

National Journal

What Does Obama's Immigration Meeting Mean?

By Jim O'Sullivan

Tuesday, April 19, 2011

Filled with influential policy stakeholders, President Obama's immigration-reform summit convened on Tuesday with nearly all the players who, theoretically, should be needed to guide some semblance of repairs nearly all sides profess to want toward the finish line.

The No Labels types were out in force: New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. Big Labor – represented by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka – was there, along with Big Business, represented by, among others, Business Roundtable President John Engler. Municipal and religious officials from across the country were present. Al Sharpton came.

Obama led off by telling the White House gathering of roughly 60 that he wanted to create conditions under which Congress can act, according to one attendee, speaking on condition of anonymity in order to reveal details from a closed-door meeting. The attendee said Obama called for a strategy rather than a policy conversation, and closed with a pledge to devote the same amount of his energy that he put into the 2010 health care overhaul and the deficit-reduction talks expected over the next several months.

Bloomberg spoke after Obama, calling inaction on immigration reform equivalent to “national suicide.”

Absent from the summit, though, were the vote-casters, the members of Congress who helped the bill clear the House last year, many of whom are gone now, and who couldn't drag it across the finish line in the Senate.

This was no happy collision of the essential role that Latino voters, who have long prized comprehensive immigration reform as a top priority, will play in Obama's reelection and the president's occasional willingness to tread in combustible policy arenas. At best, immigration advocates frustrated with Obama's policies can hope for some curtailment of the more stringent enforcement and increased deportations.

Here's the bald legislative reality: No major immigration legislation is going to become law by November 6, 2012 – and probably for sometime thereafter, unless there is a craven realization in both parties that it would be politically expedient.

Senate Majority Leader **Harry Reid**, D-Nev., realized it. Reid likely would have lost his reelection bid last year to Sharron Angle had he not received more than two-thirds, according to the exit polls, of an energized Latino electorate who outperformed its share of registered voters.

Of course, that enthusiasm for Reid didn't come without [hapless offenses](#) by Angle and Reid's hustle to deliver to Latinos a vote on the Dream Act, which would provide citizenship for qualifying illegal immigrants. Latinos shored up Democrats in Colorado and California, essentially providing a firewall to preserve the party's Senate majority. In the House, the Pew Hispanic Center said exit polls showed 64 percent of Latino voters going Democratic, 34 percent to the GOP.

If such a development – cynical or otherwise – is in the works, it is blooming slowly on the Republican side. House Speaker **John Boehner**, R-Ohio, angered some Latinos with his decision to excuse the speaker's office from its tradition of hosting a Capitol celebration of Cinco de Mayo, the chief Mexican-American holiday. Boehner instead encouraged the Congressional Hispanic Caucus to host its own celebration.

"Both parties have to put input into this issue, to help offset some of the scapegoating that's been done in the past," said Gloria Montañó Greene, director of the Washington office of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials.

And immigration advocates are none too pleased with Obama himself, pointing to a record-high 393,000 deportations last year. Rep. **Luis Gutierrez**, D-Ill., has said he is "stymied and blockaded" from delivering political support to the president unless the administration eases its policies. Leading a barnstorming tour venting immigration advocates' frustration with Obama, Gutierrez said he thought Obama had picked up on high-profile blowback, including his wife's [encounter with an unhappy second-grader](#) and his former chief of staff Rahm Emanuel's struggles during this year's Chicago mayoral campaign, that could drain support he'll sorely need in swing states like Florida, North Carolina, and Nevada.

"It's all a campaign to say to the president of the United States: 'We want to be for you. We want to be your champion; we want to be your allies.... We need you to take the kind of action you can administratively,'" said Gutierrez, calling the odds of legislative success "remote to none."

In Texas, while GOP Gov. Rick Perry, who won 55 percent of the vote last year by netting what exit polls called 84 percent of the white vote, has called for eliminating sanctuary cities and tough enforcement of existing laws, the more aggressive pushback that's occurred in other states has not yet materialized.

Instead, Texas GOP officials said their party was pursuing a grassroots strategy, albeit one that seems in fairly nascent stages. Compiling lists of Latino chambers of commerce, civic groups, and other preexisting entities, the party has been trying to identify Republican-leaning officials within the organization, said Texas GOP communications director Chris Elam.

"We're actually finding people who are interested in going out there and be part of the community events, join organizations, and be part of people's daily lives outside of election season," Elam said. For proof of the efficacy of this tack, Elam pointed to pick-ups in the 2010 elections, including Eva Guzman, the first Latina to win statewide office when she was elected a Supreme Court justice last November, and the addition of two Hispanic congressmen.

But nationally, the GOP field is boxed in by the party's grassroots resistance to easing citizenship policies, and even candidates issuing the loudest professions of concern about Latino concerns, like former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, are hidebound by the political dimensions of the primary.

"I think you will find the president's in good shape if the president shapes up the immigration policy in the coming weeks," Gutierrez said.