

To: **Interested Parties**
From: **David Winston**
Date: **October 5, 2012**
Re: **Post-Debate Public Research**



Overview

The opening 2012 Presidential debate was watched by a remarkable 67.2 million viewers according to Nielsen, and some have estimated that with computers, tablets, and phones that number may well be over 70 million. This was a 28% increase from the first 2008 Presidential debate audience of 52.4 million, and the largest audience since the Carter-Reagan debate which had 80.6 million viewers.

CNN/CBS Post Debate Surveys

There were two media surveys completed right after the debate, one by CNN of those that had watched the debate, the other by CBS of uncommitted voters (undecided or said they could change their mind) who watched the debate. Both showed by significant margins that voters believed Governor Romney won the debate. In the CBS survey, the margin favored Governor Romney 46-22; in the CNN survey it was 67-25.

There was movement for Governor Romney on issues as well. In the CBS survey, he went from leading President Obama by 15 on the economy, to leading by 21. On the issue of taxes, President Obama had been leading by 12, and after the debate Governor Romney led by 5.

More importantly, both these surveys reflected movement toward Governor Romney. In the CNN survey, 35% said they were more likely to vote for Governor Romney as opposed to 18% for President Obama. In the CBS survey, the ballot test went from favoring President Obama by 1 to a 9 point lead for Governor Romney after the debate (23-22 to 25-34).

So, in both these quantitative studies, there was clear movement toward Governor Romney at a scale greater than for President Obama.

Democracy Corps Swing Voter Group

Democracy Corps conducted a post-debate discussion with 45 swing voters in Denver, which included 16 unmarried women. According to their analysis this group contained twice as many Republican leaning participants as Democratic leaning participants. This qualitative study supports many of the findings of the quantitative studies of CBS and CNN. By a 2-1 margin they thought Governor Romney won (42% Romney, 20% Obama, 38% Neither). Additionally, this group showed a significant improvement for Governor Romney in favorables, much larger than the improvement for President Obama, to the point there was a potential for a significant difference between the two. It also showed movement in the ballot test as Governor Romney picked up more support than President Obama - although their analysis says that the movement to Romney came from Republican leaning voters only.

Additionally, Governor Romney improved his standing on several issues when contrasted against President Obama. The group was asked which candidate was better on a series of issues, and

Governor Romney improved on the issues of taxes, the economy, and achieving energy independence.

The Democracy Corps analysis goes on to say that the debate was an important missed opportunity for President Obama among women. We agree that this was an important missed opportunity but for different reasons. They believed there was not enough discussion about “women’s issues.” But in our view, the much more important finding in their data was that President Obama lost significant ground on the economy, which is the number one issue for women.

Their conclusion was that “In the end, though, this debate did not emerge as the game-changer the Romney campaign needed.”

However, most of the data in the focus group doesn’t support this conclusion and was more in line with the two quantitative studies by CBS and CNN which showed clear movement. Their rationale was that no supporter of President Obama in the focus group moved to Governor Romney. Looking at the numbers it looks like this represented about 14 people (out of 45), a small group to make such a definitive conclusion. This is a quantitative conclusion based on qualitative data from 45 people in Denver preselected to match certain demographic criteria. Focus groups can provide possible theories; they cannot provide quantitative conclusions.

Conclusion

At this point, the full impact of the debate has yet to be realized. As surveys come out over the weekend we will get a more complete sense of movement. What we do know is Governor Romney was seen as winning the debate with over 70 million people watching, and he significantly improved his standing on the number one issue - jobs and the economy.