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How Rep. Austin Scott betrayed his Tea Party roots

By [Dana Milbank](#),

Rep. [Austin Scott](#) of Georgia, a Tea Party favorite and president of the House Republicans' freshman class, got off to a slow start as a legislator but finally introduced his first bill last week.

His draftsmanship should please the people who chant "read the bill" at political rallies, because [H.R. 2774](#) is only one sentence long. In its entirety: "Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Legal Services Corporation Act is repealed."

This one sentence says a great deal about Scott, because it is a transparent attempt by the young lawmaker to defend a company in his district that discriminates against U.S. citizens in favor of Mexican migrant workers. Scott introduced the bill abolishing Legal Services exactly three days after it [became public](#) that Legal Services had won a U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission determination that Georgia's Hamilton Growers "engages in a pattern or practice of regularly denying work hours and assigning less favorable assignments to U.S. workers, in favor of H2-A guestworkers." Hamilton also "engages in a pattern or practice of discharging U.S. workers and replacing them with H-2A guestworkers," the EEOC determined.

In a broader sense, Scott's bill gets at what has long troubled me about the Tea Party movement: It is fueled by populist anger, but it has been hijacked by plutocrats. Well-intentioned Tea Party foot soldiers demand that power be returned to the people, but then their clout is used to support tax cuts for millionaires. They rally for tougher immigration laws, but then their guy in Washington helps corporations to fire U.S. workers and hire foreign nationals.

During his successful campaign to unseat moderate Democrat Jim Marshall, Scott ran a tough-on-immigration message. According to his hometown [Tifton Gazette's report](#) at the time: "Scott said Congress has ignored its responsibility to secure U.S. borders and that he has voted for tough immigration bills that included making English the official language,

seizing the vehicles of illegal immigrants, placing tougher standards for employers to verify that employees are legal U.S. citizens and chaired the committee on citizenship verification for voters. . . . He said that jobs here was the biggest draw for illegal aliens coming into the country and that making it more difficult to obtain them would curb the influx of illegal aliens.”

Given that, you’d think Scott would have sided with the 17 U.S. citizens in Georgia who claimed Hamilton Growers illegally dumped them in favor of Mexican workers on H-2A visas.

Legal Services took their case (one of three active cases it has against big growers in Scott’s district), and on July 29, it put out a news release announcing victory. (Settlement negotiations are underway.)

On Aug. 1, Scott introduced his bill.

H.R. 2774 would end the government practice, dating to the Nixon administration, of providing legal assistance to low-income people pursuing equal justice under the law: women seeking protective orders against abusive partners, homeowners fighting foreclosure or predatory lending, and similar civil actions.

“We are at a point where Congress must look at programs and ask, ‘Is this absolutely necessary?’ ” Austin said in a statement when I asked for elaboration. Noting that state and local governments, bar associations and pro bono lawyers help to subsidize legal aid, he argued that “eliminating federal funding for the LSC will not eliminate free legal aid for the poor. This bill simply takes this duplicative and unnecessary program off the federal taxpayers’ dole.”

Still, even a number of Republicans see value in Legal Services. Though House Republicans have proposed a 26 percent cut in Legal Services’ current budget of \$379 million, 68 of them joined Democrats in defeating an attempt this year to defund Legal Services.

Phyllis Holmen, executive director of Georgia Legal Services, said she has never spoken with Scott and “hadn’t been aware of his views on Legal Services” before he introduced his bill. She said it’s common for growers to call their members of Congress for help when a Legal Services client sues them.

If Scott were true to his Tea Party roots, he would have told the growers to get lost. He would have trumpeted the case as evidence that Americans are willing to do the dirty jobs that businesses claim only foreigners will do. As one of the American plaintiffs put it: “We worked hard at our jobs and really wanted the work, but Hamilton didn’t want Americans to work in their fields.” Americans, after all, would be more likely to know the laws and to complain if they’re being exploited.

Instead, Scott chose to side with a large employer of foreign migrants in his district — against his out-of-work constituents.

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