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Immigration equation

IMMIGRATION | Some say Arizona's immigration law is unfair; others say it's unfair to allow illegal immigrants to bypass the arduous legal process of becoming an American

Despite federal judge Susan Bolton's July 29 decision to block temporarily major portions of Arizona's new immigration law, SB1070 is continuing to have rippling political effects this election season. Polls show that the majority of Americans support it, and politicians are quickly reacting. Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Utah, for example, are among the states where legislators have introduced similar bills.

The issue has rocketed Arizona's interim governor Jan Brewer to national icon status and breathed new life into her previously stalled gubernatorial reelection campaign. Democratic advisors claim that the Obama administration has plenty of benefit to reap from the Justice Department's lawsuit against Arizona as well. They cite the likelihood that it will increase the president's standing among Hispanics, a demographic with whom his poll numbers have been faltering.

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Given how much both sides have invested in this fight, it's little surprise that each is promising that it is far from over and that they will take it to the Supreme Court if necessary, all but guaranteeing that immigration will be a major national issue in the months leading up to November.

But what of those most affected by SB1070 and the debate surrounding it—those living and trying to go about their business in the Grand Canyon State? Many—both supporters and opponents of the law—say the problem is being distorted to serve one political agenda or another and that the reality of illegal immigration is nowhere near as simple as it looks.

There are an estimated 500,000 illegal aliens residing in Arizona, and Holly Paulsen, a second-grade English teacher in a Phoenix school that serves disadvantaged students, says the images of drug smugglers and gangs hyped by politicians don't always paint an accurate picture of them. She has no idea how many of her students, who were placed in her class

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because of deficient English skills, are the children of illegal immigrants: "It could be 25 percent; it could be half; it could be the whole class. Unless they tell you specifically you don't know." But what she does know is the immediate impact the law's passage in April had in her school.

"Two hundred and fifty children in grades K-8 didn't come to class the day that Governor Brewer signed [SB1070]. I had 10 second-graders gone myself." For the rest of that academic year, she says the atmosphere on her campus changed, and much more time was devoted to weathering the immigration storm while much less time was spent learning.

"We had to counsel a lot of the kids because they were falling apart. They were scared for their parents and other relatives; they were scared they would have to move back to Mexico and not have a place to live. They were scared their parents would be arrested and deported and would have to leave them behind. These children already have a lot on their plates and then we throw this at them. It was tragic to see how distraught they were."

And it wasn't just the kids. Paulsen says she also noticed a dramatic change in the parents, who went from coming to her with concerns about their children's homework and test scores to coming to her with concerns they would have to pull their kids out of school and flee the state. She describes it as a difficult end to a difficult year that left many of the teachers in her school in tears, fearful for their students' futures. "You don't know if you're ever going to see or hear from some of the families again, you don't know if they're going to be safe, and you don't know if you're going to have a job next year—it was nerve-wracking."

Paulsen says she understands arguments about needing to secure the border and curb immigration-related crime, but she feels some middle way should be worked out that takes into consideration people who came to the United States for the right reasons even if it was in the wrong way. "The parents I meet, they are so passionate about their kids—they want them to learn, they want them to succeed. . . . I don't think anyone after getting to know these families would say, 'Nope, send them back home; kick them out.' I pray about it and I pray for the families and I hope that they're able to stay."

On the flip side of the issue is naturalized citizen Lisa Hope of Tucson. Born in Germany, Hope married an American serviceman who was stationed in Munich. She immigrated to the states during a long and arduous, but legal, process.

A mother of three, she describes having to stay in Germany for a year after the birth of her first child without her husband. When her visa was finally approved and she joined him in Indiana, she was confronted with the preparation book for her naturalization exam. "It was so big and full of facts on history and the Constitution. It scared the daylights out of me—I was so intimidated by it! I had two small children by then and I had a job so it was very hard to find time to study." It took her five years to become a citizen.

Citing her own background, Hope says it is unjust to people who immigrated legally to turn a blind eye to those who do so illegally. "There is a way to become an American and that is to follow America's law. There shouldn't be shortcuts. I waited and I did the right thing."

What really angers her are suggestions that the law is based on racial prejudice and will lead to racial profiling. Says Hope, "The reality is that most of the illegals in Arizona are from Mexico, so it's common sense that if the law is going to be enforced it is going to be enforced disproportionately against one racial group—but that's not because the law or the police are racist, it's because one particular racial group is breaking that law more than others."

Hope says that while she sympathizes with that portion of the illegal population that is here to pursue better lives for themselves and their children, allowing them to circumvent the law may result in a lack of appreciation for the United States and the liberty that it offers. And she fears that allowing so many people into the country via illegitimate roads has helped erode America's foundational values.

"I was happy to leave my German citizenship behind, and I am very proud to be an American citizen. Then I see these people marching waving the Mexican flag, flying the American flag upside down. Of course I look at that and think those people who came here outside the proper channels don't have an appreciation for what America means. They want to live here but still be Mexicans. They want to take advantage of what this country offers, but they're getting the wrong idea about what that is because they didn't have to sacrifice anything to get it. They think they're going to come to America so the government can give them things. When they don't go through the process like I did, they're missing the point of the American Dream."

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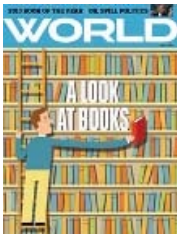
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