

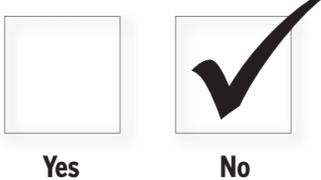
FOCUS SUNDAY

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FACT?



CAMPAIGNS HAVE NO QUALMS IN PRESENTING FALSEHOODS IN ADS

By Michael Cooper
The New York Times

In his very first television advertisement last year, Mitt Romney highlighted the nation's dire unemployment crisis, its record number of home foreclosures and the rising national debt, and showed footage of President Barack Obama delivering this arresting remark: "If we keep talking about the economy, we're going to lose."

There was one problem: the quotation was taken so wildly out of context that it turned Obama's actual meaning upside-down. The truncated clip came from a speech Obama gave in 2008 talking about his opponent, Sen. John McCain of Arizona. The full quotation? "Senator McCain's campaign actually said, and I quote, 'If we keep talking about the economy, we're going to lose.'"

Politifact.com, the Pulitzer Prize-winning fact-checking website, rated the advertisement "Pants on Fire," its most deceptive rating possible, but it achieved what the Romney campaign had hoped: People started talking about the sluggish economy and how Obama's campaign promises had fallen short. And it set the tone for the campaign that followed, which has often seemed dismissive of fact-checkers.

"We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers," Neil Newhouse, the Romney campaign's pollster, said this week during a breakfast discussion at the Republican National Convention in Tampa that was sponsored by ABC News and Yahoo News. He said fact-checkers brought their own sets of thoughts and beliefs to their work, and that the campaign stands behind its ads.

Every four years there are lies in campaigns, and at times a blurry line between acceptable political argument and outright sophistry. But recent events — from the misleading statements in convention speeches to television advertisements repeating widely debunked claims — have raised new ques-

tion marks about whether the political culture still holds any penalty for falsehood.

Brooks Jackson, the director of Factcheck.org, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, said that at various points this year both sides have blithely gone on repeating statements that were found false.

"They don't care," he said, "because it gets votes." The increasingly disaggregated media ecosystem, the diminished trust in traditional news organizations and the rise of social media had made it easier than ever to inject questionable assertions directly into the media bloodstream — and to rebut them.

But while there is arguably more fact-checking now than ever — and, thanks to the Web, more ways to independently check what candidates and campaigns say — verdicts that a campaign has crossed the line are often drowned out by dissent from its supporters, who take it upon themselves to check the checkers.

Confidence in the old arbiters, the mainstream media, has fallen precipitously in recent decades: the percentage of Americans who trust newspapers, television and radio to report the news accurately and fairly fell to 43 percent in 2010, down from 72 percent in 1976, according to the Gallup Poll. Nyhan's research has shown the difficulties in trying to set the record straight through news accounts.

In a recent paper, called "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," he and Jason Reifler, an assistant professor of political science at Georgia State University, found that corrective information in standard news articles — compared with separate fact-check pieces — was often ineffective at changing the minds of people predisposed to believe a misperception, and sometimes made the problem worse with what they termed a "backfire effect."

Bill Adair, the editor of Politifact.com, a project of The Tampa Bay Times, has seen his site come under fire from the left and the right in recent years, but said that this may prove to be the year of the fact-checker.

"I think there has always been a calculation by political campaigns if they think it will score the points they want to score," said Adair, who noted that campaigns still care enough about the truth to spend time explaining their positions and statements to his reporters. "What's different this time is there is more fact-checking than ever."

Mark Halperin, the Time magazine writer, made the point this week on MSNBC, even as he noted that the Democrats had lost some of the high ground with their recent misleading attacks. "But at this point I think the Romney campaign is besting them in making these distortions and untruths a bigger part of their message," he said.

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But some independent commentators have argued that the Romney campaign appears to be more dishonest at this point in the campaign, citing the many times it has broadcast a commercial making the false claim that Obama wants to gut the work requirements of welfare.

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Allen Black, Paintsville

Unemployed wish campaigns would stick to economy

By Tony Pugh
McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON — Two weeks after Allen Black bought a brand-new Nissan Altima, his coal mining job at Booth Energy in Martin County, Ky., was abruptly eliminated. The company blamed market conditions. Black, who's 49 and from Paintsville, blamed the Environmental Protection Agency.

"I wouldn't have made the decision to purchase a vehicle if I knew it was coming," he said. Indeed, his unemployment insurance provides only 30 percent of his former \$65,000-plus annual salary. Black is angry with the EPA for what he called its "war on coal" by holding up permits for surface mining and costing jobs. But he's equally frustrated with the failure of President Barack Obama and Republican White House nominee Mitt Romney to focus more attention on the job shortage and the plight of unemployed workers like himself. Whether it's Medicare, taxes, abortion rights, Romney's tenure at Bain Capital or the latest gaffe du jour, the economy has taken a backseat to attack ads, name calling and narrow concerns.

"I look at the election process now and this is like watching 'The Real Housewives of New Jersey,'" Black said. "It has taken on the form of some sort of grotesque reality show."

Given the chance, he'd tell both candidates: "Put the mud down. Go wash your hands, roll up your sleeves and get to work on fixing this country instead of slandering each other."

As the nation celebrates American workers this Labor Day, many of the 12.8 million unemployed Americans who are looking for their next jobs probably share Black's sentiment.

The unemployment rate in July was 8.3 percent, and it's remained above 8 percent for the length of the Obama presidency. In political terms, that's unexplored terrain. Since World War II, no president has run for reelection carrying that kind of economic baggage.

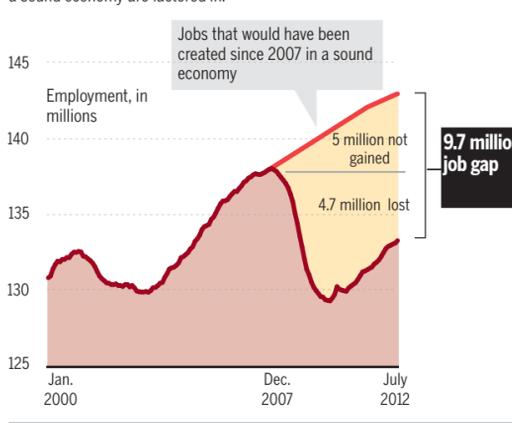
Not all the news has been bad. By July, the labor market had gained back 4 million of the 8.7 million jobs lost in the Great Recession.

But the remaining 4.7 million jobs and another 5 million that would have been created in an otherwise sound economy mean that the country is operating at a deficit of 9.7 million jobs, said Heidi Shierholz, a labor economist at the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal research center.

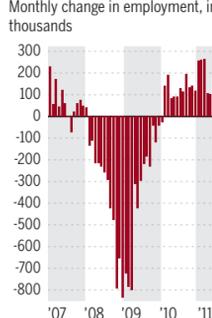
More than 5 million people, or roughly 40 percent of

Post-recession job gap

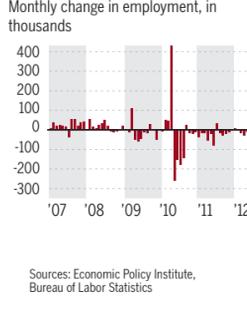
As of July, the labor market had gained 4 million of the 8.7 million jobs lost in the great recession. The size of the gap if jobs that would have been created in a sound economy are factored in:



Private sector gains jobs ...



... but not the public sector



Sources: Economic Policy Institute, Bureau of Labor Statistics

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the unemployed, have been out of work for at least six months, the government estimates. With more than three unemployed people for every job opening, finding work remains a tall order as employers delay hiring amid tepid demand for goods and services.

Since February 2010, the private sector has produced 29 straight months of job growth, adding more than 4.5 million positions, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. But over the same period, state and local governments have cut more than half a million positions, largely because of budget reductions.

Candace Falkner, of Cicero, Ill., hasn't worked since 2010, when she lost her job as a professor of psychology at Roosevelt University in Chicago. Her unemployment insurance expired in May, but she's in the running for a temporary position that would help her make ends meet. While Congress largely has blocked Obama's attempts to create more jobs through federal spending, Falkner credited the president for pressing to extend unemployment insurance, which has helped her and millions of others weather the recession.

"He hasn't forgotten those who are disadvantaged, but that doesn't necessarily improve the economy," Falkner said.

Black, the laid-off coal miner, is ready to give Romney a chance.

"As far as I'm concerned, I've got to take the lesser of two evils," he said. "I know what Obama's going to do. He's already shown that."

Obama wants to extend tax cuts to families making less than \$250,000 a year and let them expire for the wealthy. His American Jobs Act proposal touts job creation through infrastructure investment and increased funding to state and local governments to stop public-sector job losses.

Romney's campaign has tried to refocus the race on economic issues. He wants to cut taxes and regulations for businesses to spur job creation, while cutting government programs and spending to trim the federal deficit.

Steven Stapleton of Akron, Ohio, who was jobless for more than year, thinks Romney has a tin ear when it comes to the needs of working-class Americans. "He's not about me," Stapleton said. "He doesn't identify with me or anybody who's trying to make it out here. I don't care what he says."

He recently found work hauling fuel to natural gas extraction sites, but his frustration with the presidential campaign hasn't ebbed.

"Are they going to waste time and money talking about what the other guy didn't do until Election Day?" he said. "Saying Obamacare doesn't work? That's not a plan. What are you going to do for the next four years?"

Campaign '12

Between conventions: Romney tries to keep momentum as spotlight switches from GOP to Democrats. Page A6



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Brendan Nyhan, an assistant professor of government at Dartmouth College, said non-partisan fact-checking groups now compete with ideologically motivated groups from both sides that consider their work to be checking facts as well. (The political campaigns also call some of their own news releases

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