

# It's the Economy: The Effect of Economic Policy Appeals on Latino Independents\*

Derek Wakefield<sup>†</sup>

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## Abstract

Studies of minority voters have long considered the role of both ethnic identities and economic interests. However, research on Latino voters emphasizes ethnic identity and the related issue of immigration while downplaying the potential persuasive effect of candidate messages on economics, such as jobs and inflation, and on services, such as healthcare and education. To address this gap, I fielded three survey experiments with online samples of Latino Democrats, independents, and Republicans, who evaluated candidate messages that varied in their partisan label and policy rhetoric. While Latino Democrats and Republicans positively evaluated in-party messages regardless of policy, Latino independents reacted most positively to either party's economic messages. Meanwhile, both positive and negative messages about undocumented immigration were generally more polarizing than persuasive. These findings demonstrate the need for more research on the potential persuasive effects of economic appeals on Latinos and other groups.

**Keywords:** Latino, Political Psychology, Economics, Immigration, Partisanship

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<sup>†</sup>Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science, Emory University, 237 Tarbutton Hall, Atlanta, GA 30322 (djwakef@emory.edu). ORCID: 0000-0003-1675-7190

### **Declarations: Conflict of Interest and Ethical Standards Statement**

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. The author certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript. The author has no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

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Replication data and code will be provided upon request.

# 1 Introduction

A long literature in Latino<sup>1</sup> political behavior has emphasized the effects of various immigration-related discourses and messages on Latino voting behavior and mobilization. For example, studies show that outreach in favor of immigrant rights, such as Barack Obama’s executive action Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), is an important factor for explaining why many Latinos identify as and support Democrats (Barreto and Collingwood 2015; Huddy, Mason, and Horwitz 2016; Saavedra Cisneros 2017; see Jones-Correa, Al-Faham, and Cortez 2018 for a review). Several studies focusing on individual Latino voter behavior similarly find that exposure to anti-immigrant threat, such as Donald Trump’s rhetoric demeaning Mexican immigrants or his support for more militarized immigration enforcement, pushes many Latinos towards greater Democratic support (García Bedolla 2005; Reny, Wilcox-Archuleta, and Nichols 2018; Garcia-Rios, Pedraza, and Wilcox-Archuleta 2019; Gutierrez et al. 2019). As both parties become increasingly polarized on racial issues in general and especially on immigration (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Tesler 2016), the expectation is that Latino voters will trend towards Democratic support.

However, studies examining macro-level Latino voting behavior in recent elections have found that aggregate Latino partisanship and vote choice have stayed more or less stable at about 65% support for Democrats and 30% support for Republicans—including in 2016 and 2020 (Dyck and Johnson 2022; Corral and Leal 2020; Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023). Following a period when immigration was a highly salient and partisan-polarized issue, the stability of Latino voting behavior and the continually low rates of Latino partisanship and political engagement both present significant theoretical and empirical puzzles (Jones-Correa, Al-Faham, and Cortez 2018). Furthermore, immigration may not be as much of a factor for explaining the political behavior of Latinos who have remained independent during the past decade and a half of intense partisan polarization on the issue of immigration.

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<sup>1</sup>I use “Latino” interchangeably with other pan-ethnic identity terms such as “Hispanic,” “Latina,” “Latinx,” etc.

To explain Latino political behavior beyond an emphasis on immigration and partisanship, it is crucial to consider other potentially appealing topics—such as economics and social services.

In this paper, I test whether or not messaging strategies towards Latinos that incorporate economic policies have persuasive potential due to their broad appeal among Latino voters overall and their specific effectiveness among Latino independents. My definition of “economic policies” includes general references to jobs and growth as well as specific topics like inflation and social welfare programs, including education and healthcare. Even if immigration matters significantly to many Latino voters, this is potentially less true for Latinos who have remained non-partisan. I argue that these Latino independents are instead relatively more likely to care about baseline economic concerns such as job growth, the state of the economy, and being able to provide adequate services such as healthcare and education for themselves and their families.

I develop two theoretical predictions regarding Latino voting behavior based on variation in their partisanship and ensuing responses to various political messages. For Latino Democrats, and potentially also Latino Republicans, I theorize that because they have already sorted into their respective parties (Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023), they will largely behave like loyal partisans when exposed to campaign messages (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004; Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood 2019; B. L. Fraga, Velez, and West 2024). I hypothesize that they will favor in-party candidates and messages overall regardless of the message’s specific policy content. Conversely, for Latino independents, I theorize that because they have remained nonpartisan despite almost two decades of intense debates and partisan polarization on the issue of immigration, they will be less likely to be persuaded by immigration messaging or by generic partisan messaging. Instead, I hypothesize that these Latino independents will be more supportive of messages and candidates—from either party—that reference economic topics.

To test these claims, I conducted a series of online survey experiments exposing Latino

voters<sup>2</sup> to either fictional campaign messaging or simulated electoral contests between Democratic and Republican candidates who used a range of policy messages, including economic and immigration-related topics.<sup>3</sup> In Study 1, Democratic and independent respondents (N = 290) were exposed to one of four randomly assigned Facebook messages from a fictional White male Democratic candidate. Message conditions included pro-undocumented, progressive economics, race-class economics (López 2019), and a non-policy control. In Study 2, I exposed a larger and ideologically more varied Latino voter sample that included Democrats, Republicans, independents, and independents who lean towards either party (N = 1575) to a similar set of policy messaging from both Democratic and Republican candidates. Democratic candidates used similar liberal messages to Study 1 while Republican candidates used pro-business economics and anti-undocumented immigration rhetoric. Candidates from either party could also use moderate rhetoric on economics and immigration. Finally, in Study 3, I exposed a similarly ideologically varied sample of Latino voters (N = 808) to a series of conjoint candidate choice tasks between Democratic and Republican candidates. Each candidate varied in their race/ethnicity and in their usage of economic, immigration, and abortion policy.

Across studies, I find mixed support for my in-party loyalty hypothesis, as Latino Democrats and Republicans favorably evaluated candidates from their respective parties regardless of what policies they mentioned (if any). However, out-party messaging on immigration produced significantly negative effects on evaluations among partisans and independents who lean Democrat or Republican in Study 2. This suggests that while in-party messaging on immigration is not necessarily positively persuasive, as partisans are already sorted, such voters may still react negatively to out-party rhetoric on immigration.

More importantly for my core argument, I find very consistent support for my indepen-

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<sup>2</sup>Voter registration status was self-reported. Respondents were also restricted to only include those who were 18+, US residents, Latino/Hispanic identifiers, and those with at least minimal English language skills.

<sup>3</sup>The surveys were only conducted in English due to concerns over sample size, funding, and the nature of my experiments. A Spanish-language survey would also include Spanish-language campaign messaging, which is arguably a much different treatment than for English-language messaging.

dent economic voting hypothesis. Across all three studies, Latino independents reacted more positively to economic messaging relative to nonpolicy, immigration, and abortion messaging. This effect is driven by economics generally rather than any specific economic policy, although more moderate stances (e.g., supporting economic growth, reducing inflation, general service spending) tended to have more positive effects than either party's respective liberal/conservative economic stances. This consistent positive effect is notable given the relative lack of positive treatment effects among other groups. Put another way, these results suggest that emphasizing economics and social services will produce greater marginal effects on Latino voting behavior than immigration alone. Additionally, such economic messaging persuades Latino independents in particular while not being as divisive as immigration among Latino partisans.

## **2 Immigration and Latino Partisanship**

Drawing from the Latino political behavior literature, a potential reason for why economic messaging might be more persuasive among Latinos than immigration, at least in some cases, is that Latino reactions to immigration-related appeals are affected by their pre-existing individual ethnic attachments (García Bedolla 2005; Lee 2008; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016; Pérez 2015; Pérez 2021). While Latinos with strong ethnic identities who are exposed to immigration rhetoric often become mobilized, those with weaker ethnic identities are less likely to react positively (García Bedolla 2005; Pérez 2015; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016). Furthermore, some Latinos also express anti-undocumented views (Alamillo 2019; Hickel et al. 2020). This variation could potentially explain why immigration is not universally appealing to Latino voters. Furthermore, such variation in the effect of immigration politics coincides with variation in Latino partisanship. A recent study by Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez (2023) argues that even before 2016, Latino partisans had already shifted towards being consistent Democrats and Republicans (see also Corral

and Leal 2020; Dyck and Johnson 2022; B. L. Fraga, Velez, and West 2024). This coincides with other research showing that Latinos with strong ethnic attachments are more likely to be Democrats and to support liberal policies on immigration (Lee 2008; Barreto and Pedraza 2009; Huddy, Mason, and Horwitz 2016; Saavedra Cisneros 2017; Marsh and Ramírez 2019; Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023) while Latinos with weaker ethnic attachments are more likely to be Republican and to support exclusionary immigration policies, especially on undocumented immigration (Alamillo 2019; Hickel et al. 2020; Cortez 2020; Cadava 2020). In both cases, the roles of immigration and partisanship are highly related.

Still, this theoretical emphasis on the role of immigration and partisanship fails to provide leverage on the political behavior of Latino independents (Jones-Correa, Al-Faham, and Cortez 2018). This is especially important given the relatively higher proportion of Latino voters who do not identify with either party. According to Pew Research Center data, the percentage of Latino registered voters who identify as independent has increased from a relative low point of 27% in 2004 to 37% in 2017 and 33% in 2022 (Pew 2018; Krogstad, Edwards, and Lopez 2022). During this time period, rates of independent identification stayed fairly constant among White and Black voters at 35% and 25%, respectively. Similarly, a Gallup study from 2022 found that Latino voters were more likely than the full sample to identify first as "independent" (52%, vs 42% overall) and to state that they do not lean towards either party even when pushed (Newport 2022). There thus remains a gap between academic research predicting greater Latino political participation due in large part to partisan polarization on immigration, and the continually low rates of partisanship and participation in the Latino electorate overall (Jones-Correa, Al-Faham, and Cortez 2018).

Helpfully, some studies on Latino voter engagement have focused on the large portion of Latinos who have remained independent and persistently less likely to vote amidst recent partisan polarization on immigration (Wong 2006; Hajnal and Lee 2011; García Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Hersh 2015; B. L. Fraga

2018). However, these studies are also limited in terms of their discussion of what topics might specifically appeal to these otherwise alienated Latino independents. Hajnal and Lee (2011) argue that Democrats neglected ethnic/immigration-related outreach (see also Wong 2006; Masuoka and Junn 2013), but they examine the pre-Obama period—in recent elections, Democrats have been much stauncher immigration advocates compared to Republicans (Barreto and Collingwood 2015; Huddy, Mason, and Horwitz 2016; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019; Garcia-Rios, Pedraza, and Wilcox-Archuleta 2019). Other research in this vein has advocated for greater efforts at Latino engagement but has not focused on what messaging strategies in particular might be effective (García Bedolla and Michelson 2012; B. L. Fraga 2018). Furthermore, there remains a dearth of experimental research on Latino independents, leaving unanswered the question about what policies might appeal. By focusing on the potential appeal of economics, I provide a possible avenue for reaching Latino independents and addressing their persistently low rates of participation.

### **3 The Persuasive Potential of Economics for Latinos**

I next draw upon the race and ethnic politics literature more generally to explain the potential dynamics between Latino ethnic identity/immigration, partisanship, and economic considerations. The theory of racial linked fate was developed to explain high levels of Black support for the Democratic Party despite the potential appeal of Republican positions on economics, especially for more affluent Black voters (Dawson 1995; Cohen 1999; I. K. White and Laird 2020). When applied to Latinos, the theory of linked fate has often been used to explain Latino support for ethnic and immigrant solidarity and the Democratic Party (Sanchez 2006; Barreto 2010; Sanchez and Masuoka 2010; Huddy, Mason, and Horwitz 2016). However, across several studies, Latinos are also less likely than Blacks to hold a strong sense of racial linked fate (Gay, Hochschild, and A. White 2016; Marsh



and Ramírez 2019; Pérez 2021). Taken altogether, this research suggests that the theory of linked fate—that is, the prediction that ethnic/racial group interests such as immigrant solidarity will drive behavior more than individual (economic) self-interest—may not be as effective at explaining the political behavior of large portions of the Latino electorate as previous research may have predicted.

If ethnic identity and immigration are less salient for some Latinos, existing research suggests that economic concerns are then likely to be a high priority. Resource-based theories of voting behavior emphasize the importance of economic factors and perceptions, such as beliefs about the overall state of the economy or one's individual economic well-being, as a core motivator behind the political decisions of most voters (Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2013). Academic studies of Latino issue opinions have also generally demonstrated the importance of concerns over the economy and social service provisions. Economic concerns—a broad category that includes jobs, taxation, and inflation—are consistently at the top of Latino issue polls and research on Latino issue opinions, with social services such as healthcare and education following closely behind (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Garcia-Rios and Nuño 2011; Barreto and Segura 2014; DeSipio and Garza 2015; Krogstad and Lopez 2020; Krogstad, Edwards, and Lopez 2022). These studies generally find that Latinos tend to favor Democratic positions on economic issues, such as reducing economic inequality and increasing social service spending (Chong and Kim 2006; Barreto and Segura 2014; DeSipio and Garza 2015; Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018). However, Latinos are less consistently partisan than Whites in their general economic outlook: they are more likely than White Democrats to believe America provides opportunity, and are more likely than White Republicans to support a stronger social safety net (L. Fraga et al. 2010; Saavedra Cisneros 2017; McCann and Jones-Correa 2020; Lasala-Blanco et al. 2023). Still, given the lack of experimental testing of these messages on Latino voting behavior, and the relative paucity of research on Latinos' views towards economic issues more generally, it is

unclear which economic policies are potentially the most effective at appealing to Latinos.

It is similarly unclear which economic policies might appeal to which groups of Latino voters. Latino partisans are generally aligned with their respective parties not just on immigration, but also on economic policies; Latino Democrats tend to strongly support liberal policies such as raising the minimum wage and taxing the rich, while Latino Republicans are more likely to endorse free-market views and reduced government spending (Alvarez and García Bedolla 2003; Garza and Cortina 2007; Barreto and Segura 2014). Still, given the observational nature of this work, there remain questions about the direct effect of economic messaging on Latinos. An Equis Labs report by Odio and Stein (2021), for example, suggest that conservative Latinos may have used economic issues as a rhetorical strategy to "cover" their support for Trump despite (or even because of) his racial rhetoric. Similarly, Ocampo, Garcia-Rios, and Gutierrez (2021) suggest that COVID-19 closures could have made Trump's policy of opening the economy more popular, especially among the working-class Latinos who were the hardest hit (see also Vargas and Sanchez 2020). Overall, the views of Latino independents towards each party's economic platforms remains unclear. While past research suggests that Latino independents favor Democratic economic stances (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010), more recent work from the 2020 elections finds that Latino independents who voted for Trump often cited the economy as their most important issue (Odio and Stein 2021; Ocampo, Garcia-Rios, and Gutierrez 2021). While Latino partisans have potentially sorted into their respective camps based on issues including immigration and economics, Latino independents' response to economic messaging is an open question—one that I address in this paper.

## **4 Theory of Latino Partisan Sorting and Economic Voting**

Synthesizing these research strands, I theorize that extant racialized partisan sorting has produced a political context in which economic messaging may be more effective than im-

migration messaging at producing marginal shifts in Latino voting behavior. I assert that an accurate understanding of contemporary Latino voting behavior can only be achieved by recognizing the extent to which Latino partisanship, ethnic identity, and immigration are deeply interlinked (Lee 2008; Beltrán 2010; Ramírez 2015; Sen and Wasow 2016). Rather than generating cross-pressures, variation in the immigration policy views of Latino Democrats and Republicans generally coincides with their partisan identities (Huddy, Mason, and Horwitz 2016; Saavedra Cisneros 2017; Alamillo 2019; Hickel et al. 2020; Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023; B. L. Fraga, Velez, and West 2024). As such, in my first hypothesis (H1), I predict that Latino Democrats and Republicans should thus tend to support in-party candidates regardless of which policies are mentioned, including immigration, because their partisan identities are sufficiently linked with their immigration views already.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1)** *Latino Democrats and Latino Republicans will react equally positively to all in-party messages, and equally negatively to all out-party messages, regardless of the message's policy content.*

Latino independents, however, are much less likely to hold strong partisan identities. I argue that the continued nonpartisan status of Latino independents during the last two decades—when immigration messaging was the most intense and many Latinos seemed to sort into political parties based on their ethnic identities and immigration attitudes (Huddy, Mason, and Horwitz 2016; Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023; B. L. Fraga, Velez, and West 2024)—suggests that ethnicity and immigration are less influential in shaping the political behavior of Latino independents overall. As such, I argue that messaging on economics and social services may have greater potential than immigration messaging to persuade Latino independents. Given the lack of clarity in extant literature regarding Latino views towards economic topics, I also posit that either party's economic platforms might potentially appeal.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2)** *Latino independents will react positively to either parties' economic messages compared to their other messages (e.g., non-policy, immigration).*

## 5 Research Design

To test these hypotheses, I designed and administered three separate survey experiments with online samples of Latino voters. All three survey experiments were pre-registered online before data collection. The surveys were conducted in English using the online survey software Qualtrics. Even though the surveys were only conducted in English, the demographic characteristics of all three samples are very similar to those of Latino voters in the 2016 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS) and the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES) in terms of state of residence, gender, age, education, income, religion, national origin, immigrant generation, Latino identity strength, Latino linked fate, and previous self-reported voting history (Barreto, Frasure-Yokley, et al. 2016; Ansolabehere, Schaffner, and Luks 2021).<sup>4</sup>

In each of the three surveys, I block-randomized treatment assignment by partisan identity to ensure sufficient numbers of each group in each treatment condition. My goal was to accurately estimate the behavior of individuals within each partisan identity subgroup (Grimmer, Marble, and Tanigawa-Lau 2022), not to make direct estimates to the Latino population (e.g., Corral and Leal 2020). As such, these results should be interpreted as describing how a certain type of Latino voter, i.e., one from a certain partisan identity subgroup, reacts to a given Democratic or Republican candidate's immigration/economic/abortion/non-policy messages. Once pre-treatment moderators such as partisan identity and Latino linked fate were collected (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018), respondents viewed the experimental portions, which are described more below. After the experiments, respondents completed manipulation checks, remaining de-

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<sup>4</sup>See Supplementary Appendix Section 4 for a comparison of the demographics in my three samples with the CMPS 2016 and CES 2020.

mographics, and a full debrief.<sup>5</sup>

## 6 Study 1: Simulated Facebook Status

I ran my first study in April 2021 with an online Latino voter sample from the survey company Cint. This sample included Latino registered voters who identified as Democrats (N = 150) and as independents (N = 140). In the experimental portion, respondents were shown a Facebook status from a fictitious Democratic candidate for the US House of Representatives named Mark Fisher, whose profile picture was of a professionally dressed middle-aged White male.<sup>6</sup>

The text of Fisher's Facebook status varied in its economic and immigration policy references, resulting in four conditions: a non-policy control, a progressive economic message, a race-class economic message, and a pro-undocumented message.<sup>7</sup> The non-policy control message referenced politicians who make promises but fail to deliver; this tone and structure was replicated in the other messages as well. The progressive economic message called out wealthy donors and called for working-class solidarity, a minimum wage increase, and increased spending on infrastructure, education, and healthcare. These are economic issues in which Latinos have historically been closer to Democratic positions (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Barreto and Segura 2014). The race-class economic message, inspired by the work of Haney López (2019), used language similar to the progressive economic message but also specifically called out anti-immigrant scapegoating as a tool used by conservatives to divide and distract. This strategy attempts to neutralize racial rhetoric while emphasizing shared support for Democratic economic priorities (López 2019). Last,

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<sup>5</sup>See Supplementary Appendix Section 2 for full survey flow

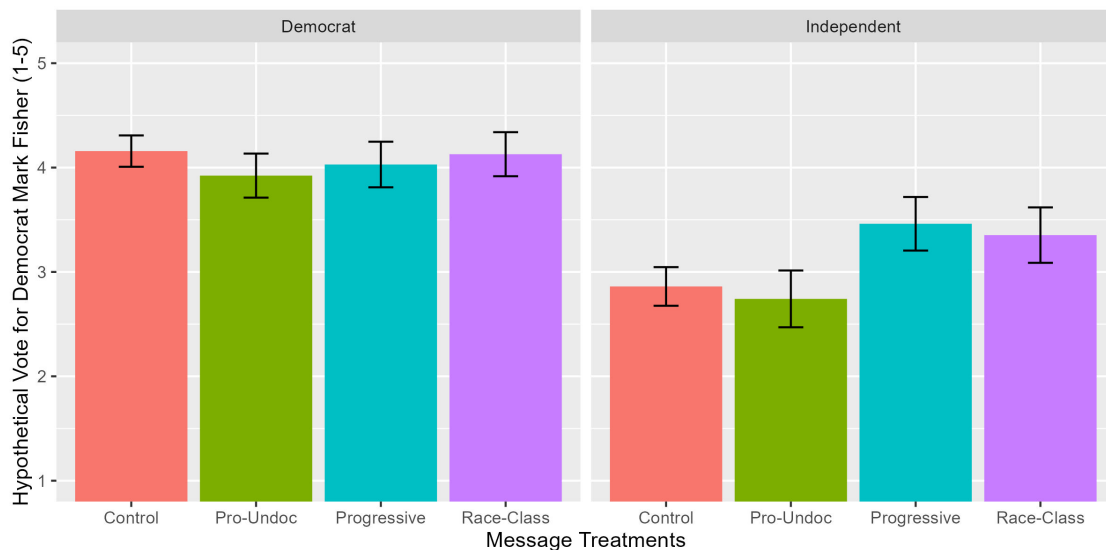
<sup>6</sup>I used a picture of a White male to minimize other potential effects resulting from support for Latino/co-ethnic candidates or differential evaluations by gender. While I designed this study to test the effect of appeals from a non-Latino candidate on Latino voters, manipulation checks revealed that a modest number of respondents perceived Fisher as being Latino himself. In post-treatment manipulation checks, I asked respondents to guess about Fisher's race/ethnicity; 75% thought he was White, 22% thought he was Latino, and 2% thought he was Black. This did not vary significantly based on which message he used.

<sup>7</sup>See Supplementary Appendix Section 1 for experimental stimuli.

the pro-undocumented message called out xenophobic politicians and expressed support for the Latino/Hispanic community and a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. After viewing the message, respondents answered how likely they would be to vote for the candidate if they could, ranging from 1 (“Extremely unlikely”) to 5 (“Extremely likely”). This outcome is the dependent variable for my analyses in Study 1.

## 6.1 Results: Study 1

Figure 1: Study 1: Facebook Study Treatment Effects by Party ID



*This figure shows findings for Study 1. Results are drawn from an OLS model (Table 1, Model 3) showing the estimated effect of treatment assignment (shown on the X-axis) on the respondent’s hypothetical desire to vote for the candidate (ranging from 1 "Very Unlikely" to 5 "Very Likely", shown on the Y-axis). Colored bars represent mean levels of the hypothetical vote outcome for each messaging condition, with Democratic respondents in the left panel and independents in the right. The black lines show 95% confidence intervals, with the control as the omitted reference category. See Table 1 for more detailed results and other models.*

In Figure 1, I display visual results from a linear regression model estimating the effect of treatment assignment on the respondent's hypothetical desire to vote for the candidate.<sup>8</sup> I separate analyses for Democratic and independent respondents. Democratic respondents expressed equally high levels of support for Fisher regardless of which message they were exposed to. Independents, meanwhile, did not shift their evaluations significantly when exposed to the pro-undocumented message but were significantly more positive about the progressive economic message ( $p < 0.05$ ) and slightly more positive towards the race-class economic message ( $p < 0.1$ ) relative to the control. I find strong evidence of partisan loyalty among Democrats and also find that independents reacted more positively towards the economic messages compared to the control or pro-undocumented messages. In support of the partisan loyalty hypothesis (H1), Democrats expressed the same level of desire to vote for the candidate regardless of whether he mentioned no policy, immigration, or either economic stance. In support of the independent economic voting hypothesis (H2), independents were more likely to express a desire to vote for the candidate when he mentioned economics compared to the non-policy and immigration conditions.

## 7 Study 2: Ad Transcripts

To expand upon these results, I ran a second survey on a larger sample of Latino voters ( $N = 1575$ ) accessed via Qualtrics from December 2021 through February 2022. Again, the survey was conducted only in English, although sample demographics remained representative.<sup>9</sup> To achieve sufficient partisan representation, I sampled roughly equal numbers of Democrats ( $N = 349$ ), Republicans ( $N = 346$ ), independents who lean Democrat ( $N = 324$ ), independents who lean Republican ( $N = 219$ ), and independents who do not lean

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<sup>8</sup>This model uses a standard Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model. Results do not change substantively when using ordinal logistic regression.

<sup>9</sup>The demographic profile of the Democrats, Republicans, and independents in my sample are very similar to Democrats, Republicans, and independents in Latino survey samples such as the CMPS 2016 and CES 2020. See Supplementary Appendix Section 4 for descriptions of sample demographics.

towards either party (N = 337).<sup>10</sup> I extended my inquiries in two ways: by including liberal, moderate, and conservative policy messages on economics and immigration and by including a Republican candidate treatment arm immediately after the Democratic messages. The Democrat and Republican candidates were both given stereotypically White male names (Mark Fisher and Jonathan Miller), so this study is again testing the effect of appeals from (ostensibly)<sup>11</sup> White candidates towards Latinos.

Each respondent was first exposed to a non-policy control message before viewing a randomized treatment message. For the Democrat's non-policy control, the candidate's message included rhetoric against politicians who fail to deliver, against those who emphasize divisive policies, and in favor of policies that are more broadly beneficial. For the Republican's non-policy control, the candidate's message stated that they are fighting against politicians who just want to win, expresses support for traditional values, and favors avoiding distractions to pass policies that matter. Subsequent treatment messages were similar in tone and overall structure but also included specific policy messages. Only the Democrat could use liberal policy messages, only the Republican could use conservative messages, and both candidates could use moderate messages.

The immigration treatment ads included messages referencing both undocumented and legal immigration. As in Study 1, the Democratic candidate's liberal immigration treatment condition used a pro-undocumented message that pushed back against politicians who point the finger at undocumented immigrants and expressed support for a pathway to citizenship. The moderate immigration treatment conditions used pro-legal messages in which the candidate is against anti-immigrant politicians, supports higher levels of legal immigration, and also supports greater immigration enforcement. This position expresses pro-immigrant sentiments while remaining more enforcement-oriented on undocumented immigration. Each party's pro-legal message had similar policy positions with slightly modified wording: the Democrat's pro-legal message supported more legal skilled immigrants

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<sup>10</sup>Note that the sample overall is not comparable to the Latino electorate, which skews more Democratic.

<sup>11</sup>65% of respondents thought the Democrat was White, while 80% thought the Republican was White.



with proper vetting, while the Republican’s pro-legal message supported more legal skilled immigrants and increased border security. Last, the conservative immigration treatment condition, which only the Republican could use, was an anti-undocumented message in which the Republican candidate states that he is against a broken immigration system and in favor of border security to stop “illegal” immigrants from bringing crime and drugs.

For economic policy, I provided an ideologically broader range of stances than in Study 1. In the liberal economic treatment condition, the Democratic candidate used a progressive economic message similar to Study 1’s, in which he opposes rich corporations and donors and is in favor of raising the minimum wage and increasing spending on healthcare and education. In the moderate economic messages, candidates are against those who ignore the economy for “divisive topics” (which were left undefined). The Democratic moderate economic message then referenced infrastructure, small businesses, and spending on healthcare and education, while the Republican moderate economic message referenced infrastructure, small businesses, and business/worker cooperation. Last, in the conservative economic treatment condition, the Republican candidate used a pro-business message in which he opposes those who demonize businesses and is in favor of lowering taxes and business regulations in order to create more jobs. This message mirrors past Republican appeals to Latino entrepreneurs and those fleeing socialist regimes (Cadava 2020).<sup>12</sup>

In the survey experiment, respondents first viewed messages from the Democratic candidate. Like in Study 1, respondents were told that they were viewing messages from a hopeful Democratic candidate who is running in a nearby House district. He was again named Mark Fisher, although no picture was provided this time. They then viewed the non-policy control message and answered how they reacted to the ad—and just that ad—from 1 (“Extremely negatively”) to 5 (“Extremely positively”).<sup>13</sup> Respondents were then exposed

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<sup>12</sup>See Supplementary Appendix Section 1.2 for full message wording.

<sup>13</sup>This non-policy/pure partisanship baseline is important to establish before any policy details were provided because Latino Democrats and Republicans were likely familiar with each party’s policy platforms already, while Latino independents are less likely to have crystallized views towards each party and its poli-

to their first Democratic treatment message, which was block-randomized within partisan identity subgroups to one of the four Democratic message conditions, and again provided their evaluations of that ad from 1-5. After these initial two ads, respondents eventually viewed the remaining three Democratic treatment ads.<sup>14</sup> After viewing the five Democratic messages, respondents were then introduced to Mark Fisher’s Republican challenger, who also had a stereotypically White male name (Jonathan Miller). Again, each respondent was shown and asked to evaluate a non-policy control ad (sixth ad overall) followed by the Republican treatment ad, which was block-randomized to one of the four Republican message conditions.

## 7.1 Results: Study 2

In my analyses, I focus on estimating heterogeneous treatment effects within partisan identity subgroups. I separate Latino independents based on their partisan leanings—either towards Democrats, towards Republicans, or towards neither. For each candidate, I show five separate OLS models that estimate the effects of each treatment message on ad evaluations (1-5). The dependent variable in these analyses is a combination of two outcomes: how respondents evaluated the candidate’s first ad, which was always a non-policy control, and how they then evaluated the candidate’s second ad, which again was block-randomized within each partisan identity subgroup to maximize power for within-group comparisons of treatment effects. I then compare the treatment effect of each message with the entire group’s control baseline. For example, in Figure 2 (below), the point estimate for “Moderate Economics” for Democrats can be interpreted as the average response of the roughly 25% of Democratic respondents who were block-randomized to view that message second, compared to the entire Democratic sample’s evaluation of every other message (control and treatment). To account for the fact that each respondent provided two outcomes, I

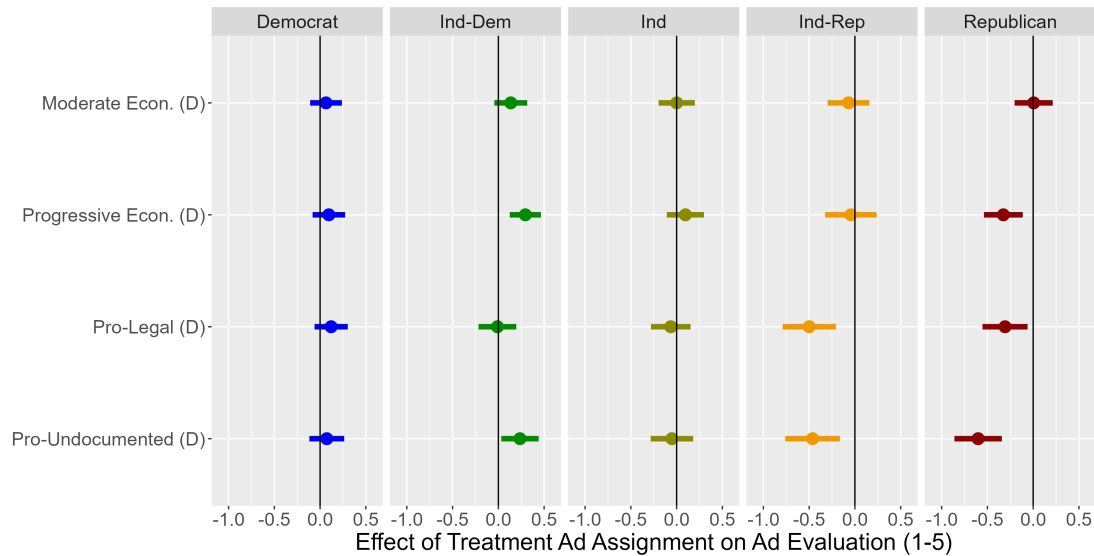
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cies (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Tesler 2015)

<sup>14</sup>To avoid spillover effects, my analyses only examine the first ad (non-policy control) and the second ad (randomized treatment) for each candidate.

estimate standard errors that are clustered by respondent.<sup>15</sup>

Figure 2: Study 2: Democratic Candidate Message Evaluations by Party ID



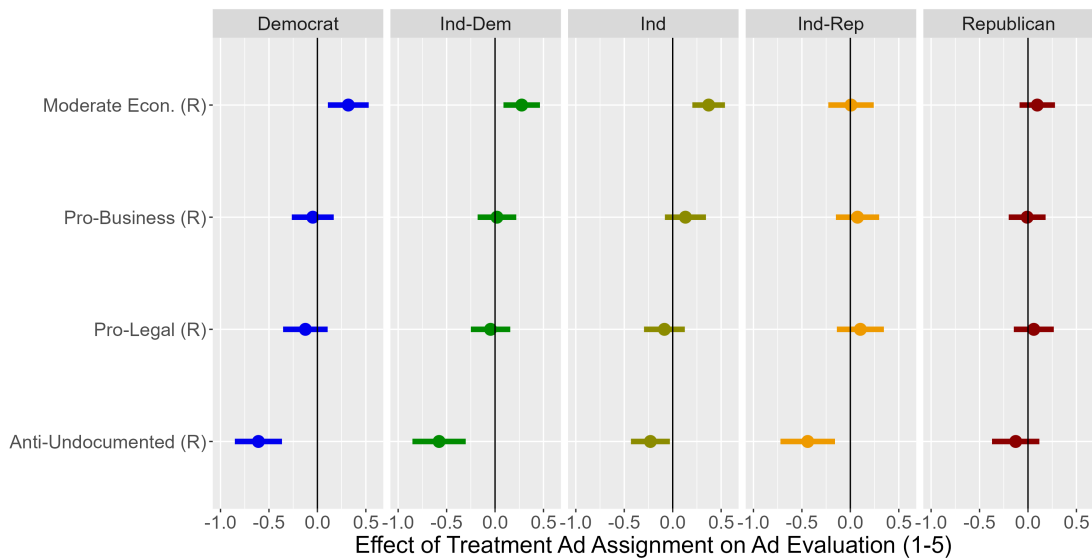
*Study 2: This figure only show reactions to the Democratic ads. These results are drawn from a bivariate OLS model estimating the effect of treatment assignment (displayed on the Y-axis) and evaluations of the Democrat’s treatment ad (displayed on the X-axis), relative to the Democrat’s non-policy control, which is the omitted category. The points estimate whether the treatment message was associated with a change in evaluations relative to the other messages within each party ID subgroup, and the horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.*

In Figure 2/Table 2, I display five OLS models estimating the effect of treatment assignment on ad evaluations. For Democratic respondents, I again find no evidence of significant messaging effects, providing further evidence of partisan loyalty. Independents who lean Democratic, however, reacted significantly positively to both the progressive economic (0.718) and pro-undocumented (0.700) messages, indicating that these voters supported liberal Democratic messages on both policy areas. I find no messaging effects among independents with no lean. Lastly, independents who lean Republican reacted very negatively to both the pro-undocumented (-0.902) and pro-legal (-0.906) messages, while Republi-

<sup>15</sup>Results remain largely consistent after the inclusion of other important demographic variables, such as Latino linked fate, immigrant generation, national origin, and self-reported proportion of their social network that is undocumented. See Supplementary Appendix Section 2.1.

cans also reacted very negatively to the pro-undocumented (-0.966) and negatively to the pro-legal (-0.451) and progressive economic messages (-0.553). Overall, while Democratic respondents were favorable towards all Democratic messages, indicating in-party loyalty, there is evidence that Latino independents who lean Democrat favored liberal messaging on economics and immigration. There were also strong negative reactions to (undocumented) immigration messaging among Latino Republicans and independents who lean Republican.

Figure 3: Study 2: Republican Candidate Message Evaluations by Party ID



*Study 2: This figure only show reactions to the Republican ads. These results are drawn from a bivariate OLS model estimating the effect of treatment assignment (displayed on the Y-axis) and evaluations of the Republican’s treatment ad (displayed on the X-axis), relative to the Republican’s non-policy control, which is the omitted category. The points estimate whether the treatment message was associated with a change in evaluations relative to the other messages within each party ID subgroup, and the horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.*

In Figure 3/Table 3, I show a similar set of results for evaluations of the Republican candidate messages. The first set of significant results come from the Republican’s moderate economic message emphasizing economic growth, small businesses and infrastructure, which had a positive effect on Democrats (0.571), Democrat-leaning independents

(0.587), and independents with no lean (0.728). The estimated size of this effect for each of these subgroups is modest but they still show a statistically significant increase on the 1-5 positive/negative scale. This positive effect among Democrats and Democratic leaners is surprising given my hypotheses about partisan loyalty. However, the pro-business economic message did not have a positive effect among any subgroup, suggesting that these respondents were more swayed by generic Republican messaging on the economy rather than more conservative/pro-business economic rhetoric. The second set of significant results comes from the anti-undocumented message, which had a significantly negative effect on evaluations for every subgroup besides Republicans. This effect is substantively quite large for Democrats (-1.043) and for Democratic-leaning independents (-1.120). It is also perhaps surprisingly significant and moderately strong for Republican-leaning independents (-0.849) and is also modest but significantly negative for independents with no partisan lean (-0.492). The pro-legal message, meanwhile, did not produce similar negative effects. Although many Latinos from across the partisan spectrum were favorable towards moderate Republican economic messaging, including Democrats and Democrat-leaners, this result shows that xenophobic rhetoric from Republicans—even when directed primarily at undocumented immigrants—was largely politically toxic for most Latinos in my sample, including Republican-leaning independents.

Overall, in Study 2, I found mixed evidence in support for my partisan loyalty hypothesis (H1) and more consistent support for my independents as economic voters hypothesis (H2). While Democrats and Republicans were equally positive to all in-party messages, which indicates in-party loyalty, the Democrats were actually positively swayed by Republican messaging on economic growth, infrastructure and small businesses. Still, the topic of immigration remained highly polarizing as well. The Democrat's progressive economic message then had a positive effect among Democratic-leaning independents, while the Republican's moderate economic message had a positive effect among many independents. These results indicate that while partisanship and immigration remain

powerful factors explaining how Latino partisans evaluate candidate messages, economic messages—especially from Republicans—may have more persuasive potential for Latino independents.

## 8 Study 3: Conjoint Candidate Evaluations

I ran a third and final study in which I exposed a nationally representative sample of Latino voters ( $N = 808$ ) to a sequence of six conjoint-randomized candidate choice tasks.<sup>16</sup> Instead of analyzing candidate and message evaluations as I did in Study 1 and Study 2, in this study I utilize a binary vote choice variable as my outcome. I launched the survey on Qualtrics from March 2023 through April 2023 on a sample of Latino registered voters. Once again, I collected responses from equally sized samples of Latino Democrats, Republicans, independents with no partisan lean, and independents who lean Democrat/Republican. In each task, respondents were shown two fictional candidate profiles (always one Democrat and one Republican).<sup>17</sup> I did not vary gender or age due to my emphasis on policy areas in this study. Each candidate varied in his race/ethnicity (White or Latino, 50/50 chance of either) and level on three policy areas: economics, immigration, and abortion access. Each candidate had either one specific policy per policy area or, in some cases, would not have any policy stance for one or more policy areas. This potential "empty" policy level is crucial because it lets me compare how respondents evaluated candidates who did and did not use an economic message, which is the main test of my second hypothesis. Each of these messages, including the empty condition, were equally likely to be used by each candidate profile with the exception of liberal messages, which only Democrats could use, and conservative messages, which only Republicans could use.

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<sup>16</sup>This survey was also conducted only in English. Still, my Study 3 demographics remain close to other studies/survey samples; see Supplementary Appendix Section 4.

<sup>17</sup>The order of Democrat/Republican and of the three policy areas was randomized at the respondent-level (not the election-level) to reduce ordering effects while still making it easier for respondents to keep track of multiple traits over multiple elections.

Because of my interest in the effects of economic policy, I included an ideologically varied range of such messages from both parties. Both Democrats and Republicans could have moderate economic policy positions on broadly popular issues like healthcare/education, infrastructure, and inflation/small businesses. These messages tested the effect of various positions on economic policy and opportunity, which either party could plausibly use. Each party then also had a partisan economic message: Democrats could use a progressive message where they support addressing inequality by taxing the rich, raising the minimum wage while Republicans could use an “anti-socialist” message where they support free markets instead of adopting “socialist” policies. Last, instead of using an economic policy message, candidates could have an “empty” cell which appeared as a blank space for the economic policy message.

For both the immigration and abortion policy areas, I included two moderate positions that the candidate from either party could use, one partisan message per candidate, and an empty condition. Moderate immigration messages could be pro-legal immigration, where they support allowing higher numbers of legal immigrants each year, and pro-border security, where they support investing in stronger and more modern border security. While the parties are increasingly polarized on immigration, these positions are moderate enough such that either a Democrat or a Republican could plausibly use them.<sup>18</sup> Similar to the previous two studies, the partisan message for Democrats was pro-undocumented immigration, in which he supports a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, and for Republicans was anti-undocumented immigration, in which he supports greatly increased border security to stop "illegal aliens and drug traffickers".

Abortion has also become an increasingly salient political issue, especially since the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision, which ended the previous *Roe v. Wade* precedent that abortion access was legal nationwide. Now, policy debates

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<sup>18</sup>For example, President Biden supported both a pathway to citizenship AND increased spending on border security in his 2023 State of the Union speech. Former President Trump similarly supported building a border wall “with a big door” to signal his support for legal immigrants while still signaling support for border enforcement.

about abortion often center around when during the pregnancy restrictions should be instituted. Moderate messages, which again could be used by either candidate, included an early limit that made abortion legal until the second trimester (13 weeks) and a more permissive limit that made it legal until the third trimester (27 weeks). The partisan Democratic message supports making abortion legal nationwide, while the partisan Republican message supports banning abortion entirely outside of exceptions for rape and incest. Both immigration and abortion policy areas could also have an empty condition, which again allowed me to compare candidates who used each of these immigration/abortion messages to those who did not.<sup>19</sup>

With both candidate profiles still up, respondents were asked who they would vote for (Democrat or Republican). They then completed the same task another five times for six elections total and twelve candidates total per respondent. Treatments were then block-randomized by partisan identity to maximize sample size within each party ID/message subgroup. My primary dependent variable is whether the respondent chose to vote for the candidate (1) or not (0). I then estimate the effect of the candidate's partisanship, race/ethnicity, and issue position on vote choice, focusing on heterogeneous effects among partisan identity subgroups.

As with other conjoint studies, I calculate average marginal component effects (AMCEs) to estimate the relationship between treatment assignment and candidate vote choice (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Kirkland and Coppock 2018). By including the "empty" policy level and using it as the omitted category for AMCE calculations, I can estimate how the presence (or absence) of a policy affects vote choice, rather than simply comparing the effects of different policies against one another. This also allows me to identify responses to candidates who use economics and those who do not, which helps me test my second hypothesis. The point estimates that are shown for each category indicate whether respondents who were exposed to a given attribute were more likely to vote for

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<sup>19</sup>For a full list of each of these policy messages, see Supplementary Appendix Section 1.3.

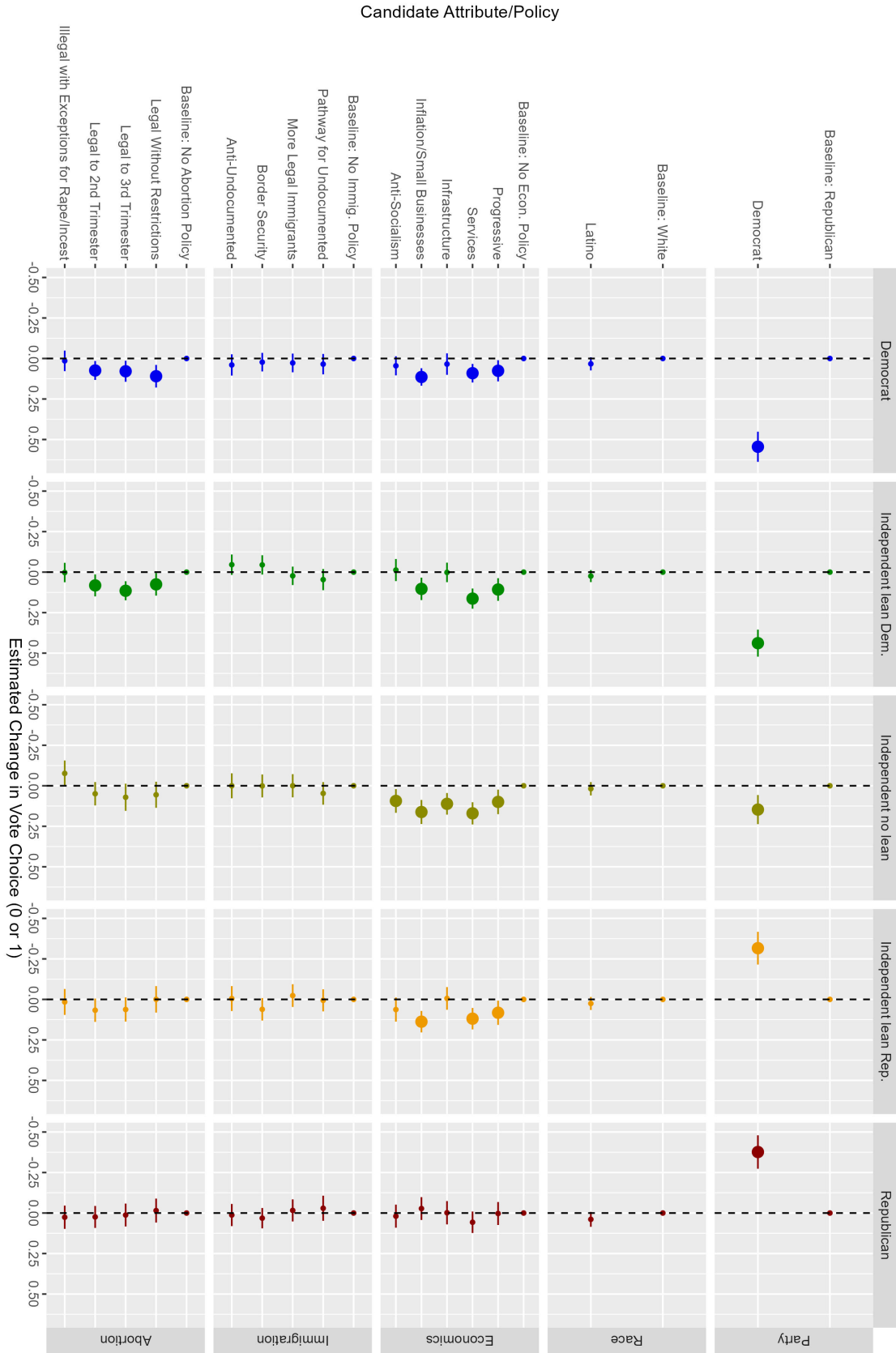


that candidate compared to the omitted baseline. Horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals and point estimates that are larger indicate a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) from the baseline, indicated by the vertical dotted line at 0.

I display my full results in Figure 4 (next page) and discuss each attribute and partisan identity group individually. A candidate's partisanship is far and away the most important factor for determining a respondent's vote choice for every group besides independents with no partisan lean. Democrats were far more likely to support Democrats, independents who lean Democrat were more likely, and even independents with no partisan lean were slightly more likely. The same effect occurs for Republicans and Republican leaners, who supported Republicans at significantly higher rates. The strength of partisan support among Democrats appears slightly stronger than among Republicans, which perhaps reflects the relative Democratic leaning of the Latino electorate overall. Still, there remains a sizable plurality of Latinos who consistently support Republicans at higher rates.

A candidate's race/ethnicity was not an important factor across any of the partisan identity subgroup results. Respondents were not consistently more supportive of Latino over White candidates. This suggests that when a wide variety of factors are available to Latino voters beyond just the heuristic of co-ethnicity, the benefit that Latino candidates experience among Latino voters may not be as pronounced as the effects of partisanship and policy messaging. Of course, this priming of Latino co-ethnicity is also quite weak (a simple label that the candidate is "Latino" versus "White"), so this result should be interpreted as the failure of a subtle (rather than consistently delivered) ethnic identity cue to shape Latino voting patterns.

Figure 4: Study 3: Conjoint Candidate Choice by Party ID



*(See figure on previous page) Study 3: This graph shows AMCEs for each of the candidate attribute/policy areas: party, candidate race/ethnicity, economics, immigration, and abortion. Point estimates show the estimated change in vote choice (binary outcome, 1 or 0) based on the candidate's attributes with 95% confidence intervals. Large points denote statistical significance relative to the baseline ( $p < 0.05$ )*

The next factor I analyze is the role of economic policies, or lack thereof. Among Democrats and independents who lean Democrat, I find that candidates who used progressive, services, and inflation/small businesses messages received more votes relative to candidates who had no economic policy message. In an even clearer indication of the persuasive potential of economics, independents with no partisan lean were more likely to support candidates who used any of the economic message relative to the baseline. The strongest effect is from the services message, but every economic message (including the anti-socialist message) has a statistically significant positive effect. Independents who lean Republican favored the same moderate economic messages (services and inflation/small businesses) but were not significantly more likely to vote for candidates using the progressive, infrastructure, or anti-socialist messages. Finally, Republican vote choice was generally unaffected by economic policy.

I do not find any effect of immigration messaging on vote choice across all subgroups. This is strong evidence supporting my arguments that such messaging is unlikely to shape Latino vote choice in a competitive electoral context in an already-sorted context. A likely possibility is that Democratic partisanship is a more reliable heuristic for pro-immigrant voters than policy by itself. Regardless of the reason, these results indicate that immigration policy messaging was not a central driver of Latino vote choice for respondents in this study. Perhaps surprisingly given this null result from immigration, I do find that abortion policy has a modest effect on voters from the liberal direction. Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents significantly favored candidates who supported full le-

galization, a third-trimester limit, and a second-trimester limit relative to the baseline. For independents with no partisan lean, independents who lean Republican and Republicans, I do not observe that abortion policies shaped their vote choice.

## 9 Conclusion

Across three studies, I find strong evidence that Latino Democrats and Republicans favor in-party candidates and messaging, supporting my partisan loyalty hypothesis (H1). I also find that economic messaging is generally more persuasive overall and is especially effective among Latino independents, providing even stronger support for my independents as economic voters hypothesis (H2).

This paper offers at least three contributions to our understanding of Latino political behavior. First, I evaluate a wide range of candidate policy messages beyond just immigration. While economic issues are consistently at the top of observational studies of Latino issue priorities (Abrajano and Alvarez 2010; Barreto and Segura 2014; DeSipio and Garza 2015; Krogstad and Lopez 2020), there is no published experimental work testing the effects of economic messages on Latino voting behavior. Furthermore, no work explores how Latino voters might navigate trade-offs between economic policies and other salient topics, such as immigration and abortion, a gap which this paper addresses.

Second, this paper offers a portrait of contemporary Latino voting behavior following a theoretically meaningful change in the contours of electoral politics, especially with regards to immigration and aggregate Latino voting outcomes. Several studies focusing on the pre-Trump and even pre-Obama period asserted that low rates of Latino political participation were in part caused by campaigns failing to incorporate messaging on ethnic identity and immigration into their outreach (Wong 2006; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Masuoka and Junn 2013). However, circumstances have changed in the preceding decades—since signing DACA, Obama has shifted Democrats toward supporting immigrant rights,

while Trump used xenophobic rhetoric towards immigrants throughout his candidacy, and racial and partisan polarization has only further intensified in the meantime (Barreto and Collingwood 2015; Mason 2015; Tesler 2016; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019). In this paper, I provide an updated analysis of how Latinos with a range of ethnic and partisan identities respond to political messaging after having experienced these vast changes in how each party discusses Latinos and immigrants in general.

Finally, while Latino Democrats and Republicans have increasingly converged towards their respective parties in terms of their policy views and voting behavior (Huddy, Mason, and Horwitz 2016; Alamillo 2019; Dyck and Johnson 2022; B. L. Fraga, Velez, and West 2024; Hopkins, Kaiser, and Pérez 2023), Latino independents remain disengaged despite intense immigration messaging in recent years (Wong 2006; Hajnal and Lee 2011; B. L. Fraga 2018). The persuasive effects of economic appeals could help explain the relative stability of Latino vote choice in recent elections and also potentially provide a pathway for reaching these otherwise disengaged Latino voters. My experimental results demonstrate that incorporating more economic messaging may be especially effective at reaching Latino independents, who have often been ignored by past campaign efforts (García Bedolla and Michelson 2012). Campaigns that incorporate such messages into their Latino outreach could potentially experience greater electoral support from an ideologically broader range of Latino voters and perhaps even help address the massive turnout gap between Latino voters and the rest of the electorate.

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## Tables

Table 1: Study 1: Effect of Treatment and Partisanship on Desire to Vote

	DV: Desire to Vote for Candidate		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Pro-Undoc.	-0.127 (0.188)	-0.169 (0.171)	-0.235 (0.232)
Progressive Econ	0.199 (0.186)	0.245 (0.169)	-0.128 (0.241)
Race-Class Econ.	0.240 (0.186)	0.220 (0.169)	-0.030 (0.232)
Independent		-0.954*** (0.121)	-1.297*** (0.237)
Independent * Pro-Undoc.			0.116 (0.341)
Independent * Progressive Econ.			0.729** (0.337)
Independent * Race-Class Econ.			0.522 (0.337)
Constant	3.527*** (0.131)	3.991*** (0.133)	4.158*** (0.165)
Observations	290	290	290

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Table 2: Study 2, Democratic Candidate Results by Party ID

	DV: Sentiment towards Democratic Treatment Ad (1-5)				
	Democrats	Ind. lean D	Independent	Ind. lean R	Republicans
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Moderate Econ.	0.247 (0.204)	0.323 (0.230)	0.009 (0.196)	-0.201 (0.231)	0.060 (0.189)
Progressive Econ.	0.298 (0.227)	0.718*** (0.222)	0.202 (0.208)	-0.077 (0.290)	-0.553*** (0.189)
Pro-Legal	0.373 (0.234)	0.094 (0.246)	-0.053 (0.212)	-0.906*** (0.291)	-0.451** (0.222)
Pro-Undocumented	0.303 (0.221)	0.700*** (0.238)	-0.050 (0.235)	-0.902*** (0.288)	-0.966*** (0.230)
Observations	349	324	337	219	346

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

Table 3: Study 2, Republican Candidate Results by Party ID

	DV: Sentiment towards Republican Treatment Ad (1-5)				
	Subgroups: Individual Party ID/Lean				
	Democrats	Ind. lean D	Independent	Ind. lean R	Republicans
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Moderate Econ.	0.571*** (0.187)	0.587*** (0.205)	0.728*** (0.171)	-0.010 (0.253)	0.156 (0.169)
Pro-Business Econ.	-0.082 (0.181)	-0.004 (0.202)	0.269 (0.222)	0.192 (0.204)	0.011 (0.172)
Pro-Legal	-0.176 (0.201)	-0.084 (0.208)	-0.105 (0.221)	0.241 (0.270)	0.189 (0.205)
Anti-Undocumented	-1.043*** (0.213)	-1.120*** (0.287)	-0.492** (0.208)	-0.849*** (0.301)	-0.090 (0.254)
Observations	349	324	337	219	346

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01