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Immigration debate key issue in presidential campaigns

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Illegal immigration is one of the most polarizing issues in American politics.

But people on each side of the issue agree about one thing: The current situation, with millions of undocumented immigrants working at factories, farms, restaurants and construction sites, needs to change.

For some, that means a border crackdown and tossing out immigrants already in the country illegally. But on the other side, it means trying to help millions of undocumented immigrants stay in the country and potentially become citizens.

"People (immigrants) want something to be done. This is an issue that just can't be avoided," said Marcos Crisanto, who oversees the Farmworker Association of Florida Inc.'s office in Pierson. "They want to be integrated into the community. They want to live their lives without fear."

The sometimes-fierce debate about changing the immigration system has turned it into a key issue as presidential candidates campaign in caucuses and primaries this year.

Republican candidates have particularly battled about the issue, though it also has played a role in the Democratic race.

Candidates have accused each other of wanting to provide amnesty to illegal immigrants, while also sparring about issues such as offering driver's licenses and college scholarships to illegal immigrants and their children.

Most candidates say the government needs to improve border security to stem the number of people coming into the country and do more to prevent employers from hiring undocumented workers.

But the battles have focused heavily on what to do with the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already in the country.

Some Republican candidates have opposed proposals aimed at creating a so-called "path to citizenship" for people in the country illegally.

"Those people should be invited to get in line outside the country with everybody else who wants to come here, but they should not be given a special right to stay here," former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney said during a Republican debate this month.

But other candidates support setting up a process that would allow many undocumented workers to stay in the country and possibly become citizens. President Bush has pushed similar ideas, though he has been unable to get them through Congress.

Under such an approach, immigrants would have to take steps, such as paying fines and learning English, before they could seek citizenship.

Republican Rudy Giuliani said he would focus on deporting illegal immigrants who have committed crimes. But he said it is not "physically possible" to force all illegal immigrants to leave the country. He supports a process that includes requiring them to pay fines if they want to stay.

"If you pay fines, it is not amnesty," said Giuliani, the former New York City mayor. "They would not get ahead of anybody else. They'd be at the back of the line. But then they could eventually become citizens, so long as they could read English, write English and speak English."

The immigration debate is a tricky political issue, in part because the Republican and Democratic parties are competing in

Florida and other states to attract the growing numbers of Hispanic voters.

More than 44.3 million Hispanics live in the country and are the largest minority group, making up 14 percent of the population. National and local organizations have been staging campaigns to get eligible permanent residents to apply for U.S. citizenship and register to vote.

Last week, the League of United Latin American Citizens announced that more than 1 million had applied for citizenship in 2007 as a result of the Ya es Hora: Ciudadania! (Citizenship, It's Time!) nationwide campaign.

Crisanto said immigrants, including many who make a living picking fern, are taking English-language and civics classes to prepare for citizenship exams. New U.S. citizens will get a chance to vote in November.

A recent study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that more than half of all Hispanic adults in the country worried that they, a relative or close friend could be deported. Nearly two-thirds said the failure of Congress to enact an immigration reform bill has made it more difficult for all Hispanics.

But polls also show deep concerns in Florida and the country about illegal immigration.

A poll released in December by the group Leadership Florida found 51 percent of Floridians thought illegal immigration was a "very serious" problem, while another 25 percent considered it a "somewhat serious" problem.

The poll showed 67 percent of Republicans and 59 percent of independents considered illegal immigration a "very serious" problem. Both of those were far higher than the 37 percent of Democrats who shared the view.

The immigration issue, however, has played a high-profile role in Democratic and Republican presidential debates. Democrat Hillary Clinton, for instance, faced controversy in October when she appeared to justify a proposal by New York's governor to issue driver's licenses to illegal immigrants.

Clinton, a New York senator, did not say she supported the idea but said it was aimed at filling a "vacuum" because of the federal government's failure to pass an immigration-reform plan.

Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a Republican, also faced criticism because of his past support for providing state college scholarships to children of illegal immigrants.

Romney hammered Huckabee about the issue during a November debate, saying illegal immigrants should not get "taxpayer-funded breaks." But Huckabee stood by his position.

"In all due respect, we're a better country than to punish children for what their parents did," Huckabee said. "We're a better country than that."

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IMMIGRATION COMMENTS

Illegal immigration has been one of the hottest issues during the 2008 presidential campaign. As Florida prepares for its Jan. 29 primary elections, here is what some of the presidential candidates have been saying about the immigration issue:

Republicans:

Arizona Sen. John McCain: "This is a national-security issue. We have to secure our borders. But I want to say again, these are God's children. We have to address it in as humane and compassionate an issue as possible. . . So I think that it's time Republicans and Democrats sat down together and resolved this issue. Because if you've got broken borders, and if you have 12 million people here illegally, then, obviously, you have de facto amnesty. It is a federal responsibility. The federal government must act."

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney: "I disagree fundamentally with the idea that the 12 million people who've come here illegally should all be allowed to remain in the United States permanently, potentially some of them applying for citizenship and becoming citizens, others just staying permanently. I think that is a form of amnesty and that it's not appropriate. We're a

nation of laws."

Former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson: "We've got to strengthen the border. We've got to enforce the border. We've got to punish employers . . . who will not obey the law. And we've got to eliminate sanctuary cities and say to sanctuary cities, 'If you continue this, we're going to cut off federal funding for you; you're not going to do it with federal money.' "

Democrats:

New York Sen. Hillary Clinton: "I believe we need to get back to comprehensive immigration reform because no state, no matter how well-intentioned, can fill this gap. There needs to be federal action on immigration reform."

Illinois Sen. Barack Obama: "I will make sure that we finally have the kind of border security that we need. That's step No. 1. Step No. 2 is to take on employers. Right now, an employer has more of a chance of getting hit by lightning than be prosecuted for hiring an undocumented worker. That has to change. They have to be held accountable. And when we do those things . . . I believe that we can take the undocumented workers, the illegal aliens who are here, get them out of the shadows, make sure that they are subject to a stiff penalty, make sure that they're learning English, make sure that they go to the back of the line so they're not getting an advantage over people who came here legally."

Former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards: "No. 1, I would put much more effort into providing security on our southern border. I don't think we can sustain what's going on there right now. . . . The second part is that I think people who've been living here for years and working, they ought to be able to earn citizenship so that they're not living in the shadows."

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