

**New Models  
Messaging on Foreign Policy, Energy, Domestic  
Policy, and the Economy**

**August 2014**

**OVERVIEW**

Presentation Testing conducted two mixed-gender focus group dial tests with moderate Independents in Tampa, FL, on August 4, 2014. One group was comprised of eight 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 or older.

An actress named Victoria spoke as the GOP advocate. Carla spoke as the advocate for the Democrats. They engaged in a point-counterpoint debate about foreign policy issues, and it is referenced throughout the report. Later in the session, we dial tested a speech by Victoria where she advocated for domestic policy proposals related to our recent national energy boom.

**KEY FINDINGS**

**1) Messaging about foreign policy issues mostly splits along ideological lines for Independents**

During each session, we conducted a 23-minute point-counterpoint dial test, where we contrasted the GOP messaging on foreign policy issues with the Democratic messaging (read by actresses from a teleprompter). The issues were the situations at the U.S. border with Mexico, in Iraq, in Israel/Gaza, and with Ukraine and Russia.

After the video, we asked respondents in each group which argument they found more persuasive.

	<b>Romney- voting Independents</b>	<b>Obama- voting Independents</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>GOP advocate (Victoria)</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Democratic advocate (Carla)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>

In each session, we asked respondents why they found one advocate's arguments more persuasive than the other advocate's arguments.

Romney-voting Independents who sided with Victoria told us that they liked her ideas about the immigration debate belonging in the hands of Congress, Israel having a right to defend herself, and holding Congress accountable. We also heard that Carla's arguments were opening our nation up to attacks on our soil instead of fighting those problems abroad. One respondent explained:

*"I've realized that especially when you're dealing with criminals at least on a local level, they exploit weakness in leadership. That's what enables them to thrive. If we're weak in Iraq or if we pull away—if the police maintain a big presence in a housing project that's known for crime and they get everything under control, but then they pull out, it takes hours for that place to be re-overrun with drug dealers and stuff. It takes literally hours...Our reputation is on the line and if we don't bring fights to other people, they're going to bring it to us. We're fighting no matter what, but what I felt Victoria's point was getting across was that we have more the opportunity to fight on our terms and on their land versus their terms on our land." – Matt, Romney-voting Independent*

Obama-voting Independents who sided with Victoria told us that they agreed with some of Victoria's criticisms about President Obama's foreign policy decisions and overall strategy.

Obama-voting Independents who sided with Carla told us that we cannot fix everybody's problems around the world and we can try to help, but military solutions alone will not fix the problems because these are conflicts that have been going on for decades or centuries. One respondent explained:

*"I thought Victoria was doing the finger-pointing and the blame game on the President. If you look at some of the foundations of what's going on—on the border with the immigration—it's been far-reaching I think back as far as Clinton or even Reagan. I don't think that was fair on [Victoria's] part. I think Carla was being more specific with data [in her arguments]. I agree that we are working in an advisory capacity [in Iraq]. We do not want to get back into a military thing in the Middle East. We need to do it in an advisory capacity and in a diplomatic way rather than going in and putting our forces at risk again for something that we shouldn't have done in the first place. I heard a comment made on the Internet—Facebook—recently that the United States has the strongest military and we can do anything anywhere in the world. I pointed out that we didn't do it in North Korea. We did not do it in Vietnam. We tried in Iraq, but that's a religious battle that's been going on for centuries. Why we got involved I have no idea." – Michael, Obama-voting Independent*

We also heard that Victoria sounded too "alarmist" about some of the foreign policy challenges we face and that it sounded like she favored the use of military force too much.

The only Romney-voting Independent to side with Carla did so primarily because he liked what she was saying about the immigration issue. He works with a lot of immigrants, and he told us that he disagrees with the people who have negative feelings toward immigrants. He thought that Carla would be more willing to provide humanitarian aid to immigrants, which he supports.

**2) Overall, Independents were slightly more concerned about the situations at the U.S. border with Mexico and in Israel/Gaza than other foreign policy issues, but foreign policy issues generally did not concern them very much**

In the beginning of each session, we asked respondents:

*On a scale from zero to 10, how concerned are you about the situation...*

Foreign Policy Issues	Romney-voting Independents	Obama-voting Independents	Total (avg.)
...at the U.S. border with Mexico	7.1	6.5	6.8
...in Israel/Gaza	7.3	6.3	6.8
...with Ukraine and Russia	5.7	6.5	6.1
...in Iraq	5.9	5.8	5.9

For this series of questions, 0=Not familiar with the situation, 1=Not at all concerned, and 10=Very concerned.

Note: For the issues of the U.S. border with Mexico, Israel/Gaza, and Ukraine and Russia, there was one respondent in each group who said that he or she was not familiar with the situation going on there. The chart shows only the average score in each group for those who were familiar with the situation (i.e. did not score the question at “0.”)

We asked Obama-voting Independents why they were not more concerned about our foreign policy issues. Some in that group told us that they were more concerned about what is going on in the U.S, especially because the conflicts abroad have been going on for many years and it appears that they will continue to do so.

Note: We did not discuss this issue with Romney-voting Independents.

**3) Independents supported imposing tougher penalties on human smugglers, some of whom are involved with our current situation at the U.S. border with Mexico**

During the dial test video, the GOP advocate said:

We need to have tougher penalties for human smugglers, particularly for those who target unaccompanied children trying to come to the United States.

The dial test scores rose to the low 90s from the mid-70s (on a zero to 100 scale of agreement) in both sessions when this argument was made.

Among Romney-voting Independents, we heard that human trafficking is off the charts these days, and the majority of those being trafficked are kids. One female respondent told us that as a

mother, she thought, “Don’t mess with my babies.” We also heard that human smugglers are making the situation at the U.S. border with Mexico worse.

Among Obama-voting Independents, we heard that human trafficking is an epidemic, it is growing, and we need to address it.

**4) Independents were skeptical that we had Iraq “basically won” in 2011, as the GOP advocate claimed**

During the dial test video, the GOP advocate said:

Before we withdrew our forces in 2011, we had a stable government in Baghdad, and we had the conflict basically won.

Independents in both sessions expressed very weak agreement with that statement—with both at 52 (on a zero to 100 scale of agreement) during the dial test video after hearing that argument. In our sessions, we heard:

*“Have we ever had it basically won? I’m not buying it because there has always been conflict [in Iraq]. We’ve never had it basically won. Some people might think that. Even the President is trying to sell us on that, but I don’t think that we’ve basically ever had it won [in Iraq].” – Pamela, Romney-voting Independent*

*“That’s not true [that we had the conflict in Iraq basically won]. We allowed one of the two factions to take over. [Iraq] didn’t have a balanced, democratic government. They don’t even want one. They just want this power struggle. It wouldn’t matter when we pulled out—now or 10 years from now, it’s going to be the same result.” – Karen, Obama-voting Independent*

**5) Romney-voting Independents were more likely than Obama-voting Independents to believe that American combat troops are going to fight in Iraq again—and that doing so would solve the problem there**

During the dial test video, the advocate for the Democrats said:

American combat troops are not going to be fighting in Iraq again. We do not have the ability to simply solve this problem by sending in tens of thousands of troops and committing the kinds of blood and treasure that has already been expended in Iraq.

Most Romney-voting Independents told us that they believe that American combat troops will be back in Iraq fighting again. Only three of 12 Obama-voting Independents agreed.

There was also much disagreement between the two groups of Independents about how much it would help to send in tens of thousands of troops and commit more resources in Iraq. During the

second sentence of the Democratic advocate’s argument, as shown above, Romney-voting Independents turned their dials down from 77 to 55, expressing disagreement that we do not have the ability to solve the problem. Meanwhile, Obama-voting Independents turned their dials up from 76 to 89 because they did not believe that there is a military solution in Iraq.

**6) The idea of “completing our mission” in Iraq “successfully” is too ambiguous for Obama-voting Independents to support**

During the dial test video, the GOP advocate said:

The President has celebrated our exit from Iraq as a hallmark of his foreign policy agenda, but our focus should be instead on completing our mission successfully.

Obama-voting Independents turned their dials down at this point in the dial test video. One respondent explained:

*“What’s the measure of completing the mission successfully? We got nowhere [in Iraq]. The whole area in the Mid-East has historically been a conflict of the religions. The British were in there after World War II. They were in Iraq. They tried to make a democracy in Iraq and finally gave up after about 20 years and left. They had a civil war and Saddam [Hussein] came in. He controlled [Iraq]. He kept the other religions under control. He was the leader. He murdered, but [Iraq is] a bigger mess now than before we went in there.” – Michael, Obama-voting Independent*

**7) Romney-voting Independents viewed the domestic policy agenda related to our national energy boom favorably, but Obama-voting Independents only expressed lukewarm agreement overall**

During each session, we showed an eight-minute video to respondents about domestic policy proposals related to our recent national energy boom (read by an actress—the GOP advocate—off of a teleprompter). In that speech, the GOP advocate tied our national energy boom to five policy issues: our debt, our tax code, our legal system, regulatory reform, and education reform.

After we showed the video to respondents, we asked:

*On a scale from zero to 10, how much did you agree with this video?*

	<b>Romney-voting Independents</b>	<b>Obama-voting Independents</b>	<b>Total (avg.)</b>
<b>0= Totally disagree to 10= Totally agree</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>6.7</b>

Romney-voting Independents generally agreed with what they heard overall, but they had some concerns, such as placing limits on financial liability that big companies have, which could harm regular people, and some were opposed to having more charter schools because it would take money away from public schools.

Among Obama-voting Independents, we heard that they scored the speech the way they did because they agreed with some aspects of it and disagreed or were unsure about other aspects of it. Overall, the topics that they agreed with the most were the ideas that we need education reform (but not necessarily more charter schools) and we need to reform our tax code.

**8) Independents did not see the connection between our national energy boom and the five policy ideas that the GOP advocate presented—and they were skeptical that we have a national energy boom going on in the U.S. right now**

Independents did not make the connection that the GOP advocate was trying to make—that our national energy boom is linked to the five policy ideas that she presented. Only two of eight Romney-voting Independents saw that there is a cause and effect relationship between the two.

Also, most Obama-voting Independents were confused about the connection that the GOP advocate was trying to make. One respondent explained:

*“I didn’t get that due to the [national energy] boom, these five things will happen. I got, ‘In order for the boom to truly be successful or to truly be capitalized [on], these five things need to also go hand-in-hand.’ That’s what I got from it. I didn’t see a cause-and-effect [relationship].” – Mike, Romney-voting Independent*

Also, one respondent thought that education reform did not fit with the other four policy ideas.

The GOP advocate’s messaging on domestic policy issues needs a better overall narrative to be effective.

Independents also expressed skepticism that we have a national energy boom going on in the U.S. right now.

Among Romney-voting Independents, we heard that we are only having a regional energy boom, in states such as North Dakota and Wyoming—an idea that Obama-voting Independents did not mention.

We asked Independents in each session what would need to happen—what they would need to see or experience—that would convince them that we are having a national energy boom.

Romney-voting Independents compiled the following list:

- Much lower gas prices (one respondent mentioned \$0.99 per gallon gas)
- Steadiness in our gas prices
- Reverse inflation that would follow having lower gas prices

Obama-voting Independents offered the following list:

- Less reliance on foreign oil
- Gas prices at least \$1.00 per gallon less than they are now
- Stabilization of the oil markets—more steadiness in our gas prices

**9) Obama-voting Independents were more likely than Romney-voting Independents to believe that the U.S. economy is improving compared to one year ago. But overall, Independents were more upbeat about the economy than they have been in recent months, with only one of 20 Independents saying that the economy is getting at least somewhat worse compared to one year ago.**

In the beginning of each session, we asked respondents the following question:

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

Answer choices	Romney-voting Independents	Obama-voting Independents	Total
<b>1=getting much worse</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>2=getting somewhat worse</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3=staying as is</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4=getting somewhat better</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>5=getting much better</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

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

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

- The airlines are laying off people (respondent is retired from the air travel industry)
- The respondents' family in Indiana are miners and mining jobs are being cut so she has a lot of unemployed family and friends

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

- The unemployment rate has been consistently going down
- One respondent is getting paid more at work
- People are going out more to spend money
- Another respondent's business is doing better
- Increased construction activity
- People are spending more money to fix up their homes
- The housing industry is stabilizing and improving

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

- One respondent cited friends who could not buy houses in the past but can now
- More people are getting jobs—200,000+ jobs per month in recent months
- The GDP rose significantly in the second quarter of 2014
- Rush hour traffic is getting worse so more people must be working
- Buying power has increased
- Credit card debt overall is going down
- The unemployment rate is going down
- Consumer confidence has increased
- Corporate earnings have been good
- The housing market is improving

Note: None of the Obama-voting Independents believe that the U.S. economy is getting at least somewhat worse compared to one year ago.

**10) 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 half (six of 12) saying that the unemployment rate will fall to between 5% and 6% by then. Half (four of eight) of Romney-voting Independents believe that the unemployment rate will increase from 6.2% today to at least 7% one year from today.**

In the beginning of each session, we asked respondents the following question:

*The unemployment rate in the U.S. now stands at 6.2%. A year from today, do you expect it to be...*

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