

Trump's nominee faces shower of criticism

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WASHINGTON>> The director of the agency that produces the nation's jobs and inflation data is typically a mild-mannered technocrat, often with extensive experience in statistical agencies, with little public profile.

But like so much in President Donald Trump's second administration, this time is different.

Trump has selected E.J. Antoni, chief economist at the conservative Heritage Foundation, to be the next commissioner at the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Antoni's nomination was quickly met with a cascade of criticism from other economists, from across the political spectrum.

His selection threatens to bring a new level of politicization to what for decades has been a nonpartisan agency widely accepted as a producer of reliable measures of the nation's economic health. While many former Labor Department officials say it is unlikely Antoni will be able to distort or alter the data, particularly in the short run, he could change the currently dry-as-dust way it is presented.

Antoni was nominated by Trump after the BLS released a jobs report Aug. 1 that showed that hiring had weakened in July and was much lower in May and June than the agency had previously reported. Trump, without evidence, charged that the data had been "rigged" for political reasons and fired the then-BLS chair, Erika McEntarfer, much to the dismay of many within the agency.

Antoni has been a vocal critic of the government's jobs data in frequent appearances on podcasts and cable TV. His partisan commentary is unusual for someone who may end up leading the BLS.

For instance, on Aug. 4 — a week before he was nominated — Antoni said in an interview on Fox News Digital that the Labor Department should stop publishing the monthly jobs reports until its data collection processes improve, and rely on quarterly data based on actual employment filings with state unemployment offices.

The monthly employment reports are probably the closest-watched economic data on Wall Street, and can frequently cause swings in stock prices.

When asked at Tuesday's White House briefing whether the jobs report would continue to be released, press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the administration hoped it would be.

"I believe that is the plan and that's the hope," Leavitt said. Leavitt also defended Antoni's nomination, calling him an "economic expert" who has testified before Congress and adding that, "the president trusts him to lead this important department."

Yet Antoni's TV and podcast appearances have created more of a portrait of a conservative ideologue, instead of a careful economist who prioritizes getting the math correct.

"There's just nothing in his writing or his resume to suggest that he's qualified for the position, besides that he is always manipulating the data to favor Trump in some way," said Brian Albrecht, chief economist at the International Center for Law and Economics.

Antoni wrongly claimed in the last year of Biden's presidency that the economy had been in recession since 2022; called on the entire Federal Reserve board to be fired for not earning a profit on its Treasury securities holdings; and posted a chart on social media that conflated timelines to suggest inflation was headed to 15%.

His argument that the U.S. was in a recession rested on a vastly exaggerated measure of housing inflation, based on newly-purchased home prices, to artificially make the nation's gross domestic product appear smaller than it was.

"This is actually maybe the worst Antoni content I've seen yet," Alan Cole of the center-right Tax Foundation said on social media, referring to his recession claim.

On a 2024 podcast, Antoni wanted to sunset Social Security payments for workers paying into the system, saying that "you'll need a generation of people who pay Social Security taxes but never actually receive any of those benefits." As head of the BLS, Antoni would oversee the release of the consumer price index by which Social Security payments are adjusted for inflation.

Many economists share, to some degree, Antoni's concerns that the government's jobs data has flaws and is threatened by trends such as declining response rates. The drop has made the jobs figures more volatile, though not necessarily less accurate over time.

Katharine Abraham, an economist at the University of Maryland who was BLS Commissioner under President Bill Clinton, said updating the jobs report's methods would require at least some initial investment.

The government could use more modern data sources, she said, such as figures from payroll processing companies, and fill in gaps with surveys.