

Dems press Obama to take executive action on immigration

By [Benjamin Goad](#) - 05/23/14 06:00 AM EDT

Congressional Democrats are pressing President Obama to take executive action to achieve his goals on immigration, as hopes for passage of a sweeping reform bill fade in Congress.

Democrats say House Republican obstructionism on immigration is forcing Obama to use all the tools available to him. They're betting Hispanic voters will agree come November's midterm elections.

"I think it's necessary," Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) said. "Given that political tenor, the administration becomes the only relief left."

The calls from Grijalva and others come as the Obama administration considers changes to the nation's deportation policies and weighs a proposal to allow some illegal immigrants to enlist in the military.

The White House has signaled executive action could be coming. White House adviser Dan Pfeiffer said this week that the president would be "picking up the pace" on executive actions and would "use every ounce of his authority" where necessary to advance his agenda.

Several Democrats said they believe Obama would take matters into his own hands this summer, if the House does not move on an immigration bill. By then, they reason, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson will have completed an ongoing review of ways to "humanize" deportation policies.

"The president, within existing law, has broad prosecutorial discretion, and I think he's going to use it," Rep. Luis Gutiérrez (D-Ill.) said. "Come Labor Day, [if] they haven't acted, the president is going to act in a very bold way."

Republicans warn that voters would view that strategy as overzealous and overtly political.

Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa), perhaps Capitol Hill's most vocal opponent of legalization benefits for illegal immigrants, said Thursday that any unilateral action by Obama would backfire on Democrats. Sidestepping Congress would violate the president's constitutional powers, he said, and legal immigrants would take notice.

"The citizens we have in this country that follow the law to become citizens believe in the rule of law. And amnesty is way down on their list," King said. "So law-abiding Hispanics are not going to change their vote if the president violates the Constitution. They'll be more likely to reject him."

Still, King suggested he is expecting Obama to take some unilateral action before the elections.

"This is about Democrats trying to document the undocumented, so that they are documented Democrats that can vote," King said. "That's their calculus. It's long been their calculus — it goes back at least two decades — and it is a naked political maneuver."

That calculus could pay off, said political analyst Stuart Rothenberg, a longtime handicapper of election races.

While Democrats are widely expected to lose seats in both the House and Senate, their bid to keep control of the Senate is likely to come down to a handful of tight races.

Hispanic turnout, buoyed by action on immigration, therefore could prove pivotal. That's particularly true in states like Colorado, where Democratic Sen. Mark Udall is facing a stiff challenge from Republican Rep. Cory Gardner.

"If it helped in two or three states, I think Democratic strategists would be happy with that," Rothenberg said. "Politics is usually won or lost on the margins."

The White House has already shown a willingness to use administrative power on immigration, moving in recent weeks to ensure access to education for illegal immigrants and loosen visa restrictions for some foreign workers. Those actions, officials said, had long been in the works and were not part of a larger effort by Obama to go it alone on immigration.

Clarissa Martinez de Castro, deputy vice president for the National Council of La Raza, said expanding the use of executive action on immigration could help the president's party, both in the 2014 election cycle and beyond.

"There will be some impact this time around, but I think the full aftershocks will be felt in 2016," Martinez de Castro said.

She echoed the sentiments of Democratic lawmakers who said Hispanic voters would hold Republicans responsible if a sweeping reform bill fails to gain traction.

"In light of inaction, they're going to want to see Democrats stepping up," she said. "Just letting the other guys be the bad guys is not enough."

Democratic calls for presidential action were amplified in recent days, after House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) prevented a vote on a GOP amendment that would grant legal status to young illegal immigrants who serve in the military.

Rep. Jeff Denham (R-Calif.) had sought a vote on the so-called ENLIST Act as an amendment to the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The Pentagon is reportedly considering a plan to make the change administratively.

Still, Democrats seized on the House denial as evidence that the GOP is unwilling to entertain proposals on immigration, even when they would appear to have bipartisan appeal.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and others responded this week by saying House Republicans have a simple choice: Either pass a comprehensive reform bill this summer, or watch the president move ahead unilaterally.

“Everything else is a band-aid,” Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) told The Hill. “There is a limited window of opportunity. It comes until, from my perspective, by the end of July. And if not, if they don’t do that, they will have forced the president ultimately to use his executive powers to create both enforcement and deportation relief.”

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