

## The shadowy network shaping Trump's anti-immigration policies

Interconnected anti-immigrant organizations have long hidden behind neutral names while pushing nativist policies.

By Carly Goodman

In Oregon, nativists have [placed a measure](#) on the ballot to overturn a 31-year-old sanctuary policy, one that restricts the use of state and local resources to enforce federal immigration laws and protects community members from profiling based on their perceived immigration status. If it passes, the message to immigrant communities across the state will be clear: You are neither safe nor welcome here. What's more, the message could resonate across the country, spurring repeal of similar policies elsewhere.

The debate over these "sanctuary" policies limiting cooperation between local law enforcement and immigration authorities often misconstrues what they actually do. Sanctuary laws like Oregon's [simply protect](#) members of our communities, some long-standing, from racial profiling, detention and deportation. But anti-immigrant activists, emboldened by President Trump's nativist rhetoric and policies, have branded these policies as dangerous to Americans, part of a multi-front attack on immigrant rights.

The group leading the battle to overturn Oregon's sanctuary law — Oregonians for Immigration Reform (OFIR) — [is supported by](#) the country's most powerful anti-immigrant organizations. But few people are aware that these groups don't just lobby for greater enforcement of immigration laws. Instead, they have a widespread, [radical agenda](#) and are part of a shadowy network with deep ties to white-supremacist groups, built by the godfather of the anti-immigrant movement: John Tanton.

Tanton, a Michigan ophthalmologist, is the guiding force behind nearly all of America's major anti-immigration groups. He launched the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) in 1979. He was initially motivated by an alarmed reaction to Paul Ehrlich's 1968 bestseller, "[The Population Bomb](#)," which [linked population growth](#) to environmental destruction and a weakening of national security.

Tanton embraced population control. His ideas built on eugenicist thinking, with aims to limit the birthrate of people deemed undesirable. His innovation was to focus on stabilizing the American population by severely limiting immigration.

The limits he sought were about more than population size, however.

Since immigration reforms in 1965 ended an explicitly racist quota system, immigrants to the United States increasingly came from Latin American and Asian countries rather than Europe. Tanton believed that cultural difference meant people from these regions lacked the "conservation ethic" that (white) Americans had.

He argued that immigrants coming from outside Western and Northern Europe had higher birthrates than white native-born Americans and were therefore to blame for destructive population growth. In a [1986 memo](#), Tanton joked about Latin American fertility rates: "Those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down!" Elsewhere he wrote: "As Whites see their power and control over their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion?"

Tanton understood that tapping into white resentment against newcomers was a powerful way to build support for restricting immigration. FAIR attracted \$1.2 million in funding from the [eugenicist foundation the Pioneer Fund](#). Cultural issues also attracted more energy and support from the grass roots than environmentalism or even economic issues. The resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s and arrival of [asylum seekers from Central America](#) and Haiti in the 1980s [exposed and fueled strong anti-refugee sentiment](#) and unabashed racism.

But focusing on demographics and culture was also ["dangerous territory"](#) for FAIR — Tanton wanted to avoid the taint of the "unsavory" early-20th-century immigration-restriction efforts. He aimed to position his push as a "new type of reform effort," one devoid of [xenophobia](#).

So in 1983, he decided to have it both ways. He created a separate organization, U.S. English, to advocate for “official English” policies at the state level. The new group could push this controversial position without damaging FAIR. Tanton’s hunch about white resentment proved correct: A direct-mail campaign focused on official English returned many more donations than FAIR had managed to get to that point.

Spinning off different organizations became a key strategy for Tanton. He created a funding organization that seeded different groups to fight his battle to dramatically curtail legal immigration and remove millions of undocumented immigrants from the country.

In 1985, he helped found the academic-sounding Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) to publish research that would seem independent, impartial and disconnected from advocacy groups like FAIR. In 1987, FAIR launched a litigation arm to work through the courts. In the mid-1990s, Tanton associate Roy Beck started NumbersUSA, a group that channeled populist anger into faxes sent to policymakers.

Suddenly there were multiple, seemingly independent organizations to push extreme positions into the political debate and media coverage. These groups advanced different arguments about immigrants, testing different messages and tactics. The existence of so many organizations — even if they were quietly interconnected — helped make their ideas and policy preferences appear widely held.

Tanton also worked at the state and local level. In the 1980s, U.S. English worked to get official English policies passed in Arizona, Colorado and Florida. In 1994, Tanton helped fund the [California Coalition for Immigration Reform](#), a co-sponsor of California’s Proposition 187, which would have limited immigrants’ access to schools and other public services.

Tanton’s groups often framed their policy prescriptions as common sense, but this cloaked ties to more sinister white-nationalist organizations. In fact, some of Tanton’s projects helped incubate white-nationalist and anti-immigrant ideas. He founded the Social Contract Press in 1990 to publish a regular journal and books such as the English-language edition of [the racist French novel](#) “The Camp of the Saints” that inspired Steve Bannon. Since 1985, Tanton’s umbrella operation has hosted a writers’ workshop featuring nativists such as Peter Brimelow, who founded the white-nationalist website VDARE, and Ann Coulter.

Though cloaked in sober-sounding rhetoric, the policies that Tanton’s groups advocated were quite extreme: mass deportations of longtime residents, significant cuts to legal immigration and an end to birthright citizenship. In a 1995 USA Today op-ed, Dan Stein, FAIR’s president, even argued that “we don’t need immigrants” at all.

Over the years, [many](#) have highlighted Tanton’s role in creating a nativist, eugenicist anti-immigration network. A 2011 [New York Times profile](#) observed that FAIR’s annual gathering featured militant talk and conspiracy theories about President Barack Obama’s birth certificate. In 1997, even conservative pundit Tucker Carlson [warned](#) that his fellow conservatives would regret making common cause with the groups because of their extremism and nativism.

Yet, over the past two decades, these groups have only gained influence. Today, Carlson now welcomes Stein and other FAIR staffers on his shows, amplifying their influence.

Even non-sympathetic news outlets have unwittingly helped sanitize and spread the messages of these groups. They quote groups like the banal-sounding Center for Immigration Studies as if they are reasonable counterweights to immigrant rights groups, rather than [anti-immigrant hate groups](#).

This has allowed these groups to shift the terms of the debate far to the right. Without proper context, readers and viewers don’t understand how outside the mainstream these groups’ views really are. Three-quarters of the public thinks immigration is a good thing for the country, and over 80 percent favor a [path to citizenship](#) for undocumented immigrants. But anti-immigrant groups, aided by allies in the media, successfully crushed even modest, bipartisan compromises on immigration in 2007 and 2013.

Now Trump has pulled former staffers from Tanton’s groups into positions of power, where they are making FAIR and CIS policy priorities a [reality](#), from cutting refugee admissions to historic lows to increasing deportations to targeting immigrants who use any public benefits.

At the state level, local spinoffs push the same agenda.

Oregon’s OFIR, which has deep ties to FAIR and its legal arm, gathered the signatures that put the anti-sanctuary measure on the ballot. OFIR has learned that emotional appeals to fear and racial resentment can be galvanizing: In 2014, the group successfully pushed through a different ballot initiative that prevented immigrant Oregonians from getting legal driver’s cards.

OFIR framed this initiative — and its current push — as public safety measures. But OFIR's president has revealed the group's true intent, declaring immigrants represent "an [organized assault on our culture](#)." Her words echo a [1993 letter](#) in which Tanton declared, "For European-American society and culture to persist requires a European-American majority, and a clear one at that."

While the powerful anti-immigrant organizations rarely frame their demands in explicitly racial terms, the policies they work to advance target nonwhite people and frame immigrants not as future Americans but as an invasion.

As the [Migration Policy Institute](#) has found, communities have been able to limit or slow Trump's aggressive deportation machinery through the use of sanctuary policies, know-your-rights trainings and community resistance. In Oregon, [a broad coalition](#) is fighting OFIR's initiatives. It is community efforts like these that will actually keep our country safer for all its residents, not the bigoted sophistry of John Tanton and his allies.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/09/27/shadowy-network-shaping-trumps-anti-immigration-policies/?utm\\_term=.e4cb83750754](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/09/27/shadowy-network-shaping-trumps-anti-immigration-policies/?utm_term=.e4cb83750754)