What I Learned from Listening to Americans Deliberate

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Turns out most Americans want the same thing: to be heard and understood.

We don’t need a new crisis over presidential abuse of power to reveal how badly polarized and degraded our politics have become. Before Watergate, majorities of the American public trusted the federal government “to do what is right,” and as recently as the early 2000s, you could find at least four in ten Americans expressing that confidence. Over the last decade, that number has hovered at or below 20 percent. A Pew international survey last year found only four in ten Americans satisfied with the way democracy is working here (compared to about 60 percent in Canada and Australia). Even two years before the polarizing election of 2016, 27 percent of Democrats and 36 percent of Republicans had come to see members of the rival party as a “threat to the nation’s well-being.” Ordinary Americans have not separated into warring partisan tribes as thoroughly as the Congress has, but it’s gotten pretty bad. As anyone brave enough to venture into political discussions on social media knows, it’s becoming harder and harder to have a civil discussion about our political differences.

For the last few decades, my Stanford University colleague James Fishkin has been developing and testing a simple theory: That civil discussion about politics can happen—and opinions on important issues can change quite a bit—under “good” conditions. People need to become better informed about the issues and the policy options. That requires balanced briefing papers that provide the background to an issue and arguments for and against specific policy proposals. People need to have the chance to question policy experts and political leaders with different views on the issues. That requires plenary sessions where people can hear and weigh alternative arguments. And people need to feel safe and respected to express their views. That requires neutral moderators, trained to elicit diverse views and ensure mutual respect and inclusive participation through small group discussion. This is the formula for democratic deliberation—a process for thinking about public choices that weighs evidence and competing arguments, rather than mobilizing prejudice and passions.

If all the citizens of a city or country could gather together in one room (and then in lots of smaller groups), they could—the theory suggests—come to more broadly representative (and thus perhaps legitimate and sustainable) decisions on the
issues. But even ancient Athens couldn’t fit all its citizens in one room. And so they used random sampling. As Fishkin argues in his latest book, *Democracy When the People are Thinking*, if we select a random, representative sample and have them deliberate in the above way, we can determine what conclusions the people would come to if they could somehow all gather together and weigh the evidence and arguments “under good conditions.” If we poll them on the issues before and after deliberation, we can learn not only what the people might decide under better conditions, but also how, after reasoned deliberation, they might change their views on the issues, and why.

This is the method of Deliberative Polling that Fishkin and his collaborators at Stanford’s Center for Deliberative Democracy have used over 100 times from the United States and the European Union to Ghana and Mongolia, to help societies arrive at decisions that are “both representative and thoughtful.” If it could help guide debate about constitutional reform in California and Mongolia, we thought maybe it could help clarify the American public’s thinking about the issues before the country in the 2020 presidential campaign.

Working with the problem-solving institution *Helena*, the independent research organization *NORC* at the University of Chicago, and By the People Productions (a democratic dialogue initiative), we brought 526 registered voters to Dallas last weekend to deliberate on the five issues that polling has identified as of greatest concern to the public: the economy, healthcare, the environment, immigration, and foreign policy. We called the event “America in One Room.” Many in the sample were initially wary of the whole idea, wondering what kind of timeshare scheme would be pushed on them when they arrived for the “deliberation.” Some people had to be contacted four and five times before they were finally persuaded —through NORC’s patience and persistence—that we simply wanted to know their opinions through a process we thought would be deeper and more meaningful than a one-off opinion survey. In this way, we were able to obtain a sample that is remarkably representative of the electorate’s diversity with respect to gender, age, education, ethnicity, sexual orientation, party, and ideology.

Our plan had been to invite the presidential candidates to come and answer the people’s questions on these five big issues. As people filed into the Texas-sized halls of the Gaylord Hotel and Convention Center last Thursday, many delegates wanted to know which presidential candidates they would hear from. In the end, all three Republican challengers (Weld, Walsh, and Sanford) but not President Trump and only two of the remaining 17 Democratic candidates (Bennet and Castro) appeared to answer the people’s questions (all by video).

If there was any initial disappointment with this showing, it quickly faded. People soon discovered that it was the issues—and their fellow citizens—that riveted their attention. One woman from Albuquerque, New Mexico, told me as she was leaving: “Our politics is so toxic. But here, I found that by focusing on issues rather than personalities, we could have respectful conversations.”
Next week we will begin to make public our statistical findings, showing how this sample of America’s registered voters viewed the issues—and changed their views on the issues—after they got a chance to deliberate “under good conditions.” But here are some things I learned during those four days that can’t be fully captured by the numbers.

- **Ordinary Americans do not want to be as bitterly divided as their parties, political campaigns, and media are driving them to be.** They are pained to the point of being traumatized by the current level of partisan polarization, and they are begging for relief. Reaching across all kinds of divides in Dallas—and not just in the group issue discussions but in deeply personal exchanges over dinner and drinks as well—they found some common ground. And they wanted to know why their politicians can’t do so as well. A heavily tattooed older man from Colorado with a gray beard, long gray hair, and a tall cowboy hat, asked, “If 500 people can get together—from different ages, races, geographic regions, with conflicting opinions—why can’t... our Congress do that?”

- **Good conditions really do matter.** Most of the small groups (which were about the size of a jury) spanned across America’s partisan, ideological, racial, and other identity divides. But when they were able to sit together in a room and talk about issues as individuals, rather than as warring red and blue tribes, something changed. At least they came to understand where their fellow Americans were coming from. A retired schoolteacher from Mariposa County, California, told me: “It’s become dangerous to express your view. But if you get people out of their places, with moderators and parameters. . . [it’s different.]” Said a middle-aged man from Wisconsin: “I didn’t know who was a Democrat, who was a Republican, and who an independent. People just shared their views. That made it much easier to listen and have a respectful exchange.”

- **Americans are fed up with the politics of personal destruction.** Pretty soon into the experiment, it was clear to all of us that they just didn’t want to hear it any more. The one time that a delegate went negative in the plenary—by alluding to Governor Mark Sanford’s alibi of a hike on the Appalachian Trail to cover up his extramarital affair—his fellow delegates made their displeasure loudly known. “We’ve really liked the fact,” said a woman from Ohio, that (save for that Sanford moment) “this hasn’t focused on the personalities; its been about the issues. That breaks the norm.”

- **Americans welcome a spirit of civility and bipartisanship.** Over and over, people remarked to me about how refreshing it was to hear contending policy experts from different parties or ideological orientations discuss the issues in a friendly and mutually respectful way, without feeling compelled to always disagree, disparage, or destroy the other side. In fact, delegates were disarmed by the spirit of good will (and even occasional humor) that leavened the policy debate on taxes and the economy between Jared Bernstein (former economic policy advisor to Vice-President Biden) and Douglas Holtz-Eakin (former chief economic advisor to Senator John
McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign), and by the significant common
ground on foreign policy issues between former Obama White House Chief of
Staff Denis McDonough and former George W. Bush national security staffer
Kori Schake.

- *Ordinary people want to understand the issues better, and they appreciate balanced and accessible means to do so.* Joyce, from Torrance, California, told me, “I’m leaving a changed person. I thought I was reasonably informed, but
I wasn’t. I heave learned so much about the issues that I didn’t know. I will
now follow them more closely.”

- *People are ready to re-think their views in the face of fresh evidence.* A young
African American woman told me she had gravitated toward a more nuanced
and gradual stance on the proposal to raise the federal minimum wage to
$15. “When I took the first survey,” she said, “I thought it was a great idea.
But you learn it could really hurt small business.”

- *Americans have not given up on their democracy, and their faith in it can be
restored.* As they were leaving last Sunday, many said they were honored to
have been chosen for the exercise, and that it had restored their faith and
pride in American democracy. One was Jackie, an elementary school teacher
from Tennessee. “I’m coming away much more informed, energized, and
proud to be part of this country,” she said. “This made me realize, we all want
the same things, to be safe and valued, to have this be a great country.”

- *Everybody wants to be treated with respect.* And this ethic—constantly
nurtured and reinforced from beginning to end in Dallas—was vital to the
success of America in One Room. Heather, from University City, Missouri,
told me, “I have had the first civil conversation about politics that I have had
in a very long time. Because on Facebook, they just call me names.” Reggie,
an African-American from the San Diego area, said of his small group, “We
all listened to one another and respected their viewpoints. In the end, that’s
all anybody wants, to be heard and understood.”

For many delegates, the final small group sessions on Sunday were poignant and
even tearful. For the first time, many people had had serious policy discussions,
and even formed friendships, across the great political, cultural, and racial
chasms of American life. In one final session, an older white woman became
flustered when she couldn’t find her mobile phone. “Oh I have your cell phone
number,” said a young Hispanic woman. “Let me try it.” And sure enough, the
older woman’s phone started buzzing from a recess of her handbag.

Not everything went quite as smoothly as we had planned. A few of the
moderators we had recruited to facilitate and umpire the small group discussions
didn’t make it to Dallas. A few others fell out during the daylong training in
advance of the event. Fortunately, some remarkable volunteers came forward to
replace them. These were Stanford undergraduates who had come to observe the
proceedings and provide logistical support. They had just taken our class on
democratic deliberation, and had done mock deliberations on each of the five
issues. In the process, they had mastered our 55-page briefing book on the issues
and had learned how to deliberate respectfully across divides. They had also just
gone through the moderator training the day before. Hence, they proved skillful
and fair-minded facilitators of the small group discussions.

One of our student moderators was an Asian American whose parents had
emigrated to the United States. He was needled by some of the 13 participants in
his racially diverse group, which included some quite conservative views on issues
like immigration. Several participants wanted to reduce the number of refugees
and the total number of immigrants admitted to the U.S. And they wondered:
Who was this young moderator? What were his views? One elderly white
participant probed, “Are you a Russian spy?” At one point they asked—maybe
half-jokingly—to see his passport or driver’s license. Instead of taking the bait or
becoming unnerved, he simply kept moving the conversations along impartially.

In order not to bias the deliberations, our moderators had been strictly instructed
not to reveal anything about themselves until their sessions were finished and the
participants had completed the final survey. At that point, our student moderator
told them his family story. “My grandparents escaped communist Chinese rule in
Tibet in the early 1960s. My parents were born in refugee settlements in India in
the 1960s and moved to America in the 1990s. My parents have two children born
in the United States. Their youngest son is a junior in the most racially diverse
high school in Oregon, and is on track to being the valedictorian. Their oldest son
graduated as valedictorian and is now a sophomore at Stanford University. My
name is Tenzin Kartsang and I have been your moderator.” They all applauded.

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