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Obama speech to focus on jobs, economy and little else

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File - In this Sept. 28, 2010, file photo President Barack Obama speaks to a rally at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wis. Few states handed Democrats bigger losses in the midterm elections than Wisconsin, even though President Obama campaigned actively there. But the president will be back again Wednesday, this time to road-test the themes from his State of the Union message. (AP Photo/Morry Gash, File)

President Obama is expected to continue revising his annual State of the Union speech until right before he delivers it -- and what he leaves out is likely to reveal as much as what he includes.

Obama will "spend most of his time talking about the economy," said White House press secretary Robert Gibbs, and "talking about the challenges that we face both in the short term in terms of doing whatever we can to help create jobs ... [and] to continue working on issues like competitiveness and innovation."

Items either not on the menu or expected to get just a passing mention include social issues Obama's base most want to hear: Gay rights and marriage, the environment, education, women's issues and immigration reform.

Although the president is expected to mention Afghanistan, the broader issues of war and terrorism -- top bills in previous years -- are likely to get limited attention.

"I get the sense he either won't bring it up or if he does, it will be very, very brief," said Malou Innocent, an expert on Afghanistan at the Cato Institute. "It's all jobs and the economy."

Terrorism and war once topped the list of voter concerns, but they have been supplanted in recent years as the nation's economy flagged and layoffs started dominating the headlines.

Obama, faulted by critics for focusing on health care reform rather than job creation the past two years, is lately refocusing time and attention on jobs.

Gibbs said there will be mention of Afghanistan and foreign policy in the speech, but it was unclear if Iraq will make a strong showing in the final draft.

"I guess the social issues will be off the table," said Matt Mackowiak, a Republican strategist and former Senate staffer.

And despite the recent mass shootings in Tucson, Ariz., "I do not think you will hear about gun control," Mackowiak said. "He will have to compete soon in states that are not crazy about gun control."

For Obama, external elements shaping this year's State of the Union address include events such the lingering economic malaise and his gathering re-election effort.

In order to win a second term, Obama will have to appeal to voters beyond his base. Already, the president has been taking on a more centrist stance, notably striking a tax deal brokered in December with congressional Republicans.

But moving to the center means jettisoning many social issues that are of concern to his base. On gay rights, Obama has some cover after signing a congressional repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" ban on gays serving openly in the military.

More problematic is the environment, once a top campaign priority for the president, who now is trying to recast the issue of so-called clean energy as a way to combine environmental issues with job creation and competitiveness.

"Anything of significant substance, no; any mention of greenhouse gases, no; the Clean Air Act, no; oil spill, no," said Frank Maisano, an energy specialist at Bracewell & Giuliani. "What he is going to talk about is 'clean energy economy,' and he's going to say it over and over again."

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