

MESSAGE MATTERS

To: Interested Parties

From: Chris Kofinis, PSS

Date: September 23rd, 2016

Re: Pre-Debate Memo: Views of Undecided Voters (Florida)

A. The State of the Race: Drowning in a Sea of Negativity

It comes as no surprise to anyone that this election season has been plagued by an overwhelming sea of negativity, but if our recent focus group with undecided voters in Florida is a measure of what undecided voters across the country feel as we approach the first presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump – we have reached a very dangerous saturation point. How bad is it?

Among the unprompted words and phrases this group of 29 undecided voters used to describe this presidential contest were “*frustrated*,” “*don’t know what to do*,” “*dumbfounded*,” “*scared and confused*,” “*chaotic*,” “*uneasy*,” “*disheartening*,” “*embarrassing*,” “*disenfranchised*,” “*disgusted*,” “*shameful*,” and “*circus*.” As much as each candidate, campaign, and party may seek to blame the other, among these undecided and soft-leaning voters, these negative views are strongly directed toward both Clinton and Trump. As one voter summed up: “*Out of 315-320 million people, these are the best two we can come up with – it’s embarrassing.*”

While these voters dislike each candidate for different reasons, it is clear that the negativity of this race has backfired. **Each candidate has high and damaging negatives, and neither has effectively communicated a positive rationale of why they should be president.** Though base voters, and even the media, may feed off such negative attacks, these critical blocs of undecided voters are desperate to hear a positive vision for the country and substantive policy answers – *not* more personal attacks that feed their already sour view of this election, and the country’s future.

B. A Look Ahead to the First 2016 Debate: Risks Clinton & Trump Face

As is evident across the country, the anticipation for this singular debate, given the candidates and the state of the race, could not be greater. If this group of voters is any indication of national trends, **it may be the first “must-see” political event where watch parties are held not by a candidate’s committed supporters, but by average Americans** who are struggling with this choice and who will watch with friends and family to grade both of the candidates. To that extent, the stakes for each could not be higher.

That being said, while these undecided voters will watch with great intensity, the negativity of this race has soured many to such an extent that the bar to move them has been raised even higher – **almost three-quarters of the respondents agreed that this negativity bothers them and will impact their vote.** In fact, **over 60% of the group believed that neither candidate shared their values or could unite the country.** However, even though a major mistake on either candidate’s part could move undecideds one way or another, **these voters will not be easily moved by one debate – with only one third of this group saying they’d likely make a decision right after.**

While committed voters to Trump or Clinton will have very different views of this race and debate, undecided voters, like these Florida voters, have very strong views and opinions about what they want to hear and see in this first debate. And, while one debate – even one as critical as this one – may not decide this election, failing to heed the concerns and insights of these undecided voters will unquestionably make a candidate’s path to the presidency much more difficult.

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Top Eight Insights: What Undecided Voters Want to Hear and See in Monday's Presidential Debate

1. **Personal and Negative Attacks Will Turn Voters Off:** The expectations for the first debate are low in terms of the candidates staying positive, and this group of undecided voters instead believes that *“it's going to be a giant circus.”* If the first debate devolves into a series of personal and negative attacks, it will hurt both Clinton and Trump.

It hurts Trump as it reinforces a pervasive negative view among voters who already question his temperament and abhor his offensive rhetoric. It hurts Clinton as it reinforces their negative view of her as an insider politician, and even worse, it drowns out her major strength that she is the more knowledgeable and substantive candidate on many of the issues that matter to them.

Who does it hurt more in the debate if they both go negative? The group was split nearly evenly between Trump and Clinton, but the majority made clear that it would hurt both equally.

2. **Now, Tell Me Why to Vote for You, Not Against Them:**

“I feel disenfranchised as a voter. I feel like neither of the parties are trying to get me to vote for them.” – Florida undecided voter

In a race where billions of dollars' worth of earned and paid media has been spent, one would assume that voters would have a better idea of where these candidates stand on the issues – but they do not. They know their negatives, but struggle to define their positive positions they hold. **It is clear that a sea of negativity (e.g. attacks, media coverage, and campaign ads) has drowned out what “positive” messages and policies these candidates hold.**

Arguably, **the absence of positive and substantive discussions has helped Trump more by not fully exposing his lack of policy knowledge** on key issues, especially in the area of national security (*which elicited some of the most negative reactions among this focus group when this lack of knowledge was evident in some of his tested message clips*). In contrast, **it has hurt Clinton in that her campaign's attacks on Trump have all but clouded the stark policy differences these candidates have, and jeopardized her ability to move these undecided voters who do admire her experience/qualifications**, and her positions (and qualities – e.g. that she is seen as the more open candidate for women, the LGBTQ community, people of color, etc.).

Key Point: In this first debate, there will be no place to hide, and **voters want and expect to hear specifics about why they should vote for each candidate – and not against the other.** As one respondent commented, *“Don't tell me what he's done or she's done. Tell me what you've done.”* Put differently, if each two-minute answer is spent destroying the qualifications of the other – and not articulating their policies – it will only reinforce the current status quo and the negative perceptions these undecided voters have of this race and these candidates.

3. **Clinton's Debate Challenges to Overcome:** Voters in this group agreed (16 of 29 respondents) – just as we have seen in past focus groups – that Trump's overall message is clearer than Clinton's. **They know that Clinton is knowledgeable, but now they must hear her speak to their issues and concerns.** Based on the insights of this group, she must (1) communicate an impassioned and clear message about where she wants to lead the nation, (2) speak to the anger and frustration that voters feel – just like Trump does, and (3) make clear how her proposals will improve the lives of hard-working families and make this nation stronger and safer.

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Key Point I: While these voters clearly see Clinton as the more experienced and knowledgeable candidate already, this is not a résumé contest – if it were, this election would have been over before it started. For Clinton, **the focus must be on the voters and on the future, not on reciting a résumé of past accomplishments they already know about.**

Key Point II: If Clinton can **outline her vision in the debate – while still speaking to voters’ frustrations in an impassioned and humble tone – she will move undecided voters.** The potential is there, but to be very clear, it will be drowned out if the only things that voters remember are the attacks and counter-attacks.

- 4. Trump’s Debate Challenges to Overcome:** As we have seen in every focus group we’ve conducted of undecided voters this cycle, **Trump’s offensive, aggressive, and racist rhetoric continues to be one of the biggest weak spots of his campaign.** If Trump’s debate performance reinforces this intemperate and “offensive” persona, he will further alienate these critical voters. The line for Trump is very thin; if he attacks Clinton unjustly, or if he engages in personal cheap shots [*and assuming Clinton does not needlessly engage*], it will reinforce what so many voters already dislike about him. Even worse, if Clinton effectively counters, it will be seen as a reflection of Trump’s inability to debate the substance of the issues.

Key Point I: For Trump, the challenge he faces in this debate is also made more complicated in that these undecided voters have already heard his rhetoric dozens of times before, so **a loud and combative Trump may please his committed voters – but it won’t win over undecideds.**

Key Point II: **Trump must not only remain composed, but he must also provide specific and credible details of what he will do and how he will do it.** For many of these undecided voters, the days of providing empty answers by citing his unrelated business experience, or avoiding the questions entirely, are over. As one voter said, “*It comes down to experience,*” and others said they “*could care less*” about the businesses he built when he discusses this in lieu of policy.

- 5. Who Will Own Their Mistakes, Accept Responsibility, and Take Accountability?** The flaws of each candidate have been well documented, and they are at the forefront of many of these undecided voters’ minds.

For Clinton, **concerns over trustworthiness, that she is a political insider, and a perennial establishment figure, linger strongly** – even among those who already lean toward her in these groups. For Trump, his offensive rhetoric, ill-thought out policies and statements, narcissistic personality, **lack of knowledge, and his temperament all make voters very queasy as to what kind of president he would actually be.**

While no one debate can erase these concerns, and **voters will not easily forgive or forget past actions, they will give credit to the candidate who humbly owns their past mistakes and accepts responsibility.** What voters want is not self-flagellation from the candidates, but an acknowledgement that they accept the responsibility as president to live up to a higher standard, and will set this standard. Put differently, when asked about past mistakes, the candidate who rationalizes or makes excuses will only reinforce for these voters that he or she a deeply flawed politician and would make a flawed president.

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Key Point I: Clinton has an opportunity to effectively address the trust issue, especially *if she addresses it head-on*. Almost three-quarters of the group agreed as one respondent noted, **“I don’t need an explanation of what she did, I just want her to own it and apologize.”** At this point in the race, **if Clinton apologizes instead of attempting to explain her way out of these issues, it could be enough to move some key undecided voters.**

Key Point II: **Trump’s challenge is arguably far greater, since he seems incapable or unwilling to admit his mistakes.** As much as his supporters may love his bombastic personality, his statements questioning President Obama’s legitimacy, and his attacks on Mexicans, women, and Muslim Americans (just to name a few) alienate the very undecided voters he must win over to have a chance to be elected. For example, none of the voters in this group agreed with Trump’s proposed Muslim ban, and thought that it hurt him tremendously. **If Trump is incapable of apologizing for such offensive statements, it will speak volumes to undecided voters about what kind of person he is, and what kind of president he would be.**

- 6. Even After Eight Years, the Message is Still About Change:** These undecided voters want change, arguably now more than ever. What kind of change? It’s not entirely clear. What issue area? It isn’t just one, but domestic issues do define their views. **The overwhelming majority (25 of 29 respondents) felt that the economic system is rigged against the middle and working class, and this entire group believed that Washington is broken – just as we have seen in our past focus groups.** This also makes them believe that things aren’t going to change, to which this group agreed unanimously. And, **when asked which candidate is more likely to make Washington work, seven respondents chose Trump, eight said Clinton, and 14 – about half the group – said neither could.**

Key Point I: In this environment, **implying the status quo – which is exactly what voters assume about Clinton in the absence of bolder policy discussions – reinforces a view that nothing will change; hence Trump’s appeal when he talks of big change.** In the group, 16 respondents agreed that Trump was better suited to “bring about change” compared to only two for Clinton (the rest said neither). However, because these same voters either fear or don’t understand the specific change he will bring, this message itself only gets Trump so far and leads to even more troubling doubts when left unexplained.

Key Point II: Voters want to hear from both candidates about how their policies will actually change this country for the better. **If Trump only provides empty rhetoric, he captures their attention, but does not win them over. If Clinton cedes the “change” message to Trump, or makes it simply about incremental change, then voters are less likely to listen, and she will have a more difficult time winning them over.**

- 7. Who Will Save the Middle Class:** One of voters’ biggest concerns in this election – and among the chief concerns they certainly want to hear the candidates address in this first debate – is the disappearing middle class. **Every single undecided voter in the room agreed that they fear that America is losing its middle class.** But when asked which candidate, if elected, would do a better of saving the middle class, 25 out of 29 respondents made it very clear that neither candidate up to this point has laid out a clear vision on how they would address this issue.

Key Point: Who will own the “saving the middle class” issue in this first debate? Based on this group, it is not clear who has the advantage, but the candidate who best answers this question may win the first debate.

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8. **Terrorism – Who Will Keep America Safe:** As is to be expected, the recent events in Minnesota, New York, and New Jersey have created a greater sense of urgency around national security. However, **almost all voters agreed that though these occurrences (and the candidates’ responses) have yet to influence their vote definitively, the importance of the issue has certainly been raised (24 of 29 respondents).** The challenge is balancing the perception of strength with solutions and messages that don’t alienate these undecided voters. For both candidates, it will be a difficult balancing act.

Key Point I: For Clinton, it’s about a measured response, without sounding overly political or without, as one respondent said, talking “about love [trumping] everything.” **Clinton’s expertise and knowledge gives them confidence that she can handle such events, especially compared to Trump.** The question is whether the nuance of her policy solutions can overcome the clarity and strength of Trump’s rhetoric.

Key Point II: For Trump, voters see a consistent strength that is much more based on his rhetoric than it is on policy specifics. Though more respondents agreed that he could keep the country safe compared to Clinton (16 of 29 respondents), the fundamental issue that Trump faces is that his blanket statements on being “tough” or “strong” will ultimately not be enough to convince these undecided voters that he is prepared to handle these issues in a diplomatic way.

- C. **Who Will Win the Debate?** Based on this group of undecided voters, when asked who will win the first debate, the answer was unclear. Of the 29 respondents, 4 said Clinton, 2 said Trump, but the remaining 23 were unsure.

D. Focus Group Exercises: Key Insights of Undecided Voters

The following is a summary of key insights from exercises distributed prior to the focus group.

Clinton’s Top Strengths

1. Experience
2. Understands the problems of working and middle class
3. Policy knowledge

Clinton’s Biggest Weaknesses

1. Not trustworthy
2. Email controversy
3. Too much of an insider/establishment candidate

Trump’s Top Strengths

1. Will bring about real change
2. Says what he thinks/not concerned with political correctness
3. Washington outsider

Trump’s Biggest Weaknesses

1. Offensive/racist rhetoric
2. Not knowledgeable about policy
3. Narcissistic personality

Candidate Qualities Voters Will Look For in First Debate

1. Honesty
2. Intelligence/competence
3. Trustworthiness
4. Integrity
5. Strength

Methodology

Insights came from a three-hour focus group of 29 undecided voters held on September 20 in Tampa, Florida. During the focus group, voters were asked what they thought about each of the candidates, their messages, and positions, as well as what they wanted to see and hear from each of the candidates heading into the first debate. To evaluate each candidate’s messaging, the respondents dial-tested a series of video clips pulled from recent campaign speaking events, TV appearances, and ads. This group of undecided voters was split evenly between those who slightly lean toward supporting Clinton (8 respondents) and those who slightly lean toward supporting Trump (8 respondents), with the remaining being completely undecided (13 respondents). All respondents were open to voting for either candidate, and all plan to vote in November. The group consisted of 14 men and 15 women, with a demographic mix reflective of the 2012 Florida General Election turnout.

No candidate, party, or group paid for or was involved in the execution of this focus group. Park Street Strategies is not affiliated with any candidate or campaign, and has not endorsed or committed to work for any campaign.

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