

# What if There's a Better Way to Handle Our Democratic Debate?

Americans can have serious and respectful conversations across our deep divides.

**By James Fishkin and Larry Diamond**

Mr. Fishkin and Mr. Diamond are leading the research for America in One Room, a new election survey experiment.

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Jordan Awan

Our presidential race is a poll-driven battle of teams managing superficial impressions. The public's responses to horse race polls are based on little more than vague ideas of what the candidates are saying. When these polls surprise (like one — an outlier, to be sure — from Monmouth University released this week showing a sudden three-way tie among Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren), that drives coverage.

But how much thinking and how much information does it represent? Most voters are still barely paying attention to the campaign. It has too many candidates, too many complex issues and too many weaponized interpretations of who might be too young or too old, who committed a gaffe or who had a strong one-liner in debates where time permits few real exchanges on the issues.

There's a better way for the American people to grapple in depth with the issues we face at the start of the primary season. Furthermore, we think that, despite their sharp differences of party and ideology, Americans can have serious and respectful conversations across our deep divides. A surprisingly simple innovation can help cut through the poisonous fog of our political polarization. It is an experiment in democracy to show what the whole electorate would think, if it could be similarly engaged.

In this experiment, we will bring America together in one room — not the whole country, of course, but a statistical microcosm of America, selected through the same methods of random sampling used to conduct the best opinion polls. This representative sample of the American public will meet for a weekend, in advance of the primaries and caucuses, to discuss in depth the issues and the candidates in the 2020 campaign. Instead of being one voice among millions, each of the randomly selected voters will know that his or her voice will matter in a sample of several hundred and in small group discussions of a dozen or so. They will feel the responsibility to take the issues and the viewpoints of others seriously.

We will need to minimize the tendency of our partisan tribes to talk past one another, and not with just different values but with different facts. That's why they will be asked to read a common set of briefing papers, reviewed by policy experts with a variety of views. A video version of the briefings would also be available. The event would discuss in depth the five big issues that (according to the polls) the public most wants to see addressed in the campaign: health care, immigration, the environment, the economy and foreign policy. To promote mutually respectful listening as well as speaking, these representative Americans will be randomly divided into smaller discussion groups, each led by a moderator trained to encourage fair and civil conversation.

This experiment is actually happening soon. From Sept. 19 to 22, the nonpartisan institution Helena is convening America in One Room. It will bring together a national sample of more than 500 registered voters from all over the United States, recruited by an independent, nonpartisan research institution, NORC at the University of Chicago.

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As the participants deliberate over these days, we will see informed public opinion taking shape under good conditions — balanced briefing materials, moderated small group discussions, group questions directed to the candidates, and conclusions collected in final confidential questionnaires. Major Democratic and Republican presidential candidates will be invited to answer the questions that the participants have agreed are most important in the small groups.

This is a well-tested process we call “deliberative polling.” It combines a meticulously conducted conventional poll with face-to-face discussion in depth, followed by a second poll. It will tell us: What would the people really think under the best practical conditions for pondering the issues? Which candidates have support on what issues after the people have had the chance to think about them and discuss them in civil fashion? Who supports whom on what policies and why?

This experiment in democratic reform has been tried 108 times since 1994 in 28 countries. Every place it has been applied, whether in Texas on wind power, Bulgaria on the education of the Roma, Japan on pension reform, South Korea on nuclear power or Uganda on education and health care in rural areas, it has had constructive effects in clarifying the public’s considered judgments.

Why not employ this at the start of our presidential race, when the public is clearly hungering for some way of understanding the vexing issues we face and the competing candidates who are asking for the power to lead in addressing them?

When the event is complete, we will present an analysis of the results in this section.

James Fishkin is a communication professor at Stanford, the director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy and the author of “Democracy When the People Are Thinking.” Larry Diamond is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and at the Freeman Spogli Institute at Stanford and author of, most recently, “Ill Winds: Saving Democracy From Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition and American Complacency.”

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