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## Narrow Options: Mexican Policy Responses to Illegal Immigration

LSE Ideas

By Guy Burton

There has been official outrage in Mexico regarding a new Arizona state law designed to discourage illegal immigration. As well as arresting day labourers in the state who solicit work, police departments may be sued for failing to enforce the law. Mexican president Felipe Calderon has claimed that immigration is a social and economic phenomenon and that to discourage it will only lead to intolerance and discrimination.

One response to the new law has been a suggestion by Mexicans to boycott Arizonan goods and services. It is difficult to see how this might be achieved for three reasons. First, although Arizona could be hit hard, since Mexico is the destination for [one-third of its exports](#), it is unclear how Mexican consumers would be able to identify such products in the absence of any specific labelling related to its state of origin. Second, any action taken officially would probably be in breach of Mexico's membership of NAFTA. Third, any attempts to foster Mexican action within Arizona itself would only have a limited effect: Mexican immigrants' purchasing power constitutes around [3%](#).

Anger against Arizona's action also obscures current trends in illegal immigration and Mexico's own culpability in the process. First, there is evidence that the number of illegal immigrants has declined: last year the Center for Immigration Studies reported that, since 2007, the number fell even as legal immigration remained steady. The main reason for this was not the economic recession (although that did have an effect from 2008) but rather stronger enforcement measures, especially after a failed legal amnesty for illegal immigrants in summer 2007.

Second, Mexico's own actions to constrain illegal immigration have been relatively limited. On one hand its economy and political leaders have proved incapable of developing a sufficient number of new jobs to discourage those from making the journey north. Since the 1980s Mexican governments have been largely committed to free market principles, relying on the private sector rather than the state to generate employment. The result has been that the most dynamic sector of the Mexican economy has been in the low-wage manufacturing north of the country. While this has incorporated some of the labour force, it has not been enough on its own.

On the other hand, Mexico has not been especially forceful in restraining illegal immigration, either by its own nationals or those of third countries which use its territory as a transit point. [Estimates](#) suggest that Mexicans make up around 60% of illegal immigrants, with Central Americans accounting for 11% and South Americans 8%. Not only are these figures considered to be an undercount, but most are likely to have crossed using the US-Mexico border. For many poor Central and South Americans the journey is made relatively easier by the porous nature of Mexico's frontier with its southern neighbours.

Ultimately then, how both American and Mexican authorities might resolve the issue of illegal immigration will continue to be difficult, whether it be in favour of greater enforcement or eventual legalisation. In the case of the US a shift away from enforcement to a legal amnesty may not necessarily reduce illegal immigration; the [Center for Immigration Studies' report](#) notes there was actually an increase in numbers entering the US in the period prior to the last attempt in 2007 (although this also coincided with a period of economic growth during the first half of the 2000s).

For Mexico, any attempt to achieve greater control in preventing both their citizens and those of other countries crossing the Rio Grande could undermine migrants' human rights (i.e. freedom to travel, arrest on suspicion). At the same time, the scope of the Mexican public security apparatus has remains both weak and compromised as an effective tool; this is becoming increasingly apparent in the context of increasing narco-related violence and permeation of the political and law enforcement system – and prompting some sections of American opinion to adopt an almost hysterical concern about Mexico as a 'failed state'.

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