

Obama's not-so-hidden second-term agenda

By E.J. Dionne Jr.



Everywhere you turn, President Obama is accused of not offering a clear second-term agenda. It's not surprising that Republicans say it, but you also hear it from quarters sympathetic to the president.

But how true is the charge?

The president does lack a crisp, here's-my-plan set of sound bites. What's less obvious is whether this should matter to anyone. Mitt Romney's five-point plan sounds good but is quite vague and, upon inspection, looks rather like five-point plans issued by earlier Republican presidential candidates. Moreover, Romney has been resolutely unspecific about his tax plans, leading to the understandable suspicion that he's hiding something politically unsavory, either in the popular deductions he'd have to slash or in the programs he'd have to get rid of.

Obama, by contrast, has been far more straightforward about what he would do about the deficit: He wants a budget deal that includes both spending cuts and tax increases. He has put forward rather detailed deficit-reduction proposals. The centerpiece is a plan that, when combined with cuts made in 2011, would reduce the deficit by \$3.8 trillion over a decade, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Obama keeps insisting (rightly) that no deal can work without new revenue, and he is upfront that he'd begin by raising taxes on Americans earning over \$250,000 a year.

Some deficit hawks argue that Obama's tax increases are not broad enough. Others are looking for steeper Medicare and Social Security cuts than Obama is willing to endorse. Many progressives, in turn, want fewer cuts and favor additional tax increases on the very wealthy. Before signing off on deeper program reductions, progressives should consider the efforts of Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., to counter all the proposals to cut tax rates. She has suggested five new, higher rates on incomes ranging from \$1 million to \$1 billion or more a year. The capital gains tax also needs to rise. Low levies on capital gains, the reason Romney paid so little tax on his \$20.9 million income, raise problems for both fiscal balance and equity.

But these are responses to what Obama has proposed. To disagree with some of Obama's specifics is to acknowledge that the specifics exist.

Some dismiss what an Obama second term might achieve by claiming that it will be mainly concerned with consolidating his first-term accomplishments. If these had been trivial, that might be a legitimate criticism. But does anyone seriously believe that implementing a massive new health insurance program

that will cover an additional 30 million Americans is unimportant? Can anyone argue that translating the Dodd-Frank Wall Street reforms into workable regulations is a minor undertaking?

The president has also been clear that he wants to take on immigration reform. The question always asked is: Why should we think he'll do it in a second term when he didn't do it in the first? The answer is that if Obama is reelected, it will be in no small part because he overwhelms Romney among Latino voters who have stoutly rejected the Republican's "self-deportation" ideas. It's possible that Republicans will cooperate on immigration reform simply because they don't want to keep losing elections by getting clobbered in Latino precincts. And Obama will know that he has an electoral debt to pay.

Republicans have been relentless in attacking the clean-energy projects Obama has financed. If Obama wins, the president will have reason to say that clean energy won, too, and push ahead. And in one of the best articles on what Obama might do in a second term, the New Yorker's Ryan Lizza observed in June that Obama's campaign statements — to that point, at least — suggested he would like to take another shot at legislation to address climate change.

Obama speaks incessantly about upgrading the country's infrastructure. He also stresses the urgency of retooling both our education system and the way we train people for well-paying jobs. One can imagine a comprehensive education, jobs and investment program being a high priority in a second Obama term. And you can bet he will join efforts to create a new campaign financing system to check the power billionaires and corporations exercise in the world after Citizens United.

There is every reason to wish that Obama would pull all this together in a more inspiring way. Some of us would like him to be much bolder in addressing income inequality, the huge roadblocks to upward mobility, and the persistence of poverty. But is there is an Obama second-term agenda? Yes, there is.

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