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GOP has perfect opportunity for real reforms

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"Hey, Republicans, you've just won four more years in the White House and bigger majorities in both the House and Senate. What are you gonna do now?"

That seems to be the question on everybody's mind. Here's hoping that we'll take our new majorities and put forward a real reform agenda. If I were crafting the reform agenda, here are a few items I'd put near the top:

Social Security reform. Once a political "third rail" that nobody dared touch; however, President Bush showed once again that you can campaign on meaningful reform and survive.

It's now time to move beyond campaigning and push substantive reforms through the Congress. The central feature has to be private accounts that will give Americans, particularly younger workers, an opportunity to receive a better return on their contributions.

Two bills to accomplish this have been introduced (I've co-authored one of them). Now is the time to move ahead.

Health care reform. The key to meaningful reform is not more government intervention, but to allow the free market to control costs and improve quality through choice and competition. President Bush can build on what has already been started with health savings accounts. Giving individuals the same tax benefits as businesses to obtain health insurance should be our next move, along with allowing the purchase of insurance across state lines. Rep. John Shadegg has championed these free-market reforms for years and has several bills in the hopper.

Immigration reform. Nothing will be more important to Arizona over the coming years than meaningful immigration reform at the federal level. It is easy to focus on Arizona's southern border and assume we can solve the problem by only increasing border enforcement. We can't. While enhanced border enforcement must be part of the package, it has to be coupled with serious workplace enforcement. Further, we've got to deal with the 8 million to 14 million illegal aliens who are already in the country.

An amnesty like the one that Congress passed in 1986 is not the answer. We should not reward illegal activity. But neither can we pretend that we don't need the labor being provided by those who are illegally here.

The key is to establish a temporary worker program that recognizes our labor needs without providing a shortcut to citizenship for those who have broken the law. Employers must be given the resources to immediately ascertain the status of those applying for work. Once these resources are provided and a temporary worker program is in place, severe sanctions can and should be put in place to punish employers who flout the law.

Legislation to implement these recommendations has already been introduced by Rep. Jim Kolbe, Sen. John McCain and me. We can't afford to wait any longer. Arizona is paying a heavy price for the federal government's failure to deal with this issue.

Transportation spending reform. With nearly 4,000 earmarks in this year's highway bill, it is clear that the primary goal of federal transportation spending is buying votes, not building roads. This practice has steadily worsened over the 25 years since the Interstate Highway System was completed. In truth, there is no reason to continue with an 18-cent-per-gallon federal gas tax when it would take less than 4 cents per gallon to maintain the Interstate Highway System.

For the long term, we need to turn back the taxing authority to the states (I've introduced legislation to that effect). For the short term, we've got to ensure that West Virginia's earmarks don't come out of Arizona's funds.

Overall spending reform. If the past four years are any guide, controlling spending is one of the most significant challenges when Republicans control both the White House and Congress. Republicans are pretty good at saying no to increased spending proposed by Democrats, but we seem to be wholly incapable of saying no to spending proposed by Republicans.

The Democrats' penchant for pork-barrel spending, long ridiculed by Republicans, has been adopted and perfected by Republicans. Reversing the trend will likely require two measures. First, we need enforceable budget rules - rules that can't be waived by a simple majority. Second, we need the president to make good on a veto threat or two.

As Republicans, we profess to believe in the principles of economic freedom, individual responsibility and limited government. With the tax cuts and reforms to welfare and other programs of the past several years, our policies have proven that we believe in economic freedom and individual responsibility. It is now time to show the voters that we believe in limited government as well.

Jeff Flake, a Republican, is a congressman representing the Sixth District of Arizona, which includes parts of Mesa and Chandler and all of Gilbert, Queen Creek, and Apache Junction.

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