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Politics, Economics of Immigration Debated as Protests Heat Up

April 10 (Bloomberg) -- Protesters waving American flags and shouting their support for looser immigration laws took to U.S. streets by the tens of thousands today, keeping the heat on congressmen taking a two-week break before tackling the divisive problem again.

The marches, coupled with scattered business boycotts designed to demonstrate immigrant economic power, blocked traffic for blocks in cities ranging from Atlanta and Philadelphia to Garden City, Kansas, as experts debated their economic and political impact.

On Sunday, more than half a million people turned out for protests in Dallas, Miami and other cities in 10 states. Today's schedule of 136 rallies was ``the main event," said Avril Smith of the Service Employees International Union, one of several supporting the National Day of Action for Immigrant Justice.

The debate on immigration has divided Republicans between lawmakers who want to focus on border security and enforcement and those including President George W. Bush who back a new guest-worker program.

Last week, legislation creating the worker program and providing a way for an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants to gain legal status stalled in the Senate as a compromise collapsed.

Republicans and Democrats disagreed on amendments to the measure and how it would be reconciled with a version approved earlier by the House, which last year passed legislation to require workers to verify their employees are in the U.S. legally and to build 700 miles of fencing along the U.S.-Mexican border.

Specter Promises Priority

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter, a Pennsylvania Republican whose office in Pittsburgh was the focus of a protest today, said immigration legislation will be his top priority when lawmakers return to Washington in two weeks.

Much of the division in the U.S. is due to fear, a law professor said today.

``The current congressional debate over legislation criminalizing illegal, and overwhelmingly Hispanic, immigration reflects American anxiety over the `browning' of the U.S. due to Mexican and Latino immigration over the past 40 years," said Teresa Miller, a professor at the New York's University Buffalo Law School, in a statement. ``This is a critical period for Hispanics and their future in America."

Economists such as Marc Levinson at JPMorgan Chase & Co. in New York said that short of building a fence across the entire U.S.-Mexico border or beefing up enforcement against employers who hire illegal workers, immigration policy changes will have little effect on the labor market.

Wages Won't Change

Wages are depressed because of the large pool of low- skilled workers, and that won't change simply because they are made legal, he said.

``A lot of the policy discussion seems to assume that once this bill is passed, some of the

undocumented aliens will simply leave the country and others will stop coming," Levinson said in an interview. Those assumptions aren't based on reality, he said.

Levinson said legalizing immigrants already in the country could create a minor boost to spending.

Illegal immigrants, he said, ``are not likely to buy property and may not be as likely to buy cars and other kinds of assets because they do not feel secure here. If legalized, they may be more willing to make more long-term investments."

Levinson said it's hard to put a number on that impact because there is no indication of how many illegal immigrants Congress may ultimately legalize.

Presidential Race Impact

With candidates already positioning themselves for the 2008 presidential election, one expert said the issue would be more galvanizing to Hispanics than to whites.

Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia's Center for Politics, said Bush was helped in his two elections by capturing about 40 percent of the Hispanic vote. While the issue may fuel anti-immigration sentiment among some white voters, most won't cast their votes based on it, he said.

``Whereas for Hispanics and Latinos, it's a more central issue and it will probably produce a larger vote shift," Sabato said.

Republicans' biggest fear, he said, is that the immigration issue will chip away at gains Bush made with Hispanic voters.

``That would be devastating simply because without 40 percent of the Hispanic vote, the Republicans can't win the presidency," Sabato said.

The issue will have less impact in this year's mid-term elections, which will decide who controls Congress, because there aren't enough competitive races that have large blocs of Hispanic voters, he said.

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