

HELENA

Stanford | Center for Deliberative Democracy

NORC
at the UNIVERSITY of CHICAGO

By the People

AMERICA
in ONE ROOM

America in One Room: Executive Summary

America in One Room was a national experiment in deliberation by the public about the major issues facing the country. It brought a state-of-the-art scientific sample of 523 registered voters from around the country to Dallas for civil discussion over a long weekend. Organized by *Helena*, a non-partisan organization, *By the People Productions* and the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University, the event gathered a stratified random sample of registered voters recruited by NORC at the University of Chicago. A control group of 844 was also recruited by NORC and took the same questionnaires before and after. Data on the representativeness of the treatment and control groups is available from the NORC Methodological Report linked below.

From September 19-22, 2019, the sample met in moderated small group discussions and plenary sessions with competing experts and politicians. After the weekend the percentage saying the system of American democracy was “working well” doubled from 30% to 60%. The participants deliberated in depth on specific policy proposals in five areas—immigration, health care, the economy, the environment, and foreign policy—the big issues identified in earlier polling as most important to the voters in this election cycle. To aid in their discussions, participants used a detailed briefing book which discussed policy proposals in the five areas, with balanced arguments for and against each proposal. This booklet was prepared and vetted by policy experts from both parties, as well as by a distinguished Advisory Committee.

There were dramatic changes of opinion. The most polarizing proposals, whether from the left or the right, generally lost support, and a number of more centrist proposals moved to the foreground. Crucially, proposals that were farther on the right typically lost support from Republicans and proposals that were farther on the left typically lost support from Democrats. It seems our divisions are not immune to deliberation.

Immigration

The debate on immigration included several proposals that elicited a more welcoming position on both legal and illegal immigration. This change was mostly due to a softening of the opposition expressed by Republicans in their initial surveys. After deliberation, support for “reducing the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the US” dropped from 37% to 22%. Support among Republicans for this dropped by 31 points (from 66% of Republicans to 34%). After deliberating, Republican support for increasing “the number of visas for skilled workers to move to the US” went from 50% to 71% (and overall support grew from 60% to 80%). By the end of our weekend together, Republicans were also much more inclined to “Increase the number of visas for low skilled workers to move to the US for industries that need them.” Their support for this policy more than doubled, from 31% to 66%, with overall support for this policy rising from 53% to 77% of our sample.

Through deliberation, our participants increased their already substantial support for continuing DACA (the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program for children whose parents brought them to the US), from 65% to 79%. Among Republicans who had initially opposed this, support increased by 25 points. Support for tough crackdowns on immigration dramatically declined. Forcing “undocumented immigrants ... to return to their home countries before applying to legally come to the US to live and work permanently” drew support from 45% of our sample initially, but after deliberation it fell to 25%. Republican support for this proposal was slashed in half, from 79% to 40%. In general, while the opposition to immigration among Republicans was intense, it proved to be open to dialogue.

Taxes and the Economy

On some of the economic issues, the movement was mostly by Democrats. Support for “increasing the federal minimum wage to 15 dollars an hour” dropped from 54% to 39% overall, with support from Democrats dropping 23 points (perhaps as they realized that different localities would adapt to this differently). Enthusiasm for covering “the cost of college tuition at public universities for all students who could not otherwise afford it” fell slightly overall, from 47% to 43%, but most of this decline was among Democrats (from 72% to 61%). Support for some expensive but imaginative economic proposals, such as a bond for each child born or a guarantee of universal basic income both fell sharply: from 43% support to 13% for “Baby Bonds” (with support from Democrats falling 40 points) and from 17 to 10 percent for Universal Basic Income (with the drop also mostly among Democrats). But support for an effective and relatively centrist proposal, expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (which currently provides a benefit to low income workers) to “more middle class workers” went up from 73% to 81% with the increase coming from both Republicans and Independents.

Health Care

Support for automatically enrolling everyone in a more generous version of Medicare (“Medicare for All”) eroded from 48% to 40% with the drop again coming mostly from Democrats (Democratic support fell 14 points from 70% to 56%). On the other side of the political spectrum, repealing the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) fared even worse. Support for repeal dropped from 35% to 25%, with most of the drop coming from Republicans (from 68% to 48%).

There were significant increases for some more centrist proposals: increasing the federal subsidies in the Affordable Care Act that help the poor rose from 55% to 60%; expanding these federal subsidies to the middle class rose from 60% to 72% and ensuring that people should have reasonable access to health insurance regardless of pre-existing conditions rose from 90% to an impressive 97%.

Foreign Policy

On foreign policy, a number of internationalist proposals that Republicans were initially skeptical about showed increased support with deliberation, primarily based on movements among Republicans. Support for the US rejoining the Trans-Pacific Partnership exploded from 47 to 74 percent as participants learned more about it. Republican approval increased stunningly from 23% to 62%. Support for reaffirming the US commitment to defend any NATO ally attacked by a hostile force” increased from 72 to 83%, with an 18 point increase among Republicans. Republicans support for recommitting to the Iran Nuclear Agreement increased by 21 points, lifting overall support of the Agreement from 51% to 67% among the whole sample. Participants also reaffirmed the importance of soft power. Support for using “diplomacy and financial support to promote democracy and human rights throughout the world” increased from 59 to 72%, with initially skeptical Republicans increasing 19 points, from 43% to 62%.

The Environment

On the environment, participants increased their majority support for rejoining the Paris Accord (from 64% to 70%) and for moving beyond the Paris Agreement for “more significant cutbacks in greenhouse gas emissions” (from 63% to 68%). In both cases the increases were primarily from Republicans. There was even more support for using taxes and market incentives to reduce greenhouse emissions. This went from 61% to 72% with the increases from all parties but mostly from Republicans (who were initially skeptical). However, the still more ambitious goal of requiring “zero carbon emissions for cars, trucks and buses” lost support (especially among Democrats), with overall opposition increasing from 34 to 45%.

Details of all the attitude changes are presented in the tables linked below. The control group evidenced little change on the issues.

Evaluations and Knowledge Gains

The participants offered very favorable evaluations of the process and all its components. 98% rated the overall process valuable; 97% rated the small group discussions valuable, 90% for the briefing materials and 90% for the plenary sessions. There were also substantial knowledge gains. On a battery of 7 knowledge questions, the participants increased their correct score by 14 points from 46% to 60%. (The control group in the same period only increased by 1 point.) Knowledge questions were selected from topics discussed, including the number of undocumented immigrants, the countries in the Paris Agreement, the Affordable Care Act, the tax rate for capital gains and trade agreements. More information is available in the attachment.

After this long weekend of intense dialogue across our divisions, reflecting America in all its diversity, 95% agreed that they “learned a lot about people very different from me - about what they and their lives are like.” They also learned a great deal about our biggest policy challenges, and they expressed a desire to stay more informed.

For more information see attachments:

- a) Evaluation Results
- b) Knowledge Gain
- c) Table of Results Overall
- d) Table of Results by Party ID
- e) NORC Methodological Report (for data on representativeness)

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