

Los Angeles Times

June 21, 2007

Poll says immigrants would heed bill

The majority surveyed say they'd take steps to gain legal status.

By Nicole Gaouette, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — In the first-ever public opinion poll of illegal immigrants, an overwhelming majority said they are intently following the Senate immigration debate and would comply with a proposed bill that would require them to pay fees and fines, undergo background checks and pass English exams to gain legal status.

The survey of 1,600 undocumented Latin American adults, done by telephone in Spanish, also found that there are limits to the hurdles illegal immigrants are willing to clear in exchange for the bill's "Z visa," which would offer a renewable legal status and could lead to citizenship. More than a quarter said they would not apply for legal status if it meant returning to their home country to pick up the new visa — a provision that may still be included in the bill.

The respondents' willingness to return home in order to receive a legal permanent resident visa, a step toward citizenship, depended on whether their return to the U.S. would be guaranteed. If it were, 85% said they would do so.

"This is a debate that is going to affect 12 million people, and up until now, no one has known what they're thinking," said Maria Cardona, a spokeswoman for New America Media, the nation's largest association of ethnic news media and the poll's sponsor.

"This poll gives us the voice of the undocumented immigrant who is going to be affected by this, and it gives policymakers an important insight to the practicality of the bill they're discussing."

The poll, conducted June 9-19 by Bendixen & Associates, a nonpartisan public opinion research firm, and released to The Times, comes as the Senate prepares to resume debate on immigration. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) pulled the legislation from the floor after it failed a test vote June 7. It may be on the agenda again as soon as the end of this week.

In the days since, senators have been working intensely behind the scenes to reach an agreement on about two dozen amendments that would form the basis for debate. Republicans have objected to the limits on amendments, and the Bush administration, which helped write the bill, has complained that some of the amendments could undermine it.

In a setback for the bill's supporters, two members of the bipartisan group that wrote the legislation withdrew their support for it Wednesday. Sens. Johnny Isakson and Saxby Chambliss, both Republicans from Georgia, said the bill would not do enough for border security and expressed concern about the restricted number of amendments lawmakers would be allowed.

The Senate bill is expected to include a provision that would immediately provide \$4.4 billion for border security and enforcement. It also would reshape future immigration to place more emphasis on skills and education and less on family ties.

Several survey questions focused on the "Z visa" provision.

Of those polled, 83% said they would apply for the visa, which would require undergoing a criminal background check, showing their work record, and paying \$3,000 in fines and fees for household heads and \$2,000 for each illegal immigrant in the family. Some immigrant advocates have suggested that the bill's fines and fees are too steep and may prevent some illegal immigrants from coming forward.

The poll found that 40% of respondents had no dependents in the U.S., a factor that would make it easier to bear the financial penalties. An additional 27% had one dependent in the U.S. and 17% had two.

"The majority of them don't think this is an insurmountable amount of money," Cardona said.

When asked whether they would return home for a short time — a process known as "touchback" — to get the Z visa, 63% said yes, 27% said no and 10% were undecided. Many said they were worried about being able to get back into the U.S.

The bill also has a touchback requirement for those seeking a legal permanent resident visa, or green card. If their return to the U.S. were guaranteed, 85% would return home for a brief period; if it were not, only 35% would do so.

The respondents to the survey, which has a margin of error of 2 percentage points, echoed the illegal Latino population of the U.S.; 70% were from Mexico, and 30% were from Central America, South America and the Caribbean.

They were young, with 41% ages 18 to 29 and 33% ages 30 to 39. Most were relatively recent arrivals — 31% had been here for less than five years and 33% five to 10 years. Just 9% had been in the U.S. 20 years or more.

They told the pollsters that anti-immigrant sentiment had been growing, and 64% said it was affecting them and their families.

Perhaps as a result, 80% said they were following the immigration debate in Congress very closely.

The poll was funded by grants from the Ford Foundation, Carnegie Corp., the James Irvine Foundation, the John L. and James S. Knight Foundation, **the San Francisco Foundation**, the California Endowment, the California Wellness Foundation and the Open Society Institute.