

New Models

Messaging on a Potential Government Shutdown, the Iran Nuclear Deal, Donald Trump, and the Economy

September 2015

OVERVIEW

Presentation Testing conducted two mixed-gender focus groups with moderate Independents in Chalfont, PA on September 15, 2015. One group was comprised of 12 Romney-voting moderate Independents, and the other was comprised of 13 Obama-voting moderate Independents. All respondents had at least some college education, and were age 22 or older.

KEY FINDINGS

1) The vast majority of Independents did not support the effort by some Republicans in Congress to shut down the government unless Planned Parenthood is defunded

During each session, we discussed the potential government shutdown over the issue of Planned Parenthood funding. Almost all (11 of 12) of Romney-voting Independents and a slight majority (seven of 13) of Obama-voting Independents had heard about a plan by some Republicans in Congress to shut down the government unless Planned Parenthood is defunded.

We asked what their reaction is to that idea. Only two of 25 respondents indicated that they would support such a plan—both Romney-voting Independents. One respondent remarked that we should cut off all funding to Planned Parenthood because we would not have any control over where the money goes if we were to partly fund that organization. Even partly funding Planned Parenthood could mean that we would be supporting partial birth abortions and the selling of body parts. The other respondent told us that he supports shutting down the government to defund Planned Parenthood due to his religious beliefs. He explained:

“There are parts of [Planned Parenthood] that I don’t like. I don’t like the selling of body parts. I don’t like abortion. I think there’s a different way to handle that. There are a ton of people who want to adopt and can’t. Let them have their baby and then give them up and let the other people have them. To me, there are other ways to say that instead of [saying], ‘Oh. We’re just going to chop this kid up and then we’re going to sell body parts. We’re going to use it for research and stem cells and all that kind of stuff.’ I just see that there are other ways. That’s my personal belief. I’m OK with the Republicans [shutting down the government] because I just look at our country and say, ‘What are we about at this point?’ And one of the areas I don’t like in our country is the fact that we allow that.” – Doug, Romney-voting Independent

Romney-voting Independents who opposed the plan by some Republicans in Congress to shut down the government unless Planned Parenthood is defunded told us that they are tired of all of

the fighting in Congress and the one issue is not really related to the other. They objected to the idea of shutting down the government for any public policy agenda.

All of the Obama-voting Independents opposed the plan, arguing that shutting down the government has been done before, in 2013, and it was a big waste of money. The last government shutdown reportedly cost the U.S. \$23 billion to \$24 billion. They remarked that videos can be taken out of context, and while those in the videos may have sounded “cavalier” in the way they discussed the fetal tissue research, doctors who deal with cadavers on a regular basis have a different attitude than the average person.

In addition, respondents in that group opposed the plan because what Planned Parenthood is doing is good for fetal research, which can cure diseases. The fetal tissue is coming from those who are willingly allowing it to be utilized for research purposes. Obama-voting Independents also objected to the idea of shutting down the government for any public policy agenda.

We continued our discussion by asking about the strategy of shutting down the government as leverage to get one’s way on a specific policy. None of the 25 respondents overall thought that was a good way to govern.

Only one respondent—a Romney-voting Independent—indicated that there is *any* policy agenda worth shutting down the government over. Others remarked that the policy agenda would have to be so far out of the mainstream to support such a strategy, and they could not even imagine what type of policy that would be. One respondent explained:

“The problem is if every coalition of people who felt strongly about an idea or a process decided to shut down the government, it would never work. I just don’t think it’s an appropriate forum.” – Robin, Romney-voting Independent

Later in each session, we asked:

What, if anything, should Congress do about Planned Parenthood?

Romney-voting Independents remarked that Congress should continue some funding for Planned Parenthood because it serves many women who need their services, but the amount should be reduced. They hope that giving that organization less money would reduce the activities that they engage in that some people find objectionable. Also, they believe that the federal government should oversee Planned Parenthood’s activities more closely.

Obama-voting Independents told us that Congress should fully fund Planned Parenthood, and that organization should justify its expenses to the public so people on both sides can understand why the money is being spent and how it is educating many people.

- 2) If a government shutdown were to occur this autumn, Obama-voting Independents would assign slightly more blame to the Republicans in Congress than to the**

Democrats in Congress; Romney-voting Independents would blame both sides equally.

During 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	5.0	6.1	5.6

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

Romney-voting Independents, on average, would blame both sides equally if a government shutdown were to occur this autumn. They remarked that it is the responsibility of both sides to seek a workable resolution. Members of Congress should not “act like children” because their primary responsibility is to keep the government running.

One-third (four of 12) of Romney-voting Independents indicated that they would slightly blame Republicans in Congress more for a government shutdown if one were to occur, scoring this question at “6” or “7” (on a zero to 10 scale). They conveyed that Democrats are happy with the status quo—funding for Planned Parenthood. However, Republicans campaign on life issues. Therefore, they would be more responsible for a government shutdown because they feel that it is their responsibility to stand up against the funding for Planned Parenthood, which engages in activities that they view as morally wrong.

Obama-voting Independents indicated that they would slightly blame Republicans in Congress more than Democrats in Congress if a government shutdown were to occur. Republicans in Congress have shut down the government in the past, and right now, they have more leverage over what happens because they control both houses of Congress. Also, they have not heard anything about Democrats in Congress threatening to shut down the government.

Then, we asked:

Is it plausible to blame Democratic Senators for shutting down the government to keep Planned Parenthood’s funding going?

Only seven of 25 respondents—four Romney-voting Independents and three Obama-voting Independents—agreed that that is a plausible argument.

3) Obama-voting Independents were slightly more likely than Romney-voting Independents to believe that a government shutdown would occur this autumn, but both groups viewed the possibility of that happening as only moderately likely

During 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	4.8	5.3	5.1

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

Romney-voting Independents told us that it is possible that a government shutdown will occur due to the lack of compromise in Congress, but they have not seen any real signs that it will happen. They indicated that they just were not sure one way or the other.

Obama-voting Independents agreed that a government shutdown is possible because everyone in the government is fighting, but there is less chatter about a potential government shutdown than there has been in the past, which makes them unsure, which is why they scored this question near the middle.

4) All of the Romney-voting Independents opposed the nuclear deal with Iran and believe that we should have negotiated a better deal. Obama-voting Independents were more divided on the issue.

During each session, we asked respondents what news they have heard lately about the nuclear deal with Iran. Then, we inquired about their reaction to the deal.

Among Romney-voting Independents, eight of 12 viewed it negatively and expressed that they want their Congressman and Senators to oppose the deal. Four indicated that they were neutral about the issue, mostly because they did not have enough information. Respondents in that group told us that Iran had too much control in the negotiations, and we kept giving in to their demands. The result was an agreement that lacks verification to show that they are not developing nuclear weapons.

Also, for them, it is “unnerving” that an Iranian official recently said that the nuclear deal with the U.S. would not deter their nuclear capabilities, especially after we recently lifted economic sanctions and released \$150 billion to Iran. They were opposed to the deal because the Iranian leader denies the Holocaust, he is committed to destroying Israel and the Jewish people, and he

chants, “Death to America!” Those actions and beliefs, taken together, provide us with a clear picture of what they are thinking, and we should not support that.

When we asked Romney-voting Independents opposed to the nuclear deal with Iran what a better deal would look like, they said that it would be one where Iran gives up all pretenses for developing weaponized nuclear materials, we get our hostages back, and anytime, anywhere inspections. Also, a better deal would include the U.S. holding on to the \$150 billion that we are planning to give back to Iran.

Among Obama-voting Independents, three indicated that they would want their Congressman and Senators to support the deal, and four would want them to oppose the deal. The other six were neutral, mostly because they did not have enough information.

Those who want their Congressman and Senators to support the nuclear deal with Iran expressed confidence that the deal would provide us with the access that we need to conduct full inspections. They said that reaching a deal is better than not reaching a deal and chasing the elusive “better deal.” They expressed concern about the developing relationship between Iran and Russia, and in their view, the nuclear deal serves as a check on that potentially dangerous alliance. Also, respondents argued that the alternative to this deal, which has more verifiable pieces than what is being reported, is a confrontation with Iran. One respondent explained:

“The alternative to the deal is war, and that’s what I’m hearing coming out of a lot of the opposition’s mouths. I did that thing. I did war before, [in Vietnam]. War is not something that I want my kids involved in or your children involved in. It’s not a perfect deal, but I’ve heard the other side of this saying that what you’re hearing is not really the truth. There are a lot of verifiable pieces in [the agreement]. Everyone’s viewing it as just our deal. It’s not just the United States’ deal. It’s a ton of countries involved in this, and if we don’t do the deal, the sanctions will be lifted by the Europeans from all the indicators.” – Carl, Obama-voting Independent

Those who want their Congressman and Senators to oppose the deal pointed to the inspections process that requires that Iran is notified of upcoming inspections far in advance, which means that they can hide evidence of any wrongdoing and basically do whatever they want. They expressed concern that the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, strongly opposes the deal. In their view, this deal does not reduce the likelihood for war. Instead, it increases the likelihood that Israel and Iran will engage in a war. Also, they opposed the deal with Iran because of their history of involvement in terrorism and their disdain for the U.S. and Israel. One respondent explained:

“I feel that Iran is so against us and being a state sponsor of terrorism that some of the money from the economic sanctions being lifted is going to go into that. It’s going to go into causing problems for the United States on a subversive level. I don’t know [why President Obama is pushing this deal]. You can look at the deal that was made with North Korea—the same kind of deal—and on the news this morning, they’re saying that [North Korea’s] nuclear weapons have been developed further so the history is right there. I don’t understand the need for [the nuclear deal with Iran] right now. I

understand that [President Obama] is afraid that it's going to happen on his watch. I just don't believe that it's not going to happen because of this deal. I think that the first thing that they'll want to do is put [a nuclear weapon] in a backpack and blow it up in some country, whether it's Israel or the United States. They've stated in their policies that we're 'the Great Satan' and Israel should be wiped from the face of the Earth. Why would we want to give [Iran] more money and a stronger economy?" – Aram, Obama-voting Independent

When we asked Obama-voting Independents opposed to the nuclear deal with Iran what a better deal would look like, they said that the deal should include non-threatening, unannounced inspections and complete access. Also, a better deal would include more input from Middle Eastern countries, especially our allies in the region.

5) Most Independents do not want Donald Trump to become President of the United States

At the end of each session, we discussed Donald Trump, the current frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination.

We asked Romney-voting Independents if they could see themselves voting for Trump in the Pennsylvania Republican primary next spring. None said “yes”, and only five of 12 respondents stated that they would “maybe” vote for him. We learned that Ben Carson and Carly Fiorina are currently attracting the most attention from Romney-voting Independents.

We asked Obama-voting Independents who they would vote for if Donald Trump were the Republican nominee and Hillary Clinton were the Democratic nominee for President. Only three of 13 in the group indicated that they would vote for Trump. They revealed that their choice was more about opposing Clinton than supporting Trump. They expressed concern about the “deep hatred” between the Clintons and Congressional Republicans, which would lead to gridlock. Also, they stated that they do not trust Clinton, and she seems out of touch with the average American. Meanwhile, Trump says things that many Americans think, but are too “scared” to say. They believe that Trump knows how to hire the best people and he will put them where they need to be to help our country.

With such weak enthusiasm overall for his presidential candidacy, we inquired about what they view as Trump's greatest weaknesses as a possible President.

Romney-voting Independents conveyed that he is not trustworthy, lacks social skills, lacks experience in government, and has been unspecific with his policy proposals. Also, we learned that they reacted negatively to his recent comments about illegal immigrants, Senator John McCain, and women, including Megyn Kelly and Carly Fiorina. They described his comments about illegal immigrants as being in “poor taste” and an “overgeneralization”, even with all 12 respondents asserting that illegal immigration is “a serious problem”. Also, everyone in the group thought that Trump insulted all veterans with his comments about Senator John McCain's military service as a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

Trump's greatest weaknesses as a possible President, according to Obama-voting Independents, include his lack of political experience, he does not listen to others, he does not have real public policy proposals, he insults others, he is egotistical, and he just wants to be President for his own personal reasons, switching political parties to achieve that objective (former Democrat, now a Republican).

We also asked respondents about what they view as Trump's greatest strengths as a possible President.

Romney-voting Independents stated that he is independent in the sense that he does not need to pander to financial special interests, he has a basic business understanding that is lacking in government, and he could be a great negotiator for our nation.

Obama-voting Independents stated that his greatest strengths include his ability to hire good people for an administration, his demand for accountability, his confidence, and his independence from special interest groups' money.

6) Independents believe that Donald Trump is both helping and hurting the Republican Party

During each session, we asked respondents how Donald Trump is helping the Republican Party, if at all.

Romney-voting Independents remarked that he is helping the party by encouraging dialogue on important issues that politicians generally do not want to talk about, he is increasing interest in the election, and he speaks his mind without backing down, which forces the other Republican candidates to take positions on issues and better define themselves. Also, his presence in the race and the support that he has garnered is showing other Republican candidates that Americans are fed up with the status quo, and speaking one's mind without trying to appease everyone is appealing. Lastly, we heard that Trump's ability to fund his own campaign allows him to take political positions without worrying about political contributions, which they believe is helpful to the party.

Obama-voting Independents told us that Donald Trump is helping the party by getting people to pay attention to politics, including encouraging 24 million people to tune in to the first Republican presidential debate. As a result, other candidates are gaining exposure that they would not otherwise receive. Also, the Republican Party is more relevant in the news with him in the presidential race. Lastly, we heard that Trump attracts so much attention from the media that the parts of other candidates' political records that some may view as unflattering are not receiving the same attention that they would without Trump in the race, which some view as helpful to the party.

Next, we asked respondents how Donald Trump is hurting the Republican Party, if at all.

Romney-voting Independents asserted that he is hurting the party because he is “bombastic” and “sarcastic.” He wants to be controversial and have people talk about him rather than doing what is good for the country. His arrogance makes him “so unlikeable” and some conveyed that they need to like the person that they vote for as the next President. Also, he is critical of all the other candidates, and he even attacked Carly Fiorina’s personal appearance. While he is a good businessman, he is not a politician, and he is not seen as a “great role model”. Also, Trump made the party look bad because they had to “coerce” him to sign the pledge not to run as a third-party candidate for President if he does not win the Republican nomination.

Obama-voting Independents argued that he is hurting the party because he turns people off by his behavior, and he lacks the likeability needed to persuade people to support him. His lead in the polls exposes how fed up the public is with career politicians, which suggests that many of the other Republican presidential candidates are not worth voting for, and that hurts the party. Also, his popular support and policy positions are forcing other candidates to advocate for more conservative positions in the campaign, which could hurt the eventual nominee in the general election.

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 eight 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 four saying that the economy is getting somewhat better, three indicating that it is staying as is, and five 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	1	0	1
2=getting somewhat worse	4	1	5
3=staying as is	3	4	7
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 at least somewhat worse or at least 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 somewhat better cited:

- The creation of new jobs—the unemployment rate is declining
- Increased business activity

- People are willing to spend more money

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

- The job market is improving—and the unemployment rate is declining
- People are spending more money, which is a sign of higher incomes
- The real estate market is improving—homes are selling more quickly
- The stock market is doing well
- One respondent remarked that he has been asked by different companies to interview for jobs, and he is not currently looking for a position
- The drop in oil prices

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

- The stock market has been going down
- Workers are falling out of the job market—they are no longer looking for jobs
- The unemployment rate is higher than what the federal government reports
- It is difficult for recent college graduates to find jobs
- One respondent informed us that members of his family are losing their jobs
- Medical costs have skyrocketed
- The cost of living is rapidly increasing
- Our products are made overseas (i.e., China and Japan)
- Commercial real estate is struggling—stores are empty at malls
- Another respondent told us that the technology company that she works for has been declining

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

- Knowing the children of friends who are unemployed
- The unemployment rate is higher than what the federal government reports—not everyone is counted
- Significant job cuts in school districts throughout the U.S.—union problems

8) Overall, Independents suggested that they were somewhat pessimistic about the direction of the unemployment rate in the U.S. While almost one-half (12 of 25) of Independents expect the unemployment rate to remain in the 5% to 6% range one year from today, more than one-third (nine of 25) of Independents expect the unemployment rate to increase from its current level of 5.1% to between 6% and 7%. Only four of 25 Independents expect the rate to drop below 5% one year from today.

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%	5	7	12
3=Between 6% and 7%	4	5	9
4=Between 7% and 8%	0	0	0
5=Between 8% and 9%	0	0	0
6=Between 9% and 10%	0	0	0
7=Above 10%	0	0	0