

# Statements by President Obama Suggesting He Didn't Have Authority to do More on Immigration Policy 2010-2014

***[PolitiFact Texas](#) presents below web-linked details of instances President Barack Obama said he couldn't do more on immigration policy by his own authority alone in the years leading up to his November 2014 announcement indicating he believed he could, in fact, do more without congressional action. This information is referenced in a Truth-O-Meter article checking a claim by U.S. Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Austin, posted online Dec. 5, 2014, the date this document was created as well.***

Let's turn next to Obama statements, identified initially in a [blog post](#) by House Speaker John Boehner, that seem to support Texas Rep. Michael McCaul's claim that President Barack Obama didn't think he had independent legal authority to act on immigration -- some made before the Obama administration issued a 2012 "deferred-action" directive enabling many immigrants under age 30 to be protected from deportation by complying with new guidelines limited to students and people joining the military.

The Obama statements:

In October 2010, Eddie "Piolin" Sotelo, a radio host on Spanish-speaking Univision, interviewed Obama well before an immigration package won bipartisan Senate approval; the legislation hasn't been voted on in the House.

SOTELO: Mr. President, you were able to pass a health care plan and you worked a lot for that. And most of my listeners, they haven't seen that, the same way that you worked for health care for immigration reform. The same effort.

OBAMA: My cabinet has been working very hard on trying to get it done, but ultimately, I think somebody said the other day, I am president, I am not king. I can't do these things just by myself. We have a system of government that requires the Congress to work with the Executive Branch to make it happen. I'm committed to making it happen, but I've gotta have some partners to do it.

At a [Univision event in March 2011](#), Obama was asked if he could stop deportations of students with an executive order. "With respect to the notion that I can just suspend deportations through executive order," Obama replied, "that's just not the case, because there are laws on the books that Congress has passed... Congress passes the law. The executive branch's job is to enforce and implement those laws. And then the judiciary has to interpret the laws."

Obama continued:

There are enough laws on the books by Congress that are very clear in terms of how we have to enforce our immigration system that for me to simply through executive order ignore those congressional mandates would not conform with my appropriate role as president.

That does not mean, though, that we can't make decisions, for example, to emphasize enforcement on those who've engaged in criminal activity.

In an [April 2011 speech](#) in Miami, Obama said he wanted to work with Democrats and Republicans on revising immigration laws. "I know some here wish that I could just bypass Congress and change the law myself," Obama said. "But that's not how democracy works."

[The next month in El Paso](#), Obama mentioned that under U.S. law, "sometimes families who are just trying to earn a living, or bright, eager students, or decent people with the best of intentions" are subject to deportation. "And sometimes when I talk to immigration advocates, they wish I could just bypass Congress and change the law myself," Obama said. "But that's not how a democracy works."

Addressing the National Council of La Raza in July 2011, Obama [drew exhortations](#) to act on immigration without waiting for congressional agreement.

OBAMA: Now, I swore an oath to uphold the laws on the books, but that doesn't mean I don't know very well the real pain and heartbreak that deportations cause. I share your concerns and I understand them. And I promise you, we are responding to your concerns and working every day to make sure we are enforcing flawed laws in the most humane and best possible way.

Now, I know some people want me to bypass Congress and change the laws on my own. (Applause.) And believe me, right now dealing with Congress --

AUDIENCE: Yes, you can! Yes, you can! Yes, you can! Yes, you can! Yes, you can!

OBAMA: Believe me -- believe me, the idea of doing things on my own is very tempting. (Laughter.) I promise you. Not just on immigration reform. (Laughter.) But that's not how -- that's not how our system works.

[In September 2012](#), Obama was asked if he would follow up his recent protective move for students by doing something similar for non-criminal immigrants such as the parents of U.S.-born children. Obama replied that “as the head of the executive branch, there’s a limit to what I can do... we’re still going to, ultimately, have to change the laws in order to avoid some of the heartbreaking stories that you see coming up occasionally,” as in parents deported.

At a [presidential debate the next month](#), Obama and Republican nominee Mitt Romney were asked: “What do you plan on doing with immigrants without their green card that are currently living here as productive members of society?” Obama revisited his desire for revised immigration laws and said: “I’ve done everything that I can on my own.”

In a [January 2013 Telemundo interview](#), Obama was asked why he couldn’t protect mothers living here without authorization from deportation as he had served law-abiding students. “I’m not a king,” Obama replied, [tracking his response the same month](#) to a similar query from Univision. “You know, my job as the head of the executive branch ultimately is to carry out the law. And-- you know, when it comes to enforcement of our immigration laws-- we’ve got some discretion. We can prioritize-- what we do. But we can’t simply ignore the law.

“When it comes to the dreamers-- we were able to identify that group and-- and say, “These folks are generally not a risk,” Obama said. “They’re not involved in crime. They’re going to school. They’re doin’ the right things. They’ve-- effectively-- been raised here and-- think of themselves as Americans. And so let’s prioritize our enforcement resources. But to sort through all the possible cases-- of everybody who might have a sympathetic story to tell is very difficult to do. This is why we need comprehensive immigration reform.”

In February 2013, Obama was asked at [a Google Hangout town hall](#) what he was going to do until immigration reform was passed “to ensure that more people aren’t being deported, and families aren’t being broken apart.” Obama replied: “This is something that I’ve struggled with throughout my presidency. The problem is that, you know, I’m the president of the United States. I’m not the emperor of the United States. My job is to execute laws that are passed, and Congress right now has not changed what I consider to be a broken immigration system.” He also said “we’ve kind of stretched our administrative flexibility as much as we can.”

In September 2013, Obama [was asked by Telemundo](#) if he would consider freezing deportations of the parents of students benefiting from the administration’s 2012 action. Obama replied that if he broadened his protective orders, “then essentially I would be ignoring the law in a way that I think would be very difficult to defend legally. So that’s not an option.”

[Speaking in San Francisco](#) in November 2013, Obama was met with this chant from some folks in the crowd: "Stop deportations!" If "I could solve all these problems without passing laws in Congress, then I would do so," Obama replied. But we're also a nation of laws. That's part of our tradition. And so the easy way out is to try to yell and pretend like I can do something by violating our laws. And what I'm proposing is the harder path, which is to use our democratic processes to achieve the same goal that you want to achieve."

In a [March 2014 Univision interview](#), Obama responded to a query stressing the pace of existing deportations, saying that "until Congress passes a new law, then I am constrained in terms of what I am able to do. What I've done is to use my prosecutorial discretion, because you can't enforce the laws across the board for 11 or 12 million people, there aren't the resources there... But at a certain point the reason that these deportations are taking place is, Congress said, you have to enforce these laws. They fund the hiring of officials at the department that's charged with enforcing. And I cannot ignore those laws anymore than I could ignore, you know, any of the other laws that are on the books. That's why it's so important for us to get comprehensive immigration reform done."

[See the Truth-O-Meter article about McCaul's statement here.](#)