

Obama emphasizes economic benefits of immigration overhaul

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By [Andy Sullivan](#)

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Barack Obama emphasized the economic benefits of overhauling the country's immigration laws in his State of the Union speech on Tuesday as he urged Congress to send him legislation to sign into law in the next few months.

In a speech largely focused on job creation, Obama said the United States could strengthen its economy by attracting more high-tech workers from overseas and establishing a pathway to citizenship for those who entered the country illegally.

"Our country is stronger when we harness the talents and ingenuity of striving, hopeful immigrants," Obama said.

Unlike some of Obama's other proposals, an immigration plan stands a chance of passing both the Democratic-controlled Senate and the Republican-controlled House of Representatives because of the growing clout of the Latino electorate.

Obama emphasized the common ground that exists among a range of stakeholders on immigration, such as the need to reduce bureaucratic hurdles and attract top global talent.

"Let's get this done. Send me a comprehensive immigration reform bill in the next few months, and I will sign it right away and America will be better for it," he said.

Obama's demand for quick action demonstrates how immigration has leaped to the top of the agenda after years of inaction.

Obama is eager to act on a top priority of Latinos, who favored him over Republican Mitt Romney in the November 6 election by 71 percent to 27 percent, helping Obama win politically divided states such as Florida and Nevada.

Republicans, meanwhile, worry that they will be consigned to irrelevancy if they do not do more to appeal to Hispanics, who the Pew Hispanic Center estimates will make up nearly one-third of the U.S. population by the middle of the century.

"The president's remarks are yet another reminder that what seemed politically impossible only a year ago is now within our reach, if only for a fleeting moment, as Democrats have a political debt to pay and Republicans a party to save," said Cheryl Little, director of Americans for Immigrant Justice, a Miami immigrant-advocacy group.

Other factors are helping as well.

Illegal immigration has declined sharply since the last time Congress took up the issue in 2007, largely because of the downturn in the U.S. economy. That has eased concerns that migrants are taking American jobs or disrupting U.S. communities.

Meanwhile, business and labor groups have increasingly chafed against the limits of a system that is widely viewed as broken.

High-tech companies argue that the country's restrictive visa program hampers innovation by limiting the number of skilled workers they can recruit from abroad.

RUBIO RESPONDS

Hamilton Place Strategies, a Washington research group, argued in a recent paper that low-skilled immigrant workers in agriculture also boost the economy by increasing work for Americans in other sectors, such as transportation and marketing.

Republican Senator Marco Rubio, who was picked by his party to respond to Obama's speech late Tuesday, also emphasized the economic benefits of immigration reform.

"We can also help our economy grow if we have a legal immigration system that allows us to attract and assimilate the world's best and brightest," said Rubio, a son of Cuban immigrants who is working to forge a bipartisan immigration bill in the Senate.

Rubio highlighted a potential stumbling block. While Obama has emphasized the importance of creating a path to citizenship for the estimated 11 million immigrants who are in the United States illegally, many Republicans emphasize that the nation's borders must be secured first.

"We need a responsible, permanent solution to the problem of those who are here illegally. But first, we must follow through on the broken promises of the past to secure our borders and enforce our laws," Rubio said.

Determining when the borders have reached an adequate level of security could prove tricky.

Obama said there are more troops on the U.S.-Mexican border than ever and pointed out that border apprehensions are at their lowest level in 40 years.

The U.S. Customs and Border Patrol's budget has increased 18 percent since Obama took office, but further increases could prove difficult in an era when Congress has agreed to tight spending caps that will effectively diminish the government's purchasing power in coming years.

Even if Rubio and other lawmakers resolve the border-security issue, many Republicans could vote against a bill on the grounds that any amnesty could lead to more illegal immigration, as happened after laws were last overhauled in 1986.

Other Republicans have signaled a new openness to overhauling immigration laws.

House Republican leader Eric Cantor, who is leading an effort to soften his party's image, says he would support legal status for those who entered the country illegally with their parents. He voted against a similar measure in 2010.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/13/us-obama-speech-immigration-idUSBRE91C0A920130213>