

Obama Says ¡Sí, Se Puede! to Immigration Reform

Written by New America Media, News Analysis, Earl Ofari Hutchinson
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President Obama's visit to El Paso to renew call for passage of a comprehensive immigration reform bill couldn't have come too soon. Five months into his White House tenure, Obama's approval ratings among Latinos topped an all-time high of more than 80 percent. Two years later, it had free fallen to slightly more than 50 percent. The tumble in part is blamed on the souring economy and the double-digit unemployment rate among Latinos.

But in bigger part it is due to the feeling among Latino leaders and organizations that Obama has done little to keep his campaign promise to push hard for comprehensive immigration reform. Obama did lash the GOP for torpedoing comprehensive immigration reform legislation in Congress on the two occasions when it appeared that the bill had a chance to pass. But it's also true that the White House has not put its full political muscle behind pushing a reform package in Congress.

Obama isn't totally to blame for this. The crushing problems and bruising fights over deficit reduction, spending, health care reform, coupled with high soaring gas prices and the jobless crisis have been endless and time consuming. Every step of the way he's had to battle an obstructionist, intransigent and petty GOP determined to make him pay a steep political price for every inch of legislative ground he gains.

Polls also consistently show that a majority of Americans still perceive immigration reform as a license to open the borders to a new flood of undocumented workers, and that's tantamount to condoning illegality. Worse, the fight for immigration reform now comes at a time when millions of Americans are in the unemployment lines. To pick a fight over immigration, risks stirring up bitter, divisive, and xenophobic hysteria from anti-immigration groups. This is a political risk that Obama seemingly cannot afford.

But it's a risk that Obama will have to take. Republicans at this juncture appear fragmented and even clownish with their birther nuttiness and their media grandstanding. Yet, whoever eventually emerges as the GOP presidential nominee will hammer the Democrats hard on the twin themes of their alleged gross economic and fiscal mismanagement and profligacy, and the need for strong leadership. Those themes will resonate with the GOP's traditional base, and a large number of moderate-to-conservative independents who deserted Obama in droves the past year.

The Latino vote remains crucial to offset that. Latino voters could provide the margin of victory in the must win swing states of Florida, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada.

Immigration reform is still potentially a major make or break issue for the overwhelming majority of Latinos. The GOP debacle in 2008 was in part the price they paid for playing hardball on this issue and souring millions of Latinos on the party. Then President George W. Bush was widely and unfairly blamed for making a mess of the immigration reform fight in Congress by not pushing hard enough for passage of the bill. Immigrant rights groups lambasted Republican senators for piling crippling demands for tight amnesty, citizenship and border security provisions in the bill. And leading Republican presidential contenders didn't help matters by flatly opposing the bill as much too soft on amnesty and border enforcement.

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This did much to kill whatever flickering hope there was for the bill's passage. This undid the inroads that Bush made in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections when he scored big with Latino voters. A big part of that then was due to the perception (and reality) that Bush would push hard for immigration reform. Bush campaign officials jumped on the newly found Latino support he got and pumped millions into ads on Spanish-language networks -- Univision and Telemundo -- that aired in New Mexico, Florida, Nevada and Arizona. The ads were geared to increase the Republican vote total among Latinos by as much as 5 percent. This was the figure that Republican strategists figured would help tip these states to Bush. They figured correctly. And GOP strategists won't make that towering mistake again of antagonizing Latino voters by playing relentless hardball on immigration reform.

Obama's battle for the Latino vote with the opening salvo being his renewed push for immigration reform is not to head off any major defection of Latino voters to the GOP. There's no chance of that. The polls that show Latinos less enthusiastic about Obama also show absolutely no enthusiasm for any GOP would-be presidential candidate, let alone translate into a massive vote for GOP candidates. The real peril is that the lack of enthusiasm for Obama could translate into a diminished Latino voter turnout in November 2012. A plunge in the Latino turnout would be as disastrous to Obama and the Democrats as a Latino defection would be to the GOP.

Obama's frontal challenge to the GOP to do something about immigration reform is a smart move. It recognizes that taking the Latino vote for granted is a prescription for political disaster.

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