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On immigration, Obama and McCain walk a fine line of fairness, security

By Steven Oberbeck
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Almost lost in all the commotion surrounding the credit crisis on Wall Street - and the presidential campaigns' responses to it - is the controversy that surrounds the issue of immigration.

As recently as seven weeks ago, likely voters from four of six Western states responding to a poll considered immigration the top issue facing their state. In Utah and Wyoming, it was No. 2 behind oil and gas drilling on public lands, but many Utahns worry that with the election only weeks away, immigration is being paid scant attention because of the economy.

Of course bank failures and billion-dollar bailouts are important, but "illegal immigration is the number one issue for me after the economy," said Mary Ann Pollard, 68, a retired certified public accountant living in Park City. "It is disgusting, though, to hear people talking about the new laws they think we need. I'd just like to hear the candidates say we need to enforce the laws we already have."

About the only certainty when it comes to the immigration is that in Utah and much of the West, the issue is a polarizing one that generates frustration and conflicted feelings.

For some, immigration is all about keeping U.S. borders secure, while for others it's about being compassionate to those less fortunate. Still others focus on ensuring that businesses have the workers they need to prosper.

The range of conflict was evident in the late August survey conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling and Research Inc. of 2,400 likely voters in Utah, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Wyoming. More than half, 53 percent, wanted the estimated 12 million undocumented workers in the U.S. to be offered the chance to apply for legal status. But an overwhelming 71 percent endorsed efforts to stop illegal immigration, including building a fence across the U.S.-Mexico border and penalizing employers who hire undocumented workers.

And the latter feeling isn't just talk, as evidenced by the Republican primary in Utah's 3rd Congressional District in June.

Six-term GOP congressman Chris Cannon was defeated by newcomer Jason Chaffetz, partly because voters in the conservative district viewed Cannon as being too forgiving of immigrants who are in the country illegally.

"It really is an issue that needs to be put back on the front burner. We can't just ignore the problem," said Chaffetz.

He supports a hard-line stand - beefing up border security and deporting immigrants found to be in the country without the proper documentation. He further argues that Utahns are being unfairly asked to "subsidize and tolerate a mass of illegal people flooding our country."

His Democratic opponent, Bennion Spencer, also supports beefing up border security. He says the

government should crack down on employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers, but he also wants a system employers can trust that would reliably verify their workers are here legally.

When it comes to presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain, some in Utah don't see much contrast in their stands on immigration.

"You don't hear them talking about it because there is zero difference between them," said Eli Cawley, chairman of the Utah Minuteman Project, an anti-illegal immigration group. "They both support amnesty for those in this country illegally. And neither one of them seems to want to stand up for American jobs."

Obama supports a pathway to U.S. citizenship provided the undocumented immigrants pay a fine and learn English. He wants additional personnel, infrastructure and technology on borders and ports of entry, and he vows to crack down on employers who hire undocumented workers.

McCain, who supported President Bush's immigration proposal that failed in Congress, also wants undocumented immigrants to assimilate by learning English and American history, but he rejects the term "amnesty."

Regardless of who wins in November, other likely voters in Utah say the immigration issue comes down to jobs.

Horace Miller, a maintenance worker in downtown Salt Lake City, said he would like to see undocumented immigrants be given the chance share in the American Dream. "If they are here to work and their only offense is that they're just trying to make a living, what is the harm?"

Many business owners are eager to ensure that they have a stable work force and hope that the winning candidate will help establish a system that will enable companies to quickly and reliably determine whether a worker has proper documentation.

"At the very least, I'd like to see the next administration support more flexibility in granting temporary work visas, so that more people can have the opportunity to work and prosper here," and become legal immigrants, said state Sen. Ross Romero, D-Salt Lake.

Romero thinks the U.S. should have an immigration system in place that fully reflects immigrants' participation in the nation's economy.

Danny Richardson, in his new position as director of the Utah Tourism Industry Coalition, would like to see the next administration move quickly to relax a cap on visas that limit the number of temporary seasonal workers able to enter the country.

The present limits are becoming a key concern throughout the \$6 billion-a-year Utah tourism industry, especially for ski-resort communities, where hundreds of foreign workers are hired annually to work at the ski areas or in restaurant and lodging establishments.

"It's a real problem, affecting Park City and the other resorts," he said, along with other tourism outlets big and small.

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