

Behind the Curtain

Americans Prepare for the Mueller Report

INSIGHTS FROM THE DEMOCRACY FUND VOTER STUDY GROUP

BY ROBERT GRIFFIN AND JOE GOLDMAN

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ABOUT THE PROJECT:

The Democracy Fund Voter Study Group is a research collaboration of more than two dozen analysts and scholars from across the political spectrum examining and delivering insights on the evolving views of American voters.

As the 2016 presidential campaign unfolded, it became increasingly clear that the underlying values and beliefs driving voter decisions need to be better understood. To that end, the Voter Study Group sought not to achieve consensus, but to engage in discussion about how the views of the electorate are evolving and what the implications of those changes may be.

To learn more, visit www.voterstudygroup.org.

ABOUT THE SURVEY AND ANALYSIS:

The 2019 VOTER Survey (Views of the Electorate Research Survey) was conducted in partnership with the survey firm YouGov. In total, 6,779 adults (age 18 and up) with internet access took the survey online between November 17, 2018 and January 7, 2019. Of these respondents, 5,948 were originally interviewed by YouGov in 2011–2012 as part of the 2012 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), and then again in the December 2016 VOTER Survey. Of those individuals, 3,691 were interviewed in both the 2017 and 2018 VOTER Survey, 1,081 were interviewed in either the 2017 or 2018 VOTER Survey, and 1,176 were interviewed in neither.

The 2019 VOTER Survey also included 290 Hispanic respondents and 326 respondents ages 18 to 24 who were interviewed for the first time in the 2018 VOTER Survey. An additional 214 respondents — the vast majority of whom were Asian American — were interviewed for the first time.

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KEY FINDINGS

- Despite a tumultuous and event-filled six months, most Americans have not changed their opinions on issues relating to the Russia investigation.
- A majority of Americans and a plurality of Republicans continue to believe that it would be serious if the Russia investigation concluded that the Trump campaign accepted or sought Russian assistance during the campaign or that his administration obstructed the investigation into Russian election interference.
- Although a majority of Americans think it would be inappropriate for the Trump administration to ignore congressional subpoenas, this view is shared by only one-third of Republicans.

Almost two years ago, Robert Mueller was appointed as a special counsel to investigate Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, including any links or coordination between Russia and the campaign of President Donald Trump. To date, this investigation has resulted in the indictment of 34 people and three companies. Six of those individuals were former Trump advisers and five have already plead guilty to a variety of charges.¹

If recent reports are true, that investigation is drawing to a close. An official report detailing Mueller's findings may soon be delivered to Attorney General William Barr and, potentially, released to the public.

This Democracy Fund Voter Study Group brief is an update to "[Jumping to Collusions](#)," a report on public opinion around the Mueller investigation that we published in June 2018. This update shows how the public currently perceives the Mueller investigation, including its fairness and integrity, the seriousness of the allegations, and the appropriateness of certain actions that the president might take. It is based on the January 2019 VOTER Survey (Views of the Electorate Research Survey) of 6,779 Americans, most of whom had been surveyed previously as part of a longitudinal panel.

Along with the results presented in this brief, several of the findings from the original "Jumping to Collusions" brief still hold:

- Most Americans do not believe that President Trump should remove Robert Mueller or pardon senior members of his administration. It's only among those who have no confidence in the fairness of the investigation that a majority support removing Mueller or pardoning senior administration officials.
- Among Republicans, those who voted for Governor John Kasich and Senator Marco Rubio in the 2016 presidential primary are the most supportive of the investigation and skeptical of presidential actions that might hinder it.

Little Change in Attitudes About the Russia Investigation

Despite a report by *The New York Times* that President Trump has attacked the Russia investigation and those leaders associated with it more than 1,100 times as “part of a strategy to beat back the investigations,”ⁱⁱ there has not been a substantial shift in attitudes relating to this topic.ⁱⁱⁱ

A consistent plurality of Americans remains confident that the investigation is being conducted fairly (49 percent) and have a favorable opinion of Robert Mueller (41 percent). Interestingly, in the face of intense media coverage and efforts to undermine the investigation, almost a quarter (23 percent) of Americans still don’t have an opinion of Mueller. However, a clear majority (61 percent) still believe it would be inappropriate for Trump to remove him from the investigation.

About half (52 percent) of Americans think that members of the Trump campaign had improper contact with Russia during the 2016 election. Almost seven in ten Americans (69 percent) think that it would be serious if the Mueller investigation concluded that Trump or his campaign accepted or sought assistance from the Russian government. An identical number (69 percent) of Americans say it would be serious if Mueller found that Trump or his staff obstructed the investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 election. About six in ten (60 percent) say it would be inappropriate for the president to issue pardons to senior members of his administration.

A consistent 44 percent of Americans believe the president should “definitely” or “probably be impeached” — including more than three-quarters of Democrats (78 percent), about three in ten independents (31 percent), and just 7 percent of Republicans.

That all of these figures have shifted only slightly in the last six months serves to illustrate how entrenched attitudes about the investigation have become.

Table 1

Survey Response	May 2018	Jan 2019	Change
Confident Russia investigation is being conducted fairly	48%	49%	1%
Favorable opinion of Robert Mueller	38%	41%	3%
Inappropriate to remove Mueller from investigation	60%	61%	1%
Confidence in Justice Department	33%	31%	-2%
Confidence in F.B.I.	41%	43%	2%
Favorable opinion of James Comey	29%	27%	-2%
Trump campaign had improper contact with Russia	51%	52%	1%
Would be serious if the Mueller Investigation concluded that...			
<i>Trump accepted assistance from Russian government</i>	68%	69%	1%
<i>Campaign staff accepted assistance from Russian government</i>	65%	66%	1%
<i>Trump sought assistance from Russian government</i>	67%	69%	2%
<i>Trump administration obstructed Russia investigation</i>	69%	69%	0%
Inappropriate to issue pardons for senior members of administration	58%	60%	2%
Trump should be impeached	44%	44%	0%

Majority of Americans See Possible Conclusions of Mueller Report as Serious

Although the contents of the Mueller report are not yet known, there are two allegations many believe will be addressed in the document. One is that President Trump or a member of his campaign had inappropriate contact with the Russian government during the course of the 2016 election. Another is that President Trump or a member of his administration attempted to obstruct the Russia investigation.

About two-thirds of Americans believe it would be “very” or “somewhat serious” if the investigation concluded that Trump (69 percent) or members of his campaign staff (66 percent) accepted assistance from the Russian government during the 2016 election. A similar number (69 percent) say it would be serious if the investigation found that Trump sought assistance from the Russian government.

Separate from interactions with the Russian government, about two-thirds (69 percent) of Americans also say it would be serious if the investigation concluded that Trump or members of his administration attempted to obstruct the investigation into Russian involvement in the 2016 election.

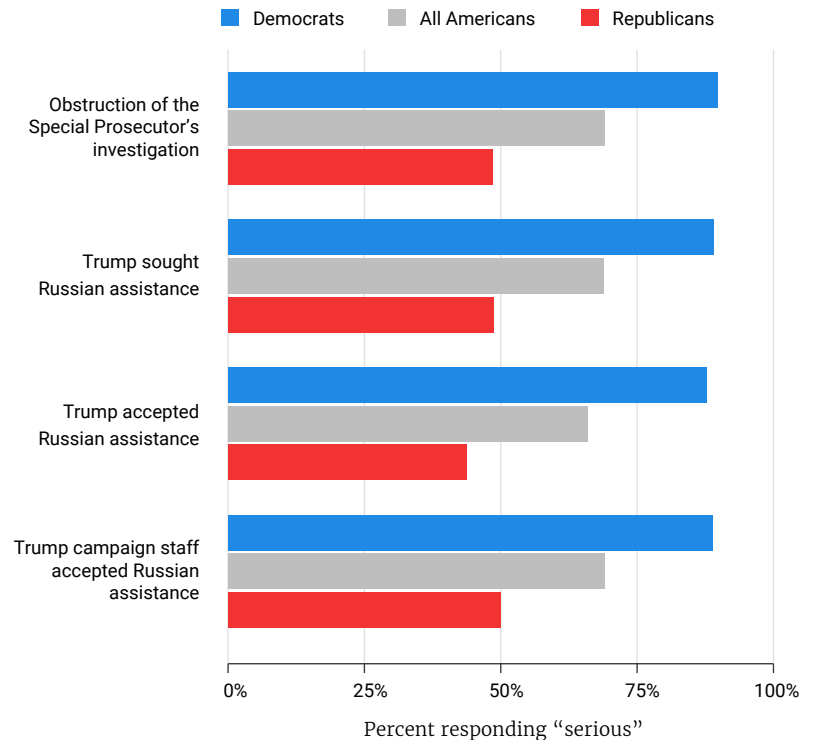
There are substantial differences between partisans on these issues, but even Republicans believe that the investigation reaching these conclusions would be serious. A plurality of Republicans think it would be serious if the investigation concluded that Trump accepted (50 percent) or sought (49 percent) assistance from the Russian government, or obstructed the investigation into Russian election interference (49 percent). A plurality (44 percent) of Republicans also think it would be serious if the investigation found that members of Trump’s campaign accepted assistance from the Russian government.

All that said, no survey can predict how Americans will react to the conclusions reached in the Mueller report. Evidence presented in the report will itself be subject to political debate and public opinion could hinge on how political elites react to these conclusions.

Figure 1

Majority of Americans Would See Allegations as Serious

If any of the following conclusions came out from the investigations, how serious do you think it would be for the Trump administration?



Source: Voter Study Group – January 2019 VOTER Survey.

Only One-Third of Republicans Say the President Should Honor a Subpoena

As reported by *The New York Times*, the release of the Mueller report may mark the beginning of a series of congressional investigations — acting as a “road map” for oversight committees in the House of Representatives.^{iv}

One of the tools available to these committees is their power to issue subpoenas — official orders to submit emails, documents, and testimony relating to their areas of oversight. As reported by *The Washington Post*, the Trump administration may be planning to broadly assert executive privilege when confronted with these orders.^v Over the next year, it seems likely that inter-branch conflict over subpoenas will become one of the new battlegrounds in the long-running investigation into the Trump administration.

Today, a majority (59 percent) of Americans believe it would be “inappropriate” for the Trump administration to ignore subpoenas issued by the House — including 46 percent who say it would be “very inappropriate.” By contrast, almost a quarter (23 percent) say such an action would be “appropriate.” Seventeen percent of Americans said they did not know if it would be “appropriate” or “inappropriate.”

However, Republicans (37 percent) are less likely than independents (49 percent) and Democrats (80 percent) to see this action as “inappropriate.” In fact, four in ten (40 percent) Republicans say that ignoring a subpoena would be “appropriate” compared to just one in five independents (19 percent) and 11 percent of Democrats.

If the Mueller report does act as a “road map” for future investigations, these partisan divides may prove consequential. Indeed, if congressional oversight is the mechanism by which new evidence is produced, ambivalence among Republican voters on this issue may make it easier for President Trump and his allies to resist the investigation.

Endnotes

- i Andrew Prokop, “All of Robert Mueller’s indictments and plea deals in the Russia investigation so far,” *Vox*, January 25, 2019. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/2/20/17031772/mueller-indictments-grand-jury>.
- ii Larry Buchanan and Karen Yourish, “Trump Has Publicly Attacked the Russia Investigation More than 1,100 Times,” *The New York Times*, February 19, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/02/19/us/politics/trump-attacks-obstruction-investigation.html>.
- iii There is evidence that more substantial shifts occurred prior to the April 2018 VOTER Survey. For example, it would appear that favorability toward Robert Mueller shifted between 2017 and 2018 (Darren Samuelsohn, “Poll shows Mueller’s public image at all-time low,” *Politico*, June 13, 2018. Available at: <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/06/13/mueller-investigation-trump-poll-643491>) and that confidence in the F.B.I. shifted sometime between 2015 and 2018 (Ariel Edwards-Levy, “Republican Confidence in the FBI Has Dropped Since 2015,” *Huffington Post*, January 31, 2018. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/republican-confidence-in-the-fbi-has-dropped-since-2015_us_5a721bbbe4b09a544b5616a7).
- iv Neal K. Katyal, “The Mueller Report is Coming. Here’s What to Expect.” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/21/opinion/mueller-report-trump-democrats-barr.html>.
- v Carol D. Leonnig, “A beefed-up White House legal team prepares aggressive defense of Trump’s executive privilege as investigations loom large,” *The Washington Post*, January 9, 2019. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-beefed-up-white-house-legal-team-prepares-aggressive-defense-of-trumps-executive-privilege-as-investigations-loom-large/2019/01/09/066-b8618-1045-11e9-84fc-d58c33d6c8c7_story.html.

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