

A potential tidal wave come election time

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Body

Two hundred; 500; 1,000; 2,000; 10,000; 300,000; 500,000. Far from counting sheep, these numbers of protesters signify an awakening. Political pundits and community activists say the prospect of congressional action on immigration reform has stirred up the Latino community.

Protesters have taken to the streets in cities coast to coast, chanting their opposition in two languages to the immigration reform plans being debated in Congress. The threats of criminalizing undocumented immigrants and the Good Samaritans who help them, separating families, imposing a man-made border, toiling away at a government-sanctioned job while paying taxes but still having no clear path to citizenship -- those are just a few issues propelling people to forgo the safety of society's shadows to speak out in unison.

It's clear that depending on which side of the river you're looking across from, immigration reform is either a political/economic issue or a human rights cause.

Members of Congress, who think their chances at future **elections** will be enhanced with voters if they play hardball with the issue, sprinkle their speech with words such as "terrorists" and "porous border" in the same breath with "illegals" and "taking jobs from Americans."

Sympathetic supporters and the undocumented hear the ticking of the proverbial clock -- not for when as many as 12 million people will be expected to turn themselves in, but for when they will be forced to live even more secretive, invisible lives.

Native-born attitudes

Though 12 million is a huge number of people, it pales in comparison with the 28 million Latinos in the USA who already have access to public services, health care, car insurance, among other taken-for-granted rights that **come** with legal status. These are the people who must be stirred to action.

It won't be an easy task. For one, Latinos are not a monolithic group. For another, a 2005 Pew Hispanic Center study found that although most Latinos have positive attitudes toward immigrants, native-born Latinos tend to be more divided in how they view the effect of illegal immigrants on U.S. society.

When native-born Latinos were asked whether illegal migrants helped the economy by providing low-cost labor rather than hurt the economy by driving wages down, 55% agreed vs. 34% who did not.

Where the political clout rests

The 12 million undocumented immigrants here have no influence over **elected** leaders. They're not citizens. They can't vote. They can make a lot of noise; they can't make a difference in a politician's future. But there are at least

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15 million eligible Hispanic voters, and they can -- if only they'd wield the full force of their votes. Numbers from the 2004 **election**, though, are not encouraging. Just 47% of Hispanic U.S. citizens (of any race) questioned after the **election** said they had voted. In contrast:

*67% of non-Hispanic whites did.

*60% of African-Americans did.

*44% of Asian-Americans did.

The top reason given for why many eligible Hispanics didn't vote was that they were too busy or had a conflicting schedule. Another reason: They weren't interested.

Time will tell what actions Congress will take against as many as 12 million illegal immigrants. Only then will we see whether this sleeping giant holding Latino votes has truly awakened, or is merely yawning before turning over to go back to sleep.

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