

Examining McFadden's charge that Franken uses scare tactics

By Eric Black
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Mike McFadden references "scare tactics" used by Al Franken during a 2008 attack against his then-opponent, U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman.

Cleaning up one matter left over from Wednesday's post about my interview with GOP U.S. Senate candidate Mike McFadden: The starting point was a statement on McFadden's website that said:

"The senior safety net is heading towards bankruptcy because of irresponsible politicians like Al Franken who've used scare tactics to win elections. We have to take action to preserve this important program for future generations."

I asked McFadden to specify what "scare tactics" by Franken he was referencing. He said it was a 2008 Franken attack against his then-opponent, U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman. McFadden's campaign followed up with a clipping from the Strib during that race assessing a Franken ad.

The topic was Social Security. The ad implied that Coleman supported Social Security "privatization" and that privatization represented a threat to the survivor benefits that are a long-standing feature of Social Security. The father of Franken's wife, Franni, died when she was a child, leaving Franni's mother to care for five children.

"They never would have made it without Social Security survivor benefits," Franken said in the ad. "I always think about Franni's family when politicians like George Bush and Norm Coleman talk about risking Social Security in the stock market. I will fight any attempt to privatize Social Security."

The complaints against Franken at the time were:

1. That Coleman was not clearly supporting the then-current plan for allowing younger workers to divert up to 4 percent of the 6.2 percent FICA tax into “individual accounts” that could be invested.
2. That the word “privatize” was an inaccurate word to describe the plan.
3. That the then-current Bush plan was designed to leave the survivor benefit portion of the existing Social Security system untouched.

The silliest complaint is No. 2, the idea (which Republicans were pushing hard at the time) that anyone who described one of these plans as “privatization” was lying. The idea, with which both Bush and Coleman had dallied during the decade previous, had always been called “privatization” (or “partial privatization”). The Cato Institute group that was formed to promote the idea in the 1990s was named the “Project on Social Security Privatization.” Apparently, at some point during the G.W. Bush years, the Repub word-givers discovered that people responded badly to that word. They have since tried to talk about the same basic idea while avoiding that word and even, as in this case by Coleman, accusing those who used the word of committing some kind of falsehood. “Privatization” may not be perfect, but it is more descriptive of the basic idea than any of the newer substitutes. The Cato group has since been renamed the “Project on Social Security Choice.”

The idea that Coleman wasn’t supporting the then-current plan to (unspeakable “P” word here) Social Security is awkward. Coleman had supported Bush’s first push to partially privatize Social Security. But heading into his 2008 reelection campaign, he downgraded his support to a statement that privatization was an option that should be “on the table” (the quote in that link is not actually from Coleman but from his campaign manager speaking for him) and that anything to revise Social Security should come from a commission that has considered all the options. It foreshadowed the McFadden position about putting everything on the table but hesitating to endorse the options once they were tabled. In fact, although I negligently failed to ask McFadden where he stood on privatization, MPR reporter Tom Scheck did ask him last year; McFadden said it should be on the table.

Perhaps the strongest part of the complaint against the 2008 Franken ad is that Franken, by bringing up Coleman’s previous support for privatization in the context of Franni’s childhood reliance on Social Security survivor benefits, may have implied that the plan then on the table would have eliminated survivor benefits. Franken didn’t say explicitly that it would. But if he had, that would have been false. The plan then under discussion would have affected retirement benefits, but not survivor benefits. But because of all the vagaries surrounding the Coleman complaints, the Strib’s assessment — written by my esteemed former colleague Pat Doyle — ruled thus:

Does the 30-second spot fairly characterize Coleman's position? Not quite. But Coleman's refusal to be specific on what he supports — along with the blurred meaning of "privatize" — hands Franken a pass on an ad that otherwise might be misleading.

Does any of this six-year-old history deserve a post now? Maybe not, but because McFadden points to it now as evidence of Franken's willingness to use "scare tactics," perhaps it was worth a short refresher.

It's worth noting that former Sen. Coleman is now a key McFadden backer and adviser, so perhaps the ancient exchange still rankles in those quarters.