

different TAKES

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Choosing Nativism: What the Christian Right's Strange Alliance with the Anti-Immigrant Movement Means for Women

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"If we didn't abort our children, the U.S. wouldn't need to hire illegals to work," reads the marquee first spotted in the fall of 2007 at a suburban Boston Baptist church. Such sentiments are surprisingly common. Prominent conservatives, including former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-TX) and Prison Ministries' Chuck Colson, argue that abortion has created a worker shortage that in turn has created an immigration problem.¹

This rhetoric is emblematic of the recent and dramatic convergence between conservative White evangelical Protestants — the base constituency of the Christian Right — and the anti-immigrant movement, whose most vocal leader is a population control advocate forged in the eugenics movement. How is it that Christian rightists have become bed-fellows with a movement at odds with them on the core principle of the sanctity of unborn human life?

Signs of the Times

The media success of the Minutemen, the vigilante border patrol group, ushered militant anti-immigrant politics into the mainstream during the spring and summer of 2005 and stoked the flames of nativism within the ranks of the Christian Right. In the spring of 2006, a Pew Research Center survey revealed that 63 percent of White evangelical Protestants view immigrants as a threat to "traditional American customs and values," as compared with less than half of the general public and only 39 percent of secular citizens.²

Confronted with this level of anti-immigrant zeal at its base, the Family Research Council (FRC) and other Christian Right groups began to reposition themselves on immigration. At the September 2007 Values Voters Summit — the Christian Right's annual political con-fab — the Heritage Foundation's Robert Rector told a

packed room that low-skilled immigrants from points south actually drain, rather than bolster, the U.S. economy. Former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee once charged that, "Some anti-immigrant Republicans are guilty of demagoguery and racism."³ But during his 2008 campaign, he took a much harder line stating, "We will say 'No' to amnesty and 'No' to sanctuary cities." He added, "Build a border fence, secure the border, and do it now!"⁴

Huckabee's change of heart represented a significant shift from the previous year's event, at which some movement leaders made tentative statements about immigration, but where there had been no embrace of anti-immigrant politics as a central movement concern. What changed? By all evidence, the movement's shepherds were following their flock. That is to say, it is the Christian Right's base — not its leadership — that is aligning the movement with anti-immigrant forces.

Anti-Immigrant House Calls

The close working relationship between conservative evangelicals and the anti-immigrant movement is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the House Immigration Reform Caucus (HIRC). Founded in 1999 by Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO) during his freshman term, the caucus has grown to 110 members — over 25 percent of the House of Representatives — and become the standard bearer for hard-right anti-

immigrant proposals.⁵ Even before the 9/11 attacks, Tancredo sponsored a moratorium on all *legal* immigration into the United States, and a bill introduced in April 2007 to eliminate the 14th Amendment guarantee of birthright citizenship has to date garnered 97 cosponsors — at least 70 of whom are members of the HIRC. The caucus counts among its numbers few women, fewer Democrats, and no people of color.⁶

The group's agenda is heavily influenced by a close network of groups for which the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) serves as a kind of hub. The anti-immigrant movement's influence in Congress and its main policy victories of the last several decades are largely the work of FAIR and its sister organizations.

The co-founder of FAIR and the individual most responsible for building up the infrastructure of the contemporary anti-immigrant movement over the last thirty years is Dr. John Tanton, an ophthalmologist who once served as the first president of Northern Michigan Planned Parenthood. Rick Swartz, who founded the liberal National Immigration Forum, considers Tanton the movement's "puppeteer," noting that, "He is the organizer of a significant amount of its financing, and is both the major recruiter of key personnel and the intellectual leader of the whole network of groups."⁷ John Tanton's obsession with immigration began as a concern with population.

"To Govern is to Populate"

An environmentalist and chair of the Sierra Club's population committee during the 1970s, John Tanton founded FAIR in 1979 after failing to persuade the group Zero Population Growth to take up immigration as an issue.⁸ Since that time, Tanton and his collaborators have built a network of organizations and campaigns, a hydra that presents different faces of the anti-immigrant movement to different constituencies. The network markets anti-immigrant

perspectives and policies to environmentalists, population control advocates, nativists, elected officials, mainstream news media outlets and, of course, conservative evangelicals.⁹

While the groups in Tanton's network generally take pains to disavow any racial animus, Tanton himself was quite forthcoming in an infamous 1986 private memo to anti-immigrant leaders that became public. In it, Tanton reveals his obsession with the fertility rates of Latina immigrants to the U.S. He writes, "To govern is to populate," and asks, "Will the present majority peaceably hand over its political power to a group that is simply more fertile? ...Perhaps this is the first instance in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down!"¹⁰ Under Tanton's leadership, FAIR has accepted over \$1 million from the nativist group The Pioneer Fund, long associated with the eugenics movement.

Gender & Juan Crow¹¹

Comparing the strategies and tactics of the Christian Right and anti-immigrant movements provides another valuable lens through which to examine the movements' relationship one to the other. Both movements are large and multifaceted, with a variety of organizations and campaigns that appeal to a range of constituencies. It must, however, be noted that the anti-choice movement dwarfs the anti-immigration movement in numbers, institutional infrastructure, and financial resources. Focus on the Family, the leading Christian Right, pro-life organization, alone has one million members and an annual budget of over \$140 million. By comparison, the dozen leading national anti-immigrant groups have an estimated combined donor base of at most 750,000 and a budget of roughly \$12 million.¹²

Both coexist with a vigilante wing that hunts down and sometimes attacks adversaries.¹³ Each in its own way is obsessed with controlling the reproductive lives of women. And, having fought to the point of stalemate over their primary federal policy objectives, both movements have prioritized policy victories elsewhere.

Of course, the anti-immigrant and anti-abortion movements are by no means unique in their emphasis on local and state policy, their efforts to restrict permissible uses of public monies, or even their attempts to control the reproductive lives of women. Similar tactics and targets are evident in other social move-



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ments. Although not coordinated in any way, the cumulative impact of anti-immigrant and anti-abortion movement policy victories nonetheless amounts to a one-two punch that has significantly limited women's reproductive freedoms. Low income women, women of color, and immigrant women — the populations most vulnerable to restrictions on the use of public funds — have been hit hardest.

Footage accompanying “Broken Borders” and other immigration segments on CNN’s “Lou Dobbs Tonight” is almost invariably of Latino men stealing across the southern border, brandishing firearms, or being arrested.¹⁴ But women and girls make up roughly half of the foreign-born and non-citizen populations and, according to one study, over 40 percent of the undocumented residents of the United States.¹⁵

Although California’s anti-immigrant Proposition 187 was struck down in the courts, the “Republican revolution” of 1994 codified some of its goals into federal law. “Welfare reform” legislation passed under Clinton (PWRORA, 1996) required that states deny Medicaid, TANF, SSI, Food Stamps, and SCHIP benefits even to most authorized immigrants for their first five years in the United States.¹⁶ Thirty-three states deny state-controlled health care funds to immigrants, including low-income pregnant women who have very limited options for prenatal care.

Another significant anti-immigrant motif has immigrant women crossing the border to have “anchor babies” — securing U.S. citizenship for their children and, in so doing, planting permanent roots in the U.S. This is often paired with a denigrating depiction of immigrant women as “breeders” that inflames both racial and anti-Catholic resentments. While less prominent in public messaging, such images are nonetheless influential, in part because they resonate with characterizations of irresponsible women using taxpayers’ money that are deployed in anti-welfare and post-Roe challenges to public funding of income supports and abortions.

A major similarity between these two movements is clear: touting abortion and immigration as critical threats to society skillfully shifts the focus away from more difficult and challenging issues that have no silver bullets: racial, gender, and economic inequalities.

Conclusion

Among the spectrum of concerns that animate the Christian Right, opposition to abortion has been central to the movement’s identity and growth. As such, the institutional anti-immigrant movement’s obsession with population control represents more than a minor problem. It’s a conflict over first principles.

The irony of the situation is not lost on some conservatives. Representative Chris Cannon, Republican of Utah, has used committee hearings to lambaste the pro-abortion position of the anti-immigrant movement’s leadership. Most Christian Rightists, however, have opted to turn a deaf ear. Nativism in this instance is proving to be a stronger bond than abortion is a wedge.

What are progressives, committed to both reproductive justice and immigrant rights, to do? We can hope that moderate and progressive actors within the Roman Catholic Church will seize the opportunity to strengthen the Church’s alliance with the immigrant rights movement and to distance the Church from nativists who have proven unable to fully contain their anti-Catholic biases.

Challenging the racial double-talk of some Christian Right leaders is another opportunity. It is incumbent upon progressives tirelessly to expose the racism of the anti-immigrant movement and to open a dialog with Christian conservatives who have a genuine desire for racial reconciliation. What is less promising is to follow some in the Democratic Party, who in an attempt at moderation have replaced historic support for abortion rights with a newly declared commitment to reduce the incidence of abortion instead. Abortion rights — and reproductive freedoms more generally — must be non-negotiable. Compromise on this commitment would violate our own first principles and could open up deep fissures among our own social movements.



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