

**New Models
Messaging on Sequestration, House GOP
Leadership, a Potential Government
Shutdown, and the Economy**

October 2015

OVERVIEW

Presentation Testing conducted two mixed-gender focus group dial tests with moderate Independents in San Diego, CA, on October 6, 2015. One group was comprised of 12 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. In our dial test video, an actress named Jean spoke as the advocate for flexibility with the sequester. Susan spoke as the advocate for hard caps and across-the-board spending cuts with the sequester. They engaged in a point-counterpoint debate, which is referenced in this report.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1) Romney-voting Independents did not respond favorably to messaging that advocated for flexibility with the sequester. However, that messaging garnered the support of two-thirds (eight of 12) of the Obama-voting Independents.**

During each session, we conducted a 12-minute point-counterpoint dial test, where we contrasted the messaging between conservative Republicans who disagree with each other—those who advocate for flexibility with the sequester vs. those who advocate for hard caps and across-the-board spending cuts with the sequester (read by actresses from a teleprompter).

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

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
Jean (Advocate for flexibility with the sequester)	2	8	10
Susan (Advocate for hard caps and across-the-board spending cuts with the sequester)	10	4	14

Then, we asked respondents why they found one advocate’s arguments more persuasive than the other advocate’s arguments.

Romney-voting Independents who sided with Susan agreed that we should cut unnecessary spending from the defense budget, such as the \$7 billion for green energy programs, so the money in the defense budget could be spent more wisely to protect our safety. Also, they view our national debt as a national security issue. One respondent pointed out that we owe a lot of money to China, which is building up its military. Respondents in that group also liked Susan's firmness in her determination to secure budget cuts. In addition, they pointed out that Jean only called for more flexibility with the sequester, and did not present an actual plan to find savings elsewhere.

Obama-voting Independents who sided with Susan argued that our nation is broke, and we need the sequester to remain as it is to keep spending in check. Also, they mentioned that they like it when Congress makes deals, like they did with the sequester. However, four years later, some Members of Congress want to re-negotiate because they are dissatisfied, and some respondents expressed disagreement with the idea of re-negotiating. Also, those who sided with Susan agreed that we spend a lot of money on our defense budget, and some of that spending should be cut.

Romney-voting Independents who sided with Jean agreed with her position that we should be more flexible in determining which programs are cut under the sequester, rather than Susan's argument for hard caps and across-the-board spending cuts. During our conversation, we asked what would have made Jean's argument better. Respondents mentioned that Jean should have mentioned cutting entitlement programs. Also, they thought that Jean should have provided specifics about which spending programs would be cut and how it would affect everyone. Lastly, they reacted negatively when Jean was speaking about fee hikes. They contended that Jean should advocate for finding money in the budget through spending cuts rather than through fee hikes.

Obama-voting Independents who sided with Jean agreed that we should not cut our military budget disproportionately due to safety concerns, and we should not leave our children and grandchildren with a huge national debt. Also, they agreed with Jean's argument that we should be more flexible and spend money where it is necessary rather than imposing hard caps and across-the-board spending cuts. They supported Jean's balanced approach. They thought that Susan's plan would gut Obamacare and other social programs—actions they opposed.

2) Many Independents believe that the federal government is spending far too much money, even with the sequester in place

During the dial test video, your advocate stated:

The Budget Control Act is engendering some fiscal discipline, and the budget deficits have actually been reduced.

Romney-voting Independents turned their dials down from 54 to 47 (on a zero to 100 scale of agreement), and Obama-voting Independents turned their dials down from 69 to 56 (using the same scale).

Our discussion with Romney-voting Independents revealed that none believe that federal spending has been under control in the past few years, since the Budget Control Act of 2011 was implemented. In fact, only two of 12 in that group would say that federal spending is *more* under control than it was prior to the Budget Control Act of 2011.

Your advocate went on to say:

Fiscal disorder in Washington and the inability to budget is undermining our ability to strengthen our economy. Government can't keep spending more than it takes in. Our huge national debt is a gross form of injustice, a tax on our children and grandchildren to pay for our lifestyle today.

Independents in both groups reacted very favorably to this messaging. Romney-voting Independents turned their dials up from 51 to 81 (on a zero to 100 scale of agreement), and Obama-voting Independents turned their dials up from 45 to 81 (using the same scale).

3) Independents were not surprised by Speaker Boehner's announcement that he is leaving Congress, and most indicated that they will not miss him

Romney-voting Independents were not surprised by Speaker Boehner's announcement that he is leaving Congress, noting that the trouble and the frustration that he experienced from dealing with the dissension from within his own party got to him, and he did not want to put up with it anymore.

Only one respondent told us that he was upset to see Speaker Boehner go. Interestingly, none of the respondents in that group believe that the Speaker has an impact on their lives. Even if a government shutdown were to occur, they did not believe that would affect them directly unless they work for the government or someone in their family works for the government. They noted that during the last government shutdown in 2013, all government employees ended up getting paid, whether they showed up for work or not. However, three-fourths of respondents (nine of 12) indicated that they would be embarrassed if the government were to shut down because it would suggest to other countries that we cannot get our act together.

Obama-voting Independents were also not surprised by Speaker Boehner's announcement that he is leaving Congress, due to the discord from within the Republican Party. Some indicated that they do not care because someone else will take his place. Others told us that they were discouraged by his departure and some expressed sadness. One of those respondents explained:

"It seems like [Speaker Boehner] was a really good man trying to do his best for the country and that he's leaving without the respect and honor that he should have had from his party and all the years he gave them." – Judy, Obama-voting Independent

4) Independents believe that the next Speaker should concentrate on getting Congress to work together to address the needs of the American people

During each session, we asked:

What are the most important things that the next Speaker should concentrate on accomplishing?

Romney-voting Independents compiled the following list:

- Get Congress to work together—unify the country
- Debt reduction
- Fix entitlements—Social Security and Medicare
- Address our challenges now—do not kick the can down the road

Obama-voting Independents offered the following list:

- Get Congress to work together
- Encourage politicians on both sides to “bash” each other less
- Serve the American people rather than political interests

5) Independents were skeptical that a government shutdown would occur this autumn

In the beginning of each session, we asked:

How likely do you think it is that there will be another government shutdown this autumn, like there was a couple of years ago?

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total (avg.)
0=Not at all likely to 10=Very likely	3.1	2.7	2.9

During our discussion with Obama-voting Independents, we asked why they were so confident that there would not be a government shutdown this autumn. Respondents contended that Republicans in Congress shut down the government in the past, and it did not work out well for them. They argued that Republicans would not want to shut down the government because they would get blamed for it, and they would not want to make themselves look bad with the 2016 election coming up. Also, Speaker Boehner has announced that he would prevent a government shutdown from taking place. Respondents remarked that they have not been hearing much chatter about the possibility of a government shutdown lately, like they did two years ago. If a government shutdown were to occur, they indicated that it would be a surprise to everybody.

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

- 6) **If a government shutdown were to occur this autumn, Obama-voting Independents would assign most of the blame to Republicans in Congress; Romney-voting Independents would blame Republicans in Congress slightly more than Democrats in Congress.**

In the beginning of each session, we asked:

If there were another government shutdown this autumn, who would you blame and to what degree?

	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total (avg.)
0=Democrats in Congress entirely to 10=Republicans in Congress entirely	5.2	6.5	5.9

- 7) **Obama-voting Independents were more optimistic than Romney-voting Independents about the direction of the U.S. economy compared to one year ago, with seven saying that it is getting somewhat better, four indicating that it is staying as is, and one saying that it is getting somewhat worse. Romney-voting Independents were more split, with five saying that the U.S. economy is getting somewhat better or much better, three indicating that it is staying as is, and four saying that it is getting somewhat worse or much worse compared to one year ago.**

In the beginning of each session, we asked:

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

Answer choices	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
1=getting much worse	2	0	2
2=getting somewhat worse	2	1	3
3=staying as is	3	4	7
4=getting somewhat better	4	7	11
5=getting much better	1	0	1

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

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

- The Federal Reserve will soon increase interest rates, which suggests that the economy is getting stronger
- People are earning more money

- People are spending more money
- Fewer companies are laying off workers—you do not hear about it so much anymore
- Gas prices are lower
- One respondent's friends, who had been looking for jobs, have found employment
- New, innovative products are coming out
- The unemployment rate is lower
- The U.S. dollar is stronger
- The real estate market is improving

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

- The unemployment rate has gone down
- More jobs are available—more job fairs
- More new companies are setting up shop
- The price of gas is going down
- Auto sales are increasing
- One respondent's friends are getting higher-paying jobs rather than taking entry level positions, which puts them in a position to make bigger purchases (i.e., real estate)
- The construction industry is improving
- More people are installing solar technology on their homes, which is very expensive

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

- Many people are unemployed and cannot find jobs, including those with college degrees and advanced degrees
- The costs of living are increasing
- Large companies are laying off thousands of workers (i.e., Qualcomm, Caterpillar, and Hewlett Packard)
- The high number of short sales in real estate
- The recent downturn in the stock market
- The high number of stores that are closing in shopping centers

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

- The costs of living are increasing
- Wages are stagnant

8) Almost two-thirds of Independents (15 of 24) believe that the unemployment rate in the U.S. will remain in the 5% to 6% range one year from today. Even with the unemployment rate in the U.S. at 5.1%, only four of 24 Independents overall indicated that they believe it will fall under 5% one year from today, which suggests that they think the unemployment rate has leveled off and will not improve very much moving forward.

In the beginning of each session, we asked:

The unemployment rate in the U.S. now stands at 5.1%. A year from today, do you expect it to be...

Answer choices	Romney INDs	Obama INDs	Total
1=Under 5%	3	1	4
2=Between 5% and 6%	6	9	15
3=Between 6% and 7%	1	1	2
4=Between 7% and 8%	0	1	1
5=Between 8% and 9%	0	0	0
6=Between 9% and 10%	1	0	1
7=Above 10%	1	0	1

