

COVID-19

RURAL VOTER INSTITUTE RESEARCH
SUMMER 2020



As part of the Rural Voter Institute's research, RVI explored perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic among rural voters in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. The focus groups; held in May, June, and July, found COVID-19 a top-of-mind issue for most panelists.

Understanding the mindset of the rural voters regarding COVID-19 involved considering a range of perspectives. Top line findings included below, followed by perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic related to public health, the economy, federal government response, and state government response.

Top Line Findings

- Almost universal among panelists was a belief the pandemic's impacts on the economy and small businesses were greater than its impact on public health and local community health.
- Rural voters perceived a strong distinction between the pandemic's impact and dynamic in rural communities versus urban and suburban communities and they believed public policy decisions regarding the pandemic should acknowledge that. Panelists were largely critical of their state government's response to the pandemic.
- Rural voters strongly supported addressing rural healthcare access, rural hospitals and rural health infrastructure.
- Overwhelmingly, panelists believed the worst effects of the pandemic were still to come, whether they considered those effects to be economic or related to public health.
- With a few exceptions, respondents were generally pessimistic, including anxiety over COVID-19 concerns. Panelists were feeling the health, economic and social impacts of life during a pandemic.
- Health care was a top-testing issue for rural voters when polled, and polling and focus groups explored how to best communicate health care agenda items in context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its perception among rural voters.

How to talk about COVID-19:

When talking about the economic impact and possible stimulus or aid, refer to "helping hardworking Americans" and "supporting our small business". ... We need leaders who understand that what's best for Milwaukee or Madison may not be what what's best for our community."

Link the pandemic response to the importance of protecting rural hospitals and supporting our rural healthcare infrastructure.

Rather than engaging in a debate about the established science around the virus with disbelievers, consistently reference that if anything, the Coronavirus outbreak has shown us how important it is for everyone to have quality and affordable health care. Wisconsin Democrats believe we must lock in protections for those with pre-existing conditions and make the cost of health care and prescription drugs more affordable.

Most importantly, look for examples in your life or experience – or the experience of those close to you – that identify with overcoming challenges in small business affairs, including the business of small and family owned farms, and what you took away from that. Look to personal narratives about the importance of quality health care to save or improve life as well as the importance of access to that care within rural communities.

Self-identified people of faith (Christian), across the panels, referenced the COVID-19 pandemic in religious terms, some likening it to a test from God and others relating it loosely to “end-time” beliefs.

As the research was conducted from late May to Mid-July, COVID-19 cases across country in rural communities had not yet spiked. At the time of these groups, the most conservative panelists likened the killer virus to a “bad cold” or “the regular flu” and said COVID-19 was hype created by a conspiracy to hurt Trump’s presidency. Still other panelists knew people that experienced the virus and believed it to be a serious public health concern.

Perceptions of COVID-19: Public Health, Personal Impact

Those participants who were presented with messages about the rural health care system and supporting rural hospitals were supportive and most panelists connected strongly with the idea of supporting rural access to health care and emergency care both when tested in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and when tested as a standalone issue.

Supporting rural hospitals and rural health care was a top concern among issues tested in polling of rural voters. One effective means to communicate about the COVID-19 pandemic linked to convictions about health care would resemble a statement such as: “The Coronavirus outbreak has shown us how important it is for everyone to have quality and affordable health care. I believe we must lock in protections for those with pre-existing conditions and make the cost of health care and prescription drugs more affordable.”

Two panelists had friends who died because of COVID-19. One of the panelists, who was close to the friend, had to go into isolation as a result. “It’s scary to think how close it is to anyone’s doorsteps. You can die if you don’t have proper treatment, I think that’s what’s scary.”

The death of her friend seemed to impact the worldview of the second panelist. “She wasn’t a close friend, but it makes it surreal...it makes it scarier that it happened to someone I know. ... People look at you funny if you’re not wearing a mask ... life in general is very different.”

Another panelist spoke about how COVID-19 has impacted her life by talking about how she had not left the house much but was starting to “hang out with family and stuff.” Although she said she was less worried about getting it herself than she was about spreading to other people, she said she feared being quarantined away from her 9-month old daughter.

A panelist also spoke about his fears for his child who would soon be born. “I have great reservations about bringing a child into this world, into this chaos.”

Another fear for panelists was children not returning to school this fall. A farmer found the care and education of her young children a challenge and distance learning as a time when teenagers were getting bored and destructive. “I work 50 hours a week away from the farm at a job, take care of the calves, keep the books for the farm, and now I manage my four kids schooling with distance learning,” she said. “I don’t feel I have the training for it.”

Panelists were anxious for “life to get back to normal.” They wanted people to get back to work. They wanted their local businesses to reopen. They wanted their children to go back to school.

For the panelists who believed that COVID-19 was more than a hoax or another flu, there was agreement that there would be a resurgence.

These focus groups were conducted prior to the most recent surge in rural cases and Midwestern cases, and some panelists were vocal in downplaying the severity of infections and the risks of the pandemic; although it is certainly possible that some of these voters view the outbreak in more serious terms as the crisis has prolonged.

Some panelists brought up that COVID-19 was a “city” issue and believed it far removed from their own communities as a health or public safety issue. One panelist articulated this view saying that COVID-19 was “predominantly a problem for cities,” and for her area “done.” She blamed COVID-19’s impact for rural hospital closures because hospitals were financially hurt when people were not having elective procedures.

Another panelist said those dying from COVID-19 were “city people.” City people were “stacked up like sardines and already have their respiratory systems messed up,” while rural residents do not sanitize everything and “we ate enough dirt.” This panelist was also upset that people could not go to hospitals “for elective procedures” but were able to seek medical abortions.

Perceptions of COVID-19: The Economy

The worry over economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic tended to be more prevalent in conversations with panelists than the public or personal health concerns. One panelist summed up her concerns with the pandemic, saying: “The businesses are hurting. Well, there goes the jobs. We’re all going to be poor.”

Panelists often linked their concerns for small businesses weathering the pandemic to larger concerns for the future of small business as the backbone of local rural economies. Panelists described downtowns that lost business to nearby big box stores or losing business to e-commerce. Some panelists were frustrated that businesses being required to shutdown to limit the spread of COVID-19 resulted in their having to drive longer distances and pay more for basic necessities.

Another theme was how COVID-19 fits into a larger frame of concerns about the economy. An older Republican was concerned her small community didn’t have the business or activity it did of her youth. Another Republican worried about businesses being taxed out of existence and environmental regulations stifling the sand mining industry. Other panelists worried about businesses surviving the COVID-19 economy, the broader impact of online shopping on local retail and limited career opportunities in their rural community. Panelists addressed short-term concerns such as caring for children as well as long-term concerns including if Social Security will be around when they retire.

Perceptions of Federal Government Response

In terms of handling the COVID-19 pandemic, panelists had criticism for and frustrated with elected officials. A Republican panelist said that both parties vote against good ideas if they come from the other party. He praised the COVID-19 stimulus package that both sides came together to pass but thought both sides brought unnecessary spending into it for their own political gain.

In its first stimulus package, the federal government approved an additional \$600 a week in unemployment to help Americans who whose businesses had closed. Given the recurring concern rural voters have expressed in testing about the concept of work, it is critical to message this in terms of support for hardworking families who have lost income despite their best efforts – a hand up to help them get back to a place of working again.

One panelist expressed doubt that COVID-19 was real, he would still like to see more stimulus money. On the flip side, one panelist said the first stimulus check went to big businesses and wherever U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi wanted it to go.

Perceptions of State Government Response

Panelists were critical of state leaders for shut-down orders – sometimes in a general sense and sometimes specifically because the shutdown orders took a blanket approach and rural residents felt that not all areas of the state had the same dynamics for community spread of the virus.

One panelist described state shut-down orders as “wishy-washy” because the panelist said a person could get their dog groomed but not get a hair cut themselves. At least one state’s leaders were accused of wanting the economy to shut down.

One Wisconsin panelist noted that Governor Tony Evers was forced by the state’s Supreme Court to allow businesses to reopen. The panelist said, “what’s the point of having a governor if they can’t make those decisions?” critical of the state Supreme Court. “I don’t like how he gave up as fast as he did,” to the Court’s authority.

While participants were pessimistic about the economic impacts of COVID-19, they also had feelings of persecution or threats to their values of hard work, independence, self-determination, and their faith tradition. Of the state stay-at-home orders, one panelist said, “It sucks staying at home, but I think the order was dropped too soon, and people are going to want to be going out there.”