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Biden campaign: Pence touted outdated data to paint a rosier-than-reality picture of Wisconsin's labor market

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Politifact: "Between January 2017 and August 2020 there was a net loss of 9,200 manufacturing jobs in Wisconsin."
A recent Politifact report finds that the Trump Administration used outdated job gains and unemployment data to mislead about their economic record in Wisconsin.

PolitiFact rated the claims false, noting that the Trump Administration attempted to "paint a rosier-than-reality picture" by using the outdated numbers which ignore the devastating economic impact of the pandemic in Wisconsin.

President Trump's failure to respond to the pandemic has crushed Wisconsin's economy and small businesses. Joe Biden has a plan that will support Wisconsin workers and build the economy back better.

PolitFact: Pence uses outdated numbers to tout Wisconsin job gains and unemployment numbers

In the run-up to the Nov. 3 election, President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence have been frequent visitors to Wisconsin.

So, you'd think by now they'd have their talking points about the state right.

In an Oct. 11, 2020, news release announcing Pence's visit two days later to Waukesha, his office claimed the administration's economic policies "led to an unemployment rate of 3.1% in Wisconsin and 61,000 jobs, including 15,000

manufacturing jobs since President Trump took office."

But those numbers are all from before the coronavirus pandemic cratered the nation's economy.

So, what's the full picture?

Unemployment numbers

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Wisconsin's unemployment rate for August 2020 was 6.2%. Those numbers are preliminary, but the most recent available. In any case, that's double the rate cited by Pence.

We reached out to Pence's office seeking backup for the claim, but they did not offer an explanation for the discrepancy.

But our examination of the numbers found the news release appears to be citing the March 2020 unemployment rate. The rate was that low – 3.1% – at the time, but climbed dramatically in the wake of COVID-fueled shutdowns across the country.

Here is the fuller picture: When Trump took office in January 2017, the Wisconsin unemployment rate was at 3.6%, and had been on a downward trend through 2016.

In 2017, the unemployment rate continued to decrease and then held steady for some months at 3%. It was at 3.1% in January 2019, and gradually increased until a sharp decline between February 2020 (3.5%) and March 2020 (3.1%).

But it has spiked since then.

In short, Pence used outdated numbers to paint a rosier-than-reality picture.

Overall job numbers

The second number the release cites is the number of jobs added in Wisconsin.

The difference between the January 2017 numbers, when Trump took office, and the preliminary numbers for August 2020 shows a net loss of 181,900 jobs in Wisconsin.

If you use February 2017, the month after President Trump's inauguration, as a starting point, there is an even bigger net loss of 185,000 Wisconsin jobs.

To be sure, there are many cautions about this approach. The preliminary numbers can sometimes change considerably before they are made final. And the BLS prefers to compare year-over-year numbers – i.e. January to January – due to seasonal employment changes.

But the comparison underlines a stark difference due to the economic fallout of coronavirus – something ignored by Pence's numbers.

In any case, it's unclear where Pence's office got the increase of 61,000 jobs. Despite our request, they did not offer an explanation.

We looked at the numbers in a variety of ways, including whether they represented a high-water mark for some point during his presidency, but could not crack the code.

One way to get 61,000 jobs is to take the difference between October 2016 – when President Trump had not been elected, let alone took office – (2,932,700 nonfarm jobs) and February 2020 (2,993,700 nonfarm jobs), the highest tally under Trump.

Manufacturing jobs number

The same ignore-the-pandemic problem holds here.

Between January 2017 and August 2020 there was a net loss of 9,200 manufacturing jobs in Wisconsin.

It seems Pence's office got the 15,000 gain by taking the difference between January 2017 and March 2020.

Taking credit

In the news release, Pence's office said the administration "enacted pro-growth policies, which led" to the numbers cited.

That leads us to the issue of credit and blame – something we always consider when politicians make such boasts. For instance, when former Gov. Scott Walker touted similar numbers when in office, economists noted he could not take full credit because the state is affected by many national and global economic forces and trends. The same scenario applies here, in reverse.

Finally, it's worth noting that Trump has argued he should be judged mainly on how the economy was performing before the pandemic. But he has taken credit for recent bounceback growth and noted – especially when defending his late-in-term Supreme Court nomination – that he is elected to a full four-year term, not a partial term.

What's more, the news release itself used the phrase "since President Trump took office," not "in the first 38 months of President Trump's term."

Our ruling

Pence claimed in a news release that since he and Trump took office, their policies "led to an unemployment rate of 3.1% in Wisconsin and 61,000 jobs, including 15,000 manufacturing jobs."

Those numbers may have been high-water marks before the pandemic, but they ignore the current reality. Even then, they overstate the credit for improvements that are driven by many economic forces.

We rate Pence's claim False.