



# Immigration: Pressure mounts on Obama to overhaul citizenship requirements

By: Anna Fifield - March 20, 2013

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Members of the US Congress tried to overhaul the nation's immigration system in 2006 and once more in 2007. After President Barack Obama took power in 2009, partly thanks to Hispanic support, pro-reform lawmakers tried yet again.

With every attempt of the past decade ending in failure, is there any reason to think that this year's effort at comprehensive immigration reform will be any more successful?

Emboldened by his resounding re-election, Mr Obama has put reform at the top of his legislative agenda this year, urging Congress to pass a "common sense" bill that would create a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants and provide more visas for highly skilled workers. If it passes, the bill will mark the most profound immigration changes in a generation, not just for the US but for Mexico, too.

About two-thirds of the estimated 11m undocumented people living in the US are Mexican and giving them the opportunity to earn US citizenship would have a significant impact on their earning power. Latin American immigrants who became citizens during the Reagan-era reforms in 1986 enjoyed wage increases in the range of 6 to 13 per cent, according to a report from the libertarian Cato Institute.

If immigration reform includes a guest worker programme, that would benefit Mexico by allowing more seasonal workers to come and go as needed. But these are big ifs. Immigration reform is a tricky political issue at any time and especially so amid continuing economic malaise.

Opponents of reform say that giving papers to unauthorised immigrants "rewards" them and allows them to take jobs away from Americans. Some even say it will precipitate a flood of new arrivals over the Mexican border.

Some of the strongest advocates still put the prospects for reform passing this year at 50-50, citing opposition from conservative "Tea Party" members in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

Bob Goodlatte, the Republican chairman of the House of Representatives judiciary committee, has argued against creating a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

“People have a pathway to citizenship right now: It's to abide by the immigration laws and if they have a family relationship, if they have a job skill that allows them to do that, they can obtain citizenship,” Mr Goodlatte said last month.

Despite such rhetoric, there is cause for optimism. There has been new consensus between groups usually on opposite sides of the issue – the labour unions and big business lobbies – to push for reform, adding to pressure to overhaul the system.

A bipartisan “gang of eight” senators has put forward a blueprint and similar efforts are under way in the House.

But the biggest factor is simple demographics. Hispanic voters comprise the fastest growing part of the electorate and their share of the US population is forecast to rise from 17 per cent now to 29 per cent by 2050.

The pressure group Voto Latino puts that in context, noting that there are 50,000 Hispanic Americans turning 18, the voting age, every month.

The Hispanic electorate as a bloc has long tended to support Democrats. In last year's election, 71 per cent backed Mr Obama, to Republican Mitt Romney's 27 per cent.

This was in large part because of Mr Romney's hostile language during the Republican campaign, when he said that, if president, he would make conditions so bad for illegal immigrants that they would choose to “self-deport”.

As they try to avoid further alienating the Hispanic electorate, some Republicans are eager to remove the issue of immigration from the table before the midterm elections at the end of next year.

Influential conservatives have been expressing new-found support for reform and that could help its passage through Congress.

Republicans have long insisted that security on the border needs to be tightened but the Obama administration's increased enforcement – including the use of drones to monitor movement – and a record number of deportations has helped slow the flow of people entering the US illegally.

The continued weakness in the US job market – and the relative health of the Mexican economy – has helped cut numbers, too. The Pew Hispanic Center last year suggested that the net flow of immigrants from Mexico to the US had actually ground to a halt.

Mr Obama is keeping the pressure on Congress. “Send me a comprehensive immigration reform bill in the next few months and I will sign it right away,” he said in his State of the Union address last month.

The president knows the clock is ticking. If reforms are not passed by September, the opportunity will pass.

And that means immigration would be put back in the too-hard basket for a few more years.

