

Points amiss in Romney's ads on welfare

Fact checkers criticize, but voters respond

By Callum Borchers | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 17, 2012



The Romney campaign has launched a series of ads attacking President Obama's position.

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Mitt Romney's ads attacking President Obama for a plan to "gut welfare reform" have been criticized by independent fact checkers but, fair or not, their message is resonating with some swing-state voters who say they've worked hard for a living and won't support a president who they believe would enable free riders.

In its [original welfare ad](#) launched last week, and in [two sequels](#), the Romney campaign asserts that Obama "has a long history of opposing work for welfare" and that last month, he waived the federal work requirement on people who receive welfare benefits.

“Under Obama’s plan, you wouldn’t have to work and wouldn’t have to train for a job,” one ad states. “They just send you your welfare check.”

Amid the hoopla surrounding Romney’s selection of Wisconsin Representative Paul Ryan as his running mate and debate over Ryan’s budget proposals, welfare overhaul has remained a major point of contention. The Obama campaign responded to Romney’s attack with a TV ad of its own.

The assertions in the Romney ads are only partially accurate.

While the Obama administration did issue a memorandum last month inviting states to apply for waivers from federal welfare requirements, the Department of Health and Human Services said it would grant waivers only to states committed to “testing approaches that build on existing evidence on successful strategies for improving employment outcomes.” States cannot “just send” welfare checks, but must increase the frequency with which they return welfare recipients to the workforce by 20 percent.

Requests for such waivers have come primarily from Republican governors, and Romney was one of 29 members of the Republican Governors Association who made a similar plea for additional flexibility at the state level in 2005.

And though Obama did oppose the bipartisan welfare overhaul law of 1996, the statements cited by the Romney campaign do not reveal an objection to welfare work mandates, when read in full.

In e-mails to reporters, the Romney campaign has provided a link to a YouTube page featuring audio of a speech Obama delivered at Carleton College on Feb. 5, 1999, when he was an Illinois state senator. In a question-and-answer session afterward, Obama said he “would not probably have supported the federal system, the federal bill that was passed.” The recording distributed by the Romney campaign ends with that line.

Obama’s next sentence, according to a complete recording on the college’s website, was “I think it is undeniable that work is better than welfare.”

Obama went on to say he had reservations about the 1996 law because he believed it failed to address underlying causes of poverty.

But “that’s an extraordinarily nuanced explanation, and it’s difficult to get the public’s attention to tell that story,” said Franklin D. Gilliam Jr., dean of UCLA’s Luskin School of

Public Affairs.

Romney's argument is not only straightforward but also believable, according to the Vanderbilt/YouGov Ad Rating Project. In a survey shared with the Globe before its publication, only 32 percent of independent voters rated Romney's first welfare ad "untruthful."

"You can quibble with the specifics of the [welfare] ad, but the core point is there, which is that Romney would be tougher on welfare work requirements than Obama," said John Geer, chairman of the political science department at Vanderbilt University.

Romney's first welfare ad received a "pants on fire" rating from PolitiFact and "four - Pinocchios" from the Washington Post's Fact Checker blog.

Tali Mendelberg, a political science professor at Princeton University, chided the Romney campaign for what she called "implicitly [communicating] a racial message" in the ads.

"First, they dwell on Obama's face," said Mendelberg, author of "The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality." "If you contrast these against other equally critical ads on unemployment, you see that the welfare ads focus more on Obama's face. Second, there is also the double meaning of the slogan 'Obama isn't Working,' implying that Obama won't make lazy people work and doesn't work himself. Finally, all the visuals of people who are working are white."

"The three components combine to send a racial cue," Mendelberg said. "The implicit equation is black equals no work, white equals work."

The Romney campaign has featured Obama's face in other ads and has been using the "Obama isn't Working" slogan for months. An aide said the campaign would not comment on racial messaging because the assertion "doesn't deserve the dignity of a response."

The Obama campaign also has been accused of racial coding in recent days, after Vice President Joe Biden told a diverse audience in Virginia on Tuesday that the Republican ticket would "put y'all back in chains." Biden later said his remark was a reference to Ryan's promise to "unshackle" the economy.

Geer said savvy strategists, like those at the Romney campaign, likely are

not worried about criticism from fact checkers and political scientists. They are worried about appealing to “lunch-bucket voters in swing states” and starting “a conversation about the role of government.”

In Rhineland, Wis., Bruce Gary said the conversation has begun among customers at the gun shop where he works part time, after retiring. “Listening to people out here, they’re fed up with these scams, these fake welfare claims and fake disability claims,” Gary said.

Gilliam, who has studied the effect of welfare-themed videos on viewers, said, “What they’re trying to do is cast Obama as ‘the other.’ They’re reminding white, middle-class voters that Obama supports people you don’t like and aren’t like you.”

“And, furthermore, he’s taking money out of your pocket to do it,” Gilliam added.

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