Debt Ceiling

On Tuesday, the House passed a debt limit bill by a vote of 221-201 suspending the debt limit until March 15, 2015. 28 Republicans joined 193 Democrats in voting for final passage. The Senate vote was 55-43, which will delay any debt ceiling and fiscal cliff arguments until the 114th Congress. The swift passage, points to a fundamental shift in dynamics in the debate over how to extend the nation’s borrowing authority. Following last year’s Government shutdown, House Republican leadership is moving away from the tactic of attaching legislative demands to debt limit increases.

Comprehensive Immigration Reform

On Sunday February 9, Senator Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) floated the idea of enacting the “Gang of Eight’s” comprehensive immigration reform law but delay implementation until after President Obama leaves office in 2017. The plan is meant to target the heart of House Republican resistance to taking up immigration reform this year—they simply don’t trust the President to implement the law, particularly provisions on border security and interior enforcement. Another idea being floated is the use of a “discharge petition”, an obscure legislative maneuver, which would allow supporters of the immigration reform to circumvent the Republican majority in the House by bringing the measure directly to the House floor if they can collect at least 218 signatures.

The talk of possible immigration reform comes after Republican House leadership circulated a one page document titled “standards for immigration reform” to their caucus. The document states the House will not go to conference with the Senate-passed comprehensive immigration bill but that immigration reform may be taken up on a piecemeal basis. While the document is extremely broad, it does endorse a pathway to citizenship for “Dreamers” as well as cites the need to increase visas and green cards for graduates of U.S. universities. The higher education associations sent a letter this week praising House leadership for offering the immigration standards and urging action this year.

Final Regulations on the Affordable Care Act (ACA) for adjuncts and student employees

The Obama Administration released its long-awaited final guidance on how institutions should calculate hours of adjunct instructors and student workers for purposes of the new ACA mandate that employers provide health insurance to those who work more than 30 hours a week.

- Adjuncts — the rules call for an additional two and one-quarter hours of service per week for each hour of teaching or classroom time for crediting hours.

- Student workers — the rules exclude work-study employment from any count of work hours, but the Administration declined to provide an exemption for student workers over all. As a result, institutions will be required to provide health insurance to teaching and research assistants who work more than 30 hours a week.