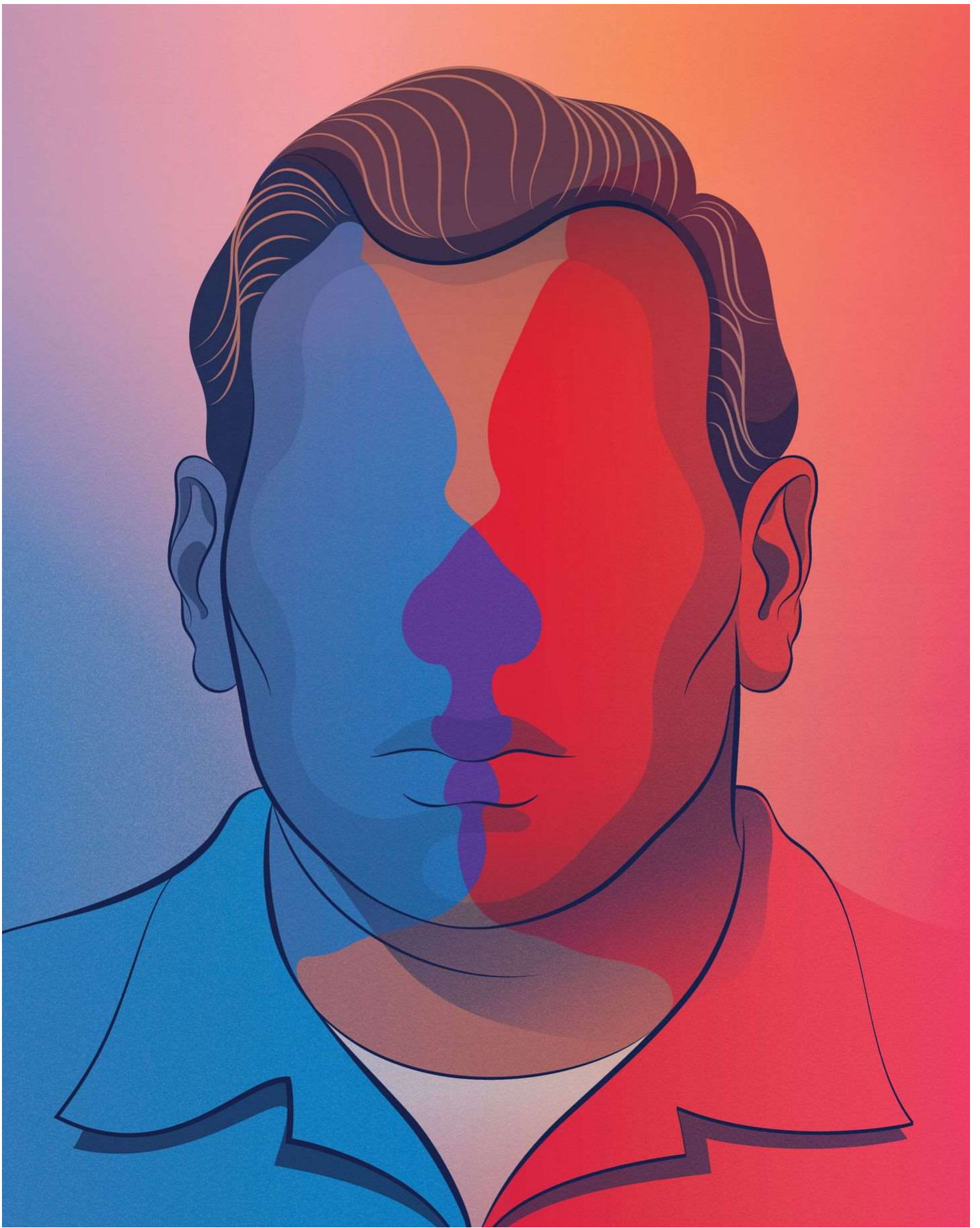


Trump, My Dad and the Rightward Shift of Latino Men

Why are Latino men moving away from Democrats? And how can liberals win them back? For me, it's a topic that hits close to home.



By **Eric Garcia**

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In 2016, my dad, Charlie Garcia — a third-generation Mexican American and lifelong Republican — supported Sen. Ted Cruz in the GOP presidential nomination contest. Recently, he recalled that, of the 17 candidates who ran for the Republican nomination in 2016, “Trump was my 17th.” Toward the end of the election, I remember him saying that he would “hold my nose and vote for Trump.”

But by this past November, something had changed. As far as I can tell, my dad voted while breathing through his nose as clearly as somebody could when wearing a face mask. Not only did he enthusiastically support Donald Trump, he gave money to the Republican National Committee. Though he has supported every GOP presidential candidate since 1980, he now contrasts them all unfavorably with Trump. “They can’t compare with

what Trump has done,” he told me recently. “And some of the things that he came up with I said, ‘Oh man, why did you do that, Trump? That’s not going to go over well.’ And it turns out, my God, what a brilliant move! I had no idea. He’s just a master.”

A native of San Antonio, my dad spent much of his career working in sales; these days, he runs residential care facilities for the elderly in Orange County, Calif. His mother and father were born in the United States. My grandfather’s mother was likely born in France, but his father was Mexican while my grandmother’s parents were likely from Monterrey, Mexico. That mix of Mexican and American is why he calls me both “son” and its Spanish equivalent, “mijo.”

When I was growing up, we frequently watched Fox News (these days, like many conservatives, my dad prefers Newsmax); he regularly listens to conservative talk radio when he isn’t listening to classic-rock stations. He proudly displays a plaque that Ronald Reagan gave my grandfather for his service as a paratrooper in World War

II. He has told me that The Washington Post, where I used to work, regularly makes things up about Trump. When he came to visit me in D.C. and we walked past CNN's building, he half-jokingly said, "Fake news."

My dad's politics wouldn't be of much interest to the wider world, except that he's part of a group that constituted one of the most puzzling footnotes to the 2020 election: Latinos who voted for Trump. [Between 2016 and 2020](#), Trump improved his overall support among Latinos by four percentage points, while Biden's support declined from Hillary Clinton's by one point — and in some places the change was even more significant. In Florida, Biden won Latinos by just five points, a massive swing from Clinton's 27-point margin in 2016. In Texas, Trump [closed the margin](#) among Latino voters by 10 points.

To many progressives, the trend was a shock — how could a president who so brazenly denigrated Latinos and immigrants actually increase his stock among those same voters? — but it

was also a wake-up call. For a generation, Democrats have taken comfort in the assumption that long-term demographics were on their side: As America became less and less White, Democrats would enjoy an increasing advantage in national politics. The growing Latino vote was a — maybe *the* — linchpin of this thinking. Which means that if, in fact, Latinos are drifting from Democrats, it constitutes an emergency for the party, one that could haunt them in 2022, 2024 and beyond.

Drawing on a number of conversations with experts, plus two with my dad, I recently spent time trying to figure out why this was happening. There are no simple answers, but I was particularly intrigued by one subplot of the story of Latino voters: [Nationally](#), Biden won Latino men by 23 points but Latinas by 39 points. [In 2016](#), Clinton won Latino men by 31 points and Latinas by 44. In other words, Trump gained among both groups over four years, but he gained more among men. In some states, the 2020 gender disparity among Hispanic voters was quite

dramatic. In North Carolina, Trump won Latino men by 20 points but lost Latinas by 54 points. In Nevada, Biden won Latino men by only six points but Latinas by 47 points. Why, I wondered, did Latino men seem to be shifting to the right? And what could Democrats do to win them back?



President Donald Trump speaks at the Latino Coalition Legislative Summit in Washington in March 2020. (Mark Wilson/Getty Images)

Writing about gender differences within the Latino vote is inherently thorny terrain. There's a long-

standing, racist stereotype that associates Latino men with machismo — and, as we all saw for the past six years, Trump’s political brand was built partly on an exaggerated macho sensibility. Ian Haney López, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, told me that there is a risk of reducing Latino men’s support of Trump to being about machismo — which takes “a pervasive social dynamic” and makes it into “an attribute of Latino culture.” “Patriarchy is a problem across racial groups,” he says, though he adds: “It’s also fair to say if you’re a man in a low-status group, masculinity may become more important to claiming high status.”

A better place to start might be jobs: what the experiences of men and women look like in the American economy right now, and how that might influence their thinking about politics. Stephanie Valencia of EquisLabs, a Democratic research firm that surveyed Latino voters in 11 states starting in 2019, says that, in the run-up to the election, they found plenty of men who had what she called

“Trump intrigue.” “They see him as the successful businessman, and they see him as somebody who has built himself up from his bootstraps, even though we all know that’s not necessarily true,” she told me.

That may contrast with the experiences of Latinas, many of whom are running their households, managing child care or employed as front-line and domestic workers — nurses or caretakers for the elderly. “They are making sure their kids are prepared for Zoom school,” Valencia explains. “I think there’s a fundamentally different experience that Hispanic men and women have in both what they experience day to day and what information they consume.”

Trump’s image as a straight-talking businessman was definitely part of what appealed to my dad. He liked that Trump was a graduate of the [Wharton School](#) and that the former president grew up with men similar to those who worked with my grandfather. “We’d run into the electrical contractor’s union or somebody else working in houses,

building houses. Every one of them talked like Trump,” my dad said. “No big words. Everything was very, very simple. And Trump learned to do that. He learned to master that, where he can communicate.”

Between 2016 and 2020, Trump improved his support among Latinos by four percentage points. To many progressives, the trend was a shock — and a wake-up call.

Kevin Marino Cabrera, formerly Trump’s Florida state director, cites the former president’s economic record from before the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, including “historic unemployment and employment for all minorities across the board.” And

Tomas Robles, co-executive for the progressive activist group Living United for Change in Arizona, argues that Democrats haven't done a good strategic job in this area. "They don't know yet how to talk about the economy in a way that resonates with Latinos, especially men of color," Robles says. "I think a big reason why Trump did slightly better with not just Latino men, but other men of color, especially Black men, was because he had an economic message, and he had an economic message that he tailored to men of color." Indeed, Trump's campaign ran a Spanish-language ad with a catchy jingle that specifically mentioned the economy.

Haney López has [conducted research](#) with Equis showing that 28 percent of Hispanics perceive themselves as part of a group that "over generations can get ahead through hard work." He also found that 32 percent of Hispanics see themselves as a group similar to European American immigrants who can join the mainstream. "The rhetoric that the right is using uses language that is designed to trigger racist stereotypes associated with

whiteness,” Haney López says. He adds that for many Latinos, there is a desire to be esteemed and recognized as someone who cares for their family rather than as a violent protester or as an outsider. “This status anxiety is inseparable from this racist hierarchy,” he says.

Both Latino men and women may share economic and status anxiety, of course. But Latinas — like female voters across ethnic categories — were repelled by Trump’s disrespect toward women and his bragging about sexual assault. “When we conducted focus groups with Latinas, they were highly attuned to the ways Trump was insulting them as women,” Haney López says. “They felt more attacked as women than they did as Latinos.”



In the constant push and pull between economic and cultural issues in the Democratic coalition, it's possible that, for some Latino men, left-wing cultural politics have proved off-putting. It's been well-documented at this point that most Latinos don't use the gender-neutral term "Latinx," but the male-female breakdown is noteworthy. According to [Pew Research Center](#), 14 percent of Latinas between 18 and 29 use the term, but only 1 percent of Latino men in the same age group use it.

Valencia points out that younger Latino men are in the same social

media spaces as their White counterparts. “They’re watching Joe Rogan, too,” she says, referring to the popular [podcast host](#) and antagonist of the cultural left. “They’re consuming a lot of the same information that White working-class young men are consuming.”

Randall Avila, the executive director of the Orange County Republican Party, says Latino men appreciated Trump’s lack of political correctness. “We kind of resonate with the president even though we may not agree with everything he says,” Avila told me. “He speaks his mind and he doesn’t sugarcoat things, so I think some of that personality style also played into Latino support for the president as well.”

News reports before and after the election [speculated](#) that Trump’s [tough talk](#) on immigration, as well as his “law and order” [rhetoric](#), helped with some Latino men. In fact, especially in some border communities, law enforcement is a major employer of Latino men. According to Department of

Homeland Security statistics for 2019, 30 percent of all U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers are Hispanic. (Hispanic men accounted for 11.8 percent of hires, while Hispanic women accounted for 8.1 percent.)

Of course, not all Latinos who work in law enforcement share Trump's view of immigrants. David Cortez, a professor at the University of Notre Dame, interviewed Latino agents who worked for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Arizona, Texas and California in 2014 and 2015. Plenty of the people in the study tended to join the agency for economic reasons. Cortez says that, despite the ICE union's support for Trump, not all Latinos who worked on the border fit the "MAGA, machismo" model of "right-leaning, staunch, anti-immigration restrictionists." "What you'll find is that the majority of them have more-nuanced positions on immigration and immigration policy than most elected officials," says Cortez, who is from Brownsville, Tex., "because they're the ones who see it on a daily basis."

Still, it's reasonable to assume that, if Democrats are seen as the party of open borders and far-left immigration policies, that might turn off at least some Latinos who work in border enforcement. Meanwhile, Latinos make up 12.5 percent of local police officers as of 2016, according to the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#), a jump from 7.8 percent in 1997 (and police forces are overwhelmingly male). And according to a [2017 Pew Research study](#), White and Latino police officers have similar views on the police killing of unarmed Black people — with 72 percent of both groups saying they were isolated incidents rather than signs of a broader problem. By comparison, 57 percent of Black police officers think the killings are signs of a bigger problem.

To progressives, all of this is a sinister example of politicians dividing a community against itself. “One of the perversities of dog-whistle politics, of this fearmongering against people of color,” says Haney López, “is that it has created a whole employment sector for working-class people in the area of government violence against

working-class people, especially with people of color.”

But conservative Latinos themselves see things differently. Avila has three family members who work in the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. He says Trump’s “law and order” message resonated with many Latinos. “They saw the president as someone who stood up for them,” Avila says, “whether it’s my family that’s actually in law enforcement or family who obviously loves and cares about my uncles and my aunts. We kind of saw that message of who was supporting the police department and who wasn’t.”



Joe Biden gets ready to discuss the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on Latinos at an event in Las Vegas in October 2020. (Brendan Smialowski/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images)

There isn't, of course, one clear explanation for why Latino men seem to be drifting, as a group, to the right. Every individual vote is a sum of many factors, and it's tough to attach a simple explanation to any of them. Indeed, when I asked my dad about what he liked about Trump, he replied, "Oh my God, son, the list is endless." As he walked around his neighborhood in January — 10 days after Biden was inaugurated — and spoke to me on the phone, he rattled off a litany of what he saw as

Trump's accomplishments: lower taxes, diplomatic agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the low Black and Latino unemployment rates before covid-19 wrecked the economy. He praised Trump's tough stance on China and his move to subsidize farmers to [offset the effects](#) of his trade conflict.

None of these policy preferences are unique to Latinos or to Latino men. But when a group shifts dramatically, it's impossible not to at least guess at broad explanations. And for Democrats, there's a lot riding on trying to get these explanations right. Perhaps the most important thing to realize is that no party is entitled to a constituency. Every campaign has to work to actively court Latino voters. Instead of expecting — as many progressives do — Latino men to automatically vote against someone who works against their “self-interest,” it might be better to ask what Latino men actually see as their best interests and how they view themselves — and then adjust accordingly.

To be sure, different Latinos will respond to the same message in disparate ways: A message like Sen. Bernie Sanders's democratic socialism that resonated with Latinos in Nevada and California in the Democratic primary may terrify Cuban American and Venezuelan American voters in Miami who fled socialist regimes.

Trump's "law and order" message resonated with many Latinos, says Randall Avila of the Orange County Republican Party: "They saw the president as someone who stood up for them."

But one place that Democrats probably can't go wrong is to focus relentlessly on jobs and the economy.

José Dante Parra, who previously worked for Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and President Barack Obama's reelection campaign and is now chief executive of the communications firm ProsperoLatino, thinks this is the best way to reach Latino men. "Doubling down on those policies and messaging it to the community will really help us, in the long run, develop a narrative where Latino men feel that they're being talked to," he says. "The biggest thing for Latino men was jobs and the economy ... being usually the main breadwinners in the family."

With Republican senators like Josh Hawley and Marco Rubio [trying to rebrand](#) the GOP as a "multiethnic, multiracial working-class coalition," Democrats will need to call their bluff by laying out a clear agenda for working-class Americans. If Latino men see themselves as aspirational Americans who want to pick themselves up by the bootstraps, perhaps the best message is one that offers a way into the middle class and economic security.

And none of this, by the way, is to suggest that Democrats should ignore Latina voters, who largely share similar priorities. (I should note here that my parents are divorced and my mom is a Democrat.) On the contrary, says Valencia at Equis, it is important to remember that working-class Latinas are voters who “we need to further understand and invest in to continue to make part of the progressive base, because on the issues they are there.”

Looking ahead to 2024, I asked my dad who he liked as a potential Republican presidential candidate. He was cagey about Trump’s children. In his eyes, Don Jr. is not ready yet and he “would probably never vote” for Ivanka. He likes Reps. Jim Jordan of Ohio, Chip Roy of Texas and Matt Gaetz of Florida — but, he said, “one day, I think the best president we have ever in our lifetime would be Tom Cotton,” the senator from Arkansas.

The day pro-Trump rioters crashed the Capitol trying to stop the certification of votes, my dad texted me to ask if I was safe and told me to

“stay away from all the crowds in D.C.” However, he does not hold Trump responsible for what happened that day. “These are all good people, good levelheaded, hard-working people,” he says of those who supported the “Stop the Steal” rally, noting that Trump told protesters to let their voices be heard peacefully.

Democrats can certainly make inroads with Latino men — though my dad, as you can see, won’t be one of them. Instead, he’s a very stark reminder that Latinos span the political spectrum — and that, as confusing as it may be to progressives and to many pundits, it’s absolutely possible for some percentage of Americans to think of themselves as archconservatives and as Latinos. Even if he doesn’t “wear it on my sleeve,” as he puts it, my dad is very proud of his heritage as a Mexican American. In January, we ended our conversation as we normally do when I’m not interviewing him. “I love you with all my heart, Dad,” I said. “I love you too, mijo,” he replied. “You take good care.”

*Eric Garcia is the author of the
forthcoming book “[We’re Not Broken:
Changing the Autism Conversation.](#)”*

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