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Tennessee Bill Would Prohibit Voting Against Trump Immigration Policies

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A Tennessee state senator told *Newsweek* Thursday that representatives were afraid to vote against [immigration policies](#), even if they could be deemed unconstitutional.

Democratic state Senator Heidi Campbell, whose 20th District covers Nashville's inner suburbs, was speaking after state legislators approved a bill Tuesday that would make it illegal for lawmakers to vote for policies perceived as opposing [President Donald Trump's agenda](#)—namely sanctuary procedure.

The bill, which includes provision for a state-based immigration enforcement agency, was passed in the state's Republican-led [Senate](#), despite opposition from both GOP and [Democratic Party](#) members.

"You don't have to spend a lot of time up at the legislature to see that we are living in a totalitarian state," Campbell told *Newsweek*.

Newsweek reached out to the bill's main sponsor, [Republican](#) Jack Johnson, as well as Republican Governor Bill Lee, for comment Thursday via email.

Why It Matters

Republican states [have been keen to show their support](#) for tougher immigration policies, during both the Biden administration and Trump's. [Long-standing precedent set out by the U.S. Supreme Court](#) leaves immigration enforcement in the hands of the federal government, however.

The move in Tennessee comes as nationwide polling has shown widespread support for immigration reform, from [Republicans](#) and [Democrats](#), although there is some division over the process. Trump was elected following a campaign largely focused on illegal immigration and his plans to tackle it.





Abby Warbington speaks with Tennessee state troopers as she is removed from a House committee meeting on immigration during a special session of the state Legislature on January 29 in Nashville. **AP PHOTO/GEORGE WALKER IV**

What To Know

[Senate Bill 6002](#) came as part of a special session of the Tennessee General Assembly, aimed at delivering Lee's plans to deal with illegal immigration in the state.

The legislation includes creating a Centralized Immigration Enforcement Division (CIEO), changes to state-issued IDs for legal immigrants, and launches incentives for local governments to participate in federal law enforcement under 287(g).

It also creates a Class E felony for local leaders or officials who adopt or maintain sanctuary policies meant to protect immigrants lacking permanent legal status from federal authorities, despite the status being banned already in the state.

Sanctuary policies, seen [in cities like New York](#) and Chicago, usually cover those without legal status but who have committed no other crimes. Trump has vowed to overturn these policies, with Republicans in [Congress](#) calling Democratic mayors to testify on February 11.

Under the Tennessee bill, any local leader who votes in favor of such a policy, and therefore against [the White House administration's views](#), could be imprisoned for one to six years, and/or be fined up to \$3,000.

During debate on the bill Tuesday, Republicans and Democrats alike spoke out against this provision, with Campbell among them. Speaking to *Newsweek* Thursday, she maintained her concerns that Republicans were bowing to pressure from MAGA members.

"Special sessions (historically for extraordinary issues) have been employed 7 times over the past 5 years to push through the governors agenda, and right now we are finishing a special session to push through a voucher scam and to establish an immigration division to support Trump's deportation plan - included in the legislation was a section that felonizes elected officials if they vote against Trump's immigration policy," she said.

"Everyone is aware that this is unconstitutional, but the super-majority voted for it anyway."

Before the special session, Lee said the idea was to strengthen public safety in the state, and references Trump's plans to include local agencies in carrying out immigration enforcement.

Tennessee is not alone in trying to enact its own immigration powers following the changeover in Washington, D.C., with [Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis calling for a special session](#) of his state assembly to discuss immigration policies, and GOP Texas Governor [Greg Abbott](#) signing a series of orders enabling enforcement at the local level in the Lone Star State.

What People Are Saying

Republican Tennessee state Senator Todd Gardenhire told fellow lawmakers Tuesday: "We are a Republic, and a Republic is one that we elect people to vote the way they feel like is best for the district, the city, county or the state. If we set the precedent of penalizing any elected official for voting their conscience, whether it's good or bad, then we set a dangerous precedent for the future."

Republican House Majority Leader William Lamberth, in a press release: "Our top priority remains the safety and interests of Tennesseans. We are grateful to partner with an administration that takes border security and the public safety of Americans seriously. We expect federal laws to be enforced and we look forward to passing common-sense legislation in a special session to assist those efforts."

Lee, in a press release: "Tennessee has a long track record of stepping up to secure our Nation's borders and strengthening public safety. President Trump has made it clear that states will play a major role in partnering with his Administration to enforce immigration laws and keep communities safe, and Tennessee is heeding the call."

Republican Tennessee Senate Majority Leader Jack Johnson, in a statement to *Newsweek*: "Sanctuary policies directly contradict federal and state laws, creating legal gray areas that put public safety at risk. Worse, when elected officials vote to support these policies, they force law enforcement officers and other public employees into an impossible position: either violate federal law or risk their jobs. This bill ensures that no official can undermine our nation's immigration laws without accountability."

What Happens Next

The bill passed in the state Senate on Wednesday and now heads back to the House. If it passes there, it will head to Lee's desk.

Update 1/30/25, 5:27 p.m. ET: This article was updated with comment from Tennessee Senate Majority Leader Jack Johnson.

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Dan Gooding is a Newsweek reporter based in New York City. His focus is reporting on immigration and border security. ...

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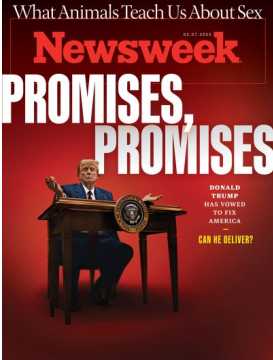
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