

# Political engagement and preferences among Texas Hispanics

A report by the Thomas Jay Harris Institute for  
Hispanic and International Communication  
Texas Tech University

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# Introduction

## Report's goals and scope

As the Hispanic population in Texas moves toward majority status, its involvement in politics and civic affairs becomes increasingly relevant and influential. *The Thomas Jay Harris Institute for Hispanic & International Communication* in Texas Tech University's College of Media & Communication conducted a state-wide survey of more than 400 Hispanics in the summer of 2015.<sup>1</sup> Participants had the option to respond in English or Spanish.

Our goal was to better understand Texas Hispanics' political participation, perceptions of efficacy in civic affairs, and trust in key institutions. These elements are related to social capital as well as civic influence and political power, which are likely to increase as the population expands.

<sup>1</sup> Please find demographic information at the end of this report.

# Texas Hispanics' Political Participation

## *The Sleeping Giant*

Since the Decade of the Hispanic (1980s), Latinos have been characterized as a “sleeping giant” with potential to swing elections at the local, state, and national levels. However, Hispanic participation in presidential elections has remained between 40% and 50%.

In 2012, 48% of eligible Hispanics nationwide voted; in Texas only 39% did (MacClaggan, 2014). The Pew Research Center estimates eligible Hispanic voters in Texas at 4.8 million, 46% of the Hispanic population (López & Stepler, 2016). *The data reported here may help elucidate these low participation figures.*



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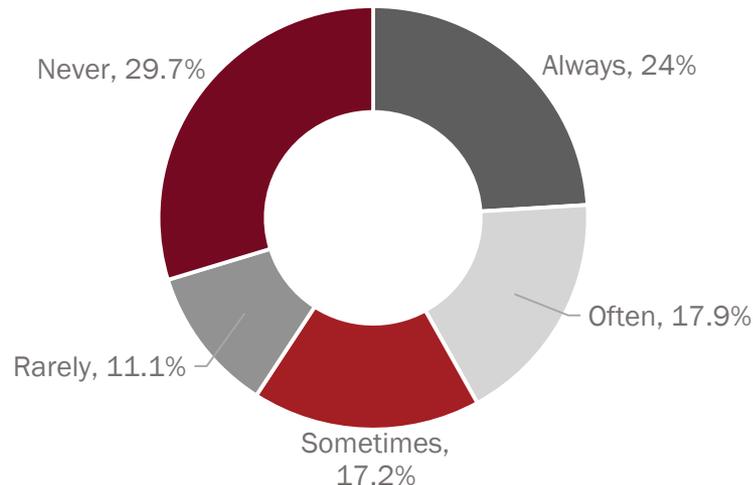
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# Texas Hispanics' Political Participation

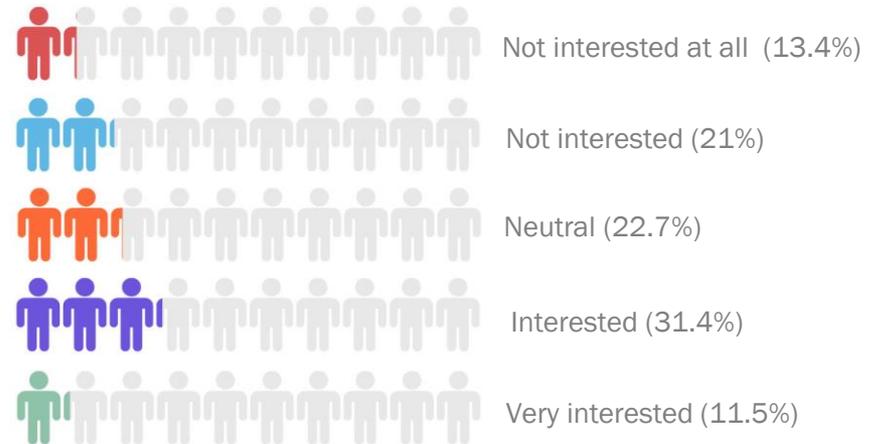
Hispanic voters have demonstrated their potential to determine the outcome of a presidential election (Barreto & Segura, 2014). However, Latino voter participation can run 20% lower than African-Americans' and non-Hispanic whites' (Valdes, 2016). In our sample, only 42% of American citizens indicated they "often" or "always" vote in elections.

A key factor is low levels of interest in politics, "a citizen's willingness to pay attention to political phenomena at the possible expense of other topics" (Lupia & Philpot, 2005; 1122). Less than half of our respondents, 43%, self-identified as "interested" or "very interested" in politics.

**How often do you vote?**  
(considering American citizens only, N=279)



**In general, what is your interest in politics?**  
(N=366)

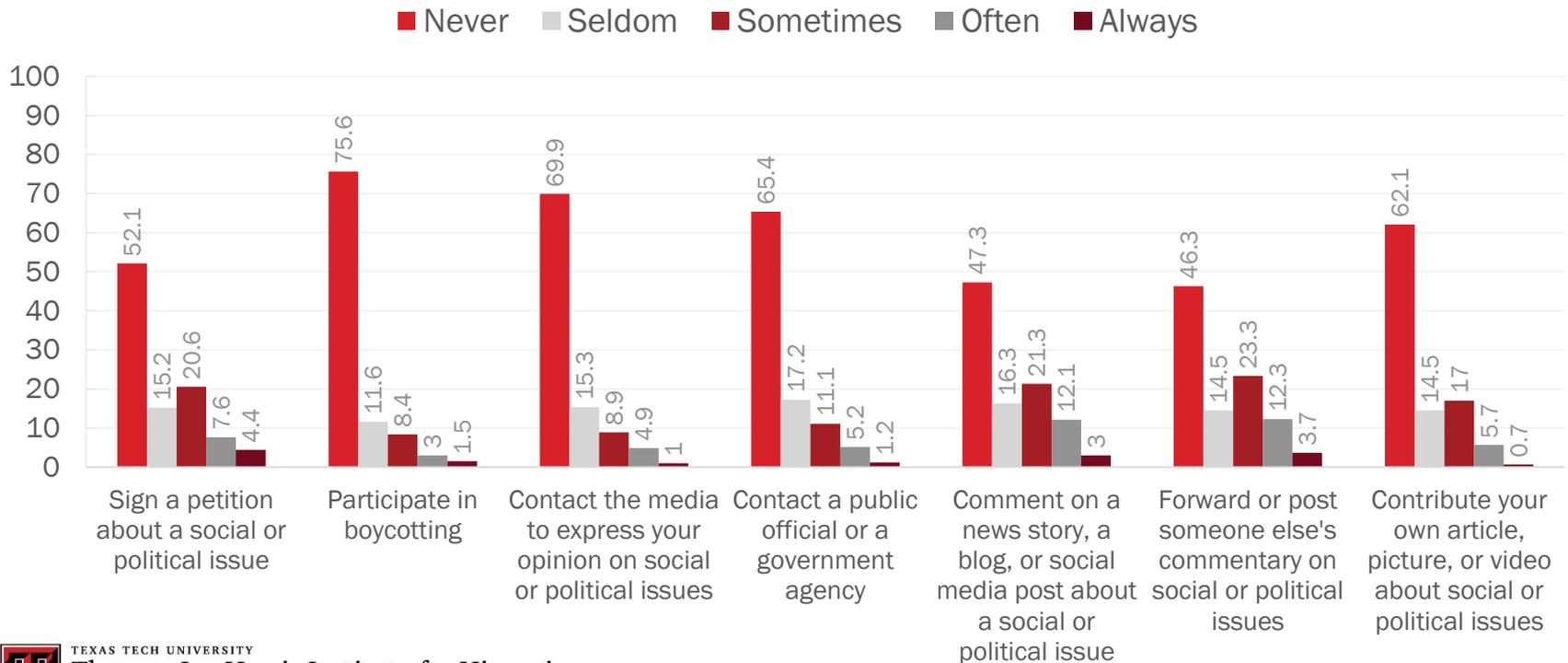


# Texas Hispanics' Political Participation

Given their low levels of interest in politics, it is not surprising that very few Texas Hispanics engage in political activities. In the previous year, only a third of respondents had contacted the media or a public official to express

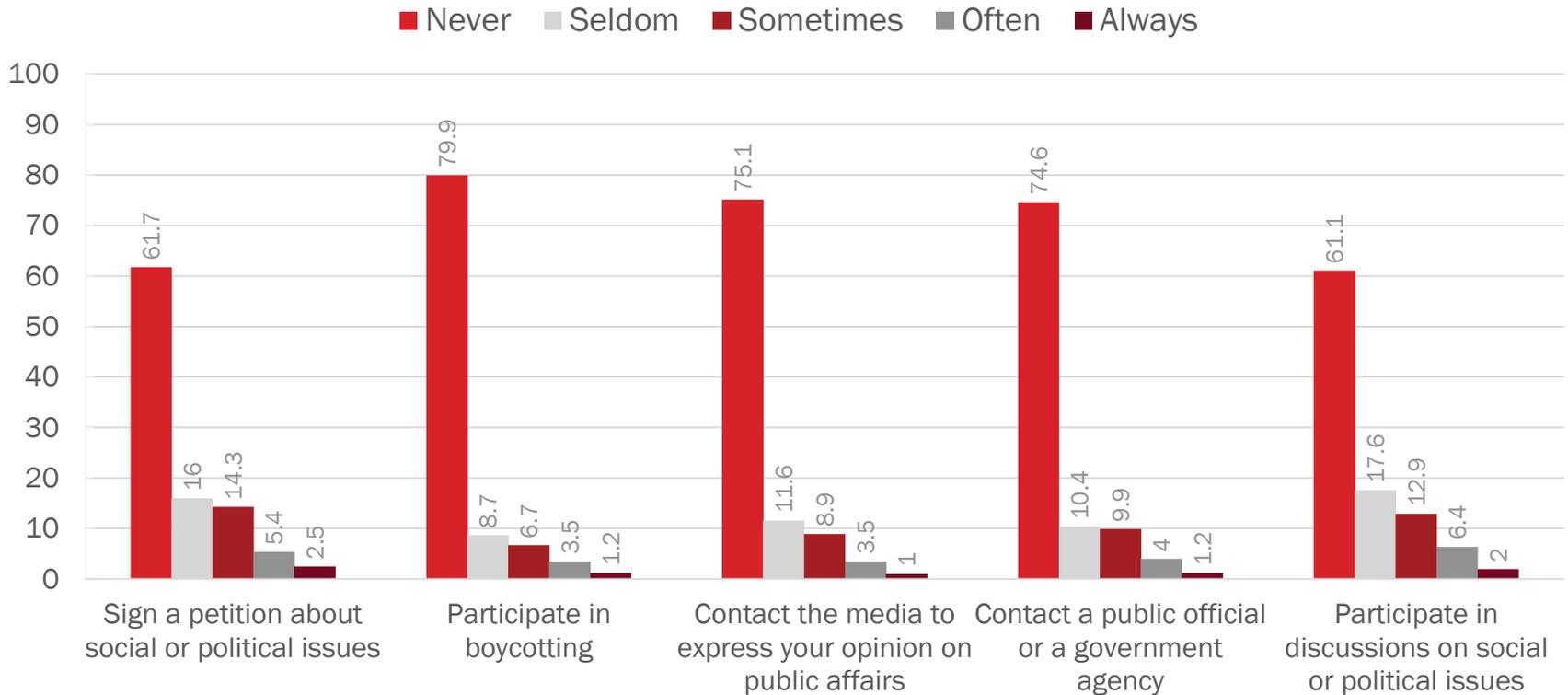
opinions or concerns. Similarly, very few had commented on political issues or contributed with political content on social media. In offline environments, the levels of participation are even lower.

During the past 12 months, how often did you participate in the following activities **on the Internet?** (N=403)



# Texas Hispanics' Political Participation

During the past 12 months, how often did you participate in the following activities **without using the Internet?** (N=403)

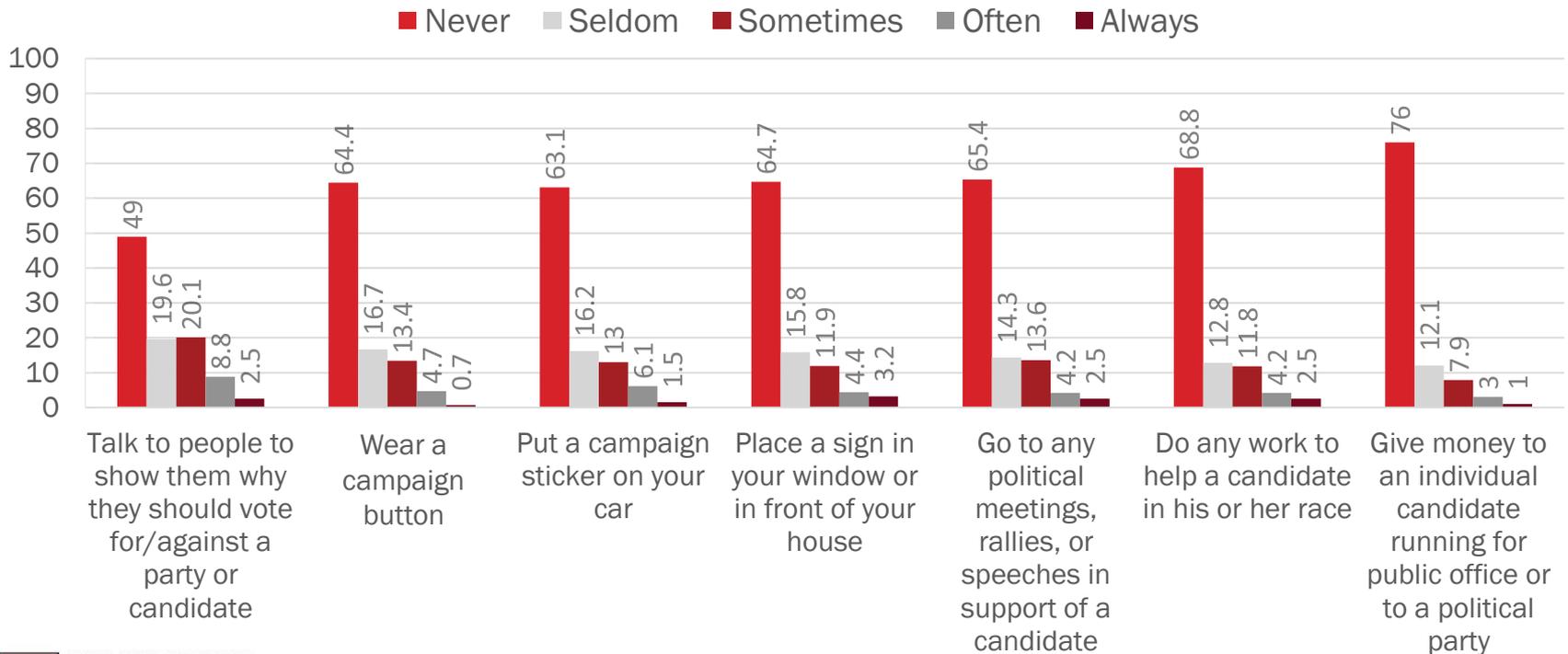


# Texas Hispanics' Political Participation

Texas Hispanics do very little to openly support candidates or political parties. According to our findings, the large majority did not display public support for a congressional

candidate, such as attending a political rally or wearing a campaign button. Seventy-six percent had not donated money for a candidate or political party in the previous 12 months.

During the past 12 months, how often did you participate in the following activities to **help a party or candidate win the 2014 midterm congressional elections?** (N=403)



# Texas Hispanics' Political Efficacy

## Power to change the status quo

Political efficacy—people’s belief that they can understand and influence political affairs—has long been an issue among minority populations in the U.S. Schildkraut (2005) found that many Hispanics believe their participation in elections and civic affairs won’t really affect their lives.

This belief has direct impacts on voter registration, voting, and civic participation, behaviors that directly influence a social group’s voice in civic governance.



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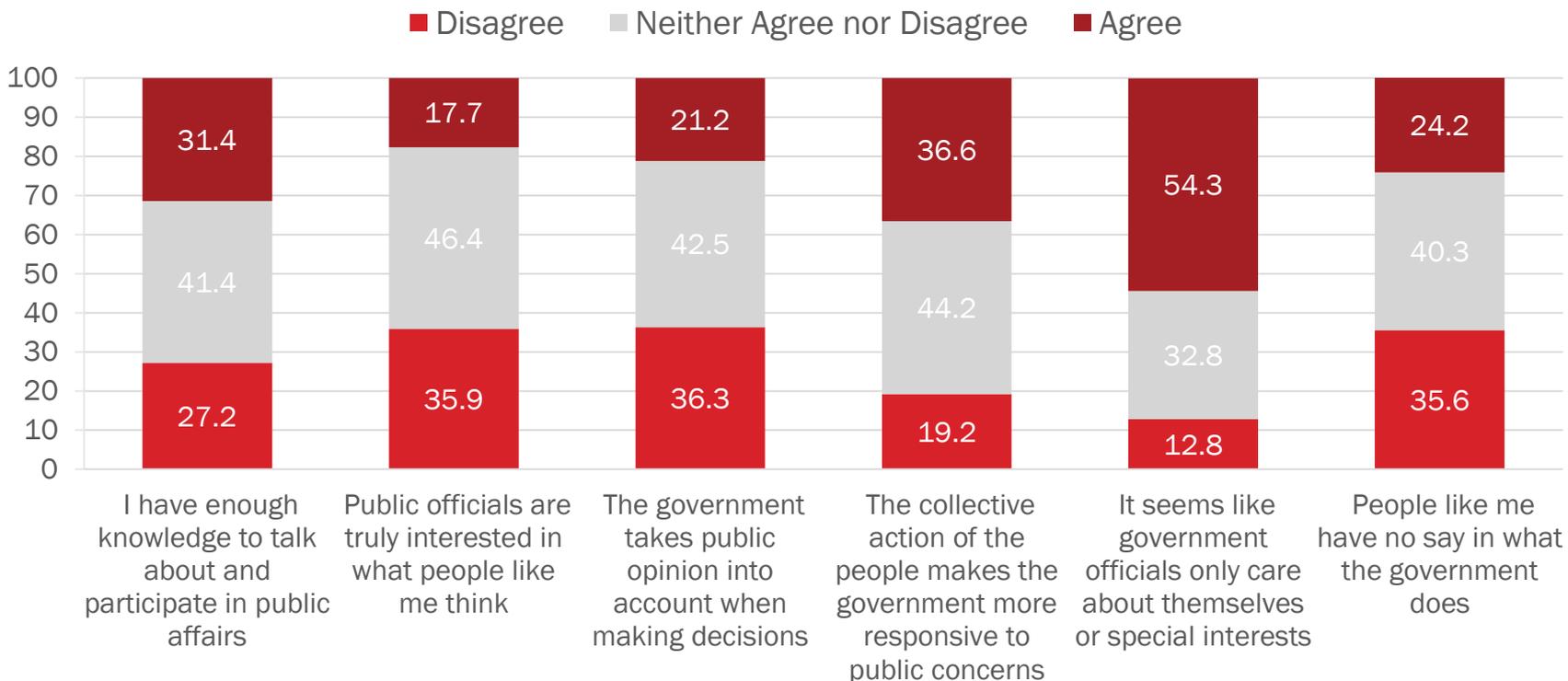
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# Texas Hispanics' Political Efficacy

Political efficacy has been identified as a robust predictor of participatory behaviors (Morrell, 2003). Low levels of efficacy may explain the levels of participation in elections and civic affairs among Texas Hispanics.

Fewer than a third of respondents claimed having sufficient knowledge to understand politics, and only 36% believe the government cares about them.

What is your **level of agreement** with the following statements? (N=402)



# How Political Parties Communicate with Texas Hispanics

## Outreach to Hispanic voters

Due to differences in age, acculturation level, language preference, and other factors, reaching Texas Hispanics who are eligible to vote presents a formidable challenge for political actors in the state.

An ever-expanding range of communication channels further complicates the equation. Data in this section report respondents' impressions of their communication with political parties.



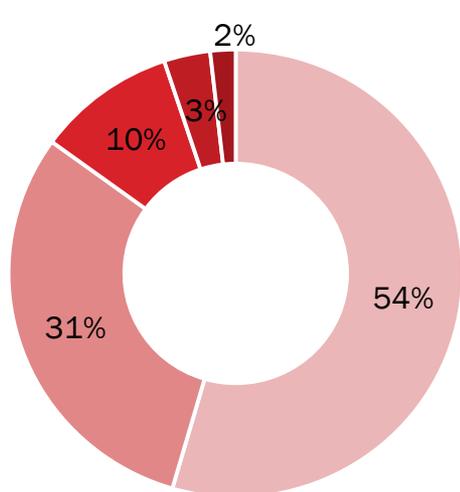
# Political Parties and Texas Hispanics

Texas Hispanics have been notoriously difficult to mobilize for political participation. Fifteen percent or fewer report being contacted regularly to participate in political activities. Those who identify themselves as Democrats

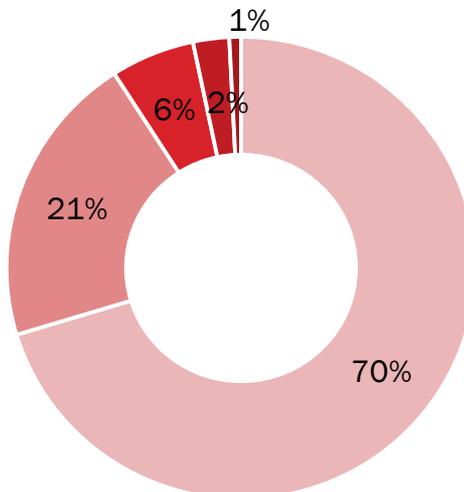
(171 respondents) have a more positive perception of their party than those who identify as Republicans (46 respondents), but neither party has built a strong relationship with Hispanic voters in Texas.

In the past 12 months, how often have you been contacted by organizations or individuals **to participate in political activities?** (N=402)

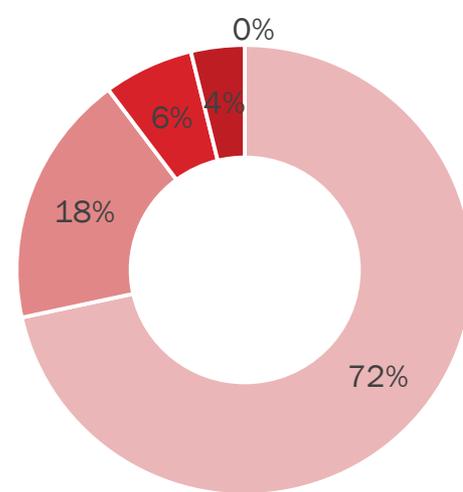
■ Never ■ Less often ■ Once a week ■ Every few days ■ Daily



Contacted through traditional media (such as phone calls or letters)



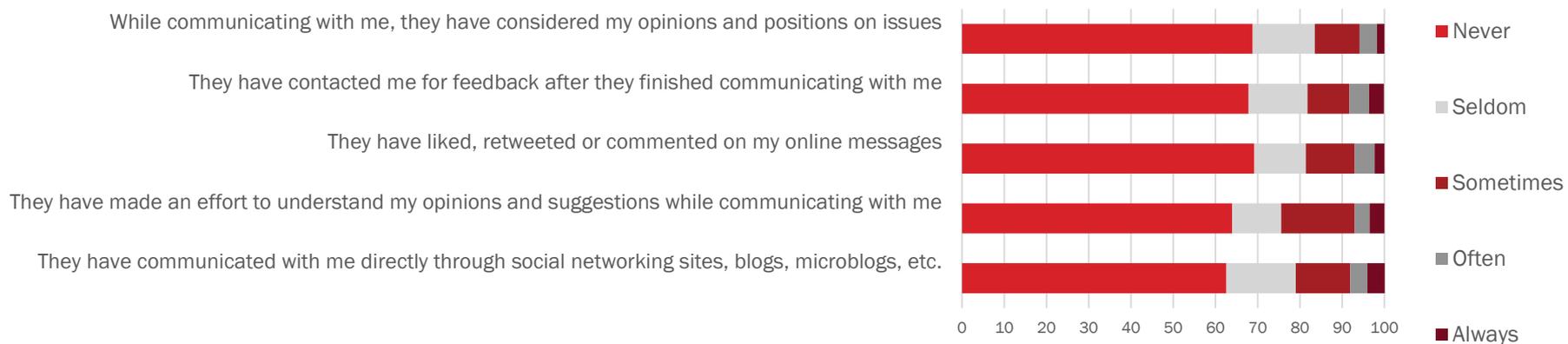
Contacted face to face (candidates or party leaders)



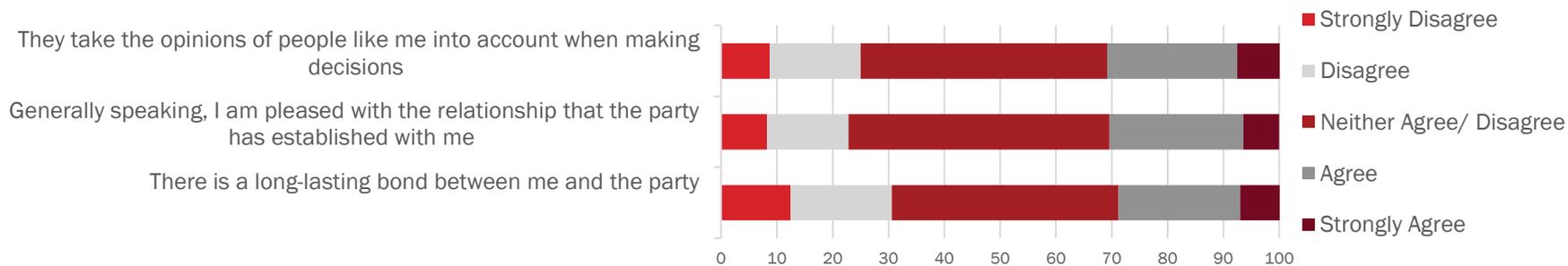
Contacted through digital media (such as texts, emails, social media)

# Political Parties and Texas Hispanics

## How Democrats have been **contacted** by the Democratic Party (N=171)

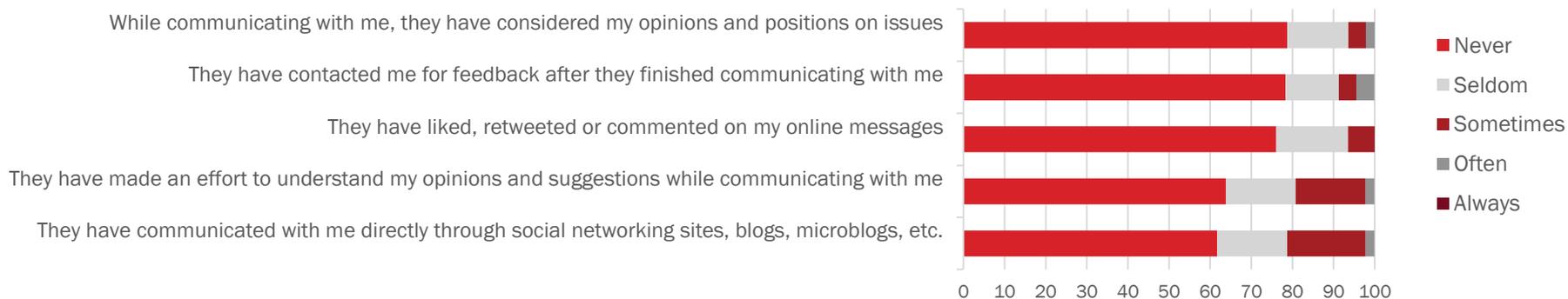


## How Democrats **perceive** the Democratic Party (N=171)

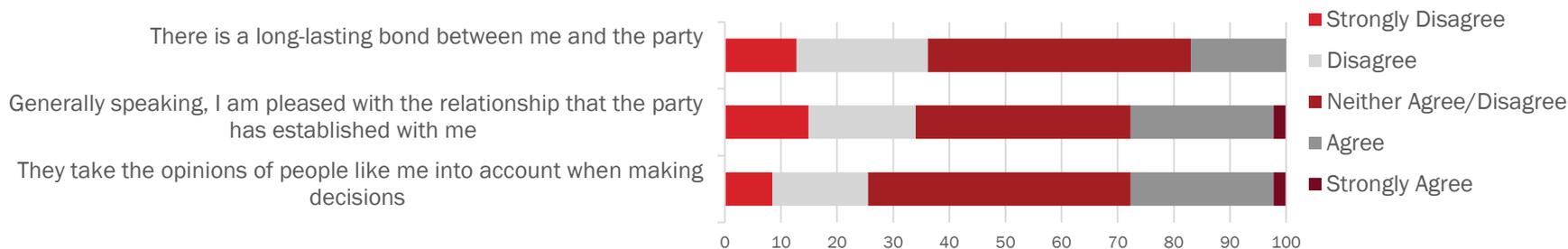


# Political Parties and Texas Hispanics

## How Republicans have been **contacted** by the Republican Party (N=46)



## How Republicans **perceive** the Republican Party (N=46)



# Texas Hispanics and U.S. Institutions: *A Matter of Trust*

## Trust in institutions

Trust has been defined as an evaluative orientation toward how well the government (or another institution) functions according to people's normative expectations (Hetherington, 1998).

Our survey asked Texas Hispanics to identify how much they trust government and other institutions that influence their political, economic, and social lives. Various levels of government scored in the lower half among institutions, and political parties occupy last place. These findings indicate ample opportunity for improvement.

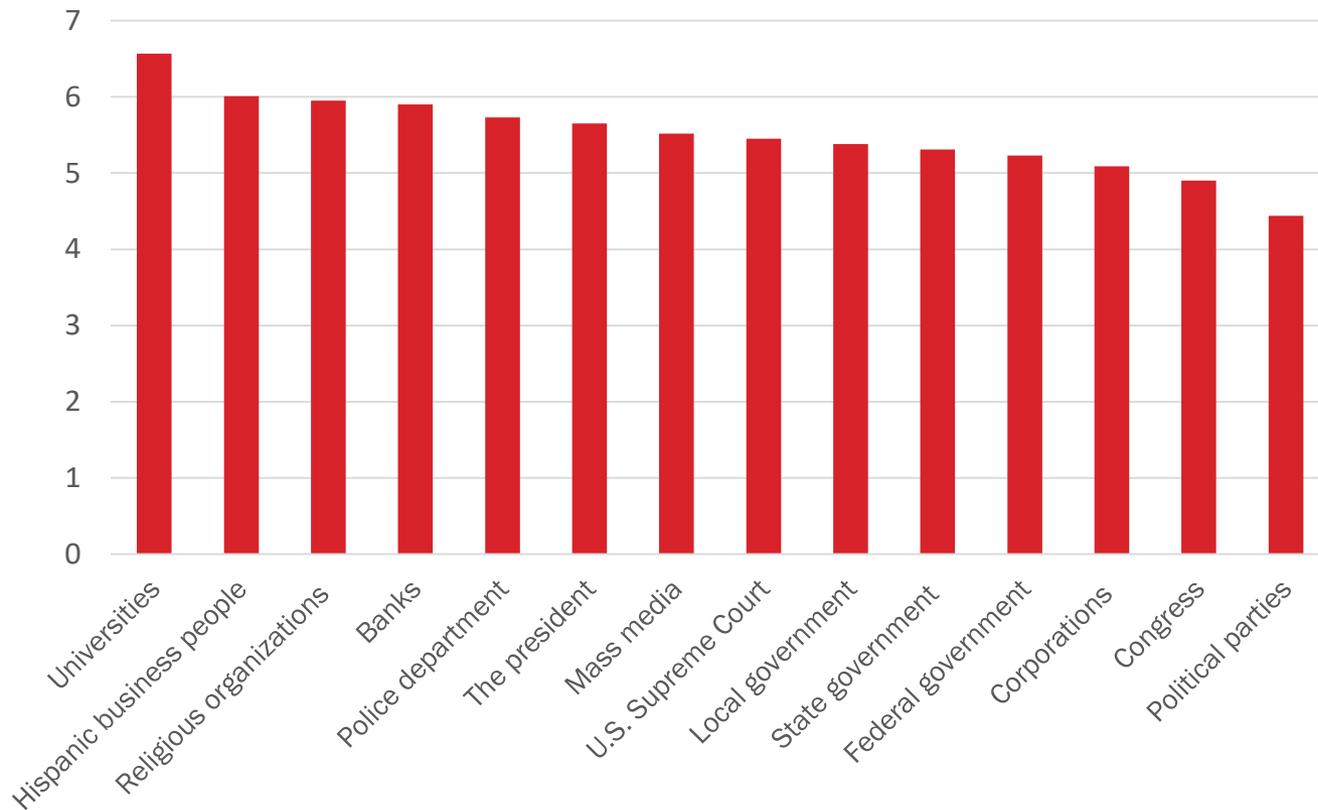


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# Texas Hispanics' Trust in Institutions

On a scale from 1 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust), **how much do you personally trust** the following institutions? (N=398)



# The Issues Texas Hispanics Care About

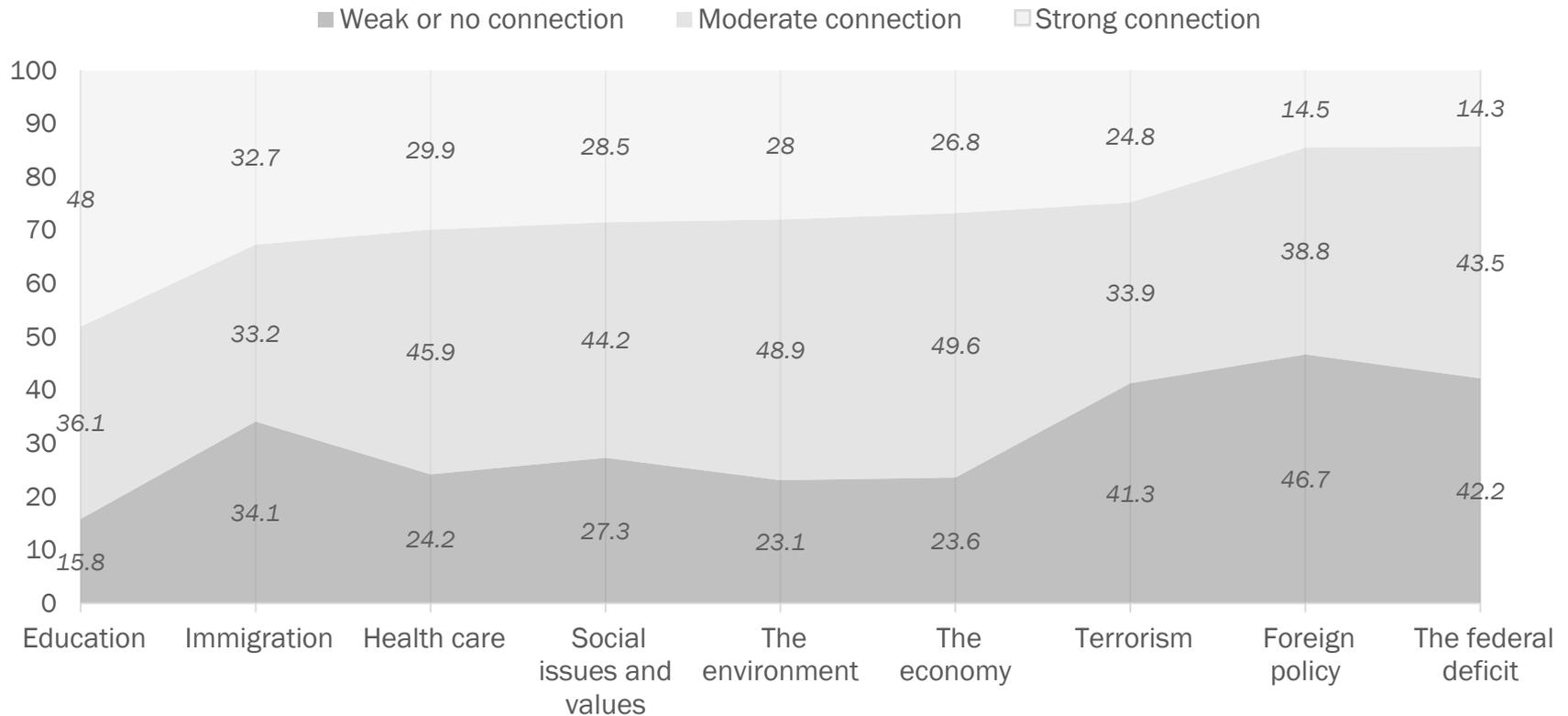
## Issues of concern

Our survey asked respondents to identify their level of connection to salient social and policy issues.

Education, immigration, and health care ranked highest, while terrorism, foreign policy, and the federal deficit scored lowest.

# Important Issues for Texas Hispanics

To what extent **do you feel a connection** between you and the following issues? (N=403)



# Demographics

## Texas Hispanics

In 2014, the Hispanic population in Texas was estimated at 10.4 million, representing 39% of the state's total population (López & Stepler, 2016). Hispanics are expected to outnumber whites by 2020 and comprise the state's majority population by 2042 (Fechter, 2015).

Although we endeavored to poll equal numbers of men and women, the latter represents three-quarters of our sample. We observe a youthful skew in the sample, with 46% of respondents falling between the ages of 18 to 29. We consider this an advantage given that 32% of eligible voters in Texas fall within that age range (López & Stepler, 2016).

It is also worth noting that “Independent” is the most common party affiliation, and “Moderate” the top political ideology selected.

# Demographics



75% of our sample is female

41% responded to the survey in Spanish



22% have a college degree

71% are younger than 40



50% earn \$30,000 or less

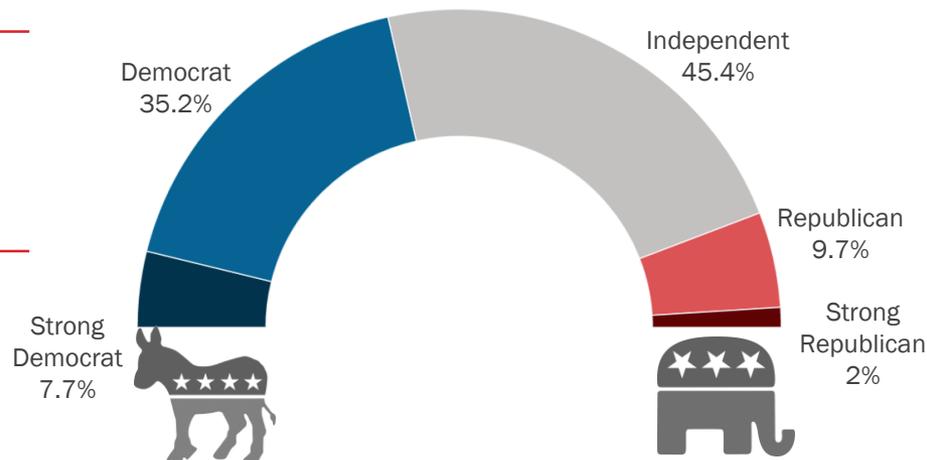
48.5% are ideologically moderate



47% say religion has no impact on their political views



Party Affiliation (N=401)



# Concluding Remarks

The survey results reported here provide a portrait of Texas Hispanics' political participation, perceptions of efficacy in civic affairs, and trust in key institutions just prior to heavy campaigning during the 2016 presidential election cycle.

The results indicate ample room for improvement in engendering greater trust and engaging in better, more consistent political communication with this expanding group.

We assert such improvement could lead to higher levels of voter registration and participation by Texas Hispanics – behaviors essential to bringing their power in closer alignment with their numbers.



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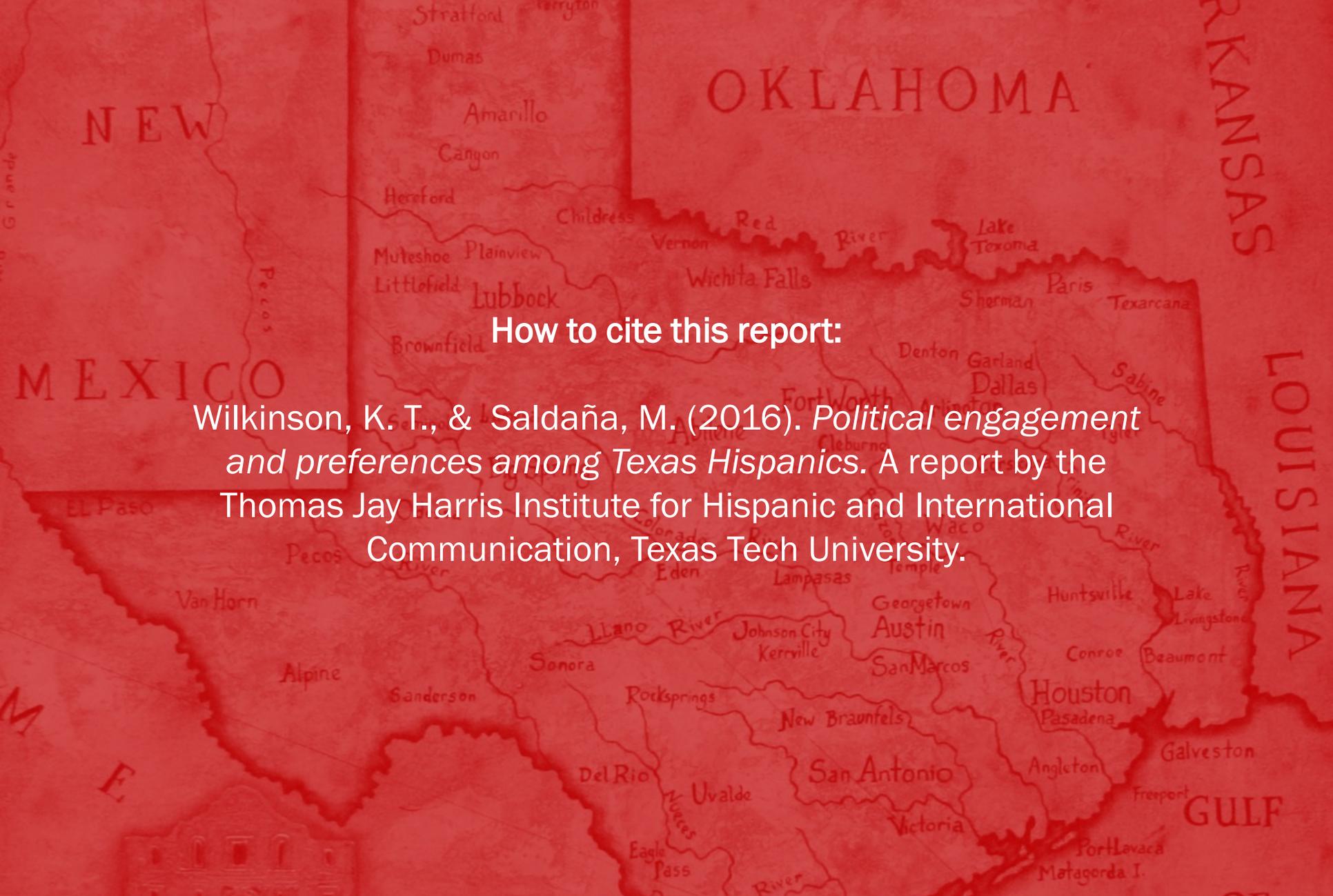
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