

E-Verify for Florida is just more immigration politics

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Let's hope that the Legislature makes **E-Verify** mandatory for real in Florida.

If Republicans crippled the largest swing state's economy, Republicans in Washington finally might get serious about immigration reform.

State Sens. Joe Gruters, R-Sarasota, and Tom Lee, R-Brandon, have filed **SB 664**. It would require all private employers to use the federal E-Verify system to determine a person's work eligibility. The supposed goal would be to prevent companies from "knowingly hiring an unauthorized alien." A House version, also from a Republican, is expected before the session begins on Jan. 14.

Last year, Republicans chummed anti-immigrant voters by banning "sanctuary cities." Florida didn't have any, but Gov. Ron DeSantis took President Trump's cue on immigration. He signed the bill and claimed credit for saving Florida from a problem that didn't exist.

DeSantis now backs E-Verify. Last week at the Republican-heavy Villages community, the governor said the bill would "protect Florida workers, preserve the rule of law, and make our communities safer."

Actually, absent reform from Congress and the Trump Administration, a hard and fast E-Verify rule would jolt Florida in a very bad way. Not surprisingly, Gruters — who also sponsored the sanctuary cities bill and co-chaired Trump's 2016 campaign in Florida — waited to introduce E-Verify. It wouldn't take effect until after the 2020 election.

Let's imagine what might happen to the state's largest industry — agriculture — if Florida not only required E-Verify but also enforced it. Crops could rot in the fields if farmers couldn't hire seasonal workers whom they have used for years. How many parents in Florida raise their children to pick blueberries? Tourism and construction could face similar disruption.

Though E-Verify has been around since 1996, the program still has a high error rate. According to the libertarian Cato Institute, the requirement could cost Florida employers nearly \$5 billion to replace eligible workers who are wrongly disqualified.

In addition to the economic dangers, DeSantis and other Republicans would face a political problem. They would have to confront the business groups that finance their campaigns but generally oppose E-Verify.

We have been here before. In 2011, the Legislature debated an immigration bill when then Gov. Rick Scott rode into office the previous year with Tea Party support. Scott began overtaking Bill McCollum in the GOP primary by criticizing him as soft on illegal immigration.

Just after taking office, Scott signed an executive order requiring state agencies and contractors to use E-Verify. Republicans seemed ready to follow that up with a requirement for private businesses.

But the Senate stripped out that portion of its bill. J.D. Alexander, a citrus grower, said of E-Verify, “It’s easy to talk about this down at the post office, but when you start looking in people’s eyes, people who live and breathe like us, we need to think long and hard.”

Immigration, though, remains a tempting political tool. Florida may vote next year on a constitutional amendment that only citizens can vote. The state already has such a law.

So E-Verify is mostly about politics, as it has been elsewhere. Bloomberg News reported last year that enforcement has been non-existent in Southern states that instituted the requirement when Florida passed on it. Businesses pushed back, and GOP legislators backed down.

In fact, a reliable E-Verify system could and should be part of American immigration policy. The 2013 comprehensive reform bill, which got nearly 70 votes in the Senate and had the Obama administration’s support, included an E-Verify requirement.

That bill, however, also would have granted legal status to many undocumented immigrants — if they qualified — and created programs to allow entry by temporary workers from foreign countries. E-Verify would have complemented those changes.

The National Immigration Forum, which advocates for increased legal entry, wrote, “Unless mandatory E-Verify is accompanied by guest worker and visa reform provisions sufficient to meet employer demand, industries that have a shortage of legal workers will face serious worker shortages.

“Employers would essentially be faced with a choice between breaking the law, operating with dramatic labor shortages, or outsourcing to other countries that have sufficient workers.”

Trump doesn’t want to solve the immigration issue. He just wants to exploit it. The same goes for supporters of an E-Verify requirement for Florida.