

## **More laws are enacted to help, not restrict, illegal immigrants; Analysis of 50 states' actions reveals a more accommodating attitude**

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### **Body**

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Despite recent national attention on such **laws** as the Arizona measure aimed at cracking down on **illegal immigrants**, a study released Monday by the [Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars](#) shows that across the country, **more laws** expanding **immigrants'** rights are **enacted** than those contracting them.

The study, "[Context Matters: Latino Immigrant Civic Engagement in Nine U.S. Cities](#)," found that areas long accustomed to an influx of **immigrants**, including close-in jurisdictions of the Washington region, tend to focus **more** on trying to **accommodate** them rather than **restrict** them.

"The reality is that they're here already, so most cities and counties are trying to figure out how they can best incorporate these **immigrants**," said Andrew Selee, director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute and a co-author of the report. In **states** including Texas, California and Illinois, he said, "There is a sense that **immigrants** are a productive part of society."

An **analysis** of 1,059 immigration-related bills in **50 state** legislatures in 2007 found that 19 percent of 313 bills expanding **immigrant** rights were **enacted**, while 11 percent of 263 bills contracting rights were **enacted**, the report says.

Bills contracting **immigrant** rights included those such as one approved that year in Prince William County allowing police officers to check people's immigration status if there was probable cause to believe that they were in the United **States** illegally. The bill was later amended to require a status check for all arrestees.

Bills expanding **immigrant** rights included a measure in New York that eliminated citizenship requirements for such occupations as police officer, firefighter and teacher; a Texas bill that made it an offense to obtain labor or services by threatening to report someone to immigration; and a Nevada bill that designated new crimes and penalties around involuntary servitude and human trafficking, said Xochitl Bada, an assistant professor in the Latin American and Latino Studies Program at the [University of Illinois at Chicago](#) and one of the report's authors.

The number of **immigrant**-related bills introduced overall has soared in recent years, she added, from 300 in 2005 to 1,500 last year.

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The Washington region, one of the nine metropolitan areas that was studied, takes a broad range of approaches to immigrants, from more-restrictive ordinances in Prince William and Loudoun counties to more-accommodating laws in Arlington and Montgomery counties.

The Washington pattern reflects the study's findings that areas with longer histories of immigration are more accommodating and that the same metropolitan area can have vastly divergent approaches to immigrants.

Often, a city's suburban areas have seen immigrants move in more recently and are more inclined to introduce restrictive laws, while the center of a city may be more accustomed to them and have an infrastructure and social services designed to accommodate them, Selee said.

"Places like Prince William and Herndon have seen a fast upsurge in the number of immigrants, whereas the near-in areas, Montgomery County, Prince George's, and Arlington and Alexandria have had a long tradition of immigration," he said.

Over time, he said, communities' views on immigration tend to shift. "What today seems so controversial, tomorrow may become much less so. Very soon, communities learn how to take advantage of immigration."

The study also found that immigrants tend to become more civically engaged in the face of a threat, such as a harsh immigration law, and that Latinos have become increasingly involved politically in recent years, with their voter registration surging 24.7 percent between 2004 and 2008.

In Washington, where the Latino population has grown rapidly over two decades, Latino immigrants are more likely to be citizens and have higher rates of education, workforce participation and homeownership than the national average, the report says.

They also tend to be better-organized politically, said Robert Donnelly, also of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute and a co-author of the report.

"The fact that the nation's capital is here makes the D.C. area especially relevant in terms of immigrant political participation," he said, noting that Latinos in the Washington area have access to national media and visible sites for demonstrations.

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