanding establishments are directly related to opinions expressed in the ANES data about the importance of political participation. However, while this data suggests both parties are failing, the Republicans benefit far more from this change. Generally speaking, the current direction of the Republican party has been heading towards being the anti establishment ‘outsider’ party. This first began during the Tea Party Movement, but under Donald Trump, that wing of the party really gained full power, especially in the later years of his presidency, as previous skeptics converted towards his agenda. Republicans may revert back to being the ‘insider’ party of elite figures such as Mitt Romney at some point, but that doesn't seem highly likely in the coming years, as the post-Trump party has doubled down on extremism.

Finally, the second major factor is assimilation and cultural familiarity. Modern Republicans have embraced an in-group vs. out-group look at Hispanic voters in which those who integrated into American culture are rewarded. Republicans have argued that they are a home for anyone who believes in the values of “Dios, Familia y Patria” or “God, Family, and Motherland.” This rhetoric was employed both by Trump’s advertising and the campaigns of local candidates such as Flores. By centering these positive value messages, Republicans have largely ignored the concepts of race and ethnicity. Messages of assimilation can be self-empowering to many people. On this topic, NYT correspondent was quoted in a 2022 article, saying, “I’ve spoken to several Latinos, particularly men, who have told me a version of this: ‘I grew up hearing that Democrats were the party of the poor. But I don’t want to be poor, so I became a Republican’” (Leonhardt 2022). This idea is also similar to the idea of ‘multi racial

whiteness' proposed by Cristina Beltran in which she argues that some non-white voters have switched political parties in the hope of obtaining the privilege that comes with conservatism and rejecting racial identity.

The ANES data helps tell this story of many Hispanic voters finding a cultural home in the conservative movement, often through assimilation. The most interesting data point from the ANES is that about half of Hispanic voters identify themselves as more of a conservative than a liberal.

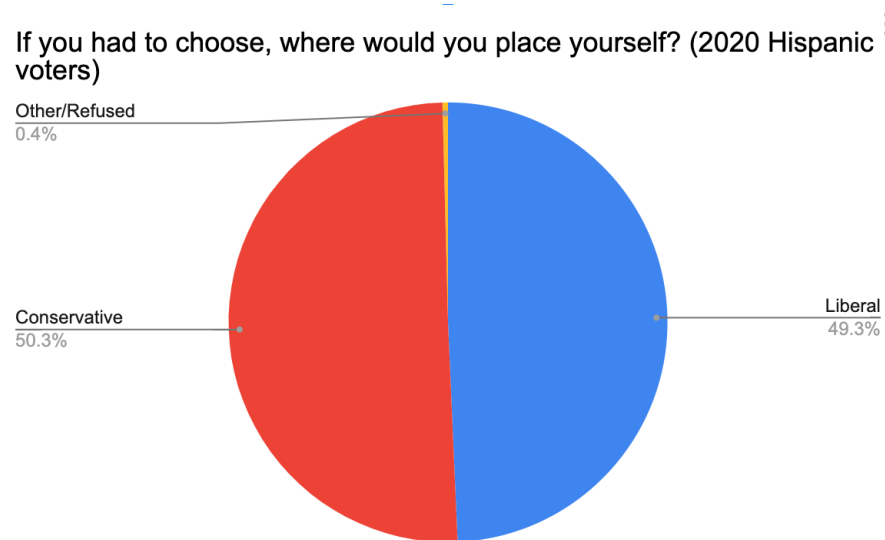


Figure 6: Self-Identification of Hispanic Voters in 2020

While this is still more liberal than non-Hispanic voters, it is very notable in considering how many Biden voters would self-identify as conservative. In fact, the data shows that a significant majority of conservative Hispanics voted for Biden. This helps show how there are a number of Hispanic Democrats who could be easily swayed by conservative messaging. Additionally, the ANES data shows that Hispanic voters are slightly more likely than non-Hispanic voters to say religion is a very important part of their lives, with those who value religion the most being the most likely to vote Republican. In a final data point on assimilation, the ANES data also shows



that Hispanic voters who think speaking English is important were much more likely to vote for Trump.

The case studies both are interesting places to look for political movements based on assimilation. Since both regions are heavily Hispanic-majority, both parties simply have no choice but to try to welcome Hispanic voters into their movements. As a result, both Cuban American communities in Miami and Mexican American communities in the Rio Grande Valley have long histories of institutional power. In Miami, this institutional power has helped the Cuban exile population quickly grow in economic status, which may increase positive thoughts on assimilation into American culture in that community. Religion also is a clearly important connection point to American culture, and with it the conservative movement. In the Rio Grande Valley, many Republican campaigns have used the church, especially the Protestant church, as a site for rallying turnout. Flores and other candidates held prayer rallies in protestant churches, which combined religion and politics. By focusing on positive campaign messaging about faith and family to Hispanic voters, Republican candidates have been able to identify this possibility of finding common ground with more conservative community members.

#### **4.4 Looking Forward to the Future of Hispanic Voting Patterns**

Looking ahead to 2024, considering the growing influence of the Hispanic electorate, both parties will be highly focused on driving up Hispanic turnout and crafting persuasive messages that appeal across racial and ethnic groups. Considering that there are Senate seats up for grabs in Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Florida, Hispanic voters will once again play an absolutely critical role in determining control of government. Similarly, Arizona and Nevada, and maybe even Texas, will be crucial in deciding the winner of the Presidential race.

Republicans have already begun refining their strategies to court Hispanic voters ahead of 2024. Specifically, they are furthering investments into Spanish language conservative media. One startup, Americano Media, believes that they can become “Fox News in Spanish.” Their primary goal is to not only motivate and keep Republican-leaning Hispanic voters engaged but also to convert unaffiliated voters to their party (Garcia 2023). The platform has grown significantly since its launch , and the company recently announced the hiring of none other than former Congresswoman Mayra Flores as a senior political contributor (Estevez 2023). Criticism of Americano Media has suggested that they go beyond conservative-leaning narratives and go as far as embracing outright misinformation. Conservative media watchdogs allege that, similarly to Fox News, Americano Media has platformed several election deniers and conspiracy theorists in its videos (Garcia 2023). This is especially concerning given that Americano Media is predominantly on online platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, both of which have historically had challenges regulating misinformation in non-English sources (Sanchez and Bennett 2022).

Patterns of media consumption have likely played a significant role in changes in Hispanic voting preferences. Specifically, digital platforms such as Facebook have been hotbeds for the advancement of conservative-slanted narratives along with outright misinformation. As discussed above, the ANES data shows that Hispanic voters who regularly checked Facebook many times a day were more likely to vote for Donald Trump. Additionally, Hispanic voters in general in the ANES check Facebook at higher rates than non-Hispanic voters, indicating that Facebook is an especially powerful tool to impact the Hispanic vote. Republicans have successfully recognized this and increased online advertising and spending

However, Republicans are not alone in trying to venture into Spanish-language media. Specifically, progressive groups have tried to venture into the talk radio market in Miami by purchasing struggling conservative networks. For example, a company named Latino Media Network owned by former advisors to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton bought 18 radio stations in Miami including a highly popular station named Radio Mambí (Corujo 2022). This shift angered Republicans including Congresswoman Maria Elvira Salazar, who claimed that Democrats wanted to “use those 18 radio stations to peddle socialism to the Latino community” and that the radio stations going leftward would diminish free speech (Corujo 2022). Republican fears of waning influence may be understandable. 97% of Hispanics in the United States listen to radio on a regular basis, more than any other group (Corujo 2022). This fight over media coverage shows that both parties are preparing to go on the offensive to court Hispanic voters in 2024.

In the next Presidential election in 2024, I would expect a largely status quo election compared to 2020 and 2022 with Hispanic voters, with neither party making significant gains. The first reason I say this is that Republicans did not gain further ground with Hispanic voters in the 2022 midterms. Exit polls indicated a 40% share of Hispanic voters going to Republican candidates, while Latino polling specialists such as BSP Research have estimated that number to be closer to 34% (Cadava 2022) . The academic consensus is that Republicans won about 38% of the Hispanic vote in 2020 based on post election studies, so both these numbers are fairly close to that total (Cadava 2022). Republicans certainly performed even better than they did in 2020 with Hispanic voters in some areas such as Florida, New York, and California, all states in which Democrats performed poorly across the board.

Meanwhile, Democrats also overperformed with Hispanic voters in other states. Avoiding further erosion with the party's Hispanic base undoubtedly helped carry Senators Mark Kelly (D-AZ) and Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) over the finish line. In Nevada, the Culinary Union, largely run by Black and Latina women, claimed to have knocked on over 1 million doors in their efforts to back Democratic candidates, reaching "more than half the Black and Latinx voters in the state" in the process (Culinary Union Local 226 2022). This organizing should not be overlooked when discussing why the Democrats overperformed expectations. Furthermore, in some cases, popular Democratic Governors such as Laura Kelly (D-KS) and Jared Polis (D-CO) not only overperformed Biden's 2020 numbers in majority Hispanic counties but Hillary Clinton's 2016 numbers as well.

Additionally, there is ample past history of Hispanic voters turning out in higher numbers for incumbents, regardless of party. For example, in Miami Dade County, Donald Trump, Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton all saw higher vote totals in their reelection bids than in their initial elections. The same is also true in Cameron County. In fact, this trend holds solid across 12 of the 15 most Hispanic counties in the United States. In all three counties that did not fit the trend, Barack Obama just narrowly underperformed his 2008 totals in 2012. Therefore, Trump, Bush, and Clinton all over performed in their reelection bids in all 15 counties. As a result, it would not be surprising to see Joe Biden at minimum hold even with, or perhaps even improve on, his 2020 performance with Hispanic voters in 2024.

Most likely, the 2024 election will be similar to 2022, in that some Hispanic communities will continue to move further rightward while others will not. Miami, for example, would be a strong candidate to continue moving rightward, given the continued migration of Venezuelans with strong suspicions of left-wing policies. In other areas, such as Arizona and Texas,

Democrats are more likely to hold their own, as party leaders are far less likely to get caught off guard this time around. Geraldo Cadava argues that these dueling numbers are good for understanding the uniqueness of Hispanic communities and will help improve specific targeting of messaging, saying that this is an opportunity to aim for new narratives about Latinos that are as complicated and divided as America itself” (Cadava 2022).

#### **4.5 Final Reflections and Conclusions**

In this project, I sought an answer as to why Trump and other Republican candidates suddenly were able to overturn years of negative trends with Hispanic voters in the 2020 election. Throughout this research it became clear that there is no one answer as to why this happened. Rather, each Hispanic community has its own story and main issues of concern. For example, Venezuelan Americans in Miami and Mexican American Tejanos who voted Republican for the first time in 2020 have very different backgrounds and reasons for voting for conservative candidates. On the other hand, many people in these same communities, in fact the majority of people, have voted Democratic for years and continue to do so. However, there are common trends across these communities that should be considered.

The three principal factors in recent trends that I identified were feelings of not being represented by traditional politics, media consumption, and assimilation into white American political culture through conservative values. All three of these trend-points can be attributed to the results of a community not feeling recognized and listened to, something seen both in the apathy towards the political process voiced in surveys and increasing challenges to established Hispanic leaders in Miami and Texas. Whether by tuning out of the process, turning to extreme anti-establishment movements, or by adapting to a sense of American culture, many of the trends among Hispanic voters can be seen through this lens. In this sense, the 2020 election may be a

very positive thing for the long term development of Hispanic political representation. 2020 showed Democrats that they can't take Hispanic voters for granted and Republicans that with the right messaging, they can appeal to Hispanic voters. Given the expected continued growth of the Hispanic voting population, both parties will have no choice but to continue increasing outreach and most importantly, listening to these communities. Hopefully, listening will be a first step towards increasing the meaningful influence of Hispanic voters in the political system.

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