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Border reform is No. 1 issue

Poll indicates third of voters put priority on immigration

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Do something to curb illegal immigration. That's the most important thing Arizona lawmakers can do this session, voters say in a new poll.

Immigration was clearly the top choice of voters, mentioned by 33 percent of those contacted by the Cronkite/Eight Poll.

Education, specifically improving classroom quality and teacher salaries, ranked second, identified as a priority by 20 percent.

Transportation issues finished a distant third, at 5 percent.

"Registered voters in Arizona are sending the Legislature a clear message," said Professor Bruce Merrill, who directs the poll from Arizona State University, in a news release. "They want something done about illegal immigration, education and transportation."

Voters were asked to identify the one issue they would like to see the Legislature try to do something about in 2007.

The voters' priorities agree generally with the goals outlined by legislative leaders. They have pledged to enact meaningful penalties against employers who knowingly hire undocumented immigrants, acknowledging that the availability of jobs is a reason so many enter the state illegally.

Such legislation has been opposed in the past by the state's business community, and a specific employer-sanction bill has yet to emerge.

Other immigration-related bills in the hopper, such as proposals to stymie the day-laborer supply; to make children born in Arizona to undocumented immigrants ineligible for public assistance and other state services; and to prevent illegal immigrants from registering cars in Arizona.

The poll also indicated that the 600 voters polled Jan. 18-21 had more faith in Gov. Janet Napolitano than in the state Legislature to come up with "meaningful solutions" to state problems. Napolitano got the backing of 51 percent of those polled, compared with 35 percent for the Legislature.

However, Merrill said respondents also seemed to understand that lawmakers have

more authority to get things done, recognizing that the governor can't achieve her goals without legislative support.

"A lot of people said, 'We trust the governor more,' but the Legislature has more power," Merrill said.

The poll indicated strong support for Napolitano's education initiatives and divided opinions on her proposal to expand government-subsidized health care for children.

Drawing the strongest support, at 92 percent, was the governor's call to boost starting teacher pay to \$33,000 a year.

Respondents favored her proposal to require students to stay in school until age 18 (from the current 16), with 67 percent in favor and 27 percent opposed.

Likewise, her call for high school students to take four years of math, instead of the current requirement of two years, was backed by 64 percent of respondents, compared with 31 percent against.

However, Napolitano's proposal to boost the eligibility ceiling to \$60,000 for KidsCare, a health-insurance program for children, got the support of 48 percent, with 41 percent opposed and 11 percent undecided. Currently, families with incomes of up to \$40,000 a year can qualify for KidsCare's reduced premiums.

The poll carried a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points. For a copy of the poll, see <http://www.azpbs.org/horizon/poll/index.htm>.

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