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During Tough Economic Times, Obama's Vision Inspires Confidence

Concerns Remain Over Whether Washington Can Deliver

Dial testing and follow-up discussions with 50 swing voters in Denver, Colorado showed that President Obama's 2011 State of the Union struck a powerful chord as he described his economic vision for the country. Following the speech, voters gave the President impressive assessments on key economic measures and were especially drawn to the President's emphasis on three of the themes he emphasized in his speech – innovation, education, and America's competitiveness in the future. As one of these swing voters put it, "the future belongs to the people who make the what and the how."

Despite their strong response to the State of the Union, these swing voters remain skeptical about Washington's ability to deliver and are hungry for tangible changes in the economy. The President's references to the nation's past accomplishments and his description of how we must invest in small businesses and out-innovate to create tomorrow's jobs helped overcome this skepticism, but getting past their skepticism will clearly be a central challenge.

This was a difficult audience for Obama, yet his speech largely won them over. It was a heavily Republican-leaning group (48 percent Republican, 18 percent Democratic) that split their votes in 2008 (48 percent Obama, 48 percent McCain) but had moved away from the President over the past two years. At the outset, majorities expressed disapproval with his job performance and unfavorable views of him on a personal level.

Despite this Republican tilt, Obama saw significant shifts in his overall standing – larger even than after his well-received State of the Union address last year. His overall job approval among these voters jumped by 26 points (10 points more than he gained last year) while his personal standing flipped from decidedly cool (30 percent warm versus 62 percent cool) to much warmer (52 percent warm, 27 percent cool).

More important, Obama had the most success on the issue of paramount importance: the economy. Prior to the speech, just 16 percent of these Republican-leaning voters said that Obama had "good plans for the economy," but this measure jumped 36 points after the speech, to



52 percent. Obama also saw large gains on job creation, earning a 28-point jump in the percent of voters who have confidence in his ability to create new jobs.

The president’s call to “innovate, educate and build” clearly resonated with these swing voters, as we saw movement on the dials from Democrats, Independents and Republicans when he focused on these themes. This was especially clear when he framed these themes around the need to make American more competitive with other nations that are already moving down this road. One of his strongest lines was his call to “out-innovate, out-educate, and out-build the rest of the world.”

The dials spiked when he talked about the need for parents to get more involved in their children’s education and to treat our teachers with more respect. Obama’s line that “we need to teach our kids that it’s not just the winner of the Super Bowl who deserves to be celebrated, but the winner of the science fair” resonated in particular. Meanwhile, these voters are hungry for innovation on energy. Obama saw a 22-point gain on the issue over the course of the speech as these voters, including the Republicans in the audience, endorsed his call to end subsidies for oil companies and instead focus those resources on expanding clean energy in America.

Table 1: Shifts in Measures

Measures	Pre-Speech	Post-Speech	Shift (Post – Pre-Speech)
Obama Job Approval: Total Approve	30	56	+26
Has Realistic Solutions to Country’s Problems: Total Describes Well	18	52	+34
Has Good Plans for the Economy: Total Describes Well	16	52	+36
Creating New Jobs: Total Confident	24	52	+28
Tax and Spend Liberal: Total Describes Well	72	36	-36
Energy: Total Confident	46	68	+22
The Federal Budget: Total Confident	8	44	+36

Obama also made gains with these fiscally conservative voters on budget issues. Entering the speech, 72 percent of these voters viewed the president as a “Tax and Spend Liberal,” but



that number fell by half after the speech. Obama also saw a 36-point gain on his ability to handle the federal budget over the course of the speech.

One of Obama's unique successes in the speech was his ability to generate a unified response across the partisan spectrum. In most speeches like this we see significant sections where the dial lines of Democrats and Republicans completely diverge. Aside from a few instances, the president was able to move Democrats, Independents and Republicans together tonight, even through controversial issues. While Democrats and Republicans diverged at the beginning of Obama's section on health care, they quickly moved back together in a positive direction once Obama began talking about maintaining new rules against insurance companies dropping people because of preexisting conditions and the dials rose in unison to some of their highest levels of the night when he argued that "instead of re-fighting the battles of the last two years, let's fix what needs fixing and move forward."

Following the speech, we conducted two breakout focus groups with participants who said Obama did not have good plans for the economy prior to the speech but indicated that he did after hearing his speech. These voters were inspired by the economic vision laid out by the President and shared a belief that his speech demonstrated an honest, unflinching understanding of the economic challenges still facing the country. They particularly embraced his focus on innovation and competitiveness, as well as his focus on small business as a driver of economic growth and the embodiment of the best of America's entrepreneurial, risk-taking spirit.

Across the political spectrum, these focus group participants lauded Obama for "going back to the roots" in capturing the critical elements of America's strength, particularly his focus on families, small businesses, and education. They share his belief that America has fallen behind in education and that increased investment and accountability for results in our schools is critical to restoring American competitiveness.

Their enthusiasm for Obama's vision was naturally tempered by skepticism over whether he can actually accomplish the goals he laid out. After the speech, a majority of participants saw Obama bridging the partisan divide (+20 from pre-speech), with several of the Republicans and Independents in the groups applauding him for challenging his own party on several issues and reaching out to Republicans to improve the health care reform law. But questions remained whether Republicans in Congress will return his gestures of compromise.¹

¹ Voters' reactions to the speech were measured with Perception Analyzer technology provided by Dialsmith.