



Romney's 'Fiscal Conservative' Whopper

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Mitt Romney says, “If you want a fiscal conservative, you can’t vote for Rick Santorum, because he’s not.” Really? Three fiscally conservative groups rate Santorum’s lifetime voting record as better than most other Republican lawmakers, and one of them considers him a “Taxpayer Hero.”

Romney is on paper-thin ice with his new line of attack against his surging rival.

- Santorum is a “hero” to the anti-pork Citizens Against Government Waste — which gives him a lifetime voting record better than three-fourths of the senators with whom he served in his final year in Congress.
- His lifetime voting record with the conservative National Taxpayers Union is roughly a “B-plus” — better than average for the Republican lawmakers with whom he served.
- The anti-tax Club for Growth rated him the 21st most fiscally conservative member of the U.S. Senate in 2006, his final year in office, better than most of his Republican colleagues.

We’ve been [reporting](#) about this [recently](#) because the independent, pro-Romney PAC [Restore Our Future](#) has been taking a similar line of attack. Now Romney himself has taken up this dubious assault — and so has his campaign committee.

In a TV spot that began airing in Michigan Feb. 17, the Romney campaign said the nation is “drowning” in debt and that “Rick Santorum supported billions in earmarks,” those provision that lawmakers slip into appropriations bills directing money to be spent on specific projects. It showed an old TV interview in which Santorum said he was “very proud” of the earmarks he sponsored.

The ad was the first direct attack ad against Santorum by Romney’ s own campaign. And the claims are true — as far they go. But the fact is, those earmarks weren’ t a major contributor to the debt. They reached their peak in fiscal year 2006, according to [data compiled](#) by Citizens Against Government Waste. And even then they totaled just \$29 billion — barely over 1 percent of [total federal outlays](#) that year.

The Romney attack ad was accompanied by a [personal attack against Santorum](#) by Romney himself. On Feb. 17 in Boise, Idaho, Romney said: “I hope that people take a very close look at his record because he was in Congress for about 20 years and during that time the size of the federal government doubled.”

Actually, Santorum was in Congress for [16 years](#), not 20. He served four years as a House member and 12 in the Senate. And we did take a look at his record. Here’ s what we found:

National Taxpayers Union

The National Taxpayers Union rated Santorum as more fiscally conservative than most of his GOP colleagues during his time in Congress. It gave him [a lifetime vote rating that is 75.2 percent positive](#), better than the 71 percent average for all his Republican contemporaries.

NTU gives Santorum an overall B-plus rating. Several Republicans have better records, to be sure. NTU rates Texas Rep. Ron Paul’ s record at nearly 91 percent and awards him a lifetime “A” average, for example.

But Santorum’s 75.2 percent rating is far above the 46 percent average for all House and Senate members of both parties during the years he was in Congress. NTU’s measure is especially comprehensive. It prides itself on looking at “every single roll call vote affecting taxes, spending, and significant regulation,” and then assigning a weight to each vote based on its importance to NTU.

Citizens Against Government Waste

And even though Santorum was indeed once a vocal supporter of earmarks, the anti-pork group Citizens Against Government Waste still rates him favorably.

CAGW’s lifetime ratings for former House and Senate members aren’t currently available in the group’s website, but the group pulled these figures for us from its own database, covering Santorum’s time in the Senate.

CAGW Congressional Ratings For Sen. Santorum												
1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	Lifetime
76	87	79	75	71	79	79	94	76	80	68	90	80

CAGW spokeswoman Leslie Paige told us that Santorum was among 14 Senate Republicans holding office in 2006 who had had a lifetime rating of 80 percent or above. That put him in the top one-fourth of all 55 Republican senators that year. “While he may have been above or below the average for each year he was in the House and Senate, the fact is that his lifetime rating was better than 74.5 percent of his peers when he left Congress,” Paige told us via email.

CAGW awards a “super hero” rating to those with a 100 percent vote rating, and a “hero” rating to those who rate from 99 percent to 80 percent.

Santorum fell below that level in some years (earning a “friendly” rating for those years) but overall was among a “limited” number whose lifetime rating qualified for the “Taxpayer Hero” rating, Paige said.

Club for Growth

The Club for Growth began giving numerical [ratings](#) only during Santorum’s final two years in the Senate, as he was campaigning for the re-election

campaign that he lost in 2006. And according to the club's "[Presidential White Paper](#)" on Santorum:

Club for Growth: In the last two years of his Senate career, he had an average Club for Growth rating of 77%, compared to an average of 73% for all Senate Republicans over that same time period.

To be sure, Santorum's record as a conservative on taxing and spending isn't perfect by any of these measures. The Club for Growth notes some "very weak spots, including his active support of wasteful spending earmarks, his penchant for trade protectionism, and his willingness to support large government expansions like the Medicare prescription drug bill and the 2005 Highway Bill." But Romney's record isn't perfect either.

Romney Gets a 'C'

We can't say whether Romney would have rated better or worse than Santorum on any of these scales: He has never served in the House or Senate. That leaves only his record as governor of Massachusetts, which can't be compared directly.

But one indication can be found in Cato Institute's "[Fiscal Policy Report Card on America's Governors](#)" for 2006, his last year in office. Cato awarded Romney a grade of "C" for his performance that year.

Cato ranked him 12th among the 50 governors — still well above average. Cato also gave him a "final overall grade" of "C" for his entire term in office, and put him fourth among the eight governors (all Republicans) who were leaving office.

Similarly, the Club for Growth rates Romney's record on taxes as "mixed" and his record on spending as "more positive than negative," considering the Democratic legislature he contended with as governor. Its [white paper](#) on Romney concludes on a skeptical note:

Club for Growth: [H]e labels himself as a pro-growth fiscal conservative, and we have no doubt that Romney would move the country in a pro-growth direction... [But] Romney supports big government solutions to health care and opposes pro-growth tax code reform – positions that are simply opposite to those supported by true economic conservatives.

We offer no opinion as to whether Romney or Santorum would be the more fiscally conservative should either be elected president. All we can say is that three anti-spending groups rate Santorum’ s record in Congress as more fiscally conservative than most other Republicans.

Based on that, we rate Romney’ s claim as false.

– *Brooks Jackson*