

Winning the Issues

Messaging on a Budget Agreement, Trade, Immigration, the Visa Waiver Program, and the Economy

April 2016

OVERVIEW

Presentation Testing conducted two mixed-gender focus group dial tests with moderate Independents in Columbus, OH on April 12, 2016. One group was comprised of 12 Romney-voting moderate Independents, and the other was comprised of 10 Obama-voting moderate Independents. All respondents had at least graduated from high school, and were age 22+. An actress named Victoria advocated for the positions of the House GOP leadership. Laurel spoke as the advocate for Donald Trump's positions. They engaged in point-counterpoint debates about trade, immigration, and the Visa Waiver Program, which are referenced throughout the report.

KEY FINDINGS

1) Independents expect Congress to formulate a budget agreement for 2016

The bottom line: No surprise—the lack of a formal budget, even with budget limits in place, remains unacceptable. Independents told us they view the absence of a budget as a demonstration of Congress's lack of planning, and by extension lack of accountability. Most respondents don't know how the budget process works, but when it's explained that you'd be passing appropriations bills under last December's caps, but without a budget, they think you're leaning on a past decision when you should be making a fresh decision about spending priorities. They also think you're just settling for a lower, unacceptable standard.

“If you're not going to set a budget...where X goes to X, and Y goes to Y, then what's the point of having a budget? It's like whoever has the most clout is going to pull the most money out, and send it to whatever pet project....If my wife told me we have \$100 to spend this month, and I went to go out and spent \$98 on whiskey, we've got \$2 left to feed the four of us.”—Fred, Obama-voting Independent

“It's not responsible. ‘Give me money and I'll spend it where I want.’ [Even though there are caps,] it doesn't matter. I'd still want to know where—if I were managing—the person is going to spend it, or the entity is going to spend it.”—Susan, Obama-voting Independent

During each session, we asked:

True or false: Congress has the authority to spend money in a given year even if it does not pass a budget for that year.

Answer choices	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
1=True	2	6	8
2=False	3	2	5
3=Don't know	7	2	9

During each session, we also asked respondents to evaluate two statements for how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each one, on a zero to 10 scale. Zero means they totally disagreed, and 10 means they totally agreed.

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	AVG.
On a scale from zero to 10, how strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: “If Congress does not pass a budget this year, Members of Congress should not get paid.”	7.5	7.9	7.7
On a scale from zero to 10, how strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement: “If Congress does not pass a budget this year, but passes bills to appropriate funds within previously agreed-upon budget limits set by both parties, that would be acceptable.”	4.3	4.6	4.5

2) Trump’s trade message resonated as much as Ryan’s—for different reasons

The bottom line: When presented with an actress reading Trump’s downbeat messaging on trade, contrasted with another reading Ryan’s upbeat messaging, each group split in half. (NOTE: Respondents were *not* told the original source of the messages.) Those preferring Trump’s message found the complaint about jobs going overseas to be spot-on. And his second-grade-level language—contrasted with Ryan’s more adult presentation—was easier for some to understand. Those supporting Ryan thought he had a more realistic view of how trade actually works, and the benefits it offers in terms of U.S. exports.

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
Laurel (Trump advocate)	6	5	11
Victoria (House GOP leadership advocate)	6	5	11

Messaging guidance on trade:

Interestingly, in the dial tests, Ryan’s most effective message focused on the problem, not on the solution or on the virtues of trade:

“People have legitimate gripes with the global economy. But let’s be sure we’ve grabbed the right culprit. The problem isn’t when other countries play by the rules. It’s when they break the rules. Or rather, it’s when they rig the rules in their favor.”

Significantly, Ryan’s message never scored above 71 out of 100 in terms of agreement throughout the video, and was mostly in the 60s, which is lackluster, though not dismal. His least effective messaging immediately followed his most effective, above, when he said:

“And I would argue that the best solution to that—is more trade agreements. Now, what trade agreements do is level the playing field. Our economy is already one of the most open in the world. So trade agreements make other countries take down barriers to our exports—tariffs, quotas, red tape.”

The most effective Trump messaging, which scored in the high 70s, was this:

“Our companies are being uprooted, taken out, and they’re moving overseas. We cannot continue to go on like this as a country. We have to keep our companies here. If you look at the numbers, they’re really discouraging.”

He is most vulnerable with lines that sound like exaggerations, where the dial lines plummet; you may want surrogates to call Trump out when he says things like:

--“We have rebuilt China singlehandedly.”

--“We are losing with everybody.”

--“Everybody’s leaving.”

--“When they send their products here, they’re going to pay a 35% tax.”

3) Trump’s immigration messaging is atrocious with Independents; Ryan’s is effective

The bottom line: When presented with an actresses reading Trump’s stump speech on immigration and Mexico, contrasted with another actress reading Ryan’s solutions-based message on immigration, *every single Independent in both sessions preferred Ryan’s messaging*—a lopsidedness we rarely see with Independents in any dial test for any client. (NOTE: Respondents were *not* told the original source of the messages.) Ryan was endorsed because he was for a solution and was more positive. Trump’s negativity was a huge turn-off.

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
Victoria (House GOP leadership advocate)	12	10	22
Laurel (Trump advocate)	0	0	0

Messaging guidance on immigration:

Ryan’s most effective message on trade was his call for cooperation and bipartisanship, which scored from the high 70s to the mid-80s when the actress reading his text said:

“We should welcome anyone who is committed to America, but we must always uphold the law—and be fair to those who followed it. Moving forward, I hope to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to craft comprehensive immigration reform that embodies these principles. We have to offer people a path to earned legalization. We have to invite people to come out of the shadows. We need to make sure that the children who are here, who are brought here, who did not choose to come here, who were brought by their parents—that they have an ability to earn citizenship in a far faster way. These are the things that we think are the principles that Republicans and Democrats can come together on.”

What also scored well—but not quite as well as the verbiage above—were his four principles for dealing with immigration.

The Trump verbiage was dismal. This was bad, scoring just in the 40s and 50s:

“We will build a wall. It will do what it’s supposed to do: keep illegal immigrants out. Now, with that said, we’re going to have a big door right in the middle of that wall and people are going to come into our country and they’re going to come in legally. We want people to come in and we want to treat people fairly, but we either have a country or we don’t.”

But this was much worse, scoring in the low 40s and 30s:

“Mexico must pay for the wall and until they do, the United States will impound all remittance payments that are sent from illegal immigrants in the United States to people living in Mexico. It’s an easy decision for Mexico. Make a one-time payment of \$5-10 billion to ensure that \$24 billion continues to flow into their country year after year.”

4) Independents, including Obama voters, take a hard line with the Visa Waiver Program

The bottom line: We contrasted two approaches: 1) the text of a Rep. Katko weekly radio address from February about the Administration carving loopholes into the VWP law that was tightened in December and 2) an amalgam of hard-hitting messages from Reps. Barletta, Kramer, Reed,

and Ellmers (as well as a sprinkling of Trump), about the need to tighten the VWP—and ways to do it. In the dial tests, the latter script scored 10-20 points higher than the former, and on the whole, the Independents in both groups preferred it by a 14-8 margin.

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
Victoria (House GOP leadership advocate)	4	4	8
Laurel (Trump advocate)	8	6	14

There was a modest amount of knowledge about the Visa Waiver Program that respondents brought to the conversation. At the beginning of our sessions we asked:

Answer choices	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
1= A program that allows citizens of specific countries to travel to the U.S. for up to 90 days without having to get a visa	6	6	12
2= A program that lets consumers use their Visa credit card numbers without having the actual cards in hand	0	0	0
3= A program to let Americans work in other countries without obtaining visas in advance	0	2	2
4= Don't know	4	2	6

Messaging guidance on the Visa Waiver Program:

Katko's most effective messaging focused on common-sense approaches; at the end of the segment our actress said this, which scored in the 70s with both groups:

“A law is only as good as how you enforce it. This is not a time to start lowering our guard. And we should not put Iran’s feelings before America’s security interests. This law is a common sense measure we need to keep us safe, and we must do all we can to make sure the administration enforces it in full.”

There was nothing he said that was all that problematic that you should obviously avoid.

With the second script, what stands out is how much higher the Obama-voting Independents scored than the Romney-voting Independents—by five to 20 points through long stretches of the dial test. These Obama-voting Independents are very anxious about another terrorist attack, and scored the following messaging in the mid-to-high 80s (view it as very effective):

“We need to have enhanced screening of travelers and require participating countries to share counterterrorism information with the U.S. or lose eligibility for participation in the

program. We should also require that all visa waiver countries use fraud resistant e-passports that use biometric data. There are some countries that do not require passports to have those, and we are saying that unless you have this capability, you cannot participate in the Visa Waiver Program.”

The key for Republicans when it comes to immigration is to sound committed to protecting our country without sounding over-the-top or hard-hearted.

5) Views about the direction of the U.S. economy were tied to ideology, with Obama-voting Independents holding a far more positive view compared to Romney-voting Independents. Among Obama-voting Independents, six stated that the U.S. economy is getting somewhat better, three indicated that it is staying as is, and one said that it is getting somewhat worse compared to one year ago. Romney-voting Independents were more split, with three stating that the U.S. economy is getting somewhat better, four indicating that it is staying as is, and five saying that it is getting somewhat worse or much worse compared to one year ago.

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
1=getting much worse	1	0	1
2=getting somewhat worse	4	1	5
3=staying as is	4	3	7
4=getting somewhat better	3	6	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:

- The strength of the U.S. Dollar in international markets
- The Federal Reserve increased interest rates
- One respondent indicated that her job stability is good and she is receiving salary increases
- The housing market is recovering
- More jobs are available

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

- The real estate market is improving—property values have increased

- People are spending more money
- There is an increasing development and focus on high school jobs
- People are more easily able to get jobs after graduating from high school and college
- Wall Street is doing well—the Dow Jones is at 17,000+

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

- Salaries are not going up at the same rate that the cost of living has
- The stock market has not been doing well
- One respondent's company just laid off over 10,000 workers
- Healthcare costs are rising
- Uncertainty in the world, including increasing levels of terrorism and the U.S. presidential election, which will cause people to spend less money

The only Obama-voting Independent who believes that compared to one year ago, the U.S. economy is getting somewhat worse cited:

- The national debt is too high
- We are too reliant on the international economy, which is not very good, on average

6) Half of Independents (11 of 22) believe that the unemployment rate in the U.S. will remain in the 5% to 6% range one year from today. Only three overall believe that the unemployment rate will fall from its current level of 5.0% to under 5% one year from today, which suggests that most think the unemployment rate has leveled off and will not improve moving forward. In fact, more than a third of respondents (eight of 22) believe that the unemployment rate in the U.S. will increase at least one full point to between 6.0% and 8.0% during that time period.

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%	1	2	3
2=Between 5% and 6%	5	6	11
3=Between 6% and 7%	5	1	6
4=Between 7% and 8%	1	1	2
5=Between 8% and 9%	0	0	0
6=Between 9% and 10%	0	0	0
7=Above 10%	0	0	0