

New Models

The economy, gas prices, “war on women,” and “Julia”

May 2012

OVERVIEW

Presentation Testing conducted two mixed-gender focus groups in Southfield, MI on May 8, 2012. One group contained 12 McCain-voting moderate Independents, and the other contained 13 Obama-voting moderate Independents. All respondents had at least some college education, and were age 22 or older.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1) No one cited issues pertaining to women as a top national concern:

We asked respondents to list the top national issues of concern to them, and once they were all listed, to tell us the top two that are most important to them. We heard in this order (with vote tallies in parentheses):

McCain-voting Independents:

Economy (8)
Job market (5)
Congressional deadlock (0)
Washington spending (0)
Status of health law--Mandated insurance (1)
Cost of gasoline (3)
Abandoned houses (0)
50 million on food stamps (1)
Fair tax system--half not paying (0)
Terrorism (3)
Immigration (2)
White House Czars--what are they doing? (0)
Government corruption (1)
EPA costs jobs--Solyndra (0)
Medicare corruption (0)

Obama-voting Independents:

Economy (5)
Jobs going overseas/Unemployment (4)

- Need for healthcare to change (3)
- Immigration (0)
- Stagnation/gridlock in Congress (7)
- Educational crisis (6)
- Social Security's future (0)
- Caring for returning veterans (0)
- Taxing the rich more (0)
- Fuel sources (0)
- Global warming (0)
- Corporate taxes--fair share (0)
- Lack of morals & values among youth (1)
- "World's police" (0)

We then asked respondents in each session to use their dials to give a number grade, on a scale from zero to 100, to both President Obama and Republicans in Congress in dealing with each top issue.

The following chart shows the top issues for McCain-voting Independents and how they graded President Obama and Republicans in Congress in dealing with each issue on that zero-to-100 scale:

	President Obama grade	Republicans in Congress grade
Economy	28	48
Job market	25	42

On the issue of the economy, McCain-voting Independents told us they scored Republicans in Congress higher than President Obama not based on their success, but based on their effort. Several McCain-voting Independents agreed with the explanation of a respondent named Geri about why she scored Republicans in Congress higher than President Obama:

“I feel as if the Republicans have at least tried to get something done, but they get stonewalled when a bill goes to the Senate, which is Democratically-held or the President gets in there and he doesn’t like this, he doesn’t like that, and so he rallies the Democrats around him. I gave [Republicans] the higher score for effort, not that they necessarily got it done, but for the effort.” – Geri, McCain-voting Independent

On the issue of the job market, McCain-voting Independents scored Republicans in Congress lower on that issue than on the economy because they do not believe Republicans in Congress have created any jobs, nor are they as focused on job creation as they are on the overall economy.

The following chart shows the top issues for Obama-voting Independents and how they graded President Obama and Republicans in Congress in dealing with each issue:

	President Obama	Republicans in Congress
Stagnation/gridlock in Congress	52	18
Educational crisis	50	28
Economy	62	22

While Obama-voting Independents believe that stagnation/gridlock in Congress is the number one problem facing the United States, they do not blame President Obama. They believe that he wants everyone in Congress to work together, but there is not much he can do to make that happen. In our group, we heard:

“Congress has a 9% approval rating right now. That is sad. How can any leader deal with someone that has no one has any confidence in?...[Republicans] have one thing in mind and they’ve said it throughout the primaries – to get rid of the President, forgetting what the President came in with. For the last two years, they haven’t allowed him to do anything he’s attempted to do.” – Alan, Obama-voting Independent

Obama-voting Independents gave President Obama a score of 50 in handling the educational crisis. Most gave him a pass because education is primarily handled by state governments. We also heard that while President Obama has not done as much as he could have on education, he has not taken education backwards like some other Presidents have.

Of the top three problems facing the United States, according to Obama-voting Independents, President Obama is doing the best job on the economy. We heard that President Obama inherited an economy in a nosedive, and although he has not gotten us out of it yet, the economy has at least started to level off. One respondent told us:

“I scored [President Obama] the highest [on the economy] because I think he’s definitely made attempts to improve the economy, whether or not they worked or not is still up for grabs. I think he definitely has put forth an effort. A lot of the things he had every intention of doing, again, haven’t gone anywhere because of Congress so I can’t say he’s had a whole lot of success in it. But I definitely see the effort in what he’s been trying to do to re-stimulate the economy.” – Nicole, Obama-voting Independent

2) What "war on women"?

Twenty-five people with at least some college education barely knew anything about a so-called "war on women." First, in an early-session written exercise, we asked respondents to fill in the blank with the first word that comes to mind: "The war on _____." And for good measure we replicated the exercise, asking them for the *next* word that comes to mind in the same sentence. McCain-voting Independents listed:

- Drugs (5)
- Terror (4)
- Crime (3)

Afghanistan (2)
Iraq (1)
Poverty (1)
Muslim extremist (1)
Wealth (1)
Economy (1)
Foreign Soil (1)
Oil (1)
Freedom (1)
Control (1)
Women (1)

Obama-voting Independents listed:

Drugs (6)
Terror (6)
Poverty (3)
Crime (2)
Middle class (2)
Iraq (1)
Economy (1)
Jobs (1)
al Qaeda (1)
Iran (1)
Middle East (1)
Gridlock (1)
Women (not mentioned)

When we later asked who'd heard of a so-called "war on women," perhaps five of the 25 in total had heard of it at all, and barely knew it. Interestingly, none of the seven female Obama-voting Independents had heard anything about a "war on women."

After we conducted an in-depth discussion about how Republicans in Congress view women, we asked female Obama-voting Independents if they believe that Republicans in Congress are engaging in a "war on women." Although female Obama-voting Independents have negative things to say about Republicans in Congress, they do not believe that there is a war on women being waged by the GOP.

3) Good news/bad news for GOP regarding women:

The good news is that since most women in our groups were completely unfamiliar with the idea of a "war on women," they didn't find it plausible that the GOP would engage in such a war. The females in the Obama group thought that Rush Limbaugh's comments about contraception were the ignorant comments of a single person, not the position of the entire party. However, the bad news is that even with McCain-voting Independent women, the party suffers from a lousy reputation vis-a-vis women.

We asked the respondents in both groups to give us an adjective to describe the attitudes of Republicans in Congress towards women.

Here's some of what we heard from women in the McCain-voting group, including their reasoning for choosing that word:

“My word was ‘unmeaningful.’ They’re not in favor of women in office and I don’t think they’re respectful towards women. When I watch on the news and the meetings on TV and everything, it seemed to me like the Republicans I feel are above everybody – that they feel that they’re above everybody. I just think that they just don’t think highly of women.” – Rene, McCain-voting Independent

“I’d say ‘lower.’ I kind of think it’s like a boys’ club. I don’t think [the Republican Party is] as open to women being in power as the Democrats are. [Democrats] had Hillary [Clinton] running for the presidency. I don’t see [in the near future] the Republicans doing something like that.” – Nicole, McCain-voting Independent

“I just put their view of women was ‘out-dated.’ I think they’re primarily white males, older, and they’ve been in Congress for a long time, unfortunately, and as opposed to corporate America and men in business who are used to women and what they can offer, I think they’re a little bit behind on that.” – Carolyn, McCain-voting Independent

“[Republicans in Congress] look at women as being well somebody they can tolerate...But I think they would prefer to have all men running as opposed to maybe a woman running.” – Victoria, McCain-voting Independent

In the Obama group we heard words (from both genders) such as demeaning, disrespectful, discriminatory, and condescending.

One Obama-voting Independent told us:

“When the discussion turns around to women’s rights, it seems that more Republicans feel like – male Republicans – know what’s right for women as opposed to women knowing what’s right for women. It seems that – to some extent – that the Republican women like [Congresswoman Michele] Bachmann go along with their male counterparts... I particularly think about abortion and things like that.” – Jim, Obama-voting Independent

4) Only one person out of 25 had heard of Obama's "Julia" composite:

The McCain-voting Independents were put off by Julia because they thought she was a "fantasy" (i.e., that they themselves could never benefit from all the government programs that “Julia” benefits from), and because these programs would cost a huge amount of money, and they'd be stuck paying for them. Also, some pointed out that other than the issue of equal pay for women, all the other government programs that “Julia” benefits from can easily apply to men as well. As

a result, some McCain-voting Independents thought that the “Julia” composite was designed to get women to vote for him. The Obama-voting Independents viewed “Julia” favorably, and while they did not believe all of Obama’s claims, they saw reflections of their own lives in the programs “Julia” benefits from.

After we explained who “Julia” is and how she benefits from government programs at each stage of her life, we asked respondents if they view “Julia” favorably or not. Not one McCain-voting Independent viewed the “Julia” composite favorably. In contrast, eight of 13 Obama-voting Independents reacted favorably to “Julia.”

Those that were critical of the “Julia” composite told us:

“[The ‘Julia’ composite] seemed like a fantasy to me. It just seemed like a fantasy in how life is supposed to work out. That could have been set 20 years ago and that’s what people were thinking – life is supposed to work this way. It just seems like a big fantasy. They’re going to pay for this. They’re going to guarantee that there’s room for her in the Head Start [program]. They’re going to guarantee that they did make the improvements to her son’s school. Nobody can guarantee any of that.” – Sara, McCain-voting Independent

“Where’s the money coming from? Who’s paying for that? Do I have to work another 20 hours a week just to be able to support my family and all these plans for [President Obama]? I don’t know how much longer I can keep doing this [working] to begin with. I’m already getting a little old.” – Deanne, McCain-voting Independent

“As far as I can see, you could put any other name in there besides ‘Julia.’ You could use ‘Christopher’ and everything except the fair pay could just apply to a man...All of these programs could apply either way. They don’t have to apply just to a woman. He’s just trying to get [women’s] votes.” – Sara, McCain-voting Independent

“I’m not sure why [‘Julia’] bothered to start the business. The only handout program she’s missing is the welfare.” – Geri, McCain-voting Independent

“I think [the ‘Julia’ story] has painted a pretty picture, but at the same time, it feels very gimmicky to me. There are so many uncertainties. You can’t say that anything for Obama or for Mitt Romney are going to pass – anything – so I think it just feels very gimmicky.” – Nicole, Obama-voting Independent

Those that responded favorably to “Julia” explained:

“[‘Julia’] went and got herself an education, used the advantages that she had, became productive, and according to the story there, she hired other people and stimulated the economy that way.” – John, Obama-voting Independent

“I think ‘Julia’ is what most of us are – not that we’re asking for a helping hand, but we appreciate having the helping hand. We’re not sitting back and taking, taking, taking,

and we're giving to the country as a whole – not just sitting back and saying, 'I deserve this.' Nobody deserves anything as far as I'm concerned. You get out and work for it just like everybody else. When you look at [former Governor Mitt] Romney and [House Budget Chairman Paul] Ryan, they want to cut everything because they can afford to pay for children and their people that go and get these things and you're still on the negative side of the ledger." – Ira, Obama-voting Independent

"I view favorably Obama's 'Julia' because of all the incentives she was given to be productive, and it doesn't appear that Romney or the Republican Party offer any incentives. In fact, they're taking more from the middle class to lower-middle class population." – Lisa, Obama-voting Independent

"It was sort of a nice story. I was happy for 'Julia.' It seems like she had a pretty good life. It's sort of the dream. I've got daughters and I would hope that things could work out for them like that." – Jim, Obama-voting Independent

During our discussion with McCain-voting Independents, we learned that four women in that group were critical of how Republicans in Congress interact with women, as stated previously. Through the "Julia" composite, we now see how President Obama interacts with women. We asked those four McCain-voting Independent women if seeing the "Julia" composite would have any effect on whom they plan to vote for in November. All four women said that "Julia" would have no effect on their vote.

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

- 5) McCain-voting and Obama-voting Independents are in at least some agreement that high gasoline prices are out of President Obama's control. However, McCain-voting Independents believe that while there are factors out of his control affecting gasoline prices, there are things he can be doing to help solve the problem that he is not currently doing.

We asked respondents in both groups to tell us how much they blame President Obama and Republicans in Congress for high gas prices on a scale from zero (not at all) to 10 (a lot).

The following chart shows what they told us:

	President Obama	Republicans in Congress
McCain-voting Independents	6.7	4.9
Obama-voting Independents	2.2	4.8

Independents basically give President Obama a pass on high gas prices because they believe there are outside factors that are causing gas prices to be so high. Also, some Independents realize that gas prices were headed higher before the President came to office. In our groups, we heard:

“I gave him more of a pass... The reason for that is I took the question more literally. I don’t think it’s Obama’s fault that the gas prices are as high as they are currently. It may be his fault that they’re high in the future. If he OK’d the pipeline, it wouldn’t be ready for awhile. If he OK’d extra drilling, it wouldn’t be ready for a while. I was taking it literally as his fault for the current gas prices... I think [gas prices being high] is a conglomeration of things – the war in the Middle East for one – all [the wars] over there – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria is now involved. All of them are oil-producing nations.” – Geri, McCain-voting Independent

“Carolyn: I agree [gas prices are] a little bit out of his control, somewhat, compared to other issues, and that’s why I gave him a little bit of a pass on it.” – Carolyn, McCain-voting Independent

“Gasoline prices are a global problem. The U.S. has got 330 million people. China and India have four times that amount so it’s not just what we do here. It’s what goes on in the world. You can do fracking here. You can open up the north shore – whatever he could do if he could just go carte blanche and do whatever, it still doesn’t address the whole problem.” – Marshall, Obama-voting Independent

“Obama may or may not do in the next four years is not going to have an immediate impact on gas prices anyway. He inherited the gas prices as they were. They’ve gone up a little bit. They’ve gone down a little bit, but in essence, they were on the rise long before he showed up.” – Ralph, Obama-voting Independent

Some McCain-voting Independents believe that President Obama should be doing more to address high gas prices. One respondent told us:

“Obama has clearly stated that there’s no magic bullet for high oil prices and there’s absolutely nothing we can do except cut back on consumption. Meanwhile, you’ve got China sucking all the oil and gas the way we used to or even worse. If something is not done then gas prices are just going to keep going up... I blame Obama for doing nothing [but] he tried to do something, but I don’t think he’s put a lot of effort into it. Otherwise I would have given him a 10 [on the dial]. [Another respondent] mentioned the oil drilling, but [President Obama] basically has pooh-pooed everything and says, ‘Well, we can’t do anything about high gas prices. There is no magic bullet.’ I think he could be exploring other forms of energy like electric vehicles and solar and wind power.” – David T., McCain-voting Independent

While Obama-voting Independents give President Obama a pass on high gas prices, they blame Republicans in Congress. Obama-voting Independents told us that Republicans have a lot more interests – financial and otherwise – in the gasoline market and seeing gasoline companies succeed. Also, it appears to them that Republicans do not support non-oil sources of energy.

- 6) It’s not plausible to say that the Democrats hold all or most of the power in DC now.

We asked early in the sessions, “Which party do you think holds more power in DC right now, and to what degree?” We asked respondents to score this statement on a scale of zero (meaning Democrats have all the power, and the Republicans have none) to 10 (meaning Republicans have all the power, and the Democrats have none).

The following chart shows how Independents responded to this question:

	McCain-voting Independents	Obama-voting Independents
Which party do you think holds more power in DC right now, and to what degree? 0 = The Democrats have all the power, and the Republicans have none 10 = The Republicans have all the power, and the Democrats have none	4.4	6.3

McCain-voting Independents scored this at 4.4 and Obama-voting Independents scored this at 6.3. Interestingly, McCain-voting Independents believe that Democrats have most of the power in DC right now while Obama-voting Independents believe that Republicans have most of the power in DC. The GOP’s numerical majority in the House, as well as your ability to stop legislation, were viewed as key reasons why you’re viewed as powerful.

- 7) Independents remain generally unaware that a payroll tax cut was in place last year, and that workers paid less in FICA taxes in 2011 than in 2009

There is still a significant lack of knowledge among Independents about the payroll tax cut. As we have done in previous sessions, we asked our 25 respondents in Detroit these two questions at the start of each session:

Imagine a worker earned gross wages of \$40,000 in 2009, and earned \$40,000 again in gross wages in 2011. When it comes to the FICA taxes that this person paid for Social Security and Medicare in 2011, was his tax rate in 2011...

- 1 = Lower than it was in 2009 (4 of 25)
- 2 = The same as it was in 2009 (12 of 25)
- 3 = Higher than it was in 2009 (9 of 25)

Did you, and/or the workers you know, get a payroll tax cut last year?

- 1 = Yes (6 of 25)
- 2 = No (13 of 25)
- 3 = Don’t know (6 of 25)

- 8) Independents are generally optimistic that the unemployment rate will be lower than it is now 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 8.1%. A year from today, do you expect it to be...

- 1 = Under 5% (0 of 25)
- 2 = Between 5% and 6% (0 of 25)
- 3 = Between 6% and 7% (3 of 25)
- 4 = Between 7% and 8% (16 of 25)
- 5 = Between 8% and 9% (4 of 25)
- 6 = Between 9% and 10% (2 of 25)
- 7 = Above 10% (0 of 25)

In our group with McCain-voting Independents, nine of 12 thought that the unemployment rate one year from now would be between 7% and 8%. One respondent said that the reason that the unemployment rate is going down is because people are no longer being counted when they stop looking for work after a long period of being unemployed.

We asked those nine respondents if they believe that the unemployment rate will be between 7% and 8% one year from now because there will be an increase in hiring or because people are no longer being counted when they stop looking for work after a long period of being unemployed. Five McCain-voting Independents believe that the unemployment rate will decline due to an increase in hiring; four McCain-voting Independents believe that the unemployment rate will decline because some people will no longer be counted after they stop looking for work.

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

9) Most Obama-voting Independents are aware of what Solyndra is

In the beginning of Obama-voting session, we asked respondents the following question:

What is Solyndra?

- 1 = A new chemical for removing stains from carpets (0 of 13)
- 2 = A soy-based food additive (0 of 13)
- 3 = A solar company that went out of business (8 of 13)
- 4 = Don't know (5 of 13)

Note: We did not ask McCain-voting Independents this question because Solyndra was mentioned during our whiteboard exercise before this question was asked.