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## **Peter Roskam: Obama's Republican Buddy**

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**Could Peter Roskam, who cut deals with the president back when they were cub state legislators, be a key GOP bridge to the White House? James Warren reports.**

If House Republicans need insights on dealing with President Obama amid their fiscal cliff melodrama, they need go no farther than their chief deputy whip, Rep. [Peter Roskam of Illinois](#).



At on time, Roskam and Obama were collegial, if not buddies. (Tom Williams / CQ Roll Call-Getty Images (FILE))

“The relationship was courteous and cordial,” says Roskam. “I don’t want to overcharacterize it. But he was somebody, well, we could spar on the Senate floor, and he was a person taken seriously, a good abstract thinker and somebody who kind of got the joke.”

After all, it wasn’t that long ago that Roskam and a then–virtually unknown Obama were state senators, traveling Illinois together virtually incognito, staying overnight in towns like Carbondale and Decatur as they ran what were often sparsely attended hearings on contentious issues related to reforming the death-penalty system.

Now Roskam finds himself both part of the [GOP leadership](#) dealing with Obama and clearly not on the same page with him. As he put it on CNBC last Friday morning: “The entire conversation since the election has been litigating one quarter of the president’s own architecture. All we’re talking about is revenue, revenues, revenues. The White House has been absolutely silent on 75 percent of their own described remedy, and that is, where are the cuts?”

So is Obama fundamentally different today from the man Roskam knew when they were both coming up in Illinois politics—the man with whom Roskam fashioned deals that led to significant changes in the state’s criminal-justice system?

“It’s two different people,” Roskam said in a phone chat. “You know, in the legislature, Barack Obama was somebody you could sit down and negotiate with. We did some of [death penalty] things together that were helpful and implemented good reforms because he was able to sit down, negotiate, and accept yes for an answer.

“Now I think the problem is that the president has not shown any bipartisanship. With Nancy Pelosi as House speaker and Harry Reid in the Senate, he could move an agenda. But with a Republican majority [in the House], his view is, you vote yes on my agenda. It’s as if there have been two different approaches. One resulted in good results. This is not yielding a good result.”

The feeling is apparently mutual. The Obama camp shows no signs of reaching across the aisle using his old Illinois colleague as a bridge. At this point, “I don’t think he has or can have much of a role,” says an Obama adviser.

A solid orator and debater, Roskam was a state Senate Republican floor leader for many years, part of a GOP “Fab 5” who saw themselves as a sort of conservative conscience in Springfield, the state capital, especially on fiscal issues.

Before Illinois Democrats took over control in 2003 after lengthy GOP rule, the Republican Senate president appointed him to chair a capital-punishment subcommittee to take testimony and propose recommendations on capital-punishment reforms based on a report of a blue-ribbon panel under the aegis of then–Republican Gov. George Ryan. Ryan would later gain renown, and notoriety, for declaring a moratorium on the death penalty, commuting more than 160 death sentences to life sentences and also being convicted of corruption (he’s now in [federal prison](#)).

The members of that small subcommittee included Obama, then a low-profile South Side state senator. During the summer and fall of 2002, the subcommittee traveled the state, conducting

hearings on the Ryan commission's recommendations, recalls then-committee staffer Peter Baroni. It was, by and large, a bipartisan group, though there were divisions, notably on an issue of particular concern to Obama: the recording of homicide interrogations.

Roskam and Obama traveled here and there together to hearings, "from Carbondale to Chicago and Peoria to Decatur," recalls Baroni, who was generally along for the ride. Everybody took their job very seriously. "We traveled all over, staying overnight at times, and often we were the only ones at the hearings."

Roskam and Obama were collegial, if not buddies, especially in the wake of redistricting that led to the Democratic takeover of the state Senate. "The relationship was courteous and cordial," says Roskam. "I don't want to overcharacterize it. But he was somebody, well, we could spar on the Senate floor, and he was a person taken seriously, a good abstract thinker and somebody who kind of got the joke."

Some saw the Democrats as flush with their new power; Obama seemed to reflect a certain bravado in insisting that all police interrogations be recorded, which was a radical notion at the time. In fact, his allies at the American Civil Liberties Union wouldn't initially bend on that issue and declined to bargain.

Over time, deals were struck between interests as diverse as the ACLU and prosecutors; Roskam was decidedly civil while being staunchly pro-capital punishment, recalls Scott Turow, the lawyer-author and former prosecutor who was on the governor's commission. Obama allowed many law-enforcement and GOP concerns to be incorporated into the final bill, but he so effectively sold as a sweeping victory what left-leaning groups deemed half a loaf that police departments through Illinois spent millions on video equipment to comply with a mandate that arguably wasn't quite a mandate.

"On some death-penalty measures, Obama could push the defense bar and the ACLU; I could push police and state's attorney," Roskam recalls. It explains why the final reforms were ones that, in the classic tradition of tough compromises, left many constituencies a bit unhappy.

Much of the Springfield goodwill between the two now seems like a thing of the past. But one can't help but wonder if it wouldn't help Congress climb out of the ditch if the two were able to find a way to work together again. Roskam is, after all, one of John Boehner's lieutenants. He's one of the few in his party's hierarchy to have had a bona fide election fight in recent years, losing in a 1998 GOP primary run and arriving in the House only after winning a 2006 squeaker for the seat long held by Republican stalwart Henry Hyde.

In that very bad GOP year, he edged out Democrat Tammy Duckworth, an Iraqi War veteran who [last month defeated](#) a Tea party favorite, Joe Walsh, and herself will enter Congress next month. He's proven an able and effective congressman and risen quickly in the party pecking order. And despite the majority of Illinois Democrats [hobbling](#) (and ultimately vanquishing) several Republican congressional incumbents in redistricting this year, Roskam sailed to reelection in his suburban-Chicago district.

While his past with Obama “comes up periodically at the leadership table,” the notion of being personally involved in talks with him isn’t realistic, Roskam says. For starters, “my relationship with him now is the same as it is with most: namely, little interaction,” he says, echoing a first-term theme among Republicans and even some high-ranking congressional Democrats.

Second, the real bargaining has to be between Obama and House Speaker John Boehner in his mind. “And Boehner is capable and well equipped. He doesn’t need any help.”

Following Obama’s reelection, Republicans don’t seem to be holding all that many cards and may have to decide how gracefully they want to lose. As for Roskam’s own take on how the high-stakes bargaining ends, he claims to have been optimistic until recent Hill appearances by Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner, who argued for greater authority to raise the debt ceiling and more stimulus spending, among other matters.

As Roskam told CNBC Friday, “Look, I come from the state of Illinois, which is an example of what not to do. The state had the same underlying problems, that is runaway spending problems, and they came up with the wrong solution: raise taxes, don’t deal with the underlying problem, chase an entrepreneurial class out.

“Seven billion dollars in current unpaid bills, more per capita debt than any state in the union [actually, it’s second, at \$9,624, behind New York’s \$13,840], and higher average unemployment rate,” he said. “It is a system for failure.”

Roskam declined to discuss the GOP House hierarchy [reassigning](#) several conservative, idiosyncratic members to lesser committee assignments as punishment for lack of fidelity to Boehner. He was less reluctant, however, to weigh in on the return from the presidential campaign trail of Rep. Paul Ryan and whether the failed vice-presidential candidate might constitute some longer-term threat to an established Republican order.

“It’s been a heroic return. He’s well regarded by colleagues. The important thing is that he’s gotten a lot of attention. But it’s based on the work he’s done, not a PR campaign. He’s been marinating in this issue of debt for 14 years, and he’s often the smartest guy in the room. But he doesn’t put you down.”

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