Tips for Messages on Anti-Immigrant State Laws in the South

Talking Race and Civil Rights

Core Message: We want our state to be a beacon of equality and fairness, rising up from our civil rights legacy. But instead this law invokes a racist past, inviting suspicion of our motives and our commitment to civil rights principles. Particularly troubling are questions around the role racism may play in the sentiments behind this type of law.

There is awareness among target persuadable audiences in the South (progressive whites, African Americans, native-born Latinos, and Asian Americans) that race and racism likely play a role in the current anti-immigrant sentiment many states in the South are experiencing. However, many of these audiences also don’t want to be labeled as racists if they support all or some of the provisions of anti-immigrant laws like Alabama’s HB56 or Arizona’s SB 1070. Balancing an acknowledgment of the role of racism in the passing of these laws, and people’s complex concerns about undocumented immigration is key in undermining support for the legislation. Here are some ideas on handling this messaging challenge.

► **Lead with Values.** Fairness, equality, America’s founding principles. Talk about how these values led Southern states through the civil rights movement and should guide our laws today.

► **It’s About All of Us.** Research shows that arguments focusing on the goal of protecting our core values resonate better than a focus on protecting the specific rights of undocumented immigrants. Because many audiences in the South recognize the race may play a role in many of anti-immigrant policies, we can underscore that they are an attack on equality, fairness and our basic values. Additionally, focusing only on wrongs to immigrants can sometimes draw resentment from African American audiences who feel that their communities continue to experience many of the same wrongs, but that no one cares.

► **Acknowledge Frustration.** Many persuadable audiences who may understand the racial component of these laws are still concerned about undocumented immigration in itself. They fear job competition or worry that new immigrants don’t have the same interest in becoming “American” as in the past. It’s important not to downplay this frustration, but rather acknowledge it and redirect it toward positive solutions such as worker protection laws. It’s also important to highlight stories of immigrants’ positive contributions to the state, and their participation in activities and customs that audiences value, such as church attendance or military service.

► **Find the Right Spokespeople.** Civil Rights is a powerful frame, particularly when invoked by historic leaders from the movement and other prominent African Americans. African Americans see their story and place in America as unique and do not like the idea that messages might attempt to “piggyback” onto the Civil Rights movement. Instead, emphasize that this fight is part of a larger, historic fight to equality. African-American leaders are best positioned to deliver this message. Be aware that messages from other spokespeople that seem to single out African Americans or treat them as somehow separate from other Americans is likely to be perceived as patronizing.