**Headline:** Behind the Texas GOP’s Latest Attack on People of Color

**Teaser:** Conservatives, white supremacists, and billionaires have revived the ghost of Arizona’s “Show Me Your Papers” law, determined to dominate Texas politics in the face of changing demographics.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

**Author Bio:** Sonali Kolhatkar is an award-winning multimedia journalist. She is the founder, host, and executive producer of “[Rising Up With Sonali](https://risingupwithsonali.com/),” a weekly television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. Her most recent book is [*Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice*](https://citylights.com/city-lights-published/rise-up-the-power-of-narrative-in-pursu/) (City Lights Books, 2023). She is a writing fellow for the [Economy for All](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/) project at the Independent Media Institute and the racial justice and civil liberties editor at [Yes! Magazine](https://www.yesmagazine.org/authors/sonali-kolhatkar). She serves as the co-director of the nonprofit solidarity organization the [Afghan Women’s Mission](https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/) and is a co-author of [*Bleeding Afghanistan*](https://www.sevenstories.com/books/2947-bleeding-afghanistan). She also sits on the board of directors of [Justice Action Center](https://justiceactioncenter.org/), an immigrant rights organization.

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**[Article Body:]**

“Y’all don’t live in our f---kin’ skin,” said Texas Democrat Armando Walle in an [angry outburst](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/texas-latino-democrat-walle-slams-republicans-immigration-bill-detain-rcna122335) at state Republicans in late October 2023. Walle was confronting his fellow lawmakers who signed a motion to limit debate on HB 4, one of the harshest immigration bills in the nation. The break in decorum was reasonable considering that people who look like Walle would likely be racially profiled as the result of a bill that his GOP colleagues pushed through in Texas to criminalize the transport of undocumented immigrants in the state.

“I can’t drive my brother, my cousin,” explained Walle in the [videotaped interaction](https://x.com/Ramos4Texas/status/1717324649992790480?s=20) with GOP lawmakers at the Texas capital in Austin. Like many Texans of Latinx descent, [Walle’s family is mixed-status](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/texas-latino-democrat-walle-slams-republicans-immigration-bill-detain-rcna122335). Given that Latinx people now [outnumber](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/TX) non-Hispanic whites in the state, the Republican Party’s move to pass anti-immigrant bills is a bold provocation. HB 4 is one of 3 bills that the [American Civil Liberties Union of Texas](https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/aclu-of-texas-responds-to-anti-immigrant-border-bills) has identified as “ignorant and dangerous.”

Another Texas Democrat, Ana-Maria Ramos [linked the promotion and passage of such anti-immigrant bills](https://x.com/Ramos4Texas/status/1717342586099109922?s=20) to “white nationalist and xenophobic and Nazi sympathizers,” and explained that the GOP cut off debate over the H.B. 4 because “they know it violates constitutional rights.” The [Texas Tribune](https://www.texastribune.org/2023/10/25/chris-russo-texans-for-strong-borders-immigration-nick-fuentes/) revealed that the legislation was the brainchild of a far-right group called Texans for Strong Borders led by a man named Chris Russo with close ties to Nazi sympathizer and white supremacist [Nick Fuentes](https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/nick-fuentes). That organization, along with several other far-right political action committees such as [Empower Texans and Defend Texas Liberty](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/texas-republican-party-war-itself-national-implications-rcna122238) are being funded by three West Texas billionaires: Tim Dunn, and two brothers named Farris and Dan Wilks.

In a nutshell: billionaires in conjunction with overt racists are pushing a white supremacist agenda via the Republican Party in one of the nation’s most populous and racially diverse states. No wonder lawmakers like Walle and Ramos are livid.

The Texas bills are apparently modeled on Arizona’s notorious [SB 1070](https://news.azpm.org/p/news-splash/2020/7/30/177558-show-me-your-papers-a-decade-after-sb-1070/), a law that passed in 2010 and galvanized immigrant rights groups and Latinx youth into a [historic movement](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/generation-sb1070-these-latino-millennials-grew-under-controversial-immigration-law-n821806). The so-called “Show Me Your Papers” law was modeled on an enforcement practice championed by Arizona’s infamous Sheriff Joe Arpaio of Maricopa County who repeatedly [violated](https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/federal-court-rules-arizona-sheriff-joe-arpaio-violated-us-constitution) people’s constitutional rights. The disgraced sheriff was eventually convicted of criminal contempt and then [pardoned](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/08/joe-arpaio-sheriff-arizona-donald-trump) by a man who shared his values: Donald Trump.

The [National Immigration Law Center](https://www.nilc.org/) labeled Arizona’s SB 1070 “[a Cautionary Tale of Race-based Immigration Policy](https://www.nilc.org/issues/immigration-enforcement/along-racial-lines-arizonas-sb1070/),” and pointed out that even the *Arizona Republic*, a conservative newspaper, ultimately lamented the bill’s passage saying in an editorial that, “Arizona understands that we don’t need a repeat of that divisive, unproductive fiasco on the national level.”

But Texas’ anti-immigrant HB 4 is considered even worse than Arizona’s SB 1070. Jennefer Canales-Pelaez, an attorney in Texas with the [Immigrant Legal Resource Center](https://www.ilrc.org/) told [NBC News](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/texas-latino-democrat-walle-slams-republicans-immigration-bill-detain-rcna122335) that “The way that the law is written is just so vague, so essentially it is just open season on people of color throughout the state of Texas.”

Not only does it authorize arrests of people suspected to be transporting undocumented immigrants, it places such authority in the hands of any “peace officer,” a term so vague that Canales-Pelaez says it could include “someone who sits on the dental examiners' board.” Texas Republicans have resorted to vigilante law enforcement before—in a 2021 [state-wide abortion ban](https://www.npr.org/2022/07/11/1107741175/texas-abortion-bounty-law) allowing for any private citizen to sue those suspected of aiding in an abortion.

Further, HB 4 would allow people suspected of being undocumented to be dumped into Mexico—regardless of their country of origin. And, it would require a [10-year mandatory minimum prison sentence](https://www.kvue.com/article/news/politics/special-session/texas-house-immigration-bills-special-session/269-9cfa8dc1-bfc5-483e-bf67-56eac3e8da2d) for those convicted of transporting any undocumented persons, including their own family members—a sentence that is longer than what [convicted rapists and even murderers](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/06/us-extreme-anti-immigrant-proposals-texas) typically get.

The bill is so egregiously unconstitutional that legal experts predict even the U.S. Supreme Court, stacked as it is with conservative justices, would likely [strike it down](https://apnews.com/article/immigration-texas-migrants-arrests-bill-mexico-49097d3961a79aefaad61a44b2f715a0). J. Anna Cabot at the University of Houston Law Center told AP News, “It’s just too cut and dry constitutionally” to pass muster. Moreover, in 2012 the U.S. Supreme Court [struck down](https://www.nilc.org/2012/06/25/supreme-court-decision-on-sb-1070/) most of SB 1070’s provisions.

The Republican Party appears to [care](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/24/gops-increasingly-novel-relationship-with-constitution/) [little](https://www.msnbc.com/all-in/watch/mitt-romney-very-large-portion-of-the-gop-doesn-t-believe-in-the-constitution-192917573731) for the U.S. Constitution these days, preferring instead to repeatedly push its boundaries in service of racist dog-whistles, knowing such moves will likely face legal challenges but nonetheless hoping that judicial rightwing activists on the bench will allow them.

It’s a theatrical gamble that appears to have multiple intentions, including upholding racist narratives about who has the right to live in the U.S. If HB 4 becomes law, one can infer that it would only further fuel anti-immigrant and racist sentiments that people like Arpaio, Trump, and Texas Republican lawmakers have forged their careers on—rather like how [anti-transgender bills fuel transphobia](https://www.oklahoman.com/story/opinion/2022/03/24/anti-lgbtq-legislation-oklahoma-fuels-transphobia/7160072001/) even if they don’t remain on the books.

Walle is convinced that HB 4 also serves as a convenient means to mobilize rightwing voters to the polls leading into the 2024 elections. “I’ve been in the Legislature 16 years and over time there has been this salacious appetite to feed Republican primary voters by demonizing border issues,” he told [NBC News](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/texas-latino-democrat-walle-slams-republicans-immigration-bill-detain-rcna122335). Already, the state has been implementing a program called [Operation Lone Star](https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/operation-lone-star-combats-president-bidens-humanitarian-crisis) to aggressively increase border enforcement and engage in dangerous stunts such as busing migrants to immigrant-friendly cities.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott is also determined to push through an [economic agenda](https://www.texastribune.org/2023/10/06/texas-education-vouchers-funding-special-session/) that is receiving far less attention than the anti-immigrant legislation: using state tax funds to subsidize private schools. Fixated on the idea of creating savings accounts that could divert taxes into private school tuition, Abbott has no plans to increase public school funding or teacher pay. His attack on Texas’s public education system means that Texas teachers have barely seen any pay raises at a time of rising inflation, and schools have been operating on deficits.

It’s critical to see such Republican political tactics for what they are: a means of asserting white supremacist capitalist values in violation of the U.S. Constitution and against the ideals of a multi-racial democracy.