

Gov. Blunt's immigration moves upset Hispanics here - Correction Appended

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 **Correction Appended**

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Body

At major Republican campaign fundraising events around town, you can usually spot at least one member of the local Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in the crowd - and often among the speakers.

Area **Hispanics**, especially those in business, long have been a targeted voting bloc for many Republican candidates. The mutual attraction: their common views on social and economic issues like abortion and taxes (generally against both).

That friendly backdrop helps explain why some local Hispanic leaders say they're angry at being blindsided by **Gov. Matt Blunt's** directives last week targeting illegal immigrants. Most illegals apprehended in Missouri have been Hispanic.

"We didn't get any kind of heads-up that this was coming down the pike," said Jorge Riopedre, secretary and legislative affairs chairman for the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan St. Louis.

In particular, the Hispanic chamber - and its larger counterpart in Kansas City - is **upset** by **Blunt's** order that the Highway Patrol verify the **immigration** status of anyone arrested and headed for jail.

In terse statements, both chambers said they feared the directive will invite "racial profiling."

Riopedre contended that law enforcement agencies may single out "Hispanic-looking" people, and take them directly to an **immigration** judge. He predicted that legal immigrants or citizens could find themselves unfairly forced to prove their status.

"This is not about illegal **immigration**. It's about due process," Riopedre said.

Blunt spokeswoman Jessica Robinson played down such concerns. "The only people who will be affected will be those who have broken the law," Robinson said.

The governor has no plans to downplay his campaign. On Wednesday night, Blunt was on cable TV, as a guest on CNN's highly rated "Lou Dobbs Tonight." Blunt referred to his critics as "fringe elements."

Blunt's focus on illegal **immigration** is unquestionably popular among the GOP's conservative base. But Riopedre warns that it could cost the governor votes next year from Missouri Hispanic voters who might otherwise have preferred his message.

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How many is unclear. Hispanics make up only about 3 percent of Missouri's legal population, far smaller than the percentage nationwide.

The political touchiness of the topic is evident in the response of Blunt's likely Democratic opponent, Attorney General Jay Nixon. "No one should be singled out because of their race or ethnicity," a Nixon spokesman said. "But it's appropriate to check someone's status at the point of incarceration."

The state Democratic Party points to \$40,000 in campaign contributions that Blunt received from Gundaker Commercial Group, and other businesses at the same address. Gundaker was cited last year for hiring illegal immigrants.

Bosnian clout is growing

Both major parties also are wooing the region's booming Bosnian community, the largest outside of Bosnia.

Secretary of State Robin Carnahan, a Democrat, made a point of being at Lambert Field last week to welcome Zeljko Komsic, president of Bosnia-Herzegovina, at the start of his four-day visit.

Ibrahim Vajovic, president of the United Bosnian Association in St. Louis, on Wednesday praised a number of politicians in both parties - including Carnahan, Blunt, St. Louis County Executive Charley Dooley and St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay - for their attention to Bosnian residents and their concerns.

For politicians, the stakes include the skyrocketing number of Bosnian votes. Carnahan said that Bosnians have made up most of the new citizens sworn in at local naturalization ceremonies she's attended this year.

Nonpartisan voting-rights groups have been on hand to distribute voter-registration cards.

COOK, FARMER ENDORSE DONNELLY

Gender also matters. State Rep. Margaret Donnelly, D-Richmond Heights, is so far the sole woman running for Missouri attorney general. Today, she's slated to roll out endorsements from four of the region's best-known women politicians.

They are former Secretary of State Bekki Cook, former state Treasurer Nancy Farmer, former state Democratic Party chair May Scheve Reardon and former St. Louis Circuit Attorney Dee Joyce Hayes.

Cook and Hayes both lauded Donnelly's experience in law and government.

In a crowded field of candidates, it's often the sole woman or man, the only white or black who has had an edge at the polls.

Farmer can attest to that during her own three-way Democratic primary for treasurer in 2000. She won, even though her two male rivals spent more.

More political news: stltoday.com/politicalfix

Correction

Jo Mannies' column in Thursday's Metro section misstated the nature of the controversy about Gundaker Commercial Group and illegal immigration. Gundaker has not been legally cited for hiring illegal immigrants. The group was among the investors in an O'Fallon project where illegal immigrants were found. Officials, unions and a state agency initially criticized Gundaker, which later took over the project and ousted the illegal workers.

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