



Democrats disappointed in White House on immigration

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As Congress returns to work this week, there's one item not on the agenda: immigration. House Democrats from California are willing to give President Barack Obama a pass for not pushing the issue, for now, anyway.

It's been two years since the Senate voted on the Dream Act. The measure would give undocumented college students brought to the U.S. as children a pathway to citizenship. The Dream Act died, failing to muster enough votes to overcome a filibuster. Democratic Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard of Los Angeles says Obama could have used his bully pulpit to push the issue, such as pressuring Congress about "let's have a hearing on that bill," or letting Congress know that "if that bill were to pass that he was ready to sign it."

Roybal-Allard and other members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus have tried another tactic: get the President to sign an executive order to protect those who would qualify for the Dream Act from being deported. So far: no action from the White House. Roybal-Allard walked out on the White House meeting. But she couches her disappointment about that with a disclaimer: "granted, the President has had a lot on his plate since he's taken office, from going near recession, the near collapse of our financial markets," she says. "So there's been a lot of things that he's had to attend to."

Roybal-Allard isn't the only California Democrat disappointed that the White House hasn't pushed hard on the Dream Act or other immigration issues. Zoe Lofgren of San Jose is the top Democrat on the House Judiciary immigration subcommittee. She's also disappointed in White House inaction on immigration, too – but at the Cato Institute, Lofgren explained it away in words that echo Roybal-Allard's. "In his defense," she says, "he took office right after the market collapsed and the requirement to actually deal with an economy that was heading to depression overwhelmed every other aspect of what he was dealing with."

And then there's this from Democrat Linda Sanchez of Lakewood: "The White House, in fairness," she says, "has had a lot on its plate."

Three Democrats, all pressing for something more on immigration, but all willing to give the White House a pass for doing little - and all using virtually identical words to do it. Former Clinton advisor Paul Begala once said, "The hardest thing for Democrats is to agree on a message and stick to it and repeat it." So what's different now?

Marc Sandalow, political science professor at the University of California's DC Center, says few things united Democrats better than election years. "Democrats understand that they've got to stand behind President Obama or he's not going to win re-election," he says. "And if one Democrat stands up and says 'Why isn't he doing this?' - that becomes a front page story."

Which is why criticism from Democrats like Linda Sanchez is muted. "Would I have wanted to see more action on immigration issues? Certainly," she says. "And my hope is that with a second term, we can really address those in a really thoughtful, constructive way."

But Sandlow warns that Sanchez may be disappointed. The president, he says, is like an inkblot test: liberals see what they want to see. "People who want to push immigration say, 'Yeah, he'll do it as soon as he gets re-elected.' People want to push gay marriage say, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, after the election year.' If you want to push cap and trade, environmental things: after the election year - because they understand that he can't start speaking strong, Democratic liberal ideas if he wants to capture the middle of the vote."

But Obama capture that vote in November and win a second term, the Democrats willing to give him a pass on immigration this year will expect something next year. The President has publicly promised to tackle the issue in a second term. At least three Democrats plan to hold him to that.

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