

# Latino evangelicals push for immigration reform ahead of election

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(RNS)—On Good Friday, March 29 this year, Pastor Tony Suarez, founder of the evangelical Christian ministry Revival Makers, drove a stake into the ground in the middle of a tent in McAllen.

“This entire southern border belongs to Jesus,” he declared to a crowd of mostly Latino Texans.

Suarez’s stop in McAllen was one of a series of [tent revivals](#) on the southern border that his ministry said have drawn more than 9,000 people.

He doesn’t just preach: As vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, Suarez advocates with politicians for immigration reform that prioritizes border enforcement, assimilation and a non-amnesty path to legal status.

A member of Donald Trump’s informal evangelical advisory board since 2016, Suarez endorsed the former president in June as one of the campaign’s “Latino Americans for Trump.”

Suarez has, however, at times expressed disappointment in the Republican party’s policies at the border. In this he is representative of Latino evangelical leaders who lack trust in either major political party’s action on the issue, while pushing them for reform.



A Border Patrol agent asks asylum-seeking migrants to line up in a makeshift, mountainous campsite after the group crossed the border with Mexico, Friday, Feb. 2, 2024, near Jacumba Hot Springs, Calif. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull)

“We went to the border, and we asked the Lord to intervene, to be in the midst of this, to give wisdom to legislators and to give patience to frustrated citizens,” Suarez told RNS earlier this month.

“In Genesis chapter 2, there was an angelic guard at the Garden of Eden. And so, we prayed and asked the Lord to do something similar at the southern border.”

For Suarez and the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, the “free flow” of migrants crossing the border is an “unprecedented crisis” that led the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference to launch its immigration reform campaign, “[The Urgency of Now](#),” in March.

Even [as illegal border crossings](#) have dropped following Biden’s [recent changes](#) to asylum policy, Suarez said the border remains in crisis, “with no real resolution or end in sight,” calling Biden’s actions “politically motivated but really just empty words.”

“We are a nation of immigrants. We love immigrants and we support

immigration reform, but we have to know who's in the country," Suarez said.

## **Latinos not a unified bloc**

Since the last presidential election, nearly [4 million more](#) Latinos are eligible to vote, putting the United States' 36.2 million eligible Latino voters at about 14.7 percent of the electorate.

As the Trump campaign has made reducing immigration a number one campaign issue, Latinos, especially those who call themselves evangelical, are far from a unified bloc.

In 2022, Pew Research Center [found](#) 15 percent of Latinos are evangelical Protestants—half of whom are Republican or Republican-leaning—and 44 percent are Democrats or Democratic-leaning. That represents a much higher percentage of Republicans than among Latino Catholics.

Suarez said immigration is just one of the issues the 40,000 member churches in the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference are concerned about in this election, saying that Democrats' "woke ideology" on marriage, life and gender are the "No. 1 issue."



Gabriel Salguero. (Photo courtesy The Gathering via RNS)

But Gabriel Salguero, president and founder of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition, said poverty and education are the most important issues for Latino evangelicals, putting emphasis on the child tax credit, earned income tax credit and nutrition assistance programs like [WIC](#) and [SNAP](#).

“Protecting the poor is an issue for the gospel, because Jesus told us that,” said Salguero, a pastor at The Gathering, an Assemblies of God church in Orlando, Fla. “Latino evangelicals are not one-issue voters, and we’re certainly not a monolith.”

The National Latino Evangelical Coalition has also kept up a “sustained outreach and advocacy effort” on immigration reform, calling for bipartisan legislation to provide more resources for border enforcement and processing asylum cases while prioritizing family unification.

“Latino evangelicals are looking for people who know how to balance justice and mercy, law and humane treatment of people,” Salguero said of the election.

Bishop Jesus Santos Yáñez, a lifelong Republican whose family settled in Texas before it became part of the United States, now leads a region of the Church of God of Prophecy covering Iowa, Colorado, Nebraska and Minnesota.

He tells the pastors in his multiethnic and multiracial Pentecostal Holiness denomination they must prioritize helping people without judgment in addition to following the law.

Recently, he accompanied advocates from [Mission Talk](#), a Florida coalition of Latino evangelicals, on a visit to Tallahassee to speak out against new laws that [raise penalties](#) for immigrants lacking permanent legal status who are caught driving without a license.

On the National Day of Prayer in May, Yáñez prayed over Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, a Republican, but like other evangelical Latino leaders, he said he cannot support former President Donald Trump because of the former president’s anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric.



Juan García. (Photo courtesy CBF via RNS)

Juan García, pastor of the Hispanic congregation of First Baptist Church in Newport News, Va., said he spends a lot of time countering the right's narrative that immigrants don't belong.

"The idea that we're not loved, we're not wanted or we're not valued may be seeded or planted in the minds of people," said García, who is Puerto Rican.

And García also reminds them of their own worth, saying they spiritually have the "blood of Christ" running through their veins.

## **Pushing back against problems**

García, moderator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, was one of many Latino Protestant leaders who pushed back against Trump's [claims](#) that immigrants are "poisoning the blood of our country."

The people Trump is targeting, Garcia said, are those who are "making the economy run."

Elket Rodríguez, an attorney and global migration advocate for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, lamented "the lack of seriousness" that lawmakers display when speaking about immigration reform, which he said is about more than U.S. aspirations and responsibilities.

Rodríguez said "a highly intellectual and honest conversation" would address the root causes driving migration and the impact of immigration on questions around the future funding for [Social Security](#), the nation's aging population and job openings in agriculture and other sectors.

"If you ask me, misinformation is the biggest threat to migrants and those who want to host them," Rodríguez said.

Some Latino faith leaders say the term "evangelical" has become too

politicized to represent them. Yáñez, García and Rodríguez all said while “evangelical” describes their congregations accurately from a theological perspective, they now shy away from identifying that way.

“Evangelical and evangélico are not the same thing,” said Rodríguez, explaining the word in Spanish has a strong theological component.

“The word evangelical in the U.S. has evolved, especially in the past 10 years, into more of a political ethno-national concept.”

But the National Latino Evangelical Coalition’s Salguero said he prefers to make the term bend to what he believes it should represent. “Why should I give up a perfectly good historical definition?” he asked.

“Some of us in the evangelical world have compromised truth for proximity to power, and that’s idolatry. That’s sin,” Salguero said.

“One of the tragic temptations of evangelicalism in America is that we have become captive to partisan talking points and instead of going to our primary source, which is Scripture.”

“Our hope is in the gospel, not in politicians,” Salguero said.