

Winning the Issues

Messaging on Developing a “Bold, Pro-Growth Agenda,” the Supreme Court, Speaker Ryan, and the Economy

May 2016

OVERVIEW

Presentation Testing conducted two mixed-gender focus groups with moderate Independents in Chalfont, PA on May 2, 2016. One group was comprised of 13 Romney-voting moderate Independents, and the other was comprised of 11 Obama-voting moderate Independents. All respondents had at least some college education, and were age 22+.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1) **The House Republicans’ goal that Independents agreed with the most was: “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.” The House Republicans’ goal that Independents agreed with the least was: “Reclaim power ceded to the executive branch over the years by reforming the rulemaking process, checking agency authority, exercising the power of the purse, and conducting more robust oversight.” Overall, Independents viewed the six-part agenda as moderately useful.**

During each session, we told respondents that some Members of Congress announced in February the formation of six House-committee-led task forces, charged with developing “a bold, pro-growth agenda.”

We asked them to use their dials to score how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the goal of each task force. Zero means they strongly disagreed, and 10 means they strongly agreed.

The following chart shows each of the six goals, in descending order, from the one that garnered the most agreement to the least agreement, on average:

	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	8.9	8.4	8.7

environment, public safety, and consumer interests.			
Strengthen our safety net and reform educational programs to make them more effective and accountable, help people move from welfare to work, and empower productive lives.	8.2	8.4	8.3
Develop an overarching strategy and the military capabilities required to confront the national security threats of the 21st century.¹	8.0	8.3	8.2
Repeal and replace Obamacare with a patient-centered system that gives patients more choice and control, increases quality, and reduces costs.²	9.2	6.9	8.1
Create jobs,³ grow the economy, and raise wages⁴ by reducing rates, removing special interest carve-outs, and making our broken tax code simpler and fairer.	8.5	7.6	8.1
Reclaim power ceded to the executive branch⁵ over the years by reforming the rulemaking process, checking agency authority, exercising the power of the	6.5*⁷	6.3	6.4

¹ With this goal, one Romney-voting Independent was thinking about our civil liberties, wondering what we will give up for security.

² Seven of 11 Obama-voting Independents scored this goal in the 8 to 10 range (of 10), expressing strong agreement, which is notable because all of them voted for the President in 2012. Respondents told us that they did not think that Obamacare solves the problem. They see high premiums, high deductibles, no better care, and fewer choices. In their view, Obamacare does not really help unless you are receiving a subsidy.

³ Romney-voting Independents told us that government does not create jobs—people and businesses do. They would have agreed more with this goal if it had said, “Make it easier for business people to create jobs.”

⁴ Some respondents in each group interpreted this phrase to mean that government would raise wages, including the minimum wage.

⁵ Some Romney-voting Independents did not know what this phrase means. One mis-interpreted it to mean that we would be giving more power to the President. Another Romney-voting Independent was uncertain about what the executive branch is. Some Romney-voting Independents questioned why Congress would have to “reclaim power” that they already have, as described in the Constitution, seemingly unaware of the controversy surrounding President Obama’s executive orders to do things that Congress did not pass. Obama-voting Independents struggled with this phrase, as well. Some were uncertain about who would be reclaiming the power from the executive branch. In that group, Obama-voting Independents told us that the phrase sounded “politically charged” because President Obama has not used his executive powers any more than previous Presidents. His actions only seem like more of a big deal because we have the Internet now and other mass media that highlights those actions, which was not the case in most other presidential administrations.

⁷ Romney-voting Independents did not fully grasp the meaning of this goal. After some clarification, we took another vote, where it scored at 7.1. After further clarification and discussion, we took another vote, where it scored at 7.6.

purse, and conducting more robust oversight.⁶

During each session, we also asked:

Overall, how useful is it for Members of Congress to create this six-part agenda?

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	AVG.
0=Not at all useful to 10=Very useful	6.6	6.4	6.5

Romney-voting Independents told us that this six-part agenda sounded “great” and they agreed with its goals, but they questioned how practical it would be to accomplish those things.

Obama-voting Independents thought that the agenda is fairly useful because it is a plan, and they were skeptical that anything could get done without one.

2) Overall, Independents thought that this six-part agenda sounded somewhat conservative

During each session, we asked:

On balance, how liberal or conservative does this agenda sound, on a scale from zero to 10?

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	AVG.
0=Very liberal to 10=Very conservative	6.6	5.7	6.2

Romney-voting Independents thought that this six-part agenda sounded conservative, overall. However, there were two parts of it that they thought sounded liberal, driving down some scores. One of the goals stated that we should “create jobs” and “raise wages.” Romney-voting Independents told us that government cannot create jobs without expanding its power, which conservatives oppose. Also, it sounded like the government, rather than the private sector, was going to raise wages, such as the minimum wage.

⁶ One Romney-voting Independent wondered what kind of oversight would be conducted. An Obama-voting Independent interpreted this goal to mean that the executive branch, including the President, is not currently overseeing and checking rules and regulations.

Obama-voting Independents thought that this agenda's call for more scrutiny, more checks and balances, and developing a plan for the military sounded conservative. Also, as with the Romney voters, they interpreted the goal that said that government should "raise wages" as referring to increasing the minimum wage, which sounded more liberal to them and made this agenda sound less conservative overall.

3) For Romney-voting Independents, the most favored names for the six-part agenda are: Roadmap for America's Future, Making America Strong, and Rebuilding a Nation. Among Obama-voting Independents, the names that garnered the strongest support were: Roadmap for America's Future and Rebuilding a Nation.

During each session, we conducted a whiteboard exercise where we asked respondents to imagine that they were in charge of coming up with a name for the six-part agenda that we presented to them earlier in the session. When each list was completed, we asked respondents to vote on their top two choices.

Romney-voting Independents compiled the following list⁸ (with their top two choices in **bold** and the number of votes in parentheses):

- Forward-moving Initiative
- Transforming America
- Goals for America (3)
- Progressively Making it Easy
- Returning America to the People (2)
- **Making America Strong (4)**
- **Rebuilding a Nation (4)**
- America Made New (1)
- Foundation for Change (1)
- Fundamental Principles (1)
- Back to Basics
- Pathway to Prosperity (1)
- **Roadmap for America's Future (9)**

Obama-voting Independents offered the following list⁹ (with their top two choices in **bold** and the number of votes in parentheses):

- Republican Moderate Platform (3)
- Equality, Fairness, and Reform Program
- Make America Better Than It Was Before
- Preparation, Restoration, Reformation

⁸ After Romney-voting Independents provided their names, we added "Pathway to Prosperity" and "Roadmap for America's Future" to the list, which have been used in the past, and then we asked respondents to vote for their top two choices.

⁹ After Obama-voting Independents provided their suggestions, we added "Rebuilding a Nation," which was one of the highest-scoring respondent-produced names for the six-part agenda from the Romney group. Next, we again added "Pathway to Prosperity" and "Roadmap for America's Future" to the list, and then we asked respondents to vote for their top two choices.

- Restoring America to its Greatness (3)
- Federal Initiatives Plan (2)
- Improvement for the 21st Century (2)
- **Rebuilding a Nation (5)**
- **Roadmap for America’s Future (6)**
- Pathway to Prosperity (1)

4) Obama-voting Independents were very troubled about the decision by Senate Republicans to not conduct hearings or vote this year on President Obama’s nominee to the Supreme Court. Romney-voting Independents were only somewhat troubled by that decision. There was very little familiarity with the nominee himself.

In the beginning of each session, we asked:

On a scale from zero to 10, how do you feel about the decision by Senate Republicans to not conduct hearings or vote this year on President Obama’s nominee to the Supreme Court?

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	AVG.
0=It does not trouble me at all to 10=It troubles me a lot	3.9	8.0	6.0

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

Romney-voting Independents held conflicting feelings about this issue. As a matter of principle, they were troubled that our elected leaders will not work with one another because they disagree with the President. However, they were not really troubled by the decision by Senate Republicans because they believe that President Obama has nominated a liberal judge who would legislate from the bench, and they do not want to see that happen. They trusted that Senate Republicans know what they are doing to stop that from occurring. Some admitted that if they agreed more with the President and he had nominated someone who they would like, they would be more troubled by the decision of Senate Republicans.

Obama-voting Independents were troubled by the Senate Republicans’ decision because they viewed it as a “political game” that we should not be playing. They believe that Justice Scalia needs to be replaced, following his death, and President Obama still has the power to put someone into that Supreme Court seat. We asked those who scored this question near the average (8.0) why they did not score it a 10. They told us that the Senate Republicans’ decision does not affect their everyday lives in a way that they would be thinking or talking about this issue all the time, but they still find it very troubling.

We asked Obama-voting Independents if they would hold the same view if it were May 2008 and President Bush had been able to name a justice to the Supreme Court at the end of his second

term and Senate Democrats were not conducting hearings or voting this year on his nominee. They told us that they would be troubled by that situation, as well.

During each session, we asked if Senate Democrats should advocate for Senate Republicans not getting paid because they are not doing their jobs, including holding hearings for President Obama’s Supreme Court nominee and voting for or against him. This idea did not generate enthusiasm in either group. Obama-voting Independents told us that there are other aspects of their jobs that they are hopefully doing, suggesting that fulfilling their other responsibilities would justify ongoing salaries for them. Also, respondents in that group told us that losing paychecks would not impact Senate Republicans very much because they have other sources of income.

Respondents were not very familiar with the President’s Supreme Court nominee. Only two respondents overall—one in each group—told us that they would be able to tell us his name. Also, only six Romney-voting Independents and four Obama-voting Independents told us that they would recognize him if they were to see his picture.

5) More than six months into his Speakership, almost one-third of Independents (seven of 24) who had at least some college education still did 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	0	0
2=Kevin McCarthy	0	0	0
3=Paul Ryan	9	8	17
4=Mitch McConnell	0	0	0
5=Don’t know	4	3	7

6) Independents were split along ideological lines regarding their view of the U.S. economy compared to one year ago, with Obama-voting Independents holding a more positive view than Romney-voting Independents. Among Obama-voting Independents, five said that the U.S. economy is getting somewhat better, and six indicated that it is staying as is. Nine Romney-voting Independents said that the U.S. economy is getting somewhat worse or much worse compared to one year ago, and four indicated that it is staying as is.

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	3	0	3
2=getting somewhat worse	6	0	6
3=staying as is	4	6	10
4=getting somewhat better	0	5	5
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.

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

- Interest rates are staying down
- Low inflation
- The unemployment rate has been steady at around 5%
- More jobs are created each month
- Our emphasis on alternate energy will create new jobs, including in the solar sector
- The stock market has been steady
- Construction projects are booming
- All industries are picking up

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

- Everything is being outsourced—one respondent’s job was outsourced and he was told that he had to train his own replacement
- Small businesses are closing (more “For Lease” signs are appearing)
- Healthcare costs keep rising
- People are losing their jobs
- Consumer spending is declining
- Food prices have increased
- People cannot find jobs, even with a college degree
- The unemployment numbers are manipulated by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to make our economy seem better than it really is—the jobs numbers are initially reported as strong and later, they are adjusted downward

Note: None of the Romney-voting Independents believe that the U.S. economy is getting at least somewhat better, and none of the Obama-voting Independents believe that it is getting at least somewhat worse.

- 7) **Most Independents (18 of 24) believe that the unemployment rate in the U.S. will remain in the 5% to 6% range one year from today. Only one respondent overall—an Obama-voting Independent—believes that the unemployment rate will fall from its current level of 5.0% to under 5% during that time frame, which suggests that Independents are not optimistic about the unemployment rate improving from its current level over the next year.**

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%	0	1	1
2=Between 5% and 6%	10	8	18
3=Between 6% and 7%	2	2	4
4=Between 7% and 8%	1	0	1
5=Between 8% and 9%	0	0	0
6=Between 9% and 10%	0	0	0
7=Above 10%	0	0	0