WASHINGTON — For two decades, [*U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar*](https://apnews.com/hub/henry-cuellar) has stood out as a moderate Democrat along the Texas-Mexico border, bucking his party at times over guns and immigration while [*seldom facing*](https://apnews.com/article/abortion-2022-midterm-elections-henry-cuellar-us-supreme-court-laredo-0973c407a2a4b59db98513e8e5c66d69) a tough reelection.

But [*a federal indictment accusing Cuellar*](https://apnews.com/article/henry-cuellar-texas-azerbaijan-ddb1dea393ba88d8d823557ec6c0d93a) of federal conspiracy and bribery charges is putting the Laredo native who was first elected in 2004 in a different spotlight. Cuellar, 68, and his wife, Imelda, 67, were taken into custody Friday in connection with a U.S. Department of Justice probe into the couple's ties to the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan.

The congressman professed his innocence after the indictment was revealed and vowed to continue his bid for an 11th term in November, saying, “Everything I have done in Congress has been to serve the people of South Texas.”

The Cuellars are accused of accepting nearly $600,000 in bribes from an Azerbaijan-controlled energy company and a bank in Mexico. In exchange, Cuellar allegedly agreed to advance those entities' interests in the U.S.

The couple surrendered to authorities, made an initial appearance before a federal judge in Houston and were each released on $100,000 bond, the DOJ said.

Cuellar's family is a political fixture along the border: His brother is the sheriff in Laredo, and his sister, a former municipal judge, is also on the ballot this year, running as a Democratic candidate for state representative.

Several of Cuellar's allies in the district, which stretches from the Rio Grande to the San Antonio suburbs, expressed surprise over the indictments but said they would still support his reelection. Cuellar's moderate ***politics*** have helped him maintain support in places where Democrats have lost ground, like Starr County, a rural and agricultural part of South Texas.

“It is extremely surprising for me because I’ve known Henry for many, many years," Starr County Judge Eloy Vera said. "He’s always been a very straight guy, you know, very sincere. I mean, he’s done so much for us in Starr County. I hate to see this going on.”

President Joe Biden won Starr County by a slim, single-digit margin. Two years later, Cuellar won it by 40%.

Sylvia Bruni, chair of nearby Webb County’s Democratic Party, said she would trust the legal system to work fairly and her focus would remain on elections. “We have a campaign to advance, our Democracy at stake," she said in a statement.

Cuellar released a statement Friday saying he and his wife “are innocent of these allegations.”

“Before I took action, I proactively sought legal advice from the House Ethics Committee, who gave me more than one written opinion, along with an additional opinion from a national law firm,” the statement said.

“Furthermore, we requested a meeting with the Washington D.C. prosecutors to explain the facts and they refused to discuss the case with us or hear our side.”

In addition to bribery and conspiracy, the couple face charges including wire fraud conspiracy, acting as agents of foreign principals and money laundering. If convicted, they could be punished with up to decades in prison and forfeiture of any property linked to proceeds from the alleged scheme.

The payments to the couple initially went through a Texas-based shell company owned by Imelda Cuellar and two of the couple’s children, according to the indictment. That company received payments from the Azerbaijan energy company of $25,000 per month under a “sham contract,” purportedly in exchange for unspecified strategic consulting and advising services.

“In reality, the contract was a sham used to disguise and legitimate the corrupt agreement between Henry Cuellar and the government of Azerbaijan,” the indictment says.

Imelda Cuellar is alleged to have sent a falsified invoice to the energy company's Washington, D.C., office under the agreement, saying her work was complete.

“In fact, Imelda Cuellar had performed little or no legitimate work under the contract,” the indictment says.

The indictment alleges that an Azerbaijani diplomat referred to Henry Cuellar in text messages as both “el Jefe” and “boss,” and also that a member of Cuellar’s staff sent multiple emails to officials at the State Department pressuring them to renew a U.S. passport for an Azerbaijani diplomat’s daughter.

Cuellar was at one time the co-chair of the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus.

The FBI [*searched the congressman’s house*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-henry-cuellar-texas-mcallen-laredo-8bd0e0706bdf00916f56fefb1235545f) in the border city of Laredo in 2022, and Cuellar’s attorney at that time said he was not the target of the investigation.

Cuellar, [*one of the last anti-abortion Democrats in Congress*](https://apnews.com/article/abortion-2022-midterm-elections-henry-cuellar-us-supreme-court-laredo-0973c407a2a4b59db98513e8e5c66d69), narrowly defeated progressive challenger Jessica Cisneros by fewer than 300 votes in a [*primary race in 2022*](https://pronto.associatedpress.com/app/stories/preview/f78fedb6809ebdf46362b4aae051793f.3.json). Cuellar has been among his party's loudest critics of Biden, particularly over the administration's response to a record number of migrant crossings on the border. His moderate ***politics*** have aligned him at times with Republicans on issues including abortion and guns. \_\_\_