

Rural And Small-Town Voters: Trump's Classified Documents Debacle

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

- Trump's mishandling of classified information bore the potential to be an important electoral issue, specifically the tape of him in his own voice taking a blasé approach to the classified nature of documents.
- The audio tape of Trump bragging about sharing classified documents hurt him in a way with his supporters unlike anything else observed in four years of Rural Voter Institute data collected with rural and small-town voters in Midwestern battleground states.
- This data merits consideration of more research on how to best communicate about this vulnerability with small-town and rural voters. Possible concepts worth further testing

include juxtaposing Trump's behavior with his own past declaratives about prosecuting anyone who mishandles classified information and using this contrast to illustrate how Trump is generally unfit for leadership.

FINDINGS

Panelists had great reservations about Trump's mishandling of classified information. Panelists felt he had indeed done something wrong and should be held accountable. For panelists, the tape of Trump bragging about sharing the classified information was an important point in judging this as a bad action for which he should be held accountable.

Regarding Trump mishandling classified information, one panelist explained, "I'm not voting for Trump. It's that simple. This is too much and too deep and I just can't go along with it." [male MI voter, 59, leans Republican, Trump-Trump voter]

Another panelist said, "Well, first of all, if, if they can- I've heard the tape, it doesn't sound good. Let's just put that right out there. It does not sound good. And if that is exactly what happened, yeah, he should- there should be some penalty for him. Exactly what, I don't know. ... there has to be some penalty if that's what he did." [male WI voter, 65, no party affiliation, Trump-Trump voter]

Panelists showed reservations about Trump as a candidate and reservations about a second Trump term in office. More generally, one panelist asserted, "I agree with [Trump's] policies and I feel like he did really good in the beginning, but then the power trip almost got to his head and it got a little wonky. And because of that, I don't know why you would vote for him or- too much like it. That's not what we want." [female MI voter, 36, leans Republican. Trump-Biden voter]

When read a statement that the election was stolen from Trump, the panel was divided on the issue. Some panelists indicated they felt Trump was being persecuted with the legal investigations and cases against him, but the mishandling of classified information was virtually a universal vulnerability for Trump amongst panelists.

As one panelist put it, "I've been following the Trump ordeal. It seems like that guy can't catch a break everywhere he turns around. But he kind of brought it on himself, too." [male WI voter, 36, no party affiliation, Trump-Biden voter]

Another panelist explained, "I don't know if I should answer it this way, but I'll just say: I feel like Trump probably did break the law and the Democrats or the institution of our legal system

has delayed it to this point prior to the election to kind of stomp on him when he kinda would rerun. Now, I wouldn't vote for Trump again. But I think that's kind of what's happening right now.” [male WI voter, 42, leans Republican, Clinton-Trump voter]

Still another panelist stated, “I feel very strongly that the last election was stolen from Trump, but if you don't have any courts that will hear it and adjudicate it, then what do you do with it?” [male MN voter, 56, strong Republican, Trump-Trump voter]

The same panelist seemed confident Trump would be elected 2024 and that the 2020 election was won by Trump. “Is he ever not gonna be under the guise of going to jail? And is he gonna have to take the oath in handcuffs? And besides all that, if you believe as I do, I mean, he got 10 million more votes than any other sitting president in history. Yet Joe Biden supposedly got 10 million more than Barack Obama. Come on. If you believe that, I've got some land in Florida for you.” [male MN voter, 56, strong Republican, Trump-Trump voter]

Other panelists rightfully supported the validity of the 2020 election: “If [Trump is] reelected miraculously, after losing the last election, which he did lose ...” [male WI voter, 42, leans Republican, Clinton-Trump voter]

When the tape itself and Trump’s blasé approach to classified national security documents shook support for Trump, rural and small-town participants leaned toward U.S. Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) who has since dropped out of the race. Panelists rejected Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. No panelist volunteered that they had or would consider voting Democrat. One shortcoming of our research was not further probing this question.

One panelist explained, “I actually thought or think DeSantis is better at the policies that I wanna see implemented, but I don't trust him as far as I can throw him when he's running on George Bush money. When he is running on Bush family money and that group, what's gonna change if he's elected? Answer: nothing. You've got the same old power cabal in office, 'cause he is running on the globalist money. Hey, we've already got that. We don't need that again. The guy that I like the best for president, uh, tell me his name. The Black guy from South Carolina. *[Another panelist: ‘Tim Scott.’]* Yes, yes. I love Tim Scott. I would vote for Scott, but again, I don't believe he's got the wherewithal to pull off the economy and what Trump did when he was in office, which was absolutely miraculous. And when people start talking about the bad- how he raised the national debt and all this, I'm like, well, what are your sources? Who are you listening to? You know, it's not the same sources that I listen to.” [male MN voter, 56, strong Republican, Trump-Trump voter]

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