

[By Alexander Bolton](#)

A sudden outburst of bipartisanship is sweeping Washington, presenting President Obama with an opportunity to move his agenda, but also a challenge to get it done quickly before this window inevitably slams shut.

In his State of the Union address on Tuesday, Obama will call on the two parties to work together on immigration and gun control — normally divisive issues.

But making that case will not be as hard as it used to be.

Since last month's fiscal-cliff deal, Republicans and Democrats have apparently tired of partisan showdowns.

As a result, unusual things have started to happen on Capitol Hill.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) forged a deal with Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.) to reform the filibuster rule; Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) praised House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.); bipartisan groups of House and Senate lawmakers are teaming up on immigration; a bipartisan House bill has been launched to stiffen penalties against straw purchasers of firearms; and House freshmen are planning a bipartisan bowling session this month.

The catalyst was the 2012 election. In his widely covered speech at the American Enterprise Institute last week, Cantor sought to broaden the GOP's focus to education, healthcare and workforce matters, traditionally Democratic issues.

"It is my hope that I can stand before you in two years and report back that our side, as well as

the president's, found within us the ability to set differences aside, to provide relief to so many millions of Americans who simply want their life to work again," Cantor said

Schumer, who often jousts with Cantor in the press last Congress, changed his tune, saying, "If House Republicans can adapt their agenda to match Leader Cantor's words, this Congress could surprise people with how productive it can be."

The season of chumminess is, of course, likely to be short-lived.

Sen. Dan Coats (D-Ind.), who with Sen. Ron Wyden (R-Ore.) has introduced the only detailed bipartisan tax reform plan in Congress, said renditions of kumbaya "quickly seem to dissolve to partisanship."

But, he added, the new bipartisanship is, while it lasts, "to the president's advantage."

Can Obama, who admits he failed to change Washington's bickering ways in his first term, seize on a new chance in his second?

Lawmakers say the president's Tuesday speech will set the tone for the next 11 months, which is all the time the parties have to pass big bills before they dig in for the next election.

To have a successful year, Obama probably needs to sign a landmark bill before the August congressional recess. In his first year, 2009, Congress swiftly passed the Lilly Ledbetter Act and the economic stimulus bill, but healthcare reform stumbled along until passage in 2010.

Obama's high approval ratings are sure to fall, and bipartisanship on Capitol Hill is always fleeting. Timing is everything — and Obama's time is now.

"It's a very important speech. He had an opportunity to reach out in his inaugural address and he chose not to do that," said Rep. Tom Cole (Okla.), who was one of the first Republicans last year to propose raising taxes on wealthy families to reach a compromise on the fiscal cliff.

After two years of gridlock, Cole said his colleagues are getting more sophisticated about identifying areas where they can work with Democrats without surrendering their principles.

While there is optimism that immigration and gun bills will get done, tax and entitlement reform are stuck in neutral.

Cole said Obama does not show the same zeal for deal-making that President Clinton did.

"Real bipartisanship is Bill Clinton and the Republican Congress actually making fiscal progress and doing welfare reform in the 1990s," he said.

Clinton's welfare compromise secured his 1996 reelection. Obama seems less inclined to give ground on entitlement reform after beating Mitt Romney. He has talked about changes to Social Security and Medicare, but implementing them is not high on his agenda.

Obama revealed some hints last Thursday about what to expect in his State of the Union address. Speaking to House Democrats at their annual retreat in Lansdowne, Va., he said he would call on Congress to stop \$85 billion in automatic spending cuts slated for March 1 and urged Democrats to rally behind his proposals for immigration reform and gun control.

He also pledged to discuss job creation, improvements to education and reducing America's dependence on foreign oil. He has hit these in past addresses to Congress.

Yet Obama made no mention of cutting Medicare and Social Security, which he considered doing in 2011 in talks with Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio). Instead, he left Democrats buoyed by the impression that he would fight for the sweeping liberal policies he articulated in his

second inaugural address.

"There was a lot of enthusiasm about his inaugural address, about how he fully embraced his victory and embraced his agenda," said Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.), who recently launched a bipartisan energy efficiency caucus.

"He said ... he meant to govern according to what he promised in the campaign. I don't know what else Republicans expected," Welch said. "I think you'll see him do everything he can to find common ground as long as it doesn't require him to give up his commitment to the middle class."

Democrats say the GOP is in retreat.

"The president won a convincing victory and that fact is not lost on Speaker Boehner, Leader Cantor and the Republicans. It's a new reality," Welch said.

Rep. Patrick Meehan (Pa.), a Republican co-sponsor of the bill against straw purchasing of guns, identified cybersecurity and the Violence Against Women Act as "good ones for collaboration."

He also cited energy and transportation as two other areas where lawmakers could make a "real difference."

Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.), who teamed with Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio) in the past to pass pension reform, said his colleagues have grown tired of partisan stalemate.

"There's no question about that," he said. "We don't like what's happened. That's one of the reasons there were efforts made to tone things down. Not just with rules reform but beyond the rules."