

MESSAGE MATTERS

To: Interested Parties

From: Chris Kofinis, PSS

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Re: State of the 2016 Presidential Election – Undecided Voters in Cleveland, OH

A. 2016 Election: Where Things Stand

Based on the opinions of twenty-nine undecided Ohio voters, the current election cycle is perhaps best characterized by extreme negativity and polarization. Universally, these undecided voters see themselves and the rest of the middle class struggling, they feel anxious at the domestic and global unrest they witness, and they see little to no progress being made in Washington to fix the problems that plague their lives and this nation.

For these voters, no singular leader, candidate, or party is to blame for the failures in Washington. It is a bipartisan failure. They believe that both parties have failed to do their jobs, even as they struggle to do theirs. Nearly all believe the nation is headed in the wrong direction, and they are deeply worried about the economic future their children will face. They see our political system as a broken, dysfunctional mess that is rigged against the middle and working class, in which nothing is accomplished. They are begging for unity, they abhor negative politics, and they demand a presidential candidate who will present a positive vision that they can trust. Suffice to say, neither candidate, in their opinion, has been successful in this task so far.

B. 2016 Election: Torn Between Clinton and Trump

In a political environment defined primarily by divisions, anger, anxiety, and frustration, voters agree that we need unity now, more than ever – and our next president must address this. But many fear that neither Clinton nor Trump can get the job done and unify the country – *although the concern is greater with Trump given his divisive rhetoric.*

For many of these undecided voters, neither Clinton nor Trump has done enough to win their votes. **While they admire Clinton’s experience and policy knowledge, they are not sure they can trust her, or whether she understands their struggles.** As for Trump, he, more than any other candidate, has a message that speaks to the level of frustration and anger that many voters feel, and **they admire his outspokenness even as they detest what he often says and how he says it.** While they have very serious doubts as to whether Trump is ready for the job, they find his calls for change appealing – even if they are not sure it will be good change.

The conflicted views these undecided voters have for Trump and Clinton may explain why, **when asked if they would prefer two other candidates in this race, every single person in this focus group said yes.** It also helps to explain why **of the twenty-nine group participants, over a third said they were open to supporting a third party candidate.** In a diverse group consisting of voters from both parties and across various ideologies, this speaks volumes. It suggests a level of unpredictability as voters like these struggle with whom they should support. Of course, if one or the other were able to refocus their campaign message, and give these voters what they want to see/hear, these voters would move. The reality is that no candidate is close to doing so.

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C. What Undecided (OH) Voters Say They Want

For those who have already decided whom they will support, it must seem almost unfathomable how any voter could be undecided at this point in the race, especially given just how much has been said about and by Clinton and Trump. While the number of undecided voters or soft leaners may seem relatively small when compared to those that have already made their decision, they remain a critical voting bloc – especially in key battleground states like Ohio. Which begs the question – why are these voters still undecided?

Based on the insights of this Ohio focus group, there is not a singular reason why these voters are undecided; rather, it is a cocktail of factors that makes them unsure whether they can support Clinton or Trump. Among the factors that are influencing their indecision are:

1. **A Clearer and More Positive Message:** They want to know what the candidates stand for, policy-wise, because right now, that message is not getting through.
2. **Fear Won't Work:** Voters want to know why they should vote *for* Trump or Clinton, not why they should be against them.
3. **Who is the Unifier:** Voters want an explanation of how each candidate will solve problems and work with the other side to get it done. They are tired of the dysfunction and rhetoric that only creates further division.
4. **Speak to Us, Not at Us:** Neither candidate has made a personal connection with the electorate, and voters have noticed. They want to know that Trump or Clinton really understands the problems and issues they care about, because right now, the perception is that they don't.
5. **Address Your Flaws:** Rather than ignore their flaws as candidates, these voters want to hear Trump and Clinton acknowledge their flaws, and how they will address them. For Clinton, it is an issue of trust, and for Trump, it is whether he has the capacity and maturity to lead.
6. **Stop With Negativity:** If everything that is said is critical and negative of the other side/party/candidate, it will only feed the anger and frustration undecided voters have toward the political system and the candidates. In other words, it will not move them – at least not yet.

While each of these factors matter in the minds of these undecided voters, it is the negativity that surrounds both of these candidates and their campaigns that proves most damaging. As effective as negative attacks seem to be, this election and these undecided voters may be different. In the case of these undecided voters, **negative attacks make the policy and political differences between Trump and Clinton less clear, rather than more clear.** Such attacks, especially the campaign commercials we tested, often come across as over-the-top and manipulative; thus, they were unbelievable and unpersuasive. Even worse, such **persistent negative attacks**, especially when delivered by the candidates themselves, **feed a toxic belief that there is no possible way that Clinton or Trump could work with the other side if elected President.** As one participant summed up best: “They stopped caring about being Americans, and they started caring about being Republicans or Democrats.”

Why is this the case? The fact is that voters already know what they like and dislike about each of the candidates. What's more is that the dislikes are significant enough that simply attacking the other candidate more will not fundamentally change them. It is why these voters want both Trump and Clinton to speak more about their vision and policies instead of the flaws of their opponent.

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D. 2016 Election: Moving Undecided Voters

Given the state of the race, current Clinton and Trump campaign strategies, and the cynicism these undecided voters have toward the political system, **no one should expect these voters to move significantly after the upcoming conventions.** In fact, if neither campaign nor candidate adjusts, an election stalemate should almost be expected; whereby the race stays stuck where it is with an almost intransigent group of undecided voters who are unable or unwilling to support either Trump or Clinton.

What should the candidates do if they want to move these undecided voters and soft leaners? Based on this Ohio focus group, each must address three factors above all others.

Trump Factors:

1. **More than Message, Prove You Can Lead:** While this group of undecided voters thought that Trump currently has a stronger message, it comes with a notable caveat: they're not entirely sure what they're going to ultimately get from that message.
2. **Stop Attacks/Admit Wrong:** Trump's divisive rhetoric and immature attacks continue to damage his candidacy – or at the very least, this is not convincing any undecided voters to move to his side.
3. **More Policy Details:** Rhetoric will not be enough for Trump. He needs greater details, and must prove that he knows what he's talking about.

Clinton Factors:

1. **Address Trust Concerns:** Voters have sincere concerns over trust, and words and message alone will not address these concerns. Clinton must not only acknowledge these concerns, but also make clear the standard to which she expects voters to hold her.
2. **Relate to Me:** Fair or not, these voters see Clinton as out-of-touch and unable to relate to middle class Americans. Her message must be more focused, more inclusive, and less focused on her biography. In other words, less "I," and more "We."
3. **Less Negativity, More Unity:** While negative attacks on Trump may get more press, they reinforce a feeling that voters have that the system is and will remain broken. Voters want to hear how she will work with the other side to get things done.

E. The Views of Undecided Voters: Key Insights

1. **Clinton: Upside/Downside:** Clinton's **strongest point** is her **experience**. Down the line, the most positive words undecided voters associated with her were experience and knowledge. Many also believe that thus far, Clinton is doing a better job of addressing their issues – "As far as a platform, I would say Hillary," one voter said. As Trump has far more work to do in this category, this is a key opportunity for Clinton to define the clear policy differences she has.

While Clinton's experience is a huge plus, and they clearly see her as ready to be President, they are not sure they can trust what she says. As one respondent summed up, "she has been so inconsistent, she goes back and forth." This perception does pose a threat to her candidacy, and shows that she must do more to earn voters' trust. Doing so requires Clinton to address this trust issue head-on, while making it clear that she wants and expects voters to hold her accountable once elected President. While words will not be enough, and actions will always matter, too, her words and message on the trust issue is what undecided voters want to hear.

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- 2. Trump: Upside/Downside:** In terms of how these undecided Ohioans view Donald Trump, they admire his **business experience**, and respect the fact that he **says what's on his mind** without fear of political correctness. Trump has openly communicated his opinions with absolutely no filter – and in a way, this makes voters feel that if nothing else, he does genuinely mean what he says. Furthermore, they feel that his business experience combined with his strong will (*or bullish personality as some described*) to stand up for what he believes in may be just what Washington needs to get real results. It is why **most in the group agreed that a Trump presidency would bring about more change than a Clinton presidency – but admittedly, they fear what that change would be.**

For Trump, **his greatest strength is also his greatest weakness:** Many acknowledge that his penchant for speaking without thinking can get him into trouble, and they'd like to see him conduct himself more professionally. They also questioned his temperament and maturity. As one person in the group noted, "Everything that comes out of his mouth is divisive; he's going to unify the people who agree with him and no one else." Furthermore, many are fearful of the rift his extreme rhetoric will cause between the American people, political parties, and our relationship with other countries. As one voter summed up for many in the group, "Trump is dividing people instead of pulling people together." For Trump, this issue is toxic, and may prove more toxic in the end than the issues of trust that plague Clinton.

- 3. Negativity: Where is the Line?:** Almost every person in the group agreed that when the candidates attack each other, **it makes them less likely to want to vote for either one. Undecided voters are not like base voters.** The base may like red-meat attacks, but undecided voters, if this group reflects how others feel, are not easily persuaded by such attacks.

What are the perils of negative campaigning in this election with two candidates with such high unfavorability ratings? As one undecided voter summed up best, "[such attacks] lack professionalism and integrity. Sometimes when you listen to what they are talking about and they talk about each other...we don't want to hear that! We want to hear solutions and real problem solving." The following are additional comments made by the group about the negativity of the race:

- "Start practicing communication instead of division and hate."
- "We want to hear what you are going to do for us, not what [the opponent] is doing wrong."
- "Be more aware of us instead of making it about each other."
- "Show us a plan, quit attacking, and put forth effort."

So where can the "negative attack line" be drawn in this race? It depends.

Negative attacks that were merely personal or unfounded/not related to policy proved to be especially frustrating for these voters. Over-the-top attacks, or attempts to use children or celebrities (especially in ad spots) came across as overly manipulative, and simply didn't work. In fact, they backfired. In some cases, not only were the distinctions lost, but many of these undecided voters then felt less positive about the candidate issuing the attack. In contrast, the most "effective" negative attacks were ones that made the "negative" argument based on facts in a calm manner – versus the histrionics or bellicose rhetoric that, while it gets good media coverage, will not move voters.

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As various focus group dial tests showed, respondents dialed either positively or neutrally to the general messages being communicated, but as soon as candidates brought up attacks against their opponents, dial scores dropped – sometimes significantly. In the group discussions that followed, even if there were parts of Clinton’s or Trump’s messages in which respondents had been dialing positively, most would only emphasize how negatively they felt about candidates bringing up their opponent. In other words, candidates’ attacks completely took away from whatever issue they were discussing, leaving a lasting bad impression.

Simply put, these undecided voters **don’t want to be persuaded to vote against a certain candidate. They want to be persuaded to vote *for* the candidate who speaks to their issues.**

4. **Open to Voting for Third Party:** Undecided OH voters were so dissatisfied with both candidates that some are considering the option of voting for a third party. “I don’t know what to do, I don’t like either of them,” one voter said after saying she might just vote for Green Party candidate Jill Stein. **About 40% of this group** (12 of 29 respondents) **said they were seriously thinking of voting either Libertarian or Green.**

Why? Because third party candidates seem to offer more positive answers and solutions, or at least, they talk about this more than Clinton and Trump do. **As one voter said, “I think they are more serious candidates. They actually know what they are talking about and are more prepared to deal with the issues at hand.”**

To what extent these voters will actually vote third party is unclear. What is clear is that they are open to the possibility, which adds a degree of unpredictability in this race, at least for the coming months.

F. Top Language/Message Lessons

The following words and phrases represent some of the top-scoring and lowest-scoring messages of the speaking clips from the candidates based on results from the dials.

Clinton

- **In it together:** When Clinton emphasized togetherness, it showed to be far more powerful than messages about her personal values, her family, and her beliefs. Some examples of top-scoring language are **“We are all in this together,”** and **“We have a responsibility to lift each other up.”** This further underscores many voters’ desire for unity.
- **On creating better opportunities:** Message clips in which Clinton spoke about creating better opportunities for all Americans were generally high-scoring. In terms of specific language, respondents in the group liked Clinton’s statement that **“Every American willing to work hard should be able to find a job that pays enough to support a family.”**
- **On a fair economy:** An economy that works **“not just for those at the top, not just for the rich and well-connected, not just for people living in some parts of the country”** was a high-scoring message. Emphasizing this speaks directly to the anxiety that middle class Americans are feeling. Dial scores were consistently positive when Clinton focused on her vision to create an economy in which the **“super rich pay their fair share of taxes”** and **“Americans can find jobs that support a middle class life [family].”**

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- **On working with Republicans:** One of the most rapid rises we saw in dial scores occurred when Clinton emphasized that to overcome the challenges America faces, it takes the **“ability to work with both parties to get results.”** Right now, with such extreme polarization, undecided voters long to see a common ground achieved through coming together. Clinton makes enough of a levelheaded impression to carry the message that she is capable of being diplomatic and working with both parties to find a solution, making such a message resonate well with undecided voters.
- **On Donald Trump:** Each time respondents heard Clinton attack Trump, dial scores plummeted. The negativity largely detracted from her message. **Examples of poor-scoring attacks** include: “Trump offers no solutions,” **“He just continues to spout reckless ideas,”** and **“Through this campaign we’re going to be demonstrating the hollowness of his rhetoric.”** Many said that such statements are “too negative” with “no substance.”
- **Her family vs. ours:** Often when Clinton talked about her own family, dial scores dipped down, even among Clinton-leaners in the group. For example, one message that voters dialed down was “Our family will do everything we can to make sure that little Charlotte, and now little Aidan grow up with every possible opportunity.” As one respondent put it, “I’m worried more about my children, not yours.”
- **Focusing on herself:** Many in the group did not respond well to Clinton talking about how she is most fit for the job – especially the Trump-leaners. Undecided voters would like to see Clinton shift from speaking in an “I” voice to more of a “we” voice in a genuine manner that shows that she is trying to recognize what the people want.

Trump

- **Making America great again:** Trump’s **“Make America Great Again”** frame elicits a positive response from voters. The phrase itself got positive dial scores, but more than that, any messages in which Trump discussed the desire to strengthen our nation scored well among undecided voters. When talking about the need to keep production within the United States, or the fact that he wants **“to make good [trade] deals for the United States,”** dial scores rose rapidly. Scores were also consistently high when Trump discussed how his policies will **“strengthen our economy”** and protect it from the potential threats that international trade and manufacturing present.
- **On ISIS and national security:** Based on how respondents dialed both candidates on the issue, Trump carries the message of defeating ISIS more effectively than Clinton. At any point when Trump brought up ISIS, dial scores rose, whereas when Clinton mentioned having a strategy to defeat ISIS, responses were minimal/neutral. Trump’s head-on approach to eliminating threats directly speaks to the concerns and fears that many feel about national security and terrorism. Some of his best language included, **“We’ll knock out ISIS,”** and when he attacked Obama’s foreign policy, saying, “[It] gave ISIS the space it needs to grow and prosper.”
- **On special interest groups:** When Trump promised to **“end the special interest monopoly in Washington,”** dial scores shot up rapidly. Another example of effective language for Trump was his claim that “too many politicians are controlled by special interests and lobbyists.” This message highlights a key difference between Clinton and Trump for many voters – the fact that he is a Washington outsider.
- **On a “rigged” economy:** Trump is speaking to the realities that many voters feel when he talks about a political and economic system that is rigged. “It’s rigged by big donors who want to keep wages down,” was top-scoring language, as well as **“It’s rigged against you, the American people.”**
- **On immigration – Going too far:** When Trump framed the issue by saying that his intent is to fix the “dysfunctional immigration system,” dial scores were high. However, when he says he will “suspend immigration” from certain areas of the world, or that he will **“build a wall,”** dial scores spiked down.

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- **On Hillary Clinton- attacks backfire:** Just like Clinton’s attacks on Trump, his attacks on her didn’t score well, either – especially when unsubstantiated. Notable examples of poor-scoring language on Clinton are, “Clinton has perfected the politics of personal profit and theft,” and, “She ran the State Department like her own personal hedge fund.”

G. What Voters Want to Hear: A Positive Message

To reach these undecided voters through a positive message, there are two critical pieces for Trump and Clinton. First, they need to articulate more solutions, vision and facts. Second, they need a more positive message that acknowledges that they understand the issues of the middle class, and paints a picture of where we are going as a nation, and how we will get there - together.

- **Solutions and facts, not problems:** Hearing the candidates discuss the problems – and only the problems – that we face as a nation is in no way moving these undecided voters. If there isn’t a solution accompanying the issue at hand, all it becomes is a reminder of what these people already know: a lack of solutions for a growing number of issues. What they want to hear are hard facts, ideas, visions, and goals – for potential and real solutions. As one undecided voter commented, “I want these candidates to give me specific ideas and actions to fix the problems that they so love to bring up all the time.” Many indicated that they would like to hear more about each candidate’s healthcare plan, for example.
- **Clear, positive messaging:** What many want and need to hear at this time are positive messages: messages of hope, messages of a brighter future, and messages of a better life. Undecided voters will also expect the candidates to address the basic issues they face on a daily basis: providing kids with a good education, being able to make a comfortable living, and living in a peaceful and just society. As one person in the group said, “I feel like both sides are trying to scare us, but what I want is for them to rebuild our infrastructure, I want them to educate our kids.” Upon testing a more positive message script (from neither candidate) that emphasized unity and acknowledged the desire to make improvements, the group responded very positively. Messages such as “No one should struggle alone,” and “We want to earn your support and trust” resonated well with participants.

H. Focus Group Exercises: Key Insights

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

Clinton’s Top Strengths

1. Experience
2. Ready for the job
3. Policy knowledge

Clinton’s Biggest Weaknesses

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

Trump’s Top Strengths

1. Tells it like it is/not concerned with political correctness
2. Washington outsider
3. Strong negotiator

Trump’s Biggest Weaknesses

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

Most Important Issues

1. Healthcare
2. Jobs & economic growth
3. Wars/military involvement

Most Important Policy Goals

1. Tax cuts for the middle class
2. Student debt forgiveness or refinancing
3. Police/law enforcement reform

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I. Methodology

Insights came from a three-hour focus group of 29 undecided voters held on July 13 in Cleveland, Ohio. 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 from each of the candidates heading into November. 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 (14 respondents) and those who slightly lean toward supporting Trump (15 respondents). All respondents were open to voting for either candidate, and all plan to vote in November. The group consisted of 12 men and 17 women, with a demographic mix reflective of the 2012 Ohio general election (79% Caucasian, 15% African American, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 3% other).

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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