



To: Interested Parties
From: One Country Project
Date: 11/19/19
Subject: Views from Rural North Carolina

The following observations on values, issues, and leaders were drawn from three focus group discussions conducted near Charlotte, North Carolina on November 14th, 2019. Groups were divided into three sessions: rural men, rural women, and a mixed-gender group of suburban residents. Participants in these groups had either voted for both President Obama and President Trump, and/or expressed support for President Trump, but are open to voting for someone else in 2020.

One of the One Country Project's core principles is that policymakers need to listen before they lead. Reopening the dialogue with rural Americans starts with hearing their concerns and aspirations, and then shaping an agenda that speaks to them. As part of our ongoing effort to amplify the voices of these Americans, the One Country Project recently conducted a series of focus group interviews with rural North Carolina residents to hear more about what matters to them and how they see America's current political situation.

Over the course of the evening a number of viewpoints were expressed, but there was at least one thing that group participants had in common: they have chosen and cherish the rural way of life. Universally, group members took pride in the fact that living where they reside meant they could live largely as they chose, in a community that prizes hard work, where people know each other, and while everyone is largely self-reliant they can count on each other when challenges arise. Not surprisingly, the same characteristics that make them proud of where they live – genuineness, honesty, and a strong work ethic – are ones they would like to see guiding their prospective leaders in Washington.

Views on the Issues

In both rural groups, when asked what the most important campaign issue was to them, the answer for most could be summed up as “individual freedom.” In addition to be designated the most important issue, this same spirit that the groups highlighted as a strength of their communities also shaped their specific policy preferences and fears. Issues raised by the groups included:

Gun Rights – Gun ownership is an individual right that must be preserved and exercised responsibly. Background checks are important, but the solution to gun violence has to go beyond gun rules. Any proposal that seems to restrict gun ownership will meet strong opposition. To these respondents, Democrats are associated with wanting to “take guns away” meaning that they view Democratic proposals with a degree of skepticism.



- Across the groups there was universally strong support for gun ownership as both an individual right and a constitutionally protected freedom. There was equally widespread acknowledgement that ownership must be combined with responsible use.
- No one questioned the legitimacy of the background check system or the need to address mass shootings – some expressed openness to small, proscribed additional measures. However, the default posture of the groups toward expanded background checks could be described as skeptical. It was noted that the existing background check system already makes it more difficult to get a gun than most think. Also, while not closing the door on better background checks, there was a sentiment that the solution to gun violence has to involve more than just new gun rules (multiple participants mentioned the need to address mental health as a cause of violence).
- The groups showed clear and strong opposition to any steps that may approach confiscation, and have associated Democrats with “taking” guns from people.

Health care – The discussion was driven by concerns over cost and value. There was a clear consensus that something is wrong with the system, but there was pronounced skepticism about “more government involvement” as an answer.

- Health care was discussed as a pocketbook issue, with numerous participants noting the unaffordable cost of monthly premiums, the burden of high deductibles, and the challenges in getting quality care.
- The negatives around initial ACA implementation still inform views on health care, with several noting their belief that the ACA has made health care more expensive or recalling problems with the healthcare.gov website.
- Even while acknowledging the system is broken and a desire for something different, the general sentiment was that more government involvement would make things worse and more complicated, not better.

Environment – Stewardship of the environment is an important responsibility, and the environment needs to be protected for the use and enjoyment of future generations. Discussion of environmental issues and climate change centered on access and use.

- Participants in the discussion clearly valued the environment and agreed that preserving the environment is a worthwhile endeavor. They focused their concern locally, with a desire to maintain the environment as a natural resource and recreational space.
- Some included criticisms of Duke Energy for polluting the area with coal ash, and some criticized President Trump for rolling back protections on national parks.
- Climate change was acknowledged by most participants but was not the main topic of environmental discussion. No climate skepticism was expressed, however there



was discussion of how much America can or should do if nations like China and India do not take action as well.

America First – Support for President Trump’s withdrawal of the United States from the world stage was strong.

- There was consistent support for President Trump’s removal of troops from Syria and rhetoric about reducing foreign aid and the burden America shoulders in the world.
- Several participants noted that the United States has enough of its own problems and should focus inward before taking on the problems of others.
- Concerns about American standing in the world or the cost of ceding global leadership were not raised.

Immigration – Immigration was discussed as a matter of “following the rules” and following basic principles of fairness.

- Views on immigration were divided between those who are comfortable with legal immigration and those who worried about immigration levels and wanted to do more to stop illegal immigrations. However, they were universally opposed to “open borders,” which some believed is becoming the Democratic position on the issue.
- There was more discussion of interior enforcement – enforcing the laws against people who have stayed too long – than of the border wall. However, many expressed the need for functional, strong borders and security.
- There was some discussion of practical ways to address undocumented people who are here and increased measures for border security.

Impeachment – Participants believed Congress has better uses of its time than impeaching President Trump.

- The information around impeachment seemed difficult to digest, and most of the group did not think anything would come from the process.
- The strongest sentiment about impeachment, even among those troubled by President Trump’s conduct, is that it is a waste of time that is distracting Congress from other national problems.
- Group participants didn’t defend President Trump’s behavior as much as dismiss it as part of his “style.” The most common refrain was that all presidents do this type of thing, though President Trump may do it in a different way.
- When pressed about conduct that would be “impeachable,” a few raised the prospect that President Trump is enriching himself or benefitting at taxpayers’ expense (replacing private security with Secret Service, security costs associated with golf and travel, hotel and business profits associated with government activity,



military parades). To the participants, that felt more tangible than the current investigation.

Education – Participants want to see a stronger school system.

- On issues related to trade and 21st century jobs, group participants consistently expressed support for increased educational opportunities as an answer.
- However, numerous group members expressed serious concerns about the state of North Carolina's public school system, and expressed support for higher teacher pay and more student support.

Some expressed support for a third-party alternative.

- A handful of participants across groups expressed frustration at the choices presented by the two-party system and indicated that they would be looking at a third party candidate.
- The notion that voting for a third-party candidate is a “wasted vote” was explicitly rejected by a few.
- The desire for a third-party candidate took on a strong libertarian lean, with several expressing support for previous candidates like Gary Johnson or Ron Paul.

Views on President Trump

Overall, these participants had positive views of the President, but had some concerns as well. They see him as a disruptor and change agent, different from those who came before. In terms of both positives and negatives, responses from the group were about traits and tone, not policy details.

Positives – President Trump is different and unapologetic about America.

- President Trump makes no apologies for America or being American. His America First attitude was appreciated by the group.
- President Trump's background was seen as a positive even as *members of the group acknowledged his business failures*. President Trump's identity as an entrepreneur was seen as a value signifier – willing to take risks, be responsible for himself, and build something – irrespective of whether or not he succeeded. Some members of the group did mention his inherited wealth, but by and large President Trump's background was viewed as a strength.
- The group also gave President Trump high marks for tax cuts, economic growth, reforming Veterans Affairs health care, and regulatory roll backs even if they had not personally seen benefits.



Negatives – President Trump talks and tweets too much.

- There was strong sentiment that the president tweets too much and is often an embarrassment. They want him to “tweet less” to get more things done.
- The president’s lack of decorum and tone was repeatedly, regretfully raised even though his bluntness is also part of his “different” appeal.

Views on Democrats

Many participants said they want to take a “wait and see” attitude toward the Democratic field, but their preliminary views were not positive. One sentiment that was consistently expressed is that Democrats are the party of “free stuff” including Medicare for All and free college. These proposals were seen as unrealistic and ultimately costly for taxpayers. Additionally, they wondered whether these candidates cared about them, or were trying to get votes from selected groups with different priorities.

Suburban Comparison

Suburban participants shared pride in their communities, but were more likely to place importance on convenient access to service and more conformity with neighborhood rules and policies.

Policy issues where suburban participants were largely in line with their rural counterparts included immigration, support for President Trump’s pull back from the world stage, criticisms of Duke Energy, and antipathy for Democratic plans for “socialism” or “free stuff.”