

Networks Flip Flop on Jobs

Identical Unemployment Numbers ‘Good’ News for Obama, But ‘All’ Bad under Reagan.

Executive Summary

Unemployment under President Barack Obama is at a 26-year-high. The last time the economy had 9.7 percent or higher unemployment was under President Ronald Reagan. But despite similar periods of rising unemployment, Obama and Reagan received almost exactly opposite treatment from the network news media.

Under Obama reporters have gone to great lengths to spin rising unemployment by finding “positive trends” in the job losses, even focusing on as few as 25 jobs being “saved” by the economic stimulus package. But when Reagan was president journalists showed unemployed families living out of their cars under a bridge in Texas and quoted Democrats or union leaders’ attacks on the president’s “wicked” and “sadistic” fiscal policies.

ABC’s George Stephanopoulos looked on the bright side for Obama Sept. 4, 2009, telling viewers, “the unemployment rate nears 10 percent, but the numbers aren’t all bad.”

Rewind to May 7, 1982, when unemployment hit 9.4 percent – three-tenths of a percentage point lower than it would be in August 2009. That night, NBC found people in Seattle in dire straights.

“The lines for free food at food banks are four times what they were six months ago,” NBC’s Don Oliver told “Nightly News” viewers. Oliver’s report focused on the “new poor” and the emotional effects of unemployment, including suicide and battering.

The Media Research Center’s Business & Media Institute examined network unemployment stories on the evenings that unemployment data was released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics from March 2009 to September 2009 and March 1982 to September 1982. During that timeframe in 1982 unemployment ranged from 8.9 percent to 9.8 percent, and in 2009 it shot up even faster – from 8.1 percent to 9.7 percent. Here are some of our findings:

- **Network Reports 13 Times More Negative Under Reagan than Under Obama:** An overwhelming majority of stories mentioning the Reagan administration were negative – 91 percent (20 out of 22) – while only 7 percent (1 out of 15) of Obama administration mentions were negative. Additionally, Obama mentions were favorable 87 percent of the time, but there were zero positive mentions of Reagan.
- **Networks Connect Reagan White House to Negative Jobs Numbers Almost Twice as Often as Obama:** Unemployment stories in 1982 mentioned the Reagan administration 71 percent of the time (22 out of 31), but 2009 stories mentioned the Obama administration only 40 percent of the time (14 out of 35).

- **Charles Gibson: 9.4% Unemployment ‘Good News’ (Obama) and also ‘All’ Bad (Reagan):** The unemployment rate reached 9.4 percent under Reagan and Obama. But ABC’s Charles Gibson covered the identical rate very differently in 1982 than in 2009. Gibson told viewers May 7, 1982, “[T]here really isn’t any good news in the statistics. All the numbers are bad.” But by 2009, Gibson had turned into an optimist citing “good news” June 5 and “hope the economy may be finally turning the corner” Aug. 7.