

What Would Happen If American Voters All Got Together And Talked Politics?

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Filed under [Polling](#)

There is a story that Stanford University political science professor Jim Fishkin likes to tell about George Gallup, the man who helped popularize public opinion polling in America.

After the 1936 presidential election — which Gallup’s polling correctly called for Franklin D. Roosevelt — Gallup [delivered a lecture](#) at Princeton in which he argued that polling could allow voters from across America to come together, like in a New England town meeting, to debate and decide on important issues facing the country. As he saw it, newspapers and the radio would broadcast the debate, and polls would capture what people thought after having heard from all sides. It would be, to quote Gallup, as if “the nation is literally in one great room.”

Eighty-some years later, Fishkin says Gallup’s vision hasn’t quite held up: “He was right in that there could be a shared discussion and polling about it, but wrong in that the room was so big that nobody was really paying attention.”

But what if you *could* get the whole country into a more manageably sized room?

That is — quite literally — what Fishkin and his Stanford colleague, Larry Diamond, tried to do. Over the course of four days in September, in partnership with [Helena](#), a nonpartisan institute that funded the event, and [NORC at the University of Chicago](#), they gathered a nationally representative sample of 526 registered voters¹ in a suburb of Dallas to talk about issues that Americans [have said are important to them in 2020](#): immigration, health care, the economy, the environment and foreign policy. They called it “[America in One Room](#).”

The aims of the project were lofty. If you gather all of America in one room and provide them with facts and a set of arguments from both sides of the political aisle, can respectful, moderated discussion change people’s minds?

The answer: Sort of.



In September, a nationally representative group of registered voters gathered to talk over some of the big issues driving the 2020 election. HELENA

There *was* some movement on the event’s five issues, as captured in the pre- and post-event surveys conducted by NORC, though how much movement differed depending on the question. Fishkin and Diamond found, for instance, that [support grew among Republicans](#) for proposals like increasing the number of visas for skilled workers and for less-skilled workers in industries that need them. And support for proposals like a \$15 minimum wage and issuing \$1,000 per month to all adults (a [universal basic income](#)) fell among Democrats.

But it’s unclear how lasting these changes will be, or even whether [these types of events](#) are the best way to encourage real political change. They’re not very practical, for one. Moreover, for people for whom these political issues hit close to home — those struggling to pay for health insurance, for example, or worried about family members being deported — the idea of engaging with the other side might seem overly idealistic, daunting or even useless. Some issues just don’t have much of a middle ground when you get down to the level of individual people.

Still, Diamond told FiveThirtyEight that if they could raise the money, they planned to survey the participants again in six or nine months to find out what, if any, changes had endured.

Many of the participants FiveThirtyEight spoke with, though, seemed to think that the emphasis on people changing their minds might be missing the larger purpose of an event like this.

“I don’t think people’s minds are changing,” said Susan Bosco, a retiree living in Fairfax, Virginia. “I think what we’re doing is respecting other people’s opinions more and not seeing them as ogres.” Robert Granger from Bristol, Tennessee, and Jamie Andersen, from Portland, Oregon, who were in Bosco’s group for the event, agreed, saying they had decided to attend so that they could better understand what makes people hold the opinions they do. “We all want to see our country succeed, regardless of race, gender or what part of the country you’re from. But we all have different ideas of how to get there,” Granger said.

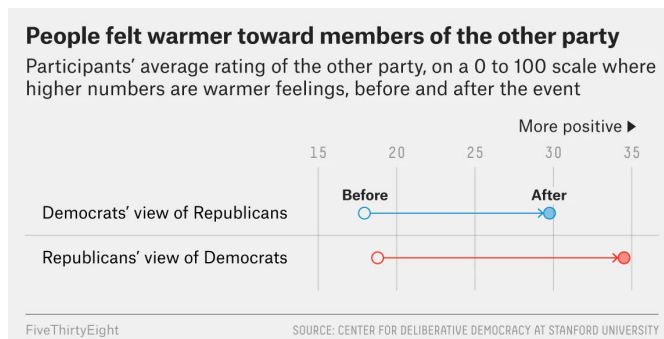


One of the discussion groups talking about the economy and taxes. HELENA

And the survey results back them up. Pre- and post-event surveys found most people who came as Democrats left as Democrats, and the same with Republicans. But while the experiment didn’t make people change how they identify politically, it did seem to make them more understanding of those who hold a different view. As London Robinson of Chicago told FiveThirtyEight, many people in her discussion group made arguments that she expected given where they were from or their political party, but she was also surprised that people from different parties “think just like I do.” “I didn’t think they would think that way,” Robinson said. “It was breathtaking to see that.”

That’s something. Contrary to conventional wisdom, most Americans [don’t watch and read only partisan news outlets](#). But the country is [largely segregated by politics](#) — most people live near and work with like-minded souls, and many [dislike their counterparts](#) from across the political aisle. So the America in One Room gathering was designed to give people a low-stakes environment to debate politics, because as Diamond said, “These are dangerous conversations out there in the real world.” For instance, a [2016 Pew Research Center study on partisanship](#) found that 55 percent of Democrats said the Republican Party makes them “afraid,” while 49 percent of Republicans said the same about the Democratic Party.

In a convention hall outside Dallas, though, getting everyone into the same room seemed to change that some:



Participants didn’t identify as more politically moderate after the event, but there is evidence that they viewed those on the other side of the political aisle more positively. When asked to rate their feelings toward the other party on a scale of 0 to 100 — with higher numbers meaning warmer feelings — Democrats’ views of Republicans improved by nearly 12 points on average. For Republicans, the jump was even larger, almost 16 points.²

Before the event, people were also more likely to say that the other side was “not thinking clearly.” On a scale of 0 to 10 — where 10 was strongly agreeing with the statement that your political opponents are not thinking clearly and 0 was strongly disagreeing with the statement — the average response dropped from 6.2 to 4.7, indicating that even if participants didn’t agree with each other more, they had more respect for those they disagreed with.

Participants also left the event with a better opinion of democracy and their place in it. They were asked to rate how well they thought democracy was working on a 10-point scale, with 0 meaning that democracy was working “extremely poorly” and 10 being “extremely well.” On average, respondents’ ratings increased by 1.6 points. There were also increases in the number of respondents who agreed that

public officials care a lot about what “people like me” think, and in those who felt they have a say in what government does or who thought that their opinions about politics were “worth listening to.”

Take Rob Snyder of Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, one of the participants FiveThirtyEight talked to. He emailed after the event to say that while he’d always considered politics as something “better left for someone else to worry about,” his experience had made him feel like he was no longer just “one person with one voice and one vote.”



And finally, the event may have gotten us one step closer to Gallup’s vision of a more informed and empowered electorate. In the post-event survey, respondents were asked seven multiple-choice questions testing their political knowledge about things like which political party holds the majority in the House and Senate, and what the major provisions of the Affordable Care Act are. And on average, participants answered one more question correctly after the event. Participants also skipped³ about one fewer question on average, suggesting they knew (or thought they knew) the answer to more questions.

For some respondents, like Veronica Munoz of Los Angeles, the event sparked an interest in being better informed. Munoz said that while she was familiar with some of the proposals being discussed, there was a lot she didn’t know, so she was glad she had come. “Now I’m more interested in reading the newspaper to find out what’s going on with our politics and our economy and policies than I was before,” she said.

Granted, the real-world implications of these findings are limited at best. Most people don’t have the opportunity to spend their weekends debating big political issues with a group that’s carefully selected to be representative of their fellow Americans — and that’s unlikely to change anytime soon. But in an era in which we’re [increasingly polarized](#) as a country and [even facts are under fire](#), the idea that an event devoted to political debate can increase knowledge, decrease skepticism of the other side, and bolster participants’ faith in democracy — and their place in it — certainly seems like good news.

Footnotes

1. Participants were selected from [AmeriSpeak](#), a nationally representative panel survey of registered voters that NORC runs. Three participants did not complete the post-event survey and were, therefore, excluded from our analysis.
2. All these results are statistically significant. In order to be as sure as we can be that the changes we’re showing happened as a result of attending the event and not because of some other external factor, we also analyzed survey responses from the researchers’ control group of people who weren’t invited to the event. Additionally, we controlled for things like level of income, gender, party identification and education.
3. Skipped questions include people who didn’t respond and people who answered “couldn’t say.”