

Obama hopes to win Latino voters in face of GOP candidates' immigration debate

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The Obama administration has unveiled several key decisions aimed at bolstering ties to the immigration reform community as the president's campaign has stepped up efforts to woo Latino voters ahead of the 2012 elections.

The moves come as Republican presidential contenders have begun staking out positions on immigration, making it a focal point of political attacks leading into the South Carolina and Florida primary elections.

Latino and immigration reform groups have heavily criticized President Obama for not doing enough to overhaul the country's immigration system to provide a path to citizenship for people in the country illegally.

The groups, on and off Capitol Hill, have stressed that the same Latino voters who helped bring Obama into office in 2008 are not a sure bet for him in 2012. As Republicans begin to attack the president on his immigration record, Obama will be forced to highlight the steps he's taken to improve the immigration process.

In a strong nod to Latino groups this week, Obama appointed Cecilia Munoz, the former senior vice president at the National Council of La Raza — the largest U.S. Latino civil rights and advocacy group — to be the director of the Domestic Policy Council where she'll help shape the president's domestic policy on immigration, education, health care and energy issues.

And last week, the administration proposed a long-awaited and greatly sought rule change that would fast track certain visa applications, lessening the time U.S. citizens are separated from their families who are required to remain outside the country while their immigrant visas are being considered.

Though the proposed rule change has been in the works for years, the two moves — taken into context with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) recent prioritization of criminals when deporting illegal immigrants — represent an attempt by Obama to make good on campaign promises to the growing Latino population who gave him two-thirds of its votes in 2008.

Bolstering Obama's immigration record is a series of legal suits the Department of Justice (DOJ) has filed against states — such as Arizona and South Carolina — that recently passed laws allowing for law enforcement officers to stop people they suspect of being in the country illegally, opening the door for possible cases of discrimination and racism.

But as Republican presidential candidates descend upon South Carolina in preparation for the state's primary, the issue of immigration and state laws versus federal government intervention is likely to launch to the forefront of the debate, according to the Somos Republicans, the largest Latino GOP group in the country.

Obama's campaign is not ignorant of this shift in focus.

In a recent interview with the Daily Beast, Obama's campaign manager, Jim Messina, pointed to the increasingly central issue of immigration in the GOP presidential race and highlighted the importance of capturing the Latino vote in November.

“One of the defining issues of the Republican primary has been the complete race to demagogue

immigrants, and there will be a price to pay politically for that kind of rhetoric," said Messina. "The Latino vote will be absolutely crucial in this election."

Earlier this week former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, the winner of the New Hampshire primary, accepted the endorsement of Kris Kobach, the Kansas secretary of state who helped craft the controversial state laws broadening law enforcement's reach.

Romney is planning to hit opponents Newt Gingrich and Rick Perry on their immigration records next week, scheduling an appearance on Monday with Kobach, who said Obama's recent proposed rule change to fast track visa applications was akin to granting amnesty to illegal immigrants.

Two weeks ago in Iowa, Romney said as president he would veto the DREAM Act if Congress passed the measure granting citizenship to illegal immigrants who came to the U.S. as children. Obama has pushed Congress to pass the DREAM Act, which is broadly supported by Latinos throughout the country, but Republicans have thwarted his efforts.

Romney's rejection of the DREAM Act prompted the Somos Republicans to call on their base to vote against the former New England governor at the polls. Instead, Somos Republican founder DeeDee Blase told The Hill that many of the group's members were leaning towards Gingrich or Jon Huntsman, who are not favored in most polls but have proposed different approaches to immigration.

For Latinos, Obama may be forced to run against his own record rather than against a Republican opponent when it comes to immigration, said several immigration reform groups.

Wendy Sefsaf, a spokeswoman for the American Immigration Council, said that "the jury's still out" on the incremental steps Obama has taken to change the immigration system — prioritizing criminals for deportations and fast tracking visa applications for family members of legal residents — and so it will be hard for him to make the case that he has dramatically shifted the country's immigration system.

"I don't think he can tout this," said Sefsaf. "Nobody knows how these changes will actually impact anybody. It's not like they can point to evidence and say, 'Look what we've done.' If he was politically motivated, he would do something like, take all DREAM Act eligible kids will not be deported."

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