

The poor largely forgotten as a presidential campaign issue

By: Alfred Lubrano – October 24th, 2012

Neither President Obama nor Mitt Romney has said very much during the presidential campaign about helping the poor.

There may be a good reason for that: Elections are won by appealing to the middle class, not the impoverished.

"Most Americans see themselves as middle class, and that's where the votes are," said Rogers Smith, a University of Pennsylvania political science professor. "Also, the poor don't vote in high numbers. That's why neither candidate is running on what he can do for the poor."

In February, Romney told CNN: "You can focus on the very poor. That's not my focus. . . . My energy is going to be devoted to helping middle-income people."

While Obama hasn't said much during the campaign about the poor, antipoverty advocates cite many of his accomplishments on their behalf. Specifically, advocates praise the president for temporarily bolstering the food-stamp program (now called SNAP, for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) with \$26 billion in federal stimulus money. He also augmented the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit.

Obama and his mother were on food stamps for a while when he was a child. But on the campaign trail, he rarely references his SNAP boost, perhaps mindful of the still-resonant sobriquet of "food-stamp president" that Newt Gingrich hung on him.

Romney hasn't used those exact words, but he mentioned during all three presidential debates that in the last four years the number of people on food stamps has increased from 32 million to 47 million.

Romney also said during the second debate that 3.5 million women fell into poverty during the Obama administration.

Obama never directly responded to the statements, nor did he say anything specific during the debates about the poor.

Toward the close of the second debate, Romney said: "I care about 100 percent of the people," a comment seen as a reference to his "47 percent" remark. Secretly taped at a fund-raiser, Romney had opined that nearly half of all Americans "have become dependent on government" and "believe they are victims."

In the debate, Obama countered that many of the 47 percent are "people who are working hard but don't make enough." In September, Obama said on Univision Noticias that people in the 47 percent "want a hand up, not a handout."

Interestingly, the poor don't monolithically support Obama, as conventional wisdom holds, according to pollster Gallup Inc..

Gallup said Americans who are in poverty are more likely than those who are not to identify themselves as political independents - 50 percent vs. 40 percent.

It's possible, then, that Romney's taped remark at the fund-raiser alienated some poor people who may otherwise have voted for him, Gallup suggested.

A USA Today/Gallup poll found that 42 percent of low-income Americans said Romney's comments made them less likely to vote for him.

Analysts believe poverty programs will be slashed under a Romney presidency because he has called for large cuts nearly everywhere. But Romney has not been specific.

In general statements, he has echoed the conservative position that many safety-net programs cultivate dependency.

In 2008, he told the Conservative Political Action Conference: "At every turn, they [liberals] try to substitute government largesse for individual responsibility. . . . Dependency is a culture-killing drug."

Romney's "drug" remark appears to dovetail with a growing attitude among the tea party and other conservatives that America is being dragged down by people dependent on entitlements.

"Entitlements are corrosive for the civic good," said Nicholas Eberstadt, a scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

Robert Rector, a scholar at the conservative Heritage Foundation, wrote recently that using entitlement programs to end poverty was futile, saying that despite a government that spends billions to help the poor, "15 percent of the population still lives in poverty."

Embedded in criticism of entitlements is a growing "racialized rhetoric" about the poor, Smith believes, "a way of conveying an image that the Democrats and Barack Obama are fostering a culture of dependency, especially among blacks and Latinos living off the dole."

Sheldon Danziger, a public-policy professor and director of the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan, agreed.

"Say the phrase struggling middle class and you conjure a vision of a white, two-parent family," he said. "Say poor person and the picture is that of a single black mother."

That's why Obama can't talk much about the poor, said Joseph Schwartz, a political science professor at Temple University.

"The Obama campaign fears he could be tagged as a 'black' president" - one who works only for a portion of the populace, Schwartz said.

While poverty itself has not been deeply debated during this election season, government spending has. And certain programs for the poor are on people's radar - SNAP chief among them.

SNAP is widely considered to be one of the most significant parts of the American safety net.

Currently, one in seven Americans receives SNAP benefits totaling about \$80 billion annually, says the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the program.

That's a 70 percent increase in the number of people receiving benefits since 2007 - a rise driven by the recession, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

While conservatives see increased SNAP rolls as proof that America has become a nation of takers, many analysts conclude that SNAP is an efficient tool that has responded effectively to the recession.

Unemployment over the last five years caused incomes of middle- and working-class Americans to plummet. That automatically qualified millions of people for SNAP.

Along with feeding the long-term poor, SNAP also kept an estimated 3.4 million more people out of poverty in 2010, Census Bureau figures show.

To contain SNAP spending, the Republican-dominated House wants to cut \$16 billion from the program over the next 10 years.

"SNAP is too large and serves to make the poor more comfortable, not to eliminate poverty," said Michael Tanner, a social-welfare policy expert with the conservative Cato Institute.

"Obama has spent more on the poor, but he's also creating more of them."

While Romney doesn't talk about cutting SNAP, his running mate, Rep. Paul Ryan (R., Wis.), does.

In his budget proposal, Ryan suggests cutting SNAP by 17 percent, or \$133.5 billion over the next 10 years, which would remove 8 million to 10 million people from the program through 2022, according to analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal think tank.

Ryan also would transform SNAP into block grants disbursed to the states, as he would do with Medicaid.

Conservative scholars hail the idea; poverty experts hate it.

"Block-granting SNAP is ridiculous," said economist Timothy Smeeding, director of the Institute for Research and Poverty at the University of Wisconsin. Each state, already under tremendous financial pressure, "will use the block grant for whatever they need. That'll really hurt the people at the bottom."

Regardless of who becomes president, he won't gain the Oval Office by emphasizing the plight of the poor.

"Voters are addressing employment, health care, national defense - not the poor," said David Bartelt, a Temple professor emeritus in urban studies. "So the poor will stay off the public agenda."