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NATIONAL DESK

Immigration Measure Taps Frustrations in Arizona

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On the face of it, the issue before Arizona voters on Election Day -- Proposition 200 -- seems straightforward enough. It would require proof of citizenship when registering to vote and would deny illegal immigrants public benefits that are not federally mandated. It is, supporters say, a reaffirmation of laws already on the books.

But should the measure pass on Nov. 2 -- and polls show it is likely to -- its opponents believe it will unleash a tempest. The measure contains language, for example, that makes it a crime for public employees not to report fraud committed by illegal immigrants to the authorities.

Opponents envision a leviathan bureaucracy and a litany of lawsuits, and raise concerns about privacy. Will residents be required to carry citizenship documents? Firefighters wonder if they will have to check immigration status when assisting in a hit-and-run accident. Would welfare workers who do not turn in someone suspected of being an illegal immigrant really be fined \$750 and sentenced to four months in jail, as the measure stipulates? Librarians ask if they will go to jail for issuing library cards. People with brown skin fear a witch hunt.

Those fears are unfounded, says Kathy McKee, the chairwoman and director of the group sponsoring Proposition 200, Protect Arizona Now.

"This is simply about order," said Ms. McKee, who describes herself as a Quaker Sunday school teacher, practicing Buddhist and Ralph Nader supporter.

"This is about protecting the voting process and

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prohibiting welfare fraud. Nothing more, nothing less," she said.

Richard M. Romley, the Maricopa County attorney, said the immigration problem was a federal issue and would not be solved by what he described as a leaky, poorly written initiative.

"I know we have a problem, but sometimes the solution is worse than the problem," said Mr. Romley, a Republican. "The frustrations of the citizens are legitimate, and we have to have a legitimate answer. This isn't it."

Passage of the measure could also have unintended political consequences. A similar measure in California, Proposition 187, passed 10 years ago with the support of Gov. Pete Wilson, a Republican. Republican support for the measure was seen as a betrayal to Latinos and pushed their swelling numbers into Democratic arms. Today, except for the popular recall governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Republicans hold no statewide office in California. Proposition 187 was eventually struck down.

No major officials in Arizona have expressed support for Proposition 200.

With crackdowns along the borders of California and Texas in recent years, Arizona has become the nexus of a billion-dollar human smuggling industry and a place of spectacular, savage crimes.

The smuggling business has become so lucrative that immigrants are being treated as commodities, increasingly kidnapped, tortured or killed when their families cannot pay.

Five people were killed on Oct. 16 in the southeastern part of the state after a smuggler trying to elude the police flipped a stolen pickup packed with 17 illegal immigrants, leading to a multicar pileup.

But Proposition 200 would not prevent illegal immigrants from being treated in emergency rooms because federal law mandates emergency care for anyone who needs it. Undocumented children would still be required to attend school and receive vaccinations.

And to complicate matters, opponents filed a lawsuit on Friday in state Superior Court claiming that the petitions people signed originally read that proof of citizenship would be required to receive "public welfare benefits." The ballot, however, states that noncitizens would be

denied "public benefits, " leaving out the word "welfare." A judge is expected to rule Wednesday on whether the ballot is invalid.

The measure could also make life difficult for residents, costing time in long lines and millions of dollars to institute a system whereby citizens can be identified, according to an analysis by the Arizona governor's office.

In the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, about 600,000 people, mostly Mexicans, were apprehended along the Arizona border. The illegal immigrant population in Arizona has ballooned to an estimated 350,000, a four-fold increase over the past 15 years. The signs of strain are everywhere: emergency rooms closing, overcrowded schools, families living in garages, homes converted to hiding places and gangland-style crime.

Some political experts say the lack of discussion of immigration issues among the presidential candidates has driven public support for Proposition 200, which is officially known as the Arizona Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act.

Even with a bombardment of anti-Proposition 200 advertising featuring the popular Senator John McCain, supporters still outnumber opponents by 42 percent to 29 percent, according to a recent poll by Northern Arizona University.

"We need to stop illegal immigration," said Nicholas J. Zendelbach, a resident of an affluent Scottsdale neighborhood who appeared on the national news earlier this year when about 160 illegal immigrants were found in squalid conditions in the house next to his.

"It's causing unrest in the American population," Mr. Zendelbach said of illegal immigration. "It's too much, too fast. You have to understand people's frustration."

Emilia Bañuelos, a Phoenix immigration lawyer active in opposing the proposition, says the measure misses the point about who immigrants are and what they do, and only sends a message that they are no longer welcome.

"There's no doubt that we need change in our immigration policy, but this isn't it," Ms. Bañuelos said. "The immigrants are the children in the schools, they are in our stores, they contribute in every aspect of our lives."

At a work center on the north side of Phoenix where illegal immigrants as well as citizens wait for daily employment, the attitude was less defiant and more

confused.

"If the law passes does this mean that if a man gets sick, he waits until he nearly dies until he is helped? It's not human," said Manuel Zarate Padilla, 37, from Guadalajara, Mexico.

"I understand the feelings of people here," Mr. Padilla said. "I wouldn't like 2,000 gringos standing at the corner of my town. But law or no law, people will come. The work is here."

Photos: Laborers at a work center in Phoenix. "Law or no law, people will come. The work is here," says a worker from Guadalajara, Mexico.; Kathy McKee, leader of the group supporting Proposition 200. (Photographs by Jeff Topping for The New York Times)