

In Rebuttal to Obama, Rubio Tries to Soften Republicans' Tone

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, seeking to help the Republican Party shed its image as a defender of the rich, stressed his working-class upbringing and the need to save social safety net programs during his response on Tuesday to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address.

The back-to-back speeches by Obama and Rubio underscored the differences between Democrats and Republicans that have brought gridlock to Washington for more than two years.

Whereas Obama proclaimed that the United States cannot get on the path to prosperity just by cutting government spending, as Republicans demand, Rubio warned that Washington cannot tax its way to economic growth.

The senator indicated that tax increases, even if focused on the wealthy, can wind up affecting middle-class areas such as his neighborhood in Miami because higher taxes can stymie job creation.

"Mr. President, I don't oppose your plans because I want to protect the rich. I oppose your plans because I want to protect my neighbors," Rubio said in calling for low taxes and less government spending and regulation—policies he said would boost economic growth.

In a speech that was notably more partisan than the president's, Rubio belittled the accomplishments of Obama's first term, including the healthcare overhaul that Republicans derisively call "Obamacare."

"His solution to virtually every problem we face is for

Washington to tax more, borrow more and spend more,” Rubio said.

For Rubio, 41, the speech represented a potential star-making moment at a time when Republicans are desperate to reach out to the nation’s fast-growing Latino population, which voted overwhelmingly for Obama and Democrats in the November elections. The senator is widely viewed as a potential contender for the presidency in 2016.

The stakes of the speech seemed evident at times.

Rubio appeared to wipe away sweat from his temples several times during his 15-minute speech, and seemed to struggle with what later became known on Twitter as “dry mouth moments.” At one point he made an awkward reach for a water bottle that nearly pulled him out of range of the television camera.

Rubio’s emphasis on his modest roots—his Cuban-born father and mother came to the United States in the 1950s and worked as a bartender and hotel maid, respectively—signaled that he and Republicans now are trying to relate to voters in a way that eluded Mitt Romney, the party’s 2012 presidential nominee.

Romney, 65, a former Massachusetts governor who made a fortune at his private equity firm, was cast by Democrats as an out-of-touch elitist during the campaign. It was an image that lowered his ratings among voters and was fed by Romney’s own comments that “47 percent” of Americans would never vote for him because they were dependent on government programs.

Romney’s stance on immigration—he touted a “self-deportation” plan under which the government essentially would make things so miserable for illegal immigrants that they would leave the United States voluntarily—further battered Republicans’ image among Latinos.

In the November 6 election, Latinos cast more than 70 percent of their votes for Obama.

Since then, Republicans have scrambled to portray their party as more tolerant and more understanding of the concerns of Latinos and the middle class.

A big part of that strategy has been to promote Rubio, a favorite of the conservative Tea Party movement who, at least when it comes to immigration, appears ready to buck the movement's no-compromises approach and work with Democrats on legislation.

Rubio presented a different face to America.

Instead of talking about self-deportation, he called for "a responsible, permanent solution to the problem of those who are here illegally."

"He's young and Hispanic. This is a party that's just been creamed in terms of appealing to ethnics of any sort," said Stephen Hess, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Rubio has joined a bipartisan group of eight senators who have called for providing a path to U.S. citizenship for many of the 11 million foreigners who are living in the United States illegally.

Rubio underscored Republicans' outreach effort to Latino voters by delivering a taped version of his speech in Spanish for Spanish-language television networks.

Republican 'Savior?'

The 2016 elections are nearly four years away, but hopes that Rubio might help Republicans at least cut into Democrats' advantage among Latinos have been such that Time magazine called him a "Republican savior."

In an attempt to blunt criticisms that Republicans want to balance budgets by gutting social safety net programs, Rubio noted that the Medicare healthcare program for the elderly and disabled "is especially important to me."

The senator, who won election to the U.S. Congress in 2010 on a wave of Tea Party successes that stressed smaller government, said Medicare “provided my father the care he needed to battle cancer and ultimately die with dignity.”

But he criticized Obama and Democrats for not seeking savings in such social programs. “Anyone who is in favor of leaving Medicare exactly the way it is right now is in favor of bankrupting it,” Rubio said.

More broadly, Rubio called for a pared-down federal government, drawing some sharp contrasts with Obama’s speech, which called for new government jobs programs and infrastructure investments that the president said would “reignite” the middle class and create new jobs.

While trying to recast his party’s image in more moderate terms, Rubio has racked up a voting record that is squarely conservative.

On Tuesday, he voted against renewing the “Violence Against Women Act” that passed the Senate 78-22 with only Republicans in opposition.

Rubio began the year as one of only eight senators opposing a “fiscal cliff” deal that raised taxes on those households with net incomes above \$450,000. And last year, he joined other Republicans in slowing legislation to keep student loan interest rates low.

Amid calls for sweeping reforms of the nation’s gun laws after December’s mass murder of school children in Connecticut, Rubio called for dealing with the rise of violence.

But aligning with gun-rights activists, he warned against “unconstitutionally undermining the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding Americans.”

Last week Rubio made waves when he questioned whether humans

were contributing to climate change, despite overwhelming evidence presented by most mainstream scientists.

In his speech late on Tuesday, Rubio made a nod toward clean fuels like solar and wind energy. "But God also blessed America with abundant coal, oil and natural gas," Rubio said, urging more production of those carbon-emitting fuels.

Even with his conservative voting record, Rubio has managed to position himself as somewhat of a moderate in his home state of Florida. That could help him appeal to a broad range of voters if he decides to wage a campaign for president in 2016.

Rubio "has done a pretty effective job of convincing many voters that he's not an ideologue," said Christopher Mann, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Miami.

Instead, Mann said, Rubio has "carved out (himself) as a voice of reason and moderation in the Republican Party."

[Click here to read the full transcript of Rubio's rebuttal to Obama's speech.](#)

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