Learning from Alabama: Telling Persuadable Audiences Why These Laws Hurt Us All

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Last week’s court decision to allow much of Alabama’s new anti-immigrant law to go into effect has put that state, and the issue of immigration policy, in the spotlight. The resulting news coverage has painted a devastating picture of both the intended and unintended consequences of such legislation — on immigrant communities, law enforcement, schools, farmers, construction companies, and many others.

Alabama is turning into a poster child for what ill-conceived immigration policy can do to a state, and this moment provides immigration advocates specifically — and progressives more broadly — an opportunity to tell persuadable audiences why they should support a different vision for their states and for the country. Below we’ve included a brief synopsis of the law as well as some ideas for talking about it.

Among other things, this law:

- Requires that public schools verify the immigration status of children and their parents and report the information collected to the state.
- Authorizes schools to report students and parents who they believe to be undocumented to the federal government.
- Requires police officers to determine the immigration status of anyone they suspect of being undocumented during arrests or routine traffic stops.
- Makes it a state crime for an individual who fails to comply with federal laws requiring documentation of his or her alien registration and if the individual is unlawfully present in the United States.

Recent public opinion research, combined with the experiences of a range of immigration advocates and activists in the field, points to a few strategies for communicating about this law and other legislation like it. As always, we recommend organizing messages under the three themes of the pro-immigrant core narrative: We need workable solutions that uphold our values and move us forward together. The Alabama law, predictably, does none of this.
Workable Solutions

▲ Highlight the unworkable burdens the legislation places on law enforcement: News coverage is showing that this law is not workable. Even FOX News has covered the confusion the law is causing police in Alabama:

“Alabama’s tough new immigration law is already proving to be quite complicated, even for law enforcement officials. The police chief of a small town in the Appalachian foothills of Alabama didn’t know what to do about checking the immigration status of a Hispanic man his department recently arrested on an old warrant.”


▲ Emphasize the unintended consequences for businesses: Coverage has also focused on economic losses in the farming and construction industries. When possible, advocates can point to these types of otherwise unlikely spokespeople to underscore that this law is unworkable for Alabama and for other states whose industries depend on the labor of immigrants, documented or not.

“A sponsor of Alabama’s tough new immigration law told desperate tomato farmers Monday that he won’t change the law, even though they told him that their crops are rotting in the field and they are at risk of losing their farms.”


In uncertain economic times, it’s just not workable to gut an industry’s labor force. Yes, we need better and more workable immigration policies, laws that respond to our economic needs and make sure that we are authorizing enough workers to keep our farms, construction companies and other businesses afloat. Only the Federal government can address those policies, and our dabbling in immigration laws has only made matters worse.

While I don’t have all the answers on how to deal with immigration in our state, I’m fairly certain that this is the wrong approach. It places huge burdens on law enforcement, employers, educators and even common citizens by requiring all sorts of new responsibilities and red tape. It’s an enormous distraction from the real problems we’re facing. Times like these call for sensible solutions, not hastily-drawn up political grandstanding.

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But paint a positive vision, too: In recent focus groups, it did not work to criticize these kinds of laws without offering alternatives. In fact, doing so often moved audiences to support increased enforcement efforts and bad legislation even more. Instead, pair criticisms with some kind of alternative or solution, or at the very least a positive vision:

We want a community where police can do their work without these kinds of added burdens.

Our communities need Congress to focus on workable solutions that uphold our values and move us all forward together. Fixing our immigration system the right way is about what kind of country we want to be. This law certainly illustrates what we don’t want to become.

**Upholding Our Values**

Get people’s attention with values: While there are many legal and policy arguments against this type of legislation, people tend to respond better to messages and facts framed under “our values” than those presented alone (which they tend to ignore).

In addition to its many legal flaws, this law fundamentally violates our values.

Avoiding jargon and unexplained legal terms is also important when making points about legislation. Specific values that resonated with research participants:

- **Fairness**
- **Due process** (audiences feel this is a part of our founding values, but may need a sentence of explanation)
- **Freedom from discrimination** (audiences are generally opposed to racial profiling, but don’t necessarily believe these types of laws encourage it, so this argument needs fleshing out)

Share your vision: Two good ways to frame around values are a quick sentence about a positive vision of what we really want our communities to be (fair, that respect basic rights like due process, that don’t discriminate), and/or a quick sentence about how the law violates our values (is an attack on our fundamental right to due process, an affront to fairness, etc.).

I don’t want to live in a state that encourages anything resembling racial profiling — and I fear this law will do exactly that. We need to start rethinking the way we address immigration policy in our state; hysteria is getting the better of us, in place of common sense laws that address the real problems we are facing.
Move Us Forward Together

Focus on the impact the law is having on every aspect of Alabama communities: In addition to confusing and disrupting law enforcement, placing new burdens on schools and educators, and crippling small businesses, the law is hurting communities across Alabama, as described in a New York Times editorial:

“The law went into effect over the weekend, after being largely upheld by a federal district judge. Volunteers on an immigrant-rights group’s hot line said that since then they have received more than 1,000 calls from pregnant women afraid to go to the hospital, crime victims afraid to go to the police, parents afraid to send their children to school.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/04/opinion/alabamas-shame.html?_r=1

This law is impractical, violates our values, and divides our communities. Instead of feeding anti-immigrant sentiments, we need real solutions that embrace fairness, equal treatment, and due process. Our immigration laws are badly broken, but disregarding our values is not the answer to fixing them. We need to call on Congress to reform our Federal immigration policies while we focus on fixing our state’s real problems.

Our communities are facing so many tough issues these days. I just don’t see the value in putting all of these extra burdens on our schools, our people of faith, our police, and our hospitals. When we stoop to scaring children out of schools, we need to rethink what kind of state we’re really trying to be. We need immigration policies that move us all forward together — to create an Alabama that can thrive, not stagnate under a few people’s political grandstanding.