Tech still pressing on immigration

Much of Washington believes a potential military strike and a debt ceiling debacle have swallowed chances this year for immigration reform. Not tech.

Silicon Valley and its D.C. representatives still envision that legislation can creep through before momentum fades. Congressional calendars be damned. Tech vows to further hound lawmakers, target districts and partner with outlying groups as the industry tries to wedge its most unifying issue yet back on the agenda.

"We're not going to accept the crisis excuse," said Scott Corley, Compete America's executive director. "There is always a crisis. Immigration is a crisis. Being in Congress you have to walk, chew gum, juggle knives and jump through hoops on fire all at once. That's the job."

Tech knows the window is small. If immigration reform trails too far into 2014, it faces a tough vote heading into midterm elections. And if it drags on much longer, advocates could lose the momentum they've gained in recent months.

Supporters point to August as a sign of that progress. Champions of an overhaul far outnumbered skeptics at rallies, events and town halls. Tech, whose focus on high-skilled immigration draws support from both parties, has helped cast reform in a positive light.

The industry links reform to job growth and innovation. Companies like Microsoft and Facebook can't find enough skilled American engineers, the argument goes and are hamstrung by a shortage of temporary worker visas and green cards. They argue the system must change to retain talented foreign workers and prevent businesses from moving abroad.

Some dispute the skilled worker shortage, which researchers struggle to quantify. Labor contends that Americans should get first priority at these jobs. Lawmakers embedded some safeguards, but tech got most of what it wanted in the Senate's comprehensive bill and many of its demands in a high-skilled bill passed by the House Judiciary Committee. Tech has pushed for a comprehensive package as the surest means to move legislation.

"We're so much closer than we have been in so long," said Emily Lam, who leads immigration reform efforts for the Silicon Valley Leadership Group. "And the political windows for opportunity in D.C. are so fickle. We can't lose this chance."

The industry expected some budget shenanigans and skeptical House Republicans this fall. But it could not have predicted that a debate about military action in Syria would dominate the spotlight even before Congress returned from summer recess.

Greg Valliere, chief political strategist at Potomac Research Group, calls immigration reform "the biggest legislative casualty of the Syria debate." House Republican leadership aides acknowledge its relocation to the back burner. Some observers now consider 2017 as the best bet.

Rather than dissuade, Lam said, the Syria conundrum has bolstered reform efforts. "Before it was, 'OK, I'm glad you are with us,'" she said. "Now it's, 'Let's really get this done.'" [FWD.us](#), led by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, has encouraged a "Day of Action" on Tuesday via social media. More than 450 business groups are running an ad in Washington papers this week demanding movement. And the Silicon Valley Leadership Group plans to pepper the Hill with CEOs and California Latino assembly members next month.

"We feel like [the Syria] issue will be addressed in the next week or two, and then the congressional focus continues to move on to other issues," said Dan Turrentine, TechNet's vice president of government relations. "We respect the process to do as they see fit, but we absolutely think it can get done this year."

Even if time prevails, the House has shown little support for a comprehensive package like the one passed by the Senate. A series of piecemeal bills has made it through the chamber's Judiciary Committee, but none tackle the contentious issue of citizenship.

AOL co-founder Steve Case, in a Wall Street Journal op-ed on Tuesday, urged that to change. He listed other countries' progress this summer in addressing immigration laws. "For while immigration is often debated in the U.S. as a humanitarian matter, or a political matter, or a legal matter (and it is all those things)," he wrote, "our global competitors see it for what it is: a critical economic matter in a global race for talent, job creation and innovation."

That leaves supporters to reconcile the push-pull between tech's speed and Washington's pace. "We can't get so impatient as a community that we place unrealistic expectations on both parties," Compete America's Corley said. "We'll just create our own gridlock. But we also can't be accommodating that we lose the fantastic momentum we have coming out of August."

Tech has no plans to back off.
"We're hoping to see out of Congress action that keeps the legislative process moving forward," said the Information Technology Industry Council's Robert Hoffman. "We knew that game plan wasn't coming together until these guys got back from August."
Congress last passed major immigration reform in the fall of 1990, he added, as lawmakers ramped up for the Persian Gulf War.