



## BACKGROUND BRIEFING: Mark Krikorian (CIS)

Executive Director of the Center for Immigration Studies, 1995-Present

...chief linguist of the Anti-Immigrant Lobby schools Judge Sotomayor on how to pronounce her own name

### → A Network of Hate:

Mark Krikorian, oft-cited as an expert on immigration issues by the mainstream media, is adding to his already damaged reputation this week.

His controversial comments regarding President Barack Obama's Supreme Court nominee, Judge Sonia Sotomayor, have launched him into the national limelight. Krikorian's organization, the [Center for Immigration Studies](#) (CIS), describes itself as a non-partisan, unbiased "think tank" on immigration, but it is widely recognized as anything but.

Under Krikorian, CIS, whose core mission is to reduce immigration to the United States, routinely [blames immigrants](#) for everything from "voter fraud" to "global warming." Krikorian figures prominently in the network of anti-immigrant, extremist organizations founded by a man with clear ties to white nationalism— [John Tanton](#). This disturbing and well-funded network have maintained a firm grip on both the airwaves and the halls of Congress in years past but their strength is waning.

Statements like those made by Krikorian this week are beginning to wear away at their "unbiased" façade and expose them for what they really are: extreme.



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### → What Krikorian has said:

While Krikorian is usually very careful to steer clear of overt racism in his CIS policy "reports" and his blogging for the National Review Online, he let it all hang out this week. Instead, he chose to go after the President's new Supreme Court nominee, Sonia Sotomayor, on the basis of – not merit, not even her stance on immigration— but rather: [the pronunciation of her last name](#).

In a post titled, “Assimilated Pronunciation,” Krikorian [stated](#):

So, are we supposed to use the Spanish pronunciation, so-toe-my-OR, or the natural English pronunciation, SO-tuh-my-er, like Niedermeyer? The president pronounced it both ways, first in Spanish, then after several uses, lapsing into English. Though in the best "Pockiston" tradition, he also rolled his r's in Puerto Rico.

In “[Krikorian: People should stop pronouncing Sotomayor’s name correctly](#),” Think Progress blogger Amanda Terkel questions where this line of reasoning might lead:

Mark Krikorian of the right-wing Center for Immigration Studies blogs on the Corner today about his outrage over people “[\[d\]eferring” to Sotomayor](#) over the ‘unnatural pronunciation’ of her own name:

**Deferring to people’s own pronunciation of their names should obviously be our first inclination, but there ought to be limits. Putting the emphasis on the final syllable of Sotomayor is unnatural in English** (which is why the president stopped doing it after the first time at his press conference), unlike my correspondent’s simple preference for a monophthong over a diphthong, and **insisting on an unnatural pronunciation is something we shouldn’t be giving in to.** [...]

[O]ne of the areas where conformity is appropriate is how your new countrymen say your name, since that’s not something the rest of us can just ignore, unlike what church you go to or what you eat for lunch. And there are basically two options — the newcomer adapts to us, or we adapt to him. And multiculturalism means there’s a lot more of the latter going on than there should be.

What’s next? Should people with ‘unnatural’ names ‘adopt a name just for identification purposes that’s [easier for Americans to deal with](#)’?

Terkel cites Krikorian’s follow-up post on the nomination, entitled “It Sticks in My Craw,” which The New Republic blog takes up in a piece called, “[The Pronunciation Wars](#):”

More generally, while everyone is allowed to focus on whatever issues they please, it is always worth paying attention to what things really bother people, what things “stick in their craw.” As for what has made America a beacon of assimilation, I would offer up the thought that this pleasant reality is more the consequence of a relative dearth of people who think like Krikorian does. That, as opposed to disputes over pronunciation, is worth paying attention to.

Krikorian is not new to controversy. He may have launched himself into stardom this week by taking on Sotomayor’s last name, but the worldview that got him there was nurtured by the extreme anti-immigrant movement. Krikorian is a protégé of the notorious anti-immigrant leader, John Tanton. Krikorian’s organization, the Center for Immigration Studies, was started by the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), the anti-immigrant hate group, in order to help “mainstream” their movement.

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→ **Who is this John Tanton Guy, Anyway?**

The puppet-master of the anti-immigration movement is [John Tanton](#).

The Center for Immigration Studies, and its advocacy arm, [NumbersUSA](#) (those angry guys who flood Congress with thousands of faxes about “illegal aliens”), were both started with Tanton’s help. Tanton also founded the [Federation for American Immigration Reform](#) (FAIR), an organization that has been designated an [anti-immigrant hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#). Tanton, who has long-standing and well-established ties to white nationalist groups, had a role in the creation of all three groups. Not to mention, all three groups’ leaders worked for Tanton.

[The SPLC](#) recently issued [a report](#) on Tanton and his ties to the anti-immigrant groups:

Three Washington, D.C. organizations most responsible for blocking comprehensive immigration reform in 2007 are part of a network of groups created by a man who has been at the heart of the white nationalist movement for decades, according to a report issued today by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The Nativist Lobby: Three Faces of Intolerance [full report [here](#)] describes how the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) and NumbersUSA were founded and funded by John Tanton, a retired Michigan ophthalmologist who operates a racist publishing company and has written that to maintain American culture, "a European-American majority" is required.

"These groups have infiltrated the mainstream by presenting themselves as legitimate commentators, when, in reality, they were all conceived by a man who is convinced that non-white immigrants threaten America," said Mark Potok, director of the SPLC's Intelligence Project. "They have never strayed far from their roots."

The report examines how Tanton, who still sits on FAIR's board of directors, founded the racist Social Contract Press and has corresponded with Holocaust deniers, white nationalist intellectuals and Klan lawyers for decades — correspondence documented by his own writings stored at a University of Michigan library.

These groups cater to the most extreme elements in the anti-immigration world, and Mark Krikorian is one of the movement’s ringleaders. Although Krikorian’s group is not technically the “policy arm” of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), the designated hate group, Krikorian and Tanton have admitted that CIS was started by FAIR and housed under their non-profit status for a time:

Although it goes unmentioned on its website and its other materials, CIS was born in 1985 as a program of FAIR, which had been run by Tanton since he started it in 1979. Even then, Tanton understood that CIS would soon need to stand on its own in order to be seen as the "independent, non-partisan" organization that its mission statement claims today. In a letter to Cordelia Scaife May, a far-right philanthropist who supported many of Tanton's nativist endeavors, Tanton was candid.

"For credibility," he told the woman whose foundation would go on to support CIS for decades, "this will need to be independent of FAIR, though the Center for Immigration Studies, as we're calling it, is starting off as a project of FAIR."

Krikorian’s latest comments on Sotomayor are disturbing, but not at all surprising, given those he chooses to associate with and the organization that he runs. As the [SPLC](#) report on CIS noted:

[T]he history of CIS make clear that it has always been part of a broad-based and well-planned effort to attack immigration in all forms. CIS Senior Policy Analyst Stephen Steinlight pretty much captured CIS' brand of "independent" analysis when he told the Inter Press Service News Agency in 2005 that immigration threatens "the American people as a whole and the future of Western civilization."

That is the real idea that lies behind CIS' worldview, even if CIS founder Tanton — who once warned of the "deadly disunity" that immigration was bringing to America — says it more clearly than most of CIS' officials today. It is much the same idea that has animated nativist extremists for centuries: the fear that Americans will be overwhelmed by foreigners who wreck the U.S. culture and economy.

### → Sotomayor, Krikorian, and the GOP

With this history, it is not surprising that Krikorian is so focused on his anger over the way that Judge Sotomayor pronounces her name that he has no idea how ridiculous he sounds. From his perch at the conservative National Review Online (NRO), Krikorian tries desperately to spin the politics of immigration reform and comes up short. Yet, time and time again, this is the guy the Republicans want as their main witness whenever immigration is discussed on Capitol Hill.

According to [Politico's Mike Allen](#), Republicans worry about the prospects that the Sotomayor nomination fight could further damage relations with Hispanic voters:

GOP officials say they realize the party needs to improve its standing among Hispanic voters in order to have any hope of winning a national election, and they admit that trashing the first Latina nominee to the court could cement stereotypes or further alienate minorities.

Krikorian doesn't share that view.

He sees no political threat – and no possible hope – for Republicans to save face because, in his thinking, immigrants/Latinos are always going to vote Democratic, anyway. As he made clear in a recent [NRO](#) column, the problem for the GOP is not illegal immigration, but any kind of immigration – and since the party can't overcome it, they might as well keep up the opposition:

[T]he threat to the GOP and its agenda is not the party's opposition to mass immigration, but mass immigration itself. The majority of Hispanics vote Democratic, and this would surprise no one knowledgeable about American history: That's what immigrants, and the native-born closest to immigration, have always done. The Irish voted Democratic not because Yankees were mean to them as they stepped off the boat in Boston, but because the Democratic party has always been more attractive to the outsider.

To date, leaders of the GOP have heeded the political advice of Krikorian and his colleagues, much to the party's detriment. And, as we've noted, he's already one of the leading voices against Sotomayor. Republicans would be wise not to heed Krikorian's advice this time or in the future. Following the 2006 elections, [Krikorian](#) made a prediction (using vintage anti-immigrant language):

But if Democratic leaders buy into the myth of an amnesty mandate, they'll be in for a big surprise come 2008.

Democrats did buy into the real promise of comprehensive reform during the 2008 elections, starting with the top of the ticket – and [we know how that turned out](#). Not quite the result Krikorian predicted.

President Obama remains committed to that goal and will [hold a meeting on immigration reform at the White House on June 8, 2009](#).

### → Conclusion

With President Obama getting ready to jump-start debate on immigration reform this month, Congress, Party leadership, and media outlets will have a serious choice to make. They will choose whether to validate extreme groups, like the Center for Immigration Studies and the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which obstruct solutions to our broken immigration system, or whether to come together on real solutions that move America forward.

Mark Krikorian has focused the attention of the media on himself by attacking the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor in the most pathetic way – taking offense at the mere fact of her ethnicity instead of debating the perceived merits or shortcomings of her record. This attention has afforded the opportunity to expose Krikorian and his organization for who and what they truly are.

Americans of all stripes will need to watch closely to make sure anti-Hispanic, anti-immigrant, and just plain anti-American extremism is no longer given a megaphone in the critical debate about a solution to our damaged immigration system that will move this country forward.

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