

Politics

After midterm rout, Obama says he got nation's message



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Obama to GOP: 'Let's get started' (3:31)

After election night's blow to the Democratic Party with the Republican takeover of the Senate, President Obama says that he can work with the GOP on the areas they agree on, such as creating new jobs. (AP)

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After [a stinging rebuke](#) at the polls, President Obama vowed Wednesday to respond to the frustrations of the American electorate by using his final two years to forge compromises with newly empowered congressional Republicans and break the political gridlock that has defined Washington over the past several years.

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“I hear you,” Obama said at a White House news conference, a day after [voters gave the GOP unilateral control over the legislative branch](#) and dealt a blow to Obama’s agenda after six years in office.

“Obviously, Republicans had a good night, and they deserve credit for running good campaigns,” the president said. But he emphasized that there was a message for both parties in the results — and the two more years of divided government they will produce: “The American people . . . expect the people they elect to work as hard as they do. They expect us to focus on their ambitions and not ours. They want us to get the job done. All of us in both parties have a responsibility to address that sentiment.”

Despite his nod to shared responsibility, however, Obama sounded less introspective and remorseful in the wake of the Democrats’ resounding midterm election defeat this year than he did four years ago, when he described the outcome as a “shellacking” for Democrats. The president noted that two-thirds of those eligible did not vote Tuesday, suggesting the lack of a broad GOP mandate, and he reminded reporters that the policies he has championed, including an increase in the minimum wage, were endorsed by voters in a number of states.

Obama pledged to work with his rivals on areas including taxes, infrastructure and trade, and the hopeful notes he sounded were matched by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), whose reelection puts him [in line to become majority leader](#)

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early next year. The president called McConnell on Wednesday to congratulate him on his victory and discuss areas of common ground, and Obama will meet with the bipartisan congressional leadership at the White House on Friday.

The voters voted the 'Republican wave' (1:34)

Republicans won big on Tuesday night. Here are the takeaways from the exit poll data. (Pamela Kirkland/The Washington Post)

“We’ll see whether we can work with the president. I hope so,” McConnell said at a news conference in Kentucky. “We’re going to pass legislation. Some of it he may not like, but this gridlock and dysfunction can be ended.”

Even as both sides suggested an openness to new cooperation, there are several immediate stumbling blocks, including potential White House action on immigration, the ongoing standoff over the stalled Keystone XL oil-sands pipeline and Obama’s appointment of a new attorney general. All have the potential to quickly reignite the toxic political environment even before McConnell takes the Senate

gavel.

Republicans vehemently oppose Obama's pledge, first issued in the summer and reiterated Wednesday, that he intends to [use his executive authority to stem deportations](#) of some undocumented immigrants before the end of the year.

Obama has argued that he has been forced into taking executive action because Congress failed to act on the problem by approving a comprehensive legislative overhaul of border-control laws. But McConnell on Wednesday compared the idea to "waving a red flag in front of a bull."

"I hope he won't do that," McConnell said. "That would poison the well."

But Obama is facing a revolt among Hispanic supporters who have escalated their calls for the White House to provide relief for the nation's more than 11 million undocumented immigrants. Obama's decision in September to [delay his administrative relief](#) until after the election — at the request of Senate Democrats fearful of the electoral ramification in conservative states — intensified anger among immigration advocates.

"You lost the Senate anyway," Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.) said at a news conference in Chicago on Wednesday. "The politics are over. The Senate has been lost. You're still president of the United States of

America, and it's time for you to act boldly.”
VIEW GRAPHIC ↻

The question for Obama is whether he feels the rout of Democrats — which Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) on Wednesday called “a real ass-whuppin’ ” — constrains or liberates him. Inside the West Wing, presidential advisers said the election results could give the president greater latitude to act unilaterally on immigration, because Republicans can pursue their own immigration bill if they do not like it.

Obama also made clear that he would resist any efforts by his opponents to undercut his landmark policies on health care and the environment. And McConnell acknowledged that Obama remains “a player” even as Republicans pursue their own initiatives.

“The veto pen is a pretty powerful tool,” McConnell said. But he urged Obama to follow the leads of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, “who are good examples of accepting the government you have rather than fantasizing about the government you think you have.”

More broadly, White House officials were mapping out a new strategy even before the final results had come in Tuesday. In the weeks before Election Day, Chief of Staff Denis McDonough had been leading a planning process to determine what the administration could achieve during the rest of the year and in early 2015 if the GOP took control of the Senate, according to a

senior administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal deliberations.

Senior Obama aides gathered for their regular 7:45 a.m. meeting with McDonough on Wednesday, and the session ran long as staff members discussed the dramatic shift in power on Capitol Hill. When Obama joined them in the Roosevelt Room nearly two hours later, the official said, the president made a point to remind them of the power of the office and emphasized that they still have an opportunity to improve the lives of the American public.

“The United States government is the most powerful force on the planet,” the president told them, the official recalled. Using the same phrase he would repeat later in his news conference, Obama told his aides he intended “to squeeze every last drop out of the last two years.”

Still, the election results were sobering for Obama. GOP candidates won seats currently held by Democrats in Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Montana, North Carolina, South Dakota and West Virginia — more than enough to [seize control of the Senate for the first time since 2007](#).

In a year in which several Republican governors initially appeared vulnerable, the party ended up winning gubernatorial races all across the country, including big blue-state surprises in Maryland and Massachusetts.

The poor showing has led some Obama allies to call for a shake-up of the White House staff, but the president

and White House press secretary Josh Earnest played down the idea of a major staff overhaul.

Manchin said the responsibility for the Democrats' trouncing "started at the White House and this administration, and it went all the way to leadership. . . . I think that people felt that the Democrats didn't work, did not reach out, basically played politics all the way through."

In recent months, Obama has set aside between 45 minutes to an hour each week to call lawmakers, according to aides, though the White House kept details of those conversations private to protect members' confidence. But on Wednesday the White House released the names of 25 Republican and Democratic officials the president phoned Tuesday night, eager to telegraph the kind of outreach he will be pursuing in a changed political landscape.

The list included several Republican lawmakers Obama will probably be negotiating with in the next two years, including Sens. Susan Collins (Maine), Lindsey O. Graham (S.C.) and James M. Inhofe (Okla.) and Sen.-elect Shelley Moore Capito (W.Va.), as well as Republican gubernatorial winners from Alabama, Arkansas and Oklahoma.

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