

The real meaning of “self-deportation”

Written by Analysis by Immigration Policy Center, Washington, DC
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The term “self-deportation” has found its way into the GOP presidential primary race, with candidate Mitt Romney outlining a vague immigration platform which includes “self-deportation,” or the idea that unauthorized immigrants will voluntarily choose to leave the U.S. if life here is made unbearable enough. While “self-deportation” may be a new idea to some, those who monitor immigration policy understand that it is code for “attrition through enforcement” - a plan pursued by extremist immigration-control organizations in Congress and state houses across the nation.

Romney [explains](#) how he thinks “self-deportation” would work by saying “if people don’t get work here, they’re going to self-deport to a place they can get work.” However, as described in a forthcoming report from the Immigration Policy Center, “self-deportation” - or, more accurately, “attrition through enforcement” - goes far beyond denying unauthorized immigrants work. The strategy is currently embodied in state laws that include provisions denying education, transportation, and even basic services like water and housing to anyone who cannot prove legal immigration status. So far, the states that have attempted to roll out this plan have done little more than undermine basic human rights, devastate local economies, and place unnecessary burdens on U.S. citizens and lawful immigrants.

There is little evidence that “attrition through enforcement” is causing unauthorized immigrants to leave. In fact, a July 2011 study from the [RAND Corporation](#) found that, despite improved economic conditions in Mexico and worsened conditions in the United States, fewer Mexican immigrants returned to Mexico in 2008 and 2009 than in the two years before the recession.

The Urban Institute’s Juan Pedrozo has also [pointed out](#) that “it’s tough to tell whether (and how many) immigrants have left a community if you are looking right after a state passes a law. It can take years of evidence to test claims of a mass exodus.” Moreover, “growing evidence suggests that most immigrants (especially families with school-age children) are here to stay, except perhaps where local economies are particularly weak.”

Furthermore, according to the [Pew Hispanic Center](#), “nearly two-thirds of the 10.2 million unauthorized adult immigrants in the United States have lived in this country for at least 10 years, and nearly half are parents of minor children,” most of whom are U.S. citizens. There is no reason to believe that they are going to “self-deport” as their ties to the country have grown much deeper.

Whether you call it “self-deportation” or “attrition through enforcement,” this is a policy that offers

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no genuine solution to the growing instability of our immigration system. Relying on a strategy conceived by immigration restrictionists and pursued by opportunistic politicians is no game plan. This country deserves to hear more detailed and thoughtful approaches from politicians and policy makers—ones that will offer a way forward, rather than ones grounded in divisive and punitive approaches to unauthorized immigration.

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