

January 6: Making a Case Against Trump and Allies with Small-Town and Rural Voters



RURAL VOTER INSTITUTE RESEARCH, 2022

The Rural Voter Institute conducted a focus group in late summer / early fall exploring perceptions of the events of January 6 and the resulting investigations. This previously unpublished research is of particular importance given the recent subpoena for former President Trump to testify before the Congressional Committee investigating the events of January 6.

Who We Interviewed

Our panelists were registered rural and small-town voters in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Respondents included four men and two women who fell within RVI's persuadable voter profile. Respondents included two Trump-Biden voters, one Stein-Trump voter, and three Trump-Trump voters. One panelist self-described herself as having no party affiliation. Two panelists described themselves as independents, two as lean Republican, and one as a strong Republican. Ideologically, two panelists described themselves as moderates, three as conservatives, and one as a strong conservative. Three panelists labeled themselves "very religious" and three others described themselves as "somewhat religious." Panelists ranged from "some college" to graduate-level education.

Executive Summary

The events of January 6 and the resulting Congressional hearings will be of little influence on the voting decisions of Trump-Trump voters interviewed in RVI's research. The Trump-Biden voters interviewed said the issue would influence how they plan to vote in the Midterms and one Trump-Trump voter said her voting decisions could be impacted.

One question uniformly moved panelists – including the most ardent Trump supporter – into an anti-Trump camp: if Trump encouraged people to bring weapons to the Capitol. When asked their thoughts on people carrying firearms to the events of January 6, panelists uniformly agreed it was wrong, with the most ardent of Trump defenders adding, "If it could be illustrated that Trump encouraged people to bring weapons to the Capitol he should be prosecuted." All panelists uniformly agreed. Panelists also unanimously agreed that individuals who entered the U.S. Capitol unauthorized should be held criminally responsible.

Trump-Trump voters routinely gave Trump the benefit of doubt on his role in the events of January 6. Trump-Biden voters held Trump and his political allies responsible. Trump-Biden voters appeared more informed on the events of January 6 and more informed regarding the Congressional hearings investigating those events.

Topline Findings

How to persuade voters:

Only one point moved voters from their existing beliefs and opinions regarding Trump or his GOP allies: whether or not Trump encouraged people to bring weapons on January 6. If Trump did so, all panelists condemned him, even Trump's most ardent defender in our focus group. The question of weapons at the Capitol was a solidifying point as all panelists agreed that those who entered the Capitol without authorization should be prosecuted.

How the issue moves voters:

Without any proactive messaging, Trump-Biden voters were disgruntled with both Trump and Trump-supporting Republicans and said it would influence their voting decisions for the midterms and 2024. Trump-Trump voters were not moved in terms of their voting decisions or political beliefs until panelists brought up the question of whether or not Trump encouraged people to bring weapons on January 6.

Priorities that are top of mind:

Panelists' priorities for the upcoming election largely remained focused on the questions of the economy and inflation. The events of January 6 and the ensuing investigation took a backseat, as one panelist described the events of January 6: "It's a sad disgraceful thing that happened but there are things impacting people's daily lives that are more important."

How to reach target voters:

Trump-Biden voters were reasonably informed about the events of January 6 and the resulting Congressional investigations, Trump-Trump and Stein-Trump voters less so. Based on where respondents said they got their news Democrats must find a way to get messaging and information out to those who largely consume information within the right-wing media ecosphere.

Findings

When asked if the events of January 6 were a bad thing, every panelist agreed but one; the most ardent Trump defender said he was neutral on the events of January 6.

When asked if Trump had a role in the events of January 6 (and if so, how to define it) Trump-Trump voters were split. One Trump-Trump voter said, "I think he had a role. Power was leaving him to go to Biden. I don't know a whole lot about Trump's involvement in January 6. Basically, what I know is that Tweet: come on over it's going to be fun or a ride or whatever."

Others gave him the benefit of the doubt. One said that Trump might have known something was going to happen because of his posts on social media, "but I don't know if he knew how far it would go." One Trump-Trump voter referred to Trump as the "spiritual leader of the MAGA movement" and that "people were following his lead," but that, "He didn't intend to incite riots. I don't believe he wanted any violence." The Trump-Stein voter said Trump had an indirect role, that Trump "probably knew what would happen... hoped for it," and added that Trump was "probably 15 percent responsible. He just wanted a protest, not violence." Both Trump-Biden voters criticized the former President's role in the events of January 6. One said, "I definitely think he [Trump] had a role. I know legally the definition of "incite" is pretty hard to prove

but setting aside the legal [aspect], I had a friend who asked what I thought about Trump vs. Tony Evers with the rioting we had in Kenosha. So, I went to their Twitter feeds. Trump said ...'be there it will be wild' and Evers said [ahead of Kenosha] 'if you protest please do so peacefully.' When I think of Trump's role, I think of him lacking governing skills and him fueling a fire."

When asked their thoughts on people carrying firearms to the events of January 6, panelists uniformly agreed it was a bad idea, with the most ardent of Trump defenders adding, "If it could be illustrated that Trump encouraged people to bring weapons to the Capitol he should be prosecuted." All panelists uniformly agreed. Panelists also unanimously agreed that individuals who entered the U.S. Capitol unauthorized should be held criminally responsible.

Only Trump-Biden voters said the events of January 6 would influence their voting decisions for 2022 or 2024. One Trump-Trump voter indicated her voting decisions could be impacted by information yet to come out in the investigation.

When asked if they believed Trump was "fueling the fire" of the events on January 6, Trump-Trump voters said they were undecided, but the Trump-Biden and Stein-Trump voters said "yes." Separately, one Trump-Trump voter said events on January 6 were "out of control" and those responsible should be "held accountable."

When asked what they had heard about the events of January 6 or the resulting Congressional hearings, half the panel responded that they had heard or read that Trump had requested Nancy Pelosi to dispatch the National Guard to quell the unrest at the Capitol, but she had refused, and insinuated Trump was therefore unfairly blamed for the violence that occurred.

The two Trump-Biden voters expressed reservations about Trump and his role in the events of January 6: "I don't care what side of the fence they're on, you can't overturn an election. Can anyone defend that? ...We were that close to having them overthrow the government on January 6. It's important it never happen again." Another added, "January 6 was one of the most difficult days for me as an American. One pride of our country had been doing the transfer of power peacefully. I understand how people had different views, but I'm frustrated by the information out there [referring to conservative misinformation]. I'm convinced Biden won fairly but Trump didn't want to give up the power. One of the hard things for me to stomach ...is the conspiracy being more widely accepted."

One female Trump-Trump voter downplayed the events of January 6 and said from the video she had seen she did not think it was "fair" to call it "storming the Capitol," noting that she had observed on video those participating "climbing in windows [but] nobody firing rifles." She said she didn't believe this "ram-shackled mob was there to overthrow the government."

A Stein-Trump voter disagreed with her, saying, "They basically stormed the capitol. ...I think it was a whistle call: Trump saying 'hey you think you can do something like this we'll show you how much power we really got. It was about them not choosing me, not selecting me.' I don't think it was justified but I like Trump. If he's racist he's out in the open about it ...That's why I like him he keeps it real."

A self-described conservative Trump-Biden voter described his perception of the events of January 6 saying, "There was an attempt for Trump to take the presidency without winning the election and Pence not to certify the election and that would have gone to the Supreme Court. In addition to the legal maneuvering there was a tweet for people to come. It would be a wild ride. And, there were some people who didn't plan to be violent and some who did plan to be violent. And, during Trump's speech people

started walking to the capitol. And, during that session of them verifying election results the presence of a large mob is the best way I can describe it some people had no intention of entering the capitol – some did. There was a lot of beating up of capitol police. Eventually our congress was able to flee and there was vandalism in the capitol. There was a woman who died in the capitol and four police officers who committed suicide after. Those police officers wouldn't have committed suicide if they weren't there on January 6."

When asked if law enforcement officers who defended the Capitol on January 6 and later committed suicide should be considered casualties of January 6, four respondents said yes and two Trump-Trump voters, one male and one female, said they did not know enough about the situation to have an opinion, even though one was otherwise well-versed in January 6 discussions.

When asked their perceptions of the news coverage of the events of January 6, the most ardent Trump defender said the coverage had all been orchestrated in an attempt to prevent Trump from running for office again. He said he had not heard much coverage of the Congressional hearings but thought they were biased because there were only two Republicans on the committee.

Two more Trump-Trump voters said they had not seen enough coverage of the Congressional hearings to have an opinion. One expressed her surprise that focus would be placed on the Congressional hearings, saying, "It's a sad, disgraceful thing that happened but there are things impacting people's daily lives that are more important."

Both Trump-Biden voters said they had seen coverage of the hearings, one noting that he had only seen coverage and had not watched the actual hearings. Both voiced their frustration with misinformation defending Trump and disparaging the hearings they had observed. Both specifically mentioned "Tucker and Hannity." One noted, "There was doubt injected about the facts of January 6. ...I don't think there is doubt in what happened." Trump-Trump and Stein-Trump voters said they had not followed the coverage of the hearings, but one noted he believed coverage was orchestrated to hurt Trump's chances to run for office again.