

Obama's big immigration opportunity

Written by Perry Bacon Jr.
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Republicans are strongly signaling they will back an immigration plan along the outlines of what President Barack Obama proposed Tuesday, creating the potential for an almost unprecedented occurrence: Obama signing a major bill without an extended fight with the GOP.

The core ideas touted in his speech in Las Vegas — creating a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 11 million undocumented people here now, making the border more secure, cracking down on employers hiring undocumented workers and streamlining the legal immigration process — have been broadly endorsed by a group of Republicans that include the president's longtime rival Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz) and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fl.), a potential 2016 GOP candidate and perhaps the party's most influential Hispanic voice. And Republicans, including McCain, acknowledge the need for the party to get immigration off the table as a national issue after the GOP lost the Latino vote in 2012 by more than 40 points.

The bi-partisan agreement is important for three reasons for the president. First, it could allow him to accomplish one of his long-held goals, remaking American's immigration system and granting permanent status to millions of people who have long lived in the United States.

But an agreement without a major fight with the Republicans is important for another reason: giving the White House time and space to take on other key issues. The intense legislative battle over health care dominated Washington for much of 2009 and 2010. By the time the president signed the Affordable Care Act into law in March 2010, neither party in Congress had much desire to take on other major legislation, including on immigration, before that fall's elections. And Obama had spent much of his own personal time campaigning for the health care law.

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If the president doesn't have to expend as much energy on immigration, the White House can make a stronger push on gun control, an issue on which there is far less agreement on Capitol Hill and among the American public. He could talk about his ideas to improve the American economy and education system, two other major priorities of a second Obama term, as well as push for more tax increases, an issue on which he and congressional Republicans sharply disagree.

More broadly, immigration could help Obama with one of his less tangible goals: improving the tone of political discourse in Washington. The past four years have been dominated by debates over the economy and health care, issues on which the two parties have fundamentally different views. The partisanship in these fights has been tense and passionate and exacerbated existing divides between Democrats and Republicans throughout the country.

Immigration is not an issue on which the parties are as polarized. And if an immigration bill gets major bi-partisan support in both houses of Congress, as it expected, it would be a rare moment where Obama's Washington is not defined by partisan rancor.

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