

Obama says immigration reform will be priority

Repeats promise made 4 years ago

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President Obama says immigration is his major second-term priority, on par with his push for health care in his first term, according to an interview aired Sunday that continues to boost the issue to the top of the political conversation.

"Fixing our broken immigration system is a top priority. I will introduce legislation in the first year to get that done," Mr. Obama told NBC's "Meet the Press" host David Gregory, who had asked the president what the second-term equivalent would be to his all-encompassing push for health care during his first term.

He also said he would like to expand energy production and set the economy on firmer footing.

The immigration pledge is similar to a vow Mr. Obama made four years ago to Hispanic audiences, when he also promised to take up immigration in his first year in office, only to let it fall behind the economic stimulus, climate change and health care.

But Democrats, who four years ago were uncertain of the politics of immigration, now think it is a clear winner for them, and they are eager to force a debate.

Mr. Obama's vow to introduce legislation also goes beyond where he stood in his first term, when he refused to write his own bill but instead quietly pushed Sens. Lindsey Graham, South Carolina Republican, and Charles E. Schumer, New York Democrat, to strike a deal.

Those efforts collapsed, and neither the House nor Senate ever held a debate on a broad immigration bill — though both took up the Dream Act legislation in 2010 to legalize young adult illegal immigrants. That bill passed the House but fell to a bipartisan filibuster in the Senate during a lame-duck session of Congress.

The NBC interview was taped Saturday and aired Sunday morning, as Mr. Obama awaited word from Capitol Hill on whether lawmakers could reach a deal to avoid tax increases and spending cuts come Tuesday.

Mr. Obama, who issued a directive this year halting deportations of students brought illegally to the country as children, won 71 percent of the Hispanic vote on Nov. 6.

Since then, some Hispanic leaders have said the president needs to acknowledge their political support with more assertive leadership on immigration reform.

Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez, an Illinois Democrat and chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Immigration Task Force, expressed postelection frustration with the president this month.

"I know that he's dealing with very momentous issues, but at the same time I also see a calendar at the White House," the 10-term congressman said in an MSNBC interview. "Look, it's great that Eva Longoria from 'Desperate Housewives' is out there, meeting with the president, but maybe he should gather more of the immigrant community so we can begin to polish up that immigration policy and get a strategy so that we can really start."

Senate Republicans have introduced their own version of the Dream Act to grant young illegal immigrants legal rights — though it wouldn't give them a special path to citizenship.

Sens. Jon Kyl and John McCain of Arizona and Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas introduced a Republican version this month as a way to restart the immigration debate and to carve out a middle ground between sending illegal immigrants home or granting them green cards, which is the intermediate step to citizenship.

In the past fiscal year, the Obama administration deported a record 409,849 illegal immigrants, the majority of them convicted criminals, according to statistics released Dec. 21.

Read more: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/dec/30/obama-names-immigration-top-second-term-priority/print/#ixzz2GvGz7PJf>