

# Restrictionism Resurgent in Post-9/11 Politics: Protect America Now

By Tom Barry | December 3, 2004

“Mean spirited” and “anti-American” is how the Latino-rights group MALDEF described the anti-immigrant bill approved in a referendum by Arizona voters on November 2.

No doubt that the Proposition 200 spearheaded by Protect Arizona Now is mean spirited. Protect Arizona Now (PAN), which has a national advisory board that includes prominent white supremacists and cultural nationalists, is part of a country-wide network of groups committed to severely restricting legal immigration and stopping illegal immigration by all necessary means. Following the victory of the PAN anti-immigrant initiative, PAN director Kathy McKee advised that other citizen groups around the country should “get busy now” because “things are really, really tough with tens of thousands of illegals invading our country every single day.”

Proposition 200 will deny noncitizens access to all non-federally mandated social services, require proof of citizenship to vote in local government and school-board elections, and obligate local and state officials to report violations of federal immigration law to federal officials.

When a federal court in 1998 declared a similarly anti-immigrant measure—California’s infamous Proposition 187—unconstitutional, the legal defeat temporarily deflated immigration-restrictionist forces. Both state and national restrictionist groups had hoped that Proposition 187 would be the first of many state initiatives that would discourage “mass immigration” particularly by Latinos crossing the U.S. southern border.

But an expansive U.S. economy and a combined lobbying effort by immigrant-advocacy and business groups made immigration restrictionism a tough political sell. Moreover, legal disputes about state and federal jurisdiction in immigration matters discouraged anti-immigrant forces in other states from following California’s lead. However, the success of Proposition 200, anti-immigrant campaigns across the country, alarmist articles in national magazines like *Time*, and recent

advances by restrictionist forces in Congress point to a widespread anti-immigrant backlash movement in the United States.

## Restrictionism is Pro-American

Critics of anti-immigrant initiatives such as Propositions 187 and 200 note that immigration restrictionism is essentially “un-American.” After all, the United States is a country largely inhabited and built by immigrants and their descendents. Restrictionists such as the prominent Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and NumbersUSA don’t deny this history. But they counter by saying that the continuing flow of immigrants is now, as never before, threatening our national security, diluting our national cultural identity, and driving down wages and working conditions for native-born Americans.

These anti-immigrant arguments, as well as other claims about the crime and public health problems associated with immigrant populations, have coursed through U.S. history, ebbing and surging in response to economic and political circumstances. However, today’s surge in restrictionist sentiment builds on forces not seen in other anti-immigrant cycles—including new fear that the American homeland is threatened. Propelling it is an unprecedented nation-wide network of anti-immigrant think tanks, policy institutes, and statewide campaigns in mobilizing public opinion and lobbying Congress.

Certainly, the deepening economic vulnerability felt by many U.S. citizens—in the face of downsizing, outsourcing, stagnant wages, labor union decline, and the steady loss of medical and retirement benefits—explains part of the rising anti-immigrant backlash. But the restrictionist forces now come to the public debate armed with a new righteousness that goes beyond perceived economic



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threats from foreign workers. Immigration restrictionism is increasingly framed as homeland and cultural protection.

All immigration restrictionist groups are now wrapping their anti-immigrant agenda in the flag. Whether promoted by local groups like Protect Arizona Now, national think tanks like Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), or congressional anti-immigrant forces like the House Immigration Reform Caucus, restrictionist proposals to halt immigration, deport undocumented residents, and deny basic services to noncitizens are routinely framed in the language of fear, patriotism, and national security.

PAN's logo has a mounted figure galloping across the state map brandishing the U.S. flag, and Center for Immigration Studies recently testified in Congress about how loose border security facilitates the entry of terrorists into the country. CIS director Mark Krikorian says that "immigrant communities act as the sea within which, as Mao might have said, terrorists can swim like fish."

Another indicator of this new attempt to leverage security concerns to sell immigration restrictionism is the organization United to Secure America. One of the leading voices for the organization's 2002 national advertising campaign was Dan Stein, executive director of FAIR. United to Secure America backed House Bill 775, the Security and Fairness Enhancement for America Act, that dresses up anti-immigration measures as national security initiatives.

Until the publication of Samuel Huntington's book *Who Are We*, the cultural nationalism of the anti-immigrant forces was relegated to the dark corners of the right-wing's Old Guard. There white supremacists and nativists weaved conspiracy theories and xenophobic fantasies with relatively little

mainstream attention. But Huntington, most famous for his previous book *The Clash of Civilizations*, raised cultural nationalism to a new intellectually acceptable level. "In this new era," he wrote, "the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America's traditional identity comes from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially Mexico." Huntington makes the case that unlike previous immigrants, Mexican-Americans are not interested in assimilating. "As their numbers increase," he

observed, "Mexican-Americans feel increasingly comfortable with their own culture and often contemptuous of American culture."

Although the immigration restriction and "English only" groups are commonly interlocked by funding sources and shared board members, they have attempted to keep their agendas separate.

Huntington explicitly links the two when he writes that the success of the United States is built on immigrants accepting the basic American creed and language. "There is no Americano dream,"

Huntington says, "There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican-Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English."

Huntington and other scholars, such as William S. Lind of the Free Congress Foundation, have given new cultural and intellectual legitimacy to immigration restrictionists who believe that the American cultural identity and even the English language are threatened by what is commonly described as the "immigrant invasion."

## **The Local-National Strategy**

Fears about immigrant terrorists after 9/11, combined with rising concerns about economic security after the end of the 90s' boom, have

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diminished the near-term prospects for a liberal immigration reform agenda. Rather than talk about new policies that support broad legalization, amnesty, and family reunification, immigration restrictionism has moved to the center of the public debate in many areas of the United States.

The House Immigration Caucus's success in incorporating draconian anti-immigration measures into the draft intelligence reform bill in early October 2004 signaled expanding public and policymaker anxiety over immigration flows. Similarly, President Bush's backing away from earlier promises to legalize long-term undocumented residents—and instead stressing his proposal for an expanded “guest worker” program—was yet another sign of the accumulating strength of restrictionist forces.

Most restrictionist action, however, is occurring at the local and state level. The Washington-based anti-immigrant lobby has long determined that the most likely path to the adoption of restrictionist legislation on a national level is through the steady build-up of anti-immigrant sentiment and mobilization outside the Beltway.

Restrictionist organizations and campaigns have over the past 25 years had mixed success. On a national level, their recommendations have failed until recently to gain the necessary support from the national leadership of either party, from the national media, or from the Wall Street corporate community. But their efforts to restrict the rights of immigrants, and restrict foreign languages, bilingual education, and affirmative action programs have been considerably more successful at the local and state levels of governance.

To a large degree the forward movement of restrictionism—both in terms of immigration and “Official English” initiatives—stems from the decision by national groups to focus on building local

campaigns. National anti-immigrant groups such as Federation for American Immigration Reform, Center for Immigration Studies, NumbersUSA, and ProjectUSA channel funding and logistical support to local initiatives like Protect Arizona Now. Similarly, those groups that want to restrict the public use of other languages, end affirmative action programs, and eliminate bilingual education—including such organizations as U.S. English, Pro-English, English First, and the Center for Equal Opportunity—also focus mainly on supporting or organizing local campaigns to advance their objectives.

PAN, for example, has represented itself as a home-grown initiative, avoiding polished policy analysis in favor of populist language of fear and resentment. According to PAN, it has been fighting an uphill battle against “the power-brokers and big bucks.” On PAN's website, director Kathy McGee's advice to restrictionist efforts in other states is: “And Again, Beware of National Groups.”

But the success of PAN can be largely attributed to its major sources of funding, all of which are national institutes: FAIR, Americans for Better Immigration, Americans for Immigration Control, POPSTOP, and Population-Environment Balance. In addition, PAN counted on advisers from such national organizations as Carrying Capacity Network and Population-Environment Balance that couch anti-immigrant advocacy and research in terms of demographic concerns.

## **Backlash Politics**

Starting in the mid-1990s many local and state governments began adopting a realpolitik approach to the fact that there are millions of undocumented immigrants living in their jurisdictions. Recognizing that most of these immigrants live, work, and have

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children in school, town councilors and state legislators began exploring ways to regularize the residency of the undocumented.

By giving undocumented immigrants access to driver's licenses, bank credit, and tuition support, many localities have reported improved community relations and economic benefits. This locally generated pragmatism is based on the logic that the federal government will eventually provide residency documents to this huge subterranean community, given that the alternative is a massive deportation of as many as ten million illegal residents—an act that would cause severe economic and social dislocation and provoke widespread protests.

The restrictionist agenda—while directed at the national level by a small network of advocacy groups—taps backlash sentiments among U.S. citizens who for cultural, racial, ethnic, or economic reasons feel threatened by the increased immigrant presence in their own communities. Pro-immigrant initiatives at the local and state level have elicited specific backlash responses.

One of the most prominent of these issue-driven backlash campaigns is led by the California Republican Assembly (CRA)—a group that President Ronald Reagan called “the conscience of the Republican Party.” This group of right-wing Republicans in California created the Save Our License campaign ([www.SaveOurLicense.com](http://www.SaveOurLicense.com)) as a response to a bill signed by former Governor Gray Davis to give driver's licenses to undocumented residents. Under the auspices of the California Republican Assembly ([www.ca-ra.org](http://www.ca-ra.org)), the Save Our License campaign helped spearhead the recall of Governor Davis and the election of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger,

who in September 2004 vetoed a new bill that would extend the right to driver's licenses for undocumented adults.

Spurred by its success, the right-wing of the California Republican Party is sponsoring a new version of Proposition 187 that would prohibit state and local governments from granting any tax-funded benefits not mandated by federal law to illegal immigrants. Moreover, the new initiative, which must gather 600,000 signatures by February 2005 to be placed on the ballot, requires the state

to vigorously defend the law against all court challenges and will hold government officials personally liable for violations of the law. According to CRA president Mike Spence, “This means if a city, like San Francisco, decides to ignore the law, an individual could bring suit to compel the city to follow the law.”

CRA's Save Our License is also circulating a “Most Wanted” flyer listing the legislators “who have been aiding and abetting illegal aliens.” This represents another prominent tactic of anti-immigrant forces, namely the targeting of all state and federal legislators regarded as “pro-immigrant” or “open-borders” advocates.

The pro-immigrant agenda includes giving legal residents and even in some cases undocumented residents the right to vote in local elections for school boards and town councils. Immigrant advocates and immigrants themselves describe their situation as not much different from the pre-revolutionary conditions in the British colonies where residents paid taxes but couldn't vote. In addition to the “taxation without representation” argument, advocates for immigrant voting point out that the large immigrant populations in many cities such as Washington, DC, San

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Francisco, Chicago, and New York say they can play a more constructive role in community relations, schooling, and neighborhood safety if they could vote in local elections. But such proposals have met with fierce opposition by some citizen groups and by anti-immigrant organizations.

When five members of the DC city council sponsored a proposal to allow immigrants to vote in local elections, Cong. Tom Tancredo, head of the House Immigration Caucus, responded with a “Dear Colleague” letter to other members of Congress, stating: “One of the things that differentiates American citizenship from simple residency is the right to vote.” Tancredo and other congressional members are sponsoring a bill that would prohibit all local governments from allowing noncitizens to vote in local elections.

Many of the anti-immigrant groups believe that theirs is a truly popular cause, although one that most politicians won’t touch either for fear of alienating Latino voters or angering big business. According to Mike Spence, president of the California Republican Assembly, citizen groups like his intend to take the matter out of the hands of politicians and put issues of border and immigration control directly before the voters. Their message to government, business, and the political parties is simple: Fix the problem of immigration, or we will do it ourselves.

Anti-immigrant forces were elated by the success of the Protect Arizona Now voter referendum. Although the measure is already facing legal challenges by groups like MALDEF, it has sparked enthusiasm among other state-wide groups determined “to take our country back,” including Georgians for Immigration Reform and Defend Colorado Now. At least thirty groups, most of them receiving logistical assistance and in some cases

funding from FAIR and other of the national anti-immigration organizations, are preparing to sponsor new state referendums and legislation that they hope will send a clear message to immigrants that they aren’t wanted.

The resurgence of immigration restrictionist sentiment in the United States underscores the spread of the politics of hate and fear across the land. These anti-immigrant campaigns, whether they win or lose, will divide communities along racial, political and cultural lines and deepen fissures. Even longtime residents, integrated into daily life on all levels but the formal one, will face renewed hostility in their own homes. As immigration restrictionists advance their agenda, the very act of assimilation that they demand of immigrants will become increasingly impossible.

The anti-immigrant forces are certainly right in their contention that immigration—legal and illegal—is an issue that needs the urgent attention of policy-makers. However, by scapegoating immigrants for so many of the country’s ills—environmental degradation, low wages, tax burdens, crime, social disintegration, and even terrorist threats—the new wave of restrictionists are building a vicious backlash movement that’s deepening the social, economic, and political divides in the nation. In the process, the anti-immigrant groups are diverting popular attention away from the more fundamental causes of the socio-economic problems that are eroding the substance and spirit of America.

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## SEE THE IRC'S RIGHT WEB PROFILES OF RESTRICTIONIST ORGANIZATIONS:

John Tanton

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/ind/tanton/tanton.php>

Center for Equal Opportunity

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/ceo.php>

Center for Immigration Studies

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/cis.php>

Council of Conservative Citizens

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/cofcc.php>

Federation for American Immigration Reform  
(FAIR)

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/fair.php>

Immigration Reform Caucus

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/irc.php>

NumbersUSA

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/numbersusa.php>

ProEnglish

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/proenglish.php>

ProjectUSA

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/projectusa.php>

Social Contract Press

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/scp.php>

U.S. English

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/org/usenglish.php>

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