

wp OPINIONS

Obama's thin agenda

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Crafting a State of the Union address often raises an internal debate at the White House: When should a president dispute a negative judgment by the public, and when should he cede it and promise better?

According to some polls, [about 60 percent of Americans disapprove of Obamacare](#). On Tuesday night, President Obama ceded nothing, maintaining that Americans are insufficiently familiar with the law's helpful provisions and (by implication) insufficiently grateful. There was no recognition that implementation problems continue, no empathy for losers in the new system, no course correction of any kind. As a political matter, this was probably the right judgment. Even a hint of presidential doubt would remove a Jenga brick from the bottom of the Obamacare tower.

A [Jan. 22 Quinnipiac University poll showed that 77 percent of voters](#) also believe the economy is "not so good" or "poor." Would [Obama, in his big speech](#), disagree with them or concede their discontent? In the end, he did both.

This produced some rhetorical tensions. Separated by only a few paragraphs, Obama declared that the economy is humming — jobs created, oil produced, China bested — then described it as stagnant and stratified for many. "Average wages have barely budged," he said, previewing the next GOP convention speech. "Inequality has deepened. Upward mobility has stalled."

But in balancing these arguments, the president developed a more accurate account of recent economic history than have many in his party. Rather than laying blame for problems on the greedy 1 percent or the previous administration or congressional GOP saboteurs, he described the nation's problems as primarily structural: "Over more than three decades," he said, "even before the Great Recession hit, massive shifts in technology and global competition had eliminated a lot of good, middle-class jobs and weakened the economic foundations that families depend on. . . . The cold, hard fact is that, even in the midst of recovery, too many Americans are working more than ever just to get by, let alone to get ahead. And too many still aren't working at all."

What should be government's response? Obama admitted a "rancorous argument" on the size and role of government in the nation but decided not to engage it. Instead, he would offer "practical proposals." And that was the organizing theme of his speech: proposing things. Without any overarching argument, they came in a torrent of the trivial, recycled and unlikely. The few glimmers of genuine policy creativity — [extending the earned-income tax credit \(EITC\) to childless workers](#), [encouraging retirement starter](#)

[accounts, or MyRAs, for low-income savers](#) — were buried in an avalanche of manufacturing hubs, program reviews and strokes for Democratic constituencies.

Someone in the White House policy process fought hard enough to get the EITC and [MyRA proposals](#) included in the speech but not quite hard enough to have them drive rhetorical themes — though increasing the rewards of work and addressing asset inequality would have been rich ones.

Obama gave a hint of a theme in his varied references to hopeful action outside the federal government by corporate leaders, small-business owners, state governments and nonprofits — which almost sounded like a conservative deference to federalism and civil society. But for conservatives, actions by these groups are preferable. For Obama, they are enlisted to pressure eventual federal action, which is the primary goal. So, “Moms, get on your kids to sign up” for Obamacare. And businesses: “Do what you can to raise your employees’ wages.” Obama seemed driven to talk about civil society — not because of its essential value but because he can’t achieve his objectives (Obamacare uptake, a minimum-wage increase) at the federal level. This is subsidiarity as the last refuge of the lame duck.

What does his fifth State of the Union say about the president? There is the natural, appropriate humility of the second term. But that adjustment has a particular poignancy in Obama’s case. A president elected to pursue an ideology — say, a new Democrat or a compassionate conservative — can downsize his domestic agenda to fit the political moment. But a president elected to transcend partisanship, heal the planet and [slow the rise of the oceans](#) has a longer fall. Obama’s appeal has always been more personal than ideological. And when that personal appeal fades, as it naturally has, there is little left to unite his agenda — leaving the disconnected set of proposals and gestures we saw Tuesday night.

Obama probably found a political message for the coming midterm elections: “Give America a raise.” But it does not give his presidency a theme or a theory.

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