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Sharon man heads to Texas for a national civic experiment on election



Jim Fredrickson Courtesy photo—

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Over the next four days, Sharon resident Jim Fredrickson will be one of 500 voters participating in America in One Room, a deliberative poll organized by the nonpartisan nonprofit Helena in Dallas, Texas.

Fredrickson said the process runs from Thursday night through Sunday afternoon. The event's website describes it as "a historic gathering of 500 American voters who will participate in a nonpartisan discussion about the major issues of the

2020 presidential election.”

“If you get 500 people in the room, can you have a civil discourse that changes preferences?” said Niall Janney, a representative for Helena, about the purpose of the event. Janney said Helena seeks for the event to serve as an alternative to the polarization and disolution of political discourse in the US.

James Fishkin, the director for the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, referred to the event as “an experiment” on Monday. His organization developed the concept of deliberative polling. According to an [article \(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/29/opinion/democratic-debate-2020-election.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/29/opinion/democratic-debate-2020-election.html) Fishkin co-wrote in late August, the method addresses some of the biases in traditional polls that lead to nonrepresentative results. He wrote that the method, applied to America in One Room, will give participants the “best practical conditions for pondering the issues,” and will determine which candidates rise to the top “after the people have had the chance to think about them and discuss them in civil fashion.”



Fredrickson said the survey panel Amerispeak invited him to participate in the event. He’s answered surveys for the panel over the past year and a half. About two months ago, he was polled on the upcoming election: his take on all of the candidates, and major policy issues. “It took forever,” he said, but he was determined to finish it. He received an email shortly after, indicating he’d been selected to participate in the America in One Room discussion.

“I hemmed and hawed, because it’s a commitment,” he said, but ultimately agreed to attend. “It’s an opportunity that I couldn’t pass up.”

According to the CDD’s [webpage \(https://cdd.stanford.edu/2019/america-in-one-room/\)](https://cdd.stanford.edu/2019/america-in-one-room/) for the event, participants were “carefully selected to form an accurate, representative sample of the entire American electorate in all its political, cultural, and demographic diversity.”

Fredrickson said that although he doesn’t know why he was selected, “I like to

think I got picked because I am neutral... I like to feel like I'm [like] a lot of people." He described himself as fiscally conservative and socially liberal, college educated, New England-raised, and "not going in with a strong right or left bias." He retired from General Electric three years ago, and is also a retired senior navy officer. His professional background is in the power generation business, he said, and he's familiar with the environmental regulations associated with the energy industry.

"They already sent me a fact book with the five major issues," Fredrickson said on Monday, which provide a "pretty balanced summary" of five key issues: the environment, economy, national security, immigration, and health care. He was completing one of the five briefings every day leading up to the event. "I think they've made a real effort to present the issues in a balanced and unbiased manner." The material summarizes policies like the Green New Deal, for example, with the arguments for and against it.

"Every issue that I've read about, I can understand the argument for both sides," he said.

Participants like Fredrickson will arrive briefed on the candidates and issues, and deliberate issues in moderated, small group discussions, before drafting and ranking questions for candidates and re-answering poll questions at the end of the process. Fredrickson said the civil tone of the event appealed to him. "We're looking for adults in Washington that will sit down and solve the country's problems," he said. "If there is yelling and screaming I'm not going to stay."

Fredrickson acknowledged that it was easier for him to attend as he didn't have to take time off work, and said that the event paid for his travel expenses and an honorarium for expenses incurred during the event. Janney said on Tuesday that the event appears to have succeeded in attracting a representative makeup of participants, including Americans who would not typically be able to afford the cost and time for such an event. He said that the final results of the event will be published, including participant demographics.

"It will be interesting to see what the results are and how they're used," Fredrickson said.

