



# Engagious

**FPG** Focus Pointe  
Global

## **SWING VOTER PROJECT (SVP)**

REPORT FOR MAY 2020

EASTERN IOWA – ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

### **OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH:**

Engagious conducted two online focus groups with a total of eight swing voters from eastern Iowa on May 12th, all of whom voted for President Obama in 2012 and then President Trump in 2016. Each group contained four respondents. We explored questions and topics surrounding the president, Joe Biden, and the coronavirus.

### **DISCLAIMER:**

The key findings in this report are based upon the opinions and feedback from eight swing voters in one location. They do not represent the views of all swing voters.

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Example: "30% of female respondents disagreed with the Medicare statement" (according to research conducted by Engagious/FPG).





## 1

**MOST SWING VOTERS WILL NOT BLAME PRESIDENT TRUMP OVER THE CORONAVIRUS SITUATION, DEFYING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM FOR AN INCUMBENT PRESIDENT.**

Respondents rated how strongly they approve or disapprove of President Trump's handling of the coronavirus situation, scoring it 6.1/10 (from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve"). They generally believe he has done a decent job, adding that he's doing the best he can in this unprecedented situation.

Some respondents give him a lot of credit for trying, despite the number of dead Americans from COVID-19 now exceeding 80,000. They pointed to his success in specific areas, including trying to help the economy, attempting to get a vaccine, preventing hospitals from overloading with cases, and giving governors the authority to make decisions that work best for their state.

He will be judged to some degree on how fearful the American people are, and the state of their well-being, when the pandemic ends. However, they are hesitant to put this entire situation on him, especially because there is no vaccine. One respondent remarked that we could shut down the entire country and fewer people may die, but people could still leave their homes and not socially distance, adding that President Trump could say whatever he wants, but it doesn't mean everyone in the country is going to listen to him. Another respondent described this as a "no-win situation" for him because he could achieve some successes but those who are suffering, including those who have lost their job, will say he hasn't done enough.

With regard to what blame he may deserve for the crisis, we heard that no matter who the president is, he will make mistakes because we're all human and none of us have been through this before. Most respondents don't blame him for this, especially because he is listening to his advisors and making the best decisions he can make.

Overall, respondents somewhat agree that President Trump's initial response to the coronavirus threat made it harder to contain the virus in the U.S., scoring this 5.6/10 (from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree").

One respondent told us that President Trump should have been in contact with other countries to find out what protocols were working and which ones weren't, and she said the president was warned by healthcare professionals about the extent of the problem and didn't take it seriously enough.



It's notable that although they generally approve of how President Trump has handled the coronavirus situation, their confidence in his leadership has taken a hit compared to three months ago, with half saying they are "less confident" or "not confident" now:

*Compared to three months ago, would you say...*

	TOTAL
You were confident in President Trump's leadership then, and you're still confident now.	3
You were confident in President Trump's leadership then, but you're less confident now.	2
You were not confident in President Trump's leadership then, but you're more confident now.	1
You were not confident in President Trump's leadership then, and you're still not confident now.	2

Reasons for this include:

- Some respondents believe he's delegating too much power to the governors.
- Any president in this situation isn't going to do everything we feel needs to be done to deal with the situation.

The unemployment rate is now 14.7%, the highest level since 1937. If the unemployment rate remains in the 14% to 15% range on election day, these swing voters generally wouldn't hold it against President Trump if COVID-19 were still a significant problem in the country, making high unemployment understandable. Importantly, if the intensity of the problem recedes noticeably and the unemployment rate remains high, they would be more likely to hold that against him.

These swing voters believe he is working hard to resolve the problem, and this coronavirus situation isn't his fault. One respondent pointed out that three months ago, the financial data showed more positive indicators—low unemployment with the "best economy." He brought us a great economy once and he can do it again.

## 2

**MOST OF THESE SWING VOTERS ARE STICKING WITH PRESIDENT TRUMP IN 2020, AND THEY EXPECT HIM TO WIN.**

If the presidential election were held tomorrow, six would vote for President Trump and two would vote for Vice President Biden.

Hypothetically, if the U.S. Constitution didn't prevent presidents from serving a third term, and former President Obama became the Democratic nominee, challenging President Trump's bid for re-election, five would vote for Trump and three would vote for Obama.

Overall, they are very confident President Trump will win re-election. If they were placing a \$100 bet on the outcome of the election, they would say their confidence that President Trump will win is 8.4/10 (from "You are totally confident Joe Biden will win" to "You are totally confident President Trump will win"). As a group, they indicated they are very likely to vote for him this autumn, scoring this 7.5/10 (from "You are extremely unlikely to vote for President Trump" to "You are extremely likely to vote for President Trump").

Reasons for sticking with Trump included:

- He has handled the coronavirus situation well and they have confidence in him continuing as president (e.g., the first stimulus check went out smoothly).
- He's a businessman – not a lifelong politician.
- They trust him because he speaks his mind and has a "backbone".
- He stands up for our country.
- Negative news about Biden, including his "outbursts" on the campaign trail, his dishonesty, his behavior with women, and the "bad rap" he has using social media.
- Biden has been in government for 30+ years and he hasn't done anything for us.
- Biden isn't capable of doing the job (mental acuity doubts).
- Republicans control the U.S. Senate and it would be easier for things to get done if the presidency and the U.S. Senate were controlled by the same party (even more important than the presidency and the U.S. House being controlled by the same party) .

Only one of our six swing voters planning to vote for Trump in 2020 indicated part of the reason for doing so would be not wanting to change leaders in the midst of a crisis. The other five told us their reasons are unrelated to that. Notably, six of our eight swing voters believe Trump would do a better job than Biden protecting them from COVID-19.



Those who plan to support Biden told us our country needs a “new outlook” on the coronavirus situation, and Trump should have communicated the problem to the public sooner. Other reasons included Biden serving as President Obama’s vice president and concern the president’s actions and language will get us into a “deeper hole” than we’re ready for.

If Biden announced right now that he plans to serve only one term if elected, seven said that would have no effect on their voting decision, while one indicated it would make him or her more likely to vote for him.

With Biden announcing he plans to choose a female running mate, our swing voters suggested he consider Kamala Harris, Stacey Abrams, Amy Klobuchar, Elizabeth Warren, and Keisha Lance Bottoms (current mayor of Atlanta). Notably, none of our swing voters would be more likely to vote for Biden based on his selection for vice president, whether it includes any of these women or not. Interestingly, one respondent in each session mentioned that Kamala Harris would be better suited for the position of attorney general rather than vice president, given her legal background.

The details about recent allegations of sexual misconduct against Joe Biden are not very familiar to our swing voters, with only two of our eight respondents having heard the name Tara Reade. Those familiar with her told us she worked for Biden and she claims he sexually assaulted her. Among the respondents who have heard of Tara Reade, we heard this story gives them another reason not to trust Biden, but they believe in due process and want to hear the entire story (both sides).



## 3

**THESE SWING VOTERS ARE NOT HEARING FROM BIDEN ABOUT HOW HE WOULD HANDLE THE CORONAVIRUS SITUATION DIFFERENTLY FROM TRUMP.**

Respondents rated how familiar they are with Joe Biden's comments about what he would do differently from President Trump with regard to the coronavirus situation, scoring this 3.3/10 (from "not at all familiar" to "very familiar").

They also rated how strongly they approve or disapprove of what Joe Biden has communicated to the public during the coronavirus situation, scoring this 3.0/10 (from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve"). Notably, none of our eight swing voters have watched any of Biden's online events and none have heard him say anything about the coronavirus situation. Some indicated they're more focused on hearing from their state and local officials about the issue.

Importantly, all of our swing voters cited pandemic-related issues as their most important voting issue (e.g., the economy/financial issues and healthcare), and they aren't hearing from the presumptive Democratic nominee about it, causing us to inquire about how they will make that decision. Among our respondents, we heard it's a hard decision and they will see how the coronavirus situation plays out. They will look to the CDC and World Health Organization for guidance. They will also consider the experience of the two candidates. With President Trump now having experience dealing with a pandemic, some wondered what Biden and his running-mate would do differently to make the situation better.

These swing voters listed the most important thing Biden can say to them right now:

- If elected, he has a plan on how to get us through this, both economically and health-wise.
- He's going to put people first, both economically and health-wise.
- He will look at making healthcare changes, ensuring medical professionals have personal protective equipment.
- He will discuss the cost of treatment for those without health insurance.
- He will create a task force for communicable diseases so if this type of situation happens again, we'll be better-prepared.

## 4

**MOST OF THESE SWING VOTERS FEEL ANXIOUS OR FRUSTRATED ABOUT THE CURRENT CORONAVIRUS SITUATION, AND IT WILL BE THEIR NUMBER ONE VOTING ISSUE IN THE UPCOMING ELECTION.**

Respondents described how their lives have changed over the past two months:

- Taking precautions when I leave the house, including wearing a mask everywhere I go.
- Being more cautious at work and at home.
- My family has been hurt financially (job losses or reduced income).
- Life is “very stressful” and “very hard”.
- I’m less social, staying home as much as possible.
- My job as a healthcare supervisor has become “quite chaotic”.
- My family is home all the time now and cooped up together.
- I’m now working from home.
- I used to see my customers and now we communicate by phone and email.
- The local economy has slowed down and many people have lost their jobs.
- I have lost extended family members from COVID-19 and it’s hard not being able to get together for funerals.

Also, respondents told us the one emotion they have felt most over the past week:

- Anxiety/stressed (3)
- Frustration (3)
- Confusion (1)
- Unsure (1)

These significant impacts have made the pandemic and related issues the number one voting issue for all eight of them this November, including the economy/financial issues, health, and how we’re going to get through this. In January, their most important voting issue would have been education (3), the economy (3), and infrastructure (1).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>One respondent remarked that he didn’t have a top voting issue in the upcoming election and started paying attention when the coronavirus situation came about.



These swing voters told us the most important thing President Trump could say to them right now:

- No American should lose their home or livelihood or have to suffer any catastrophic health conditions because of the pandemic.
- He's working on trying to figure out what to do about the pandemic and the financial problems we're all having.
- He's doing everything in his power to ensure we're saving as many lives as possible.
- He's making science-based decisions, looking out for all Americans.
- There's a concrete plan to balance re-opening with people's health.
- He's working to save small businesses from going under.
- The economy will re-start and businesses will re-open.
- He appreciates the sacrifices we have made and he'll make things better for us.

As a result of these impacts to their lives, these swing voters are changing their financial behavior, including:

- Setting aside more in savings
- Getting ahead on bills in case things get worse
- Cutting back on spending (e.g., eating out, gas)
- Developing additional income streams
- Supporting a daughter after her hours were cut
- Budgeting more
- More supportive of small businesses

If restrictions on daily life enable our respondents to get back to close-to-normal in the coming months, but they fear there will be another shelter-in-place order in the fall, only three of our eight swing voters plan to make physical improvements to their home in the meantime, to accommodate future periods when they may be stuck at home. These respondents would add more activities for her son, add exercise equipment, and create an office space that better suits her working from home.



## 5

**THESE SWING VOTERS ARE DIVIDED, WITH SOME SUPPORTING RE-OPENING RESTAURANTS, BARS, AND MOVIE THEATERS SOON, AND OTHERS WANTING TO WAIT UNTIL 2021.**

Some of our respondents indicated they would feel comfortable having these venues re-open in the coming weeks (early to mid-June). This would include certain conditions being met to make them feel safe. For example, for them to feel comfortable sitting in a restaurant, they would want the option to sit outside and they would want to receive assurances that the restaurant is taking precautions with gloves, masks, social distancing, and enhanced cleaning. Also, they would want to hear about declining COVID-19 cases and deaths. Notably, only two of our eight respondents would go to these venues this weekend if they could, while six would not.

Others were much more hesitant about having restaurants, bars, and movie theaters re-open, saying they would feel more comfortable with that in 2021. Some wondered how much these venues could change how they operate to ensure precautions are in place to protect consumers. Some were skeptical people would be able to socially distance in a movie theater or in a restaurant. They are worried that these businesses will re-open and a lot of people will end up contracting the virus, adding that we need to consider the health and economic implications of these choices. One respondent remarked that we're supposed to get a second wave of COVID-19 cases in the fall, and we may need to keep these businesses closed until next year when the numbers of cases and deaths are declining or when there's a vaccine.

Most of these swing voters approve of Governor Reynolds's handling of the coronavirus situation, which is an incremental approach to re-opening, scoring it 6.6/10 (from "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve"). Several respondents told us she's doing a "great job," citing her efforts to keep everyone safe, including with her shelter-in-place order. They told us she is balancing the needs of Iowa's economy and its people's health, and she is making science-based decisions that are appropriate for the different regions of the state. For example, Iowa has a lot of rural areas and some congested cities. She is re-opening some businesses in the state step by step and region by region as it's safe to do so. Some commented that she's moving a little too fast in re-opening the state, in their opinion.

Most of our swing voters believe Governor Reynolds's approach is in alignment with President Trump's approach in dealing with the coronavirus situation. Those who disagreed told us it's very different being responsible for one state vs. the entire country, resulting in different approaches overall. One respondent pointed out that Governor Reynolds had a travel ban for Iowa, being protective about who was entering the state, and she wishes President Trump would have had a travel ban on international travel.



Some outside observers have noted that conservative states have opened up far more extensively than liberal ones have. A couple of respondents commented on why they think that's the case:

- These states have different values: Conservative states place more value on economic capital (the economy), and liberal states place more value on human capital (health).
- I track what's going on in my area – the number of cases and whether I feel safe traveling – and what's going on in New York or California doesn't affect me.
- These decisions are being made based on the density of the population (suggesting that because conservative states are less densely populated, they feel more comfortable re-opening at this point).

## 6

**MOST OF THESE SWING VOTERS ARE MORE WORRIED ABOUT THEIR FINANCIAL HEALTH THAN THEIR PHYSICAL HEALTH.**

Seven of our eight respondents are more worried about what could happen to their financial health over the next few months, while one is more worried about what could happen to his or her physical health.

Six of our respondents indicated that compared to February, they are now in a worse financial position. Two told us they are in the same financial position, while no one is in a better financial position.

Among our eight swing voters, five have a friend or family member who has lost a job or been furloughed, and three have lost their job or been furloughed. None indicated that they don't know anyone personally who has lost a job or was furloughed.

Even with the negative impacts resulting from the coronavirus situation, a slight majority – five of eight – believe they're better off now than they were four years ago, citing:

- Switched careers, and doing better as a result (2)
- I have a better-paying job, more stable income, and a college degree.
- I'm better off financially – I'm able to make money, save, and invest.
- I'm better off financially – I have a better-paying job.

## 7

**THE PANDEMIC HAS NOT CAUSED A SIGNIFICANT SHIFT IN HOW THESE SWING VOTERS THINK ABOUT HEALTHCARE POLICY.**

Most of our swing voters indicated the pandemic hasn't made them think differently about healthcare policy, with some saying they haven't spent much time thinking about the issue. One respondent explained her beliefs haven't changed, adding she is an advocate for healthcare and preventative services and for giving people the empowerment to choose the healthcare that works best for them.

Those who are thinking differently about healthcare policy remarked that healthcare is something we should all have and be able to afford. With the pandemic, we need to be better-prepared with personal protective equipment and provide support to healthcare providers as they do their job.

They listed what they would want any president to do about healthcare:

- Focus on preventative care – we will benefit by having fewer severe health problems in the future.
- Get the government out of my healthcare.
- Allow everyone to be treated if they need care.
- Address the inequity of people receiving better healthcare with private insurance (vs. government healthcare programs).
- Don't tie healthcare to a person's job – many people are losing their jobs or getting furloughed.

## 8

**THESE SWING VOTERS ARE ONLY SOMEWHAT CONCERNED ABOUT THE IMPACT OF SPENDING TRILLIONS OF FEDERAL DOLLARS TO DEAL WITH THE CORONAVIRUS SITUATION.**

With the federal government recently spending more than \$2 trillion to combat coronavirus and stabilize the economy and talk of another \$1 trillion-plus package, respondents rated how concerned they are about the impacts of all this spending on the federal deficit and debt, scoring it 6.4/10 (from “not at all concerned” to “extremely concerned”).

Respondents were generally unsure about how we would pay that money back because it sounds “impossible.” Some speculated “the new normal” would include learning how to be fiscally responsible and sustainable, including reducing spending.

In our first session, none of our four respondents were in favor of taxing wealthy people more, saying they work hard and they have felt the negative impacts from the coronavirus situation. In our second session, some supported taxing large corporations more to pay for all this spending, contending that they have received large tax breaks and small businesses don’t have enough money to pay more taxes.

As part of the more than \$2 trillion spending package to combat coronavirus, many Americans received \$1,200 one-time payments, including seven of our eight respondents, while one received a lower amount.

Respondents told us what they did with this money:

- Paid some rent and got my van fixed
- Paid my credit card bill
- Caught up on bills, including a car repair
- 1/3 to savings, 1/3 to getting ahead on bills, and 1/3 to saving for vacation
- Supported small businesses, spending the money on Etsy and at local restaurants
- Playground equipment in the yard for my kids
- Savings
- 1/2 to savings and 1/2 to purchase a new microwave

Another component of this spending package was the Paycheck Protection Program. Overall, they haven’t heard very much about the program. Some were aware that small businesses received forgivable loans as long as they continue to employ and pay their employees, but they generally haven’t heard whether it’s been successful. Some are doubtful it has been because the money for the program was gone before many small business owners could file and receive help. Also, several have heard about the program’s funds going to help large corporations rather than small businesses. One respondent told us she is concerned about this program adding to our national debt.



9

**ON AVERAGE, THESE SWING VOTERS ARE SLIGHTLY SUPPORTIVE OF THE PROTESTORS WHO ARE DEMANDING THEIR GOVERNORS IMMEDIATELY RE-OPEN BUSINESSES.**

Respondents rated how strongly they support or oppose the protestors in various states who demand their governors immediately re-open businesses in those states, scoring this 5.6/10 (from "I totally oppose them" to "I totally support them"), suggesting they are slightly supportive of these efforts.

While some haven't heard any news about it, others told us they have the right to protest under the First Amendment, with one praising them for fighting for what they believe in. Another respondent, who works in healthcare, told us they have the right to protest, but it's "frustrating" to her that they aren't wearing masks or taking precautions to protect themselves and others.

10

**A NUMBER OF THESE SWING VOTERS BELIEVE THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY HAS CHANGED FOR THE WORSE SINCE OBAMA LEFT OFFICE.**

Respondents indicated they believe the Democratic party has changed for the worse since Obama left office. They cited:

- It's more "left-wing" and "openly socialist" – it's concerning to some that Bernie Sanders did as well as he did in the Democratic primary.
- They're appealing to voters who feel "entitled to everything" – with policy proposals including free education, getting money without having to work, etc.
- They're more calculated with who they put up as their 2020 presidential nominee – this primary was a "circus" with "lots of pandering" where a lot of time and energy was spent for nothing because Biden will be the nominee.

## 11

**THESE SWING VOTERS ARE FAIRLY CONCERNED ABOUT FOREIGN OWNERSHIP OF SMITHFIELD FOODS.**

One of the national security concerns they have is that Smithfield Foods, the world's largest pork processor and hog producer, 50 facilities and 40,000 employees in the U.S., is owned by a Chinese company. They rated this 7.0/10 (from "not at all concerned" to "very concerned"). One respondent told us she knows a pork farmer where she lives and it's a "vital" part of the food chain and she's not comfortable with it being foreign-owned. It's "scary" to think Iowa could lose that if the company shuts down, adding it's possible another buyer wouldn't come in to run the company.

