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Obama Will Seek Citizenship Path in One Fast Push

By [JULIA PRESTON](#)

WASHINGTON — [President Obama](#) plans to push Congress to move quickly in the coming months on an ambitious overhaul of the [immigration](#) system that would include a path to citizenship for most of the 11 million illegal immigrants in the country, senior administration officials and lawmakers said last week.

Mr. Obama and Senate Democrats will propose the changes in one comprehensive bill, the officials said, resisting efforts by some Republicans to break the overhaul into smaller pieces — separately addressing young illegal immigrants, migrant farmworkers or highly skilled foreigners — which might be easier for reluctant members of their party to accept.

The president and Democrats will also oppose measures that do not allow immigrants who gain legal status to become American citizens one day, the officials said.

Even while Mr. Obama has been focused on fiscal negotiations and gun control, overhauling immigration remains a priority for him this year, White House officials said. Top officials there have been quietly working on a broad proposal. Mr. Obama and lawmakers from both parties believe that the early months of his second term offer the best prospects for passing substantial legislation on the issue.

Mr. Obama is expected to lay out his plan in the coming weeks, perhaps in his [State of the Union address](#) early next month, administration officials said. The White House will argue that its solution for illegal immigrants is not an amnesty, as many critics insist, because it would include fines, the payment of back taxes and other hurdles for illegal immigrants who would obtain legal status, the officials said.

The president's plan would also impose nationwide verification of legal status for all newly hired workers; add visas to relieve backlogs and allow highly skilled immigrants to stay; and create some form of guest-worker program to bring in low-wage immigrants in the future.

A bipartisan group of senators has also been meeting to write a comprehensive bill, with the goal of introducing legislation as early as March and holding a vote in the Senate before August. As a sign of the keen interest in starting action on immigration, White House officials and Democratic leaders in the Senate have been negotiating over which of them will first introduce a bill, Senate aides said.

“This is so important now to both parties that neither the fiscal cliff nor guns will get in the way,” said Senator [Charles E. Schumer](#) of New York, a Democrat who is a leader of the bipartisan discussions.

A similar attempt at bipartisan legislation early in Mr. Obama's first term collapsed amid political divisions fueled by surging public wrath over illegal immigration in many states. But both supporters and opponents say conditions are significantly different now.

Memories of the results of the November election are still fresh here. Latinos, the nation's fastest-growing electorate, turned out in record numbers and cast 71 percent of their ballots for Mr. Obama. Many Latinos said they were put off by Republicans' harsh language and policies against illegal immigrants.

After the election, a host of Republicans, starting with Speaker John A. Boehner, said it was time for the party to find a more positive, practical approach to immigration. Many party leaders say electoral demographics are compelling them to move beyond policies based only on tough enforcement.

Supporters of comprehensive changes say that the elections were nothing less than a mandate in their favor, and that they are still optimistic that Mr. Obama is prepared to lead the fight.

"Republicans must demonstrate a reasoned approach to start to rebuild their relationship with Latino voters," said Clarissa Martinez de Castro, the director of immigration policy at the [National Council of La Raza](#), a Latino organization. "Democrats must demonstrate they can deliver on a promise."

Since the election, Mr. Obama has repeatedly pledged to act on immigration this year. In his [weekly radio address](#) on Saturday, he again referred to the urgency of fixing the immigration system, saying it was one of the "difficult missions" the country must take on.

Parallel to the White House effort, Mr. Schumer and Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a Republican, have been meeting with a group of at least four other colleagues to write a bill. Republicans who have participated include John McCain of Arizona, who has supported comprehensive legislation in the past; Jeff Flake, also of Arizona, who is newly elected to the Senate; and Mike Lee of Utah. Senator Marco Rubio of Florida participated in one meeting last month.

Democrats in the meetings include Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Senate Democrat; Robert Menendez of New Jersey and Michael Bennet of Colorado.

Basic tenets for the bill, Mr. Schumer said, were that it would be comprehensive and would offer eventual citizenship for illegal immigrants who follow a prolonged process to correct their status.

"This is a bottom line," Mr. Schumer said in an interview on Thursday. "The Democrats have made it clear we will not accept a bill without a direct path to earned citizenship." He said senators from both parties had been "pleasantly surprised" at how rapidly the talks had proceeded.

Mr. Rubio, a Cuban-American who has emerged as a star in his party, is making immigration one of his primary issues. He has advocated taking changes in pieces, arguing that lawmakers will get better results if the politically and practically tangled problems of the immigration system are handled separately.

Mr. Rubio has been preparing a bill that would provide legal status specifically for young illegal immigrants, known as Dreamers, who came to the United States as children.

Mr. Rubio said Thursday that the piecemeal approach was “not a line in the sand” for him. But he said he would insist that any legalization measure should not be unfair to immigrants who played by the rules and applied to become residents through legal channels.

His proposals would allow illegal immigrants to gain temporary status so that they could remain in the country and work. Then they would be sent to the back of the line in the existing system to apply to become permanent residents, without any special path to citizenship.

Mr. Rubio said he hoped to rally Republicans to support changes. Speaking of Latinos, he said, “We are going to have a struggle speaking to a whole segment of the population about our principles of limited government and free enterprise if they think we don’t want them here.”

In the Republican-controlled House, the future of a comprehensive bill remains unclear.

Representative Phil Gingrey, a Georgia Republican who follows immigration issues, said he remained opposed to “amnesty of any kind.”

He said that the Obama administration had been lax on enforcement, and that he would “continue working to secure our borders and enforce existing immigration law.”

But groups backing the overhaul say they are bigger and better organized than in the past. Last month, the labor movement, including the A.F.L.-C.I.O. and other sometimes-warring factions, affirmed a common strategy. Last week, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce said it would work with labor, Latino and church organizations to pass the overhaul this year.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/us/politics/obama-plans-to-push-congress-on-immigration-overhaul.html>