Talking to Diverse Audiences about the Arizona “Show Me Your Papers” Anti-Immigration Law and Upcoming Supreme Court Case

March 29, 2012

The Supreme Court will review the Arizona anti-immigration law (SB 1070) in April 2012. In late June, the Court will decide whether to permit key provisions of the law to go into place. In America we believe that people should be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, but that is not what SB 1070 does. The Arizona “show me your papers” law essentially legalizes discrimination based on the color of your skin or the way you speak.

This summer, the Supreme Court will determine whether people of color in Arizona—including immigrants and U.S. citizens—are welcome in their own home, or treated like suspects and forced to carry their “papers” on them wherever they go. Since the law has already spread to Alabama and other states, the Court’s ruling will reach beyond Arizona as well.

That’s why it’s so important that Americans of all backgrounds learn about this case. But as with any court case, the details are complicated. Following are some suggestions from AVEF and Anzalone Liszt Research about how to break down this important and complex issue.

HIGHLIGHT CONCERN: First, explain why this law concerns us: it promotes discrimination because of the way people look and speak, and this is un-American. It is important to let people know that the law encourages discrimination against all people of color—including those who have been American citizens all their lives.

LINK TO CASE: Once we underscore the law’s potential to promote discrimination, we can talk about the need for the Supreme Court to strike down the Arizona law and protect our basic rights.

END WITH SOLUTION: SB 1070 is a bad law, but Americans do want action to address our broken immigration system. That is why should also talk about our support for a real solution—a common sense, national immigration law instead of a confusing patchwork of fifty different state laws.

To summarize, an easy way to introduce the topic is to say:

The Arizona law encourages discrimination (racial profiling) against people just because of the way they look or speak, even if they have been American citizens all their lives. In order to protect our basic (or civil) rights, the Supreme Court needs to strike down this law so the U.S. can establish one national law on immigration, not a confusing patchwork of fifty different ones.
Once people understand the basics, we can talk about why the Arizona law is un-American.

Families under siege because of the way they look? Americans forced to carry their citizenship papers at all times, or else? Veterans made to feel unwelcome in a country they risked their lives for? Latinos, Asians and others subjected to harassment when they walk down the street, drive in their car, interact with the government or shop at a store? That’s not what America is about.

Should immigrants who work hard and aspire to be citizens live in daily fear of being stopped, arrested and deported away from their loved ones? Should politicians create a culture of suspicion in an America that becomes more diverse every day? No. A state law that encourages discrimination is wrong for America.

We may have come on different ships, but we are all in the same boat now. Our greatness comes from aspiring to be one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. America was founded on the idea that all men and women are created equal, no matter what they look like or where they come from. The Arizona “show me your papers” law dishonors these principles.

We can also compare the problems of the Arizona approach to the reasonable immigration solution we need from the federal government.

Some states are passing pro-immigrant laws to protect wages for all workers, enable young immigrants who grew up here to attend college at in-state tuition rates, increase the availability of English classes, and help even more immigrants become American citizens. These states see the contributions immigrants make and the value of integrating them into society. Meanwhile, laws such as Arizona’s are based on the ugly notion that our country should try to expel 11 million hard-working immigrants without papers, most of who have families and have worked in America for more than a decade. The Arizona approach is both impractical and un-American.

State “show me your papers” laws are not the solution. After Alabama passed its law, farm workers left for other states and crops were ruined. When Arizona gained a reputation for discrimination after passing its law, the state lost an estimated $145m in convention business. When teachers in Alabama were forced to become immigration agents, students were afraid to attend school. When cops are required to check immigration papers, they spend less time solving serious crimes. When states sanction profiling, U.S. citizens and immigrants alike get stopped and harassed.

Our country desperately needs immigration reform that moves us forward as both a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. That’s why Congress needs to do its job and pass comprehensive immigration reform, and the Supreme Court needs to prevent states from enacting discriminatory laws like SB 1070.

For more information, see: