

# Carly Fiorina's rise in polls fueled by buzz, not facts

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Fact-checkers have been busy in recent weeks picking apart Republican presidential candidate Carly Fiorina's shaky statements on Planned Parenthood, climate change, her own record as CEO of Hewlett Packard and more -- but that hasn't stopped her from rocketing to the top of the GOP field.

It's simply shifted her from scrappy underdog to "target."

Buoyed by buzz about her performance in the second televised Republican presidential debate, Fiorina now trails only fellow political "outsiders" Donald Trump and Ben Carson in an average of eight recent national polls compiled by Real Clear Politics. She's second in New Hampshire, and third in Iowa. As the field's only woman now has the spotlight she wanted, her campaign is turning the sharper scrutiny by the media and her rivals into a badge of honor.



Republican presidential candidate Carly Fiorina speaks at the Practical Federalism Forum hosted by American Principles Project held at Southern New Hampshire University in Hooksett, N.H., Saturday, Oct. 3, 2015. (AP Photo/Cheryl Senter) (Cheryl Senter)

"Being at the front of the pack comes with new challenges," Janel Domenico, Fiorina's senior finance adviser, wrote in an email to potential contributors as this past week's third-quarter fundraising deadline approached. "Candidates will paint a target on Carly. They will try to tear her down so they can take her place in the polls. She's been attacked before, and she will be attacked again."

While using an us-vs.-them appeal to donors and supporters may be politically savvy this early in the campaign, experts say being reckless with facts is risky in the long-term as early risers in the 2012 Republican presidential campaign Herman Cain and Michelle Bachmann discovered when they quickly flamed out. The question now for Fiorina's camp: Will she avoid the same fate?

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"The establishment media, to people who vote in Republican primaries, is clearly the enemy. If they go after you, hey, that's the red badge of courage," said Shanto Iyengar, director of Stanford University's Political Communication Laboratory. "The factual validity of debate statements make almost no difference to the trajectory of the polls," he said -- truth is less important than buzz in the short term, and daily national media

mentions are driving Fiorina's ascent even if they question her truthfulness.

But the fact that Cain's and Bachmann's 2012 runs are now historical footnotes demonstrates that courting controversy and fudging facts is "not a long-term strategy."

Fiorina's firm, measured responses at the Sept. 16 CNN debate made her sound like a saner alternative to billionaire Trump -- whom she effectively shot down over his previous comments about her appearance -- yet more aggressive than the soft-spoken neurosurgeon Carson. Her tone seemed right, if not her facts.

But NBC News, the Washington Post, [PolitiFact.com](http://PolitiFact.com) (<http://PolitiFact.com>), [FactCheck.org](http://FactCheck.org) (<http://FactCheck.org>) and other organizations have debunked her debate claim that one of the secret videos purporting to show Planned Parenthood officials haggling over the sale price of fetal tissue depicted "a fully formed fetus on the table, its heart beating, its legs kicking while someone says we have to keep it alive to harvest its brain."

Asked for comment this week, Fiorina's campaign referred to a recent memo from Deputy Campaign Manager Sarah Isgur Flores, which noted a moment in one video at which a former medical technician's voice-over describes the retention of an aborted fetus' brain tissue -- no mention of "keeping it alive" -- while stock footage of another fetus was shown.

The Washington Post, Fortune, the Christian Science Monitor and other national outlets relied on financial reports, stock prices and other tangible measures to refute the rosy picture she paints of her tenure as HP's CEO from 1999 to 2005 -- as this and other California newspapers did during her 2010 Senate run, and again earlier this year. But this week her campaign recycled opinion pieces from a few former colleagues praising her record. Flores' memo noted Fiorina had been hired to shake things up at a "struggling and stagnating" company, and saw the company through the dot-com bubble's burst while building its revenue and making "tough decisions" to lay off 30,000 workers.

Actually, revenue doubled because she oversaw the acquisition of Compaq, the personal-computer maker, as the market began turning away from PCs; many have questioned the deal's wisdom, then and now. Fiorina also chose certain quarterly reports to claim she quadrupled HP's revenue growth from 2 percent to 9 percent; a more logical annual comparison shows it actually went from 7 percent to 3 percent during her tenure. HP's stock price fell 65 percent from the day she started as CEO to the morning she was fired; it rose 7 percent on news of her firing.

Facts and beliefs are two entirely separate things, Iyengar said, and Fiorina is more concerned with cultivating the latter.

"The Republican electorate clearly believes this scene did appear (in the Planned Parenthood videos), just like they believe Obama is a Muslim," he said. The latter lie is still believed by 43 percent of Republicans, a CNN poll found last month. "There's quite a bit of misinformation out there and candidates can play to that."

The beat goes on: Fiorina's climate-change comments have been praised by conservatives and panned by fact-checkers since her August interview with Yahoo News. For example, she said California "destroys lives and livelihoods with environmental regulations," yet the state's average residential and industrial electricity bills dropped and its economy boomed as it cut its carbon emissions by a quarter in recent decades.

She said, "China could care less" if America tries to reduce carbon, yet President Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping just announced new policies, including a national cap-and-trade program in China. She said "coal provides half the energy in this nation still," yet actually it's about 20 percent. And she said wind energy "slaughters millions of birds," yet a 2013 scientific study puts the actual number far lower while other data shows many more are killed by fossil fuels.

And Fiorina told Yahoo News this week that "all of the evidence is very clear" that waterboarding -- the torturous technique used on terror suspects during the Bush Administration -- "was used when there was no other way to get information that was necessary" and helped "keep our nation safe." The Senate Intelligence Committee's bipartisan 2012 report concluded it was ineffective, brutal and used more often than intelligence agencies had claimed; she called the report "disingenuous."

Fiorina's campaign didn't respond to questions about these statements.

While her statements could come back to haunt her later, fact checks don't reach enough voters to immediately affect polls, said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center and cofounder of the center's [FactCheck.org](http://FactCheck.org) (<http://FactCheck.org>).

But in many cases, she said, "there's going to be a delayed effect as another campaign, later in the season, picks up the fact-checking indictment of a candidate and makes a case to voters who may not be so highly partisan that ... this translates into a lack of trustworthiness," she said.

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