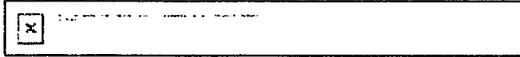


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**From:** sbwhoeop [redacted]  
**Sent:** Friday, October 8, 2010 4:08 PM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** H: The Boehner poll. Sid

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## Drew Westen

Psychologist and neuroscientist; Emory University Professor  
 Posted: October 8, 2010 09:23 AM

## Bringing Up Boehner

According to news reports, today Republican minority leader and Coppertone model John Boehner will give his "closing argument" to the American people on why they should throw out the Democrats and kill the Obama-Pelosi-Reid "job-killing agenda." He will be returning to his working class roots, speaking at a piping manufacturing plant, an unusual venue these days for a man who is seen much more frequently at gatherings of Wall Street executives with open checkbooks and the males-only country club where he works on his tan when not making the rounds at other clubs with industry lobbyists.

Either the Speaker-to-be is following the model of Michael Steele and free-lancing, or Karl Rove and the Republicans believe it is safe or even advantageous to bring him out in public after the White House made an effort to put Boehner's face on what a Republican majority might look like, with the president invoking his name eight times in one speech. I have to admit that at the time I was agnostic as to whether it made sense to try to brand him at this late date, as Boehner has minimal name recognition among voters. But the White House was no doubt responding to three realities. First, Boehner is an unknown to most Americans, which means that, unlike most Republicans in the news, he has not been well branded by the GOP -- which means for once Democrats might actually brand someone or something first rather than playing catch-up. Second, Boehner would indeed be the highest-ranking Republican were the GOP to assume control over the House (other than of course Karl Rove, who is now directing traffic on the right side of the street in Washington again). And third, a concrete face is always better than an abstraction when telling a story, and other than perhaps Sarah Palin, who Republicans could alternately accept and decline as the leader of their party, Boehner's tanned visage and history as errand-boy for virtually every major corporate special interest in his two decades in Washington (including his stint as the Marlboro Man, handing out tobacco lobby campaign checks to his fellow Republicans on the floor of the House) made him a potential counter-villain to the Republican's bogeywoman, Nancy Pelosi.

I remained agnostic until this week, when colleagues at Media Matters Action Network and I conducted a national messaging survey with 1,000 registered voters, selected to match the demographics of the voting and likely voting populations. The goal was to see how effectively we could speak with voters about Boehner as not only the symbol and standard-bearer for the GOP but also the water-boy for corporate America. (The results were surprisingly similar whether we looked at registered voters or likely voters, although as others have described, precisely how to determine who is a "likely voter" in this election is as much art as science, and the point of good messaging at this point is actually to change the dynamics of likely voting, not just to reflect them.)

As detailed in a memo published in Politico, what we found was clear: Boehner is a target well worth defining, who readily stands for precisely what Americans perceive to be the reasons they would have to hold their noses to vote for Congressional Republicans (perhaps the only group left who poll worse than Congressional Democrats with swing voters). We tested both paragraph-length narratives and single-sentence language designed to capture the essence of those narratives, and in each case, we tested them against the toughest opposition language we could test them against: the words of Boehner, Cantor, Limbaugh and others combined in defining the "Obama-Pelosi-Reid" agenda.

What we found, in brief, is that we could beat a tough GOP narrative about the "job-killing" socialists in the White House and Congress by 15 to 20 points with two narratives starring Boehner in the leading role (with best supporting bad actor going in one of the narratives to Karl Rove and his corporate allies), and we could win with over 15 different sentence-long descriptions of "what's the matter with Boehner" with margins ranging from 10 to 60 points against a tough conservative attack on the Obama-Pelosi-Reid axis of conservative evil.

The narratives that most moved likely voters -- including swing voters, who preferred them by double-digits over tough Republican rhetoric -- made clear whose voices Boehner would be speaking for as Speaker (e.g., the Wall Street executives he convened to try to block Wall Street reform). They harnessed the same populist anger at the hijacking of Washington by corporate special interests that has enlivened the tea partiers and is palpable across the political spectrum, and they focused on the extremism of the party Boehner would Speak for. A narrative that brought Karl Rove into the picture was slightly more polarizing with swing voters but slightly more powerful with likely Democratic voters. In some ways what was most surprising was the success of the single-line statements of what we need in a Speaker and who John Boehner really speaks for (although these single-line statements came after the narratives, and likely reflect the power of branding, even over the course of a brief online encounter with voters). They ranged from relatively lofty and aspirational (e.g., "We need a Speaker who is also a listener, who can hear the voices of ordinary Americans" -- a theme colleagues and I found highly resonant across the political spectrum in message testing on the role of money in politics) -- to the harder-edged (e.g., "The Speaker of the House is a heartbeat away from the Presidency. Unfortunately, we know where John Boehner's heart is, and it isn't with the middle class," or "John Boehner understands deficits. He's spent nearly 20 years in Washington creating them.")

If there's a message in this message research, it is at once short-term and long-term. In the short run, if Democrats want to hang onto their seats in November, they would do well to define this election in terms of the middle class and small business versus the billionaires and big corporations that are hijacking our democracy; to use Boehner as a poster child for the party whose primary commitment is to the latter and whose tan is a testament to that commitment; and to avoid giving voters reason to regret their vote if they give it to Democrats again this time, by supporting the things they say they stand for and avoiding that golden mean between the public interest and the special interests that finance campaigns on both sides of the aisle.

In the longer run, branding matters. One of the biggest strategic and messaging mistakes of the last two years was the failure of Democrats to brand their opponents while their opponents were busy branding them -- and in particular the failure to brand the Bush Recession as the natural consequence of failed Republican economic principles. Two years ago, that was a virtually uncontested political proposition, as the voters made clear in handing Democrats the White House and supermajorities in both the House and Senate. Today, the public is split down the middle as to who caused the recession.

Reality doesn't brand itself. Hopefully it won't take a debacle in November and another 10 million jobs lost for reality to unveil itself again for a brief political moment and for progressives to have a second bite at the apple.