

Obama Weighing Delay in Action on Immigration

By [MICHAEL D. SHEAR](#) AUG. 29, 2014

WASHINGTON — President Obama is considering a delay of his most controversial proposals to revamp immigration laws through executive action until after the midterm elections in November, mindful of the electoral peril for Democratic Senate candidates, according to allies of the administration who have knowledge of White House deliberations.

The [president vowed in late June to act unilaterally](#), declaring a deep frustration with what he termed Republican obstruction in Congress. He pledged to act to reshape the immigration system soon after he received recommendations from senior advisers at the end of the summer.

But now Mr. Obama and his aides appear to be stepping back from a firm commitment to that timing, a move that could draw fire from immigration advocacy groups who are expecting decisive action soon. In remarks to reporters on Thursday, Mr. Obama himself hinted at the possibility of a delay.

“Some of these things do affect timelines, and we’re just going to be working through as systematically as possible in order to get this done,” Mr. Obama said. “But have no doubt, in the absence of congressional action, I’m going to do what I can to make sure the system works better.”

His aides were sending similarly strong signals, but emphasized that no final decision had been made. Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary, said Friday that Mr. Obama was “as determined as ever to take that kind of action on his own.” But he and other White House officials declined to repeat the president’s earlier pledge of an announcement by the end of this summer, or to say whether Mr. Obama was considering delaying some of his decisions until later this year.

“That’s putting the cart before the horse,” Mr. Earnest said. “Those who are speculating about how those recommendations might be implemented are a little ahead of themselves.”

For Mr. Obama, talk of a delay is politically explosive among Hispanics, who are one of his most loyal constituencies and twice helped him win the presidency. Long upset by Mr. Obama’s inability to successfully push comprehensive immigration overhaul in Congress, immigration rights advocates said Friday that a delay would be unconscionable.

“This is a moment of leadership for the administration, for the president,” said Lorella Praeli, the advocacy director for [United We Dream](#), the largest network of young immigrants in the United States illegally. “Is he going to succumb to the threats from the Republican Party, or is he going to lead?”

Chris Newman, the legal director for the [National Day Laborer Organizing Network](#), said his group wants Mr. Obama to act boldly, and soon.

“Our hope is that the president’s conscience will prevail,” Mr. Newman said.

Representative Luis V. Gutiérrez, Democrat of Illinois, who has at times been critical of the administration’s approach, said that delay “comes at a tremendous cost in terms of families split up and children placed in foster care.” He said he remained confident that the president would put families and security “ahead of short-term political maneuvers.”

Inside the White House, the timing of an announcement has become the subject of a fierce debate even as immigration lawyers at the Homeland Security Department rush to develop legally defensible policy options for the president.

Some of Mr. Obama’s advisers are urging him to postpone action, fearful of the political ramifications of a broad action to protect millions of immigrants in the country illegally from deportation and to provide many of them with official work papers. Such a move by the president, some senior officials worry, could set off a pitched fight with Republicans and dash hopes for Democratic Senate candidates running in Arkansas, Louisiana, North Carolina and potentially in Iowa.

Control of the Senate hinges on the outcomes of the half-dozen close races in states where Mr. Obama is not popular, notably in Southern states where opposition to an immigration overhaul runs high, and strategists fear that an immigration announcement could hurt Democratic candidates.

Democratic senators have reached out to top White House officials, including Denis McDonough, the chief of staff, to argue that the recent crisis with unaccompanied minors crossing the border into the United States justifies a delay. Several Democratic officials on Capitol Hill said the angry reaction to that border crisis eroded public support for changing immigration policy, and in some cases, turned the issue into a negative one for them.

But others inside the White House are pushing the president to stick to his promised schedule, regardless of the immediate political consequences. They argue that Republicans will criticize the president and attack Democratic candidates even if Mr. Obama delays parts of his announcement until after the election.

And some say that the Republican reaction — which could include calls for impeachment of the president or a move to shut down the government — could benefit Democrats politically by creating a backlash against Republicans among voters.

Top White House aides say the president is eager to do as much as possible to shift immigration enforcement toward dangerous criminals and repeat border-crossers, and away from families who have lived without legal status in the United States for years. “We very much want to do an executive action,” a senior White House adviser said.

Several people who have had direct discussions with administration officials said that in the short term, the White House could take limited measures to make it easier for American citizens to obtain legal status for spouses or minor children who are unauthorized immigrants. Homeland Security officials could also issue tightened enforcement guidelines making it clear that some illegal immigrants with family members here, such as parents of American citizen children, should not be targets for deportation.

That could leave for after the election the announcement of a more formal — and potentially controversial — program that provides work permits for millions of people in the country illegally.

A person with direct knowledge of the White House deliberations disputed part of a report on Friday in [The Los Angeles Times](#) that suggested Mr. Obama might announce tighter enforcement measures in the coming days and then delay until after the election a proposal to shield millions from deportation.

“The notion that we would divide up enforcement and the other recommendations is highly unlikely,” the person said. But the person declined to say whether an announcement might be delayed or divided up in another way.

The pressure for Mr. Obama to act took on added urgency after Speaker John A. Boehner conceded this summer that [congressional efforts to overhaul the immigration system had failed](#). But a decision to protect millions from deportation would provide new ammunition to critics who accuse Mr. Obama of building an “imperial presidency” that undermines the role of Congress.

The highly polarized immigration debate has left the president little room to maneuver toward a middle ground.

If he settles on a modest executive action, he could dash the expectations he raised early this summer. But a broader move could risk an impeachment conflagration that could consume the remainder of his presidency, and a clash over the balance of power between the executive and the legislative branches of government could reverberate for decades.

Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, said: “If he acts unilaterally right now and goes in and grants five million people status in the country, I think he blows up the debate, destroys the debate. He is going to ignite a furor in the country if he thinks he can do that by executive fiat.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/30/us/politics/obama-said-to-weigh-delaying-action-on-immigration.html>