

Newt Gingrich revises claim on balanced budgets, improves Truth-O-Meter rating

During the Republican presidential debate in Jacksonville, Fla., on Jan. 26, 2012, Newt Gingrich reiterated a talking point we several times have rated False. But this time, he tweaked the language.

Responding to a comment from Rick Santorum about fiscal responsibility, Gingrich said, "When we balanced the budget with the 1997 Balanced Budget Act, and ultimately had four consecutive balanced budgets, we doubled the size of the National Institutes of Health because we set priorities. It is possible to do the right things in the right order to make this a bigger, richer, more exciting country."

We thought we'd see whether his new wording about the balanced budget was more accurate.

Previously, we rated these statements by Gingrich:

- *"When I was speaker, we had four consecutive balanced budgets."* ([Republican presidential debate, Tampa, Jan. 23, 2012](#))
- *"I balanced the budget for four straight years, paid off \$405 billion in debt."* ([Republican presidential debate in Sioux City, Iowa, Dec. 15, 2011](#))
- *"For four years, we balanced the budget and paid off \$405 billion in debt."* ([video announcement that he would run for president, May 11, 2011](#))

All earned a rating of False because Gingrich was taking credit for two budgets that he had no role in assembling or shepherding through the House.

As we explained in our earlier articles, Gingrich served as speaker from January 1995 to January 1999, when he was a Republican congressman from Atlanta's suburbs.

The federal budget runs on a fiscal year calendar that begins Oct. 1 and ends Sept. 30. During fiscal years 1996 and 1997 -- the first two that Gingrich helped shape as speaker -- there were deficits: \$107 billion in 1996 and about \$22 billion in 1997.

By fiscal year 1998, the federal budget did reach a surplus of \$69 billion. And in fiscal year 1999 -- which Gingrich can claim some responsibility for, even though he was out as speaker for most of the fiscal year -- it was in surplus as well, to the tune of \$126 billion.

But that's only two balanced budgets he can plausibly claim credit for. While the federal government did run four consecutive surpluses, the last two of those -- fiscal years 2000 and 2001 -- came when Gingrich was long gone from the House.

In the Jacksonville debate, however, Gingrich modified his statement. This time, he said that the nation "ultimately had four consecutive balanced budgets." That is a more accurate way of putting it.

His phrasing in Jacksonville was less boastful than some of his previous claims, such as the one in which he said, "I balanced the budget for four straight years." In Jacksonville, he

credited a piece of legislation passed by a Republican Congress and signed by a Democratic president.

But he glossed over a pair of tax-raising bills that made a difference, and that Gingrich opposed, including the 1990 budget deal (in which President George H.W. Bush broke his "no new taxes" pledge), and the 1993 budget vote, which cost many Democratic lawmakers their seats in the 1994 Republican landslide.

"Like most things in life, what caused the budget to be balanced was multi-factorial, most important of which was the tech boom and the surging economy," said Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense. "You can partially credit the 1997 Balanced Budget Act, but you could also credit the 1993 and 1990 bills that Speaker Gingrich opposed. It's a little too simple to say that the 1997 Balanced Budget Act 'balanced the budget.' "

In fact, when a pro-Gingrich super PAC claimed in an Iowa ad that "Newt balanced the federal budget," [we rated the statement Half True](#) for this reason.

"The budget ended up balancing faster than either party expected simply because economic growth was so strong," Chris Edwards, an economist at the libertarian Cato Institute, told us at the time. "I don't think either party had much to do with that."

Stan Collender, a former Democratic staffer for the House and Senate budget committees, added that "it happened on his watch, but it doesn't mean that he gets credit for it. The only thing you can give him credit for is stalling some additional spending programs."

Our ruling

At the Jacksonville debate, Gingrich was more accurate than he's been in the past and his chronology of the law and the four budgets is correct. But he oversimplifies the causes of the balanced budget. His words are accurate but need additional information, which makes this a Mostly True.