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Immigration: Criminal or Constructive?

By Caroline Dillard

1,254 miles. That is the length of the border between Texas and Mexico. Texas occupies over 60% of the U.S.-Mexican Border (“TRIBPEDIA: Texas-Mexico Border”). Over this vast expanse there are very few barriers. There are many places where people can enter Texas without being stopped. A major problem afflicting Texas is illegal immigration from Mexico. People leave their homes, families, and old lives to seek new opportunities in Texas. Instead of waiting years to become a citizen, some risk crossing the border without permission. Illegal immigration from Mexico to Texas causes many problems, but it can also create opportunities. Because of this, political parties have varying opinions on such immigration. In particular, the views of the Texas state Republican and Democratic parties hold widely different views on what should be done about undocumented migrants. In addition, interest groups such as the Immigration Reform Coalition of Texas also have distinct ideas about illegal immigration. While Texas typically handles this issue one way, other governments take different approaches. One example is Arizona. All of these groups disagree over the best way to address this issue, yet all believe they need to take action.

Immigration affects local governments as well as individuals statewide. It is a prevalent issue in Texas today. The University of Texas and the Texas Tribune conducted a statewide survey of Texans in 2015. Of the 1,200 adults questioned, 20% said border security was the most important problem facing Texas, and 18% thought the biggest problem was immigration (“UT-Austin/Texas Tribune” 3). People are concerned because illegal immigration can have an economic impact on everyone in the state. Specifically, however, it affects people living in urban areas and the Texas labor force. Most immigrants settle in large cities and along the southern

border. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, “The foreign-born population share tends to be relatively low in rural areas and higher in urban areas. Not surprisingly, the U.S.–Mexico border is an important exception to this pattern” (Orrenius 4). Austin, the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, and Houston have foreign-born population shares over 15%. The influx of residents increases competition for schools and housing (James 186). In addition to people living in these places, illegal immigration also directly impacts workers because it adds people to the labor pool. The Pew Hispanic Center estimated in 2008 that less than half of the total Texas population was part of the labor force, but over 60% of unauthorized immigrants were workers (Passel 30). The large number of illegal workers has both benefits and drawbacks. According to the Texas Public Policy Foundation, “The peripatetic ways of immigrants, both legal and illegal, serve as an economic lubricant—the nation relies on them to rebalance the economy so that workers and jobs are more likely to be in the same locale” (Brannon 3). Immigrant workers typically fill jobs that native Americans do not, so instead of stealing jobs, they perform necessary functions. They follow opportunity and go where businesses need their labor. Also, they contribute to lower prices because they are typically paid less than native citizens. The foundation adds, “We can estimate that immigrants save Texas consumers between \$3 billion to \$6 billion a year” (Brannon 8). While both legal and illegal immigration provide these benefits, illegal immigration also has serious disadvantages. Over \$800 million a year go to undocumented immigrants through welfare programs, and about \$3 billion a year pay for the education of illegal immigrants or the children of illegal immigrants through the public school system. In addition, there are severe law enforcement costs associated with this kind of immigration (Brannon 7-8). Regardless of these costs and benefits, the fact remains that people continue to enter Texas without becoming naturalized citizens. The strongest explanation for this

is Texas's economic climate. Researchers report that immigrants from Mexico and Central America come to the United States to find work (Stansfield 648). Texas is particularly attractive for various reasons. The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas writes, "Low-skilled immigrants, many of them unauthorized, chose Texas for its geographic proximity to Mexico, low cost of living and plentiful job opportunities ... The state has also remained relatively immigrant-friendly, rejecting laws other states have passed that target illegal immigrants" (Orrenius 16). Immigrants follow opportunity, and Texas has opportunity. Because illegal immigration has both benefits and drawbacks, state politicians are divided on the best way to respond.

The Republican and Democratic Parties in Texas have diverging views on immigration. According to their state party platforms, Republicans support stronger enforcement of immigration laws to stop people from illegally entering and living in the state while Democrats emphasize equal opportunities for undocumented immigrants and decry the separation of families. Republicans do not want social or educational programs to apply to illegal immigrants. Democrats, in contrast, support DACA and DAPA programs, the DREAM Act, and the expansion of the Affordable Care Act so it will benefit such persons. In addition, Republicans state, "We expect both the Texas Legislature and the United States Congress to make a priority of allocating funds to effectively secure the border through whatever means necessary, including but not limited to barriers, personnel, and technology over land, sea, and air" ("Report" 25). As part of this, they support a wall along the border to prevent people from illegally entering the state. They add, however, that such a wall will not be built unless it were "deemed effective and cost-efficient" (25). The Democratic Party is directly opposed to this standpoint. The 2016 platform of the Texas Democratic Party includes the following statement: "[We] denounce efforts to build a border wall of any size and the unrealistic claims a foreign country will pay for

a border wall” (“2016-2018 Texas Democratic Party Platform” 30). The second half of this proclamation is a direct response to then-candidate Donald Trump’s promises that, if elected president, he will build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border and Mexico will pay for it (Valverde). While Democrats and Republicans disagree over border security, neither party wishes to stop legal immigration. Also, both parties believe more action should be taken concerning illegal immigration, though they differ on what that action should entail. Political parties are not the only groups with opinions regarding immigration; interest groups are also involved in this issue.

One interest group is the Immigration Reform Coalition of Texas or IRCOT. The position of this non-profit organization is as follows: “We support legal immigration (at reasonable levels) of those desiring to enter legally, assimilate, and become Americans. As a first line of defense from those wishing to do us harm, we demand a well defined and secure border, the enforcement of our current immigration laws, and an end to Sanctuary Cities and other magnets that draw illegal aliens to our State” (“Immigration Reform Coalition of Texas”). IRCOT supports strong immigration reform laws, and they lobby in Austin to accomplish their goals. According to their Facebook page,

Since its formation in 2006, IRCOT leadership has been actively engaged in efforts to educate the public and elected representatives about the dangers of out-of-control immigration in Texas ... Through our networking efforts we coordinated Texans throughout the state to attend hearings and make visits to the offices of legislators to encourage them to support important legislation. (“Immigration Reform Coalition of Texas (IRCOT)”)

Thus, IRCOT focuses on getting citizens involved in the immigration issue. They believe illegal immigration is a serious problem facing Texas and that lawmakers must stop it. They use education, networking, and citizen action to convince officials to enforce current immigration laws and to pass stricter regulations. In 2010, IRCOT sued Texas colleges for allowing the

children of illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition as part of an effort to repeal the DREAM Act (Unmuth). However, they were unsuccessful, and the law is still in effect (“TRIBPEDIA: Dream Act”). The DREAM Act is part of Texas legislation, but other states have chosen not to pass it.

One state that has implemented stricter immigration laws than those in Texas is Arizona. Both are border states, so illegal immigration from Mexico greatly affects both of these states. Arizona’s reaction to this kind of immigration, however, is different than Texas’s response. Under the DREAM Act, children of illegal immigrants in Texas can pay in-state tuition at public universities. In contrast, “Arizona prohibits state schools from offering in-state tuition benefits to illegal immigrants” (“Arizona State Immigration Laws”). Arizona’s laws are stricter than Texas’s laws concerning both students and workers. In example of this is as follows: “The state of Arizona passed the Legal Arizona Workers Act in 2007 (‘LAWA’). The law authorizes the Arizona Attorney General and county attorneys to sue employers who knowingly or intentionally employed unauthorized workers such as illegal aliens as a means of combating illegal immigration” (“Chamber of Commerce”). Arizona senate bill 1070 states that it is illegal for undocumented immigrants to work or seek work. In addition, it “establishes a class 3 felony for failing to ... verify employment eligibility through E-Verify or ... keep records of verifications” (“FACT SHEET FOR S.B. 1070”). Arizonan employers must use E-verify, a government system for determining the immigration status of prospective employees. Texas does not have this stipulation nor does it have a law such as LAWA. In Arizona, illegal immigration and employing or helping illegal immigrants are viewed as serious criminal offences. In Texas, the public also views this kind of immigration as problematic, but immigration is not as criminalized. A major question for legislators centers over whether illegal immigrants are a net benefit for state

economies or a net cost. In an article about Arizona, the Wall Street Journal reported, “Economists of opposing political views agree the state’s economy took a hit when large numbers of illegal immigrants left for Mexico and other border states, following a broad crackdown (Davis). However, the Journal also stated there were economic benefits such as decreased spending on health care and education and increased wages for low-skilled laborers. A study conducted by the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy in Arizona found, “Fiscal costs of immigrants in 2004 were an estimated \$1.4 billion. Tax revenues attributable to immigrants as workers were approximately \$2.4 billion, resulting in a net fiscal gain of approximately \$940 million” (Gans 58). While these results were taken before the exodus of illegal immigrants from Arizona, they indicate that such workers are a net benefit for the state. Therefore, stricter laws regarding illegal immigrants would cause Arizona to have worse results than Texas.

Illegal immigration from Mexico is a major issue in Texas partly because there are many inconclusive reports on whether it is beneficial to the state or detrimental. While it increases state spending on education, healthcare, and law enforcement, it can also boost the economy by filling jobs and lowering prices for Texas consumers. Both Texas citizens and state politicians believe they need to take action regarding this issue. Republicans want to increase border security and make it more difficult for illegal immigrants to live, work, and go to school in Texas. Contrarily, Democrats want such people to have access to social and educational programs. Interest groups are also involved in changing laws about illegal immigration. The Immigration Reform Coalition of Texas lobbies legislators to pass stricter immigration laws and to enforce laws already enacted. This group would most likely support many of Arizona’s policies toward undocumented workers. Arizona has tough immigration laws including one that severely criminalizes the hiring of illegal immigrants. Thus, Arizona and Texas represent two different responses to illegal

immigration from Mexico. Politicians and researchers are divided over which response has the best results.

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