

Democracy in America is failing — here’s how we can still make it work

Democracy is supposed to reflect the will of the people. That's not happening now — but there are ways to fix it

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PAUL ROSENBERG

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American democracy is badly broken, but there’s no shortage of ways to improve it. One dramatic example will be on display in Dallas from Sept. 19 to 22, when a project called "[America in One Room](#)" will bring together a representative sample of more than 500 registered voters to engage in a process known as “deliberative polling” focused on five big issues: health care, immigration, the environment, the economy and foreign policy.

Participants will be polled initially, then presented with a common set of briefing papers (or video presentations) and then “randomly divided into smaller discussion groups, each led by a moderator trained to encourage fair and civil conversation,” as described in an [recent New York Times op-ed](#) by James Fishkin and Larry Diamond. They will then return to a plenary discussion after which they’ll be polled again to get the results of the shared deliberative process. They will also interact with presidential candidates.

It’s an idea that Fishkin, director of the [Center for Deliberative Democracy](#) at Stanford University, first unveiled in the Atlantic in 1988, and it’s been used more than 100 times in different venues around the world. “Every place it has been applied ... it has had constructive effects in clarifying the public’s considered judgments,” Fishkin and Diamond wrote in the Times. “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?”

Speaking to Salon, Fishkin explained that the process they devised is “meant to answer this type of hypothetical: What would the public think under good conditions? Or under the best practical conditions that we can provide on the specific issue?”