

Arizona, Bowing to Business, Softens Stand on Immigration

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Body

Arizona established itself over the past year as the most aggressive state in cracking down on illegal immigrants, gaining so much momentum with its efforts that several other states vowed to follow suit. But now the harsh realities of economics appear to have intruded, and **Arizona** may be looking to shed the image of hard-line anti-**immigration** pioneer.

In an abrupt change of course, **Arizona** lawmakers rejected new anti-**immigration** measures on Thursday, in what was widely seen as capitulation to pressure from **business** executives and an admission that the state's tough stance had resulted in a chilling of the normally robust tourism and convention industry.

The State Senate voted down five bills that among other things sought to require hospitals to inform law enforcement officials when treating patients suspected of being in the country illegally and to prod the Supreme Court to rule against automatic citizenship for American-born children of illegal immigrants.

The Senate move was a victory for the **Arizona business** lobby, which on many issues is more moderate than state lawmakers. And it was a rebuke for the State Senate president, Russell Pearce, a Republican and the driving force behind tough **immigration** measures, including the law passed last April requiring police to question the status of anyone they stop if they have a "reasonable suspicion" that the person might be an illegal immigrant.

Opponents of the five bills said that the state's image had been hit hard, and that it did not make sense to pass new measures while the state had already put itself so far out in front of other states and the federal government on the issue -- at a cost to tourism and other industries.

They said that previous **immigration** bills were still being reviewed by the courts, and that it was not smart to pass new legislation that plainly conflicted with the 14th Amendment of the Constitution.

"I don't believe that anyone, including myself, foresaw the national and international reaction" to April's bill, said Glenn Hamer, chief executive of the **Arizona** Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who said estimates of lost tourism **business** ranged from \$15 million to \$150 million. "Now we have that experience under our belts. We know these measures can cause economic damage; it's just a matter of degree."

A letter signed by 60 state **business** leaders this week blamed last year's bill for boycotts, canceled contracts, declining sales and other economic setbacks.

"**Arizona**'s lawmakers and citizens are right to be concerned about illegal **immigration**," the letter said. "But we must acknowledge that when **Arizona** goes it alone on this issue, unintended consequences inevitably occur."

While Mr. Hamer said he doubted the bills could have been defeated on Thursday without broad-based **business** opposition, he cautioned that support for tighter restrictions on **immigration** remained strong in a number of

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quarters. But, he added, "Our hope is that these types of measures have crested and we could spend our time on efforts that could rebuild our economy."

Indeed, state politicians and other officials interviewed after the bills' defeat said it was too soon to tell whether the turnabout represented a long-term change, or merely a breather until the economy rebounds. Concerns about illegal immigration remain a significant issue, and many state leaders are angry with what they describe as the federal government's unwillingness to take firm action.

But for now, "enough is enough," said State Senator John McComish, a Republican who voted no on all five bills.

Gov. Jan Brewer, a Republican, did not take a position on the five bills that were voted down Thursday -- her normal practice on legislation that has not reached her desk, a spokesman said on Friday.

An aide said Senator Pearce was unavailable for comment.

Crucial to changing the discussion was a clearly articulated and executed strategy by the state business lobby, which made concerns over negative economic effects a far more significant factor than in the debate last year.

State Senator Kyrsten Sinema, a Democrat, said business opposition -- in contrast to what she called the tepid and delayed efforts of its leaders last year -- gave Republicans the political protection they needed to vote no.

"They have been working since January to provide people cover against these bills," Senator Sinema said. Twenty-one of 30 state senators are Republicans, and none of the bills would have been defeated without many of them voting in opposition.

The effect on the state's convention and tourism industry after the April vote was immediate. Convention bookings plunged in Phoenix, one of the top destinations in the United States, with large organizations citing the immigration bill when canceling their reservations.

"It was definitely a drastic decline," said Kristen Jarnagin, vice president of communications for the Arizona Hotel and Lodging Association. She and other business officials pointed to data on bookings showing Phoenix's ranking, on some measures, had dropped from the top four destinations nationwide to 23rd.

So far, Arizona-style anti-immigration bills have not lived up to their advance billing in other states, which despite strengthened Republican legislative majorities have failed to pass any identical bills. Similar proposals are still advancing in some states, but they, too, have encountered strong business opposition.

"Our legislature and our state are suffering from immigration fatigue," Senator McComish said. "We've been at the forefront of this issue, and I think it is time for a timeout."

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Graphic

PHOTO: Senators Russell Pearce, left, and Steve Gallardo during debate on the anti-immigration measures in the Senate on Thursday. (PHOTOGRAPH BY ASSOCIATED PRESS)

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