

# NAVIGATING CROSS-PRESSURES: ACCULTURATION AND LATINO POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Latino political behavior has long defied scholarly expectations, producing persistent political diversity that the field's dominant frameworks cannot explain because they were designed to predict collective unity, not individual-level variation. This study introduces the Bidimensional Acculturation Model (BAM) to political science, which treats heritage and American cultural attachments as independent dimensions and identifies four distinct acculturation orientations (culture-affirming, bicultural, demicultural, and assimilationists), and tests whether these orientations produce distinct political profiles using the 2006 Latino National Survey (N = 4,785). The findings confirm that acculturation orientations significantly differentiate ideology, partisanship, and immigration attitudes, with the strongest effects on immigration, and that biculturals, who represent 68% of the sample and are invisible under existing approaches, exhibit a distinct political profile. These results establish psychological acculturation as a theoretically necessary construct for understanding Latino political diversity and offer a framework applicable to immigrant-origin political behavior more broadly.

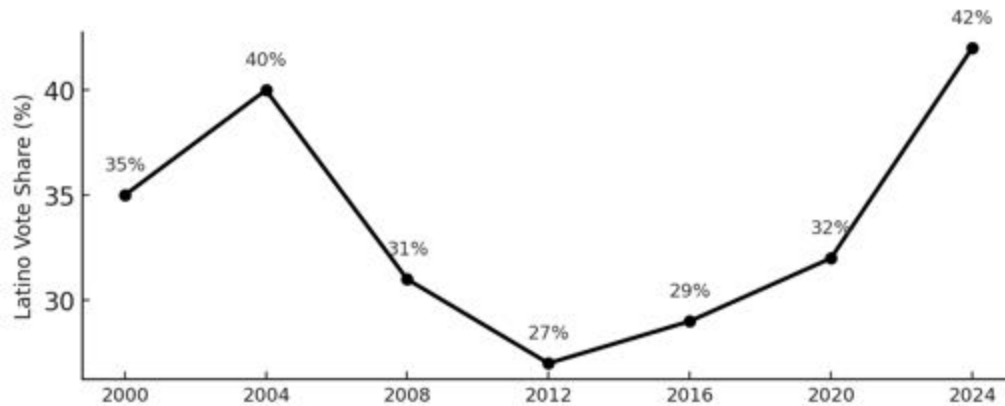
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# NAVIGATING CROSS-PRESSURES: ACCULTURATION AND LATINO POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

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Latino political behavior has long confounded scholarly expectations, producing patterns of political diversity that dominant theoretical frameworks have struggled to explain (Beltrán 2010; Jones-Correa et al. 2018). These frameworks predict that shared experiences of marginalization should produce unified political responses, a prediction rooted in the assumption that groups facing common threats will recognize their linked fate and act collectively to advance shared interests (Dawson 1994; Sanchez 2006). Yet Latinos have consistently defied this expectation. This diversity is particularly visible in presidential elections, where Latino support for Republican candidates has fluctuated between 27% and 42% over the past two decades (see Figure 1) (Roper Center 2000–2020; AP VoteCast 2024). What makes this pattern theoretically significant is not its magnitude but its persistence. It predates the current era of extreme polarization (Mason 2018; Abramowitz 2022), spans elections featuring candidates with vastly different approaches to Latino communities, and cannot be reduced to any single campaign or political moment. That the second largest and fastest growing ethnic electorate in the United States remains inadequately explained by existing frameworks represents a significant theoretical gap, one that suggests the limitation lies not in Latino political behavior itself but in the frameworks scholars have used to explain it.

**Figure 1.** Latino Republican Vote Share in Presidential Elections, 2000–2024



Group-centric frameworks such as linked fate and group consciousness emerged from scholarship on the African American experience, where they have powerfully explained how marginalization and discrimination can foster political unity within a racialized group (Dawson 1994). Scholars have often assumed that this identity-to-politics link operates similarly across racial and ethnic groups (Lee 2008), and when applied to Latinos, these frameworks predict that Latinos will act collectively to advance shared interests, particularly when facing external threats that make ethnic boundaries salient (Pantoja and Segura 2003; Zepeda-Millán 2017). While these frameworks may capture the politics of some Latinos, their emphasis on collective processes obscures the individual-level variation that actually characterizes the electorate (García Bedolla 2005; Michelson 2007). More fundamentally, when collective action is the expected outcome, Latinos who do not act collectively become the subject of questions like "why don't they vote in their own interest" rather than being understood as individuals whose politics reflect a different but equally coherent response to shared conditions. Substantial political diversity persists even among Latinos who share similar demographic profiles and face similar structural conditions, even within the same household (where family members share the same structural conditions yet diverge politically). Explaining this variation therefore requires a framework that acknowledges

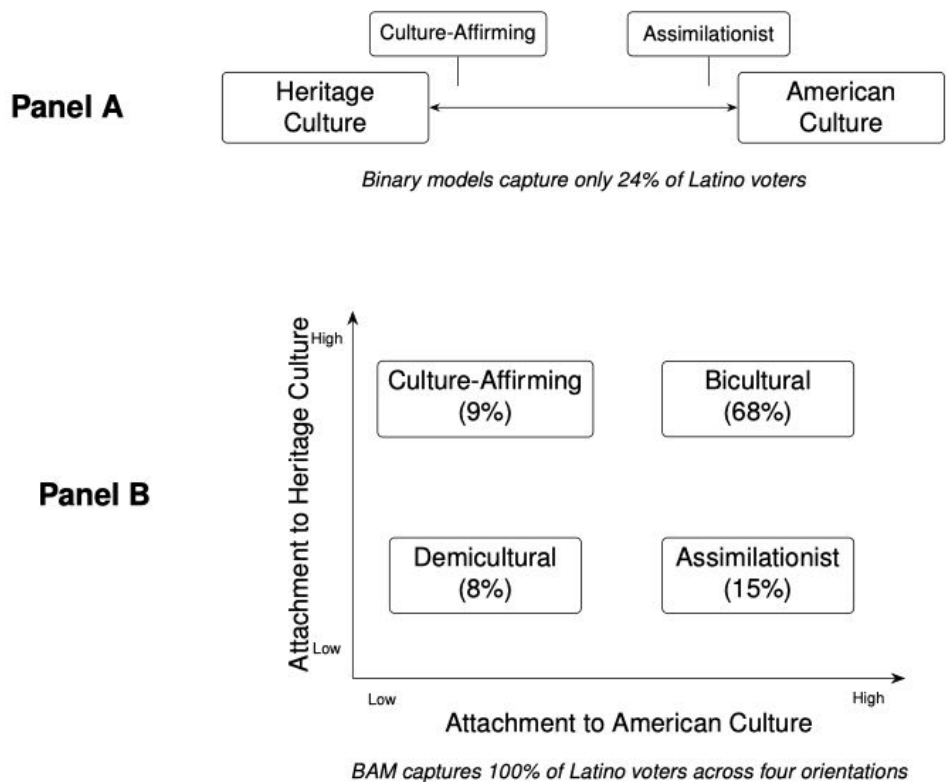
shared conditions while also operating at the individual level, one that captures the psychological processes through which similar conditions yield different responses.

Acculturation, the psychological process by which individuals navigate competing cultural demands when adapting to a new environment (Graves 1967; Chirkov 2022), is a theoretically necessary construct for understanding this variation because it operates at precisely the level where group-centric frameworks fall short, at the individual-level. Individuals may respond to these competing demands by maintaining their heritage culture, adopting mainstream culture, or pursuing some combination of both. Yet the dominant approach in political science, binary acculturation, reduces this complex process to a single question of how assimilated a person is. Binary models treat heritage culture and American culture as opposite ends of a single continuum (Figure 2, Panel A), assuming a zero-sum relationship where a stronger attachment to one necessarily means a weaker attachment to the other. This zero-sum logic fails to account for hybridity, where individuals can internalize both cultures simultaneously, and therefore fails to capture the full range of ways people navigate competing cultural demands. Beyond this empirical limitation, binary acculturation carries a normative assumption that assimilation is the desired endpoint of incorporation, framing heritage retention as resistance to belonging rather than as a legitimate adaptation strategy. Moreover, when applied to Latinos, this approach misclassifies roughly 75% of the population.

These limitations point to the need for an acculturation framework that can capture the full range of ways Latinos navigate competing cultural demands. Bidimensional acculturation (BAM) meets this need and overcomes the limitations of binary acculturation in three key ways. First, BAM is bidirectional, meaning it treats heritage and American cultural attachments as independent dimensions rather than opposing poles on a single continuum. This dismantles the

zero-sum logic of binary models and allows hybrid orientations to emerge, where individuals maintain strong attachments to both cultures simultaneously (Figure 2, Panel B). Rather than privileging assimilation as the inevitable endpoint, BAM recognizes all four orientations as equally stable and legitimate outcomes. Second, BAM measures the psychological dimensions of cultural identity and aspirational attitudes, capturing not only how individuals identify with cultural systems but what they aspire to maintain or adopt. This preserves the element of human agency that binary proxies such as generational status or language use strip away, as those proxies are themselves indicators of assimilation rather than acculturation. Third, and equally important, BAM connects these individual psychological orientations to group-level social identity and future-directed aspirations. It accounts for how individuals position themselves within or between groups and what strategies they employ to navigate cultural differences. Although this study focuses on Latinos, the framework BAM provides for understanding how immigrant-origin individuals navigate competing cultural demands has broader implications for the study of political behavior across immigrant-origin groups.

**Figure 2.** Contrasting Binary and Bidirectional Acculturation Models



Author (2026) established that these four orientations represent distinct psychological configurations. Whether they also produce distinct political profiles remained untested. This study provides that test. Using the 2006 Latino National Survey, I find that acculturation orientations predict meaningful variation across ideology, partisanship, and immigration policy attitudes, with the strongest effects appearing on immigration, where questions of group belonging are most explicit and where acculturation structures attitudes nearly three times more strongly than ideology. These findings suggest that Latino political diversity emerges in part from the distinct ways individuals navigate the acculturation process. The 2006 data capture these patterns before the intense polarization of the Obama and Trump eras, establishing that this diversity reflects durable psychological mechanisms rather than reactions to particular political moments or candidates.

The next section develops the theoretical framework, establishing the racialized context that makes acculturation an enduring process for Latinos and theorizing how distinct orientations shape political attitudes through their effects on perceived group boundaries. I then describe the data and analytical strategy before presenting results in two phases, covering orientation profiles and between-orientation differences. The discussion considers what these findings mean for how political science understands Latino political behavior.

## **Theory**

Understanding Latino political diversity requires a theoretical framework that accounts for both the conditions Latinos share and the varied ways individuals navigate those conditions. This section first establishes the racialized context that makes acculturation an enduring process for Latinos. It then describes the four orientations that emerge when heritage and American attachments are treated as independent dimensions. Finally, it theorizes how these orientations shape political attitudes and derives testable hypotheses.

### ***The Racialized Context of Latino Acculturation***

For European immigrant groups in American history, acculturation was a temporary process. Although groups such as the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Poles faced initial exclusion and were not immediately accepted as white, they eventually achieved full incorporation into American society, their "in-between" racial status resolving within two generations (Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991). The classic model of straight-line assimilation describes this predictable trajectory in which immigrants and their descendants gradually shed heritage cultural practices, adopted mainstream American norms, and achieved full social incorporation (Park and Burgess 1925; Gordon 1964). The process was often difficult and marked by discrimination, but the endpoint was clear. European-origin groups eventually became unmarked members of American

society, their ethnic origins fading into symbolic identities that carried little structural consequence (Alba 1990; Waters 1990). For Latinos, acculturation operates differently. Racialization transforms it from a temporary adjustment into an enduring condition that extends across generations. This enduring condition has deep roots. Since at least the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which incorporated Mexican residents into a racial order that defined full citizenship in terms of whiteness (Haney López 2006), Latinos have been subject to processes of racial exclusion that predate and extend well beyond any single wave of immigration. It is the depth and persistence of this exclusion that makes Latinos a core case for understanding how acculturation operates as a political force.

Racialization is the sociopolitical process through which groups are marked as racially distinct and are subjected to differential treatment on that basis (Omi and Winant 1994). For Latinos, racialization operates through the construction of perpetual foreignness. Regardless of nativity, citizenship status, or how many generations a family has been in the United States, Latinos are treated as conditional members of American society whose belonging remains permanently in question (Chavez 2014; Ngai 2014). Latino cultural markers, including surnames, phenotype, accent, and language use, function not as neutral indicators of heritage but as symbols of foreignness that trigger assumptions about immigration status, national loyalty, and cultural belonging (Gomez 2007; Gutiérrez 1995). Even U.S.-born, English-dominant, multi-generational Latino families encounter these assumptions in everyday interactions, finding their American belonging challenged in ways that European-origin families with similar generational depth do not (Telles and Ortiz 2008).

The consequences of this racialization are tangible and well-documented. Latinos face discrimination in housing, employment, and education that does not diminish with assimilation

or socioeconomic mobility (Massey 2009; Telles and Ortiz 2008). They experience heightened surveillance and suspicion from law enforcement regardless of legal status or citizenship (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). They encounter social rejection and questioning of their belonging in institutional settings and interpersonal encounters (Molina 2014). This racialization is not a historical artifact but an ongoing condition, visible in public discourse that frames Latinos as a cultural threat to Anglo-American identity (e.g. Huntington 2004) and in legal doctrine that sanctions ethnic appearance as grounds for detention. In *Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo* (2025), the Supreme Court ruled that federal agents may consider ethnicity, language, and occupation when stopping individuals suspected of being undocumented, a decision Justice Sotomayor warned "has all but declared that all Latinos, U.S. citizens or not, who work low-wage jobs are fair game to be seized at any time."

Racialization generates enduring cross-pressures, competing demands around belonging, heritage, and adaptation, that extend across generations. But individuals are not passive recipients of these conditions. They actively navigate them, developing distinct orientations toward both heritage and American cultures. The variation across these orientations reflects individual agency, the distinct ways people respond to shared structural conditions. This variation is what existing frameworks fail to capture, and what BAM is designed to address.

### ***The Bidirectional Acculturation Model***

The binary critique outlined above points to the need for a framework that treats heritage retention and American adoption as independent processes rather than opposing poles (Berry 1992; Ryder, Alden, and Paulhus 2000). Acculturation orientations, properly understood, are psychological configurations rooted in how individuals categorize themselves and where they perceive themselves as belonging (Berry 1997). Self-categorization theory holds that individuals

define themselves in relation to social groups to varying degrees, and that the salience of specific categorizations shapes perception, judgment, and behavior (Turner et al. 1987). Social identity theory extends this insight, demonstrating that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships and are motivated to maintain positive esteem for the groups they identify with (Tajfel and Turner 1979). For any immigrant-origin group navigating acculturation, the two most relevant categorizations are identification with heritage culture and identification with mainstream culture. These categorizations are not mutually exclusive. An individual can strongly identify with both, weakly identify with both, or strongly identify with one while maintaining weaker attachment to the other. The particular configuration an individual adopts constitutes their acculturation orientation, a stable pattern of cultural attachment that shapes how they interpret social information, perceive group boundaries, and evaluate others (Phinney 2003; Huddy 2001).

However, these identity configurations do not form in a vacuum. Verkuyten (2018) demonstrates that ethnic identity is not static but a dynamic process shaped by social context, intergroup relations, and the ways dominant groups define the terms of belonging. For ethnic minorities, identity negotiations occur within power structures that determine which identities are accepted, which are stigmatized, and whether dual identification is treated as legitimate or as evidence of divided loyalties (Portes and Rumbaut 2007; Waters 1999; Nagel 1994). Where theories of multiple identity management assume individuals have considerable freedom in choosing which identities to emphasize (Roccas and Brewer 2002), racialization constrains these choices for Latinos. Heritage identity remains salient because others continue to treat Latinos as foreign, regardless of how they see themselves (Chavez 2014; Telles and Ortiz 2008). At the same time, full acceptance as American remains conditional regardless of how "assimilated" they

become (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). The framework developed here, following Verkuyten (2018), recognizes that racialization shapes not only how individuals see themselves but also which identities are available to them.

BAM operationalizes this psychological understanding by treating heritage retention and American adoption as independent dimensions, capturing how individuals respond to shared structural conditions in different ways. Table 1 presents the four orientations that emerge when heritage and American attachments are treated as independent dimensions, along with their configurations and responses to cross-pressures.

**Table 1.** Acculturation Orientations as Responses to Cross-Pressures

<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Configuration</b>	<b>Response to Cross-Pressures</b>
Culture-affirming (9%)	Strong heritage attachment; lower American attachment	Prioritize heritage ties
Assimilationist (15%)	Strong American attachment; weaker heritage ties	Prioritize mainstream belonging
Bicultural (68%)	High engagement with both cultures	Integrate both systems, more consistent cultural preferences
Demicultural (8%)	Moderate attachments to both; greater variability in aspirations	Integrate both systems moderately, more varied cultural preferences

*Note.* Percentages reflect distribution in the 2006 Latino National Survey (n = 4,785 eligible voters). Orientations derived from multi-algorithmic clustering. Full validation details appear in Appendix A.

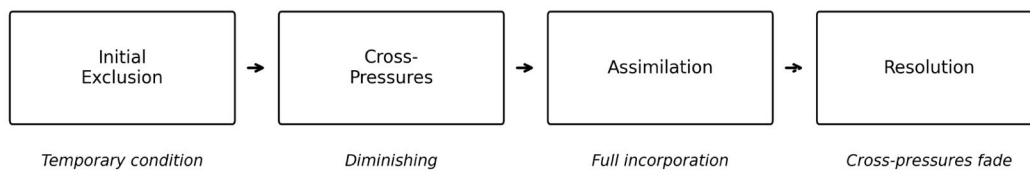
Because BAM treats both dimensions as independent, it captures all four orientations, including the hybrid configurations that binary frameworks structurally exclude (Author 2026). The question is whether these distinct psychological configurations produce distinct political profiles.

***Acculturation as a Political Lens***

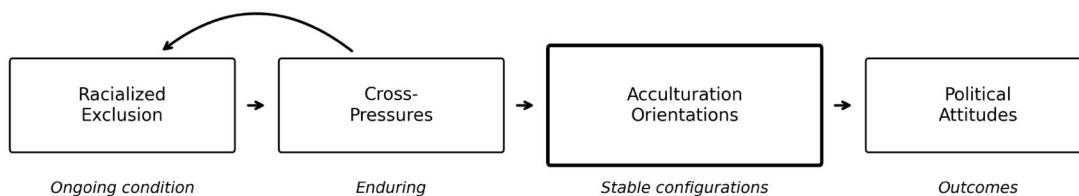
If acculturation orientations represent distinct psychological responses to enduring cross-pressures, they should also produce distinct political responses. Cross-pressures have long been central to understanding political behavior. When individuals face conflicting social influences or competing loyalties, their political responses become less predictable (Campbell et al. 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1968; Mutz 2018). The cross-pressures literature has traditionally focused on conflicting group memberships or tensions between partisan identities and issue positions (Hillygus and Shields 2014). For Latinos, cross-pressures operate at a more fundamental level, rooted in the ongoing navigation of competing demands around belonging, heritage, and ethnoracial boundaries. Figure 3 illustrates how these cross-pressures differ from the European immigrant experience. Because these cross-pressures are enduring rather than temporary, the acculturation orientations they produce represent stable psychological configurations, each of which may structure political attitudes in distinct ways.

**Figure 3.** European and Latino Acculturation Trajectories

**Panel A.** European Immigrant Trajectory



**Panel B.** Latino Trajectory



The mechanism connecting acculturation orientations to political attitudes runs through group boundary perception. Acculturation orientations capture both cultural identity and strategies for navigating cultural differences. They reflect how individuals see themselves, where they perceive themselves as belonging, and how they manage competing cultural demands, whether by prioritizing heritage, pursuing mainstream belonging, integrating both, or maintaining distance from both. Each of these configurations draws the boundaries of "my group" differently, and social identity theory explains why this matters politically (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Individuals favor ingroups over outgroups, and the boundaries of the ingroup are psychologically constructed. Strong heritage attachment leads individuals to see those who share ethnic and cultural markers, including recent immigrants, as part of their group. Assimilationist orientations pull identification and belonging toward the American mainstream, leading individuals to see themselves as distinct from co-ethnics. Bicultural orientations maintain identification with both groups, while demicultural orientations reflect weaker anchoring to either. The same policy question, for instance whether undocumented immigrants deserve a path to citizenship, activates different group loyalties depending on where an individual has drawn these boundaries.

Immigration attitudes, partisanship, and ideology represent three political domains where acculturation orientations should exert influence. Of these, immigration attitudes engage questions of group boundaries and belonging most directly, as they concern who deserves inclusion in American society. How strongly acculturation structures attitudes in each domain is an empirical question that this study addresses.

### ***Hypotheses***

These hypotheses operationalize the core proposition that acculturation orientations drive political heterogeneity among Latinos. Strong cultural anchoring, whether to heritage or American culture, should pull political attitudes in a consistent direction. Integrating both systems simultaneously should produce a profile that is qualitatively distinct from either pole, not simply a midpoint between them. Weaker anchoring to both cultures should leave individuals without a strong directional pull, producing greater variability in political attitudes.

**H1:** Each BAM orientation will exhibit a distinct political profile across ideology, partisanship, and immigration attitudes.

**H2a:** Culture-affirming Latinos will show the strongest Democratic and liberal identification and the most pro-immigration attitudes.

**H2b:** Assimilationist Latinos will show the strongest Republican and conservative identification and the most restrictive immigration attitudes.

**H2c:** Bicultural Latinos will not simply occupy a midpoint between culture-affirming and assimilationist orientations but will exhibit their own distinct political profile.

**H2d:** Demicultural Latinos, lacking strong cultural anchoring in either direction, will exhibit the least internally consistent political profile, making them the acculturation framework's equivalent of a swing group.

### **Research Design**

This study is the first to examine the relationship between four distinct acculturation orientations and political attitudes among Latinos. Because no existing literature offers predictions about the political profiles of hybrid orientations, the study is organized in two phases. The first establishes the political character of each orientation through descriptive profiling; the second quantifies between-orientation differences. Together, these phases provide a

comprehensive picture of each orientation's political profile while also enabling comparison across orientations.

### ***Data***

The analysis draws on the 2006 Latino National Survey (LNS; Fraga et al. 2006), a stratified area probability sample of self-identified Latino/a residents across 15 states and the District of Columbia. The present study uses an analytical sample of 4,785 eligible voters.

Two features of the LNS make it particularly well-suited for this analysis. First, the survey was administered bilingually, with respondents selecting their preferred language of interview. This design choice is essential for acculturation research, as English-only instruments systematically underrepresent heritage-oriented populations and introduce measurement bias on the very dimension this study seeks to examine (Marín and Marín 1991). Second, the four-category BAM typology employed here, consisting of culture-affirming, assimilationist, bicultural, and demicultural orientations, was originally validated using the LNS (Author 2026), ensuring consistency between the classification scheme and the instrument from which it was derived.

The 2006 timeframe offers an additional advantage. Because the data predate the heightened affective polarization of recent election cycles (Iyengar et al. 2019), the analysis tests whether acculturation structures political heterogeneity under conditions less shaped by contemporary partisan dynamics. Patterns that emerge in this context are more likely to reflect durable psychological mechanisms than reactions to particular political moments or candidates.

### ***Measures***

Respondents are classified into four acculturation orientations derived from a bidirectional framework that treats heritage culture maintenance and American culture

acquisition as independent dimensions (Berry 1997). This yields four orientations: culture-affirming (high heritage, low American; n = 433), assimilationist (low heritage, high American; n = 705), bicultural (high heritage, high American; n = 3,269), and demicultural (low heritage, low American; n = 378). The classification process and validation are detailed in Author (2026).

The political outcomes span two domains. First, political identity is measured through self-reported ideology (conservative, moderate, liberal) and party identification (Republican, Independent, Democrat). Second, immigration policy attitudes are measured through a general assessment of whether immigrants strengthen or burden American society, support for the DREAM Act, and preferences regarding immigration policy ranging from restrictive to permissive. These items capture distinct facets of immigration attitudes, including how people feel about immigrants, whether they support a specific policy, and their general policy preferences, allowing the analysis to assess whether acculturation effects hold across different dimensions of immigration attitudes.

### ***Analytical Strategy***

The first phase characterizes the political composition of each acculturation orientation through percentage distributions, modal categories, and central tendencies. These descriptive patterns provide the foundation for the inferential comparisons that follow.

The second phase quantifies between-orientation differences through four complementary analyses. The approach prioritizes effect sizes over significance tests alone, reflecting a growing methodological consensus that the magnitude and precision of effects are more informative than p-values alone (Wasserstein and Lazar 2016). Because political attitude measures are ordinal and response categories like "conservative, moderate, liberal" cannot be assumed to represent equal

intervals, the analysis relies on nonparametric methods that respect the measurement structure of the data rather than imposing assumptions about underlying distributions (Jamieson 2004).

I first conduct Kruskal-Wallis tests to establish that orientations differ significantly on each political outcome. I then turn to the central question of how much they differ. Pairwise differences are quantified using Cliff's Delta ( $\delta$ ), a nonparametric effect size that captures the probability that a randomly selected individual from one orientation scores higher than a randomly selected individual from another (Cliff 1993). Cliff's  $\delta$  is particularly suited to ordinal data because it makes no distributional assumptions and directly measures the degree of separation between groups (Cliff 1993). Effect sizes are interpreted following Vargha and Delaney's (2000) thresholds:  $|\delta| < 0.11$  as negligible, 0.11 to 0.28 as small, 0.28 to 0.43 as medium, and  $\geq 0.43$  as large. To assess the precision of these estimates, I construct 95% confidence intervals using bootstrapping with 1,000 resamples (Efron and Tibshirani 1994). When a confidence interval excludes zero, the difference is statistically significant at  $\alpha = .05$ , integrating significance testing within the effect size framework rather than treating the two as separate steps.

To address potential inflation of Type I error across the 30 pairwise comparisons (6 orientation pairs  $\times$  5 outcomes), I apply a Benjamini-Hochberg correction to control the false discovery rate (Benjamini and Hochberg 1995). Results are reported with both bootstrap confidence intervals and corrected p-values. When both approaches converge, confidence in the reported effects is strengthened.

Beyond pairwise comparisons, I use Cramer's V to summarize the overall strength of association between acculturation orientation and each political outcome. Cramer's V provides a single measure of how strongly orientation shapes a given outcome, complementing the more

granular pairwise effects (Mangiafico 2015). Confidence intervals are again constructed via bootstrapping.

Finally, I assess internal cohesion using two complementary approaches. This analysis directly tests the theoretical expectation that demicultural respondents, who lack strong anchoring in either cultural system, will exhibit greater within-group variability than the other three orientations. The coefficient of variation (CV), defined as the ratio of the standard deviation to the mean within each orientation, indicates how much political preferences vary within each group. Higher values signal greater internal spread. Description alone, however, cannot determine whether these differences in spread are statistically meaningful, so I also conduct Levene's tests for equality of variance on each outcome. A significant Levene's test indicates that at least one orientation is more internally divided than the others. Together, CV and Levene's tests provide the empirical basis for evaluating whether demiculturals function as the acculturation framework's swing group.

## Results

### Phase 1: Political Profiles Within Each Orientation

Table 2 presents the political makeup of each acculturation orientation across ideology, partisanship, and immigration attitudes. These profiles show that each orientation carries a distinct political character.

**Table 2.** Political Profiles by Acculturation Orientation

<b>Orientation</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>% Moderate</b>	<b>% Democrat</b>	<b>% Pro-Immig rant</b>	<b>% DREAM Support</b>	<b>% Permissive</b>
Culture-affirming	433	67.4	49.9	91.5	82.7	38.1
Assimilationist	705	57.2	40.4	74.5	68.7	31.5

Bicultural	3,269	62.2	46.9	89.4	83.8	45.2
Demicultural	378	63.0	45.5	78.3	75.7	37.8

*Note.* Percentages reflect modal response categories. Pro-Immigrant = percentage viewing immigrants as strengthening society. DREAM Support = percentage supporting (scores  $\geq 3$  on 4-point scale). Permissive = percentage favoring permissive immigration policy (scores  $\geq 4$  on 5-point scale).

Culture-affirming Latinos, who maintain stronger heritage attachment relative to American attachment, display the most consistently liberal-Democratic profile. Half identify as Democrats, the highest of any orientation, and only 11% identify as Republicans. On immigration, they hold the most favorable views of any group. Fully 92% see immigrants as strengthening society, and 83% support the DREAM Act.

Assimilationists, who maintain strong American attachment relative to heritage ties, show the opposite pattern. They are the most Republican (27%) and most conservative (28%) orientation. They also hold the most restrictive immigration views across all three measures. Only 75% view immigrants positively, 69% support the DREAM Act, and just 32% favor permissive immigration policy.

Biculturals, the 68% majority, do not simply split the difference between these poles. On immigration, they closely resemble culture-affirming Latinos. Eighty-nine percent view immigrants positively, 84% support the DREAM Act, and 45% favor permissive policy, the highest of any orientation. Yet on partisanship, biculturals occupy an intermediate position, with 47% identifying as Democrats compared to 50% of culture-affirming Latinos and 40% of assimilationists.

Demiculturals, who maintain moderate attachments to both cultures with more variable aspirations, follow a different pattern. Their immigration views fall between biculturals and assimilationists. Seventy-eight percent view immigrants positively and 76% support the DREAM

Act. On partisanship, they resemble biculturals more than assimilationists, with 46% identifying as Democrats.

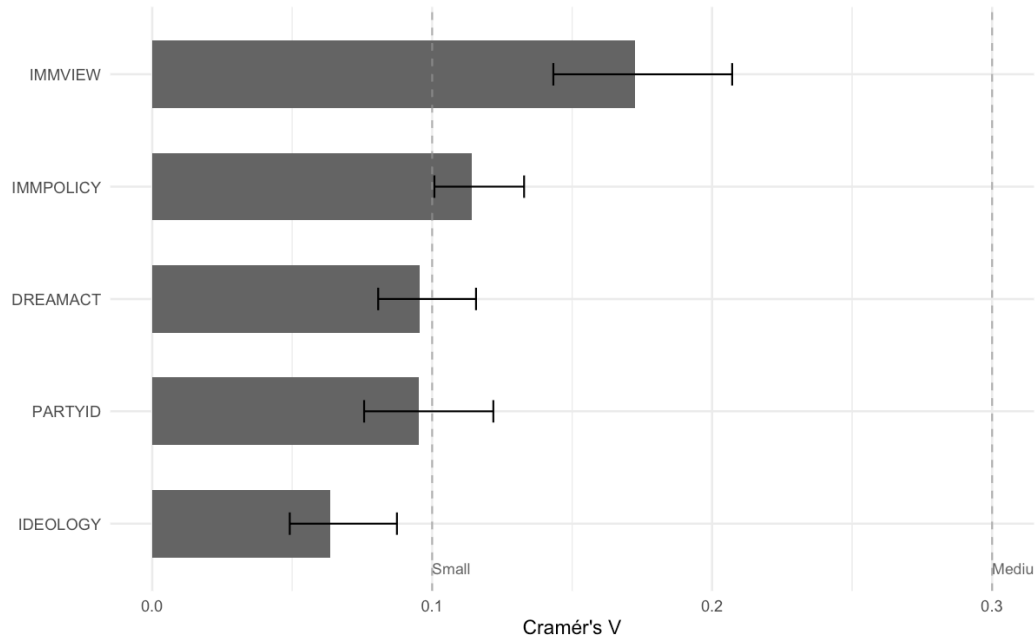
The profiles reveal different degrees of differentiation across the three domains. The sharpest separation appears on immigration, where culture-affirming and bicultural orientations cluster together with strong pro-immigrant positions while assimilationist and demicultural orientations hold more restrictive views. Partisanship shows a more graduated pattern, with culture-affirming Latinos the most Democratic, assimilationists the least, and biculturals and demiculturals falling in between. Ideology shows the least differentiation, with moderate identification dominant across all four orientations, though assimilationists are the most conservative. Phase 2 examines how large these differences are and where acculturation orientation exerts its strongest influence.

## **Phase 2: Between-Orientation Differences**

Phase 2 moves from profiles to comparisons, asking how strongly acculturation orientations differentiate political attitudes and where those differences are largest. Figure 4 presents the strength of association between acculturation orientation and each political outcome, measured by Cramér's  $V$  with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. Acculturation orientations significantly differentiate all five political outcomes, with the strongest effects appearing on immigration. Immigration views show the strongest association ( $V = .172$ ), followed by immigration policy ( $V = .114$ ), DREAM Act support ( $V = .096$ ), partisanship ( $V = .095$ ), and ideology ( $V = .064$ ). This pattern is consistent with the theoretical expectation that immigration attitudes are where acculturation is most directly engaged as a political force, as these attitudes concern questions of cultural belonging, inclusion, and membership that are at the core of what acculturation navigates. That acculturation orientations also significantly differentiate ideology

and partisanship suggests that the process operates across political domains, even where the connection to these questions is less explicit.

**Figure 4.** Association Strength (Cramér's V) Between Acculturation Orientation and Political Outcomes

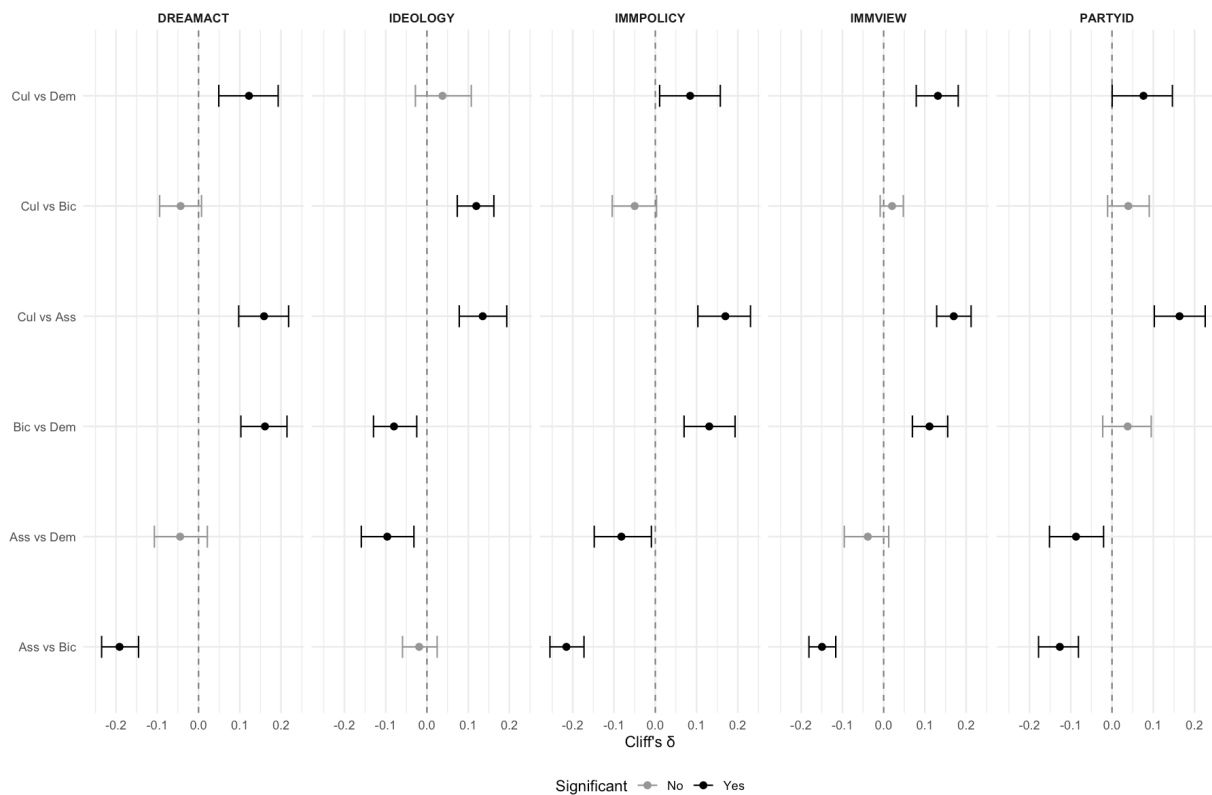


*Note.* Bars represent Cramér's V with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals (1,000 iterations). Dashed lines indicate conventional thresholds for small (.10) and medium (.30) effect sizes.

Pairwise comparisons using Cliff's Delta with Benjamini-Hochberg correction for multiple testing confirm that these differences are systematic rather than driven by any single pair of orientations. Of 30 pairwise comparisons (six orientation pairs across five outcomes), 20 reached statistical significance after FDR correction. The largest effects appear on immigration outcomes, where assimilationists and biculturals diverge most sharply. On immigration policy, biculturals and assimilationists show a Cliff's Delta of .216 (small effect), indicating a consistent tendency for biculturals to hold more permissive positions. On DREAM Act support, the corresponding effect is .192. Across all three immigration measures, biculturals are statistically indistinguishable from culture-affirming Latinos but significantly different from assimilationists.

This pattern is theoretically important because it means that maintaining heritage attachment, even alongside strong American attachment, pulls immigration attitudes in the same direction as heritage attachment alone. Biculturals do not split the difference between culture-affirming and assimilationist positions on immigration. They align with culture-affirming Latinos, supporting H2c on immigration and suggesting that heritage retention is the dimension driving immigration attitudes. Figure 5 displays these pairwise effects with bootstrapped confidence intervals across all five outcomes.

**Figure 5.** Pairwise Effect Sizes by Variable



*Note.* Points represent Cliff's  $\delta$  with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals (1,000 iterations). Black points indicate confidence intervals excluding zero. Positive values indicate the first-listed group scores higher. Twenty of 30 comparisons remained significant after Benjamini-Hochberg correction (full results in Appendix B, Table B.2).

On ideology and partisanship, the pattern shifts. Culture-affirming Latinos stand out as more liberal and more Democratic than assimilationists ( $\delta = .135$  and  $.164$  respectively), but

biculturals and assimilationists are statistically indistinguishable on ideology ( $\delta = -.019$ , nonsignificant). The strongest pairwise effects on partisanship appear between culture-affirming and assimilationist orientations ( $\delta = .164$ ) and between assimilationists and biculturals ( $\delta = .127$ ). Taken together, biculturals do not occupy a single predictable position across political outcomes. They align with culture-affirming Latinos on immigration while resembling assimilationists on ideology. Because biculturals maintain strong attachments to both heritage and American cultures, different political domains activate different dimensions of their orientation. Immigration, which directly engages questions of cultural belonging, activates heritage attachment. Ideology, which is more closely tied to mainstream political positioning, reflects their American attachment. This pattern confirms H2c, as biculturals are not simply a midpoint between the two poles but a distinct orientation whose political expression shifts depending on the issue at stake. This is precisely what bidimensionality predicts and what binary models cannot detect.

Finally, I assess internal cohesion to test H2d, the prediction that demicultural Latinos would exhibit the greatest within-group variability, functioning as the acculturation framework's equivalent of a swing group. The coefficient of variation (CV) and Levene's tests for equality of variance provide the empirical basis for this evaluation. Levene's tests are significant for all five outcomes ( $p < .01$  for ideology and partisanship,  $p < .001$  for all three immigration measures), confirming that at least one orientation is more internally divided than the others. However, the most internally heterogeneous group is not demiculturals but assimilationists, who show the highest average CV (.368) and the highest variance on four of five outcomes. Culture-affirming Latinos are the most internally unified (.282), with biculturals (.300) and demiculturals (.336) falling between. H2d is not supported as stated. The finding that assimilationists are the most

internally divided is itself theoretically suggestive, as it indicates that orienting toward mainstream belonging while navigating racialized exclusion may produce internal tension rather than political coherence. This finding is explored further in the discussion.

## **Discussion**

### ***The Politics of Acculturation***

The results demonstrate that acculturation orientations produce distinct political profiles across ideology, partisanship, and immigration attitudes, establishing acculturation as a meaningful force in Latino political behavior. But the findings go beyond establishing significance. They reveal how acculturation operates politically and why existing frameworks have been unable to capture the patterns documented here.

The central finding is where acculturation's effects concentrate. Immigration attitudes, the domain that most directly engages questions of cultural belonging and membership, show the strongest differentiation across acculturation orientations. This is not coincidental. Immigration is where the competing cultural demands that acculturation navigates become politically concrete, where questions about who belongs, who deserves inclusion, and what obligations the nation holds toward newcomers map directly onto the cultural attachments that define each orientation. That acculturation also significantly differentiates ideology and partisanship, more modestly, suggests that the process reaches across political domains rather than being confined to a single issue area.

The bicultural finding is particularly important for understanding Latino political diversity. Biculturals, who represent 68% of this sample and who are structurally invisible under binary acculturation models, do not behave as a midpoint between heritage and American cultural attachments. On immigration, they align with culture-affirming Latinos. On ideology,

they resemble assimilationists. This is not an inconsistency, but is what bidimensional theory predicts. Because biculturals maintain strong attachments to both heritage and American cultures, the political relevance of each attachment depends on what is at stake. Immigration activates heritage attachment. Ideological self-placement reflects American attachment. A framework that can only place individuals along a single assimilation continuum would classify these respondents as partially assimilated and predict a single, moderate political profile. The findings show that this prediction is wrong, and that it is wrong in a theoretically predictable way.

The culture-affirming and assimilationist profiles confirm the expectations set out in H2a and H2b, but they also reveal something the hypotheses did not anticipate. Assimilationists are the most internally divided acculturation orientation, not demiculturalists as H2d predicted. Culture-affirming Latinos, by contrast, are the most politically unified. This asymmetry suggests that strong heritage attachment provides a more coherent basis for political orientation than strong American attachment does, at least under conditions of racialized exclusion. For assimilationists, orienting toward mainstream belonging while being persistently treated as outsiders may generate competing political impulses that produce internal variability rather than a unified conservative profile. This finding points to a tension at the heart of the assimilationist experience, one that deserves sustained attention in future research on how racialization shapes the political consequences of acculturation.

Together, these findings offer an answer to the puzzle that opened this paper. Latino political diversity is not random variation around a group mean, nor is it reducible to differences in how far along an assimilation trajectory individuals have traveled, but, instead, reflects the distinct ways that individuals navigate the enduring cross-pressures of acculturation, and the

distinct political consequences that follow. The question is what these findings mean for how the field theorizes the relationship between acculturation and political behavior.

### ***From Assimilation to Psychological Acculturation***

These findings speak to a deeper theoretical problem. Political science has long lacked a framework adequate to the task of explaining the full range of Latino political behavior. Group-centric frameworks such as linked fate and group consciousness, imported from scholarship on the African American experience, explain collective mobilization well but were never designed to account for the political diversity documented here (Dawson 1994; Lee 2008). When collective action is the expected outcome, Latinos who do not act collectively become the subject of questions like "why don't they vote in their own interest" rather than being understood as individuals whose politics reflect a different but equally coherent response to shared conditions. Lee (2008) warned that assuming the identity-to-politics link operates the same way across racial and ethnic groups masks the distinct processes that connect identity to politics for immigrant-origin populations, and the findings presented here identify one such process. Acculturation orientations capture the distinct ways individuals navigate competing cultural demands, and these navigations produce politically meaningful variation that existing frameworks have been unable to detect, let alone explain. Acculturation is not simply another variable to include in a model of Latino political behavior, but is a theoretically necessary construct for understanding why shared structural conditions, in this case racialized incorporation, yield diverse political responses.

The field's alternative, binary acculturation, has been inadequate, though for different reasons. By reducing acculturation to a single question of how assimilated a person is, binary models inherited the normative logic of straight-line assimilation theory (Park and Burgess 1925;

Gordon 1964) and carried it into contemporary political analysis, treating the process as linear, deterministic, and measurable through static proxies like generational status and language use. The findings demonstrate what this approach costs empirically, as roughly 75% of Latinos in this sample occupy hybrid orientations that binary models cannot recognize. These are the majority of the Latino electorate, and biculturals alone represent 68% of the sample, with a political profile that is both distinct and theoretically coherent. A measurement framework that renders the majority of its target population invisible is not producing measurement error, but is erasing the lived reality of most Latinos.

The move from assimilation to psychological acculturation is not simply a methodological refinement, but represents a different theoretical understanding of what acculturation is and how it connects to political behavior. Binary models measure outcomes of assimilation, where someone falls along a predetermined trajectory, whereas BAM measures psychological orientations, including how individuals identify with cultural systems, what they aspire to maintain or adopt, and how they position themselves relative to competing cultural demands. This distinction matters because it restores human agency to the study of acculturation. Under binary models, a third-generation English-dominant Latino is classified as highly assimilated regardless of whether that person actively identifies with heritage culture, aspires to maintain cultural ties, or feels a deep sense of belonging to their ethnic community. BAM allows these distinctions to surface, and the findings show that they carry political consequences. The four orientations are not just finer-grained demographic categories but distinct psychological configurations, rooted in social identity and self-categorization processes (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Hogg and Turner 1987), that reflect how individuals actively navigate the cultural demands they face.

Latinos represent a core case for demonstrating why this theoretical shift matters. As the second largest and fastest growing ethnic electorate in the United States, the political behavior of Latinos is central to understanding American politics, not just a subfield question. The depth of racialization Latinos have experienced, dating back to at least the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 (Haney López 2006), ensures that acculturation does not resolve within a generation or two as it did for European immigrant groups. Because the cross-pressures persist across generations, the full range of acculturation orientations coexists simultaneously within the population, which is what makes the political consequences detectable in a cross-sectional survey that includes Latinos of every generational status. It is also what makes the failure of binary models so consequential for this population, because when acculturation is enduring, the variation in how people navigate it becomes the central political fact rather than a temporary feature of immigrant adjustment and incorporation.

Although this study focuses on Latinos, the theoretical framework has broader implications. BAM provides a general model for understanding how immigrant-origin individuals navigate competing cultural demands, and there is no theoretical reason to assume that the connection between acculturation orientations and political attitudes is unique to Latinos. Cultural attachments are not fixed along a linear trajectory for any immigrant-origin group but are fluid, capable of shifting across generations and being renewed even after periods of dormancy (Padilla 1980; Padilla and Perez 2003). A third-generation individual in any immigrant-origin community can strengthen heritage ties that their parents let fade, and binary models cannot capture this fluidity because they assume a fixed endpoint at assimilation. BAM can because it treats the two dimensions as independent and does not assume one specific directionality. What racialization adds in the Latino case is that these cross-pressures have been

enduring and pronounced for over a century, but the underlying psychological processes through which individuals navigate competing cultural demands and develop distinct political responses are not limited to racialized groups. The field's reliance on assimilation as its default framework for understanding immigrant-origin political behavior has constrained not only what answers it finds but what questions it asks, and these findings suggest it is time to ask different questions.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

The contributions of this study should be understood alongside three limitations. First, the 2006 Latino National Survey provides a pre-polarization baseline that establishes acculturation's political effects before heightened anti-Latino sentiment could confound the results, but testing whether these patterns persist under contemporary conditions remains an important next step. Second, the BAM classification itself draws on items available in the LNS, which were sufficient for this first empirical test, though richer measurement, including ingroup and outgroup evaluations, feeling thermometers, and detailed strategy items, would allow future researchers to distinguish more precisely between the identity and aspirational dimensions that BAM theorizes. Finally, this study is limited to ideology, partisanship, and immigration attitudes, yet if acculturation orientations shape how individuals interpret political life, there is every reason to expect their influence reaches into attitudes toward democratic norms, policy preferences, and political participation, domains that would further clarify how acculturation operates as a political force.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to test whether the four acculturation orientations identified by Author (2026) produce distinct political profiles among Latinos, and the findings confirm that they do. Acculturation orientations significantly differentiate ideology, partisanship, and immigration

attitudes, with the strongest effects appearing on immigration, the domain where questions of cultural belonging are most directly at stake. Biculturals, who represent the majority of the Latino electorate and who have been structurally invisible under binary acculturation models, exhibit a distinct political profile that cannot be reduced to a midpoint between heritage and American poles. These findings demonstrate that Latino political diversity is not a puzzle to be solved by better descriptive variables like income, education, or generation, or by finer-grained measures of assimilation, but by adopting a framework like BAM that captures how individuals identify with cultural differences and navigate those differences.

The broader implication is that political science needs to take psychological acculturation seriously as a constitutive force in immigrant-origin political behavior. For too long, the field has defaulted to frameworks that either predict a collective unity that does not exist or reduce acculturation to assimilation, which fails to represent most immigrant-origin individuals. BAM offers an alternative that operates at the individual level while remaining rooted in the group-level dynamics of social identity, cultural attachment, and racialized incorporation. It captures not only how individuals see themselves but what they aspire to maintain or adopt, preserving the human agency that binary models strip away. Although this study focuses on Latinos, the framework applies wherever immigrant-origin individuals navigate competing cultural demands, and the questions it raises about how those navigations shape political life extend well beyond any single group. The study of acculturation in political science is not a settled matter that needs minor updating, but an open frontier that requires fundamentally different theoretical approaches than those the field has relied on to this point.

### Data and Code Availability

Data for this study are available at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (Fraga et al., 2006). Replication materials have been archived by the author and will be made public upon publication.

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#### **AI Disclosure**

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