

TO: North Dakotans for Clean Water, Lands & Outdoor Heritage

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RE: Key Findings From Ad Test Focus Groups

DATE: August 23, 2012

The bi-partisan polling team of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) recently partnered to complete a pair of focus groups with Fargo area “swing” voters (defined below) to assess their views on Measure 4, the Clean Water, Lands and Outdoor Heritage Measure. This memo provides a summary of some key observations from the focus groups, with a focus on guiding plans for developing television advertising and mail.

METHODOLOGY

On the evening of August 21st, FM3 and POS held two focus groups with North Dakota “swing” voters to assess their views of Measure 4 and to test concepts for television ads and mail. One focus group consisted of nine Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, and the other of nine Republicans and Republican-leaning independents. For ease of reference, this report simply refers to Democrats or Republicans. We refer to these participants as “swing voters” for this measure because all participants in both groups were screened to eliminate those who indicated they would “definitely” vote “yes” or “no,” based on a short summary description of the measure (though some subsequently modified their position after seeing the full petition language). Each group was about evenly divided between men and women, with a mix of ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sportsmen and non-sportsmen.

It should be noted that focus groups do not measure directly the frequency by which opinions and attitudes may exist within a particular universe of people. Accordingly, the results of these focus groups may be considered suggestive of the attitudes of North Dakota swing voters – at least in the Eastern part of the state – but cannot be considered to represent their views with any kind of statistical precision. However, focus groups provide an opportunity to dig deeply into mind-sets, customary actions or beliefs and encourage detailed and diverse responses to new ideas or concepts. Therefore, in this summary, we focus less on specific counts or tallies of participants’ opinions, and more on broad observations of the language that they used in the conversation.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Almost no one had any awareness of the measure – or any other measures on the ballot.** When asked whether they knew what ballot measures were slated for the November ballot in North Dakota, participants were largely unable to come up with any examples. A handful referenced items that had been on the June ballot; some talked about local measures; and others referenced medical marijuana, smoke-free public spaces, or the clean water and lands measure – but acknowledged that the questions we asked in the screener questionnaire prior to the invitation to attend had been the main context in which they were familiar. None of the participants showed any awareness of the public discussion of Measure 4, or messaging from either side.
- **Participants had a favorable initial reaction to the draft ballot language.** In the absence of final ballot language, participants were offered the following summary of the measure drawn from the petition language.

MEASURE 4. This initiated measure would add a new section to Article X of the North Dakota Constitution creating the Clean Water, Lands and Outdoor Heritage Fund financed by five percent of the revenues from oil extraction and oil and gas production taxes. The fund would be used to make grants to public and private groups to aid water quality, natural flood control, fish and wildlife habitat, park and recreation areas, and farm and ranch conservation. A nine-member governing board would be appointed by legislative leaders, the Governor, and the North Dakota Wildlife Society to serve three-year terms. The fund would be invested by the State Investment Board and the principal and income would be appropriated to the board to spend on programs it selected, subject to certain limitations.

The measure drew a positive reaction, with majority support in both groups (9-0 among Democrats and 6-3 among Republicans) as shown in **Figure 1** below.

**FIGURE 1:
Patterns of Support for Measure 4**

Position	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Definitely yes	3	7
Probably yes	12	8
TOTAL YES	15	15
Definitely no	0	0
Probably no	3	3
TOTAL NO	3	3

- **Most seemed to understand what the Measure was about.** Very few expressed initial confusion about what the measure would do. A handful mistook it for a new tax, but most realized that it would set aside a small portion of existing tax revenue and dedicate it to conservation purposes. None of the participants questioned the merit of investing in conservation, and many specifically praised the nexus between taxes paid by companies that extract from the land being used to care for the land. For most – as we have seen in all the polling to date – the plan seemed to make intuitive sense.

A handful did raise some questions based on the ballot language:

- ✓ Many wanted to know how much money the measure would raise, and how it compared to other uses of oil and gas taxes;
 - ✓ Some questioned what constituted “natural flood controls;”
 - ✓ Many were uncertain about the nature of independence of the advisory board, with several wondering about the role of the North Dakota Wildlife Society, with which they were unfamiliar;
 - ✓ Several questioned how the funds being allocated are currently used, and how those uses would be impacted by the measure; and
 - ✓ A few respondents in the GOP group wanted to know more about what was threatened and why there is urgency around doing this now.
- **A surprising number indicated that they regularly skip ballot measures that are confusing or unfamiliar.** Interestingly, a majority of the participants in the Democratic group said that they occasionally skip ballot measures – particularly if they are on unfamiliar topics or have confusing or contradictory wording. However, to a person they indicated that Measure 4 did not fall into that category, and that they would be comfortable voting on it.
 - **Reactions to the ads were generally positive.** Participants were presented with video storyboards for ten ads – eight with a “yes” message and two urging a “no” vote. Participants saw two “yes” and two “no” as an introductory unit, and then the balance of the “yes” ads. Overall, the messages were clear and highly compelling. When asked, after viewing all the ads, what message they conveyed, the Democratic group said “Clean Water,” “Badlands,” and “No New Taxes” -- a fair approximation of the campaign’s key message points. The GOP group also parroted back the “No New Taxes” message, “Clean Water” and that it would conserve land for “Future Generations.” **Figure 2** on the following page shows which ads were ranked as most persuasive and memorable.

Generally, the ads can be grouped into the following tiers in terms of the participant reactions:

TOP TIER:

- ✓ The “**Sportsman**” ad got the most consistently positive reaction – not so much because its content was oriented to hunting and fishing, but because it invoked the idea of leaving a generational legacy to one’s children. Participants liked the parent-child interactions in ad, which spoke to their own experiences. One noted that she

liked seeing a girl being taught to shoot and a few noted the appeal of the pickup truck as the opening image. In addition, the sportsmen ad seemed to feel “truly North Dakotan” to many of the respondents through the overall reference to hunting, and images of dogs, a pick-up truck, and wide open spaces.

- ✓ **“Lose”** was compelling because a host of images – nature, kids, a tractor, clean water and air, a starry sky, fresh air – invoked distinctively North Dakotan experiences and memories. “I come from a farming community,” commented one Republican woman in response to this ad. It spoke to what participants viewed as the essence of what makes North Dakota both unique and enjoyable. One Republican man noted these are all “things that North Dakota has that other states do not.”
- ✓ **“Badlands”** was appealing to many because of its invocation of history, and participants acknowledged the iconic beauty of the Badlands. But most participants were irritated by frequent and repeated references to the urgency of saving “a beautiful place we *never* visit.” Most would have preferred that references to the Badlands be leavened with other sites – particularly in the Eastern part of the state.

MIDDLE TIER:

- ✓ Participants liked the **“Scientist,”** but wanted to know more about his background and expertise. And some questioned implications about the health of drinking water, noting that Fargo’s water quality is exceptional.
- ✓ The **“Rancher”** ad was appealing in both imagery and substance. Several liked the reference to keeping farms and ranches working and in the family. But many were uncertain how the measure would actually benefit working farms and ranches – fearing that it might take farmland out of production. Still others were upset at the idea, referenced in the text of the ad, that the Measure would help farmers “starting out” – not wanting to spend tax dollars to help young farmers and ranchers embark on a career. “I don’t want my money to go to establish new ranches,” commented one GOP man.
- ✓ The **“Flood”** ad clearly resonated in terms of the threat it presented; participants were acutely aware of the very real risk of flooding. “I’ve been through this one. More than once,” commented one Republican man. They also liked the spirit in which it was presented with a community coming together. “We unite in tough times,” commented one Democratic respondent. However, a number thought that a reference to Minot was too remote from their community to feel resonant, and noted again that the site specific references were all Western (so this may have been artificially heightened due to the repeated references to the Badlands in the other ad concepts). Finally, several questioned the meaning of “natural flood controls” as noted above.

FIGURE 2:
Ads Designated as Most Persuasive and Most Memorable

Ad	Most Persuasive	Most Memorable
Sportsman	6	3
Flood	3	1
Lose	3	
Rancher	3	
Badlands	2	1
Scientist	1	1
Mom	1	
Ducks		10
Negative 1		1
Negative 2		1

LOWER TIER:

- ✓ The **“Mom”** ad simply did not resonate. The fact that it was set indoors; that she did not appear with her child; and that the mother’s warmth and genuineness were impossible to evaluate all reduced its ability to connect emotionally, despite a theme that was compelling in the polling. **“It’s not REAL,”** wrote one Democratic respondent.

- ✓ The **“Ducks”** ad was deeply polarizing. As shown in **Figure 2**, participants acknowledged that it was memorable and some even felt it was **“cute,”** and it clearly caught their imagination as a concept. However, many said they did not like it – finding it condescending; too light a treatment of a serious subject; or too reminiscent of the AFLAC duck. It should be noted that humorous ads, when presented in storyboards like this, tend to draw negative reactions in focus group settings. But even so, this ad did not appear to rival the competitors.

- **Reactions to the mail were also positive.** After a review of the TV ads, participants were given four mail pieces to review. They were asked to look at all four together, and offer feedback on both text and images. Among the key reactions:
 - ✓ A piece with a beautiful sunset image of the Badlands was one of the most striking images tested in the mail; despite the same reaction as to the TV – that the Badlands was of limited resonance to residents of the eastern part of the state – most of the Democratic participants noted that would still stand out to them in the mail and merit a second look. And Republicans who had been deeply disturbed by repeated references to the Badlands and not other locations in the state in the TV ads, admitted that the images were stunning.

 - ✓ Images of children stood out – both an image of a kids running through a sprinkler and one of a child fishing. Despite minor quibbles over his appearance (a yellow shirt that was not well-received) and the activity of fishing (discussed below), the presence of a child made the mail stand out. However, given the response to the Sportsmen TV ad

concept, it would indicate that having a child and parent/grandparent might be even more powerful.

- ✓ There was an active debate among participants about the relevance and importance of “fishing.” In a mail piece focused entirely on fishing, some participants dismissed it out of hand as being targeted to people in Minnesota, or in western North Dakota – asserting that there simply was no fishing in this part of the state. Others pushed back aggressively – saying they had grown up fishing, and that it was a significant outdoor tradition. There was a general consensus that hunting was an activity that would speak to a broader selection of North Dakotans.
- ✓ Language relating to fiscal accountability stood out strongly in all the mail pieces – particularly that indicating that no taxes would be raised and no funding would be taken away from schools, health, or infrastructure. These points were repeatedly mentioned and underlined in the materials.
- **The opposition’s case made a big impression.** The participants were asked to read and review the opposition press release, as a precursor to the mail, to hear more details about the “no” campaign message. Many of the specific assertions in the release – taking money away from schools, the increase in bureaucracy, the “ninth biggest budget” in state government, the role of out-of-state environmental groups -- were significant concerns. Some Democratic participants were skeptical of the veracity of much of what was asserted. Republicans found it far more credible. However in both groups, these criticisms of the measure raised questions in their minds.

Interestingly, the Democratic and Republican groups viewed the opposition coalition very differently. The Republicans saw it as a group of influential and respected job creators; the Democrats as an agglomeration of interest groups that stood to make money from using, rather than conserving, the land.

- **Taken together, the focus group findings serve to confirm – and sharpen – a number of aspects of our messaging platform:**
 - ✓ The sessions confirmed the central role of *clean water*; voters see it as critical to public health and quality of life, and rank it as the major benefit of Measure 4;
 - ✓ We saw clearly that stating specifically no new taxes is both necessary and important to voters.
 - ✓ The more we can say about accountability – not as a lead message but a subordinate one – the better. Positioning the board as a non-political mechanism to ensure that funds will be used correctly is particularly important.
 - ✓ Discussion of the Badlands needs to be reframed as the Badlands PLUS – meaning protect unique natural areas like the Badlands along with parks, lands along rivers, etc. that will be protected around the state;
 - ✓ We must say that no other spending will be cut as a result of the Measure – not on schools, health, public safety, or any other purpose. It may also be helpful to note that spending in all those areas will in fact increase.

- ✓ Almost any message will benefit from being placed in a *generational* context – as an effort to protect what is good about North Dakota’s quality of life for our children and grandchildren.
- ✓ Invoking *images and experiences that are perceived as truly North Dakotan* – clean water and air, a starry night, hunting, wide open spaces, a pick-up truck and more – is essential to making the message resonate.