

Roll Call

PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS ABOUT DEPORTATIONS STOKE IMMIGRATION DEBATE

By David Harrison
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Immigration advocates vowed Monday to keep pressure on the White House after President Obama said he did not have the power under law to stop the deportation of illegal immigrants.

Republicans, meanwhile, pledged to limit his authority further and also to block any legislative attempt to grant legal status to undocumented people.

Obama has long called for Congress to pass a comprehensive «immigration» overhaul, an unlikely prospect with Democrats in control of the Senate and Republicans in control of the House. But the impasse on «immigration» legislation has opened the president to criticism from both sides, with advocates urging him to make use of his executive authority and opponents blasting him for supporting what they call “amnesty.”

Speaking at the conference of the National Council of La Raza, the largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy group in the country, the president said Monday that while he sympathized with concerns over his administration's deportations of illegal immigrants, he could not stop them.

“I know some people want me to bypass Congress and change the laws on my own,” he said, as the audience cheered loudly and chanted, “Yes you can.”

Obama continued: “Believe me, right now dealing with Congress, the idea of doing things on my own is very tempting, not just on «immigration» reform. But that's not how our system works . . . I need a dance partner here and the floor is empty.”

Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J. and Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez, D-Ill., both longtime «immigration» advocates, said they sided with those chanting in the audience.

“The president does have the power to grant temporary «immigration» benefits to DREAM Act students who have lived here since childhood,” said Menendez. “And he should allow Americans who are sponsoring loved ones to complete the visa process within the United States, a change that would result in the reunification of family members who now face years of separation.”

«Immigration» advocates have criticized the administration for deporting roughly 400,000 illegal immigrants a year. Administration officials say they will not target people who might be eligible to stay under a bill, known as the DREAM Act (HR 1842, S 952), which would grant legal status to young people brought to the country illegally as children who enroll in college or join the military.

Seeking Reprieves

But advocates say they want a formal policy granting a reprieve to that group, as well as to people with American spouses or children.

“We need the president to fight for us — to make it clear he is doing, and not just saying, everything possible to help,” Guitierrez said. “It is simply not the case that the president’s hands are tied when it comes to enforcement and people, like those in the audience, know it.” He said he is organizing a rally Tuesday outside the White House to keep the pressure on.

“It’s difficult for us to hear that the president says, on the one hand, he is distressed and concerned about the pain that’s being caused, and yet, on the other hand, we know that it is his administration that is the key source of that pain,” said Janet Murguia, president and CEO of the National Council of La Raza.

Republicans reiterated they would not accept any proposal that grants legal status to any group of illegal immigrants.

“Amnesty would only further bury us in debt,” said House Judiciary Chairman Lamar Smith of Texas. “If millions of illegal immigrants are legalized, they will be eligible for a wide array of taxpayer-funded benefits, such as health care and education. They will also further deplete our entitlement programs, which are already on the verge of insolvency. Amnesty would also prevent many Americans from getting jobs since millions of illegal immigrants will become eligible to work legally in the United States.”

House Republicans have introduced several bills tightening «immigration» rules, including a proposal (HR 2164) to require all employers to use an online employment verification system known as E-Verify, and another (HR 2497) to limit the administration’s discretion to selectively enforce «immigration» law.

“The president should enforce «immigration» laws, not give those who have broken them a free pass,” Smith said.

Obama ran on a platform of overhauling «immigration law during his first year in office. An earlier version of the DREAM Act passed the House last year, but could not overcome a Senate filibuster. The version that Democrats introduced this year is unlikely to make it to the president’s desk because of political gridlock.