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Obama Urges Fix to ‘Broken’ Immigration System

By [PETER BAKER](#)

WASHINGTON — [President Obama](#) pressed Congress on Thursday to adopt a sweeping plan to fix a “fundamentally broken” [immigration](#) system, taking on a volatile issue that has inflamed passions in a weak economy heading into the fall midterm campaign.

In his first speech devoted entirely to immigration policy since taking office, Mr. Obama tried to navigate between what he called the two extremes of the debate, defending his efforts to strengthen border security while promoting a path to citizenship for many of the 11 million people in the United States illegally.

The president’s decision to elevate the issue reflected more of a political strategy than a legislative one since the White House has no plan to actually push a bill this year through a Congress already consumed by other issues. Instead, Mr. Obama’s focus appeared intended to frame the debate for the approaching election to appeal to Hispanic voters who could be critical in several states as well as other middle-class voters turned off by anti-immigrant discourse while blaming Republicans for opposing a comprehensive overhaul.

“I’m ready to move forward, the majority of Democrats are ready to move forward, and I believe the majority of Americans are ready to move forward,” he told an audience of lawmakers, advocates, business executives and labor leaders at American University here. “But the fact is, without bipartisan support, as we had just a few years ago, we cannot solve this problem.”

Republicans fired back, casting Mr. Obama’s speech as cynical demagoguery and arguing that the real problem is an administration that does not do enough to enforce laws already on the books. Moreover, they said, with 15 million Americans now unemployed, this is the wrong time to loosen the rules on the estimated 8 million illegal immigrants currently in the workforce.

“We could cut unemployment in half simply by reclaiming the jobs taken by illegal workers,” said Representative [Lamar Smith](#) of Texas, co-chairman of the Reclaim American Jobs Caucus. “President Obama is on the wrong side of the American people on immigration. The president should support policies that help citizens and legal immigrants find the jobs they need and deserve, rather than fail to enforce immigration laws.”

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The immigration debate has flared in recent weeks with the passage of a new law in Arizona requiring police to question the immigration status of anyone they stop for other reasons if they suspect they are in the country illegally. About 20 other states are considering similar laws while the Justice Department is preparing a lawsuit to challenge the Arizona measure.

The White House has been under pressure to tackle an overhaul of immigration policy this year on the assumption that it could face a more hostile Congress after the November election. The president met separately this week with immigration advocates and with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

His attention to the issue was also a favor to Senator [Harry Reid](#) of Nevada, the Democratic leader, who promised to pursue legislation as he battles for re-election in a state with a rising Hispanic population. Mr. Obama invited Mr. Reid to meet at the White House after Thursday's speech.

The president drew praise from Mr. Reid and groups like the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) and the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#). "But a speech alone is not enough," said Janet Murguia, president of the National Council of La Raza, a Latino civil rights group, "and it will not make a difference if the president does not follow through and push both parties in Congress to move a bill forward."

Senator [John Cornyn](#), Republican of Texas, questioned Mr. Obama's commitment. "I haven't seen anything to demonstrate that he's used any political capital or made this a priority," he told reporters. A midday speech "without any specific proposals but just an exhortation that things are not good and need to be fixed I don't think is showing leadership."

In his address, Mr. Obama repeated his support for an approach like that proposed by Senators [Charles E. Schumer](#), Democrat of New York, and [Lindsey Graham](#), Republican of South Carolina.

Under their plan, illegal immigrants who wish to remain in the country would be required to admit they broke the law and pay fines and back taxes, pass background checks and prove that they can speak English before going to the back of the line of those seeking permanent legal residency. It would also strengthen border security and interior enforcement, create a process for temporary workers and require [Social Security](#) cards with biometric data like fingerprints or retinal patterns to help ensure that illegal workers cannot get jobs.

The president rejected the most dramatic solutions to illegal migration. Mass deportations would be "logistically impossible and wildly expensive," he said, but blanket amnesty was "unwise and unfair" to those who played by the rules.

"In sum, the system is broken and everybody knows it," Mr. Obama said. "Unfortunately, reform has been held hostage to political posturing, special-interest wrangling and to the pervasive sentiment in Washington that tackling such a thorny and emotional issue is inherently bad politics."

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He also used the opportunity to repeat his opposition to Arizona's new law. Senator [Jon Kyl](#) of Arizona, the Republican minority whip, said the state's law was a response to Washington's failure to deal with the problem. "All Americans would be better served," he said, "if this administration focused on implementing proven border security solutions rather than engaging in demagoguery."

Sheryl Gay Stolberg contributed reporting.