



IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDE AND THE **MEXICO-UNITED STATES** BINATIONAL POLICY AGENDA



POLICY BRIEF

Carlos Moreno Jaimes, ITESO
Alfonso Rojas-Alvares, UT-Austin

October, 2024



ITESO, Universidad
Jesuita de Guadalajara



TEXAS LBJ School
The University of Texas at Austin
Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

Ideological Divide and the Mexico-United States Binational Policy Agenda

Carlos Moreno Jaimes, ITESO

Alfonso Rojas-Alvarez, University of Texas at El Paso

DRAFT

PLEASE DO NOT CITE

Draft

Executive summary

The United States and Mexico have forged strong ties in wide-ranging policy domains, including trade, security, migration, environmental protection, water management, public health, and others. Despite the need to strengthen them, polarization in both countries has become an important obstacle to more effective binational collaboration.

Based on the Binational Policy Elites Survey, we analyze the prospects of binational collaboration between Mexico and the United States. Our findings indicate that policy perceptions regarding the binational relationship between Mexico and the United States vary significantly according to partisan leanings, particularly among the most polarized groups. In the United States, Democrats show more inclination to collaborate with Mexico in solving crucial problems such as crime and violence and are also more willing to legalize migrants. Republicans are more critical of the binational relationship and have a more negative view of Mexico and its problems than the other partisan groups. In Mexico, MORENA supporters share nationalist foreign policy preferences, while their political rivals are more prone to the United States. However, the binational relationship is much more divisive in the United States than in Mexico.

The two countries should take advantage of issues where rival political groups converge to renew their cooperation agreements. There is some consensus among American political groups that their country is partially responsible for the problem of criminal violence in Mexico due to the illegal sale of weapons to organized crime. This opens a window for a binational agenda to strengthen security and crime control under a new agreement in which weapon control should be a priority. Advocates of binational collaboration must find ways to depolarize the relationship by carefully framing their communication strategies so that their proposals resonate with the preferences of their supporters and rival political parties.

Introduction

With a shared 2,000-mile border and three decades since signing the first major trade agreement among North American countries, the United States and Mexico have forged strong ties. Their binational agenda primarily focuses on trade, security, and migration but also encompasses other collaborative areas such as environmental protection, water management, and public health (González-Pier & Rudman, 2021; Koebele, 2020; Lara-Valencia et al., 2023). Despite the need to strengthen policy ties that have taken place since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1992, social and political polarization in the two countries could become an important obstacle to a more effective binational collaboration (Bárcena, 2023). In general, evidence indicates that severe polarization harms democracy because it increases the support for extremist leaders, reduces electoral accountability, deteriorates democratic quality, and makes governance more difficult (Levendusky, 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Pierson & Schickler, 2020). But how does political polarization affect policymaking, particularly under the context of binational interdependence?

In this policy brief, we argue that extreme polarization might also affect the prospects of binational collaboration between Mexico and the United States. Partisan groups in both countries, particularly those who hold more extreme positions, widely disagree in their perspectives on their neighboring country's issues and the role their own country should play in the binational relationship. Results from a recent online survey revealed that foreign policy preferences vary significantly according to partisan inclinations and that the Mexico-U.S. relationship is significantly more divisive among American future policy elites than among Mexicans, with only a few policy issues where opposing political groups align.

The Binational Policy Elites Survey

Results are based on the Binational Policy Elites Survey, a primary data source collected by the authors between September 2023 and January 2024, through an online questionnaire targeting master's students enrolled in academic programs to prepare them for public sphere roles, such as public policy, public administration, global affairs, business, and law. The sample focused on American universities in the four border states: Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. All Mexican universities were included, as interest in the binational relationship is widespread across Mexico. The survey covered various topics to identify the political beliefs of future policy elites, including civic participation, discrimination, interpersonal and institutional trust, rule of law, government intervention, and economic freedom. It also included questions to capture respondents' views on public affairs in the neighboring country.

Partisan polarization groups were created by calculating the difference between the party respondents support (rated from 1 to 5) and the party they dislike (rated from 1 to 5). Those with a difference of 6 or more were classified as polarized and the remaining people were considered moderates. In Mexico, one group comprises those who support *Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional* (MORENA), the party of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). The other group includes those who oppose MORENA. In the United States, the two polarized groups are Democrats and Republicans.¹ Table 1 summarizes the main features of the sample.

Table 1. The survey sample

	Mexico	United States
Observations	315	294
Gender	Female: 40% Male: 60%	Female: 60% Male: 40%
Age	24 or younger: 5% 25-34: 49% 35 or older: 46%	24 or younger: 36% 25-34: 45% 35 or older: 19%

¹ In the remainder of this paper, whenever we mention Democrats and Republicans, we will be referring to the people who, according to our methodology, were the most polarized of those two partisan groups, not those who fall into the category of moderates. We do this for the sake of simplicity.

Party affiliation	PAN: 13% PRI: 7% MORENA: 20% Others: 14% No preference: 46%	Democrats: 61% Republicans: 14% Independents: 16% No preference: 9%
Partisan polarization	Opponents of MORENA: 24% Supporters of MORENA: 13% Moderates: 63%	Democrats (polarized): 47% Republicans (polarized): 9% Moderates: 44%

Polarization and preferences toward binational collaboration

The two nations have widely different beliefs about the neighboring country's policy issues. As shown in Table 2, a third of Mexican prospective policy elites consider that drug consumption is the leading problem in the United States, followed by racism and discrimination, and the cost of healthcare services. Americans' perceptions of Mexico's problems are practically reduced to corruption, crime and insecurity, and bad government performance.

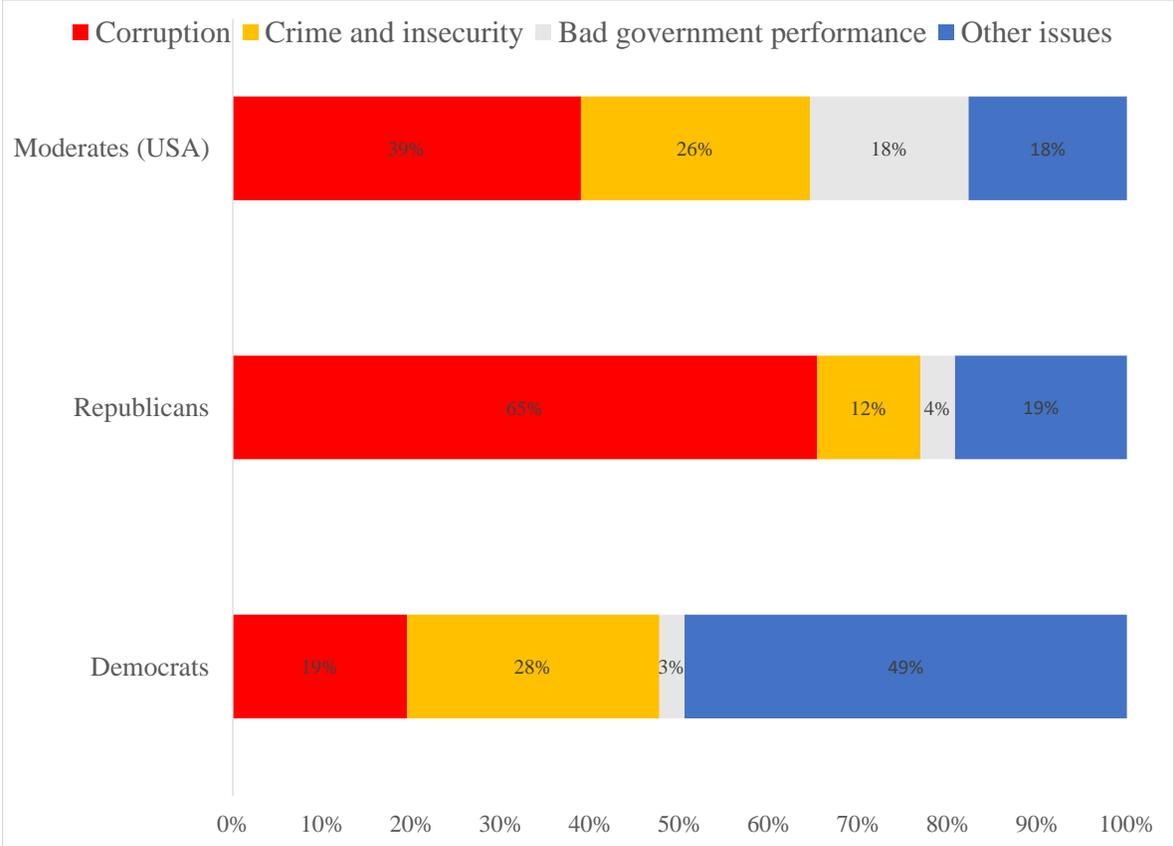
Table 2. What are the most critical issues the counterpart nation currently faces?

Mexican's viewpoint of U.S. problems		Americans' viewpoint of Mexico's problems	
Issue	%	Issue	%
Drug consumption	33%	Corruption	45%
Racism and discrimination	17%	Crime and insecurity	22%
The cost of healthcare services	9%	Bad government performance	12%
Other issues	41%	Other issues	21%

The views of American respondents widely differ between polarized partisan groups. There are more than 45 points of difference in favor of Republicans in terms of the perception that corruption is the main problem in Mexico compared to Democrats. In contrast, Democrats are more than twice as likely to believe that crime and insecurity are Mexico's leading issues

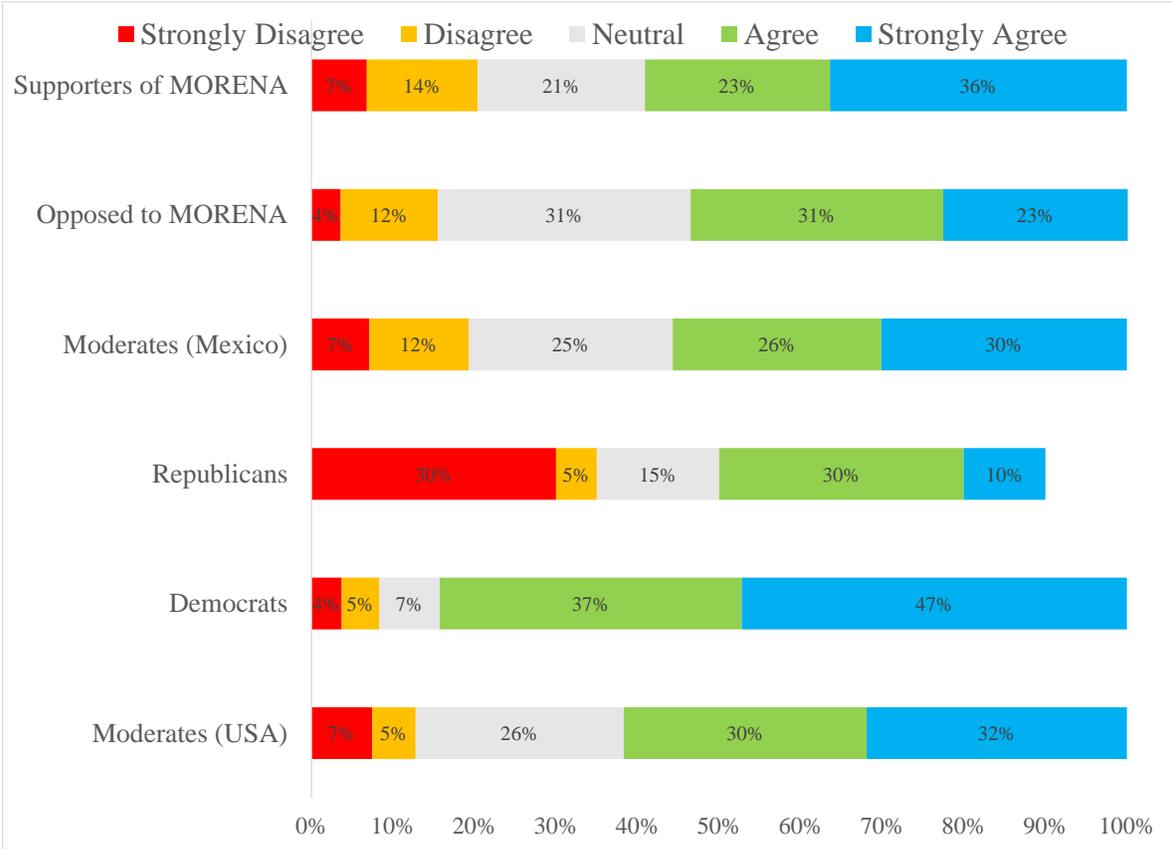
compared to Republicans (Figure 1). There are no significant differences between partisan groups in Mexico regarding their views of policy issues in the United States.

Figure 1. Critical issues the counterpart nation faces by partisan groups.



The assessment of the Mexico-United States relationship and the policies that should be adopted regarding the binational agenda is a matter of great controversy between extreme political groups in the two countries. For example, when asked whether the United States should allow foreign people to migrate, 84% of Democrats agree with such a measure, while only 40% of Republicans accept it (Figure 2). Unsurprisingly, the legalization of workers in the United States is not controversial among polarized groups in Mexico: both supporters and opponents of MORENA show they generally support that alternative.

Figure 2. The U.S. should allow foreign people to migrate legally to reduce worker shortages in the U.S.



Another contentious policy statement regards the legalization of illegal drugs by the United States (a measure that several state governments have already adopted). As shown in Figure 3, about 43% of MORENA supporters in Mexico agreed with such a policy, while only 21% of MORENA opponents embraced it. Mexican moderates' views are in between those two groups. In the United States, drug legalization is largely rejected by Republicans (90%), while Democrats support it widely (59%).

Figure 3. Should the United States legalize the consumption of some illegal drugs?

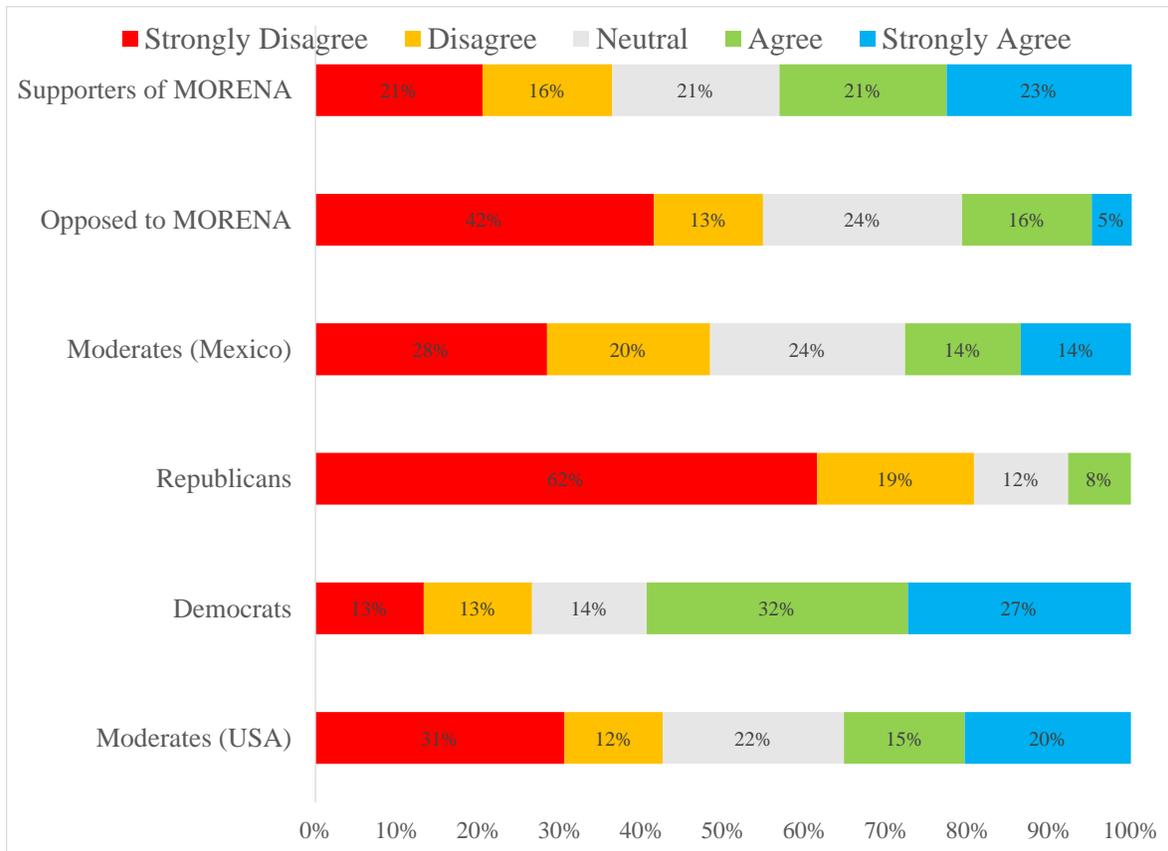


Table 3 summarizes the ideological divergence between political groups in Mexico and the United States regarding the binational relationship based on people's assessment of eight policy statements.² In Mexico, the most divisive issue is the claim that the United States should designate the Mexican drug cartels as terrorist organizations, which is strongly rejected by MORENA supporters while embraced by MORENA opponents. Another divisive matter is the assertion that the United States should not intervene at all in Mexico's crime problem: supporters of MORENA overall agree with such a statement, while people opposing MORENA slightly oppose it. The two extreme political groups also differ in the remaining topics, but divisiveness in those issues is lower. Interestingly, the two rival groups converge significantly on two issues: a) that the United States should expand opportunities for

² To measure ideological divisiveness, we calculated "net scores" by summing up the share of people who "strongly agreed" and "agreed" with each policy statement minus the sum of people who "disagreed" and "strongly disagreed" with it. The minimum net score value is -100, and the maximum is 100. The ideological divisiveness indicator is the net score's standard deviation across the three partisan groups in each country.

foreigners to emigrate and b) that undocumented immigrants living in the United States should be deported.

In the United States, the opinions of prospective policy elites are widely polarized on most issues of the binational relationship. The most divisive issue refers to the option of deporting the undocumented immigrant population: Republicans strongly favor it, while Democrats oppose it intensely. As previously discussed, the issue of drug legalization is equally controversial, as well as designating Mexico's drug cartels as terrorist organizations, an option that Republicans deeply welcome. The least controversial issue among Americans has to do with their country's responsibility in preventing the sale of weapons to criminal groups in Mexico, which suggests that they are aware that their country has a fundamental responsibility for the crime problem in Mexico.

Finally, it should be emphasized that disagreements regarding the binational policy agenda are much stronger in the United States than in Mexico since the average value of the ideological divergence indicator is more than double in the former than in the latter country.

Table 3. Ideological divergence in Mexico and the United States regarding the binational relationship

Statement	Mexico		United States	
	Who champions the statement?	Ideological divergence	Who champions the statement?	Ideological divergence
The U.S. is responsible for preventing U.S.-made weapons from being sold to criminal organizations in Mexico.	Supporters of MORENA	15.1	Democrats	11.3
Mexico should strengthen border security to protect U.S. citizens.	Opposed to MORENA	23	Republicans	51
The U.S. should legalize the consumption of some illegal drugs	Supporters of MORENA	20.9	Democrats	53.5
The U.S. should designate Mexico's drug cartels as terrorist organizations.	Opposed to MORENA	33.3	Republicans	38.2
The U.S. should not intervene at all in Mexico's crime problem.	Supporters of MORENA	23.1	Democrats	17
The U.S. should give foreign people the opportunity to migrate legally to reduce worker shortages in the U.S.	Both	1.2	Democrats	28.6
Mexico must assume responsibility for detaining people from other countries who want to emigrate to the U.S.	Opposed to MORENA	21.9	Republicans	36.3
Undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. should be deported.	Opposed to MORENA	11.1	Republicans	77.4
Overall ideological divergence		18.7		39.2

Conclusions and policy implications

Policy perceptions regarding the binational relationship between Mexico and the United States vary significantly according to partisan leanings, particularly among the most polarized groups. In the United States, Democrats show more inclination to collaborate with Mexico in solving crucial problems such as crime and violence and are also more willing to legalize migrants. Republicans are more critical of the binational relationship and have a more negative view of Mexico and its problems than the other partisan groups. In Mexico, MORENA supporters share nationalist foreign policy preferences, while their political rivals are more prone to the United States. The binational relationship is much more divisive in the United States than in Mexico.

Our findings suggest some practical implications for public policy. First, the two countries should take advantage of issues where rival political groups converge to renew their cooperation agreements. Both Democrats and Republicans agree that the United States is partially responsible for the problem of criminal violence in Mexico due to the illegal sale of weapons to organized crime. This opens a window for a binational agenda to strengthen security and crime control under a new agreement in which weapon control should be a priority (Guerrero, 2024). Second, advocates of binational collaboration (policy authorities, non-governmental organizations, universities, research centers, and others) should find ways to depolarize the relationship. Actors in the two countries need to realize that how they frame their policy proposals has consequences on how different political groups react to them. Therefore, they should carefully frame their communication strategies so that their proposals resonate with the preferences of their supporters and rival political parties.

Sources

Bárcena, M. (2023, abril 5). *The 2024 Elections and the Future of US–Mexico Relations*”.

[Conference presentation].

<https://www.facebook.com/UTLLILAS/videos/234515902425919>

González-Pier, E., & Rudman, A. I. (2021). *Time to Relaunch the U.S.-Mexico Health*

Agenda. The Wilson Center. The Wilson Center.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/time-relaunch-us-mexico-health-agenda>

Guerrero, E. (2024, febrero). Hacia un Tratado de Seguridad para América del Norte.

Nexos. <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=77510>

Koebele, E. A. (2020). Cross-Coalition Coordination in Collaborative Environmental

Governance Processes. *Policy Studies Journal*, 48(3), 727-753.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12306>

Lara-Valencia, F., Coronado, I., Mumme, S., Brown, C., Ganster, P., García-Pérez, H.,

Lybecker, D., Megdal, S. B., Sanchez, R., Sweedler, A., Varady, R. G., & Zuniga-

Teran, A. (2023). Water Management on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Achieving Water

Sustainability and Resilience through Cross-Border Cooperation. *Journal of*

Borderlands Studies, 38(2), 323-334.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2023.2168294>

Levendusky, M. S. (2018). Americans, Not Partisans: Can Priming American National

Identity Reduce Affective Polarization? *The Journal of Politics*, 80(1), 59-70.

<https://doi.org/10.1086/693987>

McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2019). Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It

Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies. *The ANNALS*

of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 681(1), 234-271.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782>

Pierson, P., & Schickler, E. (2020). Madison's Constitution Under Stress: A Developmental Analysis of Political Polarization. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23(1), 37-58.

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050718-033629>

About the authors

Carlos Moreno-Jaimes
Research professor, ITESO.
cmoreno@iteso.mx

Carlos specializes in healthcare policy, public spending decentralization, and policy evaluation at the subnational level. He holds a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of Texas in Austin, a Master's in Public Policy from the University of Chicago, and a bachelor's in Public Administration from El Colegio de México. He has been a Fulbright Visiting Professor at UT Austin, a visiting researcher at the University of California, San Diego, the Institute of Public Policy and Government of the University of Guadalajara, and an associate researcher at the *Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas* (CIDE) in Mexico City. He has consulted for the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), as well as for various public institutions in Mexico, including the National Council of Evaluation of the Social Development Policy (CONEVAL). Since 2005, Carlos has been a full-time research professor at ITESO in Guadalajara.

Alfonso Rojas-Alvarez
Faculty at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at UT Austin
arojas@austin.utexas.edu

Alfonso is a senior data scientist specializing in environmental economics and public health. He lectures at UT Austin and consults for the LBJ School of Public Affairs. Alfonso holds a Ph.D. in Public Policy, a Master's in Statistics from UT Austin, and a Master's in Public Policy from UC Berkeley. He has extensive experience in housing, urban policy, public health, and data science at UC Berkeley, Harvard, and UT Austin. He advises Costa Rican government ministers and writes for *La Nación*. He leads the Quantitative Readiness Program and the Statistical Software in Public Policy Workshop at the LBJ School. Alfonso also contributes to a multi-university data literacy program for government officials.