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Why Do Conservatives Believe The Unemployed Are Lazy?

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One of the more disconcerting political arguments that have surfaced in the past few months has been the theory put forward by a number of conservative writers that part of the cause of the nation's high unemployment is due to the extended unemployment benefits that were passed last year.

Until the current economic slump, the typical unemployment claim topped at 26 weeks. But four sets of federal extensions have added 53 weeks. Another program can add as much as 20 weeks on top of that, bringing the total potential benefits to 99 weeks. Although in most states, the maximum is much less.

The argument in favor of the extended benefits is pretty straight-forward. Long-term unemployment continues to grow, and currently, 6.5 million workers, or 44 percent of the unemployed, have been jobless for at least six months. So the extensions are a way to create a new and temporary social net to ease the plight of the long-term unemployed and help keep people from drifting into homelessness before they can find work.

But as the unemployment rate stubbornly refuses to fall, a number of conservatives are arguing that extending unemployment benefits haven't been an overall help to jobless workers. Instead, the added weeks of coverage have discouraged them from finding suitable employment.

Alan Reynolds, a senior fellow at the conservative Cato Institute, [recently told the L.A. Times](#) that the extended benefits are responsible for as much as 1.7 points of the current 9.7 national unemployment rate. "It sounds harsh, but if you want to improve the fiscal situation, you have to get people back to work," he told the Times. "This will encourage it. It's all about incentives."

Conservative commentator John Lott recently [wrote a piece for FoxNews.com](#), making the same argument:

"While most discussions assume that the long time that people are unemployed shows the need for longer benefits, there is another possibility: the unprecedented benefits are the cause, not the cure, for the current long term unemployment. The more you subsidize something, the more you get of it. In this case, people only get these unemployment benefits as long as they are unemployed."

I'll dissect the statistical problems with this argument in a separate piece, but let's concentrate here on the political question. Why are many conservatives so convinced that if Americans are given the chance, their first inclination is to sit on their butts and watch Oprah rather than looking for work?

Aside from the fact that even the most lucrative unemployment benefits wouldn't be enough to cover someone's rent or mortgage every month. Forget the fact that if you're out of work, you're likely also living without health care coverage. And that living in the midst of an extended recession means that other forms of help--from your local church to your friends and family--

are a lot less available than they would be in flusher times.

Conservatives are arguing that the real reason unemployment is high is that it's just so darn easy to be unemployed.

Now if conservatives want to argue that the country can't afford to put out tens of billions of additional dollars to cover another round of extended benefits...well, I disagree with that assessment. But at least a point of view grounded in facts and figures.

I'm fascinated why conservatives look at the trends of growing long-term unemployment and increased weeks of unemployment and immediately assume that people remain unemployed because there are more benefits available. As opposed to the just as logical view that the long-term benefits exist because it's so difficult to find a job.

This argument seems like some effort to paint the long-term unemployed as some modern-day equivalent of the welfare queen. They seem to be trying to claim that those couple of hundred dollars a week are so tempting that the average fifty-year-old unemployed accountant would jump at the chance to stay at home and ignore the job search.

It's not just an insulting point of view, it's a bad move politically for conservatives. While the demographic breakdowns on the average long-term unemployed American are a bit vague, the statistics seem to show a makeup that reflect a core constituency of the Republican Party. The average person unemployed more than six months is more often male than female, more often over fifty and better educated and trained than the average American worker. These were the people making the most money in the office when the layoffs came. And they are the people who are least likely to find a similar job anytime soon. These are also the people most likely to have voted for Republicans in the past.

So given all of that, what is behind the conservative backlash against extended unemployment benefits and the jobless of America?

From what I can tell, they just believe that if you wanted to find a job within 26 weeks, then you could.

In other words, if you're still unemployed, then you're probably just too lazy to find a job.

For our continuing coverage of the long-term unemployed and how they are covered by the media, visit our special section at www.allyourtv.com/theunemployed

You can contact Rick Ellis at rick@allyourtv.com



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thewordsman 16 hours ago

I'm a 99 weeker. The study about motivation applies when there are jobs available, and someone could land one in a few weeks once motivated. And the additional tiers didn't provide us with 99 straight weeks of income. This time last year I went two and a half months with no benefits or expectations for more. There were no jobs. Then in June the Governor of Missouri came up with a plan to use Stimulus money. Those benefits ran out in October, and there were a couple of months more with no income or assurance of additional benefits. If there were jobs out there, and people willing to hire us, we wouldn't have sat around depressed with no money coming in for months. And yes, the situation the economic conditions put in makes it even harder for us to get jobs than the newly unemployed who are in the first 26 weeks of benefits.

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