

Hello there, I'm June Simms! And this is As It Is, from VOA Learning English.

This year will be a busy year for politics in the United States. President Barack Obama will present his main policy goals to the country in his State of the Union speech Tuesday night. Political campaigns will soon follow, with voters set to elect a new Congress in November. The results of those elections could have a major effect on the president, and on lawmakers from both major political parties.

Today Bob Doughty joins as we explore some of the issues the president is likely to discuss, and the effect these issues could have on the November elections. Here is Bob Doughty.

## **Obama Set To Talk to the Nation**

Tuesday night, President Obama gives his State of the Union speech to both houses of Congress. Tens of millions of people will watch the event on television. Political experts say the president can use the speech to help lift his public approval rating.

President Obama enjoyed a warm welcome before his State of the Union speech last year. His re-election victory was still fresh in people's minds.

“There is much progress to report.”

But 2013 was a difficult year for the president. This was largely because of battles over the country’s health care reform law, known as The Affordable Care Act. The administration had problems launching the health care reform program. And troubles with the government’s health care website did little to help ease public concerns. Approval ratings for President Obama fell to new lows.

The latest national opinion survey found that 40 percent of those questioned approved of the job the president is doing. Fifty-four percent did not. Quinnipiac University carried out the study. Tim Malloy works with Quinnipiac. He says Mr. Obama received negative ratings on several important issues.

“The president remains in negative territory now on the economy, the federal budget as well as foreign policy. Registered voters in big numbers still give the president a ‘thumbs down’ on health care.”

Ratings for the Democratic and Republican parties have not been much better. Congressional Democrats saw their approval ratings drop because of the health care debate. Political experts say the lower ratings could have a major effect on the elections in November.

Stuart Rothenberg is an independent political commentator.

“The problem is, all these Democrats supported and in most cases voted for Obamacare and so they are stuck with this and to the extent to which the president is weakened, the voters tend to say, I am going to send a message to Barack Obama. He is not on the ballot in the midterm. The only way they can do that is to vote against Democrats.”

While the Democrats were blamed for problems with the health care law, many Americans blamed Republicans for forcing large parts of the federal government to close in October. The government was closed for 16 days. The shutdown shook the public’s faith in Washington’s ability to govern.

“This is not what the American people think is acceptable. They want us to try to solve problems and be practical, even if we can’t get everything done.”

Stuart Rothenberg says Republicans lawmakers remain on the defensive about that.

“The Republican brand is still terrible. People think the Republicans made a huge mistake shutting down the government and most Republican strategists will tell you they made a huge mistake.”

## **Obama Looks for a Political Revival in 2014**

Political experts predict that Mr. Obama will use his State of the Union speech to call attention to economic issues in the United States. With the economy showing signs of improvement, they say, he will likely note the need to make economic success available to all Americans.

“In other words, we have got to make sure that this recovery leaves nobody behind and we have got a lot of work to do on that front.”

Mr. Obama may also talk about the issue of income inequality, and how best to narrow differences between the very rich and average Americans.

Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution calls this, the “Two Americas” issue.

“How is the economy doing, and that is both jobs and growth and wages. But behind that is economic inequality and the ‘Two Americas’ issue.”

A recent study found that the earnings of the wealthiest one percent of the population rose 275 percent over the past 30 years. During this period, earnings for the 60 percent of Americans in the middle class rose by just under 40 percent.

Thomas Mann says Democrats hope that talk about the economy, especially economic fairness, will help their candidates in November.

Opposition Republicans say economic growth and creating jobs are also important goals for them.

Another one of their goals is limiting the size of the federal government. House Speaker John Boehner says slowing the growth of government social welfare programs is a Republican goal this year.

“Yet the president refuses, and Democrats refuse to discuss changes to those programs unless Republicans are willing to raise taxes. We are not going to raise taxes.”

Ron Bonjean is a Republican strategist. He develops and executes action plans for the Republican Party. He says the health care law will be a main target for Republicans this year.

“It is health care at this point. It is the incompetence going on within the Obama administration on how that is being handled.”

The State of the Union offers the president his best chance to set out a plan of action that includes domestic and foreign policy goals.

Political specialists say foreign policy issues could also affect the November elections. Two such issues are how to deal with Iran’s nuclear program and the continuing terrorist threat from extremist groups around the world.

All 435 seats in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives will be at risk this year. Most political observers believe Republicans will keep or increase their control in the House. The real battle will be for control of the Senate. Democrats currently hold a majority in the Senate. But many of the 35 Senate races this year take place in states where Republicans have a good record.

Political expert John Fortier says second term presidents often have trouble regaining their political influence. This can limit their ability to get new laws passed in Congress.

“Usually presidents see their popularity ebb away a bit. They are often facing a Congress of the other party or at least part of the Congress, and so the president does not have the ability to work his agenda through the Congress as he did at the beginning of his first term.”

He says political battles leading up to the November elections could change things.

“The long term trend in midterm elections is they go against the president. I think the big question for Republicans is can they get enough seats to win the Senate?”

That is As It Is. I’m Bob Doughty. Thanks for spending time with us today.



And I'm June Simms. Have a question or comment about this show? We would love to hear from you. Email us at [learningenglish@voanews.com](mailto:learningenglish@voanews.com). World news is coming up on VOA at the top of the hour, Universal Time.