


Obama's pledge to review federal regs miffs liberals

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Just ahead of what promises to be an especially thorny budget season, President Obama on Tuesday called for a governmentwide review of federal regulations.

In a flurry of documents from the Oval Office, the White House is directing federal agencies to embrace regulatory policies that "impose the least burden on society," to make the process more transparent and consider the effect of regulation on small business. The president capped the initiative with an opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal

The move dovetails with Obama's larger shift toward the political center -- a transformation that began with a major tax deal he brokered with Republicans last month. It is part of a strategy to reposition him for the 2012 presidential campaign.

But the White House was pushing back on speculation about a political motive behind the regulatory move, saying the review has been under internal discussion for some time.

"I am sure as is everything that happens in this town, they'll be wont to add a political label to this or that," said White House press secretary Robert Gibbs. "The president believes it's best to find a common-sense approach."

The call to tackle regulatory reform was assailed by some liberal bloggers, notably the influential Huffington Post, which called it "appeasement" to business and Obama's explanation "bogus."

Nearly on cue, Obama's regulatory review won cautious praise from a key former business interest antagonist, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

"While a positive first step, a robust and globally competitive economy requires fundamental reform of our broken regulatory system," said Thomas J. Donohue, president and chief executive officer of the chamber.

His first two years in office saw Obama repeatedly criticized by Republicans and some industries for policies and rhetoric that were received as anti-business.

In response, Obama has made a point of emphasizing more business-friendly policies and bringing business leaders to the White House to strategize on job creation and growth.

His hiring of prominent banker Bill Daley to serve as new White House chief of staff also was part of the pro-business campaign. For Obama, reducing the nation's unemployment rate, currently at 9.4 percent, is essential to his re-election.

Jim Harper, an information policy expert at the Cato Institute and former Senate staffer with experience in regulatory affairs, called the White House review "a cosmetic, symbolic effort."

"It really restates a lot of things agencies are supposed to be doing already," Harper said.

On Capitol Hill, Republican leaders were mostly dismissive of the regulatory review, noting that reviewing and easing government regulations has been on their agenda for a long time.

With a new House majority and stronger numbers in the Senate, Republicans are particularly keen to impose deep spending cuts on the federal government when Obama releases his budget blueprint next month.

Obama's piece in the Wall Street Journal extolled the free market and "common sense rules" while acknowledging that "sometimes, those rules have gotten out of balance" to the detriment of jobs and economic growth.

The administration is "making it our mission to root out regulations that conflict, that are not worth the cost, or that are just plain dumb," he wrote.