



RESURGENT REPUBLIC

MEMORANDUM

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: Jan van Lohuizen and Ed Gillespie

DATE: April 3, 2012

RE: The Economy and Health Care Are Determining Factors for Seniors in 2012

As part of our Target Voter Series, Resurgent Republic sponsored four focus groups among seniors ages 65 and older in Tampa, Florida and Grand Rapids, Michigan. These voters self-identified as Independents, voted for President Obama in 2008, but are undecided on the generic presidential ballot today. Conducted by Voter/Consumer Research, the focus groups were split by gender.

Over the past three presidential cycles, the senior vote has alternated its political preference. In 2008, voters ages 65 and older were the only age demographic President Obama failed to carry, losing them by 53 to 45 percent. (Those ages 45 to 64 split, giving a one-point edge to Obama.) In 2004 President Bush won this demographic by five points (52 to 47 percent), while seniors preferred Al Gore in 2000 (50 to 47 percent). This group of voters will be one of the most reliable to turn out come November.

Key Findings

When asked how they will evaluate President Obama come November, most respondents in our Target Voter Series pointed to the economy or their personal financial situation. These seniors were consistent with that theme, but this target voter group added the quality and cost of health care as a top priority. Many surveys have shown that health care is a top priority for older females, while older men tend to worry more about fiscal issues. In our groups, however, senior males and females were equally likely to bring up the health care issue.

Additional key findings include:

- With few exceptions, these seniors were satisfied with their current health care coverage and nervous about changing what is perceived as a good thing.
- These seniors recalled few specifics of ObamaCare. Recall of what is in the legislation ranges from very fuzzy to non-existent. However, when reminded, they did express negative reactions to specific features like the individual mandate, Independent Payment Advisory Board, and Medicare cuts.

- Seniors tended to cite the “wars” as more of a leading cause of the nation’s escalating debt crisis than entitlement spending.
- Since many of these voters have a fixed income, they were acutely aware of changes in home values and everyday costs (i.e., health care, food, and gas prices).

Health Care

- 1. With few exceptions, respondents in both Florida and Michigan were satisfied with their current health care coverage and nervous about pending changes.** These groups could not specify what changes are on the horizon due to ObamaCare, but several expressed concern that their health care coverage will not stay the same, including changes to doctor access or quality of care. The notion that anything might change made them skeptical and nervous. This is a good reminder to conservatives advocating for Medicare reforms. Seniors need to be reminded that proposed reforms do not affect those currently on Medicare or those expected to enroll in the next decade, and should they choose, they can remain in the present system.
- 2. Seniors’ concern about the rising cost of health care has not diminished since ObamaCare became law.** The cost of health insurance, not universal coverage, is the most important metric these voters expressed during our health care discussion, particularly senior women. One Tampa senior said, “It seems like every time you go to the doctor to get anything done you have to go through loops and go through this procedure to get that procedure done.” Several respondents live on a fixed income and described the tension they feel when their expenses increase due to rising prescription drug costs, additional out-of-pocket expenses for doctor visits, or insurance companies that now offer fewer benefits.
- 3. For the most part, these groups volunteered limited specifics about ObamaCare’s provisions.** The Tampa groups said the law’s purpose was to bring about universal coverage, while the Grand Rapids groups referenced coverage of children under the age of 26. The negative aspects of the legislation centered on the complexity of the bill itself and that hardly anybody in Congress actually read the legislation. With a hint of sarcasm, one Tampa senior said, “Only after four years and eight revisions will I think it is ok.” The pending Supreme Court decision will place this issue back into the public discourse and likely refresh their memory of the legislation.
- 4. All four groups expressed a strong negative reaction to the individual mandate, IPAB, and cuts to Medicare.** The fact that ObamaCare might not be at the forefront with these Independents does not mean the President’s signature domestic accomplishment is quietly gaining favor. Reactions from both the Florida and Michigan groups to three provisions are good reminders that ObamaCare is toxic in large part due to its policies.
 - a. Individual Mandate** – these voters expressed serious reservations about allowing the federal government to mandate coverage and thought it might place a financial burden on those already having a difficult time making ends meet.

- b. **Independent Payment Advisory Board (IPAB)** – instead of controlling costs, the respondents felt this board would add another layer of bureaucracy to the patient-doctor relationship. The newly created IPAB could very well take on the ire previously reserved for health insurance companies.
- c. **Medicare Cuts** – in light of ObamaCare cutting \$500 billion from Medicare, these seniors largely believed they will be forced to make up the shortfall. This point magnifies their (1) primary concern of rising health care costs and (2) skepticism toward making changes to Medicare when they're mostly satisfied with the current program.

Spending, Deficits and Entitlement Reform

1. **These senior voters are concerned about the level of federal spending and believed the deficit is worse under President Obama.** The respondents voiced concern about how the deficit and debt might affect their children and grandchildren, specifically regarding education and quality jobs. There was also strong awareness that this problem is worse under Obama. Even so, some of the respondents were hesitant to hold him solely responsible. One Tampa senior said Obama “walked into it and for whatever reason it hasn’t gotten any better. We’re still traveling down the wrong road.” What these voters couldn’t avoid is that President Obama failed to keep his promise of cutting the deficit in half by the end of the first term. This quote didn’t cause all of these seniors to conclude Obama owns the deficit issue, but some now question whether he would follow through on new promises of fiscal restraint moving forward.
2. **Increased spending due to the “wars” – not entitlements – was viewed as the primary driver of the nation’s debt.** Particularly in Grand Rapids, these senior voters were concerned the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are recklessly adding to the nation’s debt. (Both wars were talked about in the present tense.) They feel recent foreign policy decisions have left the country overcommitted abroad. As a result, it’s fair to conclude these groups did not grasp the magnitude of the debt or arrive at a consensus on how to solve the root cause of the problem.

We tested a series of ways to express the size of the deficit and invited the respondents’ feedback as to which descriptions were most meaningful. The responses included the increasing amount of debt owned by China and showing how the nation’s debt figures are not far behind Greece. Simplifying the aggregate debt figures was also beneficial, such as the federal government borrows 40 cents on every dollar spent and the debt owed per person is \$50K.

3. **Most of these seniors were open to learning more about the budget proposals put forward by House Republicans.** The discussion of the “Ryan Plan” did not generate strong negative or positive feedback¹. Their general impression included positive feedback to the tax

¹ Since the plan was unveiled following the Tampa groups, this discussion took place only with the two senior groups in Grand Rapids.

proposals, believing the tax code would be simpler and more fair by reducing the six federal income tax brackets to two (10% and 25%). Regarding Medicare reform, the Grand Rapids groups responded favorably to how the proposal might better control costs. However, some thought it would give the insurance industry too much power, and due to their dislike of health insurance companies, this was not appealing. Reminding these seniors that they would still have the choice to remain on traditional Medicare was helpful. To formulate a definite opinion on this matter, seniors need to understand how any changes will affect them personally and that will take time. The positive news is they did not rule the discussion out of hand.

President Barack Obama

- 1. Consistent with our previous groups, these Obama Independents like the President and are hesitant to solely blame him for the economy.** Their affinity is more due to personal characteristics rather than policy alignment. In fact, when asked to identify President Obama's policies they like most, these voters tended to say Obama inherited major problems and then shift the conversation toward his personal favorability, using words like "sincere," "smart," and "compassionate." Their blame was more directed at Washington and what they perceived as the dysfunctional nature of Congress
- 2. These seniors expressed disappointment that the President hasn't produced the type of change they expected, but are split as to the reason why.** These Independents had a mediocre opinion of the President's job performance. They view Obama as under-performing when compared to their expectations in 2008, mostly due to the economy. Respondents in both groups believed Obama should have started bringing troops home earlier. However, they view the President as trying to fix things, but often unable to since "nothing gets done in Washington." Some came to the conclusion that he is trying and not at fault. Others went a step further, concluding that he is not up to solving this country's problems and that we need someone with stronger leadership skills.

The Economy

- 1. Groups in both Florida and Michigan expressed deep concern regarding the current state of the economy.** Overall these seniors perceive the economy as "bad," "struggling," and even "worse than what they're saying." They expressed optimism about recent stock market improvements, but there was little faith their investment portfolios would return to pre-recession levels. According to one respondent in Grand Rapids, she "will never live long enough to get back what was lost in stocks and bonds." Many referenced how their grandchildren are experiencing a difficult time finding quality jobs, which also led to questions about the level of job training today. In comparing the two locations, the Grand Rapids respondents were cautiously optimistic about the local economy, citing construction and housing market improvements, while the Tampa respondents noted their housing market was worse than the national average. In gauging the economy, both groups are watching the job market, real estate, health care costs, and gas and food prices.
- 2. These voters voiced significant distrust toward corporations moving jobs overseas and felt it should be a top priority to bring these jobs back home.** Both groups viewed outsourcing as a long-term cause of the nation's economic decline and something that must be

addressed in order to permanently change the direction of the country. The Tampa seniors talked about the manufacturing industry in general, while in Grand Rapids, the seniors talked more about the recovering auto industry and the desire to have more things made in the U.S.A.

SENIOR FOCUS GROUPS

The Target Voter Series is a project of 24 focus groups among Obama Independents who are undecided on the generic presidential ballot. The focus groups are taking place in 11 battleground states among six key demographic groups (Suburban Women, Young Voters, Seniors, Independents, Hispanics, and Blue Collar Catholics). This is the third of six memos to be released in the series.

Tampa, Florida

March 5, 2012

Voters Ages 65 and older / Groups Split by Gender

Conducted by Voter/Consumer Research

Grand Rapids, Michigan

March 22, 2012

Voters Ages 65 and older / Groups Split by Gender

Conducted by Voter/Consumer Research