

The original documents are located in Box 65, folder “August 8, 1972 - H.R. Haldeman - Richard Nixon/George McGovern Strong/Weak Issues” of the Robert Teeter Papers at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

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COMMITTEE FOR THE RE-ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT

MEMORANDUM

August 8, 1972

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MEMORANDUM FOR: MR. H. R. HALDEMAN

FROM: ROBERT M. TEETER

SUBJECT: Nixon/McGovern Strong/Weak Issues

Determined to be an
Administrative Marking

By MG NARA, Date 2/8/2010

As requested this memorandum summarizes my recommendations on what I think can be the most effective issues for us in the campaign, what are our most vulnerable areas, and McGovern's potential strengths and weaknesses. These recommendations are based on my interpretation of the June data and can, of course, change as the campaign progresses.

STRONGEST NIXON ISSUES

1. Vietnam

Vietnam has been, and will probably continue to be by far the most important national issue and the one more people say will be important to their potential vote than any other. There is a strong support for the President's Vietnam program and his ratings on handling Vietnam have been and continue to be high. It is the issue on which the President has the greatest advantage in terms of his perceived ability to handle it. Both our waves of polling and the focus group sessions indicated that with many voters the President's overall approval rating is closely tied to Vietnam.

Since Vietnam has been a major national issue, there have been several secondary issues which have risen and fallen and become at times code words for a broader set of attitudes. It appears now that "Amnesty" may become such an issue. There is no question that amnesty is now seen as an integral part of the Vietnam issue as opposed to an independent issue.

2. Peace/Foreign Affairs/National Defense.

While the independent issues of foreign affairs and national defense are not ranked particularly high in terms of importance to voting, the President gets his highest ratings on them. When they are translated into ways the President is striving for peace, they can undoubtedly be effective in the campaign. They are also a means to take advantage of some of his greatest accomplishments, i.e. his Russia and China trips.



I think it is particularly important that the campaign show the breadth of the President's foreign policy accomplishments and that they always be interpreted as furthering the cause of World Peace.

3. Drugs/Crime

Drugs is a problem that is of intense personal concern to a wide spectrum of the electorate. It led the list in January of the issues that were of the most concern to the individual respondents. There is virtually no negative to anything the President might say or do on this issue and offers a great opportunity for us. It is the one issue where the President's ratings have increased sharply since January, and I think we should continue to use it extensively.

Drugs are also a believable and honest solution to the crime problem with many voters and does not get us tied up in the law and order, repression or anti-black problem. The greatest concern on the crime issue is personal safety and drugs are seen as a cause of it.

It is also an issue where the President can show his understanding, compassion, and determination to solve a problem about which there is a great deal of fear, apprehension, and lack of knowledge on the part of most older Americans, particularly parents.

4. General Unrest

I think the President can tie many issues together under this issue and improve his overall perception by using this theme which is directed at restoring a more orderly way of life in the country and decreasing the unrest. We need something to communicate the "lower our voices" and "bring us together" themes of 1968. This is the one area where the President can give people hope for an improvement in their lives.

Note:

The economy, particularly inflation, was on this list in January but is now one of our weaknesses rather than strengths. It is the second most important issue to the voters and it undoubtedly will become one of our strengths if the President takes further action, particularly with regard to food prices.

WEAKEST NIXON ISSUES

1. Inflation and Food Prices

This is the second most important issue in its effect on the vote, and the most important area where the President's ratings have dropped severely since January. In my opinion, if we get into trouble on this campaign, it will be on this issue. However, if the President should take further strong action to slow rising prices, particularly food prices, it would probably be one of our strengths rather than weaknesses.



2. Tax Reform

Taxes and tax reform are also important issues and ones where the President's ratings have decreased significantly. Rising taxes, particularly property taxes, are an important element of inflation and rising prices in general. I think the President should definitely make a major statement proposing tax reform, particularly for the middle income family early in September.

3. Change

The general issue of change is also one where we appear vulnerable. The great majority of voters think that we need major change in our governmental and economic systems and see McGovern as representing that change. More importantly, however, they see the President as being opposed to it. It is important that we portray the President as an innovator and advocate of responsible change in the campaign.

4. Unemployment/Jobs

Jobs is always an important issue and while we do not appear to be losing any votes over unemployment now, neither are we getting any votes on the jobs issue. Also the President's ratings on unemployment are low and leaving him vulnerable to attack by McGovern.

STRONGEST MCGOVERN ISSUES

McGovern's ratings on the various issues are all very similar, which indicates that he is not identified to any great degree with specific issues. Rather, he has a general issue handling perception that covers most of the individual issues and is in many ways a personal dimension attached to him. I do think there are some areas that he will concentrate on.

1. Inflation/Food Prices

While there is no evidence in the data to indicate McGovern has any unique strength on this issue, it is our weakest point and a traditional Democratic issue, and one that is particularly usable by those out of office. It also appears to me that McGovern is beginning to zero in on this issue. He is undoubtedly looking at the same kind of data we are.

2. Domestic Priorities

This general area could be effectively used by including defense spending and the whole idea of spending less abroad and more at home.

I understand that there is some consideration of a "He cares about this country most" type of theme for McGovern which handled properly could be effective. There is strong support for the idea that we need to spend a larger portion of our resources on our own domestic problems.



3. Tax Reform

Tax reform is another area where we are vulnerable and it is an extremely important issue. It is also related to both change and inflation and clearly has great appeal to most middle income people. The President is now perceived as being far from the majority of the voters.

4. Change

This is also an issue where we are vulnerable and one on which McGovern appears to have some impact in the primaries. At this point he is only moderately identified with it but he seems to be focusing in on it. It will probably be fairly easy for him to broaden this into a concentration of power and help for the little man issue. The change issue is also directly related to the domestic priority issue.

5. Unemployment/Jobs

Unemployment is an issue that does not appear to be costing us any votes now but one I would work on hard if I were McGovern, emphasizing particularly the jobs and the need for more jobs rather than just unemployment. Jobs has always been an effective political issue as everyone who has a job wants a better job and everyone who does not have a job wants to find one.

WEAKEST McGOVERN ISSUES

1. Competence

The greatest weakness of McGovern is a lack of competence and the depth and breadth to deal with the problems of the Presidency. This is the area where the President has the greatest advantage over him now. It was a McGovern weakness in June and has undoubtedly been compounded by the Eagleton affair.

2. Government Spending/Welfare/High Taxes

McGovern's weakest substantive issue may also be economic. I think it will be fairly easy to label him as a big spender at a time when there is great objection to increased government spending, particularly for social welfare programs. It is important that we tie these McGovern programs to higher taxes, and prove to the voters that he simply cannot create these new programs without higher taxes.

3. Extremism

The seeds for establishing McGovern as an extremist and his ideas as outside the dimensions of acceptability were evidence in the second wave data. This idea can be set deeper as the campaign goes on; however, can best be done by monopolizing the center and shoving McGovern to the left on the issues without attacking him personally.

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