

Winning the Issues

Messaging on Nuclear Weapons, the Iran Deal, the “10-20-30” Plan, the House GOP’s Six-Point Agenda, the 2016 Election, and the Economy

February 2016

OVERVIEW

Presentation Testing conducted two mixed-gender focus groups with moderate Independents in Manchester, NH, on February 10, 2016. One group was comprised of 11 Romney-voting moderate Independents, and the other was comprised of 12 Obama-voting moderate Independents. All respondents had at least some college education, and were age 22+.

KEY FINDINGS

1) **Independents generally viewed the “10-20-30” plan warily and cautiously**

During each session, we presented the following information to respondents:

Recently, leaders in the House of Representatives expressed an interest in working in a bipartisan fashion to alleviate poverty in the U.S. One idea they are looking at is called the “10-20-30” plan.

Here’s the idea: Using money already appropriated, NOT additional funds, all federal agencies would allocate 10% of their budgets for economic development in the counties in the U.S. where at least 20% of the residents have lived in poverty for at least 30 years. That’s where they get “10-20-30.” There are about 350 counties in the U.S. that fit this category, and they are known as “persistent poverty counties.”

Then, we asked:

What do you like about this approach?

Romney-voting Independents compiled the following list:

- The government is using existing funds for this program—no new spending
- The spending would be targeted toward those who really need the money

Obama-voting Independents offered the following list:

- It is focused
- It helps people who have been struggling for a long time—the most needy
- No new money is being spent

- The problem has not been solved for many years so we need to do something about it
- If all federal agencies are involved, this plan is a comprehensive way to approach the problem
- This plan makes us compassionate
- It is a S.M.A.R.T. goal—specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound

Next, we asked:

What do you dislike about this approach?

Romney-voting Independents compiled the following list:

- It is another government program
- There is uncertainty about where the money is coming from and what impact that will have on others—if this program is going to use existing money, then we are taking money away from some other program

Obama-voting Independents offered the following list:

- This type of program has already been done, to some degree, with the War on Poverty—targeting the communities (counties, in this case) that need the most help
- Congress would probably mess it up
- It is not specific enough—it does not say what we are going to do to get these people out of poverty (which is especially difficult for people who have been living in poverty for so long)
- Federal agencies would lose employees if 10% of their budgets were being redirected and applied toward this program (less money would be available for staff)
- There are a lot of people outside of those 350 counties who are struggling financially, and this program does not do anything to help them
- The money that this program will provide will not change the mindset of people living in poverty

Finally, we asked:

What questions do you have about this approach?

Romney-voting Independents compiled the following list:

- How do we know that the money will not be wasted?
- How long will this program continue?
- What types of checks and balances will there be on this program?
- How will the targeting of money on those 350 poor counties affect those entities that are currently receiving that money (since the government will use existing funds)?
- Will there be requirements for the people in those 350 counties to fulfill to receive those funds, or will this become an entitlement program where people get money for doing nothing?

- Why would we not just cut the bureaucracy and give the money directly to the states so they can allocate the money?
- How will the money help the people in those counties? Would the money go directly to individuals or would it go toward other things in the county, such as infrastructure?
- Are the different counties that receive money going to have leeway in how they implement the program so they can structure it to best fit their county's needs?
- What is the current state of poverty in those counties? What kind of help are they already receiving?

Obama-voting Independents offered the following list:

- How will this program help those people?
- With 10% of agency budgets targeting those poor counties, which other programs will no longer be funded, as a result?
- Where are these counties geographically? Are they all concentrated in one area, such as the South?
- Will this program create jobs for the people in those counties so that they can sustain themselves, or is the government just giving handouts to those people?
- Who is training them?
- How much money are we talking about overall for this program?
- Who is going to oversee the distribution and the management of these funds?
- How will the agencies know what to do to help those counties?
- How long will this program last?
- If 20% or more of the population in those 350 counties have lived in poverty for 30 or more years, what do the rest of those counties look like? Are the others living in those counties near poverty, or is the disparity of income significant in those areas?
- Why wouldn't the Republicans, who are in power, want to return the money to the states (which this program does not do)?

2) There was a wide disparity in how respondents reacted to the goals of the six House task forces working on building an agenda to present to the American people. Some of the disparity is attributable to the specific wording we tested, not necessarily the policy goals themselves. Jargon remains a sizable obstacle to accurate understanding of House GOP goals.

During each session, we asked respondents to evaluate the goals of six House-committee-led task forces that were recently announced by House Republican leaders, charged with developing “a bold, pro-growth agenda that will be presented to the country in the months ahead.”

We asked respondents to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the goal of each task force. Zero means they do not agree at all, and 10 means they agree entirely.

The following chart shows each of the six goals, in descending order, from the one they most agreed with to the one they least agreed with, on average. NOTE: The extensive footnote annotations help explain the scores:

House GOP's Six-Points	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	AVG.
Make it easier to invest, produce, and build things in America with a regulatory system that reduces bureaucracy and eases the burden on small businesses and job creators, while still protecting the environment, public safety, and consumer interests.	9.3	8.6	9.0
Develop an overarching strategy¹ and the military capabilities required to confront the national security threats of the 21st century.	9.4	6.8	8.1
Strengthen our safety net² and reform educational programs to make them more effective and accountable³, help people move from welfare to work, and empower productive lives.⁴	8.2	7.8	8.0
Create jobs⁵, grow the economy, and raise wages by reducing rates⁶, removing special interest carve-outs, and making our broken tax code simpler and fairer.	7.6	8.3	8.0
Repeal and replace Obamacare⁷ with a patient-centered system⁸ that gives patients more choice and control, increases quality, and reduces costs.	9.3	5.6	7.5

¹ One Obama-voting Independent reacted to this statement by saying that she thought we already had a strategy in place, and she did not think that it was that bad where we would need to dramatically change it. For some in that group, this statement sounded like a call for increased military funding, and respondents indicated their belief that we do not need to spend that much more money on the military.

² Some respondents wondered what was meant by “strengthen our safety net.” Seven of 12 Obama-voting Independents could not define that phrase. Be more specific.

³ When some Romney-voting Independents heard about reforming “educational programs to make them more effective and accountable,” they immediately thought about Common Core, which they viewed negatively. Respondents in that group expressed support for school choice and localized education.

⁴ Respondents in both groups indicated that they did not see a natural link between strengthening the safety net and reforming education, and by doing that, helping people move from welfare to work, and from that, empowering productive lives. For one Romney-voting Independent, the phrase “empower productive lives” rang “hollow” and “strange” because that is not the role of government. Individuals should take responsibility for that.

⁵ Some Romney-voting Independents questioned whether it was the proper role for government to create jobs. Some assumed that government would be creating the jobs instead of the jobs being created by the private sector, because a governmental task force would be assigned to accomplish this goal. One respondent suggested that the goal should be to “remove obstacles that are stopping the private sector from creating jobs.”

⁶ Respondents in both groups were unsure about which “rates” you were referring to. Romney-voting Independents thought that could mean the interest rates set by the Federal Reserve, corporate tax rates, or individual tax rates. Eight of 12 Obama-voting Independents thought that the statement was referring to interest rates. The others interpreted that to mean tax rates. In the future, the meaning of “rates” must be clearer.

⁷ One Obama-voting Independent pointed out that no legislation called “Obamacare” was ever passed and signed into law. He contended that we should use the proper name for the law—The Affordable Care Act.

⁸ Some Obama-voting Independents were confused by the phrase “patient-centered system.” Explain what that means.

Reclaim power ceded to the executive branch⁹ over the years by reforming the rulemaking process, checking agency authority¹⁰, exercising the power of the purse, and conducting more robust oversight¹¹.	8.1	5.8	7.0
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During each session, we also asked:

Overall, how useful is it for House Republicans to create this six-part agenda?

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	AVG.
0=Not at all useful to 10=Very useful	7.4	6.0	6.7

- 3) **Nearly four months into his Speakership, seven of 23 Independents (almost a third) with at least some college education still do not know that Paul Ryan is the Speaker of the House of Representatives**

In the beginning of each session, we asked:

The current Speaker of the House of Representatives is...

Answer choices	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
1=John Boehner	0	1	1
2=Kevin McCarthy	0	0	0
3=Paul Ryan	9	7	16
4=Mitch McConnell	0	0	0
5=Don't know	2	4	6

⁹ One Romney-voting Independent questioned why Congress ever ceded power to the executive branch in the first place. She mentioned that the courts should rule on whether a President has taken unconstitutional actions, but realized that could take “forever” to resolve. An Obama-voting Independent told us that we already have checks and balances in place, suggesting that structure should not be disturbed. She was unsure about which powers the executive branch has now that they did not have when the Constitution was written.

¹⁰ You need to clarify which agency or agencies you are talking about. One Obama-voting Independent thought that “checking agency authority” referred to the CIA and water-boarding practices. In that group, other agencies that came to mind were the FBI, immigration, the EPA, and the FDA.

¹¹ For one Romney-voting Independent, this phrase suggested more partisan fighting, which she viewed negatively.

4) Most Independents (14 of 23) were not able to name one thing that Paul Ryan has said or done since becoming Speaker of the House on October 29th

In the beginning of each session, we inquired:

If asked, could you name one thing that Paul Ryan has said or done since becoming Speaker of the House on October 29th?

Answer choices	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
1=Yes	5	4	9
2=No	6	8	14

In the beginning of each session, we also asked:

On a scale from zero to 10, how satisfied are you with the job Paul Ryan has been doing so far as Speaker of the House?

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	AVG.
0=Totally dissatisfied to 10=Totally satisfied	4.5	4.5	4.5

It appears that it is too soon for respondents to hold a strong opinion about how Paul Ryan is doing so far in his new position as Speaker. As mentioned previously, most respondents (14 of 23) could not tell us one thing that he has said or done since becoming Speaker nearly four months ago.

5) Obama-voting Independents viewed the direction of the U.S. economy compared to one year ago more positively than Romney-voting Independents, with seven saying that it is getting somewhat better, three indicating that it is staying as is, and two saying that it is getting somewhat worse. Among Romney-voting Independents, two said that compared to one year ago, the U.S. economy is getting somewhat better, five indicated that it is staying as is, and four told us the it is getting somewhat worse or much worse.

In the beginning of each session, we asked:

Compared to one year ago, is the U.S. economy...

Answer choices	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
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1=getting much worse	2	0	2
2=getting somewhat worse	2	2	4
3=staying as is	5	3	8
4=getting somewhat better	2	7	9
5=getting much better	0	0	0

We asked respondents in each session who believe that compared to one year ago, the U.S. economy is getting at least somewhat better or at least somewhat worse what evidence they have for their belief.

Romney-voting Independents who believe that compared to one year ago, the U.S. economy is getting somewhat better cited:

- It is easier to get a job
- One respondent told us that her stocks have been more stable (less volatile on a day to day basis)
- It is easier to make ends meet

Obama-voting Independents who believe that compared to one year ago, the U.S. economy is getting somewhat better cited:

- The stock market has remained steady despite world events
- The Federal Reserve has raised interest rates
- Sales of goods and services are stronger
- Car sales are up
- The unemployment rate has dropped
- More jobs are available—one respondent was just offered a job

Romney-voting Independents who believe that compared to one year ago, the U.S. economy is getting somewhat worse or much worse cited:

- Job growth is weak
- The stock market is down
- One respondent told us that a lot of his children and their friends have lost their jobs, and they have to take jobs that are paying half of what they were making
- Jobs are being sent overseas
- The official unemployment rate is not accurate—it is really higher than what the government reports

Obama-voting Independents who believe that compared to one year ago, the U.S. economy is getting somewhat worse cited:

- An increasing minimum wage has made fewer jobs available
- Young people are not finding jobs as easily as they used to
- One respondent has six children, and all of them have moved periodically from one company to another due to job loss

6) Romney-voting Independents see a nuclear-armed Iran as being nearly as much of a security threat as a nuclear-armed North Korea; Obama-voters are less concerned about these threats

In the beginning of each session, we asked:

On a scale from zero to 10, how big a threat, if any, would a nuclear-armed Iran be to the security of the United States?

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	AVG.
0=No threat at all to 10=A massive threat	8.2	6.4	7.3

We asked respondents in each group who scored this question near the average why they did so.

Romney-voting Independents told us that Iran is an unstable country in an unstable region of the world run by extremists who hate the United States and Europe. That nation is resentful toward the United States and many of its actions are provocative, including its people’s chants of “Death to America!” Also, respondents mentioned that Iran sponsors terrorism around the world. In addition, some were concerned that ISIS would try to take over Iran to acquire its nuclear capabilities if it were to become a nuclear-armed nation.

Obama-voting Independents were not as concerned about the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran. They have faith in the United States military, and they do not want to be “alarmist” because they believe that there are other nations that pose a greater risk to us than Iran, including North Korea. However, they were concerned about ISIS acquiring nuclear weapons. Respondents in that group who scored this question below the average contended that Israel would not allow anything to happen that would put their own national security at risk, such as allowing Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.

In the beginning of each session, we also asked:

On a scale from zero to 10, how big a threat, if any, is a nuclear-armed North Korea to the security of the United States?

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	AVG.
0=No threat at all to 10=A massive threat	8.5	7.4	8.0

We asked Romney-voting Independents why their scores for the two countries were so close, given that North Korea has a nuclear weapon and Iran does not. Basically, they viewed both nations as serious threats. Where differences exist for some respondents, they pointed out that

North Korea does not have an effective delivery system for their nuclear weapons. Also, respondents in that group believe that there are some checks and balances on North Korea, with South Korea and China in the region.

We asked Obama-voting Independents why they scored the question about North Korea one full point higher than the question about Iran. They argued that North Korea is a greater threat because that nation is run by one “unstable” and “deranged” individual who is unaware of the world around him, while Iran still has a degree of a society. Also, they mentioned that if something bad were to happen in North Korea related to nuclear weapons, China and Japan would get involved and that would lead to a crisis for the United States, especially because we have so much military personnel there that would be impacted.

- 7) Almost all Independents (21 of 23) doubted that the Iran deal would prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. All of the Romney-voting Independents would support new sanctions to confront Iran, even if that means jeopardizing the Iran deal. Obama-voting Independents were split on that issue.**

During each session, we asked:

Knowing what you know today, do you believe the Iran deal will keep Iran from developing a nuclear weapon?

Only two of 23 respondents overall—both Obama-voting Independents—thought that the Iran deal would keep Iran from developing a nuclear weapon.

We asked respondents in each session why they held that belief.

Romney-voting Independents viewed inspections as unreliable because inspectors would not be given free rein to search for evidence of nuclear weapon development. Also, they distrusted the ability of the United Nations to keep the United States safe.

Obama-voting Independents doubted that Iran could be trusted with the agreement. They believe that Iran will do whatever they have the capacity to do, regardless of the deal, because they want “a seat at the table,” and having a nuclear weapon would provide Iran with leverage when they are dealing with other nations, including the United States. They would not necessarily use a nuclear weapon, but they want to have it.

Then we asked respondents:

Given Iran’s continued provocations such as testing ballistic missiles near U.S. ships, would you support new sanctions on Iran even if it meant jeopardizing the Iran deal?

All 11 Romney-voting Independents and six of 12 Obama-voting Independents would support new sanctions on Iran, even if it meant jeopardizing the Iran deal.

Romney-voting Independents described the Iran deal as a “joke,” and they contended that Iran would do anything they want to do unless someone were willing to step up to enforce sanctions. They were concerned that President Obama is not paying attention to what is going on with Iran, and they doubted that he would do anything to respond to their provocations.

Obama-voting Independents were divided on this question, with six supporting new sanctions and six opposing them. One respondent who supported new sanctions pointed out that when the Soviet Union broke up, there were 12 pounds of nuclear materials that went missing, suggesting that nuclear materials could go missing from Iran, which would pose a danger to the United States. Among those who did not support new sanctions, they doubted that a nuclear weapon from Iran would be delivered by a ballistic missile (which was one of the provocations mentioned). Instead, they believe that it would go into Times Square in a suitcase. Also, respondents told us that building a nuclear weapon is not like putting together a LEGO set. There are a lot of factors that go into it, and our government has the resources to track most of that.

- 8) Obama-voting Independents were far more optimistic than Romney-voting Independents about where they believe the unemployment rate will be one year from today, with 10 of 12 saying that it would remain in the 5% to 6% range. Two indicated that the unemployment rate would fall below its current level of 5.0%. Almost half (five of 11) of Romney-voting Independents thought that the unemployment rate would increase from its current level of 5.0% to between 6% and 10% one year from today.**

In the beginning of each session, we asked:

The unemployment rate in the U.S. now stands at 5.0%. A year from today, do you expect it to be...

Answer choices	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
1=Under 5%	2	2	4
2=Between 5% and 6%	4	10	14
3=Between 6% and 7%	3	0	3
4=Between 7% and 8%	0	0	0
5=Between 8% and 9%	1	0	1
6=Between 9% and 10%	1	0	1
7=Above 10%	0	0	0

- 9) In the New Hampshire primary the previous night, the top two choices among Romney-voting Independents were Donald Trump (4) and Jeb Bush (3). Among**

Obama-voting Independents, John Kasich (5) and Bernie Sanders (4) garnered the most support in that election. Also, given the choice between Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, or not voting in a general election, most respondents would vote along ideological lines. Eight of 11 Romney-voting Independents would vote for Donald Trump, and eight of 12 Obama-voting Independents would support Hillary Clinton.

At the end of each session, we asked respondents in each group who they voted for in the New Hampshire primary.

Romney-voting Independents voted for Donald Trump (4), Jeb Bush (3), John Kasich (2), Marco Rubio (1), and Ted Cruz (1).

Obama-voting Independents voted for John Kasich (5), Bernie Sanders (4), Hillary Clinton (2), and Ted Cruz (1).

Then, we asked respondents in each session who they would vote for in November 2016 if the choices were Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, or they could choose not to vote.

Among Romney-voting Independents, eight would vote for Donald Trump, two would support Hillary Clinton, and one would not vote.

Among Obama-voting Independents, eight would vote for Hillary Clinton, one would support Donald Trump, and three would not vote or they would write in another candidate.