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— POLITICS WATCH —

What happens America is condensed into one room? Partisanship fades.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

'America in One Room' polled voters on issues both before and after small-group discussions informed by briefings. Centrist proposals gained support, as did confidence in democracy.



Alfredo Sosa/Staff

Students participate in a political 'speed dating' event sponsored by BridgeND at the University of Notre Dame campus on September 12, 2017 in South Bend, Indiana. The student-led BridgeND fosters healthy dialogue by bringing together people from across the political spectrum who want to talk openly and respectfully challenge one another on important national issues. Students are now setting up similar groups on other campuses around the country, seeking to counter political polarization.

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By [Liz Marlantes](#), Politics Editor

Dear reader:
“The country is not as divided as the media make it seem.”

That’s a quote from a participant in a recent election survey experiment called “America in One Room.” As the name indicates, the project brought together a representative sample of voters from around the country, reflecting the nation’s deep divides on partisanship, ideology, and identity. Over the course of a long weekend in Dallas, they held small-group discussions on five hot-button topics: immigration, healthcare, the environment, the economy, and foreign policy.

*Many participants experienced significant shifts in thought. “Republicans became more welcoming of immigration and less punitive in their attitudes,” the researchers write in *The New York Times*. Support for making undocumented immigrants return to their home countries, for example, fell from 45 to 25 percent. Democrats shifted notably on economic issues – support for a federal minimum wage dropped by 23 percentage points.*

The conversations also had a marked effect on people’s confidence in our democratic institutions: The percentage who said America’s system of democracy was “working well” rose from 30 percent to 60 percent.

Many groups have undertaken similar efforts in recent years, anecdotally confirming what “America in One Room” was able to measure: When you bring people of opposing views together for thoughtful discussions, the nation’s partisan divide shrinks.

The challenge, of course, lies in the “bringing together” part. Partisanship is now correlated with geography – Democrats are clustered in cities (and, increasingly, suburbs); Republicans dominate in exurban and rural areas. The lack of regular contact between Democrats and Republicans has led to a decrease in understanding. But overcoming a geographic divide is easier said than done.

And while physical distance isn’t an issue in virtual communities, those spaces are increasingly segregated as well. The participants in Dallas were given a 55-page handbook with arguments for and against each policy proposal. Most voters today get their information in a piecemeal fashion from media sources or peers that simply reinforce previously held views.

Still, the “America in One Room” researchers highlight their project’s value as a measure of public opinion – revealing Americans’ “considered judgments” following discussion and deliberation, rather than the “surface impressions” most polling reflects.

“It was interesting how many times people agreed at the heart of an issue, but just had slight differences in how to go about making needed changes,” participant Joan Young told CNN. “I was very hopeful after seeing the way our small group behaved.”

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