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Looking for action on immigration

Summit aims to mobilize Latino community amid 'dangerous situation'

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Dozens of community leaders, students and politicians spent Saturday morning in a lively discussion on immigration reform and how to best navigate the already politically charged climate that's been fueled by Arizona's recently challenged immigration law.

"We have this inflammatory hate against immigrants, (and) it's creating a very dangerous situation that needs to be corrected," said Silvia Mintz, who participated in a discussion on mobilizing the Latino community at the Houston Area Latino Summit at PlazAmericas mall in southwest Houston.

The attorney and House of Representatives candidate is concerned that some politicians are using misinformation to fuel hate and fear to generate votes.

Mintz, who immigrated from Guatemala in 1998, also took to task notions that immigrants are only coming to the U.S. to take advantage of public services, have so-called "anchor babies" or steal jobs.

"We are not here to be terrorist or to (create) problems; we are a hard-working community," Mintz said.

Immigrants account for billions of dollars of productivity and tax revenue each year in Texas. Their absence would create a vacuum in Houston's growth and stability, according to Mintz.

"It's because we Latinos don't vote," said Mintz, explaining why some politicians target the minority group. "All they care about is who is going to vote and if people are going to vote out of hate, who cares?"

Low voter turnout

Half of all eligible Latino voters nationwide register, in contrast to their African-American and white counterparts, who have registered at a rate of roughly 70 percent since 1980, according to

an analysis of U.S. Census data by The William C. Velásquez Institute, a public policy analysis organization.

A large portion of that base makes it to the polls, but Latino voters have historically accounted for only 5 percent of all voters, peaking at nearly 8 percent during the 2008 presidential election, the report continues. In comparison, white voters account for 80 to 90 percent of voters, and blacks are beginning to skirt into double digits over the past decade, according to the report.

Oscar Chacon finds that the immigration debate has also become increasingly racial, something he attributes to the changes in demographics over the past 30 years. Since the late 1970s immigrant populations from Asia, Latin America and Mexico have grown and changed the face of America, according to census data, Chacon said.

This change causes fear in the establishment and some see newcomers as a threat, says Chacon, who serves as executive director of the National Alliance of Latin American & Caribbean Communities. "What do you do with people you need but people you do not want?" Chacon asked. "That is the essence of the dilemma."

He also takes issue with the term "illegal immigrants," preferring immigrants without status or undocumented because it avoids what he calls the dehumanizing effect of the widely used term.

Feeling blamed

Oscar Fajardo nodded his head in agreement during the discussion.

"It undermines the people that are affected by it; in a way it takes the human element out, and they become an abstract object of threat," Fajardo said.

The University of Houston finance graduate student is concerned about what that attitude - combined with a law like Arizona's — would mean in a climate where he already feels targeted.

"Just by the way you look you can be stopped and harassed," said Fajardo, who adds that he has been stopped by law enforcement many times. "It seems to go against what the United States stands for."

Immigrants have even been blamed for the recession, with critics claiming that they've exhausted public services, Fajardo said.

"Politicians use it as a distraction, they shift the focus from the economy to silly stuff like changing the 14th Amendment," Fajardo said.

Houston immigration attorney Gordon J. Quan said he would like to see politicians focus on pressing issues rather than finger-pointing to sway voters.

"I hope we realize there's more to life than winning an election," Quan said. The taste of partisan politics has left him wondering if contemporary politicians are capable of working for the public benefit, rather than their re-election bids.

As hundreds of low-income families waited nearby to receive free school supplies, City Councilman James Rodriguez stressed that it was important for elected officials to start a dialogue on sensitive issues like immigration reform.

"We need to be a voice for people," said Rodriguez, who hosted the gathering. "I will bring these summits to any place that invites me."