



How Restrictive Laws Can Influence Public Attitudes Towards Immigrants

René D. Flores, University of Chicago

In the last few years, public opinion towards immigrants has grown more polarized. From the rising numbers of hate crimes against foreigners to the way the construction of a border wall with Mexico has become a rallying cry for some, Americans have growing concerns about immigration. What are the factors that appear to animate this polarization? My research indicates that exclusionary policies may be playing a role in the shifting dynamics of public attitudes.

The Effects of Anti-Immigrant Laws

In recent years, towns and municipalities have become increasingly willing to legislate on immigration matters. As efforts to enact national immigration reforms have stalled in Congress, hundreds of local communities have considered restrictive immigration ordinances, such as English-only declarations and fines for employers who hire undocumented immigrants. Such policies have spread throughout the country as Hispanic immigrants have moved into areas far beyond of traditional border gateways. Although the determinants of these laws have been studied, we know less about their consequences, including their impact on public attitudes.

In one such study, I focus on Hazleton, Pennsylvania, a blue-collar community that made international headlines by passing a strict anti-immigrant measures in 2007 that inspired dozens of imitators in communities across the country. To examine this law's impact on inter-ethnic relations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 103 residents of Hazleton in 2007 and again in 2011. I learned that the proposal of the restrictionist policy not only affected immigrants but also natives. After the policy was proposed, anti-immigrant activism in Hazleton did not subside, as some had expected. Instead, it spiked.

Why did the law have a mobilizing effect? Although residents had multiple complaints about their quality of life, the controversial new legal proposal focused the town's attention on immigrants and solidified the perception that, as the Mayor argued, many of Hazleton's problems were directly due to illegal migration. In effect, the law energized local residents and mobilized efforts to oppose Hispanic immigrants and the problems "they were bringing with them," as Joanne, a middle-aged Polish-American resident, put it. Residents were inspired to attend anti-immigrant marches, and write letters to elected officials.

Another Study of a Controversial Law in Arizona

Although my interviews with the people of Hazleton were descriptive, my informants' answers may have been biased by fading memories or their own views of the new law because the interviews were conducted after the law had been proposed. To address these potential biases, I studied Arizona's controversial 2010 law "SB

1070" that authorized police officers to detain anyone they suspected of being an illegal immigrant. I evaluated the impact of this law on public sentiment towards immigrants by using computational text analysis to analyze more than 300,000 immigration-related tweets posted by Arizona residents in 2010. An advantage of twitter data is that it provided me with information about how residents talked about immigrants both before and after the anti-immigrant policy was approved by the Arizona legislature.

Using this approach, I found that the Arizona law had a negative impact on the average sentiment expressed in twitter messages about immigrants, Mexicans, and Hispanics, but not on the sentiments expressed in tweets about Asians or Blacks. However, the changes I found in public discourse were not caused by shifts in underlying attitudes toward immigrants, but instead happened because the law helped mobilize users with pre-existing anti-immigrant views. This finding for Arizona mirrors what I previously found using ethnographic interviews in Hazleton.

Laws Can Have Material Consequences

Besides mobilizing residents with restrictionist tendencies, I also found that these policies could have other tangible social consequences. In a follow-up article, I found that the proposal of anti-immigrant policies in Pennsylvania is correlated with significant increases in handgun sales even after accounting for a rigorous set of controls. Using both newspaper and administrative data, I found that as public leaders made the case for these policies, they increasingly linked immigrants with crime and social disorder. In turn, newspapers were more likely to publish articles linking immigrants with crime following the passage of restrictionist policies. These menacing portrayals of immigrants intensified social anxiety, which led to an increase in gun purchases.

But Effects May be Ephemeral

Although my research shows that restrictionist policies have tangible social consequences, the effects tend to be ephemeral. When I left Hazleton in 2007, a few months after the town had approved the anti-immigrant ordinance, ethnic tensions were quite high. But much to my surprise, when I returned in 2011, locals consistently reported that open racial antagonism had subsided and mobilizations against immigrants had died down. In addition, Hazleton's Hispanic population has continued to grow since 2007. Recent developments thus highlight the limitations of Hazleton's exclusionary policy steps. Not only was the social and political impact temporary, repressive policies failed to stop the flow of Hispanic immigrants into Hazleton.

In short, my research reveals the unintended consequences of exclusionary laws – and also suggests their limitations. Although some politicians may endorse punitive policies in an effort to placate and attract, my findings suggest that these policies may actually stir the pot further and encourage individuals with pre-existing anti-immigrant views to become more politically active. In turn, the increased political participation of these dedicated individuals may raise the odds that a new round of punitive policies could happen in the future. This feedback loop may explain why in recent years states like Arizona have implemented ever more punitive policies targeting immigrants, racial minorities, and homosexuals. However, further repressive efforts are not a certainty – as the calming of ethnic tensions in Hazleton demonstrates. In that city, immigrants are now a majority or close to it and they make vital contributions to the local economy.

Read more in René D. Flores, "Do Anti-immigrant Laws Shape Public Sentiment?: A Study of Arizona's SB 1070 Using Twitter Data." *American Journal of Sociology* (2017); René D. Flores, "Taking the Law into
May 1, 2017 <https://scholars.org>

Their Own Hands: Do Local Anti-Immigrant Ordinances Increase Gun Sales?" *Social Problems* 62, no. 3 (2015): 363-390; and René D. Flores, "In the Eye of the Storm: How Did Hazleton's Restrictive Immigration Ordinance Affect Local Interethnic Relations?" *American Behavioral Scientist* 58, no. 13 (2014): 1743-1763.