

Rural And Small-Town Voters: Biden's Economic Record

The Rural Voter Institute's 2023 research (conducted summer of 2023) examined perceptions around three potential factors in the 2024 election: Trump's mishandling of classified information, Biden's economic record, and the public policy issue of crime and safety – a much hyped issue in the most recent mid-term election.

WHO WE INTERVIEWED

For purposes of the focus group, rural and small-town panelists came from communities between 200 and 27,000. The research was conducted June 28, 2023. Panelists were required to be registered voters who considered themselves ideologically conservative or moderate, self-identified as Republican or no-party-ID, and at least two participants had to self-identify as either Trump-Biden voters or Hillary-Trump voters. The focus group was required to be a mix of genders. Other panelist demographic data was collected and analyzed for purposes of this report.

The focus group included six male and three female voters from the states of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, all of whom voted for Trump in at least one of the two past Presidential elections. Three panelists resided in Michigan, two in Minnesota, and four in Wisconsin. Three panelists lived in communities of less than 1,000 residents. Three panelists were from communities between 5,000 and 10,000 residents. One panelist was from a community between 10,000 and 15,000 residents, another from between 15,000-20,000 and another from a community of just over 26,000 residents. All panelists self-identified as lean Republican, independent or without party identification except for one panelist who identified as a strong Republican. Ideologically, the panelists identified as moderate to conservative except for one who identified as very conservative.

TOPLINE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Panelists' disinclination to believe the positive aspects of Biden's economic record posed a vulnerability for Biden.
- Economic crises already plagued rural America before inflation began to rise, creating an economic angst exacerbated by the rural-specific nature of these issues and complexities of rural identity.
- Rather than trusting official reports or facts, panelists "feel" the economy through tangible commodity prices and at the time of this focus group were feeling intense economic angst. Panelists appeared to assess the economy and their own economic

circumstance through consumer prices rather than employment reports and economic statistics. Further research might yield insights on the disparity between big cities driving national economic performance matrices and rural areas or small towns' role in those matrices and how this creates a further disconnect in the perception of economic conditions for rural and small-town voters.

- Panelists lacked trust in official economic statistics or rhetoric and instead focused on their own lived experience.
- Consideration of using real-people testimonials to deliver the Biden economic narrative while acknowledging continued felt economic pressures is warranted. This approach would match the lived-experience perception of panelists. As one respondent put it, "Show me. Like, I haven't seen that happen in my area. You know, I haven't heard of people getting jobs or businesses expanding or nothing like that. So, where's it happening at? Show me where it's happening at." [male WI voter, 36, no party affiliation, Trump-Biden voter]

FINDINGS

Economic concerns were prominent amongst focus group participants. Panelists referenced their own experience and economic difficulties and challenges with inflation and rising grocery prices. An economic angst was apparent amongst panelists and although it was voiced through the concerns of rising prices and inflation, it was in clear alignment with the economic angst found in broader economic conditions in rural America. A reasonable association could be made to suggest that inflation is exacerbating pre-existing economic angst and providing a new way to voice a long-standing problem in rural communities.

Economic anxiety in rural and small-town communities is real, based on a recent report that showed rural families, on average, earn 25 percent less than urban Americans, rural communities and small businesses have less access to capital and financial services, rural jobs are concentrated in lower growth industries, and at the time of the study rural employment had not yet returned to pre-great-recession levels ([Heinrich & Staff, 2018](#)).

Further, rural America saw a net decline of population from 2010-2016 and an outward migration of young people. In the categories of population decline, college attainment, poverty, teen births, divorce, death rates from heart disease and cancer, and labor-force participation, rural America ranked worst amongst all 4 groupings. In years past, America's inner cities rated worst in those categories. ([Adamy & Overberg, 2017](#))

One respondent described her personal situation, saying, "I guess, being a single mom, I do worry about how I'm gonna provide for my daughters. Specifically with housing, we're gonna have to move in a couple months and I know housing has just- the price of it has gone up dramatically, and that's a little worrisome for me." [female WI voter, 43, no party affiliation, Trump-didn't vote]

Another panelist described the impact of inflation, saying, “So now we've got this runaway inflation, and it doesn't seem that the government knows how to get it under control. They caused it, but they can't get it under control. So, we've got interest rates going up and up and up and up, which is going to affect everybody. It's gonna affect the small businesses the most, I think, and people on the lower end of the income scale. More and more people are living off of credit cards and it's- I don't know exactly how to fix it, but I got a feeling the end isn't gonna be good.” [male WI voter, 65, no party affiliation, Trump-Trump voter]

Another respondent described President Biden and the economy by asserting, “I should say also I did hear that Biden had said something- it either was today or yesterday or maybe the day before- about how our economy is, you know, stronger than most. Okay, great. You know, based upon what, right? Like, eggs being, you know, \$5 a dozen, you know, two months ago or, like- what is that based on? Right? So real effective change is what I would be a proponent of.” [male WI voter, 42, leans Republican, Clinton-Trump voter]

When factual positives and rhetoric about Biden’s economic record were introduced, rural and small-town respondents rejected the positive information as fake news or false information, yielding a tepid response even with Trump-Biden voters.

Responding to statements about Biden’s economic record, one panelist said, “That's typical liberal bias. Trump had the best economy ever in the history of the United States, and lowest unemployment amongst every sector except for women. And the reason it wasn't the lowest in women is because in World War II, there was full employment for women as they went to work in the factories. But he was gaining in that, too. But in all other segments of society, you had the lowest unemployment ever, the best economy ever, the lowest inflation ever. And I just regard that previous statement as complete BS.” [male MN voter, 56, strong Republican, Trump-Trump voter]

Another panelist voiced her skepticism of Biden’s economic record and rhetoric, “I don’t know if- are all these people that were the ones that were laid off previously that we just laid off, are they coming back into the workforce and we’re just hiring them now?” [female MI voter, 36, leans Republican, Trump-Biden voter]

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