

“What was Trump Hiding?” – Rural and Small-Town Voter Perceptions of the Search at Mar-a-Lago



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The Rural Voter Institute conducted a focus group in August exploring perceptions of the search at Mar-a-Lago recovering classified documents taken by former President Donald Trump as well as perceptions of the events of January 6. The Rural Voter Institute is publishing two reports, one focused on perceptions of the Mar-a-Lago search and one focused on January 6 and the ensuing Congressional hearings.

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 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

Initially, a majority of panelists were critical of the search at Mar-a-Lago. Only one panelist considered seizure of classified documents from Trump’s possession to be justified, and one other panelist withheld judgment. However, a majority of panelists (including Trump-Trump voters) said they would change their minds based on the final results of the seizure of documents (and by connection, their opinions of Trump) based on what was or wasn’t in the classified documents seized.

Based on conversations with focus group participants, Democrats need to pose the question, “what was Trump hiding?” Trump supporters indicated they would be moved by the results of the seizure, specifically if Trump was “hiding” something with the classified documents he took from the White House. Panelists, including Trump-Trump voters, believed he should be held accountable for any wrongdoing.

From false narratives about Trump’s cooperation with the FBI over classified documents to a general lack of information about the events at Mar-a-Lago, the impacts of the right-wing media ecosystem were apparent with those panelists who got their information from ideologically slanted sources. Democrats must be prepared to take the case to right-wing media outlets – recognizing that it is a rigged playing field, but nonetheless necessary.

Topline Findings

Results of the seizure of classified documents from Mar-a-Lago matter. A majority of panelists, including Trump-Trump voters, said they would change their opinions of what happened at Mar-a-Lago depending on what was found there.

What was Trump hiding? One Trump-Trump voter explained that if the former president was guilty of hiding something, “Then he should be punished in a way that’s fair to everybody. Just because he’s the president doesn’t mean he should be elite and above suffering.” Democrats must drive the narrative, “What was Trump hiding?”

Be proactive about publicizing Trump’s lack of cooperation in turning over documents. The idea that Trump had already handed over all classified documents requested was evident in the group. Democrats must be prepared to expel this myth proactively as part of raising the narrative, “What was Trump hiding?”

Be prepared to take the case to the right-wing media ecosystem. Information matters, and the more information (mainstream news compared to the right-wing media ecosphere) voters received, the greater their reservations about Trump and his classified documents held at Mar-a-Lago. Democrats must be prepared to take the case to these voters on the platforms where they are consuming information.

Findings

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.

When asked what they had been following in the news, half of the panelists responded first with “Mar-a-Lago.” Other responses included monkeypox, airline cancellations, the Inflation Reduction Act, inflation, and student loan debt forgiveness. The Inflation Reduction Act was referenced with fears it increases taxes and increases the number of Internal Revenue Service agents.

Two Trump-Trump voters (one male and one female) reported getting their news from conservative sources including talk radio and Fox News. Another Trump-Trump voter (female) said her primary sources of news were ABC and CBS. One self-described conservative Trump-Biden voter said his primary sources of news included The Dispatch and Morning Brew. A self-described moderate Trump-Biden voter said he followed the news on ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox (including national and local affiliates for all of them) and that he watched CNN occasionally. The Stein-Trump voter said his primary source of news was the major networks and local affiliates.

The most steadfast Trump supporters seemed to see a connection between the events at the U.S. Capitol on January 6 and the events at Mar-a-Lago. When describing the news coverage of the attack on the U.S. Capitol, one panelist described it as though someone was dictating, “What can we do to make Donald Trump look bad and destroy any future attempts at him being president? And, that leads right into the Mar-a-Lago debacle.” Another panelist, a self-described moderate Stein-Trump voter, said the document search at Mar-a-Lago “might” be “payback” for the January 6 storm on the U.S. Capitol.

When asked to explain what happened with events at Mar-a-Lago, one Trump-Trump voter who gets his information from conservative sources said, “For the first time in history the FBI raided a former president’s residence, and that’s going to have a major backfire on the people that did [that] and it’s going to drive GOP voters who were already motivated to be super motivated.”

One self-described moderate Trump-Biden voter said of the search at Mar-a-Lago, “I don’t have a problem with the raid on Mar-a-Lago. Those documents [shouldn’t be there].”

One self-described conservative Trump-Biden voter described the events at Mar-a-Lago as an effort “to look for top secret documents that shouldn’t have left the White House. For me, my understanding of the event is [that] I’m not exactly sure if it was a good idea or not, or justified or not, but I think with this sort of intense investigation of the former president – either way it’s going to be intense. We’ll hear more in the future as the FBI tells us what they were up to. It’s hard for me to tell until more information comes out.”

One female Trump-Trump voter with a graduate degree described the events at Mar-a-Lago as “extreme,” saying that Trump was already cooperating with the FBI. She said Trump had given the FBI whatever they asked for up to that point. She generally described the events at Mar-a-Lago as a misuse and abuse of power.

Another female Trump-Trump voter described the events at Mar-a-Lago as “feeling like...a big conspiracy to keep him from ever being the president again.”

A majority of panelists, including Trump-Trump voters, said they would change their opinions of what happened at Mar-a-Lago depending on what was found there. One Trump-Trump voter explained that if the former president was guilty of hiding something, “Then he should be punished in a way that’s fair to everybody. Just because he’s the president doesn’t mean he should be elite and above suffering.