

## Fact checking the Biden-Palin debate

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The candidates in the vice presidential debate on Thursday night were not 100 percent accurate. To say the least.  
Summary  
Biden and Palin debated, and both mangled some facts.

- Palin mistakenly claimed that troop levels in Iraq had returned to "pre-surge" levels. Levels are gradually coming down but current plans would have levels higher than pre-surge numbers through early next year, at least.
- Biden incorrectly said "John McCain voted the exact same way" as Obama on a controversial troop funding bill. The two were actually on opposite sides.
- Palin repeated a false claim that Obama once voted in favor of higher taxes on "families" making as little as \$42,000 a year. He did not. The budget bill in question called for an increase only on singles making that amount, but a family of four would not have been affected unless they made at least \$90,000 a year.
- Palin claimed McCain's health care plan would be "budget neutral," costing the government nothing. Independent budget experts estimate McCain's plan would cost tens of billions each year, though details are too fuzzy to allow for exact estimates.
- Biden wrongly claimed that McCain had said "he wouldn't even sit down" with the president of Spain. Actually, McCain didn't reject a meeting, but simply refused to commit himself one way or the other during an interview.
- Palin wrongly claimed that "millions of small businesses" would see tax increases under Obama's tax proposals. At most, several hundred thousand business owners would see increases.

### Analysis

Vice presidential candidates Joe Biden and Sarah Palin met for their one and only debate Oct. 2 in St. Louis, Missouri. The event was broadcast nationally. Gwen Ifill of PBS was the debate moderator.

We noted the following:

#### Palin trips up on troop levels

Palin got her numbers wrong on troop levels when she said "and with the surge that has worked, we're now down to pre-surge numbers in Iraq."

The surge was announced in January 2007, at which point there were 132,000 troops in Iraq, according to the Brookings Institute Iraq Index. As of September 2008, that number was 146,000. President Bush recently announced that another 8,000 would be coming home by February of next year. But even then, there still would be 6,000 more troops in Iraq than there were when the surge began.

#### Palin's false tax claims

Palin repeated a false claim about Barack Obama's tax proposal:

Palin: Barack Obama even supported increasing taxes as late as last year for those families making only \$42,000 a year. That's a lot of middle income average American families to increase taxes on them. I think that is the way to kill jobs and to continue to harm our economy.

Obama did not in fact vote to increase taxes on "families" making as little as \$42,000 per year. What Obama actually voted for was a budget resolution that called for returning the 25 percent tax bracket to its pre-Bush tax cut level of 28 percent. That could have affected an individual with no children making as little as \$42,000. But a couple would have had to earn \$83,000 to be affected and a family of four at least \$90,000. The resolution would not have raised taxes on its own, without additional legislation, and, as we've noted before, there is no such tax increase in Obama's tax plan. (The vote took place on March 14 of this year, not last year as Palin said.)

Palin also repeated the exaggeration that Obama voted 94 times to increase taxes. That number includes seven votes that would have lowered taxes for many, while raising them on corporations or affluent individuals; 23 votes that were against tax cuts; and 17 that came on just 7 different bills. She also claimed that Biden and Obama voted for "the largest tax increase in history." Palin is referring here to the Democrats' 2008 budget proposal, which would indeed have resulted in about \$217 billion in higher taxes over two years. That's a significant increase. But measured as a percentage of the nation's economic output, or gross domestic product, the yardstick that most economists prefer, the 2008 budget proposal would have been the third-largest since 1968, and it's not even in the top 10 since 1940.

#### Biden's false defense

Biden denied that Obama supported increasing taxes for families making \$42,000 a year — but then falsely claimed that McCain had cast an identical vote.

Biden: Barack Obama did not vote to raise taxes. The vote she's referring to, John McCain voted the exact same way. It was a budget procedural vote. John McCain voted the same way. It did not raise taxes.

Biden was correct only to the extent that the resolution Obama supported would not by itself have increased taxes; it was a vote on a budget resolution that set revenue and spending targets. But he's wrong to say McCain voted the same way. The Obama campaign attempted to justify Biden's remark by pointing to a different vote, on a Senate amendment, that took place March 13. The amendment passed 99-1, with only Democratic Sen. Russ Feingold dissenting. It would have preserved some of Bush's tax cuts for lower-income people. The vote on the budget resolution in question, however, came in the wee hours of March 14 and was a mostly party-line tally, 51-44, with Obama in favor and McCain not voting.

#### Palin's health care hooey

Palin claimed that McCain's health care plan would be "budget-neutral," costing the government nothing.

Palin: He's proposing a \$5,000 tax credit for families so that they can get out there and they can purchase their own health care coverage. That's a smart thing to do. That's budget neutral. That doesn't cost the government anything ... a \$5,000 health care credit through our income tax, that's budget neutral.

The McCain campaign hasn't released an estimate of how much the plan would cost, but independent experts contradict Palin's claim of a cost-free program.

The Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center estimates that McCain's plan, which at its peak would cover 5 million of the uninsured, would increase the deficit by \$1.3 trillion over 10 years. Obama's plan, which would cover 34 million of the uninsured, would cost \$1.6 trillion over that time period.

The nonpartisan U.S. Budget Watch's fiscal voter guide estimates that McCain's tax credit would increase the deficit by somewhere between \$288 billion to \$364 billion by the year 2013, and that making employer health benefits taxable would bring in between \$201 billion to \$274 billion in revenue. That nets out to a shortfall of somewhere between \$14 billion to \$163 billion &ndash; for that year alone.

Palin also said that Obama's plan would be "universal government run" health care and that health care would be "taken over by the feds." That's not the case at all. As we've said before, Obama's plan would not replace or remove private insurance, or require people to enroll in a public plan. It would increase the offerings of publicly funded health care.

McCain in Spain?

Biden said that McCain had refused to meet with the president of Spain, but McCain made no such definite statement.

Biden: The last point I'll make, John McCain said as recently as a couple of weeks ago he wouldn't even sit down with the government of Spain, a NATO ally that has troops in Afghanistan with us now. I find that incredible.

In a September 17 interview on Radio Caracol Miami, McCain appeared confused when asked whether he would meet with President Zapatero of Spain. He responded that "I would be willing to meet with those leaders who are our friends and want to work with us in a cooperative fashion," but then started talking about leaders in Latin America. He did not commit to meeting with Zapatero, but it wasn't clear he'd understood the question.

But the McCain campaign denied that their candidate was confused.

According to our colleagues at PolitiFact.com, campaign adviser Randy Scheunemann e-mailed CNN and the Washington Post the next day, saying that McCain's reluctance to commit to a meeting with Zapatero was a policy decision.

Scheunemann, September 2008: The questioner asked several times about Senator McCain's willingness to meet Zapatero &ndash; and I'd him in the question so there is no doubt Senator McCain knew exactly to whom the question referred. Senator McCain refused to commit to a White House meeting with President Zapatero in this interview.

That's not a refusal to meet with Zapatero, as Biden said. It's simply a refusal to commit himself one way or the other.

Palin's small business balderdash

Palin repeated a falsehood that the McCain campaign has peddled, off and on, for some time:

Palin: But when you talk about Barack's plan to tax increase affecting only those making \$250,000 a year or more, you're forgetting millions of small businesses that are going to fit into that category. So they're going to be the ones paying higher taxes thus resulting in fewer jobs being created and less productivity.

As we reported June 23, it's simply untrue that "millions" of small business owners will pay higher federal income taxes under Obama's proposal. According to an analysis by the independent Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, several hundred thousand small business owners, at most, would have incomes high enough to be affected by the higher rates on income, capital gains and dividends that Obama proposes. That counts as "small business owners" even those who merely have some sideline income from such endeavors as freelance writing, speaking or running rental properties, and who get the bulk of their income from employment elsewhere.

Defense disagreements

Biden and Palin got into a tussle about military recommendations in Afghanistan:

Biden: The fact is that our commanding general in Afghanistan said today that a surge &ndash; the surge principles used in Iraq will not &ndash; well, let me say this again now &ndash; our commanding general in Afghanistan said the surge principle in Iraq will not work in Afghanistan, not Joe Biden, our commanding general in Afghanistan. He said we need more troops. We need government-building. We need to spend more money on the infrastructure in Afghanistan.

Palin: Well, first, McClellan did not say definitively the surge principles would not work in Afghanistan. Certainly, accounting for different conditions in that different country and conditions are certainly different. We have NATO allies helping us for one, and even the geographic differences are huge but the counterinsurgency principles could work in Afghanistan. McClellan didn't say anything opposite of that. The counterinsurgency strategy going into Afghanistan, clearing, holding, rebuilding, the civil society and the infrastructure can work in Afghanistan.

Point Biden. To start, Palin got newly appointed Gen. David D. McKiernan's name wrong when she called him McClellan. And, more important, Gen. McKiernan clearly did say that surge principles would not work in Afghanistan. As the Washington Post reported:

Washington Post: "The word I don't use for Afghanistan is 'surge,' " McKiernan stressed, saying that what is required is a "sustained commitment" to a counterinsurgency effort that could last many years and would ultimately require a political, not military, solution.

However, it is worth noting that McKiernan also said that Afghanistan would need an infusion of American troops "as quickly as possible."

Killing Afghan civilians?

Palin said that Obama had accused American troops of doing nothing but killing civilians, a claim she called "reckless"

and "untrue."

Palin: Now, Barack Obama had said that all we're doing in Afghanistan is air-raiding villages and killing civilians. And such a reckless, reckless comment and untrue comment, again, hurts our cause.

Obama did say that troops in Afghanistan were killing civilians. Here's the whole quote, from a campaign stop in New Hampshire:

Obama (August 2007): We've got to get the job done there and that requires us to have enough troops so that we're not just air-raiding villages and killing civilians, which is causing enormous problems there.

The Associated Press fact-checked this one, and found that in fact U.S. troops were killing more civilians at the time than insurgents: "As of Aug. 1, the AP count shows that while militants killed 231 civilians in attacks in 2007, Western forces killed 286. Another 20 were killed in crossfire that can't be attributed to one party." Afghan President Hamid Karzai had expressed concern about these civilian killings, a concern President Bush said he shared.

Whether Obama said that this was "all we're doing" is debatable. He said that we need to have enough troops so that we're "not just air-raiding villages and killing civilians," but did not say that troops are doing nothing else.

Out of context?

Biden claimed a comment he made about "clean coal" was taken out of context:

Biden: My record for 25 years has supported clean coal technology. A comment made in a rope line was taken out of context. I was talking about exporting that technology to China so when they burn their dirty coal, it won't be as dirty, it will be clean.

Was it really taken out of context? Here's the full exchange, which took place while Biden was shaking hands with voters along a rope line in Ohio.

Woman: Wind and solar are flourishing here in Ohio, why are you supporting clean coal?

Biden: We're not supporting clean coal. Guess what? China's building two every week, two dirty coal plants, and it's polluting the United States. It's causing people to die.

Obama-Biden campaign spokesman David Wade later said that "Biden's point is that China is building coal plants with outdated technology every day, and the United States needs to lead by developing clean coal technologies."

Whatever Biden meant or didn't mean to say on the rope line, he has supported clean coal in the past. When the McCain camp used this one remark from Biden as the basis for a TV ad saying that Obama-Biden oppose clean coal, we said the claim was false. Obama's position in favor of clean coal has been clear, and pushing for the technology has been part of his energy policy.

McCain in the vanguard of mortgage reform?

Palin said that McCain had sounded the alarm on Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac two years ago.

Palin: We need to look back, even two years ago, and we need to be appreciative of John McCain's call for reform with Fannie Mae, with Freddie Mac, with the mortgage-lenders, too, who were starting to really kind of rear that head of abuse.

Palin is referring to a bill that would have increased oversight on Fannie and Freddie. In our recent article about assigning blame for the crisis, we found that by the time McCain added his name to the bill as a cosponsor, the collapse was well underway. Home prices began falling only two months later. Our colleagues at PolitiFact also questioned this claim.

And there's more ...

A few other misleads of note:

- Palin said, "We're circulating about \$700 billion a year into foreign countries" for imported oil, repeating an outdated figure often used by McCain. At oil prices current as of Sept. 30, imports are running at a rate of about \$493 billion per year.

- Biden claimed that McCain said in a magazine article that he wanted to deregulate the health care industry as the banking industry had been. That's taking McCain's words out of context. As we've said before, he was talking specifically about his proposal to allow the sale of health insurance across state lines.

- Biden said five times that McCain's tax plan would give oil companies a "\$4 billion tax cut." As we've noted previously, McCain's plan would cut the corporate tax rate from 35 percent to 25 percent — for ALL corporations, not just oil companies. Biden uses a Democratic think tank's estimate for what the rate change is worth to the five largest U.S. oil companies.

- Palin threw out an old canard when she criticized Obama for voting for the 2005 energy bill and said, "that's what gave those oil companies those big tax breaks." It's a false attack Sen. Hillary Clinton used against Obama in the primary, and McCain himself has hurled. It's true that the bill gave some tax breaks to oil companies, but it also took away others. And according to the Congressional Research Service, the bill created a slight net increase in taxes for the oil industry.

- Biden said that Iraq had an "\$80 billion surplus." The country was once projected to have as much as a \$79 billion surplus, but no more. The Iraqis have \$29 billion in the bank, and could have \$47 billion to \$59 billion by the end of the year, as we noted when Obama used the incorrect figure. A \$21 billion supplemental spending bill, passed by the Iraqi legislature in August, knocked down the old projection.

- Biden said four times that McCain had voted 20 times against funding alternative energy. However, in analyzing the Obama campaign's list of votes after the first presidential debate, we found the number was actually 11. In the other instances the Obama-Biden campaign cites, McCain voted not against alternative energy but against mandatory use of alternative energy, or he voted in favor of allowing exemptions from these mandates.

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