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Memorandum

To: Interested Parties

From: Celinda Lake, David Mermin, Zach Young;
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Subject: Findings From Immigration Focus Groups on Behalf of The
Opportunity Agenda

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Focus groups conducted by Lake Research Partners¹ on behalf of The Opportunity Agenda show a public that is ready for comprehensive immigration reform. **Voters are in a problem solving frame of mind, and we find that communication through this problem/solution framework is the best way to talk to them about immigration issues.**

The overall finding in messaging is that voters examine any message they hear for the kernel of a specific solution. If they do not hear that the speaker understands their insistence on an actual solution to the problem, they will dismiss the message. A human rights framework has some salience, mostly in the area of due process, but the solution-oriented frame is much more successful overall.

We spoke to progressive white voters, African Americans, and U.S. born Latinos, and there were more similarities than differences. **Among all groups, the core narrative of The Opportunity Agenda – workable solutions that uphold our nation’s values and move us forward together – captures the mood and effectively frames the discussion going forward.** Though immigration is a lower priority than the economy, **voters strongly agree that the system is broken and that a solution is long overdue.**

¹ Lake Research Partners conducted eight focus groups in Seattle, Chicago, Richmond, and New York. The groups occurred on May 11, 18, 20, and 21 respectively.

Key Points

- Similar to our findings earlier this year among swing audiences, voters in these groups are firmly in a problem and solution-oriented frame of mind.
- More broadly, the atmosphere for immigration issues is less toxic than in past years for advocacy on immigrant issues in general. However, participants' response to messaging underscores the fact that we will need action on reform for this shift to take root. In this case, good policy is good politics. The more advocates can be seen to be on the side of common sense, workable solutions, the more receptive they will find American voters to be.
- Participants in all groups draw a clear distinction between legal and illegal immigrants.
 - Legal immigrants are mostly described in positive terms and are seen as “deserving” of the rights, privileges, and benefits that America has to offer.
 - Even among progressive voters, illegal immigrants are initially described as lawbreakers and a drain on the system, getting benefits and not paying taxes.
- Even highly attentive voters who are generally engaged with political news do not know very much about the immigration system, its laws, and its specific problems. We see the same common misperceptions in these groups as in others among less attentive swing voters.
- Some facts about the immigration system work to motivate participants to support reform. Effective facts include the number of illegal immigrants currently living in the United States, the impossibility of them ever “becoming legal” under current law, and some of the impacts of the current legal framework on children and families, such as the plight of children brought to the United States illegally at a very young age. Less effective are facts that seem to undermine the prospects of reform actually solving the problem, like the size of the family backlog and the wait times endured by legal immigrants.
- While these voters have little appetite for the restrictionist or xenophobic rhetoric that comes from anti-immigrant hardliners, they do not actually perceive there to be an extreme or ideological debate going on. Voters instead see myriad problems with the system, and they gravitate most to those who propose solutions. In this, there is both opportunity to frame the debate on our terms and risk that opponents may again seize the initiative by disguising bad policies with smooth or conciliatory language.

Attitudes Toward Immigration

- In African American and Latino groups, discussion of immigration moves very quickly on to illegal immigration, specifically from Mexico. White progressive participants, who are often more likely to work alongside legal immigrants of various nationalities, offer a more nuanced picture.
- On the positive side, all of these groups believe immigrants, legal or illegal, to be hard working. They laud legal immigrants for bringing diversity and exemplifying the American Dream.

- On the negative side, we hear many of the usual complaints dealing with illegal immigration. Specifically, participants are very sensitive to a perceived strain on public services, especially health care. There is a widespread perception that immigrants are overloading systems like Medicaid, hospitals, and public schools. While all participants were concerned about use of resources, African Americans and Latinos were also more likely to worry about competition for jobs and lowering wages.
- Non-economic anxieties were mostly limited to complaints about immigrants who do not speak English. However, there was pushback in all groups, especially among white progressives. All participants tend to believe that immigrants *should* learn English, but not all believed that it should be a requirement.

Preconceptions of the Current System and Reactions to Facts

- Though they lack specific information about the workings of the immigration system, participants are well aware that the system has major problems. Participants in all groups tended to use words like “inadequate,” “in shambles,” “insane,” and “broken,” and still others questioned whether it even deserved to be called a “system” at all.
- When participants are presented with facts about the system, those facts tend to reinforce their negative preconceptions. Overall, they find the picture the facts paint to be “sad,” “frustrating,” and “overwhelming” and they describe the system as “unfair.”
- The top testing fact, that children brought here illegally have no way to remedy the situation later in life, evokes a sense of sympathy from participants. They understand the extreme difficulty of the bind in which these children find themselves, and it leads them to believe there must be some solution. While this is less effective in the context of system-wide reform, the empathy shown to children can be an important tool for advocates working specifically with immigrant children and families. Voters afford children much greater leeway than adults, who they feel have more control over their own situation.
- Two of the more surprising facts for participants were that even at the record pace of 2007 and 2008, it would take at least 34 years to deport all illegal immigrants and that there is currently no way for undocumented immigrants to become legal. The latter, especially, is important to emphasize. Many voters incorrectly believe that illegal immigrants could just go to a government office and “get legal.” Knowledge that this is not the case provides a catalyst for supporting reform and greater sympathy and understanding across audiences. It also reinforces the notion that the system is broken.
- The third highest testing fact—that in 2007 ninety-eight percent of workplace arrests were of workers and 2 percent were of employers—is another important one to highlight in support both of comprehensive immigration reform and of individual immigrants. It is important to note that while a lack of “enforcement” is certainly a major cause for frustration with the immigration system, enforcement has two parts. The first is border security, but the second, and just as, if not more important is enforcement in the labor market. Voters repeatedly express exasperation at employers who break the law by hiring illegal workers and paying them below-market wages with no consequences. The fact that the punishments come squarely down on the workers and almost never on the employers really drives home the need for reform and draws sympathy for workers.

Values

When asked what values our immigration system ought to reflect, participants were most likely to name “fairness,” “equality,” and a less concise but strongly felt idea that the system should encourage immigrants who are proud of becoming Americans.

- In the white and Latino groups, participants frequently told stories of parents or grandparents who had been proud of coming to America. The distinction was drawn between this older, idealized model and the attitude that many ascribe to illegal immigrants who demonstrate less commitment to America by coming here to work, but sending much of their money to homes and families in other countries. Often, the assumption is that illegal immigrants do not want to become Americans.
- Equality refers to the idea that no group or nationality of immigrants ought to be treated differently than any other. In African American and Latino groups, participants believed that immigrants from some countries, notably European countries, are treated better than African, Caribbean, or Latino immigrants.
- Fairness builds on equality, but has more to do with laws and how they treat people. However, it means both fairness to immigrants and fairness to American citizens. The immigration system ought to reflect human rights like due process; it ought to provide a process that moves in a timely fashion; and it ought to treat people with dignity. However, the idea that immigrants should not be avoiding taxes while collecting benefits and receiving opportunities that American citizens cannot get is also a part of fairness, especially among African Americans and Latinos.
- Cracking down on employers who hire illegal immigrants is also a key component of a fair system. The issue was primarily raised in the context of ways illegal immigration hurts American workers and employers who are playing by the rules, but participants also strongly recognized that undocumented workers are often exploited. Participants almost universally consider employers to be more at fault than their undocumented workers.

The Immigration Debate and “Extremism”

Unlike many pundits, politicians, and advocates, voters do not perceive immigration as an “issue” to be “debated,” but rather as a problem or set of problems to be solved. When we ask who might be considered “extremists” on the immigration issue, participants initially have trouble answering because they do not see things that way.

- With some prompting, all groups do report that right wing commentators and politicians tend to be the most extremely anti-immigrant in their views and statements. African American and Latino groups were more likely to identify some of these commentators as racist.
- White progressive groups also identified right wing commentators as more anti-immigrant, but they tended to shy away from combative or confrontational language from either side. These groups have really taken to heart the consensus-building tone fostered by President Obama both in his campaign and early in his presidency. In general, it is better and more effective to talk about workable, positive solutions than to decry the rhetoric or policies of the other side. Doing the latter makes you part of the problem rather than part of the solution in their eyes.

Comprehensive Immigration Reform Proposal

With voters in such a problem and solution-oriented frame of mind, they are predisposed to look favorably upon comprehensive immigration reform. Indeed, we find that support is consistent across all groups and all audiences. We found intensity of support to be somewhat lower than that found among swing voters. Any comprehensive reform will necessarily be a compromise. Though not everyone will agree with every part of any proposal, it is important to emphasize that the proposal is a concrete step toward solving the problem and that it is important to act now. Participants recognized that it might not be perfect, but thought it could be a key improvement.

- The key feature of the tested proposal and of any successful proposal is that it sets up a process and re-establishes order on a system that voters believe to be out of control.
- Border security and enforcement on employers who hire illegal immigrants are key prerequisites for voters to embrace reform. Though border anxiety is somewhat less acute than among swing voters, participants insist that in order for any solution to work, the laws we put in place must be enforced.
- Voter criticisms were largely constructive, such as arguing that it may not be realistic in this economy to require people to have a current job. They are more likely to single out certain provisions as too harsh rather than too lenient. Elements that drew criticism were those meant to make the proposal “tougher,” like the requirement that applicants remain employed and pass a basic English test or that they must wait five years for eligibility for government benefits. Once immigrants have shown their commitment to the process by registering, applying for citizenship, and paying taxes, the need for punishment falls away for most. People also felt that immigrants in this process should be subject to the same rules as other Americans.
- Once it is established that immigrants will take part in a legal process in which they will be paying taxes and contributing to the social safety net, resistance to immigrants receiving benefits like health care or Social Security drops significantly.
- One frequent reaction to the proposal was that though it is not perfect it is at least “a start.” Though immigration is not the top of mind issue that it was in years past, long-simmering frustration on the issue drives voters to want some kind of solution sooner rather than later. We have seen this result in polling over the past year, and we have heard the sentiment in focus groups among all audiences.

Messaging

- Different audiences are more alike than they are different. The most successful messages were those that at some point enumerated the steps of a comprehensive solution. We found this to be true both in the situation where participants had seen a reform proposal prior to messaging and when they had not. The Core Narrative of The Opportunity Agenda is a successful example of this, emphasizing workable solutions that uphold our values and move us forward together. This message and its overall style is widely applicable outside of advocacy on behalf of comprehensive immigration reform legislation.

[CORE NARRATIVE] When it comes to immigration, we need workable solutions that uphold our nation's values, and move us forward together. We need to fix our system so that individuals who contribute and participate can live in the United States legally. That means creating a system where undocumented immigrants can register, get legal, learn English, and apply for citizenship.

- Messages that target African Americans by attempting to identify a “shared interest” with immigrants generally fall flat. African Americans see their story and place in America as unique and resent the idea that messages might attempt to “piggyback” onto the Civil Rights movement. Any message that singles out black people or treats them as somehow separate from other Americans is likely to be perceived as patronizing. Using the language of civil rights to talk about immigration (or other struggles like gay rights) only brings to the surface resentment about how black people have been and still are treated in this country. The recent arrest of scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. is the type of high profile incident that undermines this approach. African Americans, like all audiences, do strongly believe in due process as a human right. However, when it comes to messaging, it is better to stick with messages like those aimed at swing voters.
- More successful among African Americans and Latinos was a populist, anti-corporate message that pins the blame for the still broken system on the appetite of big business for cheap, easily controlled labor. However, this message did poorly with college-educated white voters. Progressive white voters were more likely to label the assertion that corporations are fighting immigration reform as a baseless conspiracy theory and object to the confrontational language.

[POPULIST/ANTI-CORPORATE] It just doesn't make sense that we could have an immigration system that's been broken for so long when Americans want it fixed. One reason for this is that Big Business likes cheap labor that they can control. We need a system that protects workers from exploitation and allows us to all rise together. What we don't need is those with only an eye on greed and profit dictating how the immigration system should work.

- In two of the groups we tested a message designed to work with the urgency of starting the process of solving the problem, even if the first steps are not perfect. Among Latino men, the message successfully captured the desire to get started. Among progressive white seniors, it was not quite as successful, though criticisms tended to focus on the difficulties of implementation, rather than the overall thrust of the message. We believe the message represents a promising avenue, and we look forward to refining it.

[GET STARTED] Elected leaders have been talking about fixing our broken immigration system for over 20 years. It's time they did something to actually fix it now, even if their first steps are not perfect. They should get started now working toward a way to get undocumented immigrants legalized, paying taxes, contributing fully, and on their way to becoming American citizens. Even if the changes Congress and the President adopt now don't completely solve the problem right away, it will be a good step in the right direction, and that's what we need.

- Among these audiences, the messenger will be key. The strongest messenger in support of comprehensive reform and immigrants in general is President Obama. The president is very popular among all these audiences, and he is seen as an honest broker and a problem solver. In order to be consistent with language the president is likely to use, it will be best to avoid more confrontational language. The language in The Opportunity Agenda core narrative about “workable solutions that uphold our nation’s values and move us forward together” is successful in that regard.

[OBAMA] One of President Obama’s central messages has been that our policies must recognize that we’re all in it together, with common rights and responsibilities. As a candidate, Obama promised to pass comprehensive immigration reform in his first year in office because he understood that our broken immigration system does not reflect those American values. Now it's time for us to stand with him against the forces of intolerance who would rather play politics with people's lives than solve real problems