

Obama won't do what the people want until after November. Congress just won't do it at all.

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

September 8, 2014

“There is something odd,” [writes Ezra Klein](#), “about accusing Republicans of politicizing action on immigration reform while you’re delaying it because of the electoral calendar.”

He’s referring to [President Obama’s decision to hold off on executive action on immigration](#)—action the president previously named as a priority—until after the fall midterms. And Klein’s right, of course: it’s a nakedly political move on Obama’s part, and it makes his accusations that Republicans are playing politics sound pretty hollow.

But while this certainly isn’t Obama’s most inspiring moment, as an example of political hypocrisy it’s pretty unremarkable stuff. Politicians always play politics, and they always do it while accusing their opponents of doing it.

To be sure, the president’s decision to delay action will have [very real consequences for immigrants living in the U.S.](#) But it's possible that the political long game he’s playing will have even larger effects. Immigration reform is dead in the current Congress, but what about the next one? Obama’s deciding to prioritize helping the Democrats keep the Senate over taking executive action on immigration in the short term. Reform might not happen in the next Congress either, even if the Democrats keep the Senate. But if they don't, it almost certainly won't.

And it's important to recognize that, politically speaking, Obama's decision here is a symptom rather than a cause. If our political system were functioning properly, the fact that [a large majority of Americans support a path to citizenship](#) would compel Congress to, you know, pass one.

"It is hard to attack Republicans for defying the will of the majority of the American people," Klein continues, "but then delay your own immigration actions until after the election." Sure, I guess; it certainly makes for weak rhetoric, at least. But American elections aren't about enacting majoritarian policy views, not really.

They're about the possibility of handing over the keys and letting the other guys drive for a while. Whether we're actually going where most voters want—or, for that matter, going anywhere at all—is a less closely related question than we might like to think.

That's because neither the House nor the Senate answers to national majorities—and national elected officials have intense incentives to be more loyal to their party than to the people. Obama's change of course on immigration shows, not for the first time, that he's very much a part of this broken system, not the transcendent healer-of-our-politics his 2008 rhetoric suggested.

But Obama didn't break the political system. And he didn't prevent Congress from passing immigration reform.