



# RESURGENT REPUBLIC

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FROM:** Ed Gillespie and Whit Ayres  
**DATE:** September 11, 2009  
**RE:** Key Findings From August Focus Groups

An extensive round of focus groups (five pairs) during August with Independents who voted for President Obama last November, but who are undecided on the congressional generic ballot, provided revealing insights about voters' concerns over the economy, government spending, mounting Federal debt and government intervention into the private sector.

### VIEWS OF THE ECONOMY

These voters remain very anxious about the state of the economy, with adjectives like "nervous," "uncertain," "stressful" and "hurting" permeating the discussions, tempered only occasionally with more optimistic expressions like "trying to bounce back" and "about to turn around."

However, ten months after the presidential election and eight months since the Inauguration, these Independent Obama voters demonstrated great patience with the President, and give him credit for trying to improve the bad economy, which they still see as him inheriting.

These voters clearly separate their feelings about him personally from their much more negative feelings about policies his Administration and Congress are pursuing. And they see congressional leaders, specifically House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid in a harshly negative light.

**Consequently, criticizing the policies of the Democratic Congress is likely to resonate much more strongly with persuadable individuals than criticizing "President Obama's policies."**

While specific probing of the GOP brand was not included, the participants did not bring up any GOP leaders or ideas, suggesting that voters do not yet see the Republicans in Congress as offering alternatives. It was also clear from the groups that the assertion of "too much, too soon, too fast" has penetrated public perception, reinforced by perceptions of the stimulus bill

and the “cash for clunkers” program, which is widely seen as poorly managed by the Federal Government.

## **MOUNTING FEDERAL DEFICITS AND DEBT**

As quantitative data have consistently shown, there is great concern over increasing deficits and mounting Federal debt. Based on that data and feedback from these voters, this is the greatest concern about the current majority’s legislative agenda.

Two significant takeaways emerged from these groups: 1. The sheer magnitude of the deficit and debt numbers are virtually incomprehensible for voters, and 2. Their fears are largely intuitive and, as focus group participants, had a difficult time volunteering what specifically underlies their fears about growing deficits and mounting debt.

**When the magnitude of the debt was made more comprehensible, specifically when numbers are put in per household terms (i.e., total federal obligation of \$546,000 per household, rather than total of \$6 trillion in federal debt), or in context of how those figures are projected to dramatically increase over a short period of time – i.e., doubling the debt over the next five years and tripling the debt in ten years, these voters’ concerns intensified.**

Talking about Federal debt in more comprehensible terms will have much greater impact than talking in terms of “trillions of dollars.”

And when specific effects of the debt were raised, voters readily grasped them:

- **Their paramount concern was that the mounting Federal debt will mean their children and grandchildren will not enjoy the same levels of opportunity that past American generations have enjoyed, and that future generations will inherit a less prosperous nation than current generations inherited from past generations.** (Interestingly, younger voters were least concerned about this, assuming that technology would ultimately prevail.)

They also believe that Americans will eventually pay for mounting Federal debt one of four ways:

- **Broad-based tax increases,**
- **Cuts in future government services (resonant with younger voters, who were skeptical they would see any benefit from Social Security, and older voters, who fear cuts in Medicare),**
- **Inflation or,**
- **China having a greater controlling or even ownership stake in our economy.**

While voters are unlikely to offer these impacts on their own, raising them in the debate will likely intensify public opposition to new Federal spending programs.

## **GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION IN THE ECONOMY**

It's important to recognize not only the anxiety voters feel over the current state of the economy, but the extent to which many voters were shaken to their core by the near collapse of the financial markets last October. It has made them much more open to government agencies playing a "protector" and policing role, particularly in the financial markets.

However, they do not share liberals' penchants for "transforming" our economy away from a market-based economy to a more government controlled one.

Voters were asked to circle one of two statements that came closest to their views:

*The U.S. economy is too fueled by a cycle of boom and bust, where the rich have gotten extremely wealthy but ordinary workers have not seen their incomes or wages go up. It's time for structural changes that bring about greater government control to even out those economic cycles and provide greater stability.*

or...

*The ups and downs of business cycles in a market economy are frustrating and at times even frightening, but if the Federal Government tries to manage business cycles it runs the risk of stifling the kind of innovation and long-term growth that has made America's prosperity the envy of the world.*

**Opponents of greater government intervention in the economy need to acknowledge the anxiety caused by the current recession and last Fall's financial crisis, as well as the desire for the Federal Government to ensure a level playing field. Forcefully asserting that continuing to expand the federal government's control of the private sector will ultimately stifle innovation, limit economic growth, and threaten our long-term prosperity will likely have a significant impact on the public debate.**

## **CONCLUSION**

A qualitative analysis of the views of the independent-minded Obama voters reinforce what quantitative surveys have consistently shown: America remains a center-right country in which most voters are leery of too much Federal involvement in our economy.

## **FOCUS GROUPS**

Columbus, Ohio  
August 6, 2009  
Independent Women / Independent Men

The Tarrance Group

Las Vegas, Nevada

August 11, 2009

Independent Women / Hispanic Men

American Viewpoint

Virginia Beach, Virginia

August 18, 2009

Younger Voters (18-29) / Independent Men

McLaughlin & Associates

Orlando, Florida

August 20, 2009

Hispanic Women / Small Business Owners

Voter Consumer Research

Billings, Montana

August 26, 2009

Independent Women / Independent Men

Public Opinion Strategies

*Resurgent Republic is a 501(c)(4) organization dedicated to shaping the debate over the proper role of government. It is an independent, not-for-profit organization that promotes conservative free market principles such as lower taxes and economic growth, and supports strong national defense policies.*