Winning ‘the 47 Percent’
Recommendations based on major new research

Single women, people of color and young people – the Rising American Electorate -- voted for change in 2008. To understand the dynamics of this election, Women’s Voices. Women Vote Action Fund and Democracy Corps engaged in a three-phase research project with a particular emphasis on disengaged voters, Obama defectors, and unmarried women. This project included a national survey, focus groups among unmarried and married women in Fairfax, Virginia and Columbus, Ohio, and dial meter research during the first presidential debate with follow up focus groups in Denver, Colorado.

What is clear is that unmarried women are more likely to engage and turn out when they are convinced they have a stake in the outcome of the election – and that there is a powerful argument that can be made to persuade them to show up and vote their values.

The 47 percent

It is a pretty straightforward story. President Obama was pushing toward his 2008 margin among the Rising American Electorate– particularly unmarried women – according to this pivotal research completed right before the first debate. But the debate touched on none of the issues that have moved these voters.

According to this survey and focus groups, Obama can get to 2008 levels when he makes Romney own ‘the 47 percent’ and offers a robust message to make this country work for the middle class again – with more punch and choice, more values, more on the consequences of unequal power, and above all, big policy choices that go well beyond the thin rhetoric of the first debate.

Romney got his strongest response at the beginning of the debate when he presented his five-point plan for creating jobs, but this timely research shows that Romney’s best position
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is trumped by an Obama message in which he articulates his plan to use his second term to clean up Wall Street, limit lobbyists, keep taxes low for small business and the middle class, use the budget to seriously invest in education, rebuild America and make sure Medicare is there. After voters hear this powerful message, Obama moves up decisively.

Bill Clinton – “on your own”

Just rich and poor and the rich use their power

When I look at our great challenges, I say, we’re all in this together. But the Republicans say, ‘you are on your own.’ Well that’s given us a country of just rich and poor and the well-connected using their power to get more tax cuts and breaks. Well, we need to make our country work for the middle class again. Clean up lobbyists and big money. Let’s keep taxes low for the middle class and small businesses and use the budget to help the middle class by seriously investing in education, rebuilding America, and making sure Medicare is there.

Big future policy offer

This message is bolstered when voters first hear a clear case against Romney based on the 47 percent. After hearing these attacks and Obama’s strong future-oriented middle class message, two-thirds (68 percent) of the RAE say they are more likely support Obama—getting to 58 percent among young voters and 72 percent among unmarried women, two points above 2008. So, there is a very clear route back that runs through ‘the 47 percent,’ a powerful choice of values and serious plans to create jobs and help the middle class over the next four years.

Parsing the 47 percent

Voters were asked which of a series of attacks raised the most doubts in their mind about Mitt Romney. The strongest—Mitt Romney’s 47 percent quote—raised serious doubts for four in ten voters and the fact that many of the so-called ‘47 percent’ are veterans, seniors, and the children of the working poor raised serious doubts for a third.
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47 Percent Attacks

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Engaging the RAE

Before the debate, RAE levels of support for Obama were nearing the 2008 mark.

Rising American Electorate solidly behind Obama and nearing 2008 levels, but not back yet

Thinking about the presidential election, if the election for president were held today and the candidates were Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney, for whom would you vote?

- Rising American Electorate:
  - Obama: 62%
  - Romney: 32%

- Unmarried women:
  - Obama: 63%
  - Romney: 34%

- Youth:
  - Obama: 59%
  - Romney: 35%

- Minority:
  - Obama: 73%
  - Romney: 19%
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In this most recent survey—in which unmarried women make up almost a quarter of all likely voters—63 percent indicated that they would vote for Obama. This figure is not quite back to 2008 levels, but still cuts the 2010 deficit in half.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008 Vote Share</th>
<th>Obama Vote</th>
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<th>Democratic Vote</th>
<th>Sept 2012 Vote Share</th>
<th>Obama Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth (under 30)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried women</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White unmarried women</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52</td>
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Prior to the debate, unmarried women were more engaged than even just two months ago. Over the last two years, unmarried women’s engagement has lagged behind all voters. In July, just 71 percent said they were following the election closely, a mere 29 percent strongly. In late September, unmarried women were indistinguishable from all voters on this measure. Among all voters and among unmarried women, 83 percent said they were following the election closely. However, young voters continue to trail all voters by a significant margin.

Despite these shortcomings, there is a clear path forward to re-connect with the Rising American Electorate.

The Presidential debate

During the debate the meter line for unmarried women closely tracked with independents, not with the Democrats’ line, despite the fact that over half of them leaned to Obama. Romney performed better with this group when he spoke about the middle class and his plans for the future.

From the start, independents and unmarried women responded strongly to the specific economic plans offered by Romney or when he said, “my priority is jobs.” The lines were flat or went down in all sections of the debate where the president talked about the number of jobs created, his accomplishments, or spoke about the past.
“You know, four years ago, I said that I'm not a perfect man and I wouldn't be a perfect president. And that's probably a promise that Governor Romney thinks I've kept. But I also promised that I'd fight every single day on behalf of the American people, the middle class, and all those who were striving to get into the middle class. I've kept that promise and if you'll vote for me, then I promise I'll fight just as hard in a second term.”

“High-income people are doing just fine in this economy. They'll do fine whether you're president or I am. The people who are having the hard time right now are middle-income Americans. Under the president's policies, middle-income Americans have been buried. They're just being crushed. Middle-income Americans have seen their income come down by $4,300. This is a -- this is a tax in and of itself. I'll call it the economy tax. It's been crushing.”
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The subject that was not discussed in the debate was the 47 percent – which is a vivid part of the public consciousness, particularly for unmarried women and the progressive base.

Focus group findings

The focus groups, survey research, and dial groups all show that voters—in particular unmarried women—strongly identify with the ‘47 percent.’ In focus groups in both Columbus, Ohio and Fairfax, Virginia, participants instantly identified with the ‘47 percent.’ When asked about Mitt Romney’s comment on the ‘47 percent,’ these women quickly responded with disgust and then explained, “he’s talking about me.”

*It’s hurtful. I am probably one of the 47 percent. By speaking of that 47 percent, he’s probably never been in that 47 percent...I work and pay my taxes. I wake up at 4:30 every morning, feed my kids and go to work.* (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

*These people are all of us in this room. We work. Yes, if we need assistance, we earn that title, if we pay into the system just like everyone else.* (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

*He’s putting me down.* (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

*I’ve worked and I paid into that Social Security. I started working at 15. I paid into that. I deserve it.* (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

*[The 47 percent is] us. Normal people. Who may have jobs, who need some assistance. I know my sister, when she first got married, had a full time job and her husband had a full time job, but they needed to go on WIC. They didn’t make enough and they needed some assistance.* (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

And they expressed disgust at Romney’s inability to understand middle class and working people’s everyday realities.

*The tone is so accusatory and so demeaning. Rather than talking about helping people. It’s not about lifting them up, it’s about dropping them down.* (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

*He doesn’t know who those 47 percent are. Most of them are working people, the working poor, they get up and go to work every day.* (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)
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Using the word ‘entitled.’ I hate that word. He makes 47 percent sound like spoiled brats who sit at home and do nothing. It shouldn’t be a dirty word but it is. That word really got to me. Like these people are so entitled. (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

These people feel they are entitled to food?! To housing?! These stupid, stupid poor people feel they are entitled to food! Shame on them! (Unmarried woman, Fairfax, VA)

He is saying he doesn’t care. It makes you take a step further – does he care about anyone at all? (Unmarried woman, Fairfax, VA)

And these voters were especially upset when they thought about it in terms of their elderly parents and relatives on Medicare and Social Security, or students who need loans to pay for education, or those who are disabled and require some assistance just to get by.

A lot of them are retired. After my dad died, we had to get my mom food stamps. That’s 20% of the 47. (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

Who are the people who pay no income tax? You could be a student and pay none. Or an elderly person on Social Security. (Unmarried woman, Fairfax, VA)

They aren’t all people in poverty. There’s middle class people. People on disability. Veterans. It’s not a lot of people cheating off the system. It’s a lot of people. (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

Unmarried women were also concerned about what a Romney-Ryan administration might mean for women. What was clear, however, was that these women understand “women’s issues” as part of, not separate from, the economic issues surrounding the 47 percent.

In focus groups, participants read a series of facts about women’s issues—including everything from income inequality to women’s reproductive health services. These women responded through the lens of the 47 percent—women’s health care and equity are totally framed by economic realities.

It’s not right. They shouldn’t be limiting health care of women; if you limit her health care then you limit her economic status. (Unmarried woman, Columbus, OH)

I see this as more all-encompassing, taking a whole demographic group [women] that brings life into the world and saying ‘oops, you are not gonna have health care.’ (Unmarried woman, Fairfax, VA)
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All of these are so disconcerting. You can’t choose between the ones that deal with health care and the ones that deal with jobs. (Unmarried woman, Fairfax, VA)

This was echoed by the women who responded to the debate in Denver on October 3. For these women, a woman’s access to health care is critical to her ability to survive in this economy—particularly if she doesn’t have health insurance due to loss of a job or reduced status at work.

This is the first time in ten years that I have had medical coverage, and being part of this 47% we don’t count because we don’t do anything for ourselves. (Unmarried woman, Denver, CO)

Taking away Planned Parenthood—so many women depend on that. It’s not just teenagers who are out getting pregnant. It’s also for middle class women who don’t have insurance. (Unmarried woman, Denver, CO)

National survey results

In the national survey right before the debate, we tested two sets of attacks on Romney – one explicitly on policies that affect women and the other on the 47 percent characterization. Many of those were in fact policies and attitudes that disproportionately affected women and the hostility to Planned Parenthood had a big economic component.

Both sets of attacks raise comparable doubts, but when the 47 percent message was combined with a big economic message centered on the middle class, it proved much more powerful in moving the vote. And importantly, the 47 percent attack moves many more unmarried women and the Rising American Electorate to be receptive to Obama.
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<td>Mitt Romney has promised to get rid of Planned Parenthood, an organization that provides contraception and reproductive health services for millions of women.</td>
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<td>Mitt Romney says he’ll repeal the law that says all new insurance plans must cover preventive health care for women, such as mammograms, screenings for cervical cancer and other services.</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>Paul Ryan voted against the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, a bill that provides women legal channels to get equal pay for equal work. Mitt Romney won't say whether he would have signed it into law.</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>Two-thirds of the lay-offs in the last 3 years have been women, but Mitt Romney opposed a law that allowed thousands of teachers and nurses to keep their jobs.</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mitt Romney opposes the law that prevents insurance companies from charging women higher rates than men and he is committed to repeal it if he becomes president.</td>
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Priming Obama’s message with the 47 percent changes the intensity and overall strength of Obama’s middle class narrative. Among all voters, a third responded with strong intensity and almost half with intensity after hearing about the 47 percent. By contrast, those who heard just attacks about the “war on women” responded weaker overall to Obama’s message.
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This is particularly true among unmarried women, who are especially primed to hear about the 47 percent. In our exercise, 72 percent of unmarried women (49 percent strongly) responded positively to the middle class message when primed with attacks about the 47 percent, compared to 64 percent (34 percent strongly) when primed with attacks about the so-called “war on women.”

Important to this discussion are the issues around access and cost of preventive health services and reproductive issues. This survey suggests that the best message is centered on the 47 percent -- it incorporates Planned Parenthood, health and reproductive issues -- but in an economic way.
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Among unmarried women, middle class message much stronger with 47 percent framework

Now I’m going to read you a statement that Barack Obama might say about our country. After I read this statement, please tell me whether this statement would make you much more likely to vote for Barack Obama, somewhat more likely, a little more likely, no more likely, or less likely to vote for Barack Obama.

Among unmarried women

When I look at our great challenges, I say, we’re all in this together. But the Republicans say, you are your own. Well that’s given us a country of just rich and poor and the well-connected using their power to get more tax cuts and breaks. Well, we need to make our country work for the middle class again. Clean up lobbyists and big money. Let’s keep taxes low for the middle class and small businesses and use the budget to help the middle class by seriously investing in education, rebuilding America, and making sure Medicare is there.

Including those vital issues as part of broader economic framework that centers on economic policies that can help the middle class and the most vulnerable is the best way to frame the debate.

This future middle class frame pushes RAE to goal

When I look at our great challenges, I say, we’re all in this together. But the Republicans say, you are on your own. Well that’s given us a country of just rich and poor and the well-connected using their power to get more tax cuts and breaks. Well, we need to make our country work for the middle class again. Clean up lobbyists and big money. Let’s keep taxes low for the middle class and small businesses and use the budget to help the middle class by seriously investing in education, rebuilding America, and making sure Medicare is there.
Conclusions

- President Obama missed a major opportunity during the debate because he didn’t speak to the 47 percent or to his plans to build a middle class future.

- In focus groups, unmarried women instantly identified with the 47 percent. When asked about Mitt Romney’s comment on the “47 percent,” these women quickly responded with disgust, explaining, “he’s talking about me.”

- Obama’s best message is squarely aimed at creating a better economic future for the middle class. This best message combines the “in it together” versus “on your own” framework used by Bill Clinton during the convention, combined with a call to get big money out of politics and advance policies to help the middle class. It is the strong economic message about what President Obama will do going FORWARD on the economy – combined with the 47 percent argument against Romney that succeeds in motivating single women.

- While the women in our focus groups were concerned about what a Romney-Ryan administration might mean for women specifically, these concerns are totally framed by the “47 percent.” Responding to Romney’s plan to end Planned Parenthood, one woman replied that for women without health insurance, Planned Parenthood is the only source for basic women’s health services. “It’s for middle class women who don’t have insurance, who aren’t married… it’d be detrimental to get rid of it.”

- Facts about the 47 percent and Mitt Romney’s policies have a powerful impact on voters’ reception to the candidates’ messages. In an experimental exercise, voters who heard facts about Mitt Romney’s 47 percent comment, his tax policies, and his plans for Medicare and Social Security responded more favorably to Obama’s middle class-centered message than those who heard facts highlighting what Romney and Ryan’s policies on issues related to women. The 47 percent framework is even more powerful among unmarried women than among the electorate at large.
Appendix

The survey instrument tested the influence of attacks centered on Mitt Romney’s 47 percent comments compared to attacks more acutely focused on women’s issues. Half the sample received each line of attacks, and all respondents heard a series of attacks on Barack Obama. After each line of attacks, respondents were asked how seriously the attacks raise doubts about each candidate. The impact of the experiment is felt in the message test that follows, testing Obama and Romney’s best economic messages. Finally, respondents were asked which candidate would do a better job on a series of issues.