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Fact check on Obama's State of the Union address

Published February 13, 2013 | Associated Press

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama did some cherry-picking Tuesday night in defense of his record on jobs and laid out a conditional path to citizenship for illegal immigrants that may be less onerous than he made it sound.

A look at some of the claims in his State of the Union speech, a glance at the Republican counterargument and how they fit with the facts:

OBAMA: "After years of grueling recession, our businesses have created over 6 million new jobs."

THE FACTS: That's in the ballpark, as far as it goes. But Obama starts his count not when he took office, but from the point in his first term when job losses were the highest. In doing so, he ignores the 5 million or so jobs that were lost on his watch, up to that point.

Private sector jobs have grown by 6.1 million since February 2010. But since he became president, the gain is a more modest 1.9 million.

And when losses in public sector employment are added to the mix, his overall jobs record is a gain of 1.2 million.

OBAMA: "We have doubled the distance our cars will go on a gallon of gas."

THE FACTS: Not so fast.

That's expected to happen in 12 more years.

Under a deal the Obama administration reached with automakers in 2011, vehicles will have a corporate average fuel economy of 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025, twice the 27 miles per gallon, on average, that cars and trucks get today. Automobile manufacturers won't start making changes to achieve the new fuel economy standards until model year 2017. Not all cars will double their gas mileage, since the standard is based on an average of a manufacturers' fleet.

OBAMA: "Already the Affordable Care Act is helping to reduce the growth of health care costs."

THE FACTS: The jury is still out on whether Obama's health care overhaul will reduce the growth of health care costs. It's true that cost increases have eased, but many experts say that's due to the sluggish economy, not to the health care law, whose main provisions are not yet fully in effect.

OBAMA: "Real reform means establishing a responsible pathway to earned citizenship -- a path that includes passing a background check, paying taxes and a meaningful penalty, learning English and going to the back of the line behind the folks trying to come here legally."

THE FACTS: The seemingly stern admonition that illegal immigrants must go to the back of the line, often heard from the president, doesn't appear to have much practical effect except in the most obvious sense. Everyone who joins a line, whether for a movie, a coffee or citizenship, starts at the back of that particular line. It's not clear he is saying anything more than that illegal immigrants won't get to cut in line for citizenship once they've obtained provisional legal status.

Like those living abroad who have applied to come to the U.S. legally, illegal immigrants who qualify for Obama's proposed path to citizenship will surely face long waits to be processed. But during that time, they are already in the U.S. and will get to stay, work and travel in the country under their new status as provisional immigrants, while those outside the U.S. simply have to wait.

Sending illegal immigrants to the "back of the line" is something of a distinction without a difference for some legal immigrants who

dutifully followed all the rules before coming to the United States.

For instance, some legal immigrants who are in the U.S. on an employer-sponsored visa can't easily change jobs, or in some cases take a promotion, without jeopardizing their place in line to get a green card. In other cases, would-be legal immigrants in other countries wait for years to be able to settle in the U.S.

Obama is using "back of the line" somewhat figuratively, because there are multiple lines depending on the applicant's relationship with family already in the U.S. or with an employer. Generally, a foreign-born spouse of a U.S. citizen or someone with needed skills and a job offer will be accepted more quickly than many others.

But even as a figurative point, his assertion may cloak the fact that people who came to the U.S. illegally and win provisional status have the great advantage over applicants abroad of already being where they all want to go.

OBAMA: "Study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road. ... And for poor kids who need help the most, this lack of access to preschool education can shadow them for the rest of their lives. ... Every dollar we invest in high-quality early education can save more than \$7 later on -- by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime."

THE FACTS: Dozens of studies have shown Head Start graduates are more likely to complete high school than their at-risk peers who don't participate in the program. But a study last year by the Department of Health and Human Services that found big vocabulary and social development gains for at-risk students in pre-kindergarten programs also found those effects largely faded by the time pupils reached third grade. The report didn't explain why the kids saw a drop-off in performance or predict how they would fare as they aged.

OBAMA: "I urge this Congress to pursue a bipartisan, market-based solution to climate change, like the one John McCain and Joe Lieberman worked on together a few years ago. But if Congress won't act soon to protect future generations, I will. I will direct my Cabinet to come up with executive actions we can take, now and in the future, to reduce pollution, prepare our communities for the

consequences of climate change and speed the transition to more sustainable sources of energy."

THE FACTS: Obama failed to get a global warming bill through Congress when both Houses were controlled by Democrats in 2010. With Republicans in control of the House, the chances of a bill to limit the gases blamed for global warming and to create a market for businesses to trade pollution credits are close to zero. The Obama administration has already acted to control greenhouse gases through existing law. It has boosted fuel-efficiency standards and proposed rules to control heat-trapping emissions from new power plants. And while there are still other ways to address climate change without Congress, it's questionable regulation alone can achieve the reductions needed to start curbing global warming.

FLORIDA SEN. MARCO RUBIO, in the Republican response: "The real cause of our debt is that our government has been spending \$1 trillion more than it takes in every year. That's why we need a balanced-budget amendment."

THE FACTS: That statement may reflect the math behind recent debt, but it doesn't get directly to the cause -- the worst recession since the Depression and its aftereffects. The deficit is not only caused by spending, but by reduced tax revenues. And during the recession, revenues from both individual and corporate taxes fell markedly.

The steep increases in debt and the measures that should be taken to ease the burden are central to the debate in Washington. But there is no serious move afoot to amend the Constitution to prohibit deficit spending.

The ability to take on debt has been used by governments worldwide and through U.S. history to shelter people from the ravages of a down economy, wage war and achieve many other ends. An effort to amend the Constitution for any purpose faces daunting odds; this would be no exception. Most state constitutions demand a balanced budget, but states lack some big obligations of the federal government, including national defense. And Washington's ability to go deeper into debt provides states with at least a minimal safety net in times of high unemployment.

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