

Obama to delay immigration action

By JIM KUHNHENN

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Abandoning his pledge to act by the end of summer, President Barack Obama has decided to delay any executive action on immigration until after the November congressional elections, White House officials said.

The move is certain to infuriate immigration advocates while offering relief to some vulnerable Democrats in tough Senate re-election contests.

Two White House officials said Obama concluded that circumventing Congress through executive actions on immigration during the campaign would politicize the issue and hurt future efforts to pass a broad overhaul.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the president's decision before it was announced, said Obama made his decision Friday as he returned to Washington from a NATO summit in Wales.

They said Obama called a few allies from Air Force One and informed them of his decision, and that the president made more calls from the White House on Saturday.

The officials said Obama had no specific timeline to act, but that he still would take his executive steps before the end of the year.

In a Rose Garden speech on June 30, Obama said he had directed Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson and Attorney General Eric Holder to give him recommendations for executive action by the end of summer. Obama also pledged to "adopt those recommendations without further delay."

Obama faced competing pressures from immigration advocacy groups that wanted prompt action and from Democrats worried that acting now would energize Republican opposition against vulnerable Senate Democrats. Among those considered most at risk were Democratic Sens. Mark Pryor of Arkansas, Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and Kay Hagan of North Carolina.

Obama advisers were not convinced that any presidential action would affect the elections. But the officials said the discussions around the timing grew more pronounced within the past few weeks.

Ultimately, the advisers drew a lesson from 1994 when Democratic losses were blamed on votes for gun control legislation, undermining any interest in passing future gun measures.

White House officials said aides realized that if Obama's immigration action was deemed

responsible for Democratic losses this year, it could hurt any attempt to pass a broad overhaul later on.

Partisan fighting erupted recently over how to address the increased flow of unaccompanied minors from Central America at the U.S. border with Mexico. The officials said the White House had not envisioned such a battle when Obama made his pledge June 30.

Obama asked for \$3.7 billion to address the border crisis. The Republican-controlled House, however, passed a measure that only gave Obama a fraction of what he sought and made it easier to deport the young migrants arriving at the border, a provision opposed by Democrats and immigration advocates. In the end, Congress adjourned without a final bill.

The number of minors caught alone illegally crossing the Mexican border into the United States has been declining since June. That decrease and Congress' absence from Washington during August has taken attention away from the border for now.

Still, the dispute over how to deal with the surge of Central American border crossers threatened to spill over into the larger debate over immigration and the fate of 11 million immigrants in the United States who either entered illegally or overstayed their visas and have been in the U.S. for some time.

The Democratic-led Senate last year passed a broad overhaul of immigration that boosted border security, increased visas for legal immigrants and a provided a path to citizenship for immigrants illegally in the country.

But the Republican-controlled House balked at acting on any broad measure and House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, informed Obama earlier this year that the House would not act in 2014. That led Obama to declare he would act on his own.

During a news conference Friday in Wales, Obama reiterated his determination to act on his own even as he avoided making a commitment on timing. He also spelled out ambitious objectives for his executive actions.

Obama said that without legislation from Congress, he would take steps to increase border security, upgrade the processing of border crossers and encourage legal immigration. He also said he would offer immigrants who have been illegally in the United States for some time a way to become legal residents, pay taxes, pay a fine and learn English.

"I want to be very clear: My intention is, in the absence of ... action by Congress, I'm going to do what I can do within the legal constraints of my office, because it's the right thing to do for the country," he said.

The extent of Obama's authority is a matter of debate among legal experts and in Congress. Some Democrats say it would be best for Obama to let Congress act.

But pro-immigrant groups called on Obama to stick to his end-of-summer deadline, and weighed

in with a strongly worded appeal to him on Friday.

"Being a leader requires making difficult and courageous decisions," said the letter, whose signers included the National Council of La Raza and the League of United Latin American Citizens. "It is your time to lead, Mr. President."