

BORDER DISPUTE

Arizona Seizes Spotlight In U.S. Immigration Debate

State's Aggressive Stance Is Spurred by Newcomers; 'We're Being Overrun'

The Wall Street Journal

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February 1, 2008; Page A1

PHOENIX -- Arizona is at the heart of what many say is the biggest, angriest storm over immigration to hit the U.S. in nearly a century.

Efforts to combat illegal immigration from Mexico and Latin America are popping up across the state, fueled in part by an influx of immigrants of another sort: Americans from the North and East.

The collision of these two groups has helped turn Arizona into a laboratory for new ways to crack down on illegal immigrants. Employers here can lose their licenses if they hire undocumented workers. English is now the state's official language. And the latest idea being floated in the state legislature would bar U.S. citizenship to babies born to illegal immigrants.

Immigration has become one of the most hotly contested issues heading into Tuesday's presidential primaries. Arizona Sen. John McCain was an architect of the defeated U.S. Senate bill last year that included a guest-worker program and a pathway to legal status for illegal immigrants. He is now the Republican party's front-runner, but the issue has hurt his standing among some voters. Among the remaining Democrats, both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton support comprehensive immigration reform.

Tensions are palpable in greater Phoenix, home to two-thirds of the state's population. Joe Arpaio, the Maricopa County headline-grabbing sheriff whose jurisdiction includes Phoenix, recently unveiled a hotline for citizens to report suspected illegal immigrants. The hotline is advertised on the side of the sheriff's vehicles with a big red "Do Not Enter" sign and the word "Illegally" scrawled over it.

Mr. Arpaio has also given his deputies new authority to arrest illegal immigrants in the course of duty -- taking on a job normally reserved for federal agents. In the past year, he says they have arrested hundreds of people as a result.

The sheriff's actions have turned him into a household name in the Latino community. Many say they avoid leaving the house except to go to work or to buy groceries, for fear of arrest. Spanish-language radio and television report frequently on locations where deputies appear to be stopping drivers. In some extreme cases, people are crossing back over the border to Mexico. "Isn't it great to spread fear so they follow the law," said Mr. Arpaio in an interview.

Politicians and law-enforcement officials say they are responding to the sentiment expressed by residents like Bill Seaber. Mr. Seaber moved to Phoenix from Pittsburgh about a decade ago to settle a community called Paradise Peak West. "We're being overrun by illegals," Mr. Seaber says. "We need to do whatever it's going to take to get rid of them."

Isolationist Sentiments

Hostility toward immigrants has waxed and waned throughout U.S. history. At the turn of the 20th century, restrictionists denounced Italian and Eastern European immigrants as crime-prone, diseased and unable to assimilate. After isolationist sentiments flared during World War I, nativists in Congress pressured President Warren G. Harding into signing the first immigration Quota Act in 1921. The law effectively ended the open-door policy that had allowed millions of foreigners to settle in the U.S. in the previous decades. The National Origins Act of 1924 further stymied the flow, and the impact lasted for decades -- the stanch flow of immigrants to the U.S. did not pick up again until the 1960s.

Today's debate is partly a reaction to the fact that the U.S. is now home to more than 35 million immigrants, an all-time high in absolute numbers, scholars say. The density of the foreign-born population -- almost 13% of the total -- is approaching the 15% peak reached in the last massive wave of immigration from the 1880s to 1920s, according to scholars who study immigration. "In the last two years nativism has become as intense as it was during its last peak, the 1920s," says Gary Gerstle, an immigration historian at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn.

The current wave of immigration has reached pockets of the country untouched by immigration for decades, and the fact that a huge number of the immigrants -- 12 million -- are here illegally further inflames passions.

Nationally, more than 1,500 pieces of legislation were introduced in state houses last year related to illegal immigration, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Coming from all but four states, 244 of them became laws -- three times as many as were passed in 2006. Arizona is one of the top states in terms of enacted laws last year, with a total of 13. The proposals typically tackle employment, law enforcement, drivers' licenses and public benefits. Many of them are facing legal challenges; others are yet to be enforced.

Perched on Border

Perched on Mexico's border with the U.S., Arizona was long accustomed to the presence of Spanish speakers who moved back and forth between the porous borders. But the harsh desert terrain along its 340-mile-long border meant that most illegal immigrants tended to cross over the Texas or California border instead. Arizona only became ground zero in the immigration debate after the federal government began beefing up enforcement along the other two states in the 1990s. Today, Arizona is considered to be the main passageway for Latin Americans sneaking into the U.S.

For years, most undocumented workers just passed through Arizona on the way to other destinations. But as the economy boomed, many chose to stay in the burgeoning Valley of the Sun, as the Phoenix area is known to locals. They were drawn by cheap housing and job opportunities fueled in part by the arrival of Americans from other states. All told, the population of greater Phoenix grew at the rate of 18,000 a month between 1990

and 2000, adding more than two million people in a decade, to reach 3.1 million, according to the Census Bureau. Today, Phoenix is the fifth-largest city in the country.

Over time, the newcomers settled into an uneasy coexistence. Arizona residents were inundated with a steady stream of news about migrants dying in the desert, border patrol chases on highways and illegal immigrants held hostage by smugglers in drop houses. In day-to-day life, Latino immigrants and their children became increasingly visible -- in stores, schools and hospital emergency rooms. Arizona's foreign-born population surged to 900,000 in 2005 from about 270,000 in 1990, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. More than half are believed to be illegal immigrants.

"We're a border state that has always had Mexicans," says Arizona state historian Marshall Trimble. But, he adds, "a lot of these people who moved here in the last few years are uncomfortable when they see so many folks who are brown-skinned and speak another language."

A particularly rancorous part of the debate involves the question of whether illegal immigrants are a burden on the state's schools, health-care system and other public services. Dueling economic-impact surveys have done little to settle the argument. Some researchers say immigrants' contributions outweigh their cost because they help stimulate the economy with their labor and by consuming goods and services. Others say unauthorized workers depress the wages of legal workers, especially among low-skilled laborers.

Much of the recent legislation has addressed economic concerns. Proposition 200, for example, a ballot measure passed in 2004, halted all nonfederally mandated assistance, such as state health care, to illegal immigrants.

"Immigrants who had been contributing to the economy by doing jobs no one else wanted felt under attack," says Joe Rubio, lead organizer for the Phoenix Industrial Areas Foundation, a coalition of local faith-based groups that fights nativist measures.

In 2006, about three-quarters of all Arizonans voted in favor of four more ballot measures aimed at illegal immigrants, including one that bans undocumented immigrants from receiving in-state residency tuition for college and other benefits. Another denies an award of punitive damages in any civil court to an illegal immigrant.

Republican state legislator Russell Pearce, who speaks of an "invasion" from Mexico, has launched at least a dozen bills to combat illegal immigration.

"In the face of federal government inaction, Arizona has become a laboratory for how to deal with illegal immigration," says Janet Napolitano, the state's governor, referring to a series of failed federal immigration reforms and lack of enforcement at the border.

The nonstop legal volleys reflect the immigrant-related conflict raging across the state. In a working-class neighborhood in central Phoenix, a handyman named Ken Adams, 40 years old, says, "At one time Mexicans were a minority. Not anymore." For a supervising job in construction, for example, "you have to speak Spanish to deal with employees who just speak Spanish," Mr. Adams says.

Mr. Adams and his wife, Suzi, are home-schooling their two daughters, 13 and 14, partly because they believe the quality of education has deteriorated due to the influx of Spanish speakers. Ms. Adams remembers attending the school across the street from their home

when the student body was overwhelmingly white. Now, like most schools in the area, the students are mostly Latino. "My biggest problem is the culture thing," she says. "They come here and disrespect our culture...by not learning English."

It is the future Hispanic face of the state that has propelled many anti-immigrant forces into action. At Lela Alston Elementary School, which opened six years ago, 95% of the 380 students are Hispanic and 78% come from homes where English isn't the dominant language. Virtually all the children are entitled to free meals because their families live at or below the poverty line.

In one kindergarten class, Carrie Bergum teaches 22 students -- only one is not Hispanic -- how to read. "They come to us not knowing anything," says Ms. Bergum, but "most of the kids pick up English within two months, some of them in less time." On a recent afternoon, almost all the kindergarteners, including newcomer Michael Garcia, spelled cat, box and jet correctly. "We winners!" declared the 6-year-old boy, flashing a grin. Last year, the elementary school in the heart of a Latino neighborhood won a "highly performing school" designation from the state as a result of its students' performance on standardized tests and attendance record.

Kent Scribner is the superintendent of Phoenix's Isaac School District, where 95% of students are Latino. He says the immigrant crackdown is driving some families out of state. "We have requests for student transcripts from schools in Utah, Colorado, Texas and New Mexico," he says, adding that about 5% of these students didn't return for the second semester of the school year that began last month.

Diana and Adrian Arce moved to Phoenix 15 years ago from Guadalajara, Mexico, to "seek a better future for our children," she says. Her husband held a steady job as a painter, and she cleaned houses. They saved enough to make a down payment on a house and buy two cars. Two years ago, their eldest daughter graduated from high school and won a full scholarship to a community college.

After the employer-sanctions bill passed last year, Mr. Arce lost his job, which paid \$14 an hour. He scrambled to find another job until finding one that paid only \$7.50. Because he is an unauthorized worker, "the employer knew he would take the job," says Mrs. Arce.

State Tuition

When the proposition banning undocumented students from paying in-state tuition went into effect last year, the Arces' daughter lost her scholarship and had to withdraw from college because the family can't afford to pay the \$360 out-of-state fee per semester. Their second daughter, who is 19, works at a fast-food chain and has postponed plans to attend college. Their 18-year-old son is hoping to get a soccer scholarship at a private university. Only their youngest daughter is a U.S. citizen.

Mrs. Arce, who earns \$12 to \$15 an hour cleaning houses for "*puros americanos* who treat me very well," says families for whom she has worked more than a decade recently asked whether she is here legally. "I tell them I am a citizen," she says. "Or they'll fire me immediately."

On her way to work recently, Mrs. Arce conferred with her friends by cellphone about where Mr. Arpaio's deputies might be stationed and changed her route accordingly. The

family restricts its outings to a minimum, she says. "We used to like visiting the park and the library," says Mrs. Arce. In the last year, "everything has changed," says Mrs. Arce. "We're thinking of moving to another state but it's hard to start from scratch."