

Obama Weighs Broader Move on Legal Immigration

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President Barack Obama is considering key changes in the nation's immigration system requested by tech, industry and powerful interest groups, in a move that could blunt Republicans' election-year criticism of the president's go-it-alone approach to immigration.

Administration officials and advocates said the steps would go beyond the expected relief from deportations for some immigrants in the U.S. illegally that Obama signaled he'd adopt after immigration efforts in Congress collapsed. Following a bevy of recent White House meetings, top officials have compiled specific recommendations from business groups and other advocates whose support could undercut GOP claims that Obama is exceeding his authority to help people who have already violated immigration laws.

"The president has not made a decision regarding next steps, but he believes it's important to understand and consider the full range of perspectives on potential solutions," said White House spokesman Shawn Turner.

One of the more popular requests among business and family groups is a change in the way green cards are counted that would essentially free up some 800,000 additional visas the first year, advocates say.

The result would be threefold: It would lessen the visa bottleneck for business seeking global talent; shorten the green card line for those being sponsored by relatives, a wait that can stretch nearly 25 years; and potentially reduce the incentive for illegal immigration by creating more legal avenues for those wanting to come, as well as those already here.

Obama's aides have held more than 20 meetings in recent months with business groups and other interest groups to discuss possibilities, ahead of an announcement about next steps the president is expected to make in September. Coordinating these "listening sessions," as the White House calls them, is its Office of Public Engagement, led by top Obama adviser Valerie Jarrett.

Obama's options without new laws from Congress are limited and would only partially address obstacles business groups say are preventing them from hiring more workers. Even so, administration officials say these groups are urging the White House to help streamline a complex and unpredictable system.

Republicans are working to use immigration and the surge of unaccompanied minors at the border against Democrats in the midterm elections by arguing that Obama and his party are undermining the rule of law.

"Politically we think it flips the switch because it's not just talking about a benefit to those who broke the law," said former Rep. Bruce Morrison, D-Conn., who authored the 1990 immigration law and is now lobbying on behalf of groups representing tech industry professionals, business management and U.S. citizens married to foreigners.

Matt Mackowiak, a Texas-based Republican strategist, said the moves on legal immigration might prompt businesses to praise the president, even if it's not enough to persuade the business community to side with Democrats in the upcoming elections.

"From the White House's perspective, this is an easy way for them to score some points," Mackowiak said. "They'll say: 'We're arguing about substance, Republicans are arguing about process.'"

Obama in June announced that in the face of congressional inaction, he would act on his own to address as much of the nation's immigration mess as he could. Since then, advocates for the roughly 11 million people living in the country illegally have lobbied for deportation relief particularly for the parents of U.S.-born children and the parents of youth who authorized to remain in the country under a program Obama announced in 2012.

But in recent weeks, other groups have stepped up public pressure in favor of presidential action that would change how the legal immigration system operates, too.

Those who support changing the green card count say each year half of the 140,000 employment-based green cards issued go to spouses and children, unnecessarily reducing the numbers available to workers.

Other requests have included removing the requirement that some spouses of U.S. citizens return to their native country for at least three years before they can apply for U.S. residency, as well as extending work permits to the spouses of all temporary H1-B skilled workers.

The potential for broader executive action ignited flames this week from Republicans in Congress already vehemently opposed to legislation that would increase immigration quotas.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., slammed the White House this week for meeting with big business to bring in more workers while "tens of millions of Americans are on welfare, unemployment and public assistance."

Not all industries are pushing for broad action, though. Agriculture leaders, who acknowledge as much as 70 percent of their workforce is "unauthorized" have remained on the sidelines — a reminder of the limits of any Obama's executive authority.

Kristi Boswell, director of congressional relations for the American Farm Bureau, said her organization has met this summer with White House to encourage administrative changes that would reduce immigration raids targeting farms and processing plants and cut the red tape on hiring guest workers.

"Absolutely, ag workers have an ability to benefit at least temporarily from executive action," she said but added that reforming guest worker provisions and other aspects of the immigration system couldn't be done by the president alone.

For that, she said, Congress will still have to act.

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