

Q&A: HOW SIGNIFICANT IS OBAMA'S IMMIGRANT AMNESTY ACTION?

By Tamar Jacoby
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President Barack Obama announced on June 15 that the United States would no longer initiate deportation proceedings against undocumented immigrants who arrived in the country before age 16, are younger than 30 and meet other conditions that include having clean criminal records. Obama made the announcement five months before the U.S. presidential election in which Hispanics are playing an increased role. What are the economic and political impacts of Obama's announcement? Will it have a significant effect on the presidential race?

The most significant thing about President Obama's June 15 announcement isn't the policy but the public's reaction to it – a stunning lack of opposition or controversy.

The announcement closely mirrors legislation known as the Dream Act, which Congress has been trying to pass, unsuccessfully, for more than a decade. Originally a bipartisan proposal, only three Republicans voted for that bill in December 2010 when it last came up in the Senate. In critics' eyes, it's classic "amnesty" – and according to demographers, the Obama version could apply to as many as 1.4 million young people brought to the United States illegally as children. Bottom line: it wouldn't have been surprising if the Obama announcement had ignited a firestorm of criticism.

Instead, it brought mostly yawns. A poll by *Bloomberg News* showed nearly two-thirds of the public in favor. Mitt Romney and other leading Republicans lambasted the president for going around Congress, but virtually none challenged the substance of the announcement. A few courageous members of the opposing party – including influential former Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour – endorsed the president's decision. Even hard-core GOP voters at Romney rallies told reporters they thought it made sense. "You can't send people back," said one man at a Romney campaign stop in Troy, Ohio. "I don't hate immigrants," said a woman. "I don't think there's anything wrong with" the Obama policy.

It's no secret what is behind the political jockeying by Democrats or Republicans: the outsized role the Latino vote is likely to play in November, determining the outcome in several swing states and perhaps the next president. But as significant in the past few weeks has been the broader public's easy acceptance of the Obama order – a new mood that could create the political space for Congress to address immigration after the election.

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