

**New Models  
Messaging on Helping America’s Middle Class,  
Protecting the President’s Safety,  
Foreign Policy, and the Economy**

**October 2014**

**OVERVIEW**

Presentation Testing conducted two mixed-gender focus group dial tests with moderate Independents in Seattle, WA, on October 7, 2014. One group was comprised of 11 Romney-voting moderate Independents, and the other was comprised of 11 Obama-voting moderate Independents. All respondents have at least some college education, and are age 22 or older. During each session, we dial tested a speech delivered by an actress named Jean, who was advocating for an agenda to help the middle class in the United States.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- 1) Independents, especially Romney-voting Independents, generally liked the speech that Jean presented to help the middle class. However, the speech in its totality appealed only to Romney-voting Independents as a platform for helping middle class Americans.**

During each session, we showed a 14 minute video to respondents where a speaker named Jean (an actress reading from a teleprompter) presented her platform to help the middle class, which included education reform to help improve earning power, family-friendly tax reform, targeted infrastructure spending, and rolling back the excessive requirements for people to get a professional license.

After we showed the video to respondents, we asked:

*Now that you’ve watched the video, on a scale from zero to 10, how much did you like the messages you heard in the presentation?*

	<b>Romney- voting Independents</b>	<b>Obama- voting Independents</b>	<b>Total (avg.)</b>
<b>0=Totally disliked to 10=Totally liked</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>7.7</b>

During our discussion with respondents, we asked what they liked about the speech.

Romney-voting Independents told us that they liked that the speech emphasized less government and more personal responsibility; the ideas were described as “practical;” some liked Jean’s idea about increasing public transportation options to expand job opportunities for people.

Obama-voting Independents generally liked the speech, but they expressed some concerns with reducing the requirements for occupational licensing, reducing the role of government in our lives, and supporting population growth by providing child tax credits.

During our discussion with respondents in each group, we asked whether the plan that Jean presented sounded like a platform to help middle class Americans. Seven of 11 Romney-voting Independents said that it did, with four in that group disagreeing. All 11 Obama-voting Independents disagreed. Obama-voting Independents described the speech as “simplistic,” in that it did not provide details, such as how we would pay for the plan. Some Romney-voting Independents shared that concern.

## **2) Independents were generally wary about reducing professional licensing requirements**

During her presentation, Jean said:

The last idea I’d like to mention has to do with occupational licensing. Cosmetologists and emergency medical technicians, or EMTs, have to be licensed to practice in the state of Washington. Which group do you think requires more training? A licensed intermediate EMT needs about 350 hours of training. A licensed cosmetologist needs 1,600 classroom hours, and 2,000 apprentice hours. Obviously the government plays an important role in setting and enforcing professional standards. But licensing requirements can go too far. Are interest groups protecting the public, or are they protecting their careers by using licensing to bar entry? Scaling requirements back, when feasible, can remove an obstacle to job entry.

Independents expressed concerns about reducing professional licensing requirements, and some viewed the comparison between EMTs and cosmetologists as incongruent. They want the professionals they deal with to be well-trained and certified, and they do not want to reduce those standards. They generally rejected the idea that those requirements exist to keep others out of the profession (which would increase competition for those already in the profession).

One Romney-voting Independent explained:

*“I think that requirements for licensing are a good thing. You want to make sure that CPAs know what they’re doing. Cosmetology may sound stupid, but you want to make sure that they know what they’re doing. They deal with chemicals on your head. I just think it’s important that there be some licensing requirements.” – John, Romney-voting Independent*

Obama-voting Independents explained:

*“It seems like [Jean’s] entire spiel would want to make it easier for people who don’t make enough money to make more money. So it’s like, ‘I don’t make very much money and I want to be a doctor, but I don’t really know much about medicine so let’s just make it so I can take a six week class and then I’m a doctor.’ That doesn’t sound like a very good idea to me.” – Tim, Obama-voting Independent*

*“It was a very blanket statement. There are so many different professional jobs out there and to lower the requirements on certain jobs, if it’s to appeal to the disadvantaged—to the people [or] demographics who can’t access those jobs—that’s a really bad way to go...That blanket statement was definitely a turn-off because some jobs, they probably do need the training.” – Alan, Obama-voting Independent*

**3) Independents generally did not believe that online degrees are as valuable as regular four-year degrees from a college or university, and that the accreditation process could be reformed to give the programs credibility in the eyes of employers**

During her presentation, Jean said:

Online degree programs are innovative, convenient, and affordable. Reform of the accreditation process would give these newer ways to study greater credibility with employers.

Independents generally rejected the ideas that online degrees are as valuable as regular four-year degrees from a college or university, and that reforming the accreditation process would increase the credibility of those degrees with employers.

Romney-voting Independents explained:

*“I think we’ve become too reliant on these online things. I think there’s a unique value of being in a classroom, engaging in conversation, and personal interaction that you don’t get online.” – Darren, Romney-voting Independent*

*“I know three different people that have gotten their University of Phoenix [online] degrees and it’s not as rigorous as going to a regular classroom. I think the degree program is dumbed-down so it doesn’t have the standing [it needs] in the business community.” – Sue Anne, Romney-voting Independent*

One Obama-voting Independent explained:

*“You’re not going to change an employer’s mind [about an online degree program’s accreditation value]—this four year college or university versus taking some online classes just to get a degree. I don’t think you’re going to change anybody else’s mind by doing that. [Jean is] saying we’re going to change the accreditation so we’re going to give more accreditation to the online universities and then it’s going to change the*

*employers' minds. That's what [Jean] said. I just disagree with that."* – John, Obama-voting Independent

- 4) **If the Republicans continue to control the House of Representatives and take over control of the Senate following the November elections, Romney-voting Independents would like to see the President work with Republicans in Congress on getting our budget and spending under control, and repealing Obamacare. Obama-voting Independents would like to see the President work with Republicans in Congress on improving our infrastructure, as well as immigration and border security.**

In each session, we conducted two whiteboard exercises where we asked respondents to make the assumption, for the sake of the discussion, that the Republicans continue to control the House of Representatives and take over control of the Senate following the November elections.

For the first whiteboard exercise, we asked respondents to make a list of all the things that they think President Obama should work on in his last two years, knowing he would have to deal with a Republican-led Congress.

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

- Border control: terrorists from Mexico (2)
- Border control: immigration policy (2)
- **Budget/spending under control and debt reduction (9)**
- Growth-focused tax changes for business (1)
- A national "living wage" (1)
- Deal better with Afghanistan and Syria/Iraq (1)
- Get lobbyists out—separate money and politics (1)
- Campaign spending reform (0)
- Student loan forgiveness (1)
- **Repeal Obamacare (4)**

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

- **Immigration and border security (5)**
- Appoint Supreme Court justices who will overturn recent decisions related to women's reproductive rights (0)
- Push back on GOP attempts to overturn reproductive rights (1)
- Stand up for Obamacare (1)
- Work on balancing budget (2)
- Line-item veto (0)
- K-12 education funding (2)
- Link climate policy with Keystone—CO2 caps with Keystone approval (1)
- **Improve infrastructure (7)**

- Remove cannabis as schedule 1 and support industrial hemp (0)
- Decimate ISIS without ground war (3)
- Fund export/import bank (0)

5) **If the Republicans continue to control the House of Representatives and take over control of the Senate following the November elections, Romney-voting Independents would like to see Republicans in Congress work with the President on getting our budget and spending under control (debt reduction) and repealing Obamacare. Obama-voting Independents would like to see Republicans in Congress work with the President to create a fairer tax structure for the middle class, work toward energy independence, and improve our infrastructure.**

For the second whiteboard exercise, we asked respondents to make a list of all the things that they think the Republicans in Congress should work on during President Obama’s last two years as President.

Romney-voting Independents built upon the prior exercise’s list, and compiled the following list (with their top two choices in **bold** and the number of votes in parentheses):

- Border control: terrorists from Mexico (0)
- Border control: immigration policy (4)
- **Budget/spending under control and debt reduction (9)**
- Growth-focused tax changes for business (1)
- A national “living wage” (1)
- Deal better with Afghanistan and Syria/Iraq (0)
- Get lobbyists out—separate money and politics (0)
- Campaign spending reform (0)
- Student loan forgiveness (0)
- **Repeal Obamacare (6)**
- Gun control (1)

Obama-voting Independents built upon the prior exercise’s list, and offered the following list (with their top two choices in **bold** and the number of votes in parentheses):

- Immigration and border security (3)
- Appoint Supreme Court justices who will overturn recent decisions related to women’s reproductive rights (0)
- Push back on GOP attempts to overturn reproductive rights (0)
- Stand up for Obamacare (0)
- Work on balancing budget (0)
- Line-item veto (0)
- K-12 education funding (0)
- Link climate policy with Keystone—CO2 caps with Keystone approval (0)
- **Improve infrastructure (5)**
- Remove cannabis as schedule 1 and support industrial hemp (0)
- Decimate ISIS without ground war (0)

- Fund export/import bank (0)
- Get China to play more fairly (1)
- **Energy independence (5)**
- **Fairer tax structure for middle class (8)**

**6) If Republicans were to control both houses of Congress—the House and the Senate—following the November elections, all of the Obama-voting Independents would prefer that Republicans pass modest reforms that the President could conceivably embrace rather than going bold, risking presidential vetoes and more government crises and showdowns. Romney-voting Independents were more split on the issue.**

In each session after the whiteboard exercises, we asked respondents:

*Given the choice, would you want to see Congress pass a steady stream of responsible legislation on jobs and the economy and spending, with modest reforms the President can conceivably embrace—or go bold and push the envelope in these areas with aggressive reforms, risking presidential vetoes and another two years of government lurching from crisis to crisis and showdown to showdown?*

All of the Obama-voting Independents wanted to see a Republican-controlled Congress pass modest reforms that the President could conceivably embrace rather than going bold, risking presidential vetoes and more government crises and showdowns.

Seven of 11 Romney-voting Independents agreed. They told us that the bold actions of Republicans in the past did not work, including the government shutdown where they ended up caving to the President. In their view, it did not accomplish anything and Republicans hurt themselves. Four of 11 Romney-voting Independents disagreed. They said that Republicans need to be bold, stand on principle, and prepare for the next election. One respondent explained:

*“At this time with two years left in [President Obama’s] term, I would like to see the Republicans be very bold and pushing hard because that will shape the discussion in two years. If they can get the country behind them for [their bold action], then it will force the other party’s politicians to address it. Small changes [equal] small results.” – John, Romney-voting Independent*

**7) Independents were not very concerned about the President’s safety following some of the recent controversies involving the Secret Service. Independents generally believed that those issues were isolated incidents and the President and his family were not in any real danger.**

During each session, we asked respondents:

*On a scale from one to 10, how concerned are you about President Obama’s safety?*

Answer choices	Romney- voting Independents	Obama- voting Independents	Total (avg.)
1=Not at all concerned to 10=Very concerned	3.1	4.1	3.6

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

Romney-voting Independents described the recent concerns surrounding the Secret Service as an “anomaly.” They told us that they do not believe that there is a big, existing plot to harm the President. They believe that the man going across the fence at the White House did not pose a danger to the President or his family because they were not home at the time, and the man was stopped. The man standing next to President Obama in the elevator with a gun and a felony conviction did not pose a real danger either, in their view. One respondent told us that it would take a much more shocking situation to make him think that the President is in danger.

Obama-voting Independents did not believe that the President was in any significant danger in those two circumstances. They pointed out that the President was not in the White House at the time that the man jumped the fence, and if he were there at the time, the man would have had to go through multiple security checkpoints to get to him. Obama-voting Independents told us that these scenarios will serve as a learning experience for the Secret Service, and they will close the gaps that currently exist.

**8) Overall, Independents were most concerned about the situation in Iraq and Syria, but the other foreign policy situations elicited at least modest concern, as well**

In the beginning of each session, we asked respondents:

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

Issues	Romney- voting Independents	Obama- voting Independents	Total (avg.)
<b>...in Iraq and Syria</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>7.7</b>
<b>...at the U.S. border with Mexico</b>	<b>6.5</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>6.2</b>
<b>...in Israel/Gaza</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>6.2</b>
<b>...with Ukraine and Russia</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>6.0</b>

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 Israel/Gaza and Iraq and Syria, there was one respondent in the group of Obama-voting Independents who said that he or she was not familiar with the situations going on in those places. The chart shows only the average score in each group for those who were familiar with the situation (did not score the question at "0.")

- 9) **Most Independents believed that the likelihood of a terrorist attack against a U.S. target overseas is now higher than it was one year ago. Also, Romney-voting Independents believed that the likelihood of a terrorist attack on U.S. soil is now higher than it was one year ago. Obama-voting Independents were more split.**

During each session, we asked respondents:

*Compared to one year ago, would you say that when it comes to the likelihood of a terrorist attack against a U.S. target overseas, such as a military base or embassy, the threat now...*

Answer choices	Romney-voting Independents	Obama-voting Independents	Total
1=is currently lower	0	0	0
2=is about the same	3	3	6
3=is currently higher	8	8	16

We also asked respondents:

*Compared to one year ago, would you say that when it comes to the likelihood of a terrorist attack on U.S. soil, the threat now...*

Answer choices	Romney-voting Independents	Obama-voting Independents	Total
1=is currently lower	0	1	1
2=is about the same	3	5	8
3=is currently higher	8	5	13

We asked respondents in each group why they generally believed that the likelihood of a terrorist attack against a U.S. target overseas or on U.S. soil is now higher than it was one year ago.

Romney-voting Independents told us that the threat has become more visible with Americans being beheaded on YouTube. Also, respondents in that group told us that there have been reports that potential terrorists have been caught at our border, and we do not know how many have actually made it through into the U.S. One respondent told us that some Americans are part of ISIS and more could be recruited, which is a serious threat to our security.

Obama-voting Independents told us that our southern border is not adequately secure and a trained soldier/terrorist from abroad could easily come into the U.S. and harm people. Respondents also told us that they have heard about the young man in Chicago who was on his way to join ISIS, and they were concerned that Americans that join ISIS have passports, could travel freely between the U.S. and the Middle East, and they could easily come back to the U.S. to harm us.

**10) Romney-voting Independents were very dissatisfied with President Obama’s handling of the situation in Iraq and Syria. Obama-voting Independents were split on the issue.**

During each session, we asked respondents:

*On a scale from zero to 10, how satisfied are you with President Obama’s handling of the situation in Iraq and Syria?*

<b>Answer choices</b>	<b>Romney-voting Independents</b>	<b>Obama-voting Independents</b>	<b>Total (avg.)</b>
<b>0=Not at all satisfied to 10=Very satisfied</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>3.8</b>

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

Romney-voting Independents told us that President Obama denied having knowledge about how pervasive ISIS’s power is and former members of his staff have come forward to say that the President has been aware of the threat that ISIS poses for a while now. Respondents also told us that they found the President’s admission that he did not have a plan to deal with ISIS problematic. Some in that group believed that President Obama has been too hesitant in dealing with ISIS.

Obama-voting Independents told us that they were satisfied with some of what the President has done in this situation and dissatisfied with some of what he has done. On the positive side, respondents told us that President Obama removed our ground troops from Iraq, as he promised; he handled the removal of al-Maliki from power well so Iraq could more easily create an inclusive government; and he has built a coalition to deal with the ISIS threat. One respondent pointed out that the President inherited this situation from the previous administration, he faces opposition from Republicans, and these groups in Iraq and Syria have been fighting each other for many, many years. On the negative side, respondents told us that the President was reckless to remove our intelligence-gathering capability from Iraq, he was apparently unaware of the threat that ISIS poses, his military response is going to be very expensive, and respondents described the President’s response as “slow” and “timid.”

## **11) Hearing about our problems in Iraq and Syria elicited strong emotions from Independents**

In each session, we asked Independents about recent news that they may have heard about Iraq and Syria lately. We then asked respondents to describe for us in one word how the situation in Iraq and Syria makes them feel when they hear the news.

Romney-voting Independents compiled the following list (with the number of times respondents used that word in parentheses):

- Disgusted (1)
- Sickening (1)
- Panicked (1)
- Inevitable (1)
- Dismayed (1)
- Sad (1)
- Concerned (1)
- Vulnerable (1)
- Threatened (1)
- Tense (1)
- Depressed (1)

Obama-voting Independents offered the following list (with the number of times respondents used that word in parentheses):

- Frustrated (3)
- Angry (2)
- Scared (1)
- Confused (1)
- Nervous (1)
- Apprehensive (1)
- Afraid (1)
- Distressed (1)

## **12) Almost all (21 of 22) Independents believed that ISIS is a direct threat to the U.S., and they believed that there are numerous ways that we can reduce or eliminate the threat**

During our discussion with respondents, we asked:

*Do you generally view ISIS as a regional threat only or as a direct threat to the U.S.?*

Almost all (10 of 11) Romney-voting Independents and all 11 Obama-voting Independents told us that they view ISIS as a direct threat to the U.S.

We followed up by asking respondents:

*Imagine you are the President. What would you do about ISIS?*

Romney-voting Independents compiled the following list:

- Drop more bombs against ISIS to show that we are serious about defeating them
- Take swift action to cut off their funding
- Confidently express that we want to defeat ISIS and will, rather than expressing uncertainty about a plan of action
- Send in special operations forces to take out the key players of ISIS
- Inform Congress about what we are doing to defeat ISIS

Obama-voting Independents offered the following list:

- Heavily arm the Kurds because they are reliable. Weapons given to them would not get into the hands of Islamic militants.
- Send in Navy SEALs
- Encourage a media blackout about our actions against ISIS to help us meet our objectives—sometimes too much information is not helpful
- Work together with other countries to find a solution
- Work with Syria’s President Assad and Iran because they are not trying to wipe us out (unlike ISIS)
- Allow the military to influence and handle the decision-making rather than politicians

**13) Obama-voting Independents were optimistic about the direction of the U.S. economy compared to one year ago, with eight of 11 saying that the economy is getting somewhat better. Romney-voting Independents were more split, with four saying that the economy is getting somewhat worse, three saying that it is staying as is, and four saying that it is getting somewhat better.**

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
1=getting much worse	0	0	0
2=getting somewhat worse	4	1	5
3=staying as is	3	2	5
4=getting somewhat better	4	8	12
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 somewhat worse or somewhat better what evidence they have for their belief.

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

- The unemployment rate is understated (does not count those who have given up or who are underemployed)
- There is not much room for advancement right now in the job market
- The U.S. is increasingly in debt to China
- People are making less money than they were before
- Costs of living are increasing while wages are stagnant
- There is a lot of homelessness
- Small businesses are struggling

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

- The stock market has been declining since July 2014
- Interest rates are lower, which suggests a weaker economy

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

- Housing costs are skyrocketing in the local area (Seattle) and if people can afford to pay those increasing costs, they must have income
- Some sectors in the economy cannot get enough workers to fill available positions of employment
- Business activity is increasing
- The unemployment rate is down
- People have more disposable income for entertainment

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

- The stock market is up for the year
- The unemployment rate is dropping
- Manufacturing companies are starting to move back to the U.S.
- More news stories about companies innovating and building new products
- Fewer news stories about people being laid off
- Consumer spending has increased, which suggests stronger confidence
- Housing prices have increased
- Rising GDP in the last two quarters
- Jobs growth—200,000+ jobs per month for the past six or seven months
- Business activity is increasing

**14) 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 eight of 11 saying that the unemployment rate will remain in the 5% to 6% range. Eight of 11 Romney-voting Independents believe that the unemployment rate will increase to between 6% and 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 5.9%. A year from today, do you expect it to be...*

<b>Answer choices</b>	<b>Romney- voting Independents</b>	<b>Obama- voting Independents</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1=Under 5%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>2=Between 5% and 6%</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3=Between 6% and 7%</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4=Between 7% and 8%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>5=Between 8% and 9%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>6=Between 9% and 10%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>7=Above 10%</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>