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HEADLINE: Discontent over illegals in Arizona

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HIGHLIGHT:

Prop. 200 on the state's ballot proposes limiting public benefits for the undocumented.

BODY:

At a suburban job center here where about 100 day laborers are lined up for work, Antonio Laguna speaks while his colleagues - illegal immigrants all - nod approval. "We help make this economy run smoothly, but now they want to crack down on us," says Mr. Laguna, husband and father of four who works for about \$ 350 a week.

Outside a Wal-Mart downtown Judy Martinez, a third-generation Mexican-American, explains why legal American citizens like herself feel the time for a tougher approach has come. "They take jobs from legal citizens, and use up social services," notes Ms. Martinez, who says her own daughter Ciara has been passed over for several jobs given to illegals. "At the same time they drive up crime all over the city."

The two comments encapsulate an immigration controversy that is raising debate to decibel levels not heard since California's Prop. 187 tried to deny social services to illegals a decade ago.

Arizona's Proposition 200, on the Nov. 2 ballot wants state and local governments to verify the identity and immigration status of all applicants for certain public benefits, and to require government employees to report violations. It also asks proof of US citizenship for every person who registers to vote and for every voter to show ID at polls. Pollsters say citizens support it (by 42 percent to 29 percent, in a new poll), while public officials, Democratic and Republican leadership, and churches do not.

However the vote turns out, observers say the sheer intensity of concern here is symbolic of discontent that is growing in border and immigrant-rich Western states about the level of illegal immigration - and how little action is being taken by politicians nationally to stop it.

"There is a disconnect between politicians and the people," says Bruce Merrill, a pollster at Arizona State University, who has gotten more questions on this issue than any other over three decades of polling. He says many people want something done about the problem, but

politicians are often afraid to act out of fear of alienating an increasingly powerful Hispanic voting bloc. Many people cite the steep drop in approval for California's former Gov. Pete Wilson and the California Republican Party after the passage there of the get-tough Prop. 187 in 1994 as evidence of what can happen. The GOP suffered a loss of Hispanic voters as a result.

"I think leaders here informally looked at California and saw what happened," he says. "Hispanics are 25 percent of the population now, but will be 40 percent in 10 to 12 years ... so the strategy has been to not put things on the ballot that will motivate Hispanics."

Prop. 200 will provide the latest litmus test of how deep the public's discontent is over illegal immigration across the nation's southern border. Attitudes about the problem have hardened in recent years in some states, both out of concern about the economic impact, particularly in a time of slow job growth, and out of concern about the security threat posed since 9/11.

To be sure, the federal government has tried to stem the flow of illegal immigrants coming across the border with high-profile crackdowns in places like San Diego and southern Texas. Now the front-line battle is shifting to Arizona, where the border remains porous.

The concern over illegal immigration has intensified as the federal government has shifted more of the cost and control of welfare benefits to the states - further burdening state budgets. "Other states will be looking at whether this [Prop. 200] is a failure or a success so they can model theirs after what Arizona is doing," says Shirley Gunther, an analyst for ThinkAZ, an Arizona public policy group.

As in immigration policy battles of the past, propaganda wars are already afoot, delineating the costs and advantages that immigrants bring to the economy. Some anti-immigrant groups say they siphon more than \$ 1 billion a year in social services from the Arizona treasury - \$ 700 per family in the state. "Arizona has a serious problem on its hands in paying \$ 1.3 billion a year in services to illegals," says Ira Mehlman of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which helped gather signatures to qualify the initiative. "All [the state is] trying to do is provide a check to see if people are eligible to receive the benefits they are applying for."

But ASU's Merrill and other analysts question the \$ 1.3 billion figure. "No research or statistics are available to make that claim," he says.

And there is the usual battle over what the proposition actually says and does, as well as the motives of supporters and detractors. Backers say passage will help the state by preventing illegal immigrants from receiving benefits they don't qualify for. They also say a separate provision of Prop. 200 will prevent voter fraud by keeping illegals from registering to vote.

Critics say Prop. 200 will do nothing to prevent illegals from crossing the border, but will only make it harder for citizens to vote. They also say it will be costly to implement, by requiring the processing of

documentation (driver's license, passport, birth certificate) by registered voters.

Analysts at ThinkAZ say both sides are taking advantage of the measure's complexity to confuse voters. They also say the measure is written in such a way as to keep some key points vague. "Prop. 200 does not include a definition of the public benefits which it says are covered by the new law," says Ms. Gunther - an omission she says could require the intervention of either the state legislature or the courts if approved. She also says the measure does not remove federally mandated public benefits for illegals such as emergency healthcare, immunizations, and K-12 public education.

"They are trying to scare us into leaving the country," says Leonardo Flores, a 19-year-old in line at the labor center. "It's a cheap tactic to fool the very people who are doing the work of this state that others don't want to do."