

Behind Obama's Immigration Push

By Jason L. Riley

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President Obama is pressuring House Republicans to move immigration legislation this year. And while it's probably in the GOP's interest to get past this contentious issue, don't hold your breath.

"When it comes to immigration reform, we have to have the confidence to believe we can get this done, and we should get it done," Mr. Obama said Monday. "The only thing standing in our way right now is the unwillingness of certain Republicans in Congress to catch up with the rest of the country."

A survey out this week shows what such surveys have shown for years, which is that a large majority of the country favors comprehensive immigration reform that includes offering citizenship to people who are here illegally. Some 63 percent of respondents, including 60 percent of Republicans, expressed support for a "pathway to citizenship" for illegal aliens. A bill that included such a path was co-sponsored by Republican Sen. Marco Rubio and passed the Democratic-controlled Senate earlier this year. But the House has refused to vote on it.

Last week, Mr. Obama said that he was open to a so-called "piece-meal" approach that House Republicans prefer, which involves passing separate bills for border security, employer mandates, high-skill immigrants, farm workers and so forth. But no progress has been made on the piece that really matters: what to do with the 11 million or so illegal immigrants already here. The president says legalizing them must be part of any package. House Republicans say that legalizing them is amnesty, which they oppose. And notwithstanding the national polls, many of these GOP restrictionists come from safe districts where their position is popular.

In any case, House Republican leaders from John Boehner to Eric Cantor to Kevin McCarthy have said that immigration reform is dead this year. But reaching a compromise in 2014 won't be any easier. This is an issue that's easy to demagogue, and the midterm elections will be looming. The president's base is upset over the record number of deportations and five years of inaction on comprehensive reform, but the White House remains confident that voters who care most about this issue won't abandon the Democratic Party so long as Republicans are giving off an "anti-immigrant vibe," as one White House official put it.

The GOP understandably wants to keep the focus on the disastrous ObamaCare rollout and not give the president a political victory on immigration. Republicans also remain concerned that amnesty will only create a large bloc of new Democratic voters. Still, the demographic trends suggest that delay probably hurts Republicans more than Democrats in the long run. We still tend to associate immigration with Latinos, which Mr. Obama won, 71 percent to 27 percent, in 2012. But today's new arrivals are mostly Asians, and Mr. Obama won 73 percent of that vote as well, according to exit polls. Some Republicans are eager to concede these groups to Democrats, but they can't afford to for much longer.

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