

OBAMA (AND JOHN BOEHNER) ON AL PUNTO

Since I pushed Obama's appearance on Univision's Al Punto the other day, I thought I should watch it.

The Obama interview lasted about 15 minutes (as did the Boehner interview that followed) and included—in addition to the questions about whether undocumented workers and health care reform I discuss in more detail below—the following questions (working from memory—my Spanish too rusty to live-blog **and** retranslate while listening!!):

- Whether the opposition to Obama's policies stem from racism (he gave the answer about delegitimizing government he has given elsewhere)
- Presenting a claim John Boehner made—that Democrats don't have the votes to pass health care by themselves—whether the Democrats could do it on their own (Obama gave a typical answer celebrating bipartisanship but saying he thought it would pass)
- Whether Obama supported a public option and whether it could be passed (Obama repeated his answers about the importance of the public option as part of a larger reform, and said he did not

believe that it was dead)

- Whether Obama, who has said he supports more cultural exchange with Cuba, supported a big concert they're doing there
- What Obama would do regarding Honduras (Obama took a middle ground, appealing to having a more legitimate election in the future)
- Whether Obama would fulfill his promise to put forth immigration reform in the first year of his Administration (again, Obama took a middle ground, and pointed out he promised he'd have to get it passed)

The most important questions, of course, had to do with the exclusion of undocumented workers from the health exchange (and therefore from health care in the United States). Al Punto host Jorge Ramos asked Obama whether this policy made sense in about three different ways (and asked the same question in his interview of John Boehner). Both Obama and Boehner generally responded by pretending that exclusion from the exchange didn't amount to exclusion from health care (Obama said something like, "well, if they buy health care from insurers directly, that's between them and the insurer"). Both, too, responded to questions about health care by talking about the need for immigration reform. Ramos asked Obama specifically about the number of children born in this country who, because at least one parent is undocumented, will have problems accessing health care (if I heard it right, Obama said he'd like to cover these

children in SCHIP).

Obama's worst answer, IMO (I'm going to try to find a transcript of this) was whether Democrats had stiffened the language excluding undocumented workers in response to Joe "You Lie!" Wilson's outburst in Congress. I couldn't make out Obama's answer very well, but he basically made up some line about those moves happening simultaneously—that the tie between Wilson's outburst and the new language in the bill was just a coincidence.

Yeah right.

One of the other most interesting questions concerned the use of the term "illegal immigrants" instead of "undocumented workers"—I believe Ramos was referring to this line from Obama's address to Congress:

There are also those who claim that our reform efforts would insure illegal immigrants. This, too, is false. The reforms – the reforms I'm proposing would not apply to those who are here illegally.

Again, Obama's response was weak, an attempt to pretend a really bad use of "illegal" didn't imply he had picked up some of the nativist attitudes directed at undocumented workers.

Here's the complete transcript from Obama's appearance on Univision's Al Punto.

Jorge Ramos

Let's start. I want to understand, first of all, why there is so much opposition to your healthcare reform? Is it the expanding role of the government or is it as Republicans told us that we are looking into trillion dollar deficits?

President Obama

Yeah. You know I think that.

Jorge Ramos

What is it?

President Obama

Well, part of it is, I think, that the opposition has made a decision. They are just not going to support anything, for political reasons. I think there are some legitimate concerns about the fact that this is a big deal. I mean, we've been talking for forty years about trying to change healthcare. And what I've said is that we can't keep on doing what we're doing right now. That people who don't have health insurance, the numbers are growing. And that's true especially in the Latino community. On the other hand, people who do have health insurance, it's very insecure. So, I think that we can solve those two problems. Give people healthcare who need it, provide security to people who do have health care, and we can do it without adding to our deficit. And we can do it, and actually, over time drive costs down for everybody by making the system work better. But, having said all that, you know, people naturally are worried even though they know that what they get is not very good, they are still worried that, you know, any change might make them more insecure. And so my whole job is to try to insist and constantly explain to people that if you've got health insurance already, I'm not asking you to change it. But if you don't have health insurance or you're not satisfied with your health insurance, this is going to give you a better option and we can do it in a very cost effective way, because the healthcare system currently wastes so much money.

Jorge Ramos

But what I want to understand, Mr. President, is what's really behind all the opposition? As you know, President Jimmy Carter said that part of the opposition against you has to do with the fact that you are African-American. Do you agree with him?

President Obama

You know, I think that it really has more to do

with the fact that there are some people who think government can't do anything. As I said, there's some people who just cynically want to defeat me politically, but there's nothing new about that.

Jorge Ramos

Well what about the racism...

President Obama

I think it's much more an issue of people just thinking that government of any sort is bad. And that group is not new. They , you know, were mad at FDR when he started Social Security. They were mad at Lyndon Johnson when he started Medicare. And, you know, I think that the fact that this has become such a heated debate, is a sign that we're really trying to change the system. That we're not just tinkering around the edges. Now, I do hope that people can maintain civility in these conversations. And I've been concerned about how much anger and venom has been expressed. I think that we can disagree and still be polite, and still give other people the benefit of the doubt that they want what's best for the United States.

Jorge Ramos

Now, being very pragmatic, I had the opportunity to talk to Minority Leader John Boehner, and he told us that Democrats right now don't have the votes to pass any healthcare reform without Republicans .

President Obama

Well, you know...

Jorge Ramos

Is he right? Do you have the votes? That's the question.

President Obama

Let me put it this way. You know, I'd love to get Republican votes, but I don't count on them. And I'm confident that we're gonna get healthcare passed.

Jorge Ramos

But do you, at this point, do you have the

votes?

President Obama

I'm confident we're gonna get healthcare passed.

Jorge Ramos

Those who favor a public option say that creating an insurance mandate without a public option is really rewarding the insurance companies that brought us into this mess in the first place. Do you agree? How do you respond to that?

President Obama

Well I think that the public option is an important part of keeping insurance companies in check by giving them competition, giving consumers more choice. If we're going to have very explicit reforms that say, you can't drop people because of pre-existing conditions, that you can't charge people exorbitant out-of-pocket expenses, that you can't place lifetime limits so that suddenly people find themselves without care. And the public option is one element, but just one element of keeping those insurance companies in check.

Jorge Ramos

So at this point the public option is not dead.

President Obama

I absolutely do not believe that it's dead. I think that it's something that we can still include as part of a comprehensive reform effort.

Jorge Ramos

Do you believe that undocumented immigrants should be required to buy insurance? Basically, what I would like to know is, could you clarify if they will have access to private insurance in the exchange?

President Obama

Right now, the plan that we've put forward, I want to be absolutely clear, should not include undocumented workers, because I think that as is true with SCHIP, as is true with all our various social insurance programs, you've gotta be an

American citizen, or at least a legal resident in terms of access for those programs. Now, as I've said before, and as I did with SCHIP, I do think that children of legal residents, for example, should have access to care. That's good for all of us. And that's a principal that I will continue to fight for.

Jorge Ramos

But if an undocumented immigrant wants to buy private insurance...

President Obama

If they want to buy private insurance, then that's between them and their private insurer, but they can't do it through the exchange because the exchange is going to be part of an overall plan including subsidies and I don't think it's fair for American taxpayers to be including those subsidies. Particularly when there's not gonna be a lot of money to go around.

Jorge Ramos

Then, there are going to be millions of people who are not going to be covered. So if undocumented immigrants can't get neither public or private insurance, then they're going to keep on going to the emergency rooms of the hospitals, and this is too expensive. Isn't that exactly what you wanted to avoid in the first place?

President Obama

Well look, the... Here's what I'd like to deal with. I'd really like to solve our immigration problem, but I can't solve every problem all at once. The immigration problem is one set of problems and a whole range of issues are raised through immigration. Healthcare is a problem that doesn't just affect all Americans. It especially affects Hispanic Americans, who have the highest rate of uninsurance. Now I'm not talking about undocumented now.

Jorge Ramos

I have a specific problem and let me see how we can find a solution. There are four million children born in the United States who have at

least one undocumented parent. What are they supposed to do?

President Obama

Well, if they are born in the United States, they are U.S. citizens. And we're gonna make sure...

Jorge Ramos

Yes, but one of their parents...

President Obama

We're gonna make sure that those children are covered, as we already have expanding coverage with respect to SCHIP. As I said, Jorge, we're gonna have to solve the immigration problem. That's a commitment that I have made.

Jorge Ramos

I'm interested to know what happened after Joe Wilson said you lied in Congress. Was that the moment in which you think undocumented immigrants got involved into these healthcare debates?

President Obama

No, no, no...

Jorge Ramos

What happened?

President Obama

Well, well... Keep in mind, first of all, I said that undocumented workers wouldn't be covered before Joe Wilson shouted. So obviously, if there was any cause and effect, it was from what I said. It wasn't me responding to him. But this is a position that I have said consistently during the campaign. There's been no change in my approach.

Jorge Ramos

Now, in your speech to Congress you used the words "illegal immigrants." However, and I remember very clearly, during the campaign you were very careful to use the words "undocumented immigrants". Why the change? You said words matter. Now, why do you choose to use the language that is being used by...

President Obama
Well, keep in mind...

Jorge Ramos
...those who criticize immigrants.

President Obama
Well, keep in mind what I was addressing. I was addressing misinformation by the other side that was engaging in scare tactics. So I was essentially quoting them. I was saying, "for those of you who are saying that illegal immigrants are going to be covered under this plan," I said that's not true. Right? So I'm using their language because I was addressing the misinformation that they are providing. And I was speaking directly to an audience, the American people, who because of this misinformation, I think actually were very responding oftentimes in a negative way.

Jorge Ramos
OK, so. But what I wanted to ask you is about what Latino's call, "la promesa de Obama – Obama's promise." On May 28th you told me, and I am quoting, "what I can guarantee is that we will have in the first year an immigration bill that I strongly support." And then I asked again, "in the first year?" And you said, "Yes, in the first year." This is your promise and the question that many of them have is, are you going to keep your promise. Can you do it before January 20th?

President Obama
Here's what I've said. I have met with not just the Hispanic caucus, but leaders from both the House and the Senate, Republican and Democrat. I've said I want to get this done. I've put Secretary Janet Napolitano, of Homeland Security, in charge of first making a whole host of administrative changes and eliminating the most negative practices that we have been seeing. And then what I've said is, start working up legislation that we think can, over time, move through Congress. Now, whether that bill gets introduced on November 15th or December 15th or January 15th, that's not really

the issue. I mean, it would be easy for us to get a bill introduced. The challenge is getting the bill passed. And there I've been realistic. What I said is that this is going to be a tough fight and that we're going to have to make sure that we are working as hard as we can to do it. I am not backing off one minute from getting this done, but let's face it, I've had a few things to do. We had an economic crisis that almost...

Jorge Ramos
I understand.

President Obama
...saw a financial meltdown. Healthcare has taken longer than I would have liked, but it's a big, tough issue. Immigration reform is gonna be tough as well, but I think we can get it done.

Jorge Ramos
Two more questions. Colombian singer Juanes will be performing this Sunday in Havana, but before that, he met with Secretary Clinton. Is your government supporting this concert and do you think that concerts like this and cultural exchanges between Cuba and the United States will promote democracy in Cuba?

President Obama
Well, let me be clear. The U.S. government isn't a concert promoter.

Jorge Ramos
Did he get your blessing? Or Secretary Clinton's blessing?

President Obama
I don't think it's a matter of us providing blessings. My understanding is that he's a terrific musician. He puts on a very good concert. I certainly don't think it hurts U.S./Cuban relations. These kinds of cultural exchanges. I wouldn't overstate the degree that it helps. I think what's gonna be more important is, as we have now opened up travel restrictions and remittance restrictions to Cuba. What I'd really like to see is Cuba starting to show that it wants to move away from some of the anti-

democratic practices of the past.

Jorge Ramos

And the last question has to do with Honduras.
Will you recognize the winner of the next
presidential election in November in Honduras?

President Obama

I really would like to see the parties embrace
the Arias approach. That will, I think, confer
much greater legitimacy on the elections that
are coming up.

Jorge Ramos

Mr. President, thank you so much.

President Obama

Oh, it was a pleasure. Thank you.