

Getting to Know the Opposition



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Getting to Know the Opposition -- Nativists and the Immigration Debate

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Immigration matters. Immigration has been and will continue to be central to who we are as a nation and key to our economic, social and cultural vigor and well-being. Immigration matters because of its dramatic impacts on people's lives. Immigration laws and policies determine if loved ones can stay together, refugees and asylees are granted the protection they deserve, and American business has the workers it needs. Security experts also emphasize that a well-running immigration system enhances our security. Certainly, our current system has taught us that enforcing dysfunctional laws leads to more dysfunction, not more enforcement.

Immigration also is a high profile issue, not only because Congress is debating how best to reform our laws, but also because immigration incites deep passions. And anti-immigrant groups have manipulated these passions, especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Well organized and with deep pockets, these groups operate at the federal, state and local levels. They are determined to reduce, if not end, immigration to this country, notwithstanding the fact that immigrants contribute to our educational, cultural and social well-being.

Fearful of our nation's changing demographics and diversity, some of these groups position themselves as mainstream and "pro-immigrant while anti-immigration," and caution their members to not appear racist. Others openly flaunt their white nationalist and anti-immigrant, anti-Jewish, anti-Latino, anti-black, and anti-gay agenda. Pro-immigration proponents have yet to settle on a name to describe these groups, with some labeling them "restrictionist" and others "nativist." These nativists, my term for them, should not be confused with conservatives. While their movement includes some conservatives, it is its own group, and it is important to remember that the pro-immigration movement includes people with a wide range of views, including conservatives who strongly support immigration and immigrants. The nativists also should not be confused with people who express concerns about immigration. To them, we owe discussion and debate. To the nativists, we owe our undying and determined opposition.

Nativist groups tried, but failed, to turn immigration into a wedge issue in the 2006 mid-term elections to help ensure that the candidates they supported would win. In fact, some prominent Members of Congress seeking re-election and other first-time candidates who ran on anti-immigration platforms lost their races. Yet this failure means neither that immigration will disappear from public attention nor that this nation has achieved consensus on how to reform our broken immigration system. Far from it. The nativists are a determined opposition and immigration remains a highly charged issue, especially given the nativists' strength and focus that was born out of the negative population growth and radical environmental movements. Further fueling the situation is the absence of a federal solution to what everyone agrees is a totally broken immigration system. Given this absence, states and localities are proposing controversial measures that guarantee to keep the issue in the headlines.

Who are they? Unfortunately, nativists are no strangers to the United States. Benjamin Franklin feared that Germans who settled in Pennsylvania would threaten the English language. Nativism reared its head in the early and middle 19th century in response to Irish and Catholic migrations, and in the late 19th century to Chinese migrants, and again in the early 20th century when Italians, Poles, Jews and other Central Europeans came to the U.S. The Klu Klux Klan of the 1920s was rooted in anti-Catholicism. Later in the 20th century, nativism arose in reaction to Vietnamese and other refugees from Southeast Asia. And today nativists decry immigrants from Mexico and

Central and South America, and especially after September 11, immigrants from Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

About a dozen national nativist organizations that try to influence public policy and political campaigns and grow their base are located in or near Washington D.C. These closely connected groups include the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) founded in 1979, the Federation's spin-off, the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) – a supposedly non-biased think tank, US English, U.S. Inc. (the umbrella group for Numbers USA, ProEnglish and the Social Contract Press), American Patrol/Voices of Citizens Together, and American Immigration Control Foundation (whose leader has claimed that it is against God's will to weaken the "divinely unique" character of every nation). Spokespersons from the Federation and CIS often appear in the media, with the CIS, founded in 1985, characterizing itself as an objective think tank, "the nation's only think tank devoted exclusively to research and policy analysis of the economic, social, demographic, fiscal, and other impacts of immigration on the United States." In fact, the CIS supports the more activist work of the Federation, and, while it sells itself as "nonpartisan" and independent," takes care to use carefully modulated language to consistently support a nativist agenda.

These groups have a combined annual budget of about \$15 million, include activists from white nationalist groups like the Council of Conservative Citizens, and have received funding from a eugenics foundation, the Pioneer Fund. The "father" of the current nativist movement and person most responsible for its current configuration is John Tanton, a retired Michigan ophthalmologist. He founded the Federation and built and helped to finance the movement and organizations, including the California Coalition for Immigration Reform. Tanton also helped to arrange for the English-language publication of *The Camp of the Saints*, a racist French novel about European civilization being overrun by bestial Third World immigrants. While initially working in population control and the environment, Tanton turned his attention to immigration as the key to controlling the U.S. population.

While the focus of the work of these groups is largely on the federal government, about 225 state and local anti-immigrant groups operate outside D.C. The recent increase in their numbers reflects the growth of the Minutemen project founded by Chris Simcox and James Gilchrist in 2004. This effort organizes civilians to guard the U.S. borders and echoes the Klan Border Watch project of the 1970s that generated little interest or publicity at the time. In contrast, the Minutemen are all about publicity and spin and had its biggest media splash in 2005 when about 150 volunteers "deployed" along the Arizona-Mexico border. This border vigilantism succeeded as a publicity and organizing stunt, but ensured neither Gilchrist's 2006 election to Congress or consensus in the project, with organizational disunity and disagreements hobbling their work. This disunity should not obscure their focus. Gilchrist has declared that "illegal immigration will destroy this country," and "Every time a Mexican flag is planted on American soil, it is a declaration of war," a comment that reflects his obsession with the so-called *reconquista* conspiracy theory whereby Mexico is supposedly infiltrating a fifth column into the U.S. for territorial conquest.

Both sets of groups blame immigrants for America's crime and poverty rates, health care concerns, school overcrowding, racial tensions, urban sprawl, traffic jams, and environmental degradation, the latter issues explaining their repeated (and failed) attempts at a hostile take-over of the Sierra Club. They allege that immigrants, both legal and undocumented, take jobs away from Americans, and attack immigration and immigrants for putting American culture at risk. They condemn the "culture of multiculturalism" and point to the balkanization of America and the

“clash of civilizations,” which they view as inevitable given the current levels and sources of immigration. Especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks, they seek to link immigration with terrorism and have been using fear as a tactic to win converts.

Nativists are gearing up for the Congressional debate on immigration reform and the 2008 elections, and are continuing to generate and support initiatives at the state and local levels. Key to these efforts is their sophisticated and well-funded use of the media to get out their messages and generate support.

- Congressional Debate on Immigration: Along with their Congressional allies, nativist groups quickly condemn any measure that addresses the people who are living here without papers as an “amnesty,” notwithstanding the fact that these people are the symptom of a broken system, not the problem, and have contributed much to our economy, society and culture. They also attack family-unification measures for promoting “chain migration” instead of supporting measures that would reduce the long backlogs in family-based immigration, and attack new worker programs for opening the “floodgates to cheap foreign labor.” While they allege with little proof that “illegal immigration depresses wages, takes jobs, and fragments American culture,” they also attack legal immigration and equate immigrants with terrorists, positioning themselves as champions of American workers whom they allege, despite data to the contrary, are often displaced by immigrant workers. These nativists offer no solutions to our broken system. In fact, they support not only the status quo, but more of the status quo which really is no solution at all. Thus they strongly support enforcement-only reform measures (such as last year’s H.R. 4437 introduced by Representative Sensenbrenner (R-WI)) .

Many nativist groups get deeply involved in Congressional immigration debates, organizing letter writing and emails campaigns to Congress and working closely with their allies, including Concerned Women for America. They also use the internet and paid and unpaid media, especially talk radio, to mobilize their grassroots. Their allies within Congress are organized in the Immigration Reform Caucus founded by Representative Tom Tancredo (R-CO) in 1999 and currently chaired and being reorganized by Representative Brian Bilbray (R-CA), with strong support from Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX). According to the website, the Caucus’s main goals are to combat illegal immigration, reverse the growth of legal immigration, and stop efforts to grant an amnesty to undocumented immigrants. Caucus members routinely issue “Dear Colleague” letters to fellow Senators and Representatives that equate immigration with terrorism and link “open borders, unregulated immigration and the potential for terrorism.”

- The 2006 and 2008 Elections: A significant number of candidates were defeated in the 2006 mid-term elections who, given their records, would have supported anti-immigrant and anti-immigration measures in the 110th Congress. For instance, Minuteman Randy Graf (R-AZ) ran for the seat of retiring Republican Representative Jim Kolbe. He was defeated along with Representatives J.D. Hayworth (R-AZ), John Hostettler (R-IN) the chair in the 109th Congress of the House Immigration Subcommittee), Chris Chocola (R-IN), Anne Northup (R-KY), Melissa Hart (R-PA), Bob Beauprez (R-CO) who lost his race for Governor, Charles Taylor (R-NC), Gil Gutknecht (R-MN), and Richard Pombo (R-CA). Many of those defeated were members of the Immigration Reform Caucus. Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA), the third ranking Senate Republican in the 109th Congress, also lost his election. Nonetheless, many

Representatives and Senators who support anti-immigrant and immigration measures were returned to Congress, including Representatives Tom Tancredo (R-CO), Steve King (R-IA), John Culberson (R-TX), Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), Nathan Deal (R-GA), Brian Bilbray (R-CA), and James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) the former chair of the House Judiciary Committee and author of H.R. 4437, the enforcement-only measure that passed the House in the 109th Congress, and Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ), who, along with John Cornyn (R-TX) and Jeff Sessions (R-AL), serves on the Senate Judiciary Committee, the committee of jurisdiction for most immigration issues the Senate considers.

Nativist groups and their Congressional allies are expected to try again to use the 2008 elections as a referendum on immigration. In fact, Representative Tancredo, who formally declared that he is a candidate for President, will be key to this effort because he has one issue, immigration, that he has used to gain notoriety and attention unusual for a backbencher. While other Presidential candidates probably will not seek to highlight immigration, Representative Tancredo has indicated that it will be the primary issue of his campaign, and he will try to force other candidates to stake out their positions. While acknowledging that he will not have the money his rivals have, Representative Tancredo says that he has "something they don't have: a group of people out there who are there because of an issue."

- State and local issues: Nativist organizations increasingly have focused on passing measures at the state and local level. They seek to legislate immigration (which is a federal function) at these levels of government to force those without papers to leave by making life impossible for them and/or penalize employers who hire undocumented workers or landlords who house them. While many of these state and local laws are being challenged in court, it is clear that this effort reflects frustration at the lack of response at the federal level and an opportunity for nativist organizations that have not succeeded at the federal level in passing many of their high priority issues. Clearly, the only real solution is the federal government reforming our immigration laws.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 570 bills concerning immigrants were introduced in state legislatures around the country in 2006. At least 90 bills and resolutions passed the legislatures in that year; 84 bills were signed into law, more than double the amount of 2005, and 6 bills were vetoed. Last year, bills were enacted into law in 32 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming. While bills dealt with a wide variety of topics, many focused on education, employment, identification and driver's licenses, law enforcement, legal services, public benefits, trafficking, and voting procedures.

According to the Latino Justice Project, over 100 cities in 27 states recently enacted or are considering laws trying to curb illegal immigration. For instance, an April 2006 ballot initiative in San Bernardino, California would have denied city permits, contracts and grants to businesses that employ undocumented immigrants, allowed police to seize vehicles used to pick up day laborers, prohibited undocumented people from renting or leasing property and required official city business to be conducted in English. Because this initiative did not gather sufficient signatures it was never brought to a vote. However, a similar ordinance passed in Hazelton, Pennsylvania in July 2006, but has been challenged by civil rights

groups. This measure broadly and vaguely defines an “illegal” immigrant, includes an English-only provision, and seeks to penalize landlords, employers and others who do business with undocumented people. In December, 2006 civil rights groups filed suit against an anti-immigrant housing ordinance enacted by the city of Farmers Branch, Texas. The City Council repealed the ordinance, replacing it with a new ordinance (that includes similar restrictions on immigrants’ access to housing) that will be on the ballot during a special May, 2007 election.

Another Federation spin-off and its litigation arm, the Immigration Reform Law Institute, has been a party to the legal battles in some of these jurisdictions. In commenting on their work in Farmer’s Branch, the IRLI notes that it was “instrumental in helping many local governments around the country craft local ordinances in a way that does not conflict with federal jurisdiction over immigration policy.” IRLI sees this case “as a precedent-setting one that could clear the way for other local governments to protect legal residents against an influx of illegal immigrants.”

- Working the Media: Central to these organizations’ strategy is a concerted and often sophisticated use of the print and broadcast media, including especially talk radio. For example, the Federation for American Immigration Reform holds an annual “Hold Their Feet to the Fire” rally in Washington DC in April during which it teams up with talk show hosts from across the country who broadcast live from D.C. During recent elections, these talk show DJs have targeted specific Members of Congress. Clearly, their goal is to intimidate Members of Congress who hold contrary views on immigration or whom they view as insufficiently opposed to immigration. For example, the John and Ken Show on KFI 640FM targeted Representative Dreier (R-CA) during the 2004 Congressional elections for his record that they viewed as too pro-immigrant. While Representative Dreier won re-election, his margin of victory that year was smaller than it had been in earlier races. After the election, he became even more cautious and less supportive than he had in the past. John and Ken are scheduled to participate in this year’s “Hold Their Feet to the Fire” and, along with other talk show hosts including Boston’s Howie Carr and San Diego’s Roger Hedgecock, are organizing against “amnesty.” The importance of talk radio to the nativist movement was underscored by Representative Tancredo who credits talk radio with giving him a “megaphone” that he never would have had.

These organizations (or their fronts) have bought spots, often during election cycles or Congressional debate on a high priority issue, in print and broadcast media. A recent ad that appeared in a Washington D.C. based paper (*Roll Call* -- whose audience is largely people who work in or are focused on the federal government) supposedly was from the “You Don’t Speak For Me Coalition.” This ad included a picture of a Latina with the quote, “Some people assume because I’m Hispanic, I support illegal immigration. They’re Wrong.” On the top of the ad was the phrase “Our Country Is Being Overwhelmed.” Readers are urged to “speak up now” and go to the Coalition’s web site to join “American Hispanics across the U.S. as a member of *You Don’t Speak For Me*.” That the website directs you to Ira Mehlman, the Federation’s Media Director for additional information, a link that supports the fact that this group is Federation front.

No review would be complete without mentioning Lou Dobbs, the anchor and managing editor on CNN of “*Lou Dobbs Tonight*,” and recently named a special contributor to “*The Early Show on CBS*.” Abandoning his longtime financial news show, *Moneyline*, his role as a reporter, and any sense of balanced reporting, Dobbs on *Lou Dobbs Tonight* has become a

leading spokesperson for anti-immigrant hardliners in his “Broken Borders” segments. In fact, Dobbs has indicated that “what you won’t see on our broadcast is ‘fair and balanced journalism.’ You will not see ‘objective journalism.’ The truth is not ‘fair and balanced.’ “

In an August 2005 op-ed piece for the *Arizona Republic*, Dobbs wrote, "In the United States, an obscene alliance of corporate supremacists, desperate labor unions, certain ethnocentric Latino activist organizations and a majority of our elected officials in Washington works diligently to keep our borders open, wages suppressed and the American people all but helpless to resist the crushing financial and economic burden created by the millions of illegal aliens who crash our borders each year."

Dobbs regularly invites anti-immigrant hardliners to offer their not-surprising views on his show, thereby helping them move from the margins into the mainstream, and he quotes members of extremist and even openly racist groups, while failing to mention these connections. He also often distorts facts or just gets them wrong, features letters that echo his views, asks slanted poll questions, and attacks, as he did in 2006 on the CNN website, "the rampant barrage of misinformation, disseminated by such vociferous special interests, whether they are ethnocentric social activists, labor unions, the Catholic Church or Corporate America. The truth is, advocates of amnesty, guest-worker programs and open borders are unconcerned about the 280 million American citizens, the men and women of this country who work for a living and their families."

While seemingly offended by the charge that he is anti-immigrant, Dobbs continually alleges that illegal immigrants cause disease, crimes and terrorism, are welfare cheats, are destroying the public school system, burden our health care systems, and don't speak English. He views Mexican immigrants as an “army of invaders” who are determined to annex parts of the Southwestern U.S. to Mexico. He presents himself as a populist and, in alarmist tones, notes his concern about border security, U.S. employers taking advantage of immigrants, and the changing American culture that has resulted from the recent influx of immigrants.

CNN has defended Dobbs by noting that he is a legitimate immigration specialist and has increased his air time, many believe because he has increased the station's revenue.

To find out more about these groups, I encourage you to go to the following sites: the Southern Poverty Law Center (www.splc.org), Center for New Community's Building Democracy Project (www.buildingdemocracy.org), and Right Web (www.rightweb.irc-online.org).

At the Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC) we work to empower immigrants and their advocates. We ignore at our peril the misstatements, allegations, and fear that these nativists and their allies generate and manipulate. We have a long fight ahead to ensure that our voices are louder than theirs, but we are gaining ground. For more information on how to get involved, please visit our website, www.ilrc.org.