

In Southern States, Immigration Law Battle Rages On

by [Kathy Lohr](#)

Last year, several states passed strict laws aimed at cracking down on illegal immigration. Those laws are now being challenged in federal court, and next month the Supreme Court is set to hear arguments on Arizona's immigration law — but that hasn't stopped some Southern states from moving forward with more restrictions.

In 2011, Georgia passed a sweeping anti-immigration measure that requires law enforcement officers to check the status of people they suspect are in the country illegally and forces employers to verify the immigration status of workers. Now, lawmakers have been debating a bill to ban students here illegally from attending all public colleges — and that has drawn criticism.

In February, protesters in Atlanta showed their opposition to a state bill that would ban students here illegally from attending Georgia's public higher education institutions.

Democratic state Sen. Nan Orrock addressed the bill at a recent rally held at the Georgia Capitol.

Before a vote last night, a House committee took out the provision that would have banned illegal immigrants from colleges. D.A. King helped write the Georgia immigration law, and he says the intent of the bill is to update the identification requirements for people to prove they are here legally.

"But also to stop the acceptance of undocumented passports or passports issued to people in the country illegally after they arrive in the United States," King says. "That will do a lot to keep illegal aliens uncomfortable in the state of Georgia which has been our goal since we started."

Some suggest the move to forbid immigrants from using foreign passports to prove their identity will affect thousands of legal immigrants and foreign tourists. The ACLU's Jonathon Blazer says the regulation makes it difficult for this group to use basic services.

"It includes access to municipal buildings, marriage licenses, water [and] sewage services," Blazer says. "And these are the kind of unintended — if they are unintended — consequences that arise when states try to dabble in this area."

Alabama is moving forward with efforts to clarify its immigration law, which is in the courts, and the Mississippi House recently passed a bill calling for police to check the immigration status of those who are arrested. During a fiery debate over the bill, Mississippi state Rep. Andy Gipson, a Republican, said the measure is not unjust.

"Any person in Mississippi who breaks our laws and is arrested for doing so can be asked to present proof that they're here legally," Gipson said. "I don't think that's asking too much."

But state Rep. Ed Blackmon, a Democrat, is among those who oppose the bill.

"There's no compassion in this," he responded. "There's no forgiveness in this. We are going to bring down the hammer on a group of people who only want to do one thing: Find a better life for themselves."

Meanwhile, Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant has continued to support immigration laws, saying the states are justified in passing them.

"I think we took some of the most offensive language out ... so I think we have a really good, fair law," he says.

This year, Southeastern states have provided much of the debate on the immigration issue. Some, like Georgia and Alabama, are revamping laws. But bills in Tennessee, Arkansas and Virginia are on hold at least until this summer, when the Supreme Court is expected to rule on Arizona's law.

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