

Immigration Debate: Politics, Ideologies of Anti-Immigration Forces

By Tom Barry | June 17, 2005

(This is the first in a series IRC Americas reports that examine the political forces shaping the immigration debate in the United States.)

Stereotypes and labels hinder understanding of the intensifying immigration debate in the United States. The debate divides sharply into two sides. On one side stand those who believe that immigration flows should be dramatically restricted. Commonly described as being anti-immigrant, these groups object to the negative label, saying that they oppose uncontrolled immigration, not immigrants themselves.

On the other side of the immigration debate are those who believe that immigration should be regulated but at levels that reflect the reality of both emigration pressures outside the country and labor needs within it. In contrast to those arguing for a clamp down on immigration flows, these forces routinely point to the economic and cultural benefits resulting from the immigrant community, while also noting that the United States has always been a nation of immigrants. Described variously by their opponents as the “pro-immigrant” or “open-borders lobby,” they often assume the immigrants rights’ standpoint: opposing governmental and private practices that abuse or exploit illegal as well as legal immigrants.

Those advocating reduced immigration flows can fairly be described as being immigration restrictionists. Like most other policy reformers, the immigration restrictionists have three main bases of operation: policy institutes and think tanks in Washington, D.C.; local citizen movements and organizations; and a loose team of pundits, politicians, and polemicists dedicated to influencing public opinion.

Although immigration restrictionists share a common agenda, they do not operate as a unified political bloc. Anti-immigration forces include partisans of the two main political parties as well as adherents of parties and movements on the political left and right that fall outside mainstream political thinking.

In most cases, the leaders of the national restrictionist groups are reactionary nationalists who fundamentally believe that immigrants are undermining the U.S. economy and society, while also posing an increasing threat to U.S. national security. But many restrictionist groups,

including NumbersUSA [sic] and the Center for Immigration Studies, frame their views in the policy language of environmental protection, access to jobs, anti-corporate sentiment, and population control. Their rhetoric often sounds closer to liberal groups than to the citizen militias, white supremacists, and more nationalist institutes such as Americans for Immigration Control, which is explicitly dedicated to “preserving our common heritage as Americans.” The rhetoric obscures the profile of a growing movement that has as its shared goal a campaign against immigrants and for draconian border controls and legislation.

Most immigration restrictionists are found within the political right, but by no means do all Republicans, conservatives, and members of other right-wing sectors believe that the government should actively restrict immigration. Some of the strongest proponents of immigration are found within the ranks of the Republican Party, including the libertarians who believe that the market, and not the government, should regulate labor supply and business sectors favoring the easy flow of cheap immigrant labor.

Within the anti-immigration camp, there are major differences. The paleoconservatives, for example, together with associated traditionalists and social conservatives, criticize the leading restrictionist policy institutes such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and Center for Immigration Studies (CIS). They believe that these groups espouse essentially secular and liberal ideas about population control, environmentalism, and labor issues, rather than standing firmly behind the country’s core Judeo-Christian culture and values.



A belief in the superiority of U.S. culture and values is a common thread uniting the many restrictionists, although major differences exist in how this perspective is expressed. The most militant anti-immigrant activists are often associated with white supremacist groups. Others take pains to avoid racist rhetoric, insisting the issue is one of “control of our borders.”

A strong populist streak also runs through the restrictionist movement. Its critique of the “open borders” agenda of Corporate America puts it at odds with the leadership of the Republican Party and the corporate sponsors of both political parties. The pro-worker, anti-big business arguments of the restrictionists resonate with many Americans who feel hard-pressed to pay their bills and who worry about their economic security.

The terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, sparked an increase in anti-immigration grassroots organizing, congressional bills, and media coverage—substantially increasing the constituency base of the restrictionists. Anti-immigrant forces quickly appropriated the administration’s language of the “war on terrorism”, couching restrictionist arguments in terms of the importance of gaining total control of the U.S. borders, downsizing the resident immigrant population, and severely restricting new immigration.

The rising influence of these diverse forces rests in the widespread public conviction that U.S. immigration policy and U.S. borders are out of control. This concern with the cultural, economic, environmental, and security impact of the influx of immigrants does not necessarily arise from racist, xenophobic, or supremacist beliefs. It is often the result of people’s own experience with the effects of a large and expanding immigrant population in their communities, combined with the lenses for interpretation of this phenomena offered by governments and mass media.

Restrictionist Policy Institutes

The leading national restrictionist organizations in the immigration debate, like those in the language debate, such as ProEnglish [sic] and English First, are part of an institutional network that emerged from the population control, environmental, and carrying-capacity movements in the late 1970s. By the mid-1970s, the alarmist predictions that zero population growth advocates had been making during the post-WWII boom could no longer be supported by the population statistics. Birth statistics were showing steady declines. But population statistics began to show—as they still do—that the main

source of population growth in the United States is the expanding first- and second-generation immigrant population. So, for a faction within Zero Population Growth, “population control” in the United States became synonymous with “immigration control.” John Tanton along with several other former board members of ZPG in 1979 formed the country’s first anti-immigrant policy institute, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR).

Rick Swartz, who founded the self-identified “pro-immigrant” National Immigration Forum in 1982, described Tanton as the “puppeteer behind this entire [restrictionist] movement.”¹ In addition to being a cofounder and current board member of FAIR, Tanton has been a key figure in establishing and funding a phalanx of anti-immigrant and “English Only” institutes, including NumbersUSA, Center for Immigration Studies, Population-Environment Balance, U.S. English, ProEnglish, Social Contract Press, and U.S. Inc.2

Other leading restrictionist groups include Project USA, Americans for Immigration Control, and Americans for a Better Immigration (ABI). The most influential institutes are FAIR, which focuses on providing logistical support for the restrictionist movement, and CIS, which concentrates on producing briefing papers for Congress and the media. Associated groups that provide legal assistance to anti-immigrant campaigns and organizations are the Immigration Reform Law Institute and Friends of Immigration Law Enforcement. Also part of the D.C.-based infrastructure of restrictionist organizations are anti-immigration political action committees—the most prominent being Team America headed by Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-CO, and the U.S. Immigration Reform Political Action Committee (USIRP), whose president is Mary Lou Tanton, wife of John Tanton. These groups often share interlocking directorates and sources of rightwing financing.

These and other leading restrictionist groups have reworked their image since the early days of the movement to restrict immigration and establish English as the official language in the states. They explicitly maintain that they are not “anti-immigrant,” and instead identify themselves as opposing “mass immigration”—which has become the catch phrase of the restrictionist movement.

These institutes are politically situated on the right and within the umbrella of the Republican Party. But they operate outside the political network of the right’s leading think tanks and policy institutes, such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation—organizations that are closely associated with the interests of

Corporate America and therefore oppose the restrictionist agenda. The restrictionist institutes are linked with these and other right-wing organizations through the main right-wing foundations that fund both groups.³

White Supremacists

Among the most prominent white supremacist organizations are the Council of Conservative Citizens (the successor to the White Citizen Councils), the European-American Unity and Rights Organization-EURO (former Ku Klux Klan chief David Duke directs EURO), the pro-eugenics Pioneer Fund, the American Nationalist Union, and the Occidental Quarterly (a journal dedicated to the notion that “immigration into the United States should be restricted to selected people of European ancestry”).

Although not in the forefront of the current surge in anti-immigrant sentiment and organizing, white supremacist organizations and their leaders have ties to state-level anti-immigrant campaigns such as Protect Arizona Now (PAN) and to national anti-immigrant advocacy organizations such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform. Virginia Abernathy, who served as the chair of PAN’s national advisory, is an editorial board member of Occidental Quarterly and speaks at forums sponsored by the Council of Conservative Citizens, for example.⁴ According to Duke’s EURO, “Massive Third World immigration will destroy the character and heritage of America and put the European American population at risk. The time has come to demand enforcement of our laws concerning illegal immigration and to severely limit legal immigration.”⁵

Hold-the-Line Environmentalists

The leading anti-immigrant policy institutes, including NumbersUSA and Center for Immigration Studies, wield arguments about the impact of immigrants on urban sprawl and resource depletion. The environmental wing of the anti-immigrant forces emerged from the zero-population movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Included in this wing of the immigration restrictionists are such organizations as Environment-Population Balance, Carrying Capacity Network, and Negative Population Growth. These organizations base their restrictionism on the fact that immigration is the most significant factor in U.S. population growth.

Carrying Capacity Network distributes a bumper-sticker bearing the slogan: “Mass Immigration = Lifeboat USA Sinking.” Negative Population Growth regards even the

granting of political asylum as a threat to U.S. sustainable development, and in the mid-1990s it called the government’s purportedly liberal refugee policy the “Achilles Heel of Immigration Reform.”

The public voice of the anti-immigration environmentalists is Richard Lamm, the former Colorado governor who is the coauthor of *The Immigration Time Bomb: The Fragmenting of America*. Lamm, who serves on FAIR’s advisory board, led the restrictionist slate of candidates who in 2004 sought unsuccessfully to win control of Sierra Club’s elected board of directors.

Paleoconservatives

These traditional conservatives have consistently opposed “liberal” immigration laws on both nationalistic and cultural supremacy grounds. They argue that Corporate America has lost its loyalty to the United States. In their view, transnational corporations together with liberal pro-immigrant groups have imposed in practice an open-borders agenda that not only facilitates trade and investments flows but also immigration flows. In addition, they argue that high immigration flows are diluting our national identity and turning the United States into a polyglot nation that is losing its Anglo-American core values.

Paleoconservatives do not generally join with the ranks of language and immigration restrictionist organizations. These traditionalists charge that the leading restrictionist organizations are driven more by liberals and progressive values than conservative ones. For example, they complain that population-control measures run counter to orthodox religious values. Although paleoconservatives are social conservatives, they are not closely tied to the Religious Right and see themselves more as intellectuals than as a grassroots force. A leading voice of paleoconservative thought regarding immigration was Samuel Francis, whose book *America Extinguished: Mass Immigration and the Disintegration of American Culture*, published shortly before he died, set forth the paleoconservative position. “Security, economy, and party interests are well and good, but the fundamental issue in the immigration debate is who we are and what sort of nation we want to be.”⁶

Paleocons such as Samuel Francis and Patrick Buchanan quickly lined up behind Samuel Huntington’s cultural war and “clash of civilization” theses. “You cannot expect millions of aliens from one civilization to enter the country, abandon all loyalties and values of

their old civilization and sign up with all of those of the new one they have entered,” warned Francis. More intellectuals and polemicists than activists, the paleoconservatives have seen their influence expand as the anti-immigrant forces multiply. The popularity of the American Conservative, the flagship publication of the paleocons, demonstrates that these traditional conservatives are experiencing a comeback—a result not only of their anti-immigrant arguments but also of their opposition to the Iraq occupation and their criticism of the neoconservatives and the Bush administration’s “big government” policies.

Neoconservatives

This influential small group of ideologues, foreign policy strategists, and political operatives does not advocate immigration restrictionism. Most of the leading neoconservatives, especially the Jews and Catholics, have a strong sense of their immigrant origins. Moreover, the neoconservatives, as a consequence of their forging ever-closer alliance with Wall Street capitalists, have regarded immigration flows of both cheap and skilled workers as a benefit for U.S. corporations and hence the U.S. economy.

However, neoconservatives, as part of their campaign against multiculturalism and government policies that attempt to reshape the “natural order” and promote equity, are fierce opponents of affirmative action programs and government-sponsored bilingual education. They are also proponents of what they call “Official English” but what are more commonly known as “English Only” laws. The Sept. 11 attacks and the war on terrorism have caused many neocons to back away from their pro-immigration posture.

The global backlash against the Bush administration’s war on terrorism and its Middle East policies is partly evident in increased anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism. This has raised neocon apprehension about the expanding Muslim population in the United States and Europe. In their book *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror*, leading neocons David Frum and Richard Perle called for a national identification system as a way to break the alleged immigration-terrorism link. Another indicator of the neoconservative conversion to restrictionism is the anti-immigrant writings of the Manhattan Institute’s Heather MacDonald, who concluded a recent op-ed with this recommendation: “Washington should allocate the resources to detain and deport illegals and should start enforcing long-standing laws against employing alien lawbreakers. A deafening roar of ‘racism’ will result—but with the country at war,

pandering to the race advocates must give way to protecting American lives.”⁷

A development worth noting is that the emerging anti-immigrant position among neoconservatives is increasingly akin to that of the cultural and “value” arguments of the paleoconservatives, who have been the leading critics of the neoconservatives since the neocon-paleocon split in the right-wing in the early 1980s.

Border Vigilantes

Over the past few decades numerous incidents have occurred in southeastern Arizona in which white ranchers resort to violence—including torture—against immigrants crossing from Mexico. In the past few years, anti-immigrant vigilante activity has become institutionalized in the form of citizen militias that have emerged in Arizona and to a lesser extent in California and Texas.

The leading voice among the border vigilantes is Glenn Spencer, who founded the American Border Patrol. Before moving to Arizona from California, the outspoken Spencer, who is associated with such white supremacist groups as the Council of Conservative Citizens and the National Alliance, was a leading advocate of the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 and proposals to make English the official language of California. Recently, the national media have portrayed him as a grassroots patriot protecting America and Arizona from an “invasion of illegals.”

Other vigilante groups include Ranch Rescue, Arizona Ranchers’ Alliance, and Civil Homeland Defense.⁸ Ranch Rescue has organized volunteer hunts for “hordes of criminal aliens,” encouraging volunteers to “come and have fun in the sun” and to bring their weapons and night-vision equipment.

The latest citizen group to take border patrolling into its own hands is the Minuteman Project, which is organizing hundreds of volunteers from around the nation to patrol the border and help apprehend immigrants. “This is a direct challenge to President Bush,” said project organizer Chris Simox who lives in Tombstone, AZ. “You have continued to ignore this problem. So this is a last-ditch effort to roll up our sleeves and do it ourselves.”⁹

State Anti-Immigration Movements

Framing immigration as an issue of “Them versus Us” in the 1980s, garnered Republican Party stalwarts and

New Right constituencies in California landslide support for the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 in 1994.¹⁰ A spate of complaints by native Latinos who said that police were stopping them to ask for proof of citizenship sparked the creation of a state-wide coalition to oppose the discriminatory treatment resulting from the proposition.

In 1998 a court decision that ruled the measure unconstitutional proved a severe setback for the restrictionist movement. Unable to push anti-immigrant bills forward in Congress, the country's chief restrictionist strategists and policy institutes, notably John Tanton and FAIR, switched tactics; they began to support local and state-level anti-immigrant campaigns as part of a bottom-up strategy to stop immigration flows.

In November 2004, Arizona voters approved the anti-immigrant Proposition 200 referendum that requires voters to present proof of citizenship, denies non-federally mandated services to unauthorized immigrants, and requires local and state employees to alert immigration authorities if they determine a client is an "illegal alien." Exploiting post-Sept. 11 fears about attacks by foreigners on the U.S. homeland, the proposition organizers called their campaign Protect Arizona Now. PAN's logo has a mounted figure galloping across the state map waving the U.S. flag.¹¹

Although PAN did not openly appeal to racist beliefs, its national advisory board included prominent white supremacists and cultural nationalists. And it was funded by a network of national anti-immigrants — including FAIR, Population-Environment Balance, Americans for Immigration Control, and Americans for Better Immigration.¹²

Following the victory of the PAN anti-immigrant initiative, PAN director Kathy McKee advised other citizen groups around the country to "get busy now" because "things are really, really tough with tens of thousands of illegals invading our country every single day." After the proposition beat back a legal challenge to its constitutionality, the PAN victory has sparked enthusiasm among other state-wide groups determined "to take our country back."

At least 30 groups, most of them receiving logistical assistance and in some cases funding from FAIR and other 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. Included among them are Georgians for Immigration Reform and Defend Colorado Now.¹³ After spearheading a successful campaign to pressure

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to veto a bill to permit undocumented residents to obtain driver's licenses, the right-wing California Republican Assembly has launched another campaign that would in effect resurrect the provisions of Proposition 187.¹⁴

Proposition 187 set the precedent of a state initiative targeting immigrants. It mandated that government workers, including teachers, check immigration status and deny services to those in the United States illegally. Championed by Save Our State, the anti-immigrant measure was sold as a solution that would solve California's financial crisis. While benefiting from some national funding, support for Proposition 187 was widespread among the state's non-Latino voters.

The recent increase in restrictionist legislation, anti-immigrant activism and media excitement about the dangers of immigration shows that a broad-based offensive has taken root in the United States. The groups coordinating this offensive, despite their rhetorical and ideological differences, are well-funded, well-connected and increasingly powerful.

Fears about immigrant terrorists after Sept. 11, combined with rising concerns about economic security after the end of the 1990s' boom, have diminished the near-term prospects for an immigration reform agenda that favors immigrants, whether in the country legally or illegally. Immigration restrictionism has moved to the center of the public debate, once occupied by advocacy for broad legalization, amnesty, and family reunification.

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Endnotes

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- 2 "John Tanton," Right Web Profile (International Relations Center, 2004), at: <http://rightweb.irc-online.org/ind/taanton/taanton.php>
- 3 The major sources of funding for the restrictionist institutes include the following foundations: Philip M. McKenna Foundation, Jaquelin Hume Foundation, Sarah Scaife Foundation, John M. Olin Foundation, Carthage Foundation, and the Scaife Family Foundation.

- 4 See various articles and reports published by The Center for New Community, including "White Nationalist Staffing U.S. Immigration Reform PAC" (nd), at: <http://bdi.newcomm.org/content/view/5/2/>; and Protect Arizona Now Selects White Supremacist to Chair National Advisory Board, August 2004, at: <http://www.newcomm.org/pan.pdf>
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For More Information:

Glossary of Right-Wing Sectors in U.S. Foreign Policy
<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/charts/glossary.php>

The Immigration Debate: Whose Side Are You On?

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/analysis/2005/0506immig.php>

Right Web Profiles of Restrictionist Groups

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

Center for Immigration Studies

<http://www.cis.org>

ProEnglish

<http://www.proenglish.org>

Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus

<http://www.tancredo.house.gov/welcome.htm>

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<http://americas.irc-online.org/index/immig/index.php>

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