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WHILE SEEKING SUPPORT, OBAMA FACES A FRUSTRATED HISPANIC ELECTORATE

By Julia Preston
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As President Obama heads into the main stretch of his re-election campaign, his immigration policies have produced few gains among Latinos, whose votes could be crucial for him in November.

The Department of Homeland Security reported last week that only about 4,400 deportations of illegal immigrants had been halted nationwide under a major initiative started a year ago.

In a strategic shift, immigration authorities had said they would focus on deporting criminals and people who cheated the visa system, while sparing illegal immigrants with clean records. But after an administration review of more than 288,000 deportation cases before the immigration courts, the total suspended by prosecutors so far is less than 2 percent.

That is not the only policy that has been a jarring disappointment for Latinos. Mr. Obama, who easily won a majority of their votes in 2008, promised to move in his first year to overhaul the immigration system and to give legal status to illegal immigrants.

As it becomes clear that Mr. Obama faces a tight race against the presumed Republican nominee, Mitt Romney, pressure is building for him to do something more for Latinos.

Early in his term, Mr. Obama put a stop to raids in factories and fields that snared many illegal immigrants who were working to support families. But quiet inspections of employers' hiring records have accelerated, forcing many thousands of unauthorized workers to leave their jobs.

The Department of Homeland Security has aggressively expanded a fingerprinting program, which vastly increases the chances for an illegal immigrant to be detained, even for minor offenses like traffic violations.

In January, administration officials announced a measure that would make it easier for Americans who are married to illegal immigrants to gain legal residence for their spouses. Although it awakened great hopes – there are hundreds of thousands of couples in that situation – the measure is making its way through the bureaucracy and will probably not take effect before November.

At the same time, Mr. Obama's record on deportations has not been matched since the 1950s, with nearly 400,000 foreigners removed in each year of his term.

"People are saying, 'What gives?' " said Clarissa Martínez de Castro, director of immigration issues for the National Council of La Raza, or N.C.L.R., the nation's largest Latino civil rights organization. "Immigration is deeply personal for many of our voters, and there is disillusionment out there."

Hispanics tend to have low rates of voter registration. Polls show that they place a higher priority on jobs and education than on immigration. But many Hispanic immigrants have family or friends who are here illegally.

Despite his immigration results, Mr. Obama enjoys a wide lead over Mr. Romney among Hispanics. A recent Gallup poll, based on nationwide telephone interviews conducted from May 14 to June 3, found that Hispanic voters favored Mr. Obama over Mr. Romney by 67 percent to 26 percent. In the 2008 and 2010 elections, Latinos mobilized late but in large numbers against Republicans who took a hard line against immigration, handing victories to Mr. Obama and other Democrats in closely contested states.

This year, Mr. Obama's supporters are warning, it may be much harder to prompt that late turnout, even though many Latinos have been dismayed by attacks on illegal immigrants by Mr. Romney and other candidates in the Republican presidential primary race.

"There is ambivalence about the president, where there really should be none," said Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles.

During Mr. Obama's first two years, he leaned hard on enforcement, seeking to build credibility with Republicans to attract their votes for an immigration overhaul. But with the economy lagging and millions of Americans out of jobs, Republicans backed away from proposals that would aid illegal immigrants. In 2010, they rebuffed a bid by Mr. Obama to pass the Dream Act, a bill to give legal status to students who are illegal immigrants.

Since then, the administration has tried to soften the impact of deportations on communities by focusing on expelling criminals. But the effect has been limited.

"I do believe the administration has the right intention, prioritizing deportations," Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, a leading Democrat on immigration issues, said after seeing the low figures from the deportations review. "But these abysmal numbers raise serious questions about whether the Department of Homeland Security is making that vision a reality."

The White House defends its programs for Latinos, saying they go far beyond immigration. On Saturday, senior administration officials gathered in Arlington, Va., for the latest in a series of town-hall-style meetings the White House organized with local Hispanic leaders to discuss jobs, education and health, as well as immigration. Also, Cecilia Muñoz, the White House domestic policy council director, has made it clear that the administration will try to blame Republicans for Mr. Obama's failure to pass his immigration overhaul.

Democratic leaders are saying that is not enough. Mr. Menendez called on the administration to expand the reviews to stop deportations of many more immigrants who are close relatives of citizens. Senator Charles E. Schumer, a New York Democrat who is the chairman of the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on immigration, said prosecutors should give work permits to immigrants who are allowed to remain here under their case reviews.

Students who would be eligible for legal status under the Dream Act are demanding that Mr. Obama grant them a general reprieve from deportation. One group of students staged a sit-in protest last week at the Obama campaign office in Denver.

Latino leaders are worried. Ms. Martínez de Castro said, "Our immigration policy cannot continue to be at war with our beliefs and our needs."