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Obama delay on immigration complicates health reform

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Warning that he needs to pace major initiatives, President Barack Obama said his administration will tackle comprehensive immigration reform -- next year.

"Am I going to be able to snap my fingers and get this done? No," Obama said at a North American leaders summit in Mexico. "There are going to be demagogues out there who try to suggest that any form of pathway for legalization for those who are already in the United States is unacceptable."

Immigration is deeply intertwined with health care reform, the administration's top legislative priority.

Obama has said he does not support extending health care benefits to illegal immigrants. But an estimated 59 percent of the nation's nearly 12 million illegal immigrants lack health insurance, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

That means millions would still be uninsured, even if health care reform passes.

"I don't think there is anybody in Congress or anywhere else who would see health insurance benefits going to the unauthorized population," said Doris Meissner, director of the U.S. immigration policy program at the Migration Policy Institute.

"However, if you have comprehensive immigration reform, you have an expanded legalization program, which may then include them in the pool that is eligible for health care," Meissner said, adding, "but you still couldn't just assume that."

Obama's difficulties in building a consensus behind health care reform provide a forecast of likely battles to come over the intense and deeply divisive issue of immigration reform.

The president dismissed the idea that any loss of political capital on health care would make immigration tougher to pass, saying immigration reform is never easy.

"Those are fights that I'd have to have if my poll numbers are at 70 or if my poll numbers are at 40," he said.

"That's just the nature of the U.S. immigration debate."

Even so, there is a political benefit to Democrats in stalling work on immigration reform while promising to tackle it eventually, said Daniel Griswold, director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute.

"The immigration reform debate has hurt Republicans," Griswold said. "It has made them look anti-Hispanic and harsh in the eyes of the increasing Hispanic voting bloc."

Griswold noted that the Republican House leadership that thwarted former President George W. Bush's efforts to pass immigration reform are not a threat to Obama.

"That excuse has run out," he said.

Obama in July 2008 told the League of United Latin American Citizens that immigration reform would be a top priority of his first year in office.


The president subsequently said that the financial meltdown, automakers collapse and other crises forced him to push back the deadline for tackling illegal immigration, but that the issue remains a priority.

"It's very important for us to sequence these big initiatives in a way where they don't all just crash at the same time," Obama said. "And what we've said is, in the fall when we come back, we're going to complete health care reform."

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