

Immigration may play a key role in Arizona's Senate race

USA TODAY

May 18, 2006 Thursday, FINAL EDITION

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Section: NEWS; Pg. 4A

Length: 633 words

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Body

PHOENIX -- Barbara Orr sees Minutemen trying to keep out illegal immigrants and Hispanics marching downtown to support the border crossers. She's fed up that the government has been unable to control illegal immigration.

"Anyone who's an incumbent, I'm not too happy with," says Orr, a water planning analyst.

She includes Republican Sen. Jon Kyl, whose bid for a third term this fall could hinge on immigration.

Kyl is co-sponsor of a Senate bill that would require illegal immigrants to leave the country and return only through legal means. His likely opponent, Democrat Jim Pederson, backs a bill being debated in the Senate this week that would offer many of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants a chance to become citizens. The plan's author: Arizona's other, more well-known GOP senator, John McCain.

On Wednesday, the Senate adopted Kyl's amendment to exclude illegal immigrants convicted of a felony or three misdemeanors from a chance at remaining in the country. The move came two days after President Bush's call to send National Guard troops to help police the border with Mexico.

In Arizona, Kyl says it "will matter a lot" to voters whether government addresses immigration. Democratic Gov. Janet Napolitano declared a state of emergency last year because the state cannot keep up with the cost of providing services to illegal immigrants.

Border security and immigration were already campaign topics before Bush's speech, including Nebraska's Senate race where incumbent Ben Nelson, a Democrat, is trying to win support for a proposal for a longer fence along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Kyl's bill is at odds with Bush's goal of creating a path to citizenship for many illegal immigrants. Arizona State University political analyst Bruce Merrill says that stance appeals to the conservative voters Kyl will need in November.

Former Republican state senator John Verkamp is also running for the Democratic nomination. Verkamp says Pederson and Kyl have failed to talk about the Iraq war, which he opposes. Pederson has a financial edge over Verkamp and has already loaned his own campaign \$2 million.

Pederson, a shopping mall developer, accuses Republicans of whipping up a wedge issue. They "are using immigration in '06 the way they used terror and national security in '04," he says.

Pederson also supports strong border security but says his "realistic approach" would allow illegal immigrants to eventually become citizens if they have no criminal record, pay fines and learn English. He hopes to appeal to Hispanics, who are 28% of the state's population and 13% of its voters.

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Interviews with voters highlighted mixed feelings. "We need to put some limitations on (illegal immigration), but I don't necessarily believe that we're supposed to pick up 11 million people and send them all back to Mexico," says Republican Steve Keiper, 45, a Chandler sales manager.

Kyl calls his plan the "moderate" approach. He opposes a House bill that would make illegal immigration a crime and says the citizenship proposal in McCain's bill "doesn't seem necessary."

An Arizona State University poll last month showed Kyl with a 42% to 31% advantage over Pederson.

Pederson agrees with Bush on the need for a "guest worker" program, but he points out that Kyl has voted 97% of the time with the president. Pederson also has run TV ads that include criticism of Kyl's immigration plan by McCain, the senator's campaign chairman.

McCain said he was "disappointed" that his name was used to attack a fellow Republican. Pederson often contrasts the former presidential candidate to Kyl, who was recently dubbed "that other guy" in the Senate by a local alternative newspaper.

"It's a disadvantage because you haven't been bragging about yourself all this time," Kyl says. "That's something I have to deal with."

Graphic

PHOTO, B/W, Todd Warshaw, Getty Images for NASCAR

PHOTO, B/W, AP

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: IMMIGRATION (94%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (94%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (91%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (90%); CITIZENSHIP (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); NATIONAL SECURITY (89%); BORDER CONTROL (89%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (89%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (89%); VOTERS & VOTING (88%); US STATE IMMIGRATION LAW (78%); CITIZENSHIP LAW (78%); MISDEMEANORS (78%); CRIMINAL OFFENSES (78%); POPULATION SIZE (78%); POLITICAL PARTIES (77%); CONSERVATISM (77%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (77%); POLITICS (76%); US CONGRESS (76%); PLATFORMS & ISSUES (76%); LEGISLATION (75%); CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS (72%); STATES OF EMERGENCY (71%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2008 (68%); FINES & PENALTIES (67%); FELONIES (67%); SHOPPING CENTER DEVELOPMENT (63%)

Industry: SHOPPING CENTER DEVELOPMENT (63%)

Person: JON KYL (79%); JANET NAPOLITANO (79%); BEN NELSON (58%); JOHN MCCAIN (58%)

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Geographic: ARIZONA, USA (93%); MEXICO (92%); IRAQ (79%); UNITED STATES (79%); NORTH AMERICA (79%)

Load-Date: May 18, 2006

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