

Winning the Persuadable Switchers

**Jim Kessler**

Senior Vice President for Policy

[@ThirdWayKessler](https://twitter.com/ThirdWayKessler)**Lanae Erickson****Hatafsky**

Vice President for the Social Policy & Politics Program

[@LanaeErickson](https://twitter.com/LanaeErickson)

In this memo, we zero in on two sets of voters who will determine the outcome of the 2012 elections. We call them the “droppers” and the “switchers.” These are Obama voters from 2008 who either stayed home (“droppers”) or voted Republican (“switchers”) in the 2010 midterms. For the President and Congressional Democrats to succeed, droppers must show up and a large number of switchers must return to the fold in 2012.

We polled these droppers and switchers in 12 battleground states,¹ and the gist is this:

The droppers have returned home.

Seventy-three percent of droppers say they will definitely or probably vote to re-elect the President, and only 11% say they will definitely or probably vote for the Republican nominee (just 3% are in the definite column). Similarly, 69% of droppers say they will definitely or probably vote for the Democratic Congressional candidate, with only 11% saying they will probably or definitely vote for the Republican (only 3% say definitely).

Droppers, for the most part, are dismayed with Congressional Republicans and have warm feelings toward the President and his party. By a margin of 50–8%, they blame Republicans in Congress for our near-default compared to President Obama and Democrats in Congress. And when asked to come up with one word to describe the President, first on the list was “trying,” followed by “good,” “intelligent,” “caring,” “honest,” “fair,” and “excellent.” They describe Democrats in Congress as “trying,” “good,” and “fair,” while they call Republicans “stubborn” and “irresponsible.” With the expected ground game that Democrats will generate in 2012, the droppers are—by and large—locked up.

The switchers are seeking a home.

There are three salient points about the switchers. First, there is a gaping ideological divide between Democrats and these crucial voters. Switchers perceive Democrats as substantially out of touch with their own values, much more so than Republicans. And the switchers see today's Democratic Party as beholden to traditional liberal economic orthodoxies.

Second, they are true swing voters. While some have definitely made up their minds about the next election, three-fifths of switchers have not yet chosen a Presidential candidate, and more than two-thirds haven't chosen a Congressional candidate for 2012. Among these *persuadable switchers*, more than three-fifths feel they are more conservative than the President, and similar numbers say they are more conservative than Congressional Democrats.

But third, they are deeply skeptical of the Tea Party whom they view, by a 3-to-1 margin, as going too far in the wrong direction. The more the Tea Party is seen as synonymous with Republicans, the better chance Democrats have to widen the ideological distance between switchers and Republicans—and ultimately to win them back.

In Section I of this memo we analyze the beliefs of the persuadable switchers and outline the dimensions of the ideological gap between them and the Democratic Party. In Section II, we offer specific advice on how to narrow the gap and widen the one between these persuadable voters and Republicans.

Section I

Persuadable Switchers & Democrats: The Ideological Divide

Essentially, switchers fall into three categories:

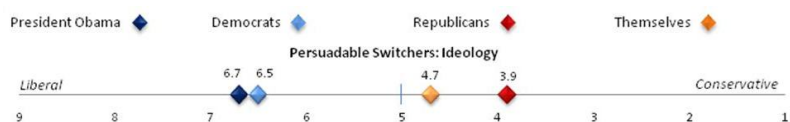
- Solid supporters: 16% of switchers say they will definitely vote for the President.

- Lost supporters: 25% say they will definitely vote for the Republican nominee.
- Persuadable switchers: 59% say they will either probably vote for the President (18%), probably vote for the Republican (15%), or volunteered “depends” (20%) or don’t know.

This memo focuses on the persuadable switchers.

The most salient fact about persuadable switchers is that they feel they are significantly more conservative than the President and his party. We asked them to place themselves on an ideological continuum between 1 and 9, with one being conservative, 5 being moderate, and 9 being liberal.

- Persuadable switchers self-identified at 4.7—just right of center.
- They placed President Obama at 6.7 and Congressional Democrats at 6.5.
- They put Congressional Republicans at 3.9.



The ideological gap between persuadable switchers and Republicans is only 0.8, but it is 2.0 when it comes to the President and 1.8 when it comes to Democrats. The belief that the Democratic Party is too liberal is a serious hurdle to clear. Among persuadable switchers, 59% said the Democratic Party is more liberal than they are, 17% said more conservative, and 19% said the party was about the same as them ideologically.

This chasm between persuadable switchers and Democrats shows up in five specific areas: deficits, taxes, spending, the role of government, and entitlements. And in each area, the divide reflects significant doubts they have about the Democratic Party brand.

Persuadable Switchers and Deficits

Persuadable switchers are highly deficit sensitive, and they perceive that they care more about the deficit than anyone in Washington. On a 0 to 10 scale, where 10 means the deficit is the most important issue and 0 means it is not important:

- Persuadable switchers placed themselves at 6.8.
- They placed President Obama at 5.5 and Congressional Democrats at 5.0.
- They put Congressional Republicans at 6.0.

The perceived passion gap on the deficit is small between persuadable switchers and Republicans (0.8) and larger when it comes to the President (1.3) and Democrats (1.8).

By a margin of 37–31%, persuadable switchers said that Republicans were “more reasonable” on the deficit issue than Democrats. And when asked whether the phrase “serious about reducing the federal budget deficit” described the Democratic Party, only 34% of persuadable switchers thought it described the party somewhat or very well (Republicans scored 46%).

The belief that Democrats are not serious about reducing the federal deficit correlated with thinking that the party was too liberal more than any other question in the poll (tying with a belief that Democrats are “too reliant on government spending to solve problems”).

Persuadable switchers also equate deficit reduction with economic growth. When asked what Washington could do to create jobs, persuadable switchers chose “reducing the federal budget deficit” as their number one choice. And when asked directly about the link between deficit reduction and job creation, by a 46–41% margin persuadable switchers said deficit reduction would help create jobs and by a 64–27% margin that it would lead to economic growth.

Consistent with their deep sensitivity about the debt and deficit, persuadable switchers believe there is much more to

be done on deficit reduction after the recent deal.

- 48% of persuadable switchers said the debt deal “did not make a dent in solving our deficit problem.”
- 49% said it “started to solve our deficit problem but we still have a long way to go.”
- Only 1% thought the deal mostly solved the problem.

Persuadable Switchers and Taxes

Persuadable switchers are accepting of tax increases to reduce the deficit, but they harbor a distrust of Democrats on taxes. Persuadable switchers favored Democrats on which party was more reasonable on taxes—43–37%. But they also said the phrase “too willing to raise taxes” was among the two top attributes of the Democratic Party. And agreement with that characterization of Democrats was the third most highly correlated indicator that a person would think the party was too liberal.

Still persuadable switchers are not ideologues when it comes to raising revenue *in a deficit reduction context*. Sixty-six percent strongly or moderately disagreed with the statement “we should not allow any increases in taxes even if it would help reduce the deficit.” By a 63–24% margin, persuadable switchers say “wealthy people should be taxed at a higher rate because we can’t solve the deficit problem without doing so.”

When asked which approach they would choose to reduce the budget deficit:

- 24% of persuadable switchers said all spending cuts;
- 27% said mostly spending cuts with some tax increases;
- 31% said half spending cuts and half tax increases;
- 10% said mostly tax increases with some spending cuts; and,

- 3% said all tax increases.

Persuadable Switchers and Spending

Persuadable switchers want government spending cut and see Democrats as spenders. Only 16% chose “pass new federal spending on innovation and infrastructure” from a menu of ways Washington should act to create jobs.

When asked which party was more reasonable on spending, persuadable switchers chose Republicans by 46–25%.

Seventy-eight percent said being “responsible with taxpayer dollars” does not describe Democrats (though 71% said the same about Republicans). Persuadable switchers chose “too reliant on government spending to solve problems” as the number one phrase to best describe Democrats.

On the debt ceiling negotiations and the deficit deal that emerged this summer, many in the Democratic base argued that the President went too far and compromised too much. But based on their views on spending, persuadable switchers disagreed. They did not believe the spending cuts in the deal went too far—in fact, many persuadable switchers wished the President had gone further:

- 22% of persuadable switchers said the President compromised too much;
- 39% said he did not compromise enough; and,
- 29% said he compromised the right amount.

Persuadable Switchers and the Role of Government

Americans’ trust in government is at historically low levels, but among persuadable switchers, this dubiousness of government is even more pronounced. Sixty-seven percent of persuadable switchers say “government is almost always wasteful and inefficient,” while only 26% say “government often does a better job than people give it credit for.” As noted above, they see Democrats as the party of government.

Persuadable switchers see the private sector—not government intervention—as driving job creation and economic growth. When asked what they felt was the most helpful thing Washington could do to create jobs, the persuadable switchers’ first two choices were reducing the federal budget deficit and streamlining government regulations on businesses—and they chose both of those options above investment in innovation and infrastructure.

Persuadable Switchers and Entitlements

The story is a bit more complicated on entitlements.

On one level, persuadable switchers seem to be closer to where the President and his party are on entitlement reform—they don’t want big cuts to the programs, and they trust Democrats more to protect them. By 42-28%, persuadable switchers chose Democrats as more reasonable on reforming entitlements. And only 23% said Republicans “can be trusted to protect Medicare,” while 56% of persuadable switchers say the Tea Party is “going too far and jeopardizing important safety nets like Medicare and Social Security.”

But in contrast to many Democrats in Congress, a supermajority of persuadable switchers believes entitlements are in desperate financial shape and recognizes the need for serious reforms. Among persuadable switchers:

- 71% say Social Security and Medicare have “serious financial problems that need to be addressed or the programs won’t be around for future generations.”
- 24% say they have “minor problems that will need to be addressed at some point in the near future.”
- 2% say the programs “are in good financial shape.”

Section II

Closing the Gap: Growth Democrats, Tea Party Republicans

To win the tug of war for the persuadable switchers, Democrats must employ a two-pronged strategy—pulling themselves closer to these voters while pushing Republicans further away from them.

The Pull: Become growth Democrats focused on long-term prosperity, American economic supremacy, and individual success as the middle class defines it (which means achieving their aspirations). This, as we will explain further, is not the same as being an “economic security,” “economic justice,” or “economic disparity” Democrat.

The Push: Link Republicans to the Tea Party and paint officeholders as beholden to Tea Party fealty. When these swing voters walk into the voting booth, the question you want them to ask is: “Do I really want these folks in charge?”

The Pull: Position yourself as a Growth Democrat.

“Tax and spend” is how persuadable switchers think Democrats seek to solve every economic problem.

To shed that brand, it means becoming a “growth Democrat” with a private sector growth agenda. It means showing that a growth Democrat has better ideas than Republicans on issues that switchers care about: long-term economic growth, deficit reduction, middle-class wealth creation, and government reforms. This can be done in the following five ways:

1) Focus on economic supremacy and promote an optimistic view of our economic future.

By far, the most interesting and alarming finding in our poll is the pervasive pessimism about America’s future. The switchers believe that:

- Our economy will not recover for at least two years.
- We will most likely never lead the world economy again. We may not even earn a bronze medal.

- Our deficit is out of control, and Washington prefers squabbling for petty political gain over true teamwork to solve the nation's problems.

Democrats need to change this mood and own optimism with a story and vision about growth and American economic leadership.

We started this century as the undisputed world economic leader. But a series of bad, short-sighted decisions set our nation on the wrong course. Now we are fighting to regain our crown—to be the champions, not just next year but beyond. We must take the best ideas from the left, right, and center, from business and entrepreneurs, to earn back the gold medal.

Fighting for economic growth and American economic supremacy is a large and evocative canvas, and it appeals to centrist sensibilities. (Fighting for economic justice, for economic security, and against income disparity do not.) And this broader economic supremacy narrative is not directly tied to the unemployment rate, so the message won't be trumped by weekly jobs numbers.

Regarding the Democratic tendency to tout populism, we warn once again to be very careful. It is true that businesses like banks, oil companies, insurers, and pharmaceutical companies are often unpopular in polling. But switchers like the government and Congress even less. More importantly, railing against the private sector is one of the quickest ways to reinforce the persuadable switchers' notion that Democrats are dyed-in-the-wool liberals. Finally, one of every three workers is employed by a company that has more than 10,000 employees, so attacking "big business" falls flat with them.

Democrats need an optimistic, muscular economic vision of the future. Populism is tempting, but it's negative. And you don't beat pessimism with pessimism.

2) Embrace deficit reduction as essential to long-term economic growth—don't just be resigned to it.

Congressional Democrats passed a large budget deal this summer and received no credit for it. It is because whenever Democrats cut spending, they do so kicking and screaming. Moving forward, when Democrats seek to raise taxes, it must be done grudgingly. And when Democrats agree to cut spending, it must be done boastfully.

Democrats should tout deficit reduction efforts and use the Super Committee as an opportunity to counter the perception that they don't care about red ink. That means embracing cuts to which they are agreeing—not voting for them while holding their noses.

Every policy proposal should be framed in the context of reforms that get our fiscal house in order. For example, when President Obama announced the review of deportation proceedings for 300,000 undocumented immigrants, the lead point should have been: *it's \$4 billion in government spending we can't afford right now.*

3) Call for growth investments, but pay for them.

Democrats are right that America must make investments in young people, young industries, old roads, and new technologies because we are not prepared to win the future. But it's tricky. Persuadable switchers are extremely deficit-sensitive, and they are inclined to believe that new spending won't help the economy.

When offering a plan that involves spending, it must be offset, and that fact should be just as important in the message as the plan itself. Don't use jargon like "deficit neutral"—instead, emphasize in plain terms that the country must invest where necessary to put America back on top, but it won't cost the taxpayer one extra dime.

It is best if new spending is offset with spending cuts rather than revenue increases. Ideally, Democrats would want to say that every penny of the repeal of the upper-income Bush tax breaks would go to deficit reduction only. On new spending, the President hit it on the mark in his Thursday night address by showing it was paid for.

4) Show independence by tipping some sacred cows.

The only way for Democrats to credibly claim that they are putting country over party is to break with traditional party positions to solve our nation's long-term problems and help America win the gold medal. Democrats must demonstrate that they are serious about becoming growth Democrats by taking solutions from all comers.

Growth ideas to consider supporting include:

- Entitlement reform to make the safety net secure, solvent, and sustainable;
- Corporate tax reform to make the U.S. more competitive;
- Trade agreements to promote U.S. exports; and,
- Federal pension reforms to show that Washington will take its share of cuts.

Preserving the status quo on Medicare and Social Security has been a longtime Democratic standard. But in our poll, a supermajority of persuadable switchers (as well as droppers) believes that the status quo is not sustainable. Offering a plan to fix—not gut—entitlement programs could help demonstrate that Democrats aren't beholden to old ideas and interest groups while also showing seriousness about preserving the safety net and fixing our deficit problem. And given that persuadable switchers trust Democrats more than Republicans on entitlements, they would likely be open to hearing a Democratic plan for reform that would preserve the safety net without breaking the bank.

Whether or not it is entitlements, individual Democrats must show independence from orthodoxy and frame this independence as in service to American growth and success.

5) Reframe the tax and regulatory debates.

Repealing the Bush upper-income tax cuts is necessary to reduce the deficit, but could there be anything more fitting with old-line, traditional, doctrinaire, Mondale-inspired,

Democratic liberalism than trotting out the ole “millionaires and billionaires” chestnut?

Our polling shows that 63% of persuadable switchers are willing to see taxes increased on the wealthy. But they also ranked “too willing to raise taxes” as one of the most accurate descriptors of Democrats. When Democrats use the same old rationales for tax increases, what could sound like harmony sounds instead like fingernails on a chalkboard.

To reach the switchers, progressive priorities—like raising taxes on higher earners—must be framed to appeal to centrist sensibilities. Centrists fear that Democrats want to raise taxes so they can spend more money on people who don’t deserve it, through programs that don’t work, at schools that don’t teach, for a government that doesn’t demand results.

But an appeal to the values that switchers care about will work:

- *We cannot solve our deficit problem through cuts alone. If we are going to talk taxes, we need to start with those who can most afford it.*
- *If all we do is cut, we will not maintain the strongest military in the world. Raising taxes on those who can most afford it is ultimately in the interest of our national security.*

Similarly, on regulatory reform, Democrats must appeal to centrist sensibilities as well by making it a contest over what kind of regulatory reform to pursue—not whether to pursue it. Given current levels of public dissatisfaction toward government, Democrats must offer an alternative plan for eliminating regulations, showing that they too want to cut regulations and modernize government for a new century.

As an example, the Obama Administration has developed a list of more than 500 government regulations to eliminate or reform. Democrats should tout them because they want to cut regulations, while Republicans want to gut them. Democrats want to reform government; Republicans want to end it.

The Push: Show that the GOP is beholden to the Tea Party.

Republicans relentlessly try to persuade voters that pulling the lever for a Democrat means tax and spend. Democrats must persuade voters that pulling the lever for a Republican means putting the Tea Party in charge.

The Tea Party is very unpopular with persuadable switchers, and demonstrating that Republicans are rigidly adhering to that group's ideological demands will go a long way toward creating a larger gap between the Republican Party and switchers.

Democrats can confront Republicans with questions like these:

- Tell me one place where you think the Tea Party is wrong?
- Why did you have one position two years ago but have now switched it to the Tea Party position?
- Who is making the decisions, you or the Tea Party?

There is no need to characterize the Tea Party or its ideas. Let their words and actions speak for themselves—they are already doing a bang-up job of persuading the switchers that they have the wrong ideas. The question voters must ponder as they consider pulling the lever for a Republican is “Do I really want to put the Tea Party in charge of the national economy? In charge of Social Security? In charge of teaching my kids about science?”

The 2012 primary campaign will continue to provide constant proof points for the narrative that there is no Republican Party—only the Tea Party. In an August debate of the Republican Presidential candidates, every single person on stage rejected a deficit-reduction plan that was 10 to 1 spending cuts versus tax revenues. And in a similar debate in September, Rick Perry doubled down on his accusation that Social Security is an unconstitutional “Ponzi scheme.” Mitt Romney recently backtracked on the causes of global

warming—to align himself with the Tea Party, many of whom are avid global warming-skeptics. Michele Bachmann says the recent hurricane and earthquake were messages from God to policymakers in DC—that’s a Tea Party belief. Rick Perry believes creationism should be taught in public schools—that’s a Tea Party idea. Ron Paul thinks we should return to the gold standard and eliminate the Department of Education—that’s a Tea Party mantra. Every Presidential aspirant but one (Huntsman) thought *America should default on its debt*—that’s a Tea Party position.

Similarly, the Ryan budget, which has been championed by the Tea Party and endorsed by most of the Republican Presidential candidates, is now the Tea Party budget—one that would have a devastating impact on the economy and average Americans. Eliminating the deficit by 2040 entirely with spending reductions would mean cutting all government services—except Social Security—in half. That means getting rid of half of the air traffic controllers in the country, firing half of the FBI agents, removing border control agents from half of the border, cutting down on customs inspections at our ports, and closing half of the national parks. It would gut our economy by making air travel slow and dangerous and criminals harder to capture, and it would increase illegal immigration, harm entrepreneurship, slow down commerce, and reduce international tourism. Marrying Republicans to these Tea Party ideas will push them away from the persuadable switchers on the ideological scale—to the benefit of Democrats.

Conclusion

Entering 2012, there is a significant ideological gap between Democrats and the switchers. In order to close that gap, Democratic candidates must pull themselves closer to these crucial voters by positioning themselves as growth Democrats and making this election about two competing visions of the future. On the other side, they must also push Republicans away from the switchers by marrying them to the Tea Party.

Karl Rove's biggest fear is that voters will not be able to distinguish between Republicans and Tea Party absolutists. He has not been shy about this viewpoint, saying in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed last year: "The GOP is also better off if it foregoes any attempt to merge with the tea party movement...[it] will hurt Republicans if the party is formally associated with tea party groups."

Democrats should show him he's right to be worried.

TOPICS

AMERICAN ELECTORATE 139

PUBLIC OPINION 138

END NOTES

1. Lincoln Park Strategies, 400 Droppers and 400 Switchers from PA, OH, CO, FL, NV, NH, WI, NC, IA, NM, MI, VA, completed August 16, 2011. For more information see: <http://www.LPStrategies.com>.