

New Models Economy, Supercommittee, and Medicare with Independents

November 2011

OVERVIEW

Presentation Testing conducted two mixed-gender focus groups in suburban Cincinnati (Highland Heights, KY) on November 22, 2011. One group contained 12 McCain-voting moderate Independents, and the other contained 13 Obama-voting moderate Independents. Virtually all respondents had at least some college education, and almost all were between the ages of 18 and 65.

KEY FINDINGS

1) Both groups of Independents take a dim view of President Obama's presidency, but for very different reasons

We conducted a white board exercise where all respondents were asked to complete this sentence: "President Obama inherited a lot of problems when he became President, and because of his actions, he _____." We then asked each respondent to indicate the two answers that come closest to the way they personally feel.

McCain Independents answered the question this way (and in this order, as we went around the room):

Accelerated the fiscal problems

Exacerbated the economic mess

In no way made any of it better

Made the fiscal problem worse

He doesn't have a clue as to how things work (second place)

Didn't fix any of the problems and made them worse and did nothing for job creation

Mortgaged the future of America (top-scoring)

Screwed the military

Made it so I don't enjoy my job anymore

Deeply divided the country (third place)

He made things worse

In our discussion afterwards, these McCain Independents railed against all of the debt that has been accumulating, as well as the new healthcare law, and their effects on individuals and businesses.

In our group, we heard:

“It’s the debt issue. Yes, he did do the stimulus, but everyone has to pay that money back. He put individual people and businesses in debt, as well.” – Angela, McCain Independent

“I think it’s the debt. I work for a small mom and pop company. The healthcare stuff that he’s bringing around is going to run all those businesses into the ground with the regulations that he’s bringing about.” – Lisa, McCain Independent

Obama Independents answered the question this way:

Lost the favor of the people
Was unsuccessful
Lost a lot of popularity
Failed to keep a lot of his promises
Became a lame duck
Didn’t change what he was going to change
Didn’t make things better
Bit off more than he could chew
Didn’t change Washington’s culture (tied for top-scoring)
Will not be re-elected
Did the best he could with what he had to work with
Slow to respond to a failing economy
Had a difficult time accomplishing his goals (tied for top-scoring)

In our discussion about these results, there is a strong belief that the President did not keep his promise to change Washington’s lobbyist-dominated culture, and that he was naïve in thinking it was possible. And the group was split as to whether the problems the President faces now are of his own making, or caused more by Republicans and the dominant Washington culture.

Respondents explained:

“We came out of a Republican White House and a lot of the key people were still hanging out up there and still on the Hill. We have the best government money can buy. That’s what’s happened in our country. We are run by Congress that’s being fed money by lobbyists, and I don’t blame the President as much as I blame what’s happening with the change of the Congress.” – Jane, Obama Independent

“It’s partially [problems of the Republicans’ making]. I think it’s partially the moneyed interests that have been influencing [them] for a long time, and I think [President Obama] was probably naïve about what he could change. He was young as a senator. He did a very good job on the campaign trail, and I think that resonated with everyone, but I don’t think he really had a good sense of how difficult it would be. It’s not just Republicans. It’s the lobbying that goes on.” – John, Obama Independent

2) House Republicans are viewed as ineffective and inarticulate by McCain Independents, and uncompromising, conflict-focused, and deceptive by Obama Independents

We conducted a second white board exercise where all respondents were asked to complete this sentence: “The Republicans who took over the House of Representatives in January have _____.”

McCain Independents said the House Republicans have:

Tried but failed to get anything done
Run into roadblocks
Been trying to make a change
Done nothing
Trouble articulating their message (second-highest)
Stalled
Come up on a brick wall
Fizzled out
Failed
Been ineffective (top scoring)

McCain Independents said the House GOP has been unable to explain the complexities of the policies they’re advancing, such as opposing tax hikes on the wealthy, or what is wrong with the new healthcare law. They also thought that Republicans are shy about pointing out the extremely serious nature of the problems the country faces because if they do, they are likely to be pushed out of office by those who don’t want personally painful changes made to government.

Our respondents told us:

“I think they’ve been ineffective in the way that they haven’t gone through the healthcare plan, and made the American people aware of the major things that aren’t even involved with healthcare that are in that plan. I don’t think that they’ve effectively gone through it and explained it to people to let them know why it’s so bad.” – Janet, McCain Independent

“[Republicans] are fighting an uphill battle in that what is best for America is for us to step back a couple of generations and take that long-term perspective of ‘I’m going to do without right now, but it’s going to make things better in the future.’ They are already fighting an uphill battle, and they’re not getting that clear to people because society has become so much, ‘I want it right now, and I want it my way.’ It’s a lot easier for the Democrats to come across and say, ‘This is going to be awesome for you right now.’” - Lisa, McCain Independent

“I don’t think they do a very good job of explaining things. The Democrats, I think, are much better at explaining what they’re trying to do. When you put that on top of the

Republican message, it's harder. Nobody wants to hear that, but you don't want to sugar coat it, but that's just the way it is. If you're going to correct this problem, it's going to take a lot of things. 'You can't kick the can down the road any longer' is really what they need to say much more vividly." – Steve, McCain Independent

Obama Independents said the following:

Turned compromise into a dirty word
Made things more difficult
To stop fighting and start focusing
Have lost sight of the citizens
Created stalemate
Have been difficult to work with
Have lost the trust of the American people
Created conflict and deception (second-highest)
Caused more problems
Have added frustration to already difficult situation
Faced serious opposition
Been unwilling to compromise (top scoring)

The Obama Independents told us they don't like the Republicans' intransigence, such as being unwilling to meet with the President when he asks them to.

In our group, we heard:

"When they should have come to meetings, or not taken a vacation, or come back to Washington, they chose not to come back. They really did not want to work on this." – Jane, Obama Independent

"There was a lot of stuff going on that was not necessary, like not meeting with the President or not taking a vote to change things as far as issues were concerned, almost turning their backs against what Obama was trying to accomplish. It seemed like they would go behind his back and do things that he did not approve of being the President. It was like [Republicans] had the voice, and the President did not. Therefore, he didn't have any help there, so it created a lot of conflict within the House, within the republic, within the lobbyists, within the people. They didn't see the good things that Obama was trying to do because he had a lot of bad things where everybody was trying to make him a scapegoat." – Phyllistine, Obama Independent

3) Both groups were generally unfamiliar with the supercommittee—and were equally unfamiliar with the cut in payroll taxes currently in effect

On a scale from zero to 10, the McCain Independents averaged a 4.8 in terms of familiarity with the supercommittee. Obama Independents averaged a 3.6.

We asked both groups, “What happened this week with the ‘supercommittee?’” Among 12 McCain Independents, none said it was successful, eight said it failed, and four didn’t know. Among 13 Obama Independents, zero said it was successful, seven said it failed, and six didn’t know.

We next asked, “Imagine an American worker earned gross wages of \$40,000 in 2009, and will earn \$40,000 again in gross wages in 2011. When it comes to the FICA taxes that this person will pay for Social Security and Medicare this year, will his tax rate in 2011 be lower than it was in 2009, the same as it was in 2009, or higher than it was in 2009. Here’s what we found:

	McCain Independents	Obama Independents
Lower than it was in 2009	4	5
The same as it was in 2009	5	6
Higher than it was in 2009	3	2

Just to put a fine point on this: Only nine of 25 respondents know that workers have received a payroll tax cut. That was amplified by the responses to this question: “President Obama says he wants Congress to extend the (FICA) payroll tax cut next year. Did you and/or the workers you know get a payroll tax cut this year?”

	McCain Independents	Obama Independents
Yes	4	5
No	5	6
Don’t know	3	2

4) On balance, the President’s messaging on the supercommittee is more effective with moderate Independents than the House Republicans’ messaging

We tested 34 statements that came directly (or almost directly) from either the President or GOP House leadership in the wake of the supercommittee. The statements were presented somewhat randomly, alternating back and forth between an Obama statement and a House GOP statement.

Each statement was scored by respondents for their agreement levels on a scale from zero to 10; respondents were asked to evaluate the totality of the statement and just not one portion of it.

Only one statement from the House GOP scored above a 7.0 on average between the two groups, while four from the President scored above 7.0. Eleven GOP statements scored below a 6.0, while only eight from the President scored that low.

Below are two charts, showing the results in descending order of agreement.

HOUSE GOP STATEMENTS

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
We can't get our economy moving again and create jobs without dealing with Washington's out-of-control spending.	7.8	8.9	6.6
Republicans were willing to consider new tax revenue, as long as it was through pro-growth policies that make the tax code fairer, simpler and more competitive, which will help create more jobs.	6.6	7.6	5.7
The President designed a political strategy that doomed the committee to failure, first by insisting the committee include \$450 billion of his failed stimulus policies in any agreement, making deficit reduction much harder, and second, by issuing a veto threat, warning he would not accept an agreement that did not include a job-killing tax increase.	6.2	7.9	4.4
Sadly, the so-called "supercommittee" was unable to reach agreement because President Obama and Washington Democrats insisted on dramatic tax hikes on American job creators, which would make our economy worse.	6.1	7.3	5.0
With the "supercommittee," Democrats, unfortunately, refused to offer anything they didn't previously support — insisting on a trillion dollar tax hike on job creators and nearly a trillion dollars in new "stimulus" spending.	6.0	7.1	4.9
Not everyone in the Republican party was happy that party leaders offered tax reform as part of the "supercommittee," but Republicans put forth good-faith offers that would address Democrats' demands for more revenue.	5.9	6.6	5.3
Democrats never offered a plan to solve what President Obama has called the single largest driver of our debt crisis, our nation's health care costs.	5.9	8.1	3.7
It's disappointing that Democrats now blame Republicans for trying to clean up their mess without more job-killing tax increases that would intensify the painful effects of the Obama economy on American families and small businesses.	5.9	8.0	3.8

Republicans went “bigger” than Democrats, and made multiple offers, including \$3.9 trillion in deficit reduction to solve the crisis, a sensible \$1.5 trillion plan, and even \$600 billion of deficit reduction – all rejected by Democrats who refused to coalesce around a plan.	5.5	6.8	4.2
The “supercommittee” was unable to reach agreement because President Obama and Washington Democrats insisted on dramatic tax hikes on American job creators, which would make our economy worse.	5.2	7.3	3.2
Throughout the "supercommittee" process, Republicans made a series of serious, good-faith offers that included tax reforms that would lead to new revenue and more economic growth.	5.2	5.8	4.5
After President Obama and a complicit Congress went on a reckless two-year spending spree, Republicans told the President that if he wanted our help to pay his bills, he had to cut up the credit cards.	5.1	6.9	3.2
Republican proposals would get rid of special-interest tax breaks and loopholes, and replace the current tax code with a system that would lower tax rates for every single American and help create jobs.	4.5	5.8	3.2
Republicans are focused on the American people's No. 1 priority: jobs.	4.4	5.4	3.4
The “supercommittee” was created to help reverse the President’s spending and failed economic policies that brought us to \$15 trillion in debt and persistent 9% unemployment: a painful debt and jobs crisis.	4.2	5.3	3.2
Republicans will continue to try to find common ground with Democrats to address what President Obama called the single biggest contributor to our deficits — health care costs, including Medicare and Medicaid — without job-killing tax hikes.	4.1	4.8	3.5
Republicans did everything in their power to fulfill both their statutory goal of \$1.5 trillion in deficit reduction and, more importantly, to fulfill their statutory duty of solving our nation’s debt crisis and jobs crisis. Republicans negotiated in good faith until the deadline.	3.9	5.2	2.7

OBAMA STATEMENTS

	Total	IND McCain	IND Obama
--	-------	------------	-----------

		voters	voters
There will be some Republicans who are still interested in preventing the automatic cuts from taking place.	7.9	7.9	7.8
We need to keep the pressure up to compromise -- not turn off the pressure. The only way these spending cuts will not take place is if Congress gets back to work and agrees on a balanced plan to reduce the deficit by at least \$1.2 trillion. That's the job they promised to do.	7.8	7.8	7.8
The question right now is whether we can reduce the deficit in a way that helps the economy grow, that operates with a scalpel, not with a hatchet, and if not, whether Congress is willing to stick to the painful deal that we made in August for the automatic cuts.	7.3	6.9	7.8
Despite the broad agreement that exists for a balanced approach, there are still too many Republicans in Congress who have refused to listen to the voices of reason and compromise that are coming from outside of Washington.	7.1	6.3	7.9
Part of the law that President Obama signed this summer stated that if Congress could not reach an agreement on the deficit, there would be another \$1.2 trillion of automatic cuts in 2013 -- divided equally between domestic spending and defense spending.	6.5	6.7	6.4
Republicans simply will not budge from their negotiating position. And so far, that refusal continues to be the main stumbling block that has prevented Congress from reaching an agreement to further reduce our deficit.	6.3	4.8	7.9
In September, President Obama sent Congress a detailed plan that would have gone above and beyond the \$1.2 trillion goal. It's a plan that would reduce the deficit by an additional \$3 trillion, by cutting spending, slowing the growth of Medicare and Medicaid, and asking the wealthiest Americans to pay their fair share.	6.3	4.6	8.0
To their credit, many Democrats in Congress were willing to put politics aside, and commit to reasonable adjustments that would have reduced the cost of Medicare, as long as they were part of a balanced approach.	6.0	5.3	6.6

Already, some in Congress are trying to undo these automatic spending cuts. We must veto any effort to get rid of those automatic spending cuts to domestic and defense spending.	6.0	6.2	5.8
Republicans continue to insist on protecting \$100 billion worth of tax cuts for the wealthiest two percent of Americans at any cost, even if it means reducing the deficit with deep cuts to things like education and medical research. Even if it means deep cuts in Medicare.	5.8	4.5	7.2
One way or another, we will be trimming the deficit by a total of at least \$2.2 trillion over the next 10 years. We've got \$1 trillion locked in, and either Congress comes up with \$1.2 trillion more, which so far they've failed to do, or the sequester kicks in and these automatic spending cuts will occur that bring in an additional \$1.2 trillion in deficit reduction.	5.6	4.7	6.6
Part of the law that President Obama signed last summer required Congress, by the end of this year, to reduce the deficit over the next 10 years by an additional \$1.2 trillion.	5.6	5.5	5.8
A balanced approach to reducing our deficit -- an approach where everybody gives a little bit, and everyone does their fair share -- is supported by an overwhelming majority of Americans -- Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. It's supported by experts and economists from all across the political spectrum.	5.5	5.2	5.8
There are already \$1 trillion worth of spending cuts that are locked in to the law the President signed last summer.	5.0	4.6	5.4
Last summer, President Obama signed a law that will cut nearly \$1 trillion of spending over the next 10 years.	5.0	4.3	5.7
Although Congress has not come to an agreement yet, nothing prevents them from coming up with an agreement in the days ahead. They can still come together around a balanced plan. Democrats are prepared to do so.	4.4	2.4	6.4
There is no imminent threat to America of defaulting on the debt that we owe.	2.5	2.0	2.9

After respondents scored each of the preceding statements, they were asked to explain in some depth the reasons they scored particular statements the way they did. Obama statements are in black text and House Republican statements are in red text, shown in the following charts.

Our respondents are only slightly favorable to the idea that a balanced approach to reducing our deficit is supported by an overwhelming majority of Americans. Independent Obama voters are more likely than Independent McCain voters to agree with this statement.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
A balanced approach to reducing our deficit -- an approach where everybody gives a little bit, and everyone does their fair share -- is supported by an overwhelming majority of Americans -- Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. It's supported by experts and economists from all across the political spectrum.	5.5	5.2	5.8

In our group, we heard:

“It’s the ‘overwhelming majority’ that I had trouble with. Most of the people I know are completely one side or completely the other... I know people that think ‘No, you absolutely have to raise nothing but taxes’ and other people that think, ‘No, you absolutely have to do nothing but cut taxes.’ It’s the whole ‘balanced approach’ and the ‘overwhelming’ which I felt in the middle about the whole thing.” – Joe, McCain Ind.

“Number one, if it’s an overwhelming majority, something would have already been done. Number two, I can say that I want a balanced approach, but my balanced approach may not be your balanced approach. I don’t think anybody actually thinks that it is a 50/50 divide. You fall to one side or the other. What is ‘fair share?’” – Lisa, McCain Independent

Overall, respondents were neutral to the idea that Republicans made a series of serious, good-faith offers throughout the “supercommittee” process. Independent McCain voters scored this statement more favorably than Independent Obama voters.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
Throughout the "supercommittee" process, Republicans made a series of serious, good-faith offers that included tax reforms that would lead to new revenue and more economic growth.	5.2	5.8	4.5

One respondent told us:

“You said to grade [the statement] in its totality. I can’t say definitively that any of their offers would lead to new revenue and more economic growth. There’s a possibility that they would but if I’m grading it in totality, I agree more than disagree but I can’t say I completely agree. It’s possible but I don’t know that it’s probable.” – Lisa, McCain Independent

Independent McCain voters and Independent Obama voters are significantly divided over whether they believe Republican proposals would get rid of special-interest tax breaks and loopholes to replace the current tax code to improve the economy. Overall, this statement is viewed unfavorably.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
Republican proposals would get rid of special-interest tax breaks and loopholes, and replace the current tax code with a system that would lower tax rates for every single American and help create jobs.	4.5	5.8	3.2

In our group, we heard:

“I don’t know that either side of the aisle is going to get rid of special-interest tax breaks. I don’t know that that will ever happen. I think loopholes will be there forever. The interests’ tax breaks aren’t going to go away. I lean that way because I would like lower tax rates for everybody.” – Jeff, McCain Independent

Both Independent McCain and Independent Obama voters recognize that Republican party leaders may have made some Republicans unhappy by their willingness to negotiate to address Democrats’ demands during the “supercommittee” process.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
Not everyone in the Republican party was happy that party leaders offered tax reform as part of the “supercommittee,” but Republicans put forth good-faith offers that would address Democrats’ demands for more revenue.	5.9	6.6	5.3

One respondent told us:

“I think they did put a proposal in that did include some tax loophole closing and some tax revenue growth and some of the party – the Tea Party, especially – didn’t like it... I’m not sure anything a politician does is in good faith.” – Jim, McCain Independent

Respondents were asked to consider how insistent Republicans are about protecting tax cuts for the wealthiest two percent, even if that means reducing the deficit with deep cuts to popular social programs. Independent Obama voters far more likely to agree with this statement.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
Republicans continue to insist on protecting \$100 billion worth of tax cuts for the wealthiest two percent of Americans at any cost, even if it means reducing the deficit with deep cuts to things like education and medical research. Even if it means deep cuts in Medicare.	5.8	4.5	7.2

In our group, we heard:

“That’s a big stickler for the Republicans. They want to stick with the tax cuts for some of the wealthier percentage of the population. At the same time, I didn’t want to give it too high [of a score] because I didn’t know if I was completely in agreement with the education and medical research portion of it, or the Medicare part of it. I do believe that they want to protect the tax cuts on the wealthy, but I didn’t know exactly where they were going to make those cuts from the other cuts.” – Natalie, McCain Independent

Respondents were asked to consider to what extent the “supercommittee” was created to help reverse President Obama’s spending and failed economic policies. There is general disagreement with this statement with an average score of 4.2. Independent McCain voters only slightly agree with this statement.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
The “supercommittee” was created to help reverse the President’s spending and failed economic policies that brought us to \$15 trillion in debt and persistent 9% unemployment: a painful debt and jobs crisis.	4.2	5.3	3.2

One respondent told us:

“I was in the middle on that because Obama created the supercommittee and that would mean that he was admitting failure. He won’t admit failure, so I couldn’t agree or disagree. I was right in the middle on that [statement].” – Joe, McCain Independent

Respondents were asked to score how likely they think at least \$2.2 trillion will be trimmed from the deficit over the next 10 years. Independent Obama voters are more likely to agree with this statement, with a score of 6.6 compared to Independent McCain voters, who scored this statement at 4.7.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
One way or another, we will be trimming the deficit by a total of at least \$2.2 trillion over the next 10 years. We’ve got \$1 trillion locked in, and either Congress comes up with \$1.2 trillion more, which so far they’ve failed to do, or the sequester kicks in and these automatic spending cuts will occur that bring in an additional \$1.2 trillion in deficit reduction.	5.6	4.7	6.6

“I agree that that’s supposed to happen, but they never, ever save us money to do what they say they’re going to do. They say they’re going to but to them, a ‘cut’ is not raising [spending levels] as much. I just don’t think it’ll ever happen.” – Jim, McCain Independent

“The definition of what a ‘cut’ is is not real clear. The election is coming up, they might [get rid of] the whole thing... I don’t have a whole lot of confidence in the plan.” – Steve, McCain Independent

Respondents overall disagree that Republicans did everything in their power to fulfill their goals and duties to help solve our nation’s debt and job’s crisis. Even Independent McCain voters only slightly agree with this statement.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
Republicans did everything in their power to fulfill both their statutory goal of \$1.5 trillion in deficit reduction and, more importantly, to fulfill their statutory duty of solving our nation’s debt crisis and jobs crisis. Republicans negotiated in good faith until the deadline.	3.9	5.2	2.7

Respondents explained:

“I think both sides of the aisle are pretty fixed in their way of thinking and I don’t know that there’s really a lot of good faith negotiating going on in the House or Senate. I think [Republicans] did have some proposals that would have led towards a reduction [in the deficit].” – Jeff, McCain Independent

“I think that they tow the party lines, and I’m not sure that there’s much good faith negotiation going on.” – Angela, McCain Independent

There is a sharp difference of opinion about whether President Obama designed a political strategy that doomed the committee to failure. Independent McCain voters scored this statement at 7.9 while Independent Obama voters scored this statement at 4.4.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
The President designed a political strategy that doomed the committee to failure, first by insisting the committee include \$450 billion of his failed stimulus policies in any agreement, making deficit reduction much harder, and second, by issuing a veto threat, warning he would not accept an agreement that did not include a job-killing tax increase.	6.2	7.9	4.4

In our group, we heard:

“Everything [the President] has done so far has failed. To me, that statement, I agree because what he has done has failed. He takes the easy way out.” – Sam, McCain Independent

“I think if he doesn’t get his way, he pouts and throws that [veto] threat out there. It’s his way or no way.” – Natalie, McCain Independent

There is broad agreement among all respondents about the need to keep the pressure on Congress to compromise to help solve our deficit challenges. Both Independent McCain voters and Independent Obama voters scored this at 7.8.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters

We need to keep the pressure up to compromise -- not turn off the pressure. The only way these spending cuts will not take place is if Congress gets back to work and agrees on a balanced plan to reduce the deficit by at least \$1.2 trillion. That's the job they promised to do.	7.8	7.8	7.8
---	-----	-----	-----

Respondents told us:

“I think they need to learn to play nice.” – Lisa, McCain Independent

“They need to stop fighting.” – Natalie, McCain Independent

“I’m just the opposite. I think they need to start playing hardball. Tell it the way it is.” – Joe, McCain Independent

Respondents were asked to consider if part of the law that President Obama signed last summer would require Congress, by the end of this year, to reduce the deficit over the next 10 years by an additional \$1.2 trillion. There is only slight, general agreement with this statement, with an average score of 5.6.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
Part of the law that President Obama signed last summer required Congress, by the end of this year, to reduce the deficit over the next 10 years by an additional \$1.2 trillion.	5.6	5.5	5.8

In our group, one respondent explained:

“I remember [President Obama] coming on television and making that statement. I was iffy with that. One reason, we’ll be electing another President and it might not be that [same deal].” – Phyllistine, Obama Independent

Respondents were asked to consider if there are too many Republicans in Congress who have refused to listen to the voices of reason and compromise that are coming from outside of Washington to agree on a balanced approach for deficit reduction. Overall, there is general agreement with this statement, with the Independent Obama voters viewing this statement more favorably, with an average score of 7.1 between the two groups of voters.

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters

Despite the broad agreement that exists for a balanced approach, there are still too many Republicans in Congress who have refused to listen to the voices of reason and compromise that are coming from outside of Washington.	7.1	6.3	7.9
---	-----	-----	-----

In our group, we heard:

“I think there’s an entrenchment that’s happened, especially with some of the new Republicans. It’s almost that feeling that there’s no way that we can agree to any new revenue, which they would label as some sort of tax increase. Part of it is because of a commitment to someone like Grover Norquist and a pledge that says if they go back on [their pledge not to raise taxes], then he’s a lobbyist and he’ll come after them and make sure they’re not re-elected.” – John, Obama Independent

Note: Only two of the 13 respondents are aware of whom Grover Norquist is.

5) There is an imminent threat of America’s defaulting on its debt, according to respondents

As part of the evaluation of the 34 statements above, one statement, slightly altered from the President’s press briefing on Monday, was as follows: “There is no imminent threat to America of defaulting on the debt that we owe.” Remarkably, it was the lowest or second-lowest scoring statement in each session (2.0 out of 10 in the McCain voters group, and 2.9 in the Obama voters group).

	Total	IND McCain voters	IND Obama voters
There is no imminent threat to America of defaulting on the debt that we owe.	2.5	2.0	2.9

When we asked about those very low scores, respondents told us they are very concerned about what’s going on in Europe, and with our inability to get our domestic budget under control. And “imminent,” while not meaning “tomorrow” for them, means that even bigger trouble is approaching. Respondents explained:

“A lot of cities have already defaulted and filed bankruptcy. We’re seeing strong economies over in Europe that are defaulting on their loans, so that’s why I thought it is an imminent threat because everybody assumes it’s not going to happen and it is actually happening. It’s just being ignored.” – Sam, McCain Independent

“I think the threat is already there. We’re seeing it with the stock market going way back down again this week. We see it with Europe falling apart and the Germans not moving and they’re not wanting to deal with the situation. Everybody is expecting the United States to come bail them out. One of the worst things that hit us is now China wants its money back. Why they ever thought to borrow money from China is beyond me. We owe everybody. Then if there is a natural disaster somewhere in the world again, everybody is going to say, ‘Cough up more money, United States.’ We don’t have it. We have to find the cuts and stop giving money to every other part of the world and start focusing back here [in the United States].” – Jane, Obama Independent

Furthermore, we asked them the question phrased differently: Who here thinks the U.S. is in imminent danger of defaulting on its debt? All 12 McCain Independents, and 11 of 13 Obama Independents, thought there is an imminent threat.

6) There was little knowledge about the 2013 sequestration cuts—and many in both groups were not happy with the cuts to defense

Considering respondents’ lack of familiarity with the supercommittee (as cited above), it is unsurprising they were likewise unfamiliar with the sequestration provisions in the August law that are scheduled to kick in starting in 2013.

The McCain Independents were strongly opposed to the cuts, mostly because of the effect on troop compensation. One respondent described how his cousin in Iraq did not get paid. Among the Obama Independents, six of the 13 were not OK with the scheduled cuts, though many of the others seemed to be—and wanted more money spent on domestic concerns. One Obama Independent named Jill made the following argument:

“I don’t have the analysis. I don’t know where everything is coming [in terms of cuts]. I know Obama said he was going to bring everybody back, and was going to be making all these cuts, and he really didn’t do that. So I’m thinking, ‘There’s a lot we don’t know as the American people.’ I think those that know what is going on should make the decisions. But I think to make something that drastic, with as much safety issues as we have in the world, concerns me. Because safety is number one. Our welfare is number one. I can be poor, but if I’m alive, that means more to me.”—Jill, Obama Independent

William, an Independent Obama voter, explained his support for \$600 billion in defense cuts with the following argument:

“Right now we cannot continue to be the police of the world. We have to take care of our own in the United States first. If we can cut \$600 billion out of the budget and take care of our own first, why not? Every other country needs to step up to the plate and take care of them self.” – William, Obama Independent

The cuts to domestic programs were far more acceptable to the McCain Independents than to the Obama Independents. One McCain Independent complained about how stimulus dollars were

used to buy IPADs for local kids. Another talked about farmers being paid not to plant. Only one Obama Independent was OK with the cuts in the law; the rest were concerned about the cuts to healthcare and education. An Independent Obama voter named Kyle explained his concern about cuts to domestic programs by making the following argument:

“I think those [domestic program] cuts would not be OK because it would be more permanent, whereas defense would still be OK because if something happens, if we got into another war, they would find the money. I think our education system has been in the crapper for a while and they’re not doing anything about it. If they cut it now, that money is not going back. It’s going to be a permanent loss.” – Kyle, Obama Independent

7) Was there a vote on Medicare this year? We must have missed it.

We introduced the segment on Medicare by asking the question: “In 2011, did the U.S. House of Representatives vote in favor of making major changes to the Medicare system?” Only eight of 25 respondents knew that there was one:

	McCain Independents	Obama Independents
Yes	5	3
No	0	3
Don’t know	7	7

We followed this question with a final white board exercise, where we asked respondents to fill in the blank on this unfinished sentence: “Before Congress makes any changes to Medicare, it first needs to _____.”

McCain Independents said:

- Cut their own salaries and pay their own healthcare
- Apply to them as well
- Get an idea of what costs actually are
- Consult with clinicians
- Reduce the number of regulations** (tied for top)
- See where Medicare fits in list of priorities
- Look at fraud** (tied for top)

In our group, we heard:

“First, we need to go through – I don’t know how – but they need to pinpoint all this fraud. I know it’s hard to do but they need to address that first. They need to go through and they need to find, you know, how we were saying that health care providers are raising the cost of everything. I understand that clinicians need to be reimbursed but something costs this amount – this is what they should be reimbursed for. The amount of fraud needs to be addressed.” – Natalie, McCain Independent

Obama Independents said:

Put responsibility on younger generations to reduce their own debt

Figure out what kind of budget they have to work with

Have a firm, concrete plan

Hear the American public and to not take the words of the insurance companies and carriers as the final answer

Stop operating in the red

Pay lower rates

Think practically

Come up with a plan that meets needs of individuals

Try to be more preventative

Talk to someone caring for an elderly family member (top choice by far)

Roll back Bush era tax cuts

Make cuts in other areas

Obama Independents pointed out that if their representatives in Washington actually spoke to those caring for an elderly family member, that Member of Congress would better understand the reality ordinary citizens struggle with every day. Then, those Members might not be so quick to cut Medicare, and in fact would provide more help to those who are struggling to care for aged relatives. One respondent, Kelly, is currently caring for two aging relatives. She told us:

“There has to be some compensation for the family members who are trying to take care of them. We just need more help, more assistance because one person can’t do it all. We’re stuck in that we’re having to work ourselves. You can’t take care of them. You can’t work anymore. The income coming in isn’t sufficing to cover the medication, much less even after Medicare, and AARP, and everything else. Thank God my dad is a [veteran] or else I don’t know what they would do. Maybe extend the VA benefits to the spouses.” – Kelly, Obama Independent

In the discussion that ensued, we asked which party is doing a better job dealing with Medicare. In both sessions, there was silence after the question was asked, followed by snorts of “neither” and a lot of blank stares—as if these non-seniors have no idea.

Respondents explained:

“I think this is one of those subjects that neither Republican nor Democrat that nobody wants to touch, especially the people at that age. They vote so nobody wants to mess with [Medicare]. It’s all political. Nobody is going to come out on their ad and say, ‘We’re going to cut Medicare in half.’ I’ll guarantee you that. That’s not going to happen.” – Steve, McCain Independent

“I think, historically, probably Democrats have done more in terms of even establishing the program to begin with. At the present time, I think it seems there’s a willingness to

cut everywhere and [Democrats] may have to step back on [their support for Medicare].” – John, Obama Independent

We then asked whether they think Medicare needs minor changes, major changes, or whether it needs to be completely rebuilt.

	McCain Independents	Obama Independents
Minor changes	1	0
Major changes	5	8
Completely rebuilt	4	4
Torn	2	0
Don't know	0	1

When we asked in both sessions what the major changes would look like, we heard (as in the past) that the system needs to do a better job of weeding out fraud and over-payment. Obama Independents also suggested means testing Medicare recipients, encouraging young medical students to focus on geriatric care, and overhauling drug costs. Jill, an Obama Independent, shared her personal experience with these problems:

“They need a better, really good computer system. People are charging for things that they shouldn't. My aunt went to the eye doctor. My mom is taking care of my aunt and taking care of all her bills. The things that they charge – she'll have some minor little thing done and they'll charge her \$2,000. It's not in sync with what an insurance company, a private insurance company would pay. They get so much more and nobody is watching over them. They just bill them and they just pay them. They need people in there. They would save so much money if they had people checking out these bills. There's a lot of fraud.” – Jill, Obama Independent

One McCain Independent, Lisa, believes that people of a particular age should be grandfathered into Medicare and that the program should be eventually eliminated. She explained:

“[Medicare] gets grandfathered and eliminated. They've got to come up with an age and then you grandfather people and then it's eliminated from that point. We can't continue to have all the social handouts that we have for everybody forever. People live a lot longer now than when it was brought in. It's just not fiscally sustainable.” – Lisa, McCain Independent

We also heard something that was new on this topic. There were a couple of McCain Independents who were convinced that Medicare money was being spent on non-seniors. One respondent, Jeff, who is a medical clinician, said that non-seniors suffering from renal failure and ALS were eligible for Medicare benefits. He believed that those dollars should be reserved for seniors. (This resembles similar complaints about SSI benefits draining the Social Security system.) Here's our exchange with him:

Jeff: "I think a big major change would be to get back to its original intent. Right now, Medicare, you don't have to be over 65 to have Medicare as your primary payer. If they got back to its original..."

Rich: "Medicare?"

Jeff: "Yeah. If you're disabled, you could get Medicare. If you're a child..."

Rich: "Medicare or Medicaid?"

Jeff: "Medicare."

Sam: "There are two things I forgot. I remember doing papers. There are two things that under 65 that you could get Medicare..."

Rich: "OK."

Sam: "...for before they switch it to Medicaid. I know there's two things. I forgot. I did a paper on it one time."

Natalie: "One is renal failure, chronic renal failure."

Sam: "And there is something else..."

Jeff: "ALS. There's a lot of different things. You don't have to necessarily be..."

Sam: "...that you can get Medicare."

Rich: "So the program for seniors..."

Sam: "Chronic renal failure and there was something else."

Rich: "You mentioned renal failure. What was the other one?"

Jeff: "ALS was one of the ones that I deal with."

Rich: "ALS. So you have people who are under 65 on Medicare."

Jeff: "Yeah."

Rich: "OK, thanks, Jeff."