

Conservatives tell GOP: Look past Obama order on immigration

By Franco Ordoñez
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WASHINGTON — As Capitol Hill prepares for battle over President Barack Obama's planned executive order on immigration, a coalition of business and conservative leaders has a message for Republicans: Don't lose focus.

They've coordinated messages in events across the country today to convince lawmakers that, regardless of what Obama does, the nation needs a congressional solution to its immigration problem.

Among the efforts today will be organized commentary in conservative the conservative press, local news conferences and events such as one in D.C. featuring Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, and national business leaders.

Jeremy Robbins, executive director of the Partnership for a New American Economy, said the demographics of the country are rapidly changing. Leaders can't ignore the speed with which the Latino and Asian voting bloc is growing if the party wants to remain competitive in 2016 and beyond, he said.

"I think there will be a negative reaction to what Obama does among some circles in the Republican party, but at the end of the day congressional action is such an important economic thing to do, but it's also such an important political thing to do," said Robbins, who heads the business coalition established by former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The group supports an overhaul of the nation's immigration laws.

Obama is expected to issue an executive order as soon as this week that would shield as many as five million undocumented immigrants from deportation. The leaked plans have set off a wave of discontent among Republicans who see the move as an unconstitutional power grab. Republicans leaders including incoming Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio., say the move would poison future cooperative efforts with the White House.

Robbins cites his group's own findings that there are more than 13.2 million unregistered Hispanic and Asian eligible voters in the United States, with high numbers in swing states such as Texas (2.4 million), Florida (814,000), Colorado (272,000), and Nevada (154,000). By 2020, another 4.2 million Hispanic and Asian residents are expected to become naturalized citizens and therefore eligible to vote, the partnership found.

It was only two years ago that many Republican leaders, like Boehner, appeared to be harnessing their political futures to passing an immigration overhaul. Obama's re-election in 2012, with overwhelming support from Latinos, plunged the GOP into an identity crisis as members wrestled with an image problem.

The Republican National Committee conducted a months-long review that concluded that Hispanics thought Republicans "do not care" about them. Committee Chairman Reince Priebus called on the party to embrace changing the immigration law or risk shrinking to the GOP's core constituency. But two years is an eternity in Washington.

Those leading the charge for change are some of the biggest names in business and conservative circles, including Norquist, Bloomberg, Bill Marriott, Jr. of the Marriott International hotel company, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. They're seeking, among other things, a labor pool with more high- and low-skilled immigrants.

To gain support, they likely will first focus on encouraging the original 14 Senate Republicans who helped pass the Senate immigration bill in 2012 to speak out. That legislation, which was never taken up by the House, would have boosted border security and put millions of undocumented immigrants on a path to citizenship. But some of senators, such as Republican Marco Rubio of Florida, have disowned the bill.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., followed party talking points last week, telling McClatchy that Obama would be "poisoning the well" of cooperation if he enacts the executive order. He said Obama should at least give the new Congress a chance to find a resolution.

But McCain stopped short of saying that issuing an executive order would eliminate the possibility of Congress taking up the matter again before the 2016 elections.

Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, went a little further. Obama should not act on an executive order, Hatch said, but he added that even if the president does go forward, it is important to find a congressional solution.

"I still think we have to take it back and do it right," Hatch said in an interview. "I'm willing to work on this because it's an important set of issues. And it's something that needs to be done."

The White House reiterated Tuesday that Obama plans to issue the executive order by the end of the year. But Press Secretary Josh Earnest said the president would back off on his executive order if House Republicans would take up and pass the Senate bill.

"Republicans can certainly prevent the president from taking this executive action," Earnest said.

The president wants to cement an image that Republicans oppose the needs of immigrants, according to Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Nowrasteh said Republican leaders will not act on an immigration overhaul now because, he said, they would risk looking like they're "kowtowing" to the president. He argued Republicans

should override Obama's actions by passing piecemeal immigration reform bills that nullify the executive orders, but also overhaul the system in way that appeals to conservatives, such as creating a larger guest worker program.