

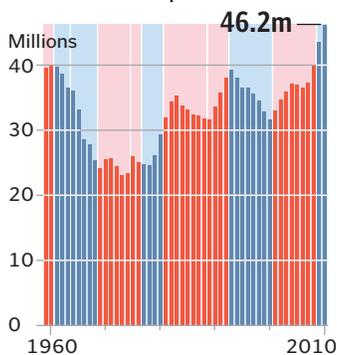
The Boston Globe

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2012

LIVING IN POVERTY

Number of Americans living in families that earn less than the federal poverty limit

■ Republican president
■ Democratic president



SOURCE: US Census Bureau
DAVID BUTLER/GLOBE STAFF

Little mentioned on the trail, poverty widening in nation

By Bobby Caina Calvin
GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON — For all the talk by the presidential candidates about producing jobs, fixing the economy, and bolstering the country's middle class, a dispiriting prospect looms ahead of November's election: The nation's poverty rate is poised to rise to its highest level since President Lyndon B. Johnson launched his war against it.

New Census Bureau estimates are expected to be released this week, and even a small two-tenths tick upward would push the 2011 rate to the highest level since 1965.

With nearly one in every six Americans now living in poverty, advocates for the poor say little attention is being paid to the issue and express concern over how this fall's elections could influence government programs meant to aid the

Romney tax policy

The candidate vows not to hurt the middle class. **A4.**

2008 comparison

The "are you better off" query brings a range of answers. **B1.**

poor.

"The political visibility and influence of the poor is now about where it was in the early 1960s, before the war on pov-

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For advocates of poor in US, campaign offers little clarity

► POVERTY

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erty. If either plans to address poverty, they clearly expect to do it below the radar," said Christopher Jencks, a professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School.

Much of the rhetoric and promises of both Mitt Romney and President Obama have centered on rescuing the middle class. The word poverty is seldom heard. Yet the election's outcome could have a profound effect on the nation's neediest, particularly regarding plans to trim entitlements and slash such programs as food stamps to ease the strain on the federal budget.

When he accepted his party's nomination, Romney broached the topic while assailing Obama for what the former Massachusetts governor said were failed economic policies.

"Today more Americans wake up in poverty than ever before," Romney said. "Look around you. These are not strangers. These are our brothers and sisters, our fellow Americans."

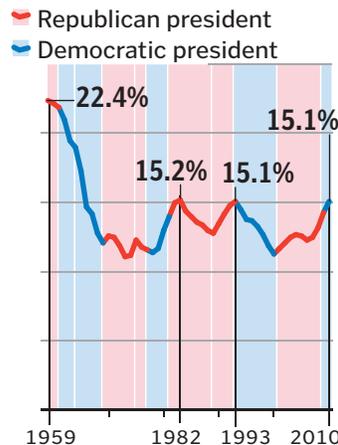
Those words created a sense of dissonance among advocates for the poor, who note that Romney's proposed budget plan would require spending cuts of nearly \$10 trillion over what he hopes will be two terms in the White House. But it is uncertain which programs he would cut, and by how much, because the plan lacks such details.

The Romney campaign argues that controlling government spending and cutting tax rates for top earners will stimulate the economy and create jobs, particularly for the poor.

"It's clear that if the economy has a reasonable recovery, nobody doubts the rate of poverty would come down," said Jencks. It won't necessarily help the poor who have jobs but are paid minimum wage. Nor

US POVERTY RATE

Percentage of population living in poverty.



SOURCE: US Census Bureau

DAVID BUTLER/GLOBE STAFF

will it help the job prospects of the disabled, the low-skilled or uneducated, he said.

While arguing that the White House is taking the right course by resisting most of the spending cuts pushed by Republicans, advocates for the poor say Obama and Democrats should be more aggressive in trying to lift people out of poverty.

Shortly after his election, Obama pledged to raise the \$7.25 an hour minimum wage to \$9.50 by 2011, so "full-time workers can earn a living wage that allows them to raise their families and pay for basic needs such as food, transportation, and housing — things so many people take for granted."

But he didn't deliver, and the prospect of renewing that pledge could be political folly because the House is now controlled by Republicans — who have rejected Obama's major jobs bills.

That's not to say Obama has not had victories. The president's \$787 billion stimulus program set aside money to boost food stamps and unemployment insurance benefits, as well as expand earned income and child tax credits. After get-



SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES FILE 2011

Reading, Pa., a city once boasting numerous industries and the nation's largest railroad company, was recently named the poorest US city with more than 65,000 residents.

ting a temporary extension of the tax credits until the end of this year, the White House is proposing to make the tax breaks permanent. The extended jobless benefits have expired.

In his own convention speech, Obama used the word "poverty" twice. In one instance, he framed the issue as part of a broader discussion about the role of government.

"We know that churches and charities can often make more of a difference than a poverty program alone," he said. "We don't want handouts for people who refuse to help themselves."

An analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal think tank, showed that the president's stimulus package in 2009 prevented nearly 7 million Americans from falling into poverty. The center also pointed out the key role that entitlement programs such as Social Security play in keeping

people out of poverty, suggesting the rate would nearly double to 28.6 percent if all such programs were eliminated.

In 2010, there were 46.2 million people living in poverty — 15.1 percent — in the United States. That is the most people since the government began its accounting in 1959, although the rate is lower than 1965.

In Massachusetts in 2009, the most recent year for state breakdowns, about 655,000 people lived in poverty, or about 10.3 percent of the population.

The government's formula for income includes a person's earnings, Social Security benefits, pension, and other before-tax income, but excludes food stamps, housing subsidies, and other noncash benefits. In 2011, the government's threshold for poverty was \$10,890 for an individual and \$22,350 for a family of four in the continental United States. The median income for a family of four in

Massachusetts is \$99,067, according to the US Census Bureau.

“The looming question of the next president is about what can be done to address this overarching challenge. The American people should hear how each candidate views the capacity of the government and its programs to diminish poverty,” said Jodie Levin-Epstein, the deputy director of the Center for Law and Social Policy, a nonpartisan advocacy group in Washington.

Conservatives contend that reducing deficits takes priority right now. Patrick Louis Knudsen, a senior budget fellow with Heritage Foundation, said, “We need to do something significant on the spending side to get things under control” — even if that means cutting food stamps.

Much of the recent focus has been on the budget plan proposed by Romney’s vice presidential pick, Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin. His \$5.3 trillion in spending reductions has advocates for the poor concerned. Ryan’s budget, for example, would cut \$133.5 billion from the food stamp program over 10 years, bumping as many as 10 million people off the rolls, the budget policy center said. In addition, about 1.6 million people would sink into poverty because of the loss of earned income and child tax credits, the center said.

“Simply put, I do not believe that the preferential option for the poor means a preferential option for big government,” Ryan said in April at Georgetown University, after his austerity budget plan came under criticism from the US Conference of Bishops. In a letter to Congress, the bishops said Ryan’s budget failed to meet the “moral criteria” to extend a “circle of protection” around America’s poor and vulnerable.

Soon after Ryan’s defense, a

group of Roman Catholic nuns went on a 2,700-mile bus tour through the battleground states of Iowa, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Virginia to assail a Republican budget plan they deemed an immoral attack on America’s poor.

The tour stopped in Janesville, Wis., even before Ryan, the town’s most famous resident and a former altar boy at St. John Vianney Catholic Church, was picked by Romney to be his running mate.

“He is very good at numbers and comes across as a very astute budget person,” said Sister Rochelle Friedman, one of the protesting nuns and the director of public policy for the Coalition on Human Needs in Washington.

“But when I really looked at the policies he is advocating,” she said, “they clearly reflect a preference for wealthy people, and not the poor and struggling families.”

No one knows for sure how the poor will fare if the Ryan budget becomes reality, an unlikely scenario if Democrats retain control of the Senate or keep the White House. The GOP-controlled House passed his budget in March, but the Senate did not take it up.

Melissa Boteach, director of the Poverty to Prosperity program at the left-leaning Center for American Progress, contends that antipoverty groups and their allies in Washington have been playing defense on the issue, allowing critics to define the discussion and demonize safety net programs.

“Most politicians prefer to talk about the middle class because it’s more palatable,” Boteach said. “Too often the issue of poverty just sits there, it festers, and it gets ignored.”

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