

Immigration less important, report says

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A year and a half ago, the immigration debate rankled members of Congress and the public.

Today, it has receded in importance, even among one of the groups most affected by it - Latinos.

Only three in 10 Latinos rate immigration as an "extremely important" issue facing the incoming Obama administration, according to a new report from the Pew Hispanic Center.

The top-rated issue among Latinos is the economy, with 57 percent saying it is an "extremely important" one for the new president to address, the report states.

Education, health care, national security and the environment also rank higher than immigration as a policy priority among Latinos, according to the nationwide survey of 1,007 Latino adults conducted last month.

Latinos, who make up about 15 percent of the U.S. population, are by far the nation's largest immigrant group.

Nearly half of San Bernardino County's population is Latino, according to U.S. Census data.

Immigration became a major issue for Latinos in 2005 when a bill to crack down on illegal immigration passed the House of Representatives. The legislation became the catalyst for massive immigrant-rights protests in 2006. The following year, Congress failed to pass a bill to provide legal status and a path to citizenship for the roughly 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States.

The immigration issue has fallen in importance since 2007 among the general population as well as Latinos, according to the Pew report.

While 56 percent of all registered voters cited immigration as a very important issue in 2007, the number fell to 49 percent last year, the survey says.

"There are other policy and social issues that are much more salient right now in the minds of Latinos and non-Latinos," said Adrian Pantoja, an associate professor of

political studies at Pitzer College in Claremont. "Immigration is important when the issue is politicized by a candidate or political party. That's when Latinos react to it."

While acknowledging that rescuing the economy should be the top priority of the new administration, Latino advocacy groups say immigration reform cannot be ignored. "I think politicians have a mandate from the electorate to try and solve some of the toughest problems our country is facing," said Paco Fabian, spokesman for America's Voice, a pro-immigrant organization based in Washington, D.C. "One of those problems is immigration."

Andy Ramirez, chairman of the non-profit Friends of the Border Patrol, says the bigger issue with immigration is its effect on national security.

"We don't know who a lot of these folks are, if they got here illegally, how many of them got here because of slavery and indentured servitude, how many others came across for the purpose of distributing and bringing narcotics back and forth across the borders," Ramirez said. "How many of them are doing god only knows what. That's one of the problems with immigration. It's not just about immigration - it's about national security."

With the economy in the state it is in, immigration plays a part in taking jobs away from American workers who need them, he said.

"How many companies right now are downsizing because of the economy? So we're going to go out and hire cheap labor that's not even here legally," he said. "That makes a mockery of the system and the thousands of Americans that are losing jobs right now." Ideas of free or cheap labor that come with hiring illegal immigrants is at the expense of the American tax payer, he said.

A need to build more hospitals and jails to hold criminal aliens comes at a time when the economy is too unstable to support these type of projects.

"It's this whole bigger picture for what? Free labor?," he said. "It's not free, it's not cheap. they're getting paid cheap and the companies are getting free labor and the American tax payers are footing an enormous bill that unfortunately we will never know what the size of it is."

Assisting was Sandra Emerson, Daily Bulletin Staff Writer

Compean, Ramos pardon sought

Sandra Emerson, Daily Bulletin Staff Writer

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The two former U.S. Border Patrol agents whose sentences were recently commuted by former President Bush are set to be released in late March.

But some Texas representatives, activists and the agents' families may soon be pushing for President Barack Obama to pardon Ignacio Ramos and Jose Compean entirely.

"It is good that President Bush has commuted their sentence," said Congressman Ted Poe, R-Texas, during a House address Jan. 21. "We hope to press further with the new president, President Obama, and get a complete pardon for these two individuals."

The agents, once released, will still be convicted felons if not given a pardon or a chance to exonerate themselves.

Poe and other representatives "are advocating that Obama pardon them and release them earlier," said Robin Hvidston of the Minuteman Project. "It's also the beginning of a fight to clear their names. They are planning on going forward to appeal and clear their names."

CNN recently reported the Mexican government's disapproval of Bush's decision.

"You see right away, the Mexican government, in its self-righteous indignation, disapproves of the commutation of Ramos and Compean," Poe said in the address. "Obviously, if the Mexican government is opposed to it, President Bush did the right thing."

The Mexican government was also reported to have significant involvement in the case.

"The big thing everybody is jumping on now is that we know that there was involvement by the Mexican government at the highest levels looking into their case and influencing their case behind the scene," said Andy Ramirez, chairman of Friends of the Border Patrol. "Which means that they were trying to keep them in prison."