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Obama prepared to avoid Congress, go it alone on carrying out modest initiatives

By [Scott Wilson](#), Published: January 28

This wasn't the presidency Barack Obama had in mind after winning his historic election five years ago. But it is the one he believes he has left.

For the first time since taking office, Obama spoke to Congress on Tuesday evening from a clear position of confrontation, threatening to veto new Iran sanctions, warning against further moves against his health-care law and demanding action on a series of previously proposed economic measures.

The areas he identified for possible cooperation with a divided Congress have shrunk, leaving an agenda filled out by a growing number of modest initiatives that he told lawmakers he intends to carry out alone.

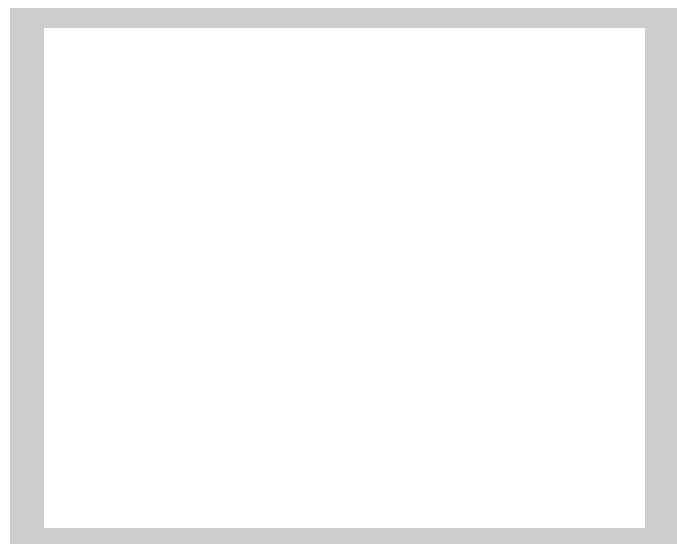
Among them is an executive order raising the minimum wage paid under future federal contracts. In a tone less resigned than dismissive, Obama said he intends to implement more than a dozen others this year, including efforts to improve job-training skills, technology in schools and fuel-efficiency standards in trucks.

The approach, outlined in a speech that ran more than an hour, reflects the White House's view that [Obama spent too much time](#) last year in conflict with recalcitrant lawmakers, rather than using the unilateral powers in his grasp.

But the go-it-mostly-alone strategy risks further antagonizing Congress and resting part of his legacy on executive actions that do not have the permanence, or breadth, of major legislation.

The more executive-style presidency [scores high with the public](#) after years of political deadlock in Washington. It also marks a refiguring of Brand Obama, of the politician who promised to govern more modestly and cooperatively with the opposition after the polarizing years of the George W. Bush administration.

In [his fifth State of the Union](#) address, Obama set that aside.



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By declaring his intention to ignore Congress when necessary as lawmakers looked on, the president framed [an election-year debate](#) about which party is more determined to solve the nation's enduring economic problems.

He called his ideas "concrete, practical proposals to speed up growth, strengthen the middle class and build new ladders of opportunity into the middle class."

"Some require congressional action, and I'm eager to work with all of you," he said. "But America does not stand still, and neither will I. So wherever and whenever I can take steps without legislation to expand opportunity for more American families, that's what I'm going to do."

The speech revealed Obama's frustration about his lack of progress in key areas, and the diminishing time left to secure his legacy after a largely lost year. He scolded lawmakers for last year's 16-day government shutdown, saying the paralysis showed that "we are not doing right by the American people."

He called on Congress to take up gun control again after defeating his proposals to restrict firearm sales last year, help close the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and refrain from working to repeal the Affordable Care Act after dozens of attempts.

"We owe it to the American people to say what we are for," he said, "not just what we are against."

Obama's speech showed just how much the hope and change he promised in his 2008 campaign has been honed down by years of partisan conflict, replaced by the narrower ambitions on display Tuesday.

The core of the address was a series of specific policy prescriptions to address the tenuous condition of the U.S. middle class and [the disparity in opportunity](#) that economic imbalances have opened. His tone was populist, if not overtly partisan.

In one reference that drew raucous bipartisan applause, Obama noted proudly that House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) was the "son of a barkeep," prompting a thumbs-up from his sometimes partisan opponent, who was seated behind him.

"After four years of economic growth, corporate profits and stock prices have rarely been higher, and those at the top have never done better," Obama said. "But average wages have barely budged. Inequality has deepened. Upward mobility has stalled."

He [delivered his first State of the Union](#) address in 2010, at the start of a midterm election year that ended with his party losing control of the House. He called [the loss a "shellacking."](#) and Congress has remained divided since.

As he addressed the nation four years ago, the health-care legislation he championed remained uncertain in Congress and the focus of debate nationwide. He called on lawmakers "to overcome the numbing weight of our politics."

"It's time the American people get a government that matches their decency," Obama said, adding that he intended to use his State of the Union speech that year "to talk about how together we can deliver on that promise."

Obama began 2012 with a rebuke to Congress, adopting the slogan "We can't wait" to announce a smaller set of executive actions on the economy, immigration and other issues.

But the slogan then was as much about campaigning as governing, and White House officials said it was designed to pressure Congress to act rather than to signal a turning away. His message Tuesday pointed more toward a new way of navigating Washington.

Obama has shifted tactics several times over the years to pursue legislation, sometimes to the frustration of his own party. Those differences have arisen most prominently when he [negotiated fiscal issues](#) with ideologically divided Republicans.

Congressional Democrats have at times demanded more support from Obama — or, at least, a better sense of policy priorities.

Now, the political interests of Obama and his party coincide more neatly than they have in years. By using executive action to [address climate change](#), economic policies such as the minimum wage and other issues important to the Democratic base and to independent voters, Obama will seek throughout the year to contrast his approach with Republican inaction in Congress.

The strategy could help Democrats, who are a long shot to take the House and in jeopardy of losing the Senate. But in some of the conservative states where Democrats need to do well in November, the perception of a presidential end run around Congress could do more harm than good to the party's candidates.

The White House thinks the pressure Obama will be able to apply to Republicans through executive actions could pay off in legislative progress. Fearing an obstructionist label, Republicans may decide it is better to act in concert with the president on some issues, such as immigration and infrastructure spending, than not to act at all.

Obama has preferred passing legislation to going around Congress, whether to secure new restrictions on gun purchases or new rules to address pollution. But the path has been increasingly narrow since his first State of the Union address, and his advisers have concluded that he has suffered politically by measuring too much of his success as president by his legislative record.

Some angry moments have occurred between Obama and lawmakers, most memorably during his address on health care in 2009. From the audience, Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) [shouted "You lie!"](#) when Obama said his health-care proposals would not insure illegal immigrants.


With his insistence Tuesday night that he will sidestep Congress if necessary, he placed himself in many ways against the institution, not just his most ardent Republican opponents.


It is, in one clear way, safe political ground: Only 16 percent of Americans approve of the way Congress is handling its job, [according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll](#) published this week.


Obama's join-or-be-left-behind threat, though, could discourage the few moderate Republicans in Congress from working with the administration over the course of a campaign year.

The consequence could be a legislative record even slimmer than last year's, when he managed to secure only a [small fraction](#) of his State of the Union initiatives. And after this one he has only two such speeches left, played out against the backdrop of waning public attention to his presidency.

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