

Rural Voters: Gas Prices, Inflation, and the War in Ukraine



RURAL VOTER INSTITUTE RESEARCH, 2022

The Rural Voter Institute conducted a focus group in late May of 2022 with rural and small-town voters in Midwest battleground states to discuss current events, with particular emphasis on gas prices, inflation, the war in Ukraine, and current political attitudes ahead of this year's election.

Who We Interviewed

Our panelists were registered rural and small-town voters in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. Respondents included six women and two men who fell within RVI's persuadable voter profile. Six respondents self-reported as split-ticket voters, including two Trump-Biden voters. Three respondents described themselves as ideological moderates and six as ideological conservatives. Respondents included three who described themselves as having no party affiliation, another three as leaning Republican, and another two as strong Republicans. Six participants self-identified as "white" or "Caucasian" and one as Native American and another as Hispanic.

Executive Summary

The latest research by the Rural Voter Institute not only emphasizes the dire predicament Democrats face on the issues of gas prices and inflation going into the midterm elections, but also offers a path for Democrats to discuss the issue with rural and small-town voters in an effective way to narrow margins of loss enough in November to win.

Panelists felt a palpable frustration with and dislike for President Biden and Democrats, including both Trump-Biden voters who expressed regret for having voted for Biden. Having done custom rural voter research in these three states over the past two years, this was the worst animosity toward Democrats we have observed in our research.

Inflation, gas prices, and the economy were a top concern for almost all voters. When asked whose fault the high gas prices were, panelists almost universally assigned blame to President Biden, the Democrats, and those in charge in Washington.

Over and over, voters complained of the hardship from increasing gas prices and escalating prices at the grocery store.

Roughly half of our panelists responded effectively to one argument about the increase in gas prices and inflation, and it was tied to the war in Ukraine.

When asked how the U.S. is involved in the War in Ukraine, six panelists said the U.S. had sent troops, one said she was unsure, and another said she was too unaware of the situation to be undecided. Six panelists said the U.S. is sending money to Ukraine for the war. No panelist thought the U.S. was doing the “right” amount in Ukraine. Panelists either believed the U.S. was doing too much, too little, or were undecided. When asked if they saw higher gas prices as part of a war effort or part of our country fighting for freedom around the world, no respondents agreed. Five directly said no. Three remained undecided.

When the point was made that in World War 2 there were higher prices for all kinds of items and shortages of goods because of the war effort, panelists were asked if they saw the current economic situation with inflation and gas prices like that or differently. Three female panelists agreed the situations were similar, and one was undecided but leaned strongly in that direction.

Exit polls in 2016 and 2020 in Wisconsin offered insights on the effect of narrowing the margin of loss with rural voters. Hillary Clinton lost Wisconsin rural voters by 26 points. Donald Trump carried the state and won the White House. Joe Biden lost rural voters by 23 points, carried the state, and won the White House.

Narrowing the margin with rural and small-town voters by as few as three in 100 can change the outcome of an election. Finding an argument that effectively addressed the issue with nearly half of our panelists was significant if Democrats will take the initiative to communicate effectively and directly with rural and small-town voters.

Topline Findings:

- **Panelists felt a palpable frustration with and dislike for President Biden and Democrats,** including both Trump-Biden voters who expressed regret for having voted for Biden.
 - One female panelist said, “I couldn’t vote for any Democrat right now. You couldn’t pay me enough.” One male panelist added, “Biden let us down.”
 - One Trump-Biden voter said, “I initially voted for Trump, then some of the actions ...seeing what he was doing on Twitter, that was a real turn off so I voted the other way for Biden in hopes that something would change. Obviously, I screwed up.” The other Trump-Biden voter added, “I voted for Biden. I don’t think he’s done anything great. I don’t think he’s done anything at all. I don’t know if I’d vote [in future elections]. Maybe just vote in local elections. I don’t think it would make a difference.”
- **When asked how the U.S. is involved in the War in Ukraine,** six panelists said the U.S. had sent troops, one said she was unsure, and another said she was unaware. Six panelists said the U.S. is sending money to Ukraine for the war.
 - No panelist thought current elected officials were handling the war in Ukraine well.
 - No panelist thought the U.S. was doing the “right” amount in Ukraine. Panelists either believed the U.S. was doing too much, too little, or were undecided.
 - Panelists were critical of the administration’s handling of the war, were concerned too much money was being spent, and multiple panelists felt the U.S. approach to Russia was not aggressive enough.

- Only two of the eight panelists said they had seen evidence of non-government U.S. entities helping with relief or similar activities for Ukraine.
- **Inflation, gas prices, and the economy were a top concern for almost all voters.** When asked whose fault are the high gas prices, panelists almost universally assigned blame to President Biden, the Democrats, and those in charge in Washington. One panelist blamed lobbyists.
 - One male panelist commented, “We’re in for some hard times ... the leadership in the U.S. is poor right now and they aren’t hearing the struggles of the American people.”
 - “I do OK right now, but if they [costs of living] get much more expensive it’s going to get really tough,” a female panelist said.
 - “Pretty soon the middle class is going to be the lower class. ...We don’t want to get too involved in overseas countries [because it] could start World War 3 but pretty soon we are going to [face] World War 3 because we are self-destructing ourselves and setting ourselves up for failure [economically],” a female panelist added. “If you are a single mom with a long drive to work you can’t do it with these gas prices. It’s spiraling down more. House prices are going up. Where are these people going to live? It’s not just a little more expense or just gas prices going up,” she said, referring to an economic ripple effect.
 - When a discussion of raising the minimum wage ensued, five panelists said the minimum wage should be higher, two said it should be lower, and one remained undecided.
- **Roughly half of respondents responded effectively to one argument about the increase in gas prices and inflation.** When asked if they saw the higher gas prices as part of a war effort or part of our country fighting for freedom around the world, no respondents agreed, five directly said no, and three remained undecided.
 - When the point was made that in World War 2 there were higher prices for all kinds of items and shortages of items because of the war effort, panelists were asked if they saw the current economic situation with inflation and gas prices like that or different. Three female panelists agreed and one was undecided but leaned in that direction.
- **The Uvalde Texas shooting massacre was top of mind for panelists.** When asked, three respondents said current gun laws needed to be stricter, three said current gun laws were just right, one said current gun laws were too strict, and one was undecided. Those who said current gun laws needed to be stricter or were strict enough were all female. The two panelists who were undecided or said gun laws should be less strict were both male.

Findings

Top of Mind

When panelists were asked what important current issues they were hearing about in the news the most prevalent answer was the massacre in Uvalde, Texas. Panelists of all political and ideological backgrounds seemed to be aware of it and discussed it with some detail. Female respondents occasionally linked their concerns about the news to their own communities and families. One self-described conservative who leaned Republican said “something needs to be done” about school shootings, but she didn’t know what.

When asked, three respondents said current gun laws needed to be stricter, three said current gun laws were just right, one said current gun laws were too strict and one was undecided. Those who said current gun laws needed to be stricter or were strict enough were all female. The two panelists who were undecided or said gun laws should be less strict were both male.

Other items mentioned as recently featured in the news included rising gas prices, the war in Ukraine, inflation, the shortage of baby formula, Monkeypox, and immigration and border security. State-specific news and local issues mentioned included natural disasters (tornado), marijuana related news, gambling regulations (sports betting), and the opioid crisis.

Elections Ahead, Perceptions of Biden

One female panelist explained her political views saying, “I didn’t vote for Biden – not this dementia patient. I believed in Trump and his politics and the direction he was heading and that’s the direction I’m going to go. It has nothing to do with Democrat or Republican. I agree with both on some things but the direction we were headed as an economy and a country is what I’m voting for in November.”

Other panelists agreed.

A female panelist added, “I couldn’t vote for any Democrat right now. You couldn’t pay me enough.”

“Biden let us down,” one male panelist added.

Both Trump-Biden voters indicated they would not vote for him again.

One said, “I initially voted for Trump, then some of the actions ...seeing what he was doing on Twitter, that was a real turn off so I voted the other way for Biden in hopes that something would change. Obviously, I screwed up.”

The other Trump-Biden voter added, “I voted for Biden. I don’t think he’s done anything great. I don’t think he’s done anything at all. I don’t know if I’d vote [in future elections]. Maybe just vote in local elections. I don’t think it would make a difference.”

A male panelist added that he was so discouraged by national politics he only planned to vote in state and local elections on upcoming ballots.

The War in Ukraine

One panelist, a two-time Trump voter, summarized the War in Ukraine saying, “[The] Ukrainian people were minding their own business and Russia and Putin decided they want to take over the southside by the ocean or lake and control a canal, and Putin wants to get it to control the canal to control oil supply shipping. The U.S. and other countries are spending billions, and I think it’s terrible – terrible war and

refugees trying to escape ...It's just an evil empire from Russia, [not] all the Russian people ...The money we are spending is worth it to the Ukrainians and might be worth it to NATO and European people. We are or were the world's premiere empire and we have the power to do it and not everybody does. Unfortunately, it's taxpayer money going over there to do it. ...seems like an awful lot of money. We need to kick Putin back into one of his castles in Russia."

Other panelists described a lack of knowledge of the situation.

One self-described "moderate" two-time-Trump voter and self-described ticket splitter said, "I've heard bits and pieces ...We're trying to help them out, but our country needs to start focusing on our country. But there is so much focus on all these other countries we're not helping our people here."

Four panelists said they were unsure of what to believe about the War in Ukraine because they said so much false information was being circulated.

When asked where they had been getting information about what was happening in Ukraine, respondents named the following sources:

- Tik Tok
- Washington Post
- Social media
- Google
- International news outlets
- Local TV news
- Friends and water cooler talk
- News app on their phones
- MSNBC (when watching at work)

When asked how the U.S. is involved in the War in Ukraine, six panelists said the U.S. had sent troops, one said she was unsure, and another said she was unaware. Six panelists said the U.S. is sending money to Ukraine for the War.

One panelist complained, "We should have beaten Russia by now," and that the U.S. should have been more aggressive militarily. Four indicated the U.S. was spending too much or "doing too much" for Ukraine and one complained that the money being spent was not accounted for and might be "just going to Russia and to Putin. ...It's not that we are doing too much or too little – we are going about it wrong. If our military or our money stops then Putin will just take over and take the weapons and the money we gave. We should send our military to get this over with instead of just handing over money and firearms."

Another panelist complained, "We could have done more at the beginning, right at the very beginning, and stopped Putin in his tracks – stopped [the] Russian military in its tracks." He described what he called a "weak beginning by the American government. ...Why fight the war in Ukraine and why not take it to Russia – right into Moscow."

A Trump-Biden voter said, we "could have done more by now."

No panelist thought the U.S. was doing the "right" amount in Ukraine. Panelists either believed the U.S. was doing too much, too little, or were undecided.

Only two of the eight panelists said they had seen evidence of non-governmental U.S. entities helping with relief or similar activities for Ukraine.

When asked how U.S. elected officials were handling the situation in Ukraine, one female panelist said no action from U.S. elected officials had any merit, “just lots of blah blah blah,” and said officials of both parties lacked backbone. “It’s not necessarily Democrat or Republican. We’ve had other leaders who at least had something to say and were present and trying.”

She went on to praise Trump and criticize Biden’s leadership and other panelists agreed.

Another panelist added, “I don’t think they know what they are doing. They are just making too many mistakes, caving in to the same old story that unfolded in the Middle East, the same old story in Southeast Asia. Our people are suffering for it.”

Another panelist added, “I don’t know [if] they even know what to do or have a clue.”

One panelist was specifically critical of Senator Amy Klobuchar going to Ukraine for what he called a “photo op.”

Another panelist defaulted to think of her state officials rather than federal, saying that her governor and lieutenant governor were not that involved in the Ukraine situation.

Inflation, Economy, and Gas Prices

One male panelist commented, “We’re in for some hard times ...the leadership in the U.S. is poor right now and they aren’t hearing the struggles of the American people.”

One self-described moderate who considered herself a “strong Republican” said inflation was the top concern facing the nation currently, and specifically named gas prices as a major problem.

Another female respondent talked about the pain of current gas prices and went on to describe other economic woes of increasing costs of living and a perceived rise in unemployment going up. She also linked the increasing cost of gas to “pipelines being closed.”

“It’s getting worse and worse,” she summarized. She said the “unknowns” of the future drive her fear.

One male panelist diagnosed societal ills saying, “The problem today is we don’t help the other guy out.”

A Trump-Biden voter said that the most concerning issue for her was the economy. “I do OK right now, but if they [costs of living] get much more expensive it’s going to get really tough.”

When a discussion of raising the minimum wage ensued, five panelists said the minimum wage should be higher, two said it should be lower, and one remained undecided.

When asked whose fault are the high gas prices, panelists almost universally assigned blame to President Biden, the Democrats, and those in charge in Washington. One panelist blamed lobbyists.

A female panelist complained of the current leadership in Washington contributing to a negative economic situation in the country. She referred to the “free money” during the pandemic “not being free” and linking it to the rising cost of milk and other groceries.

“Pretty soon the middle class is going to be the lower class. ...We don’t want to get too involved in overseas countries [because it] could start World War 3 but pretty soon we are going to [face] World War 3 because we are self-destructing ourselves and setting ourselves up for failure [economically],” she said.

Another female panelist added, “If you are a single mom with a long drive to work you can’t do it with these gas prices. It’s spiraling down more. House prices are going up. Where are these people going to live? It’s not just a little more expense or just gas prices going up.” She said, referring to an economic ripple effect.

A male panelist added, “It’s the farmers and truckers and airlines and all these things that depend on fuel and it’s too much of a burden,” and said it could drive a revolution in the country.

Another female panelist added that the circumstances are “ridiculous how much the gas prices are” noting that she drives 30 miles each day to work.

She said definitively that the gas prices are not related to the War in Ukraine, but are “Biden’s fault.”

Another female panelist added that, “the gas prices are a shame. From what I hear it does have something to do with Ukraine. ...also inflation on groceries is the worst I’ve ever seen and the worst is yet to come. We’re going to be going into a recession.”

Possible Solution

When asked if they saw the higher gas prices as part of a war effort or part of our country fighting for freedom around the world, none said yes, five said no, and three remained undecided.

When the point was made that in World War 2 there were higher prices for all kinds of items and shortages of items because of the war effort, panelists were asked if they saw the current economic situation with inflation and gas prices like that or different. Three female panelists agreed.

One female panelist who agreed explained, “It was the same thing with World War 2 because they were trying to cut off resources so they could overpower America and that’s what is happening.”

Another chimed in, “It’s basically the same situation.”

The one undecided panelist chimed in that she agreed with their reasoning in the comparison to World War 2, but was “in the middle” because we generally had more resources today than then.

The panelists who disagreed said they did so based on the difference they perceived in the mission of World War 2 and the circumstances coming out of the Great Depression.