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Opportunity Trumps Fairness with Swing Independents

By Michelle Diggles and Lanae Erickson

The number of Americans identifying as Independents has reached historic levels, and wooing them will be crucial to victory for either party in 2012. In order to better understand this pivotal group, we worked with Global Strategy Group to conduct a poll of Independents in battleground states, and the results offer a clear picture of who among them are truly swing voters, as well as outlining a path to reach them.¹

Overall, our poll revealed good news for the President in the topline numbers. In the horse race, President Obama and Governor Romney are tied among Independents in the 12 battleground states, when leaners are included. More Independents view the President favorably than unfavorably: 49% to 47%. By contrast, Governor Romney's favorability is underwater with Independent voters in battleground states, with only 41% viewing him favorably and 47% saying their view is unfavorable. On the Congressional ballot, Independents give Republicans a slight edge, with 34% saying they would vote for the Democratic candidate and 39% for the Republican. But both parties were viewed equally unfavorably by these voters, with only 32% and 31% viewing Democrats and Republicans in Congress favorably, respectively, and 57% and 58% voicing unfavorable views.

But within the battleground state Independents, there was a key segment that was clearly up-for-grabs: a group of voters we call *Swing Independents*, who were defined as those who did not voice a strongly favorable or unfavorable view towards either the President or Mitt Romney.² These Swing Independents are winnable for either side—and the party or candidate who appeals to them will declare victory in November.

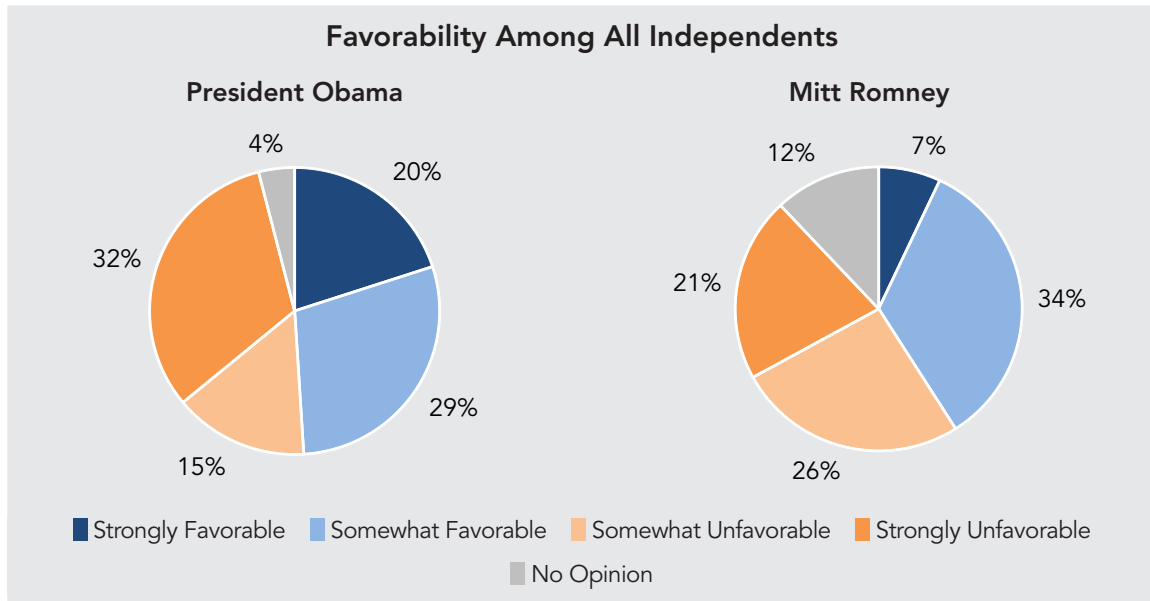
In this memo, we demonstrate that:

- Swing Independents are a sizeable group and truly are up for grabs;
- The fairness argument falls short with Swing Independents; and,
- An opportunity framework resonates more broadly with Swing Independents.

LESSON ONE

Swing voters are a sizable group and truly are up for grabs.

While there were some Independents who had already formed strong views for or against the President or the two political parties, there was a significant group in the center who remained torn.



Swing Independents—those who had neither strongly favorable or unfavorable views of either Obama or Romney—made up about 38% of Independent voters in our poll, which means they are approximately 15% of the electorate as a whole. Although they liked the President more than his likely Republican opponent, they saw themselves as closer to Romney ideologically.

Swing Independents are warm towards Obama.

Asked for whom they would cast their vote if the Presidential election were held today, among Swing Independents:

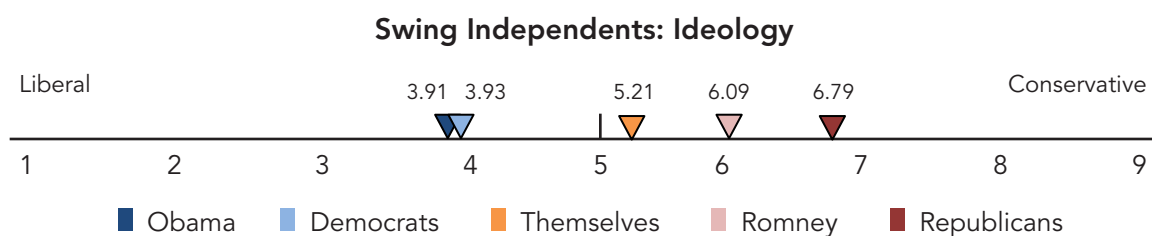
- 35% said President Obama;
- 29% said they would vote for Romney; and,
- 36% said they were undecided, but when pushed 9% said they leaned towards Obama and the same number towards Romney.

All told, that means President Obama would win Swing Independents 44% to 38%. And Obama's favorability rating is even better amongst these voters than among Independents generally, with 57% holding a favorable view and only 35% an unfavorable one. Towards Governor Romney, however, the Swing Independents were split, with 41% saying their views were favorable and 40%

unfavorable. Clearly, a large swath of the Swing Independents like the President and may be inclined to support him, as 57% of them said they did in 2008.

Swing Independents view themselves as ideologically closer to Romney.

But despite these positive indications for the President, there are also obstacles and potential warning signs from the Swing Independents. Most fundamentally, when asked to place themselves on a 9-point ideological scale, with 1 being liberal, 9 being conservative, and 5 being moderate, Swing Independents put themselves just barely right-of-center at 5.21. And they viewed Governor Romney as fairly close to themselves ideologically, placing him at 6.09. But they put President Obama at 3.91—meaning the gap they perceived between themselves and the President was 150% of the gap between themselves and Romney. It is notable that Swing Independents placed both President Obama and Romney equidistant from center, 1.09 to the left or right from the moderate 5. For these voters, the choice is between candidates they deem center-left and center-right, but they see themselves as slightly to the right-of-center.



The disproportionate gap did not exist, however, with the political parties generally. Swing Independents placed Democrats in Congress at 3.93, almost identical to where they put President Obama, and Republicans at 6.79—significantly further right than Romney and the farthest away from themselves of any mark on the scale. Overall, 65% of Swing Independents consider themselves moderates, and they see Obama as further left than their own political outlook and the Republican party as significantly further right.

Neither party reigns on the issues.

Their affinity for the President coupled with the ideological gulf they perceive between him and themselves may explain why these voters are split between the parties on a number of issues.

- Swing Independents trust President Obama over Republicans on taxes, 44% to 38%.
- But they are split on who they trust on the economy overall, with the President at 40% and Republicans at 41%.

- And they strongly prefer Republicans both on the budget deficit (46%-32%) and government spending (51%-29%), two issues about which they expressed concerns throughout the survey.

When we asked Swing Independents whether each party had a plan to make America a stronger economic power in the world—something they cared deeply about in our poll—47% agreed that Democrats have such a plan, with 45% disagreeing. The numbers were nearly identical, but flipped, for the Republicans, with 45% agreeing that the party has a plan and 47% disagreeing.

When taken together, these numbers draw a distinct picture of Swing Independents. They like the President, and many voted for him in 2008. But they aren't a slam dunk for November. They see themselves as more moderate than the President and Democrats in Congress, and they view Governor Romney as closer to them, but Republicans further away, ideologically. They are up-for-grabs on a number of key issues, and finding a framework that appeals to them on the economy is crucial in order to bring them solidly over to one side.

LESSON TWO

The fairness argument falls short with Swing Independents.

Recently, many on the left have argued that framing the election in terms of economic fairness is the best narrative for 2012. That may work for the base, but our poll revealed serious limitations with that approach, illustrating that no matter what definition of fairness one chooses, Swing Independents are not wooed by a fairness message—rather, it often seemed to skirt their deepest economic concerns.

We looked at four notions of fairness: income inequality, system-wide fairness, haves versus have nots, and making the wealthy pay more in taxes. All four fell short with Swing Independents as economic narratives.

Income inequality doesn't resonate with Swing Independents.

Income inequality ranked near the bottom of Swing Independents' concerns, and they repeatedly prioritized the debt over income inequality as a bigger issue for them. When asked which was most important, a substantial majority of Swing Independents chose fixing the budget deficit over reducing income inequality. Those who had strong feelings selected the deficit by nearly two-to-one.

- 57% said it was more important to fix the budget deficit with 38% agreeing strongly;
- 38% said it was more important to reduce the income gap, with 20% agreeing strongly.

Reducing income inequality also fell short as a strategy to strengthen the American economy. The plurality of Swing Independents said the best way to strengthen our economy—a subject of utmost concern to them—was to reduce the deficit.

- 42% said reducing the budget deficit was the most effective way to strengthen our economy;
- 28% chose reducing regulations and taxes on businesses; and,
- Only 22% picked reducing income inequality.

This means over three-quarters of Swing Independents chose an alternate option besides reducing income inequality when asked how to address their number one economic issue in this election. In fact, income inequality came in last on that scale.

Both as a priority and a way to strengthen the economy, reducing income inequality was not Swing Independents' top choice. Indeed, a message about fixing income inequality didn't address their deepest economic anxieties.

Swing Independents think the system is basically fair.

Advocates of the fairness and populist arguments may say those themes are meant to trigger something broader than income inequality: the notion that the system is simply stacked against most Americans. But that would assume that target voters believe the system is stacked against them, and our poll rebuts that notion for Swing Independents. When asked whether American society is fair, a clear majority (57%) said they believe America's economic system is basically fair and that the deck is not stacked against them.

We found in previous focus groups that most people thought the system was not stacked against them. But if they did identify systematic and institutional unfairness, they believed it was the fault of Congress. In this poll, we found similar antipathy toward Congress, with Swing Independents describing themselves as very angry about Congressional gridlock, more so than the debt, bailouts, or the rich not paying their fair share.

Swing Independents view themselves as haves, not have nots.

Others may say that fairness and populist arguments resonate because people increasingly see our society as divided between the "haves" and the "have nots," and that most would consider themselves part of the latter category. While 61% of Swing Independents agree that America is divided between the haves and the have nots, by a three-to-one margin they categorized themselves as belonging to the *haves* side of that equation. Similarly, 62% of Swing Independents said they are "doing better than the average American,"

and only 35% disagreed with that statement. A full 90% said they are confident they could pay their bills over the next year.

Only 20% of Swing Independents said they were have nots—meaning that a narrative targeting those who see themselves as on the losing end of that bargain are missing 4 out of 5 of these crucial voters. Swing Independents do not think of themselves as victims of unfair situations, nor is remedying economic unfairness their highest priority.

Fairness on taxes doesn't always connote the wealthy paying more for Swing Independents.

Another common use of the fairness message is as an attempt to evoke the idea that the wealthy are getting off easy—not paying their fair share. This meme has been used frequently in recent months to highlight low tax rates for upper-income earners or loopholes that are viewed as favoring elites.

But arguments about fairness on taxes trigger concerns about both the rich and the poor not pulling their weight for Swing Independents. When asked which was the most fair, a supermajority of Swing Independents picked other options on taxes than making the wealthy pay more:

- 36% said making wealthy Americans pay a higher tax rate than other Americans was most fair;
- 33% said it was most fair to make everyone pay the same tax rate, no matter how much they earn; and,
- 27% said the fairest policy would be to make every American pay something in taxes, even if they are lower income.

Swing Independents support raising taxes on the wealthy, with only about 30%, consistently across several questions on the issue, who did not support tax increases on anyone. But when pressed to consider the *fairness* of different tax proposals, large numbers defected to support policies most current advocates of a populist fairness framework would oppose: including a flat tax or taxing those on the lower income end who are currently exempt from income tax. So while making the wealthy pay more may be popular, it does not necessarily connote fairness to these voters.

Swing Independents do not prioritize reducing income inequality. They actually believe America is already basically fair and consider themselves to be haves, not part of the have nots. Finally, Swing Independents are open to the idea of raising taxes on the wealthy, but pressing them on what would be most fair may push them in the opposite direction.

LESSON THREE

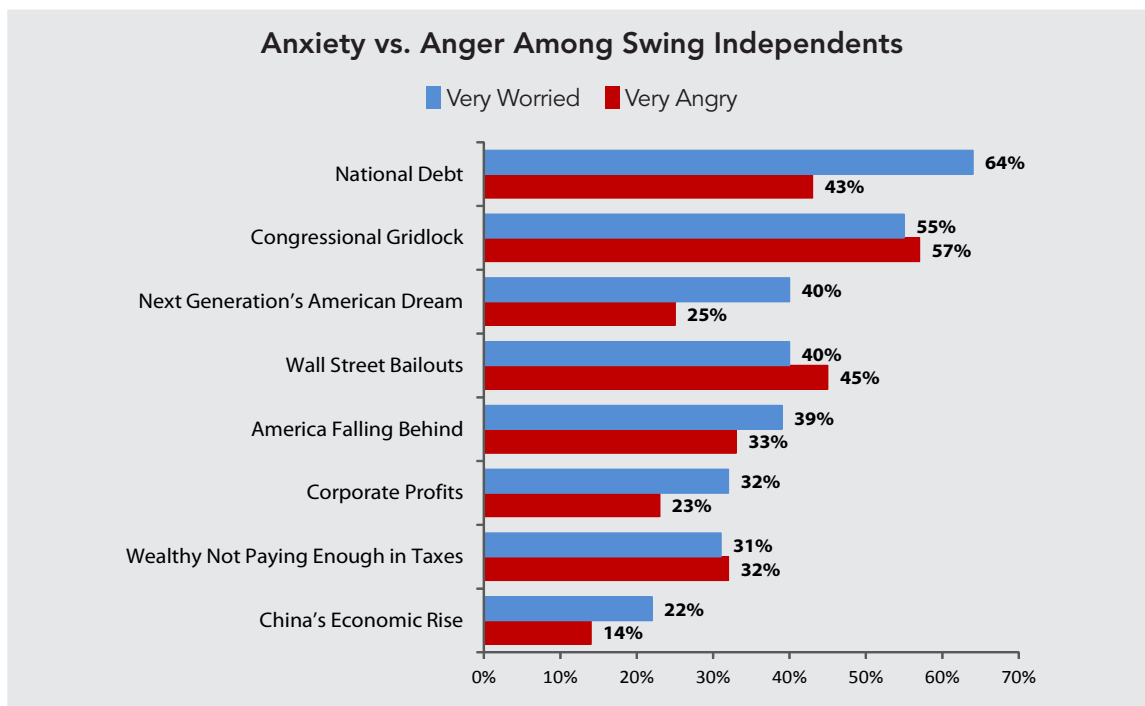
An opportunity framework resonates more broadly with Swing Independents.

The biggest problem with the fairness frame is that it completely bypasses Swing Independents' number one concern: economic growth, jobs, and future success for family and country. While the fairness message didn't address their highest priorities nor soothe their biggest concerns, an alternative framework emerged that succeeded in doing both with Swing Independents.

Opportunity responds to Swing Independents' deep anxieties.

Many who advocate the use of populist fairness messages argue that they can use it to tap into a hidden anger bubbling under the surface with the American electorate. But our poll disputes that notion when it comes to Swing Independents.

When asked what makes them angry, Swing Independents did not point the finger primarily at Wall Street or the wealthy. Rather, the number one source of their anger was Congress, with nearly 6 in 10 (57%) saying they were very angry about Congressional gridlock, and 85% indicating they were at least somewhat angry. The intensity of their anger towards Congress dwarfed their anger towards the rich or corporations, with 45% saying they were very angry about Wall Street bailouts, 32% about the wealthy not paying enough in taxes, and only 23% about corporate profits. These numbers indicate that although Swing Independents certainly are not fans of bailouts, they are also not raging against the Wall Street machine.



Even more important than their anger, Swing Independents' anxieties pertain to the future of our economy—not the sins of the past. When asked what worries them:

- Nearly two-thirds of Swing Independents (64%) say they are very worried about the national debt, with 93% somewhat or very worried;
- 85% say they are worried about Congressional gridlock (55% very worried);
- 82% worry about America falling behind its global competitors (39% very worried);
- 80% worry about the next generation's ability to achieve the American Dream (40% very worried);
- Fully half of Swing Independents think China will be the world economic leader in 20 years, and only 36% say the U.S. will lead the global economy.

Swing Independents are less preoccupied with day-to-day finances, believing they are doing better than the average American, and they are confident they can pay their bills. Yet nearly six-in-ten aren't confident that the next generation will be able to find good jobs, and only 8% are strongly confident. Swing Independents are searching for leaders who will articulate a positive vision for the future—one where the American economy is back on top and the next generation can achieve the American Dream. While the fairness framework does not feed this need, an economic opportunity message answers these deep concerns about the future.

Swing Independents believe opportunity leads to a strong economy.

A message of opportunity was clearly linked to strengthening our economy in the minds of these crucial voters. When asked directly what was the most important thing we could do to make our economy stronger, a significant majority (55%) said we should "provide more economic opportunity for Americans to succeed through hard work." Their second—and much less popular—choice was to "give Americans the greatest amount of freedom to make it on their own" (20%). Last on their list was to "create more economic security so all Americans can withstand life's misfortunes" (19%).

Overwhelmingly, Swing Independents linked economic opportunity with growth. And restarting America's stalled economy, including creating good jobs and winning the global economic race, is paramount to these voters.

Opportunity trumps fairness with Swing Independents.

Swing Independents clearly preferred an economic opportunity frame when it was pitted against other messages, including those about fairness. For example, when asked which candidate they'd be more likely to support, 80% chose a candidate "focusing on economic growth and opportunity" while only

15% picked one “focusing on income inequality.” Even when the question was asked in a way that made clear the second candidate wanted to reduce income inequality specifically “to help the middle class,” 76% chose opportunity.

We also asked Swing Independents to select which candidate they were more likely to support:

- One who says, “We need an economy based on opportunity—where hard work is rewarded, the government lives within its means, and economic growth is our top priority. Because more opportunity means a stronger economy.” [51%] OR
- One who says, “We need an economy based on fairness—where the rich pay their fair share, corporations play by the rules, and all Americans get a fair shot. Because a fairer economy is a stronger economy.” [43%]

Opportunity trumped even this most robust articulation of fairness. 51% of Swing Independents selected a candidate who said we need an economy based on opportunity. 43% chose the candidate who said we need an economy based on fairness.

When asked a question that was based on the entire premise of the fairness narrative, Swing Independents chose opportunity. When asked about the best way to address income inequality, nearly three-fourths of Swing Independents said “to expand opportunities for the middle class,” while only 22% chose “to ensure the rich are paying their fair share.” And when offered the fairness argument versus a conservative message on the best way to reduce income inequality, Swing Independents split between lowering taxes on job creators (44%) or making the rich pay their fair share (44%).

Democrats have work to do on opportunity with Swing Independents.

Some argue that it is possible to make a populist fairness argument while simultaneously using an opportunity message. But our poll data proves that for Swing Independents, that mixed message doesn’t work. Because of their preconceived notions of Democrats and President Obama, the fairness message is stickier with these voters—it confirms what they already think they know about policymakers to their left.

When asked, “Which sounds more like something President Obama would say?” a supermajority (63%) of Swing Independents chose the fairness option:

We need an economy based on fairness—where the rich pay their fair share, corporations play by the rules, and all Americans get a fair shot. Because a fairer economy is a stronger economy.

Yet less than a quarter thought this was something President Obama would say:

We need an economy based on opportunity—where hard work is rewarded, the government lives within its means, and economic growth is our top priority. Because more opportunity means a stronger economy.

Trying to have it both ways leads Swing Independents to remember only the message that confirms their preexisting assumption about what Democrats believe. And it drowns out the message they truly need to hear in order to be persuaded: opportunity.

Swing Independents’ main anxieties are about the future and their kids’ ability to achieve the American dream. Opportunity responds to these concerns more than fairness, and it is linked with growth and a strong economy in the minds of these voters. While President Obama is clearly associated with fairness, these voters preferred an opportunity frame.

■ CONCLUSION

Swing Independents are a large and winnable group—comprising as much as 15% of the electorate and close to 40% of all Independents. They have a favorable impression of the President, but they are not sold. Appeals to them based on fairness fall flat, largely because they believe that America is basically fair, and they are worried most about America’s and the next generation’s ability to succeed and achieve the American Dream. Economic opportunity is a framework that responds to their anxieties and is associated with strengthening and growing the economy. With Independents increasing their share of the electorate, appealing to them will be crucial, and opportunity is the best message for the job.

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ABOUT THIRD WAY

Third Way is a think tank that answers America's challenges with modern ideas aimed at the center. We advocate for private-sector economic growth, a tough and smart centrist security strategy, a clean energy revolution, and progress on divisive social issues, all through a moderate-led U.S. politics.

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■ ENDNOTES

1 Global Strategy Group and Third Way poll of 1000 self-identified Independents who voted in the 2008 Presidential election, fielded March 8-18th, 2012, in 12 swing states: CO, FL, IA, MI, NC, NH, NM, NV, OH, PA, VA, and WI. Margin of Error +/- 3.1%.

2 Swing Independents constituted 376 of the 1000 Independents we polled. They comprise about 38% of Independents and approximately 15% of the total electorate. Margin of Error for Swing Independents +/- 5.1.