

Welcome to Obama's more progressive America

Written by Perry A. Bacon, Jr.
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In 2009, President Obama, in a private meeting with congressional leaders, bluntly told the Republicans there that they should agree to his economic ideas because, as he described it, "I won."

The remark, referring to his election in 2008, not only annoyed the Republicans, but was ignored by them as they opposed everything the president did in his first term in office.

But now, after the president's second victory, we are watching Republicans concede to Obama's vision of a more liberal country. A group of top former and current GOP leaders this week urged the U.S. Supreme Court to declare gay marriage a constitutional right. New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, once highly critical of "Obamacare," is opting to accept federal funds under the law to expand his state's Medicaid program, essentially acknowledging that the Affordable Care Act is here to stay. An immigration bill creating a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants seems on the way to passing in Congress, as well as a proposal to require background checks for all gun purchases, two other provisions that likely would never been on the legislative agenda if Mitt Romney were president.

Welcome to Barack Obama's America. The back and forth between the president and Republicans over the \$85 billion in cuts due to go into effect on March 1 has obscured the new reality of Washington: much of Obama's vision for the country, blocked in 2011 and 2012 as the GOP gained control of the House, is now becoming a reality.

This does not seem surprising, but think back to a year ago. Then, with his advisers wary of its effects on his reelection, the president had not even declared support for gay marriage himself.

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It seemed the Supreme Court would strike down parts of the health care law, and even if it did not, that Republican governors would never implement it. The idea that Republicans would ever accept a tax increase seemed far-fetched.

These concessions by Republicans are not all the result of Obama's political moves, or even his reelection. Obama can push gun control in part because the shooting in Newtown galvanized the public, while Republicans need to reach an agreement on immigration if they hope to avoid losing by 40 points among Latino voters as they did in 2012.

But these shifts are huge, whatever their origin. Obama's support of gay marriage during the campaign, and the absence of any backlash at the polls, has helped trigger a new era on gay rights. It's now difficult to anticipate any Democratic president candidate running in 2016 who is not an unabashed gay marriage supporter, or else a leading Republican candidate who makes opposition to gay unions a central part of his candidacy. Obamacare, most of which does not go into effect until next year, will have a real chance to succeed or fail on its own merits as a law, as opposed to Republicans at the state level refusing to implement it. The president is on the verge of forcing Republicans to break their previously ironclad opposition to bills that would in any way control guns, after he already did so on raising taxes. With Obama leading on the issue nationally, governors like in liberal states like New York are pressing for even stronger gun limits.

This more progressive nation is not a surprise if you look at polls. Most Americans have long supported hiking taxes on the wealthy, additional gun control measures and many of the individual provisions in Obamacare, if not the law itself. In truth, it's less Obama moving the country to the left than Republicans facing a new reality that they must move closer to the political center.

Republicans are aware of Obama's successes, which is in part why they have turned the debate over the sequester into a major clash in which they are showing no signs of compromise. And they are unlikely to adopt even more progressive ideas Obama has laid out, such as spending much money in federal funds on pre-kindergarten programs, raising the minimum wage, tackling climate change, or banning military-style weapons.

And Obama, even aside from the Republicans, can't accomplish some of his broader goals. Economic inequality has grown during his tenure, and it's not clear he has a plan to fix it. Black unemployment remains double that of white unemployment. And U.S. Supreme Court,

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controlled by Republicans, could decide to end affirmative action in college admissions and weaken the Voting Rights Act in rulings later this year, despite Obama's opposition to both ideas.

But for now, we are watching a major march toward a more liberal America. The key question is how and when Republicans try to stop it.