

## **Immigration hot topic for voters, not candidates**

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### **Body**

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Survey after survey plainly shows it: American voters are preoccupied with immigration, sometimes intensely so.

But in a presidential campaign in which partisan lines have been sharply drawn over welfare and the budget, the subject of immigration has yet to provoke much of a stir. With the notable exception of Pat Buchanan, for instance, the major Republican challengers have been content to voice approving soundbites about legal immigration, while uniformly condemning illegal entry.

A year after inspiring the Proposition 187 movement in California to deny public services to undocumented aliens, though, illegal immigration is less and less the issue, at least in presidential politics. Everyone is against it, even many of the most ardent defenders of immigration, leaving little room for argument.

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It may simply be too early. The campaign, after all, has yet to move full force into the states where immigration really matters, like California and Florida.

There may be a deeper reason, though: When it comes to immigration, there is no simple liberal-conservative divide. It's a Democratic president, Bill Clinton, who can lay claim to actually cracking down on illegals, and who has endorsed a proposal to reduce the levels of legal immigration by as much as a third.

Only Buchanan has gone further. He calls for a five-year moratorium on most legal immigration, while other Republican candidates, including Sens. Bob Dole and Phil Gramm, have pointedly refused to follow his lead. To a man, they defend legal immigrants as an asset, a wellspring of economic vigor for the country.

Meanwhile, it is publishing heir Steve Forbes who has directly attacked the Clinton-backed proposal to scale back legal immigration as "misguided."

With pro- and anti-immigration sentiment crossing party lines, some political observers say, there is little partisan advantage in attacking legal newcomers for Republican candidates - and potentially much to lose.

"This issue is not really a winner for most Republicans," said Frank Sharpy, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, a pro-immigration lobbying group. "You have many traditional conservatives who are very pro-immigration. If you're a candidate who wants to win the Republican nomination, you have to be very careful. You could lose Cubans in Miami, Asians in California, 20 different ethnic groups in New York, and some very conservative Mexican-Americans in Texas."

A Voices of Florida poll last fall found that an overwhelming majority of registered Florida voters, even Hispanic and foreign-born residents, consider immigration to be a problem. The poll revealed that a majority of voters favor

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tough measures to crack down on illegal immigration by denying access to public services such as health care and education.

Voices of Florida is a coalition of six newspapers, 11 television stations and public radio - including the Times, the Miami Herald, WTSP-Ch. 10 and WUSF-FM 89.7. The news organizations joined forces to explore which issues are most important to voters in Florida.

In South Florida, where Cuban-Americans remain pivotal to the GOP, Dole, Gramm and Lamar Alexander have found themselves treading very cautiously around the immigration issue, avoiding talk about making English the nation's official language, sealing the borders and declaring the "American culture" superior to all others.

The gap between Buchanan and the others reflects deep divisions over immigration in the Republican Party. Like Dole, Gramm, Forbes and Alexander, the party's traditional pro-business and libertarian wings see the growth that immigration produces as good for the economy.

They also regard some proposals to control immigration - including national ID cards and a tax on businesses that import workers - as intrusive big government.

Gramm and Dole have taken firm stands on one issue: They have backed bills that would end or restrict immigrants' use of certain government benefits, including welfare and Social Security.

But their other forays into immigration-related issues have been careful, even tentative. In a highly publicized speech to the American Legion last year, Dole called for English to be made the country's official language and blasted bilingual education - then seemed to quickly abandon that course.

Alexander's main proposal has been to strip control of the country's borders from the Immigration and Naturalization Service and turn it over to the military or a private contractor. The former Tennessee governor said the agency is incapable of controlling illegal border crossings at the same time that it oversees legal immigration.

Those moderate stands could clash with the hard-line position of many in the Republican rank-and-file.

In both houses of Congress, Republicans have introduced bills that would scale back legal immigration from the present level of about 900,000 a year, some drastically.

They would do so by varying methods. Most legal immigrants are relatives of naturalized citizens or permanent U.S. residents. Some proposals would bar parents, siblings and adult children of immigrants from joining them, or place a strict cap on their numbers, for instance.

Buchanan has backed a bill that would freeze all immigration for five years, with the exception of spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens.

The idea, he says, is to keep the millions of recent arrivals from overwhelming the country culturally and economically, giving them time to learn English, get on their feet economically and join the American mainstream. "We've got to become one country again," Buchanan has said.

At least two bills are expected to make it out of committee this spring. As they come up for debate, and as the presidential campaigns move into Florida, California and Texas, immigration could again catch fire, and the candidates could be forced to show their hands.

Alexander, Forbes and Gramm have criticized the bills, directly or indirectly, but none has given specifics about how he would deal with legal immigration. In columns in his business magazine, Forbes has suggested that present levels suit him fine.

Gramm has left the door open to some restrictions.

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"We are here setting up arbitrary limits that prevent people who came here legally, who have been successful, who have achieved the American dream, from bringing their kinfolk to America," he said recently. "I do **not** think that is right. I do **not** think it makes any sense."

Yet, he added on another occasion, "I think we ought to put a premium on people who can bring new skills, new energy. But I'm **not** ready to tear down the Statue of Liberty."

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