



There isn't that much action in Obama's 'year of action'

By: Anita Kumar
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President Barack Obama boasts about his “year of action,” the 40-plus executive actions he’s taken this year to push past a gridlocked Congress in order to help struggling Americans.

But for all his strong rhetoric, not to mention the reaction of the right, warning of an out-of-control executive, Obama’s actions this year are mostly minor, in line with previous presidents and within his scope. His most consequential actions took place well before 2014.

“It’s a pattern that’s really not much different than before. It’s very traditional stuff,” said Phillip J. Cooper, the author of “By Order of the President: The Use and Abuse of Executive Direct Action.” “Some presidents have not talked much but do a lot. This president talks a lot but is not doing much.”

Obama has taken some substantial actions this year: raising the minimum wage for federal contractors and ordering power plants to cut carbon dioxide emissions, for example. But most of his actions this year have been far more modest.

Among those on the White House list: hosting a summit on concussions in youth sports, urging mayors to increase resources for budding entrepreneurs and asking Vice President Joe Biden to review federal training programs.

Some border on double counting. Executive action No. 14 on its list, for example, was the launch of My Brother’s Keeper, an effort aimed at empowering minority boys, while executive action No. 35 was the acceptance of a report from the My Brother’s Keeper task force.

Some actions on the list duplicate efforts already underway somewhere else. Last week, Obama unveiled a program to urge private companies to pay their small suppliers faster in order to help them expand and hire more workers. But of the 27 companies he announced had joined the initiative, most already have long-standing policies to pay their suppliers more quickly.

“Almost everybody is already doing something similar,” said Helen Burt, senior vice president and chief customer officer at Pacific Gas and Electric Co., who attended a meeting at the White House with Obama last week to kick off his latest executive action. PG&E supports Obama’s initiative, though the company is among those that have had similar programs for years.

Sometimes it lists actions that have been underway for years.

This week, Obama unveiled a list of a dozen actions to combat climate change by helping localities improve electric grids, build stronger seawalls and protect water supplies. It includes millions of dollars in loans in eight states to modernize infrastructure, though similar loans were given for each previous year he's been in office.

White House officials declined to answer specific questions about the significance of the actions but they claimed to have helped millions of Americans build "real, long-lasting security for the middle class."

For example, White House officials said, expanding a program that allows borrowers to cap their college loan payments benefits 5 million people. Reducing wait times for visa applications has helped boost the number of international visitors from 55 million in 2009 to 70 million in 2013.

"The president is delivering on his commitment," said Jeff Zients, the director of the National Economic Council. "And these actions are having a domino effect, spurring growth and investment in communities across the country."

Obama largely worked through the legislative process during his first two years in office, when fellow Democrats controlled Congress. He won approval for a \$787 billion plan to stimulate the economy and, most significantly, the Affordable Care Act overhauling health insurance.

But after Republicans won control of the House of Representatives in 2010, he began wielding the same executive power he once criticized his Republican predecessor, George W. Bush, for exerting.

In 2011, Obama launched the "We Can't Wait" campaign, unveiling dozens of policies through executive actions – creating jobs for veterans, adopting fuel efficiency standards and stopping drug shortages – that came straight from his jobs bills that stalled in Congress.

He followed with more, and many of the most significant ones came well before 2014's "year of action."

It was 2011, for example, when he told the Justice Department to stop defending the Defense of Marriage Act, deciding that the 1996 federal law defining marriage as between a man and a woman was unconstitutional.

It was 2012 and 2013 when he halted the deportations of some of those who came to the United States illegally when they were young.

He delayed parts of the health care law several times, with the most significant delays ordered last year.

It was those pre-2014 moves, not current actions, that prompted House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, to decide to sue Obama for exceeding his authority in delaying a key provision of the Affordable Care Act that requires employers to offer health insurance.

“The current president believes he has the power to make his own laws, at times even boasting about it,” Boehner said.

Obama says in his defense that he’s taken fewer such actions than his predecessor did, but the numbers don’t tell the full story because it’s the scope of the orders, memorandums and directives that matters.

When the president launched his so-called year of action in January, he stressed that he’d use his pen and his phone to get things done when Congress stood in his way.

“Whenever and wherever I have the power, the legal authority, to help families like yours, even if Congress is not doing anything, I will take that opportunity. I will try to make something happen,” Obama said in a recent speech in Texas.

George Edwards, a presidential scholar at Texas A&M University, said Obama tried to draw attention to his actions _ however small _ to show his supporters that he was working hard for them. “We have to view this as politics as usual,” he said.

“The actions don’t really live up to the rhetoric on either side of the aisle,” said Gene Healy, a vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute who’s the author of “The Cult of the Presidency: America’s Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power.” “In the big sweep of history, these are not on the level.”

Healy said Congress created part of the problem by passing the bills that gave presidents broad authority.

With Congress deadlocked on a number of issues, don’t look for Obama to halt his executive actions. Zients said Obama planned to continue them at the same pace for the rest of the year, even though the next president, Congress or a court might overturn them.