

In Texas, Racist Conspiracy Theories Fuel Suppression of Latino Voters

House candidate Cecilia Castellano tells *Truthout*
Ken Paxton's investigations into voter fraud are a "partisan attack."

By Mike Ludwig *Truthout*, Published September 12, 2024

Fox News anchor Maria Bartiromo is perhaps best known for spreading the baseless claim on air that *Dominion Voting Systems* rigged the 2020 presidential election. Her source for that "information" was a viewer who also claimed to be "internally decapitated" and said she spoke with the wind. Along with similar misinformation, this false claim landed *Fox* in court for defamation, and the company agreed to pay an unprecedented \$787 million settlement to Dominion.

But last month, Bartiromo returned to reporting baseless hearsay again, this time to cast doubt on the upcoming election. On August 18, she claimed on social media that the wife of a friend of a friend went to a DMV in Weatherford, Texas, and saw a "massive line of immigrants getting licenses" and a "tent and table outside the front door of the DMV registering them to vote!" Apparently the "same Dems" were registering immigrants to vote outside other DMVs in the area as well. Without explanation or evidence, the post insinuated that something nefarious must be going on because the people at the DMV appeared to be "immigrants."

Law enforcement and even the local Republican Party completely debunked Bartiromo's rumor. A spokesman for the Texas Department of Public Safety, which issues drivers' licenses in the state, pointed out that assuming people are undocumented immigrants based solely on their appearance is "kind of racist."

Still, Bartiromo's post has continued to spark a firestorm of suspicion — and action from some Texas authorities. Ken Paxton, a Republican and Texas's scandal-plagued attorney general, quickly announced an investigation into claims that unspecified "organizations" may be "unlawfully registering noncitizens to vote." He followed that by announcing a new "illegal voting" tip line, writing: "Significant growth of the noncitizen population in Texas and a pattern of partisan efforts to illegally weaponize voter registration and the voting process to manipulate electoral outcomes have created urgent risks to local, state, and federal elections."

Paxton recently filed lawsuits against some of the most populous and diverse counties in Texas (which also happen to lean Democrat) for hiring contractors to mail voter registration forms to constituents. Apparently, as part of a two-year investigation into claims of election fraud, Paxton also ordered squads of state police to aggressively search the homes and property of multiple volunteers and Democratic politicians from Latino communities.



Photo Credit: Lorie Shaul

Cecilia Castellano, a Democrat running for an open seat in Texas House District 80, had her phone seized by Paxton's election police.

"What's happening right now is that this is a Republican-launched partisan attack," Castellano said. "Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that just because I choose as part of my rights to run for office that I would then be subject to harassment with my business, my personal life, my home

and my campaign."

Noncitizens do not vote in detectable numbers. Experts say the notion that noncitizens are trying to vote is nonsensical to begin with. Criminal penalties are stiff and could result in deportation and family separation. However, the idea is central to the racist, Trump-fueled conspiracy theories about the 2020 election. It also reinforces the white nationalist "great replacement theory" which claims white people are being demographically "replaced" through immigration. Believers in that conspiracy theory often claim the process is engineered by Jewish billionaires and elite Democrats.

One of Paxton's most notable targets was 87-year-old Lidia Martinez, who spent decades volunteering to help elderly and disabled voters access the ballot under Texas's hyper-strict voting laws. On August 20, Martinez's home in Austin was raided by the Texas "election integrity unit," which was added to Paxton's office after former President Donald Trump spread lies about his loss in the 2020 election.

Martinez reported being interrogated for three hours as a gang of nine officers, some of them armed, went through her personal belongings, including "my underwear, my nightgown, everything, they went through everything." They confiscated her laptop, phone, planner and some documents. No

charges have been filed against Martinez, and Paxton has told the press that he cannot comment on an ongoing investigation.

Meanwhile, the “election integrity unit” was raiding homes and seizing property from at least four Latino Democrats in majority-Latino communities outside of San Antonio. In all, the *League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)*, a longtime civil rights group, reports that at least five of its Latino members had property searched and seized by Paxton’s election unit.

“You don’t go after our grandmothers,” said Domingo Garcia, a *LULAC* lead attorney, in a press conference in late August.

Castellano told *Truthout* Paxton’s election unit would have torn through her house as well if she had not agreed to hand over her cellphone. One of Castellano’s aides and others connected to her campaign were also targeted with search warrants.

“And I’m thinking, what’s going to happen next, what are they going to come up with next,” Castellano said. “What are they going to do to paint this picture better for the Republicans because this is a seat that they desperately want.”

Paxton has not announced any charges stemming from the investigation. According to warrants uncovered by *The Texas Tribune*, police were investigating tips about alleged “ballot harvesting,” the practice of submitting absentee ballots for other people that is central to debunked conspiracy theories about the 2020 election.

Racist conspiracy theories about voter fraud and immigrants — many of whom are naturalized citizens who can legally vote — became central to GOP messaging under the leadership of Donald Trump, who appears convinced that stoking fear about migrants will help him repeat his 2016 victory.

Paxton and other Republicans are deploying lawfare to muddy the waters with sensational headlines and, according to *LULAC*, targeting Latino voters for intimidation and suppression.

Democrats and civil rights groups say Paxton’s ploy is all part of a deeper pattern of voter suppression going back years, if not decades, in Texas and other red states. In the past, Paxton has filed criminal charges against election workers, Democrats and Latino voting rights activists over allegations of voter fraud that upended lives but rarely resulted in conviction.

“As a majority-minority state, with Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans together constituting 58 percent of the population, these raids are having a chilling effect on civic participation within these communities,” *LULAC* President Roman Palomares said in a statement. “This underscores a broader, more concerning strategy aimed at suppressing minority voices.”

Vanessa Cárdenas, executive director of immigration reform group *America’s Voice*, said undermining public trust in elections and promoting the white nationalist “replacement theory” is core to the GOP’s 2024 election strategy.

“This lie is being used to justify voter purges, intimidate those trying to help people register, create new bureaucratic and financial barriers to voting, and lay the groundwork for contesting the results if the Republicans don’t win,” Cárdenas said in a recent statement. “Added together, it’s a dangerous assault on American democracy that instigates the possibility

of more political violence.”

For Castellano, the hysteria over election “fraud” and non-citizen voters is also about dirty politics. Castellano is running for an open seat long held by a Democrat that Republicans think they can flip, putting them one seat closer to a supermajority that can pass the Texas GOP’s most extreme policies, including an extremely controversial voucher program that would direct public school funding toward private schools. Castellano said she is passionate advocate for greater public school funding and opposes private school vouchers.

“If they can pick up this seat and three others that they have identified, and these are words from the governor, it [can be flipped], and then they can pass their private school voucher program,” Castellano said. “What is that going to do to the majority of children who go to public schools?”

As of Wednesday, Castellano’s phone had not been returned. A judge will decide on Thursday whether to lift a temporary protective order on the phone confiscated from her campaign aide, who claimed in court that allowing Republican-controlled law enforcement to search the phone’s contents would “provide an unfair and illegal advantage to the prying eyes of opposing political foes.” Castellano said her construction business, which contracts with the government, has been swamped with public records and audit requests like never before in 18 years of business.

Castellano said all of this harassment has the effect of keeping her team swamped with paperwork and legal worries instead of running a successful campaign.

“If I can’t be out on the streets, I need others to pick up that baton and go and knock on those doors,” Castellano said.

Castellano and *LULAC* say the police raids on homes of Latino volunteers and candidates, along with the lawsuits against counties attempting to increase voter engagement, is ultimately meant to chill turnout by intimidating naturalized immigrants and minority voters. Under Paxton and the GOP-dominated Texas government, participation in democracy, whether by registering people to vote or simply casting a ballot, could result in court dates and police raids on your home.

La Voz de Esperanza update: Leave three lines to update the verdict by judge handed down this week. G.

***La Voz de Esperanza* update:** A judge on Monday, September 16, ruled against Attorney General Ken Paxton’s effort to stop Bexar County from mass mailing voter registration forms after the county said all the applications had already been sent out. State District Judge Antonia Arteaga also denied the state’s request to sanction the county if it sends more applications or pursues similar contracts. For full story see: bit.ly/judge-ag-paxton

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