

An immigration crackdown killed - by conservatives

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Body

Last November, Republicans finally took control of the Mississippi House of Representatives, the final victory of the party's long Southern strategy. Not since Reconstruction had the GOP controlled every facet of political life in the state.

It wasn't just any Republicans, either. Former Gov. Haley Barbour is considered a moderate now. Gov. Phil Bryant is a creature of the tea party. Though this is not a border state, every aspect of political life was aligned to follow in the footsteps of Arizona, Alabama, and Georgia with sweeping laws against illegal **immigration**.

But something surprising happened in the Magnolia State. While liberals were harboring futile hopes that the Supreme Court would invalidate Arizona's anti-immigrant law, Mississippi **conservatives** quietly shelved theirs. It now appears that Arizona-like laws are more likely to suffer at the hands of politics rather than judges.

States often learn from the mistakes of their 49 siblings. Draconian **immigration** laws have been a disaster for Arizona and Alabama. Those states' economies thrived off of undocumented immigrants; not anymore. And now the laws are reportedly being undercut by lack of enforcement rather than adverse court rulings.

Mississippi's politics still tend to be divided along racial lines. The state is 37 percent African American, and its black community has long been organized around progressive causes. In the 1990s, the state's growing casino industry became a lure for Hispanic immigrants. They joined forces with African Americans against rising Republican power. But that seemed only to drive more whites into the GOP.

While many of those voters were enraged over illegal **immigration**, many others were not. The state Senate faced strong opposition to its anti-illegal-immigrant bill from the state chamber of commerce, the farm lobby, and local governments.

Their reasons were all different and not very appealing. Clearly, cheap labor with no regulation animated some of the farm and business groups. Farmers couldn't ignore accounts coming out of Georgia and Alabama of crops rotting in the fields. Cities and towns didn't want the extra work hunting down undocumented workers. The chamber feared the state would suffer boycotts and a hurt reputation.

These groups changed the way **immigration** is discussed in a state that's about as **conservative** as can be. Rhetoric about civil rights or racial profiling only goes so far here. Concerns about the business climate, agricultural interests, and government mandates gained traction. With all these 'white' interests aligned to defeat the bill, even the most **conservative** politicians took note.

In Mississippi, the lieutenant governor gets to pick the heads of state Senate committees. **Conservative** Republican Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves appointed a Democrat, Bob Armory, head of the Judiciary Committee and then sent the bill there. Armory never put it up for a vote. In defending the move that **killed** the bill, Reeves'

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spokeswoman said the concerns 'expressed by the Mississippi Economic Council, Farm Bureau, the Mississippi Poultry Association, and local cities, counties, police chiefs, and sheriffs" weighed heavily.

Missing from that list is anything related to immigrants or their rights. The opposition spoke the language that would win in a **conservative** state. The victory may be discomfoting, but it is a victory nonetheless.

Juliette Kayyem writes for the Boston Globe.

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