

The Greening of Hate?: Rhetoric in Sierra Club's Internal Division on Immigration Neutrality

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*In April of 1998, members of the Sierra Club overwhelmingly defeated a proposal that would have had the organization adopt a policy in favor of limiting immigration into the United States. This project is concerned with the initial Sierra Club debate over Alternative B as a substantive communication controversy. Using the strategies identified by Teun A. van Dijk in *Elite Discourse and Racism* is particularly important as a response to those anti-immigration advocates who are concerned about the stifling effects of racist labels. Van Dijk specifically argues that his focus is not upon "white supremacist ideologies of race" or "overt blatant discriminatory acts" (5). Racism, he claims, also involves the "everyday, mundane...that directly or indirectly contributes to the dominance of the white group and the subordinate position of minorities" (5). Examining the rhetoric of the SUSPS through the material available at their website and those websites with which it is hypertextually alligned. I examine how the debate over Alternative A embodies the elements of elite political discourse identified by Van Dijk, and it's implications for an understanding of the conflict within the Sierra Club and enhancing the substantive and procedural quality of the discussion of immigration.*

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In April of 1998, members of the Sierra Club overwhelmingly defeated a proposal that would have had the organization adopt a policy in favor of limiting immigration into the United States. The proposal, Alternative A, read as follows:

Shall the Sierra Club reverse its 1996 decision to “take no position on immigration levels or on policies governing immigration into the United States,” and adopt a comprehensive population policy for the United States that continues to advocate an end to U.S. population growth at the earliest possible time through reduction in natural increase (births minus deaths) but now also through reduction in net immigration (immigration minus emigration) (Schneider and Kuper 105)?

The controversy preceding the vote was considerable, prompting Executive Director Carl Pope to comment that the “controversy over immigration, sadly, distracted us from much more important population issues (14). In spite of the defeat of the initiative to end the Sierra Club's previously stated position of neutrality, known as Alternative A, the forces that motivated that initiative remain largely intact. In October of 1999, Pope attempted to answer charges made regarding Alternative A, stating that “any implication that it (The Sierra Club) is retreating from its neutrality on immigration to the United States is false” (Hartmann 23). Pope's claims, however, failed to illustrate the internal discontent that remains within his organization, as more accurately demonstrated by the organization SUSPS.¹ As Brenda Walker of SUSPS notes, “The forces of democracy have been aroused and may yet win on another day. . . Plans for another campaign are being formulated” (Para. 16).

Those plans have since come to fruition in a number of ways. First, anti-immigration advocate was elected to the Sierra Club Board of Directors in 2002. In 2003, SUSPS endorsed candidates Doug LaFollette and Paul Watson were elected to the Board. Subsequent efforts to get more members onto the board of directors have been made as was an effort in 1995 to once more adopt anti-immigration addenda to the Sierra Club Agenda, in the form of the following initiative:

Shall the Sierra Club policy on immigration, adopted by the Board of Directors in 1999 and revised in 2003, be changed to recognize the need to adopt lower limits on migration to the United States?²

Constituents on both sides of the issue have suggested that the controversy is largely rhetorical in nature. Proponents of retaining neutrality on the immigration issue have claimed that adopting a position in favor of limiting immigration would send the wrong signal to others, particularly minorities, who they claim are central to future struggles over environmental justice issues. As Richard B. Anderson, a lecturer in Environmental Studies at UC Santa Barbara noted, the Sierra Club's vote was “an exercise in psychological denial and projection, blaming others for our own faults” while masking the assumption that the world “is unchangeable” and ensuring that “the tacit assumption of materialism is unquestioned.” Pope argued that the vote in favor of neutrality embraced Buckminster Fuller's metaphor of “Spaceship Earth” “while rejecting environmental philosopher Garrett Hardin's metaphor of a “lifeboat” (14).

Opponents of the Sierra Club's position on immigration neutrality argue that any legitimate debate on immigration's actual environmental effects is stifled by charges of racism and xenophobia. When opponents of immigration neutrality were accused of engaging in the “greening of hate” (Reed, Para. 12), K.C. McAlpin of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) responded “It's typical name-calling. . . You can shut off debate by calling people and organizations racist, nativist and xenophobic” (Motavilli, Para. 7). As Roy Beck, Washington editor of *The Social Contract* notes, “The ‘X’ word has joined a host of others, including the powerful ‘L’ word (for ‘liberal,’ remember?) in the lexicon of labels that muffle discussion”(144).

The immigration controversy that continues to face the Sierra Club embodies communication scholars W. Barnett Pearce and Stephen W. Littlejohn's conception of moral conflict. As they note,

The originating cause of moral conflicts quickly disappears from the public discourse or is cited more as a club with which to beat one's opponent than an issue to be resolved. Public discourse often

focuses on the ways in which the other side's methods of handling conflict are morally depraved (69).

Jim Motavalli of *E: The Environmental Magazine* specifically commented on the particularly divisive nature of the immigration debate when he noted “With such hot rhetoric, it's not surprising that serious debate about the real impact of immigration on the environment gets lost.”

This project is concerned with the initial Sierra Club debate over Alternative B as a substantive communication controversy. Examining the discourse in this controversy can enhance the substantive and procedural quality of the discussion of immigration. The remainder of this essay will first establish the significance of this research endeavor, then move on to locating it within the larger context of rhetorical criticism. Finally, I will provide the methodological basis for this essay.

Immigration and The Environment

“Implicitly, arguments for an indefinite continuation of immigration presume a limitless world into which immigrants can move,” said Garrett Hardin, perhaps the pre-eminent advocate of limiting immigration for environmental purposes (*Living Within Limits* 280). While Hardin's arguments also consider other aspects of immigration detrimental, it is specifically the environmental component that continues to influence the continuing controversy.

Most critics seem to clearly associate immigration with population growth, arguing that population growth stimulates immigration or that immigration spurs population growth within specific spatial barriers. Scientist Virginia Abemathy suggests:

. . . a conservation ethic in America should start with the goal of maintaining this country at as small a population size as possible. This goal is incompatible with a relatively open door immigration policy. . . the U.S. open door probably is not neutral but actually, because of the misleading signals it sends, does harm (“Environmental and Ethical. . .” 132).

In 1994, Leon F. Bouvier and Lindsay Grant of the Sierra Club, published a book addressing the impact of human population upon the environment. Specifically, they claimed:

By 1972, the 2.1 barrier had been broken; in fact, for the next fifteen years or so American fertility hovered around 1.8 live births per woman. Yet the population continued to grow more rapidly than anywhere else in the industrialized world. Obviously, something besides fertility was contributing to such growth. That “something” was immigration (6).

Because of the size and consumptive patterns of the U.S. population, Bouvier and Grant go on to claim that the U.S. is “the leading source of some of the immediate threats to the future of humankind” including global warming, acid rain, depletion of the ozone layer, species loss and deforestation (14). These sentiments were mirrored by Alan Kuper, a retired engineering professor who proposed the initiative that would become Alternative A, arguing “We can't win if the population keeps growing” (Baden and Noonan 41).

Many of Kuper's opponents saw less savory motives. Many saw in Kuper's initiative an embrace of xenophobia and bigotry that had been suggested by past environmentalists.

Alexander Cockburn of the *Nation* argued in the Los Angeles Times that Sierra Club founder John Muir had been a contemporary and ally of Henry Fairfield Osborn, a noted proponent of strict immigration quotas, and Madison Grant, a leader of the Save the Redwoods League, who warned of the racial abyss posed by the continued immigration of “South Europeans, Italians and Jews” into the United States. As scientists Robert Gottlieb and Peter Dreier noted:

Similarly minded environmentalists joined forces with the burgeoning eugenics movement, which considered immigrants and racial minorities biologically inferior. They urged restrictions on the right

to reproduce.

As recently as 1995, activist Michael Novick claimed that “racists are seeking to influence the environmental movement” (8).

Others identified more pragmatic difficulties, namely the ability to maintain support from minority members. As journalist Emil Guillermo noted “We've long known how white the green movement really is. . . This new push to restrict immigration won't be good for the club's minority outreach.” Dreier and Gottlieb suggest that favoring immigration limits will particularly hurt the Sierra Club's efforts to develop a coalition on issues of environmental justice.

If the movement is to become part of a larger progressivism, it should be mindful of its roots in urban environmentalism and social justice: Hull House on Chicago's Halstead Street, where Addams and her allies proclaimed a new vision of civic life that viewed immigrants and the poor as important contributors to a vibrant society, not as outcasts undermining the nation's social and environmental fabric.

In either event, Kuper's initiative was introduced after a petition drive to garner support. The petition initially emerged after a February 1996 vote by the Sierra Club Board of Directors to not take a position on immigration. As indicated on the Sierra Club's website:

Members of the Board expressed concern that the issue has been discussed in ways that were polarizing the Club and that were unproductive and detrimental to our efforts to reduce global population growth. After three years of discussion, the Club had failed to develop a policy on immigration that commanded support across the spectrum of Club leaders, activists and members (“The Pending Vote. . .)

As per Club policy, if a “sufficient number of members. . . request a direct membership vote on an issue, such a vote is mandatory” (“The Pending Vote”). The proposal, now to be known as Alternative A, was countered by a proposal from those favoring the current policy, to be known as Alternative B. On April 25, 1998, the Sierra Club announced the defeat of Alternative A by a vote of 60.1% to 39.9% (“Sierra Club Election...”). The issue, however, remains a point of contention, as noted above.

Analyzing the Rhetorical Dimensions of the Conflict Over Alternative A

Rhetorical critic Philip Wander has argued that ideology “encompasses not only the partiality or 'party' interest in any formulation but also the connection between what is embraced or concealed and the interests served by a particular formulation” (1). Examining the public debate over Alternative A might help to reveal the interests underlying its advocacy, as what is important is not only what is said, but what is not. Criticism is particularly in this endeavor, for as scholar Henry Louis Gates has argued, “[t]o use contemporary theories of criticism to explicate these modes of inscription is to demystify large and obscure ideological relations and, indeed, theory itself” (6). Determining the nature of those ideological relations will require a careful reading of the texts of both sides of the controversy in question. A focus on the dominant tropes employed by the disputants can reveal a great deal about what their interests are. By examining not only the discourse, but the ideal audience suggested by the rhetorical choices employed in that discourse, we can come to understand how the specific discourses function.

I am also concerned in determining whether the use of terms like “xenophobia” inappropriately stifles the debate on immigration. Is such a characterization warranted and to what degree is the charge of xenophobia intended as a persuasive vehicle for those falling immediately outside of the organizational confines of the Sierra Club? Answering this question might reveal a great deal about the nature of the persuasive vehicles employed by environmental organizations when dealing with the public as opposed to internally directed appeals. Furthermore, determining the degree to which the use of ad hominem arguments like charges of 'xenophobia' or attacks against such arguments are premised in a recognition and reification of sovereign territory as a discursive fiction will

also provide insights into the discursive struggle still being waged within the Sierra Club itself.

Perhaps the most fundamental distinction that proponents of Alternative A might construct regarding their own position versus the position of their opponents is largely oriented in the distinction between being “anti-immigration” versus “anti-immigrant.” As would appear evident from some of the aforementioned material, opponents of continued immigration into the United States are quick to illustrate that they are opposed to the physical consequences of immigration, while simultaneously claiming that such a perspective is oriented in pragmatic rationality and not in any particular disdain for immigrants themselves.

Such claims run counter to findings by scholar Teun van Dijk, who claims that “political debate about several controversial ethnic issues, especially immigration, cultural differences and affirmative action programs, is such that extant stereotypes and prejudices are confirmed rather than combated.” Among the strategies through which racism is enacted, that appear present 1) Positive Self-Presentation, through the use of nationalist rhetoric and disclaimers and the denial of racism on the part of those advancing racist claims; 2) Negative “Other” Presentation, of minorities and/or immigrants; 3) Firm, but Fair, which consists of claims that policies directed towards non-whites are fair in spite of their harsh appearance; 4) For Their Own Good, which asserts that such policies are in minority and/or immigrant interests; 5) Vox Populi, or White Racism as Threat; which notes the unpopularity of those policies benefiting minorities and/or immigrants; 6) The Numbers Game, which makes the use of statistics as normative claims; and 7) Anti-Racism, which asserts that opponents of immigration policies and/or affirmative action policies are the only legitimate opponents of racism.

Using van Dijk’s strategies is particularly important as a response to those anti-immigration advocates who are concerned about the stifling effects of racist labels. Van Dijk specifically argues that his focus is not upon “white supremacist ideologies of race” or “overt blatant discriminatory acts” (5). Racism, he claims, also involves the “everyday, mundane... that directly or indirectly contribute to the dominance of the white group and the subordinate position of minorities” (5). Examining the rhetoric of the SUSPS through the material immediately available at their website and those websites with which it is hypertextually aligned. I will examine how the debate over Alternative A embodies the elements of elite political discourse identified by Van Dijk, and its implications for an understanding of the conflict within the Sierra Club.

The Rhetoric of Sierrans United for Population Stabilization

One great concern of this work is not only to understand how the disputants construct the debate over immigration, but also how that debate ultimately articulates the role of the contemporary nation-state. As Richard Falk, Milbank Professor of International Law at Princeton has stated:

The failures of the modern world are here overwhelmingly associated with the artificial and constraining boundaries on *imagination* and *community*, which then become springboards for conflict inducing violence and massive suffering. The most massive of these artificial boundaries are undoubtedly the borders of the sovereign state. . . (Exploration? 6).

This mirrors social ecologist Murray Bookchin's own contemplation into the role of the state as he argued:

.. the State is not merely a constellation of bureaucratic and coercive institutions. It is also a state of mind, an instilled mentality for ordering reality. Accordingly, the State has a long history—not only institutionally, but psychologically (*Ecology of Freedom* 94).

Issues of immigration are ultimately inseparable from questions of state sovereignty, as the very notion of immigration presupposes that to traverse the boundaries demarcating the sovereign territory of a nation-state is to immigrate. An analysis geared toward determining the disposition toward the role of the state and the border seems imperative.

The first identified component of Van Dijk's characteristics of political elite racist discourse, positive self-presentation, is the characteristic most consistently present throughout SUSPS discourse. It embodies an

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explicitly nationalist rhetoric, as per the first component of positive self presentation, an element at the core of the Garrett Hardin's own environmental philosophy, as cited in the SUSPS site.:

Population policy must be a policy for a nation, not for the whole world, because there is no world sovereignty to back up a global policy. We can, and should, seek to persuade other nations to take steps to control their population growth; but our primary focus should be on the population growth within our own borders.(Living Within Limits 2)

This largely reflects the principle philosophy of the nation state. Hardin derides the notion of world sovereignty, accepting the limitations of existing territorial limitation and sovereign authority. Regional immigration restriction is a sound alternative because of existing systems of governance. Nationalist realities are recognized, reified and respected. This is more clearly articulated in the SUSPS Frequently Asked Questions Page, which states:

The U.S. will add 125 million persons in the next fifty years. California alone will add 17 million by 2025, the equivalent of another southern California. Growth will continue indefinitely thereafter, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Mass immigration will account for 2/3 of U.S. population growth over the next 50 years according to the National Academy of Sciences. Thus, a Club population policy which has recently been modified to exclude the overall impact of mass immigration on U.S. population and our environment is an ineffectual policy, at best.

SUSPS articulates a population policy borne of egalitarian impetus. Note the lengthy Myths and Facts section of the SUSPS website:

MYTH - This initiative is racist.

FACT - The initiative calls for a reduction in mass immigration along with lower birth rates. No numbers are mentioned and no nationalities are singled out.

This argument immediately presumes that the audience is already cognizant and accepting of nationalist principles. It singles no one specifically out, save for those already falling outside of the immediate jurisdiction of the United States sovereign territory. The next statement attempts to answer the anti-immigrant charge:

MYTH - This is anti-immigrant.

FACT - If asking for reduced immigration levels (as was done after the Irish came) is “racist,” then we must all be anti-child because we call for lower birth rates.

FACT - Every legitimate poll ever done has consistently shown strong support for mass immigration reform amongst virtually all ethnic groups and Americans as a whole. Here are a few unbiased poll examples: 1.1996 Roper poll - 83% of all Americans surveyed favor lower mass immigration levels. 73% of black Americans and 53% of hispanic Americans favor reducing mass immigration levels top 300,000 or less annually. 2.Latino National Political Survey (1993) found that 7 out of10 Latino Americans believe mass immigration levels are too high. 3.Hispanic USA Research Group Poll (1993) found 3/4 of hispanics believe fewer immigrants should be admitted.

These facts are oriented in two defenses. The first is that the anti-immigrant charge is not racist in the same manner that calls for traditional calls for lower birth rates are not anti-child. That existing immigrants are capable of agency, whilst the unborn are incapable of any agent oriented action seems taken for granted. And the charge, while occasionally ad-hominem in nature, does not presume that the very notion of sovereignty to articulate “personhood” is troublesome at all. Using existing sovereign territory to demarcate who does and does not belong is both natural and acceptable as public policy. Feagin and Vera note that whites are often willing to privately acknowledge that their race imparts privilege, but they are unwilling to explicitly acknowledge that such privilege comes at the expense of others or generally has any negative consequences(144-148). Such may also be the case with national identity. Acknowledging the privilege

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afforded by place of origin would undermine claims of fairness, so denying that any such advantage is imparted becomes a powerful suasive device.

The second defense, that minorities also largely favor curbing immigration seems to similarly deny the privilege afforded by residency. Minority interest is served best by maintaining the order of the nation which they sought in the first place. The existence of borders indicates that space is also a commodity, and immigration facilitates competition for that commodity. National identity is a premium, and immigration controls check its value.

Van Dijk's second strategy, negative "other" presentation, is not as well articulated by SUSPS discourse, but some element of it is available by association. For example, to the credit of SUSPS, there is little bashing of individual immigrants, which van Dijk would identify as Negative Presentation of Other. Instead, many of SUSPS arguments are focused on immigration rather than immigrants. That they deny immigrants are a component of immigration that should merit our concern is without question, but their efforts to define immigration as an exigency rather than immigrants avoid simple charges of scapegoating. Such claims cannot, however, be made against some of the hyper-linked websites with which SUSPS is associated. For example, Mark Shafer of the *Social Contract* writes:

Although he has been deported three times for smuggling illegal immigrants into Arizona, Carlos Humberto Samayoa Lopez has scant respect for law officers. Those who know him say Samayoa likes to belt down a few cold ones, talk about the stupidity of U.S. immigration officials, then brag about how he tears up all his traffic tickets.

Laden with similar stereotypes of Latino immigrants involved in the illicit immigration trade, Shafer's piece seems to suggest that immigrants pose an ominous threat to the U.S.

More well supported is the third strategy, strategic use of arguments positing immigration policies as "firm, but fair." Note the following from the SUSPS Statement of Principles:

We are sympathetic with those seeking to immigrate, the majority for economic gain. However, we believe that decisions about appropriate immigration levels should be based more on environmental impact than on complex social and economic factors - And there can be no doubt that environments at home and abroad are suffering disproportionately from rapid U.S. population growth.

SUSPS suggests that their support for immigration control functions as a sort of "this hurts us worse than it hurts you" caveat against charges of excess. US population growth, they suggest, hurts everyone, so immigration policies are in everyone's best interest.

Related to the aforementioned is the fourth strategy that posits immigration as "for their own good." This strategy emphasizes the benefits of limited immigration into the US as championed by a number of proponents Alternative A. As one proponent, Froma Harrop argues in the Miami Herald:

And if Pope can't do his job, some new blood should take over. (Pope can put out the Sierra Club's lovely calendars.) New leaders might note that America's immigrants are overwhelmingly fine, hardworking people. And newcomers are every bit as good as European immigrants who came before them. They will add, however, that the current immigration numbers are devastating for our nation's environmental future. They want to preserve a beautiful America not only for their children but for the children of today's immigrants. (SUSPS, From the Providence Journal)

Limiting immigration is then in the best interest of even the most self interested immigrant.

A recent tactic that has been used with some success concerns the use of White Racism as the exigence posed by immigration itself. In this case, the fifth strategy, also identified as Vox Populi, or "the popular voice" by van Dijk, serves to inform of the potential consequences of actions that threaten to upset the white majority.

Note the following from Hugh Graham of the *Social Contract*:

Finally, voices on the Left, traditionally supporting affirmative action and open immigration, began to challenge traditional liberal assumptions. Michael Lind, a New Republic editor, in his 1996 book *The Next American Nation*, paints the marriage between multiculturalism, immigration, and affirmative action as a catastrophe for the left. It has fragmented the class-based New Deal coalition, Lind argues, leaving working class Americans defenseless as income distribution has polarized, paving the way for the “Brazilianization” of America. Berkeley sociologist and 1960s radical Todd Gitlin agrees the multiculturalist obsession with group differences destroyed the commons by fracturing working-class solidarity. It allowed the Right to seize the White House while the Left seized the English Department!

Here Graham is asserting the natural consequence of actions contrary to the popular voice have roused the ire of the forces of intolerance. Better to remain silent, he suggests, rather than risking the anger of the white populace.

The sixth strategy identified by van Dijk, the numbers game, is a strategy that involves the use of statistical data to make conclusions not necessarily suggested by the data itself. It is the suggestion that data has normative implications. Note the following from Allan Kupers:

Since I am addressing an environmentally-aware audience, it can be safely assumed that all of you would prefer that U.S. population were smaller and not growing rapidly. (The U.S. at 269 million is #3 in population and it is growing about 3 million/year, far faster than any other large industrial nation.) Since mass immigration accounts for about half the growth, it follows that you join with 83% of those polled in the U.S. as favoring reduced mass immigration. (Roper poll 1996), The U.S. Census Bureau middle projection says at present rates U.S. population will double in less than 70 years, 80% due to mass immigration and descendants.

Kupers infers that those favoring decreased population growth **must** also favoring restricting immigration, as the two concepts run in parallel. Connecting the statistical data with explicitly normative claims heightens the data's effect, but risks distorting the data's intention.

The final argumentative strategy identified by van Dijk, Anti-Racism, explicitly implies that the policy in question for distinctly anti-racist reasons, and that those opposing the proposal are the actual racists. Note the following from Dave Foreman in a Letter to the Editor from *Canyon Echo*:

I am disappointed that my friend Sandy Bahr has chosen to echo the Sierra Club establishment by characterizing the Sierra Club ballot question on immigration as 'anti-immigrant'. This is a grave charge. It is also a base lie. As one of the earliest endorsers of the immigration ballot question, I feel personally and professionally slandered by the wild charges of 'anti-immigrant' being tossed around. I demand an apology from Sandy and the Canyon Echo. Considering that I work in Mexico and have friends and colleagues there, that I admire and respect recent immigrants who I know, and that all of my nieces and nephews have Spanish surnames, I am getting pretty hot under the collar about the free and easy charges of anti-Hispano bias being tossed about by opponents of the immigration ballot question. **Intent is not racist. The only racists are those who mention it!!!**

Racism, it seems, becomes the sole domain of those who would suggest that the policy under question has potentially racial implications.

The clearest and most immediate implication of this analysis of the pro-Alternative A arguments is the parallel between elite political discourse reflecting racism and the rhetoric of SUSPS. While the inference is weaker in certain areas, as in the explicit negative portrayal of immigrants themselves, it is heavily implicated in those issues surrounding the legitimacy of sovereign state territorial distinctions.

While critics like Abernathy and Beck might be quick to argue that the immediate pejorative label

poisons the discourse on immigration limits as a means of controlling population growth, the parallels again speak for themselves. Whether this should prove generative to a larger discussion of sovereign boundaries and the privilege, legitimate or otherwise, afforded by simply falling within distinct sovereign jurisdictions is an issue worth investigating.

Further approaching the issue as one of perception, which is to separate the discourse of the pro-Alternative B forces from the parallels they suggest, might facilitate some movement toward easing unnecessarily heated discussion. Those favoring restrictions could simply be shown that what matters is not their intention so much as the perceived reaction, such that they might recognize the potential implication of their discourse upon minorities with whom they might otherwise be aligned on issues of social justice.

And perhaps addressing the roots of the issue might at the least enhance the deliberative content of this public discussion. That is to say, is immigration legitimately a population concern? Much like discussions of consumption as a by-product of our consumptive ideology as opposed to simple personal behavior, the immigration issue is one that will demand deeper attention and better deliberative arguments by both sides to enhance the larger public discourse, and avoid the pitfalls of a discourse entrenched in historical systems of oppression.

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¹ SUSPS was originally an acronym for Sierrans United for U.S. Population Stability. Their website, and most news stories have since taken to referring to the organization as simply SUSPS, although the header for the SUSPS homepage now reads "Support U.S. Population Stabilization" (SUSPS)

² According to the *New York Times*, the issue had been deferred in 2003 as all parties had agreed "to defer the ballot question on immigration until a nonpresidential election year" (Barrenger 9)