

11 million illegal immigrants could be offered amnesty 'pathway' in US

America's 11 million illegal immigrants could be offered a "pathway" to amnesty, under contentious plans to be unveiled this week by President Barack Obama and a group of bipartisan senators.



The 'gang of eight' plans would make citizenship tougher to obtain and dependent on strengthening of the border with Mexico Photo: Getty Images

By Jon Swaine, Washington

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Mr Obama, who says immigration reform is the "number-one priority" for his second term in the White House, will call for an overhaul of the chaotic **US** system during a speech on Tuesday in Las Vegas, Nevada.

He is expected to propose an "earned citizenship" scheme for the millions of undocumented migrants already living in the US, encouraging them to come forward and become taxpaying Americans.

"We can create a pathway for legal status that is fair, and reflective of our values, and works," Mr Obama has previously said. A spokesman added that the president saw "no excuse for stalling or delay".

His speech comes a day after the publication of a separate plan for overhauling the US immigration

system and offering citizenship to illegal migrants by a "gang of eight" senators from both parties.

Their plan would make citizenship tougher to obtain than Mr Obama's, and see the scheme dependent on strengthening of the border with Mexico and measures to ensure foreigners do not outstay visas.

The proposals are likely to cause sharp division in Congress, which has for years been bedevilled by the question of how to deal with the estimated 11 million living in the US illegally.

A majority of all Americans favours offering them a citizenship scheme, according to several recent opinion polls, with support at its highest – roughly four in five people – among Hispanics.

Politically-savvy Republicans are keen to push through measures attractive to the rapidly-growing Hispanic population, who voted overwhelmingly for Mr Obama over Mitt Romney in November's presidential election 71 per cent to 27 per cent.

John McCain, the veteran Arizona senator and a member of the "gang of eight", who tried to reform immigration in 2010, said there was "a new appreciation" among Republicans to act quickly on the issue.

"Look at the last election," he told ABC News on Sunday. "We are losing dramatically the Hispanic vote, which we think should be ours." However, many Right-wing members of the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, which must approve any overhaul of the system, remain fiercely opposed to giving citizenship to illegal migrants – and could torpedo the scheme altogether.

Opposition to citizenship also remains strong among the party's grassroots, which prompted Mr Romney to urge those in the US illegally to "self-deport" as part of his presidential primary campaign.

Marco Rubio, a Cuban-American senator for Florida who is tipped to be the party's presidential nominee in 2016, was a late addition to the "gang" and is charged with securing support for the plan among conservative sceptics.

Republican naysayers could attempt to obstruct the citizenship "pathway" with extra demands that would make obtaining citizenship more difficult and time-consuming.

Mr Obama has already called for those entering the scheme to learn English, pay back-taxes and undergo criminal background checks before being allowed to "get in line to become eligible".

This means that all those applying would have to join the back of America's existing long immigration queue, which is already notorious for its lengthy delays and onerous bureaucracy.

The "gang of eight" called for illegal migrants to first apply for a "probationary legal status", which

would allow them to live and work in the US while not qualifying for government benefits. They could then be eligible to apply for permanent residency and eventually US citizenship.

The White House praised the group's efforts but added that Mr Obama would "continue to urge Congress to act" until there was meaningful reform.

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