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Politics

Transcript: President Obama's Nov. 5 news conference on midterm election results

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, like creating new jobs. (AP)

November 5 at 4:24 PM

President Obama held a news conference Nov. 5 at the White House to discuss the results of the midterm congressional elections .

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good afternoon, everybody. Have a seat.

Today I had a chance to speak with John Boehner and congratulated Mitch McConnell on becoming the next Senate majority leader. And I told them both that I look forward to finishing up this Congress's business and then working together for the next two years to advance America's business.

And I very much appreciated Leader McConnell's words last night about the prospect of working together to deliver for the American people.

During a news conference after election night, President Obama says he will continue to act through executive authority on immigration reform, as Congress has continuously delayed the issue. (AP)

On Friday, I look forward to hosting the entire Republican and Democratic leadership at the White House to chart a new course forward.

Obviously, Republicans had a good night. And they deserve credit for running good campaigns. Beyond that, I'll leave it to all of you and the professional pundits to pick through yesterday's results.

What stands out to me, though, is that the American people sent a message, one that they've sent for several elections now. They 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.

Still, as president, I have a unique responsibility to try and make this town work. So, to everyone who voted, I want you to know that I hear you. To the two-thirds of voters who chose not to participate in the process yesterday, I hear you, too.

All of us have to give more Americans a reason to feel like the ground is stable beneath their feet, that the future is secure, that there is a path for young people to succeed, and that folks here in Washington are concerned about them.

So, I plan on spending every moment of the next two-plus years doing my job the best I can to keep this country safe and to make sure that more Americans share in its prosperity.

This country has made real progress since the crisis six years ago. The fact is, more Americans are working. Unemployment has come down. More Americans have health insurance. Manufacturing has grown. Our deficits have shrunk. Our dependence on foreign oil is down, as are gas prices. Our graduation rates are up. Our businesses aren't just creating jobs at the fastest pace since the 1990s. Our economy is outpacing most of the world.

President Obama says that he would enjoy drinking some Kentucky bourbon with Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), who is in line to be the next majority leader after the Republican Senate takeover. (AP)

OBAMA: But we just gotta keep at it until every American feels the gains of the growing economy where it matters most, and that's in their own lives.

Obviously, much of that will take action from Congress. And I'm eager to work with the new Congress to make the next two years as productive as possible. I'm committed to making sure

that I measure ideas not by whether they are from Democrats or Republicans, but whether they work for the American people.

And that's not to say that we won't disagree over some issues that we're passionate about. We will. Congress will pass some bills I cannot sign. I'm pretty sure I'll take some actions that some in Congress will not like. That's natural. That's how our democracy works.

But we can surely find ways to work together on issues where there's broad agreement among the American people. So I look forward to Republicans putting forward their governing agenda. I will offer my ideas on areas where I think we can move together to respond to people's economic needs. So just take one example. We all agree on the need to create more jobs that pay well. Traditionally, both parties have been for creating jobs rebuilding our infrastructure -- our roads, bridges, ports, waterways.

I think we can hone in on a way to pay for it through tax reform that closes loopholes and makes it more attractive for companies to create jobs here in the United States.

We can also work together to grow our -- grow our exports and open new markets for our manufacturers to sell more American-made goods to the rest of the world. That's something I'll be focused on when I travel to Asia next week.

We all share the same aspirations for our young people. And I was encouraged that this year Republicans agreed to investments that expanded early childhood education. I think we've got a chance to do more on that front.

We've got some common ideas to help more young people afford college and graduate without crippling debt, so that they have the freedom to fill the good jobs of tomorrow and buy their first homes and start a family.

And in the five states where a minimum wage increase was on the ballot last night, voters went five for five to increase it. That will give about 325,000 Americans a raise in states where Republican candidates prevailed. So that should give us new reason to get it done for everybody with a national increase in the minimum wage.

So those are some areas where I think we've got some real opportunities to cooperate, and I am very eager to hear Republican ideas for what they think we can do together over the next couple of years.

Of course, there's still business on the docket that needs attention this year. And here are three places where I think we can work together over the next several weeks before this Congress wraps up for the holidays.

First, I'm submitting a request to Congress to funding to ensure that our doctors, scientists and troops have the resources that they need to combat the spread of Ebola in Africa and to increase our preparedness for any future cases here at home.

Second, I'm going to begin engaging Congress over a new authorization to use military force against ISIL. The world needs to know we are united behind this effort and the men and women of our military deserve our clear and unified support.

Third, back in September, Congress passed short-term legislation to keep the government open and operating into December. That gives Congress five weeks to pass a budget for the rest of the fiscal year. And I hope that they'll do it in the same bipartisan, drama-free way that they did earlier this year.

When our companies are steadily creating jobs, which they are, we don't want to inject any new uncertainty into the world economy and to the American economy.

The point is, it's time for us to take care of business. There are things this country has to do that can't wait another two years or another four years. There are plans this country has to put in place for our future. And the truth is, I'm optimistic about our future. I have good reason to be.

I need Americans all across the country who are determined and big-hearted and ask what they can do and never give up and overcome obstacles, and they inspire me every single day.

So, the fact is, I still believe in what I said when I was first elected six years ago last night. All the maps plastered across our TV screens today and for all the cynics who say otherwise, I continue to believe we are simply more than just a collection of red and blue states. We are the United States.

And whether it's immigration or climate change or making sure our kids are going to the best possible schools to making sure that our communities are creating jobs, whether it's stopping the spread of terror and disease, to opening up the doors of opportunity to everybody who's willing to work hard and take responsibility, the United States has big things to do.

We can and we will make progress if we do it together. And I look forward to the work ahead.

So, with that, let me take some questions. I think that our team has got my list. And we're going to start with Julie Pace at Associated Press.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President.

You said during this election that while your name wasn't on the ballot, your policies were. And despite the optimism that you're expressing here, last night was a devastating night for your party. Given that, do you feel any responsibility to recalibrate your agenda for the next two years, and what changes do you need to make in your White House and in your dealings with Republicans in order to address the concerns that voters expressed with your administration?

OBAMA: Well, as I said in my opening remarks, the American people overwhelmingly believe that this town doesn't work well, and that it is not attentive to their needs. And as president, they rightly hold me accountable to do more to make it work properly.

I'm the guy who's elected by everybody, not just from a particular state or a particular district. And they want me to push hard to close some of these divisions, break through some of the gridlock, and get stuff done.

So, the most important thing I can do is just get stuff done and help Congress get some things done.

In terms of agenda items though, Julie, if you look as I just mentioned, to a minimum wage increase for example. That's something I talked about a lot during the campaign, where voters had a chance to vote directly on that agenda item, they voted for it.

And so, I think it'd be hard to suggest that people aren't supportive of it. We know that the surveys consistently say they want to see that happen.

The key is to find areas where the agenda that I've put forward, one that I believe will help strengthen the middle class and create more ladders of opportunity into the middle class, and improve our schools, and make college more affordable to more young people, and make sure that we're growing faster as an economy, and we stay competitive, the key is to make sure that those ideas that I have overlap somewhere with some of the ideas that Republicans have.

There's not going to be perfect overlap. I mean, there's going to be some ideas that I've got that I think the evidence backs up would be good for the economy, and Republicans disagree. They're not going to support those ideas. But I'm going to keep on arguing for them, because I think they're the right thing for the country to do.

OBAMA: There are going to be some ideas that they've got that they believe will improve the economy or create jobs that, from my perspective, isn't going to help middle class families improve their economic situation. So, I probably won't support theirs.

But I do think there are going to be areas where we do agree on infrastructure, on making sure that we're boosting American exports. And you know, part of my task then is to reach out to Republicans, make sure that I'm listening to them. I'm looking forward to them putting forward a very specific agenda in terms of what they would like to accomplish.

You know, let's compare notes in terms of what I'm looking at and what they're looking at and let's get started on those things where we agree. Even if we don't agree a hundred percent, let's get started on those things where we agree 70, 80, 90 percent.

And if we can do that and build up some trust and improve how processes work in Washington, then I think that's going to give the American people a little bit more confidence that, in fact, you know, their government is looking after them.

QUESTION: But specifically (OFF-MIKE), do you feel like (OFF- MIKE)?

OBAMA: I think -- every single day, I'm looking for how can we do what we need to do better. Whether that is delivering basic services the government provides to the American people,

whether that is our capacity to work with Congress, so that they're passing legislation, whether it's how we communicate with the American people about what our priorities and vision is.

OBAMA: You know, we are constantly asking ourselves questions about, you know, how do we make sure that we're doing a better job. And that's not going to stop. I think that every election is a moment for reflection. And you know, I think that everybody in this White House is going to look and say, all right, what do we need to do differently? But the principles that we're fighting for -- the -- the -- the things that motivate me every single day and motivate my staff every day -- those things aren't going to change. There's going to be a consistent focus on how do we deliver more opportunity to more people in this country, how do we grow the economy faster, how do we put more people back to work.

And, you know, I maybe have a naive confidence that if we continue to focus on the American people, and not on, you know, our own ambitions or image or, you know, various concerns like that, that, you know, at the end of the day, when I look back, I'm going to be able to say the American people are better off than they were before I was president. And that's my most important goal.

OBAMA: So -- but the other thing I just want to emphasize is, I'm -- I've said this before. I want to reiterate it. If their ideas that the Republicans have that I have confidence will make things better for ordinary Americans, the fact that the Republicans suggesting it, as opposed to a Democrat -- that'll be irrelevant to me. I want to just see what works.

And there's some things, like rebuilding our infrastructure or early childhood education, that we know works. And I'm hoping that, you know, the kind of attitude and approach that Mitch McConnell and John Boehner have already expressed, their desires to get things done allows us to find some common ground.

Jeff Mason?

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President.

In 2010, you called the results of the midterm election a "shellacking." What do you call this?

And can you give us an update on your feelings about the immigration executive order and the result in the aftermath of this election? Does the election affect your plans to release it?

OBAMA: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: Will it still -- is it likely to come out before the lame duck session is over? And have you reduced its scope to just a couple million people?

OBAMA: Well, as I said in my opening statement, there's no doubt that the Republicans had a good night. And what we're gonna make sure that we do is to reach out to Mitch McConnell and John Boehner, who are now running both chambers in Congress, and find out what their agenda is.

And my hope is, is that they've got some specific things they want to do that correspond with some things that we want to get done.

What's most important to the American people right now, the resounding message, not just of this election, but basically the last several, is get stuff done. Don't worry about the next election. Don't worry about party affiliation.

Do worry about our concerns. Worry about the fact that I'm a single mom and at the end of the month it's really hard for me to pay the bills, in part because I've got these huge child care costs. Do worry about the fact that I'm a young person who's qualified to go to college but I'm really worried about taking \$50,000 a year out in debt, and I don't know how I'd pay that back.

Do worry about the fact that I'm a construction worker who has been working all my life, and I know that there's construction work that should be done but right now for some reason, projects are stalled.

If we're thinking about those folks, I think we're hopefully going to be able to get some stuff done.

In terms of immigration, I have consistently said that it is my profound preference and interest to see Congress act on a comprehensive immigration reform bill that would strengthen our borders, would streamline our legal immigration system so that it works better and we're attracting the best and the brightest from around the world, and that we give an opportunity for folks who've lived here, in many cases for a very long time, may have kids who are U.S. citizens, but aren't properly documented, give them a chance to pay their back taxes, get in the back of the line, but get through a process that allows them to get legal.

The Senate on a bipartisan basis passed a good bill. It wasn't perfect, it wasn't exactly what I wanted, but it was a sound, smart piece of legislation that really would greatly improve not just our immigration system but our economy and would improve business conditions here in the United States and make sure that American-born workers aren't undercut by workers who are undocumented and aren't always paid a fair wage and as a consequence, employers who are breaking the rules are able to undercut folks who are doing the right thing.

So, we got a bipartisan bill out of the Senate. I asked John Boehner at that point, can we pass this through the House? There's a majority of votes in the House to get this passed. And Speaker Boehner, I think was sincere about wanting to pass it, but had difficulty over the last year getting it done. So, when he finally told me he wasn't going to call it up this year, what I indicated to him is I feel obliged to do everything I can lawfully with my executive authority to make sure that we don't keep on making the system worse, but that whatever executive actions that I take will be replaced and supplanted by action by Congress. You send me a bill that I can sign, and those executive actions go away.

That's a commitment I made not just to the American people and to businesses and evangelical community, law enforcement folks, and everybody who's looked at this issue and thinks that we

need immigration reform, that's a commitment that I also made to John Boehner, that I would act in the absence of action by Congress.

So, before the end of the year, we're going to take whatever lawful actions that I can take, that I believe will improve the functioning of our immigration system, that will allow us to surge additional resources to the border, where I think the vast majority of Americans have the deepest concern.

And at the same time, I'll be reaching out to both Mitch McConnell, John Boehner, and other Republican as well as Democratic leaders to find out how it is that they want to proceed. And if they want to get a bill done, whether it's during the lame duck or next year, I am eager to see what they have to offer.

But what I'm not going to do is just wait. I think it's fair to say that I have shown a lot of patience and have tried to work on a bipartisan basis as much as possible. And I'm going to keep on doing so. But in the meantime, let's figure out what we can do lawfully through executive actions to improve the functioning of the existing system.

QUESTION: (OFF-MIKE) And can you give us a sense of whether or not (OFF-MIKE) or a lot more going now...

OBAMA: Jeff, you know, I think if you want to get into the details of it, I suspect that when I announce that executive action, it'll be bright full of detail.

(LAUGHTER)

And I'm sure there will be a lot of follow up questions.

Chris Jansing.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President.

I want to follow up on a couple of things, and start with immigration. And are you concerned that if you sign an executive order on immigration before the end of the year, it will scuttle whatever chances there may be for there to be some sort of compromise on the issues that you talked about.

And I wonder that given this unhappy electorate, clearly, and they seem to be disappointed with both sides pretty much, why they punish the Democrats more than the Republicans by far?

OBAMA: Well, as I said, when it comes to the political analysis, that's your job. But what is also true is I am the president of the United States. And I think understandably, people are going to ask for greater accountability and more responsibility from me than from anybody else in this town: appropriately so, and I welcome that.

The commitment that I will make to the American people and the way I've tried to conduct myself throughout this presidency is that I'm going to wake up every single day doing my absolute best to deliver for them. And there are areas where we've made real progress.

I think economically, I can look back and there is no doubt that on almost every measure, we are better off economically than we were when I took office.

But, what is also true is there are still a lot of folks out there who are anxious and are hurting and are having trouble making ends meet, or are worried about their children's future.

And it's my job to give them some confidence that this town can work to respond to some of those worries that folks have. And we haven't done a good enough job convincing of that. And I understand that.

OBAMA: They've been watching in Washington over the last two, four years. What they've seen is a lot of arguing and a lot of gridlock, but not a lot of concrete actions, at least legislatively, that have made a difference in their lives.

And so we've got to make sure that we do a better job, and I'm committed to doing that.

On immigration, I know that concerns have been expressed that, well, if you do something through executive actions, even if it's within your own authorities, that that will make it harder to pass immigration reform. I just have to remind everybody, I've heard that argument now for a couple of years. This is an issue I actually wanted to get done in my first term. And we didn't see legislative action.

And in my second term, I made it my top legislative priority. We got really good work done by a bipartisan group of senators, but it froze up in the House. And, you know, I think that the best way, if folks are serious about getting immigration reform done, is going ahead and passing a bill and getting it to my desk.

And then the executive actions that I take go away. They're superseded by the law that is passed. And I will engage any member of Congress who's interested in this in how we can shape legislation that will be a significant improvement over the existing system. But what we can't do is just keep on waiting. There is a cost to waiting. There's a cost to our economy. It means that resources are misallocated.

When the issue of unaccompanied children cropped up during this summer, there was a lot of folks who perceived this as a major crisis in our immigration system. Now, the fact is that those numbers have now come down and they're approximately where they were a year ago or two years ago or a year before that.

But it did identify a real problem in a certain portion of the border where we've got to get more resources. But those resources may be misallocated separating families right now that most of us, most Americans would say probably we'd rather have them just pay their back taxes, pay a fine,

learn English, get to the back of the line, but we'll give you a pathway where you can be legal in this country.

So, where I've got executive authorities to do that, we should get started on that. But I want to emphasize once again, if in fact Republican leadership wants to see an immigration bill passed, they now have the capacity to pass it and hopefully engaging with me and Democrats in both the House and the Senate, it's a bill that I can sign because it addresses the real concerns that are out there. And the sooner they do it, from my perspective, the better.

Jon Karl?

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President.

Mitch McConnell's been the Republican leader for six years, as long as you've been president. But his office tells me that he's only met with you one-on-one once or twice during that entire six-year period. So I'm wondering, as somebody who came to Washington promising to end the hyper-partisanship that was here long before you became president, but it's gotten worse since you got here, was it a mistake for you to do so little to develop relationships with Republicans in Congress?

OBAMA: I think that every day I'm asking myself: Are there some things I can do better? And, you know, I'm going to keep on asking that every single day. The fact is that most of my interactions with members of Congress have been cordial and they've been constructive. Oftentimes, though, we just haven't been able to actually get what's discussed in a leadership meeting through caucuses in the House and the Senate to deliver a bill.

The good news is that now Mitch McConnell and John Boehner are from the same party. I think they can come together and decide what their agenda is. They've got sufficient majorities to make real progress on some of these issues.

And you know, I'm certainly going to be spending a lot more time with them now, because that's the only way that we're going to be able to get some stuff done. And I take them at their word, that they want to produce. They're the majority. They need to present their agenda. I need to put forward my best ideas.

I think the American people are going to be able to watch us -- and they're paying attention -- to see whether or not we're serious about actually compromising and being constructive. And my commitment to them, and I've said this when I spoken them is is that anywhere we can find common ground, I'm eager to pursue it.

QUESTION: Are you going to have that drink with Mitch McConnell now that you joked about at the White House correspondent's dinner?

OBAMA: You know, actually, I would enjoy having some Kentucky bourbon with Mitch McConnell. I don't know what his preferred drink is, but you know, my interactions with Mitch McConnell, he -- you know, he has always been very straightforward with me.

To his credit, he has never made a promise that he couldn't deliver. And you know, he knows the legislative process well. He obviously knows his caucus well. You know, he's always given me, I think, realistic assessments of what he can get through his caucus and what he can't. And so, I think we can have a productive relationship.

Phil Mattingly?

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President.

OBAMA: Yeah.

QUESTION: Another deadline coming up is on your negotiators by November 24th. Have to figure out if they're going to reach a deal with Iran on a nuclear area -- or nuclear agreement. I'm interested what your current perspective is on how those negotiations are going. Also, if it is your feeling that you have the power to implement any type of agreement that's reached without any action from Congress. And then also just wanted to quickly touch on the AUMF that you mentioned earlier. Is that going to be more of a codification of the limits that you've put in place for the mission up to this point? Or what -- what should we be looking for on that when you send it to the Hill?

Thank you.

OBAMA: On AUMF, the leaders are going to be coming here on Friday. It'll be an expanded group. Not just the four leaders, but a larger group who all have an interest in the issues we're discussing today. And I'm actually going to invite Lloyd Austin, the CENTCOM commander, to make a presentation about how our fight against ISIL is proceeding. And I think to answer questions and assure that Congress is fully briefed on what we're doing there.

With respect to the AUMF, we've already had conversations with members of both parties in Congress. And the idea is to -- to right- size and update whatever authorization Congress provides to suit the current fight, rather than previous fights.

You know, in 2001, after the heartbreaking tragedy of 9/11, we had a very specific set of missions that we had to conduct. And the AUMF was designed to pursue those missions.

With respect to Iraq, there was a very specific AUMF. We now have a different type of enemy. The strategy is different, and how we partner with Iraq and other Gulf countries and the international coalition, that has to be structured differently. So, it makes sense for us to make sure that the authorization from Congress reflects what we perceive to be not just our strategy over the next two or three months, but our strategy going forward.

And you know, it'll be a process of listening to members of Congress, as well as us presenting what we think needs to be the set of authorities that we have, and I'm confident we're going to be able to get that done. And that may just be a process of us getting it started, now. It may carry over into the next -- into the next Congress.

On Iran. Because of the unprecedented sanctions that we put in place that really did have a crippling effect on Iran's economy, they have come to the table and they have negotiated seriously around providing assurances that they're not developing a nuclear weapon for the first time.

And they have abided by the interim rules. We have been able to freeze their program: in some cases reduce the stockpile of nuclear material that they already had in hand. And the -- the discussions, the negotiations, have been constructive. The international community has been unified and cohesive. There haven't been a lot of cracks in our alliance. Even in countries where we have some differences like Russia, have agreed with us and have worked with us cooperatively in trying to find ways to make sure that we can verify and have confidence going forward that Iran doesn't have the capacity to develop a nuclear weapon that could not only threaten friends of ours like Israel, trigger a nuclear arms race in the region, but could over the long term potentially threaten us.

Whether we can actually get a deal done, we're going to have to find out over the next three to four weeks. We have presented to them a framework that would allow them to meet their peaceful energy needs. And if in fact what their leadership says, that they don't want to develop a nuclear weapon, if that is in fact true, then they've got an avenue here to provide that assurance to the world community and in a progressive, step by step, verifiable way, allow them to get out from under sanctions so that they can reenter as full-fledged members of the international community. But they have their own politics and there's a long tradition of mistrust between the two countries. And there's a sizable portion of the political elite that you know, cut its teeth on anti-Americanism and still finds it convenient to blame America for every ill that there is.

And whether they can manage to say yes to what clearly would be better for Iran, better for the region, and better for the world, is an open question. We'll find out over the next several weeks.

All right?

QUESTION: Sir, on whether or not you have the power unilaterally to relax sanctions, to implement an agreement?

OBAMA: Yeah, there are a series of different sanctions. There are multilateral sanctions, there are U.N. sanctions. There are sanctions that have been imposed by us, this administration, unilaterally. And I think it's different for each of those areas.

But I don't want to put the cart before the horse. What I want to do is see if in fact, we have a deal. If we do have a deal that I have confidence will prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon and that we can convince the world and the public will prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, then, you know, it'll be time to engage in Congress. And I think that we'll be able to make a strong argument to Congress that this is the best way for us to avoid a nuclear Iran, that it will be more effective than any other alternatives we might take, including military action.

But that requires it being a good deal. And I've said consistently that I'd rather have no deal than a bad deal. Because what we won't want to do is lift sanctions and provide Iran legitimacy, but

not have the verifiable mechanisms to make sure that they don't break out and product a nuclear weapon.

Ed Henry?

I missed you guys. I haven't done this in a while.

QUESTION: I know. I've missed you.

Thank you, Mr. President. I haven't heard you -- I haven't heard you say a specific thing during this news conference that you would do differently. You've been asked it a few different ways.

I understand you're going to reach out, but you've talked about doing that before. It's almost like you're doubling down on the same policies and approach you've had for six years.

And so, my question is, why not pull a page from the Clinton playbook and admit you have to make a much more dramatic shift in course for these last two years?

And on ISIS, there was a pretty dramatic setback in the last few days, with it appearing that the Syrian rebels were routed, there are some Gitmo detainees who have rejoined the battlefield, helping ISIS and other terror groups.

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION: So my question is, are we winning?

OBAMA: Well, I think it's too early to say whether we are winning, because, as I said at the outset of the ISIL campaign, this is gonna be a long-term plan to solidify the Iraqi government, to solidify their security forces, to make sure that in addition to our air cover, that they have the capacity to run a ground game that pushes ISIL back from some of the territories that they had taken. That we have a strong international coalition that we've now built, but that they are on the ground, providing the training, providing the equipment, providing the supplies that are necessary for Iraqis to fight on behalf of their territory.

And what I also said was that in Syria, that's been complicated and that's not gonna be solved any time soon. Our focus in Syria is not to solve the entire Syria situation, but, rather, to isolate the areas in which ISIL can operate. And there is no doubt that because of the extraordinary bravery of our men and women in uniform and the precision of our pilots and the strikes that have taken place, that ISIL is in a more vulnerable position and it is more difficult for them to maneuver than it was previously.

Now, there is a specific issue about trying to get a moderate opposition in Syria that can serve as a partner with us on the ground. That's always been the hardest piece of -- piece of business to get done. There are a lot of opposition groups in Syria along a spectrum from radical jihadists who are our enemies to folks who believe in inclusive democracy, and everything in between.

They fight among each other. They are fighting the regime. And what we're trying to do is to find a core group that we can work with, that we have confidence in, that we've vetted, that can help in regaining territory from ISIL and then ultimately serve as a responsible party to sit at the table in eventual political negotiations that are probably some ways off in the future.

That's always been difficult. As -- as you know, one of the debates has consistently been, you know, should the Obama administration provide more support to the opposition; could that have averted some of the problems that are taking place in Syria? And as I've said before, part of the challenge is it's a messy situation. This is not a situation where we have one single, unified, broad-based, effective, reliable...

(CROSSTALK)

OBAMA: Let me answer the question.

The -- and so what we are going to continue to test is can we get a more stable, effective, cohesive, moderate opposition.

But that's not the sole measure of whether we are quote-unquote "winning" or not. Remember, our first focus here is to drive ISIL out of Iraq. And what we're doing in Syria is, first and foremost, in service of reducing ISIL's capacity to resupply and send troops and then run back in over the Syrian border, to eventually reestablish a border between Iraq and Syria so that slowly Iraq regains control of its security and its territory.

That is our number one mission. That is our number one focus. There are aspects of what's going on in Syria that, you know, we've got to deal with in order to reduce the scope of ISIL's operations. So for example, our support for Kurds in Kobani, where they've been able to hold off ISIL and where we've been able to effectively strike ISIL positions consistently -- that's not just because we're trying to solve a Syria problem. That's also because it gives us an opportunity to further weaken ISIL so that we can meet our number one mission which is -- which is Iraq.

In terms of things to do differently, you know, I guess, Ed, your -- the question you're asking is one actually I think I have answered. If you're asking about personnel or if you're asking about a position on issues or what have you, then it's probably premature because I want to hear what -- what -- what...

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION: (inaudible) your leadership -- there's something about your leadership (inaudible).

OBAMA: Ed -- what I -- what I'd like to do is to hear from the Republicans to find out what it is that they would like to see happen. And what I'm committing to is making sure that I am open to working with them on the issues that -- where they think that there's going to be cooperation.

Now, that isn't a change because I've suggested to them before that where they think there's areas of cooperation, I'd like to see us get some things done. But the fact that they now control

both chambers of -- of Congress I think means that perhaps they have more confidence that they can pass their agenda and get a bill on my desk. It means that negotiations end up perhaps being a little more real because, you know, they have larger majorities, for example, in the House, and they may be able to get some things through their caucuses that they couldn't before.

But the bottom line that the American people want to know and that I'm going to repeat here today is that my number one goal, because I'm not running again -- I'm not on the ballot. I don't have any further political aspirations. My number one goal is just to deliver as much as I can for the American people in these last two years. And wherever I see an opportunity, no matter how large or how small, to make it a little bit easier for a kid to go to college, make it a little more likely that somebody's finding a good paying job, make it a little more likely that somebody has high quality health care, even if I'm not getting a whole loaf, I'm interested in getting whatever legislation we can get passed that adds up to improved prospects of improved future for the American people.

Sam Stein?

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President.

Following the elections, congressional Republicans are pushing once again for major reforms to your health care act.

OBAMA: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: In the past, you've said you hope some good ideas, that you don't want to undermine the bill. Can you tell us what specific ideas you're ruling out? Have the election results changed your calculus on reforming the law? And how confident are you, heading into the second enrollment period?

And on a totally unrelated matter, have you settled on a nominee to replace Attorney General Eric Holder, and if so, who is it?

(LAUGHTER)

OBAMA: He -- you want to spread out your news a little bit, don't you? You don't want it all in just one big bang.

On the attorney general, we have a number of outstanding candidates who we're taking a look at now. And in due course, I will have an announcement. And you'll be there, Sam, when that's announced.

But I'm confident that we'll find somebody who is well-qualified, will elicit the confidence of the American people, will uphold their constitutional obligations of rule of law, and will get confirmed by the Senate.

On health care, there are certainly some lines I'm going to draw. Repeal of the law, I won't sign. Efforts that would take away health care from the 10 million people who now have it and the millions more who are eligible to get it, we're not going to support. In some cases, there may be recommendations that Republicans have for changes that would undermine the structure of the law, and you know, I'll be very honest with them about that and say "look, the law doesn't work if you pull out that piece or that piece."

On the other hand, what I have said, is there's no law that's ever been passed that is perfect. And given the contentious nature in which it was passed in the first place, there are places where if I were just drafting a bill on our own, we would've made those changes back then. And certainly, as we've been implementing, there are some other areas where we think we can do even better.

So, you know, if in fact one of the items on Mitch McConnell's agenda and John Boehner's agenda is to make responsible changes to the Affordable Care Act to make it work better, I'm going to be very open and receptive to hearing those ideas.

OBAMA: But what I will remind them is that despite all the contention, we now know that the law works. You've got millions of people who have health insurance who didn't have it before. You've got states who have expanded Medicaid to folks who did not have it before, including Republican governors who've concluded this is a good deal for their state.

And despite some of the previous predictions, even as we've been enrolled more people into the Affordable Care Act and given more people the security of health insurance, health care inflation has gone down every single year since the law passed, so that we now have the lowest increase in health care costs in 50 years. Which is saving us about \$180 billion in reduced overall costs to the federal government and its -- in the Medicare program.

So, we are, I think, really proud of the work that's been done. But there's no doubt that there are areas where we can improve it. So, I'll look forward to seeing what -- what lists they've got of improvements.

QUESTION: (inaudible) the individual mandate one of those lines that came across?

OBAMA: Yeah, the individual mandate is a line I came across because the concept, borrowed from Massachusetts, from a law instituted by a former opponent of mine, Mitt Romney, understood that if you're providing health insurance to people through the private marketplace, then you've got to make sure that people can't game the system and just wait until they get sick before they go try to buy health insurance. You can't ensure that people with preexisting conditions can get health insurance unless you also say, while you're healthy, before you need it, you've got to -- you've got to get health insurance.

And, obviously, there are hardship exemptions. We understand that there's some folks who, even with the generous subsidies that have been provided still can't afford it. But -- but that's a central component of the law.

In terms of enrollment, we'll do some additional announcements about that in -- in the days to come. Starting in the middle of this month, people can sign up again. I think there are a number of people who, the first time around, sat on the sidelines, in part because of our screw-ups on healthcare.gov. That's one area, Ed, by the way, is very particular. We're really making sure that that Web site works super well before the next open enrollment period. We're double- and triple-checking it.

And so. I think a lot of people who maybe initially thought, we're not sure how this works, let's wait and see, they're gonna have an opportunity now to sign up.

And what's been terrific is to see how more private insurers have come into the marketplace, so that there's greater competition in more markets all around the country. The premiums that have come in, that are available to people and the choices that are available, are better than a lot of people, I think, had predicted.

So the law's working. That doesn't mean it can't be improved.

Major Garrett?

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President. If you do miss us, allow me to humbly suggest we do this every week.

OBAMA: We might. You know, who knows. I'm having a great time.

QUESTION: Let me go back to immigration. Moments before you walked out here, sir, Mitch McConnell said, and I quote, that "if you, in fact, use your executive authority to legalize a certain number of millions of undocumented workers, it would poison the well," direct quote, and it would be like waving a red flag in front of a bull.

Do you not believe that is the considered opinion of the new Republican majority in the House and the Senate? And do you also not believe what they have said in the aftermath of last night's results, that the verdict rendered by voters should stop you or should prevent you from taking this action because it was a subtext in many of the campaigns?

Let me ask you a couple of specifics. Republicans haven't made a mystery about some of the things they intend to say.,

(CROSSTALK)

OBAMA: Do I have to write all these down, Major?

(LAUGHTER)

QUESTION: No, you're very well familiar with these. These will not be mysteries to you.

OBAMA: I know, but I -- you know...

QUESTION: Keystone XL pipeline, they will send you legislation on that. They will ask you to repeal the medical device tax as a part of a funding mechanism of the Affordable Care Act.

And they have said they would like to repatriate some maybe \$2 trillion of offshore revenue at the corporate level by reforming the corporate tax code without touching the individual tax code.

To use your words, Mr. President, are any of those three lines you cannot cross? And also deal with what you perceive to be Republican attitudes about immigration?

OBAMA: All right. I think, Major, that I answered the question on immigration. I have no doubt that there will be some Republicans who are angered or frustrated by any executive action that I may take. Those are folks, I just have to say, who are also deeply opposed to immigration reform in any form and blocked the House from being able to pass a bipartisan bill.

I have said before that I actually believe that John Boehner is sincere about wanting to get immigration reform passed, which is why for a year I held off taking any action beyond what we'd already done for the so-called DREAM kids, and did everything I could to give him space and room to get something done.

And what I also said at the time was, if, in fact Congress -- if this Congress could not get something done, then I would take further executive actions in order to make the system work better, understanding that any bill that they pass will supplant the executive actions that I take.

So, I just want to re-emphasize this, Major: If, in fact, there is a great eagerness on the part of Republicans to tackle a broken immigration system, then they have every opportunity to do it.

My executive actions not only do not prevent them from passing a law that supercedes those actions, but should be a spur for them to actually try to get something done.

And I am prepared to engage them every step of the way with their ideas. I think we should have further, broad-based debate among the American people. As I've said before, I do think that the episode with the unaccompanied children changed a lot of attitudes. I think what may also change a lot attitudes is when the public now realizes that that was a very temporary and isolated event, and that in fact, we have fewer illegal immigrants coming in today than we did five years ago, 10 years ago, or 20 years ago.

But then what we also have is a system that is not serving our economy well. So...

QUESTION: Republicans who say the election was a referendum, at least in part, on your intentions to use executive authority for immigration?

OBAMA: As I said before, I don't want to try to read the tea leaves on election results. What I am going to try to do as president is to make sure that I am advancing what I think is best for the country. And here is an opportunity where I can use my administrative authorities, executive authorities, and lawfully try to make improvements on the existing system, understanding that's

not going to fix the entire problem. And we're much better off if we go ahead and pass a comprehensive bill.

And I hope that the Republicans really want to get it passed. If they do, they're going to have a lot of cooperation from me. So, let me just pick up on Keystone. There's an independent process. It's moving forward. And the -- I'm going to let that process play out. I've given some parameters in terms of how I think about it. Ultimately, is this going to be good for the American people? Is it going to be good for their pocketbook? Is it going to actually create jobs? Is it actually going to reduce gas prices that have been coming down?

And is it going to be, on net, something that doesn't increase climate change that we're going to have to grapple with? There's a pending case before a Nebraska judge about some of the sighting. The process is moving forward. And I'm just going to gather up the facts.

I will note while this debate about Canadian oil has been raging, keeping in mind this is Canadian oil, this isn't U.S. oil. While that debate has been raging, we've seen the -- some of the biggest increases in American oil production and American natural gas production in our history.

We are closer to energy independence than we've ever been before, or at least as we've been in decades. We are importing less foreign oil than we produce for the first time in a very long time. We've got a 100 year supply of natural gas that if we responsibly tap, puts us in the strongest position when it comes to energy of any industrialized country around the world.

When I travel to Asia or I travel to Europe, their biggest envy is the incredible, homegrown, U.S. energy production that is producing jobs and attracting manufacturing, because locating here means you've got lower energy costs.

OBAMA: So, our energy sector is booming. And I'm happy to engage Republicans with additional ideas for how we can enhance that.

I should note that our clean energy production is booming as well. And so Keystone, I just consider as one small aspect of a broader trend that's really positive for the American people.

And let's see -- see -- OK -- medical device tax -- you know, I've already answered the question. We are going to take a look at whatever ideas -- let me take a look comprehensively at the ideas that they present. Let's give them time to -- to tell me. I'd rather hear it from them than from you.

(CROSSTALK)

OBAMA: Major, you know...

(CROSSTALK)

OBAMA: Conceivably, I could just cancel my meeting on Friday because I've heard everything from you.

(LAUGHTER)

I think I'd rather let Mitch McConnell...

(CROSSTALK)

OBAMA: ... I'd rather hear from Mitch McConnell and John Boehner what ideas they'd like to pursue and we'll have a conversation with them on that.

On repatriation, I said in my opening remarks that there is an opportunity for us to do a tax reform package that is good for business, good for jobs, and can potentially finance infrastructure development here in the United States. Now, the devil's in the details. So, I think conceptually it's something where we may have some overlap.

And I'm very interested in pursuing ideas that can put folks to work right now on roads and bridges and waterways and ports and a better air traffic control system. If we had one, by the way, we could reduce delays by about 30 percent. We could reduce fuel costs for airlines by about 30 percent, and hopefully that would translate into cheaper airline tickets, which I know everybody would be interested in. So there's all kinds of work we can do on our infrastructure. This may be one mechanism that Republicans are comfortable in -- in financing those kinds of efforts. So, that will be part of the discussion that I think we're prepared for on Friday, and then in the weeks to come leading into the new Congress.

Whew. Major -- Major works me, man.

Jim Acosta (ph).

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President.

I know you don't want to read the tea leaves, but it is a fact that your party rejected you in these mid-terms. By and large, they did not want you out on the campaign trail in these key battleground states. How do you account for that? And your aides have said that this is the fourth quarter of your administration. But I don't know if you saw the morning talk shows, but there were several potential candidates for 2016 who were out there already.

Is the clock ticking? Are you running out of time? How much time do you have left? And what do you make of the notion that you're now a lame duck?

OBAMA: Well, traditionally after the last mid-term of the two-term presidency, since I can't run again, that's the label that you guys apply. Here's what I tell my -- my team. I told them this last week and I told them this this morning.

We have this incredible privilege of being in charge of the most important organization on earth - the U.S. government and our military and everything that we do for good around the world. And there's a lot of work to be done to make government work better, to make Americans safer,

to make opportunity available to more people, for us to be able to have a positive influence in every corner of the globe, the way we're doing right now in West Africa.

And I'm going to squeeze every last little bit of opportunity to help make this world a better place over these last two years. And -- and some of that is going to be what we can do administratively. And, you know, simple things, like how do we make customer service better in every agency? Or the things that we can do to -- to streamline, you know, how our veterans access care? Are there better ways that we can make businesses understand the programs that are available to them to promote their business or exports?

OBAMA: So, there's a whole bunch of stuff to do on that front. And, as I said before, there's going to be opportunities to work with Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill to get laws done. And, you know, if you look at the history of almost every president, those last two years, all kinds of stuff happens. In some cases, stuff that we couldn't predict.

So -- the one thing I'm pretty confident about, Jim, is, I'm going to be busy for the next two years. And the one thing that I want the American people to be confident about is that every day, I'm going to be filling up my time trying to figure out how I can make their lives better. And if I'm doing that, at the end of my presidency, I'll say, "We played that fourth quarter well, and we played the game well." And the only difference between, I guess, basketball and -- and politics is that the only score that matters is how'd somebody else do? Not how you did. And that's the score I'm keeping.

Am I going to be able to look back and say, "Are more people working? Are the bank accounts better? Are more kids going to college? Is housing improved? Is the financial system more stable? Are younger kids getting a better education? Do we have greater energy independence? Is the environment cleaner? Have done something about climate change? Have we, you know, done something about climate change?"

Have we, you know, dealt with an ongoing terrorist threat and helped to bring about stability around the world? You know.

And those things, every single day I've got an opportunity to make a difference on those fronts, which is...

(CROSSTALK)

QUESTION: So you're not satisfied where you are now?

OBAMA: Absolutely not. I wouldn't be -- I wouldn't be satisfied as long as I'm meeting somebody who has a -- doesn't have a job and wants one. I'm not gonna be satisfied as long as there's a kid who writes me a letter and says I've got \$60,000 worth of debt and I don't know how to pay it back.

And the American people aren't satisfied. So, you know, I want to do everything I can to deliver for them.

QUESTION: And how about Democrats? The fact that they kept you out of the battleground states. Does that kind of bug you a little bit?

OBAMA: Listen, I -- As I think some of you saw when I was out on the campaign trail, I love campaigning. I love talking to ordinary people. I love listening to their stories. I love shaking hands and getting hugs, and just seeing the process of democracy and citizenship manifest itself during an election.

But I'm also a practical guy, and ultimately every candidate out there had to make their own decisions about what they thought would be most helpful for them. And, you know, I wanted to make sure that I'm respectful of their particular region, their particular state or congressional district, and if it was more helpful for them for me to be behind the scenes, I'm happy to do it.

I don't have,,,

(CROSSTALK)

OBAMA: I'll let other people analyze that. But what I will emphasize is that one of the nice things about being in the sixth year of your presidency is you've seen a lot of ups and downs, and you've gotten more than your fair share of attention.

And, you know, I've had the limelight and I've -- there have been times where the requests for my appearances were endless. There have been times where politically we were down. And it all kind of evens out, which is why what's most important, I think, is keeping your eye on the ball, and that is very actually getting some good done.

Scott Horsily (ph), last question.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. President. You mentioned that where your policies actually were on the ballot, they often did better than members of your party?

OBAMA: Yes.

QUESTION: Does that signal some shortcoming on your part or on the party's part in framing this election and communicating to the American people what it is that Democrats stand for?

OBAMA: You know, I do think that, you know, one area where I know we're constantly experimenting and trying to do better is just making sure the people know exactly what it is we're trying to accomplish and what we have accomplished in clear ways that people can -- that understand how it affects them.

And, you know, I think the minimum wage, I talked about it a lot on the campaign trail, but, you know, I'm not sure it penetrated well enough to make a difference.

Part of what I also think we've got to look at is the two-thirds of people who were eligible to vote and just didn't vote. You know, one of the things that I'm very proud of in 2008 and 2012,

when I ran for office, was we got people involved who hadn't been involved before. We got folks to vote who hadn't voted before: particularly young people. And -- and that was part of the promise.

And the excitement was, if you get involved, if you participate, if you embrace that sense of citizenship, then things change. And -- and not just in abstract ways, in concrete ways. Somebody gets a job who didn't have it before. Somebody gets health care who didn't have it before. Or a student is able to go to college who couldn't afford it before.

And sustaining that, especially in midterms elections, has proven difficult. Sustaining that sense of if you get involved, then you know, if you vote, then there's going to be a big change out there. And then partly, I think when they look at Washington, they say nothing's working and it's not making a difference and there's just a constant slew of bad news coming over the TV screen, then you can understand how folks would get discouraged.

But, it's my job to figure this out as best I can. And if the way we are talking about issues isn't working, then I'm going to try some different things. If the ways that we're approaching the Republicans in Congress isn't working, you know, I'm going to try different things.

Whether it's having a drink with Mitch McConnell or letting John Boehner beat me again at golf, or what -- what -- what -- or weekly press conferences, I don't know if that would be effective.

(LAUGHTER)

But you know, whatever I think might make a difference in this, you know, I'm going to be trying out up until my last day in office. But I'll close with what I said to -- in my opening statement. I am really optimistic about America. I know that runs counter to the current mood. But when you look at the facts, our economy is stronger than just about anybody's.

Our energy production is better than just about anybody's. We've slashed our deficit by more than half. More people have health insurance. Our businesses have the strongest balance sheets that they've had in decades. Our young people are just incredibly talented and gifted, and more of them are graduating from high school and more of them are going on to college and more women are getting degrees and entering into the workforce.

And one part of the reason I love campaigning is you travel around the country. Folks are just good. They're smart and they're hard working, and they're not always paying a lot of attention to Washington. In some cases, they've given up on Washington, but their impulses are not sharply partisan, and their impulses are not ideological. They're really practical, good, generous people.

So, and we continue to be a magnet for the best and brightest from all around the world. We have all the best cards relative to every other country on Earth. Our armed forces, you talk to them, you know, I had a chance this morning to just call some of the -- our health service that is operating in Liberia. And the amount of hope and professionalism that they've brought has galvanized the entire country and has built -- they've built a platform effectively for other

countries suddenly to start coming in, and we're seeing real progress in fighting the disease in a country that just a month or a month-and-a-half ago was desperate and had no hope.

So all that makes me optimistic. And my job over the next couple of years is to do some practical, concrete things as much as possible with Congress. If it's not possible with Congress, on my own, to show people why we should be confident and to give people a sense of progress and a sense of hope.

That doesn't mean there aren't going to be ongoing nagging problems that are stubborn and can't be solved overnight. And probably the biggest one is the fact that despite economic growth, wages and income have still not gone up. And that's a long-term trend that we've seen for 10, 20, 30 years. And it makes people worried about not just their own situation, but whether their kids are going to be doing better than they did, which is the essence of the American Dream.

I think there are some concrete things we can do to make sure that wages and incomes do go up. Minimum wage in those five states was a good start. But -- but I think more than anything, what I want to communicate over these next two years is the promise and possibility of America. This is just an extraordinary country. And our democracy is messy and we're diverse and we're big, and there are times when you're a politician and you're disappointed with election results.

But maybe I'm just getting older. I don't know. It doesn't make me mopey. It energizes me because it means that this democracy is working. And people in America were restless and impatient and we want to get things done. And even when things are going good, we want them to do better. And that's why this is the greatest country on earth. That's why I'm so privileged to have a chance to be president for the next couple of years.

All right? Thank you, everybody.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/transcript-president-obamas-remarks-on-midterm-election-results/2014/11/05/491a02b2-6524-11e4-9fdc-d43b053ecb4d_story.html