

## ***The Media and Obama's Immigration Gambit***

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(Ross Douthat)

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**Highlight:** Is the press exaggerating the political brilliance of the White House's new immigration policy?

### **Body**

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A month ago, I wrote [a Campaign Stops column](#) laying out the political risks associated with a presidential "evolution" on gay marriage. That same afternoon, President Obama formally endorsed same-sex marriage. Last week, I wrote [a Campaign Stops piece](#) explaining why the politics of immigration aren't as favorable to various forms of legalization as many elites in both parties tend to assume. Three days later, President Obama unilaterally ordered a kind of provisional legalization (an end to deportation, and with it the possibility of work permits) for under-30 illegal immigrants who were brought to America as children.

You may be detecting a pattern here. Clearly the White House has a slightly different reading of the politics of various hot-button issues than yours truly, and clearly they think what I've dubbed ["the social issues strategy"](#) carries more benefits than costs. And they're being confirmed in this perspective by much of the press coverage of their various culture-war forays: In both center-left and mainstream outlets, there has been consistent admiration for the administration's maneuverings on these issues, and a consistent implication that the political risks are marginal-to-nonexistent.

This passage from [Matt Taylor's Slate dispatch](#) on the decision's political consequences distills that conventional wisdom to its essence:

The dexterity with which Obama and his team have been able to repeatedly put Republican nominee Mitt Romney in a box, forcing him to awkwardly cater to his party's rigid, out of the mainstream views on gay rights and immigration rules, is helping to ease fears on the part of some Democrats that the economy would drag their man down in November.

The headline of the piece is "Obama's immigration move already paying dividends," and even though the author doesn't actually cite any such evidence (unless you count quotes from two Democratic consultants and the "co-founder of the polling firm Latino Decisions") there is a new poll out that shows the president's gambit [boosting Hispanic enthusiasm](#). But Hispanics aren't the entirety of the electorate, and Taylor's piece only references the possibility that some voters might be less than thrilled with the decision in order to dismiss it. "The president's immigration shift," he writes, "confirms he has no intention of getting drawn into a fight over the working class white voters of campaign lore, but instead changing the composition of the electorate like he did four years ago."

Now it's true that Obama's easy 2008 win was built in part on youth and minority turnout, and that the president cruised to victory even though he didn't perform particularly well among working class whites. But Hispanics were still [only about 10 percent of the electorate](#) four years ago, whereas whites without college degrees were almost 40 percent. This meant that even though Obama won about 67 percent of Hispanics and only 40 percent of white working class voters, he still won millions more working class white votes in total - and needs to win at least some

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of those millions again. Given that anxieties about immigration's impact on native employment tend to be [concentrated among working class voters](#) (and particularly among working class voters, who happen to be in direct competition for jobs with the beneficiaries of this policy change), it seems at least possible that the White House's gambit will hurt in states like Ohio and Wisconsin as much as it helps the campaign in states like Nevada and Florida.

One reason that this possibility has found its way into so little of the press coverage, I suspect, is that ***the media*** has persistent difficulty recognizing that there are swing voters who lean rightward on the social issues (broadly defined to include immigration as well as abortion, gay marriage, etc.) as well as swing voters who fit the Acela Corridor's ["socially liberal, economically moderate" paradigm](#) of what a good centrist should be. Thus the "secure the borders first" position on immigration is defined as incorrigibly right-wing and potential general election poison by reporters, even though [a plurality of independents](#) prioritize border security over a path to citizenship and a substantial minority of Democrats do as well. (Likewise on abortion, of course, where the press has difficulty [even acknowledging that pro-life women exist](#).) Whether the White House really knows what they're doing politically, then - both with this policy shift and with the social issues strategy, generally - depends on how thoroughly they've dug into the underlying numbers and gamed out their state-by-state implications, versus how much they've allowed themselves to be swaddled in a comfortable media cocoon.

- [The Social Issues Strategy Revisited](#)
- [Obama and the Steelworkers](#)
- [Why "Julia" Is Dangerous For Obama](#)
- [The Success of the Gay Marriage Movement](#)
- [Nothing to Fear but Medicare Cuts](#)

## Classification

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