

The Anti-Immigrant Movement and the Politics of Exceptionalism



By

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Over the period from 2005 to 2007, I researched the anti-immigrant movement. As I spoke with immigration restrictionists and observed their patrols and anti-immigrant rallies, I was often haunted by the question, “Are these people to be taken seriously?” At times it was hard to fathom that they amounted to anything more than a disgruntled fringe element of a society experiencing complex transformations in an increasingly interconnected world. I witnessed much hyperbole and many “colorful” characters, but at times questioned their potential broader impact.

However, it is now clear that the capacity of these groups to stymie attempts to reform our broken immigration system should not be underestimated. They played a major role in undermining previous efforts to pass comprehensive immigration reform and are poised to do so again. While the recent past failures at reform cannot be totally attributed to such groups, their role was not insignificant. What can loosely be called an anti-immigrant “movement” in this country is not organized into one formal unified entity. However, there clearly exists a network of restrictionist groups and organizations that are connected to one another in various ways, which has enabled them to collectively undermine efforts to pass legislation that would result in any meaningful changes to our immigration laws and policies. They have been able to successfully spread their messages due to alliances with elements of the national media, other like-minded, issue-oriented organizations, and perhaps most importantly because they play upon powerful ideas and sentiments found amongst elements of the population at large.

Now that immigration reform has once again surfaced on the nation’s agenda this year, immigration restrictionists have already begun to “circle the wagons.” In February, the anti-immigrant “think tank,” Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) released a poll of questionable validity suggesting that minority groups prefer immigration enforcement—including the deportation of undocumented migrants—over comprehensive reform. Membership in various restrictionist groups such as the Federal Immigration Reform and Enforcement (FIRE) Coalition has increased since 2008—the number of FIRE chapters had grown from 13 in 2008 to 135 by the end of 2009. William Gheen, President and founder of ALIPAC (Americans for Legal Immigration Political Action Committee), joined forces with the conservative tea party movement to counter the March 21, 2010, march in Washington D.C. for immigration reform and plans other “anti-amnesty” actions.

Recent passage in the state of Arizona of what is arguably the most extreme anti-immigrant legislation in the country should put to rest any lingering doubts as to the ability of anti-immigrant factions to affect policy and the lives of immigrants as well as non-immigrants. Senator Russell

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Published on American Immigration Council (<http://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org>)

Pearce (R-Mesa, Arizona), sponsor of the bill known as SB0170, was an enthusiastic supporter of the 2005 Minuteman Project border watch and is a well-known anti-immigrant activist. The new law makes it a misdemeanor to lack proper paperwork in Arizona and requires police officers to determine a person's immigration status if they have a "reasonable suspicion" that some one is an undocumented immigrant.

Published On: **Fri, Jun 04, 2010** | [Download File](#) [3]

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