



The Latinas of the GOP

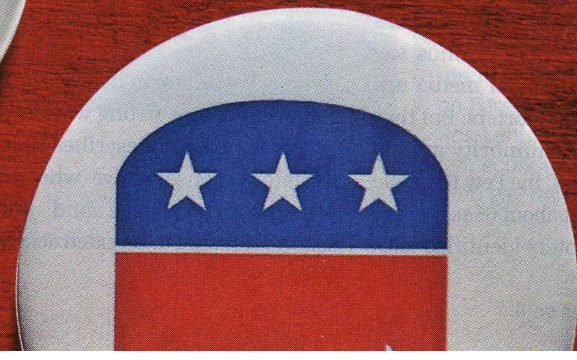
Although the majority of Latinos in the United States most often vote for Democrats, those who identify with the **REPUBLICAN PARTY** are a passionate group—and they're intent on spreading the word.



By **Monica Rohr** Photographs by **Matthew Rainwaters**



True Believers
Republican Latinas who attended a GOP rally in Houston include Phallyn Espinoza (top left) and Elizabeth Perez (near left).





ELIZABETH PEREZ GRABS a blue plastic megaphone and strides to the center of the East End parking lot in the heart of Houston's Latino barrio. Overhead, the August sun is blazing, the blistering heat intensified by the expanse of black asphalt.

For the past two days, Perez had walked the blocks of this working-class neighborhood, which is bordered by railroad tracks and lined with *clínicas, taquerías* and *carnicerías*. She had knocked on hundreds of doors and chatted with dozens of residents, spreading the gospel of a true believer. At each stop, Perez had extended an invitation to this Saturday gathering—a first for that part of town.

Now, an hour into the R.E.D. Rally (for “Republicans Embrace Diversity”), Perez takes her place and welcomes all those in attendance. “Thank you all for coming out here. This is the first time the Republican Party has been in Houston’s East End with such a big presence,” whoops Perez, a 30-year-old single mother and business consultant. “I’ve been out block-walking, and I’m happy to say we have a lot of converters coming our way. *Woo!*”

Perez then points to a donkey-shaped piñata—a metaphor for beating Democrats out of office.

But neither Perez’s enthusiasm nor the piñata’s symbolism can mask one glaring fact: The parking lot is empty. There are no neighborhood residents, no Democratic converts, no rally-goers at all, except for a handful of Republican candidates—which includes one Latino—and their campaign volunteers.

Sometimes, it’s not easy being a Latino Republican.

They face resistance from Latinos who believe that Republicans are anti-Hispanic and anti-immigrant, and suspicion from Republicans who believe Latinos don’t share their conservative doctrine. Insisting that their numbers are about to grow, these Latinos say Facebook and other social media are helping draw more supporters. But they are by far still in the minority among Latino voters: In 2008, the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that about 65 percent of Latino registered voters identified with

the Democratic Party, compared with roughly 26 percent who identified with the Republican Party.

Yet these Republicans with roots throughout Latin America all fiercely defend their choice of political parties, saying the GOP platform mirrors the traditional Latino value system. “I chuckle when people say Latinos should be Democrats. Hispanics have traditionally and culturally been conservative people,” says Perez, a member of the Latino National Republican Coalition, which organized the Houston rally. “We are pro-life, pro-family, small business

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The Democratic Party has HIJACKED a lot of Latinos by saying that Republicans don’t like you.
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owners. We believe in the sanctity of marriage and have a strong work ethic.”

Perez proudly describes herself as a lifelong conservative who put herself through college and graduate school, refusing to be sidetracked by an

unplanned pregnancy at the age of 18. Her Mexican immigrant parents raised six children in a strict household that emphasized faith, family and an unyielding work ethic—ideals she now wants to pass onto her 11-year-old son.

“I put myself through college with jobs and student loans. I was never a welfare recipient. I don’t get any child support, so don’t tell me it can’t be done,” says Perez, who often juggles her political activism with maternal responsibilities. “I believe a stumbling block can be turned into a stepping stone.”

Many Republican Latinos echo Perez’s bootstrap success story and say they have been drawn to the GOP by the party’s emphasis on self-reliance, a trait many have seen in the stories of immigrant parents and grandparents who built successful lives in this country from scratch. The Democratic Party, they say, only offers entitlements and higher taxes.

“I’m working hard, paying taxes, finishing school,” notes Phallyn Espinoza, a 27-year-old Houstonian of Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage. “We shouldn’t be paying into the system for people who are not.”

Espinoza—caramel-skinned, wearing a tiny jeweled stud in her nose—is not the image most people conjure up when they think of Republican Party stalwarts. But like the Latino community itself, Hispanic Republicans are a diverse lot. They range from Tea Party candidate supporters such as Alice Lara, a third-generation Mexican American

who lives in Phoenix, Ariz., to more moderate party members like Espinoza, who espouses conservative fiscal policies yet supports a woman's right to choose. Some wince at the Republican Party's stance on immigration, while others, including Lara, wholeheartedly support hard-line measures such as Arizona's SB 1070 law.

"It may not be perfect legislation, but it's an indicator of the frustration in the state. Illegal immigration costs a lot of money," Lara says. "There are Latinos who want to make it easy for illegal immigration, but more conservative Latinos like myself think we need to know who's in our country."

Lara, now an executive assistant for a lobbyist, once considered herself an independent, even liberal, voter. That began to change after she started watching C-Span and worked as a talk radio producer for a station that carried conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh.

"It comes down to the core values of respecting tradition and individual



Conservative Values

Alice Lara is an Arizona Latina who supports the controversial SB 1070 law.

responsibility," says Lara, who describes herself as a "Reagan Republican." "The Democrats talk a lot about social justice, but I believe in equal justice and equal opportunity."

Lara was also turned off by what she saw as an almost arrogant assumption that as a Latina, she would automatically align with the Democratic Party.

"The Democratic Party has hijacked a lot of Latinos by saying that Republicans don't like you," notes Lara. "Why would anyone think we'd be in the Republican Party if that's the case? It's outrageous to me."

In August, Democratic Sen. Harry

Reid set off similar outrage among many Republican Latinos when he noted: "I don't know how anyone of Hispanic heritage could be a Republican, okay?" And Ricardo Ramirez, a spokesman for the Democratic National Committee, offered this in defense of the Democratic Party: "Since day one, President Obama and Democrats have fought for initiatives that overwhelmingly help Latinos and the middle class—policies that improve our lives right at home."

Still, many conservative Latinos are hopeful that more Latinos will turn to the Grand Old Party. Perez refused to be disheartened by the lack of community turnout for the R.E.D. Rally. Even though no one showed up, most of the people she encountered while block-walking had seemed receptive to her pitch, she said, noting that only one man had taken up the Democratic Party's side.

"I'm a little disappointed, but not discouraged," said Perez, as she surveyed the empty parking lot. "We plan to have a rally like this every year. This is only our first." ■



REPRESENTING IN CONGRESS

Only three Latino members of the 111th Congress are Republican—all Cuban Americans from Florida. However, 75 percent of Latino challengers this election year are Republicans.

Mario Diaz-Balart

The younger brother of Lincoln, Mario Diaz-Balart (photo, far left) has been in the House since 2002. This year, the 49-year-old is vacating his seat to run in his brother's district. Mario Diaz-Balart, who has a more conservative voting record than his brother, is a founding member of the Congressional Hispanic Conference, a caucus of Hispanic Republicans.

Lincoln Diaz-Balart

Diaz-Balart (seen in the center of the photo) who was elected to the House of Representatives in 1992, was born in Havana, Cuba, and raised in South Florida. Diaz-Balart, 56, and his family were Democrats until 1985, when they switched parties. As a congressman, he's been rated a moderate voter and has been an outspoken critic of Fidel Castro, who was once married to one of Diaz-Balart's aunts. In February, he announced that he would not seek re-election in November.



Ileana Ros-Lehtinen

Former teacher Ros-Lehtinen (photo, near left), a member of Congress since 1989, is the most senior Republican woman in the U.S. House, as well as the first Cuban American and first Latina elected to the U.S. Congress. She wields power as the ranking member on the Committee on Foreign Affairs. Although Ros-Lehtinen, 58, veers toward conservative stances on foreign, economic and some social policies, she has strongly backed gay rights. —M.R.

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