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100,000 march for immigrant rights

Massive crowds highlight economic, political might

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A crowd of more than 100,000 marched and rallied Monday in Phoenix in support of legalization for millions of undocumented immigrants, exceeding organizers' expectations and adding momentum to the nationwide movement that included similar marches in cities across the country.

The boisterous but peaceful crowd was so huge it filled wide boulevards with a river of humanity that snaked more than two miles from the state fairgrounds to the state Capitol, making it by far the largest political demonstration in the city's history.

The march's dominant theme, *Somos America, We Are America: Today We March, Tomorrow We Vote*, was calibrated to demonstrate the political and economic might of immigrants at a time when federal lawmakers are in the midst of a momentous debate over what to do with the estimated 11 million to 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Demonstrators waved American flags and chanted pro-American slogans. The marchers sought to cast themselves as hard-working Americans who contribute to the nation's economy and show they are fed up with the way many conservative lawmakers in Congress and the state Legislature have attempted to vilify them as lawbreakers who take jobs from Americans, drive down wages and drain public services.

"We want to demonstrate that we are contributing to this country, and we are helping develop this nation in every aspect," said golf course maintenance worker David Santos, 24, an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala, who wore an American flag bandana on his head, and another American flag around his shoulders.

In addition to thousands of undocumented immigrants, the crowd included many legal residents and U.S. citizens. Many said they shared the goal of pressing Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform, allowing undocumented immigrants in the United States to gain legal status and eventually citizenship, and rejecting punitive measures that would turn undocumented immigrants into criminals.

Raul Yzaguirre, former head of the National Council of La Raza, said the rallies are an important show of force, but their impact remains to be seen. "There's an opportunity, a diminishing opportunity, to revive" the immigration-reform bill, Yzaguirre said. "I think that the march can help that along. But it's a small chance."

Impressive, massive

Wearing white T-shirts to represent unity and peace, the marchers waved American flags and carried signs with slogans like "God Bless America" and "I wasn't born here, but I belong here" as they chanted "*Sí, se puede*," Spanish for Yes, it can be done.

Organizers had urged demonstrators to carry only American flags to avoid the backlash ignited by a large demonstration on March 24 and a series of smaller student marches the week after, when Mexican flags were commonplace.

In contrast, the Mexican flag was virtually non-existent on Monday.

Phoenix resident Shane Lee, 30, who owns a landscaping business, marched along Grand Avenue in support of his workers. He guessed more than half of his workers likely are undocumented.

"They are such great workers that you can't help but be a little angry over bills that want to criminalize them," Lee said.

Organizers, who had hoped for a crowd of between 50,000 and 100,000, estimated Monday's event drew between 200,000 and 250,000. City officials put the number at more than 100,000.

Democracy and politics

Along the route, demonstrators were met by a handful of anti-illegal-immigration activists.

On the corner of Adams Street and Third Avenue, two Mesa residents advocated for stricter immigration reform by holding signs that said, "No Amnesty" and "Close the Border Now."

"We have no problem with immigration as long as it's legal," said Steve Campbell, 47. "So we thought we'd exercise our right, as Americans, to protest."

Six Phoenix police officers separated the two anti-illegal-immigration activists from the river of protesters walking toward the Capitol. Some protesters "booed" them, while others kissed the American flag.

The march and rally in Phoenix was just one of dozens of events that took place across the country as part of a National Day of Action timed to coincide with the beginning of a two-week Easter recess, when members of Congress were back in their districts. Organizers in some cities are calling for a nationwide economic boycott on May 1 and possibly more marches to keep pressure on Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform, which still faces a battle in an election year.

The Senate vowed last week to continue hammering out a bill when they return after a compromise bill unraveled at the last minute.

But Yzaguirre said the demonstration shows that immigrants are beginning to "feel their voice" and will force politicians to take notice. "This is irreversible. We've crossed the line, we've revived hope, we've stimulated optimism in our community."

March meaning

Marchers began to arrive at the Capitol by 1:30 p.m. to cheers from bystanders

lining Washington Street. Many danced to Mexican music blaring through speakers on a podium at 17th Avenue and Washington while police watched through binoculars from rooftops of at least a half-dozen government buildings.

At the rally, speakers brought home the "Today we march, tomorrow we vote" theme.

Speakers included U.S. Reps. Ed Pastor of Phoenix and Raul Grijalva of Tucson, state lawmakers, Latino student leaders, union representatives, religious leaders and a handful of immigrants who told their stories.

All urged demonstrators to register to vote, and carry the momentum forward in voting out representatives who opposed their interests. Several speakers were even clearer: target Republican conservatives.

Some conservative Republican lawmakers defied the protest, walking around the Capitol with homemade signs. Glendale Rep. Jerry Weiers' sign read: "Border security isn't racism. It's smart."

Speeches continued for more than an hour before former state lawmaker and onetime Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Alfredo Gutierrez closed the rally.

"We shall arm ourselves, and in America, the only weapon that counts is the vote," Gutierrez said. "Be prepared to defeat those who humiliate us and defend those who stand with us."

Reporters Yvonne Wingett and Chip Scutari contributed to this article.

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