

Hispanics caution Obama

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President Barack Obama risks losing important Hispanic votes if he does not do more on the immigration issue, protesters from Winston-Salem and surrounding areas said Tuesday during a rally in Charlotte, echoing a message that has been expressed at similar rallies nationwide.

"For me, the rally means: 'Obama, you really need to help us, and if not, we can take you out of office,'" said Ana Sosa, a 19-year-old Mocksville resident who can't vote because she doesn't have legal permission to be in the United States but who says she can affect how other people vote.

Hispanic voters in North Carolina represent 1.3 percent, or 83,998, of the 6,165,223 registered voters, according to the latest State Board of Elections statistics. But nationwide, Hispanics voters represented about 9 percent of the electorate in the 2008 election, and nearly seven out of 10 chose Obama, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

"I think it's going to be pretty difficult to win the presidential election without addressing the immigration issue," said Mary Giovagnoli, the director of the Washington-based Immigration Policy Center, adding that Hispanic voters were important in swing states during the 2010 elections.

That idea has been on the minds of protesters nationwide as they participate in rallies similar to the one in Charlotte.

The rally in Charlotte was organized by El Cambio, an immigrant-advocacy group based in Yadkinville, and United 4 the DREAM, based in Charlotte. Protesters said that about 50 people attended the rally in front of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's office building.

They called on Obama to issue an executive order that would grant access to work permits and remove the threat of deportation against young immigrants who do not have legal permission to be in the United States, want to seek an education or join the military, and do not have a serious criminal record.

Critics say that type of government action — by the president or Congress — would allow illegal immigrants to get a free pass, or amnesty. The parents should be held accountable for illegally bringing their children into the U.S., they say, and allowing families to stay in the U.S. would reward them for running afoul of immigration laws.

The protesters, on the other hand, say that they don't want a handout, or a free pass or amnesty.

They say that their parents crossed the border to escape dire conditions and pursue the American dream. And they say that they want to earn their way as contributing members of society by paying a fine, if necessary, as well as getting a college degree, buying a house and paying taxes.

The DREAM Act — proposed federal legislation that would give those who aren't authorized to be in the U.S. a pathway to legal residency — has been stalled in Congress for years. A version of the bill passed in the Democratic-led U.S. House last year but was scuttled in the Senate when five Democrats, including Sen. Kay Hagan of North Carolina, sided with Republicans to quash discussion of the bill.

With a year left before the 2012 presidential election, pushing Obama now for an executive order is the best option to the DREAM Act, protesters said.

"If Obama wants the Latino vote, he has to give us what we want," said Moises Serrano, a member of

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El Cambio.

Mary Dickinson, a member of the Forsyth County Democratic Party, created a rally poster that read, "Deport Me Instead."

"I believe these young people ... this is our future, and when Americans figure that out they're going to see that you can't put a dead-end on them," Dickinson said.

Directing her next comment to Obama, she said, "If you want us to help you, then you have to make it worth our while."

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