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Where are Mitt Romney's details?

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When Mitt Romney ran for governor in 2002, he campaigned like the management consultant he had once been, digging deep into issues and proposing thoughtful plans based on his analysis of the facts. It was a winning performance.

A decade later, however, it's as if an anti-matter Mitt is running for president. This Romney takes regular refuge in vague answers and foggy formulations. And not just on caught-by-surprise matters such as President Obama's new policy not to deport certain young illegal immigrants.

Rather, the vagueness extends to the heart of the Republican candidate's core proposals. He has, for example, promised a 20 percent income tax cut, which would cost an estimated \$5 trillion over a decade, on top of the \$3.8 trillion or more it would cost to extend the Bush-era tax cuts. That means Romney favors about \$6 trillion more in tax cuts than President Obama. Yet he also asserts he will balance the budget.

How? So far, with little besides legerdemain. Romney says he'll pay for his new tax cuts in large part by closing tax loopholes and limiting deductions. Although he's said he won't target deductions important to the middle class, he's declined to specify something far more relevant: which ones he will target.

"His tax-rate cut is so large that you would need a very big broadening of the tax base to make up the lost revenues," notes Roberton Williams, a senior fellow at the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center. "You would have to get rid of a lot of very popular tax breaks. He said he wouldn't do that for the middle-class and has ruled out higher taxes on investment. Take all that off the table and there is just not a lot left."

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Then there's Romney's plan for Medicare, the cornerstone of health care for those over 65. He has proposed transforming it from an entitlement to a premium-

support plan that would give future seniors a set annual sum to apply toward private insurance; if they chose, they could stay in a program somewhat like traditional Medicare.

Fair enough, but until you know how generous the premium supports would be and how much they would increase annually, you can't determine how much of the cost of care would be shifted to future seniors. Those crucial details weren't available when Romney put his plan out in November. This week, a Romney adviser said those specifics "are beyond the level of detail we would offer" during the campaign.

The same murky mist clouds Romney's plans to cut spending. Although he talks of reducing federal spending to 20 percent of gross domestic product in his first term, the few specific cuts he's mentioned — things like Amtrak subsidies, funding for Planned Parenthood, and money for arts and humanities — are merely a drop in the bucket. By far his largest quasi-specific is a 5 percent cut in non-security domestic spending, which would be around \$300 billion over 10 years. That's about 6 percent of the pricetag for his new tax cuts.

Even organizations that favor much smaller government have criticized Romney for a lack of detail that makes his plans hard to assess. "In a day and age when the budget is arguably the number one issue, if someone is going to run on a platform of smaller government, they need to get specific about what they would cut and what they see as the role of government," says Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Romney has as much as said he's keeping things vague because that presents less of a political target. But there's obviously another reason as well: His numbers simply don't add up. No surprise there; he's trying to defy fiscal gravity.

An analysis of the broad contours of Romney's proposals led the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities to this conclusion: If he exempts Social Security from cuts, "to meet Romney's spending cap, defense spending target, and balanced budget requirements, then non-defense programs other than Social Security would have to be cut 29 percent in 2016 and 59 percent in 2022." Cuts of that magnitude, the analysts write, "would make health insurance unaffordable (or unavailable) to tens of millions of people."

It's enough to make one long for the Romney of yesteryear. After all, the data-driven candidate of a decade ago wasn't asking voters to buy a pig in a poke.