



FACT CHECK: Overreaching in State of Union speech

By CALVIN WOODWARD / Associated Press – 7 hrs ago (2013-02-13)

WASHINGTON (AP) — 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.

Growth in costs will spike upwards in 2014, as the law's big coverage expansion gets under way. After that, the government's nonpartisan experts project that health care spending will return to the pattern of the last few decades, growing more rapidly than the economy, which poses problems for government programs and workplace health plans alike.

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.

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 after-effects. 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.

RUBIO: "Obamacare was supposed to help middle-class Americans afford health insurance. But now, some people are losing the health insurance they were happy with. And because Obamacare created expensive requirements for companies with more than 50 employees, now many of these businesses aren't hiring. Not only that, they're being forced to lay people off and switch from full-time employees to part-time workers."

THE FACTS: Rubio's assertion repeats longstanding Republican charges about Obama's health care law, but so far such drastic consequences have not been the norm. It's true that the health care law adds new requirements for employers and insurers, but the government's nonpartisan analysts say the Affordable Care Act has had a minimal impact on health care costs up to now. That will change when millions of uninsured people start getting health insurance next year, but most experts expect employer coverage to remain the mainstay for workers and their families. Some large employers with many low-wage workers have been experimenting with limited hours, but it's unclear what their final decisions will be.

Associated Press writers Tom Raum, Dina Cappiello, Andrew Taylor, Christopher S. Rugaber, Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, Alicia A. Caldwell and Philip Elliott contributed to this report.

EDITOR'S NOTE _ An occasional look at political claims that take shortcuts with the facts or don't tell the full story.

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