

Obama unveils his own proposal for immigration reform

By [Zachary A. Goldfarb](#) and [William Branigin](#), Updated: Tuesday, January 29, 3:21 PM

LAS VEGAS — Declaring that America’s immigration system is broken, President Obama on Tuesday called for a process to allow millions of illegal immigrants in the country to “earn their way to citizenship,” and he warned that he would send his own bill to Congress if lawmakers deadlock on a new Senate proposal.

In his first trip outside Washington since his inauguration last week, Obama added to momentum on Capitol Hill in favor of an overhaul of the nation’s immigration laws, setting forth the principles for a top second-term priority — and perhaps the one most likely to be accomplished.

“I’m here today because the time has come for common sense, comprehensive immigration reform,” Obama told a crowd at a public high school. “Now’s the time,” he said repeatedly.

“We need Congress to act on a comprehensive approach that finally deals with the 11 million undocumented immigrants who are in this country right now,” Obama said later in the speech.

The Senate Judiciary Committee plans to hold a hearing on Feb. 13, the day after Obama’s State of the Union address, to begin considering immigration reform, according to the panel’s chairman, Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.).

Speaking in a state with a population that is 27 percent Hispanic, Obama outlined the steps illegal immigrants could take to apply for citizenship. They would register, submit biometric data, pass background checks and pay fees before gaining provisional legal status. After taking those steps and learning English, the immigrants would wait in line for existing immigration backlogs to clear before being allowed to apply for permanent resident status, while immigrants must hold before they can apply for citizenship.

“So that means it won’t be a quick process, but it will be a fair process,” Obama said. “And it will lift these individuals out of the shadows and give them a chance to earn their way to a green card and eventually to citizenship.”

Obama said his principles for immigration reform also include strengthening border security and cracking down more forcefully on businesses that knowingly hire illegal workers.

“We have to make sure that every business and every worker in America is playing by the same set of rules,” he said. “We have to bring the shadow economy into the light so that everybody’s held accountable — businesses for who they hire and immigrants for getting on the right side of the law. That’s common sense. That’s why we need comprehensive immigration reform.”

He said he hopes that his proposal “provides some key markers to members of Congress as they craft a bill.”

While welcoming a newly announced Senate plan, Obama ventured beyond it in several respects. He said a [framework for comprehensive immigration reform](#) that was announced by a [bipartisan group of senators](#) Monday is “very much in line with the principles I’ve proposed and campaigned on for the last few years. At this moment, it looks like there’s a genuine desire to get this done soon. And that’s very encouraging.”

But he warned: “We can’t allow immigration reform to get bogged down in an endless debate.... And if Congress is unable to move forward in a timely fashion, I will send up a bill based on my proposal and insist that they vote on it right away.”

Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), the leading Republican in the bipartisan Senate group, praised Obama’s speech.

“I appreciate the president’s support for our bipartisan effort on comprehensive immigration reform,” McCain said in a statement. “While there are some differences in our approaches to this issue, we share the belief that any reform must recognize America as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. We should all agree that border security and enforcement is particularly important in order to ensure that we don’t repeat the mistakes of the 1986 immigration reform.”

He added: “The road ahead will be not be easy, but I am cautiously optimistic that working together, we can find common ground and move forward on this vitally important issue.”

A more critical reaction to Obama’s speech came from a spokesman for House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio), who warned the president not to derail bipartisan legislative efforts by pushing more liberal proposals those under consideration in Congress.

“There are a lot of ideas about how best to fix our broken immigration system,” Boehner’s spokesman, Brendan Buck, said in a statement. “Any solution should be a bipartisan one, and we hope the president is careful not to drag the debate to the left and ultimately disrupt the difficult work that is ahead in the House and Senate.”

In announcing the start of Senate Judiciary Committee hearings, Leahy said Obama “should be commended” for making an overhaul of the nation’s immigration laws a priority. “His recommendations for how to tackle one of our nation’s most pressing problems are thoughtful, realistic and inclusive,” Leahy said in a statement.

The committee chairman said he was “particularly pleased to see that the president’s proposal includes better access to visas for victims of domestic and sexual violence, improved laws for refugees and asylum seekers, an enhanced investor visa program, and the assurance that every family, including bi-national gay and lesbian spouses, receives equal treatment under the law.”

Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D.N.Y.), a member of the bipartisan Senate group and chairman of the Judiciary subcommittee on immigration, said Obama “is handling this perfectly.” The president

“is using the bully pulpit to focus the nation’s attention on the urgency of immigration reform and set goals for action on this issue,” Schumer said. “But he is also giving lawmakers on both sides the space to form a bipartisan coalition.”

According to the proposal Obama made Tuesday, children brought to the United States illegally would be eligible for an expedited process if they go to college or serve in the military for at least two years.

Obama is kicking off a public effort to revise immigration laws after an unsuccessful effort in his first term — something he said he regards as his biggest regret — and after President George W. Bush tried unsuccessfully to overhaul immigration policy in his second term.

This year, Republicans seem more open than in the past to rewriting the nation’s immigration laws, with rising stars such as Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) pushing to move ahead and demographic changes in the country weighing heavily on the GOP’s political fortunes.

Obama’s principles largely mirror the work that a bipartisan Senate group seeking to overhaul immigration laws released Monday.

“The good news is that — for the first time in many years — Republicans and Democrats seem ready to tackle this problem together,” Obama said. “Members of both parties, in both chambers, are actively working on a solution.”

However, Obama’s approach differs from that of the senators, with the president proposing an easier pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants. The Senate plan links such a process to additional steps to enforce border security.

In his proposal Tuesday, Obama made clear that he was not planning to loosen border security and enforcement, but he also noted that the administration has made substantial progress on this front already. Looking forward, the administration said it would seek to phase in electronic employment verification programs at companies.

But it was the proposal for easing immigration restrictions that were sure to garner the most attention. The proposal seeks to expedite applications from immigrants who are family members of existing residents or citizens.

For the first time, it would allow citizens and permanent residents to seek a visa for a same-sex partner.

To help recruit science and engineering professionals to stay in the country, Obama’s proposal would offer green cards to people who have received master’s degrees or doctorates from American universities in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics and have also obtained employment in the United States.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-unveils-his-own-proposal-for-immigration-reform/2013/01/29/b27dcb78-6a47-11e2-95b3-272d604a10a3_story_1.html