

NATIONAL, POLITICS

## In Midst of Polarized Times, a Hopeful Experiment in Deliberative Democracy Shows Voters Can Agree on Solutions to the Country's Problems

10/4/2019 by **KATHY SPILLAR**

Many consider political polarization—the vast gap between Republicans and Democrats—to be a defining and ever-growing feature of American politics today. But an experiment called “America in One Room” set out to discover just how rigid and vast that gap is. Turns out: It’s not as solid or as wide as you may think.

The brainchild of Stanford’s [Center for Deliberative Democracy](#), nonpartisan institution [Helena](#) and By the People Productions, “America in One Room” was a four-day experiment held in Dallas that brought a cross-section of 523 registered voters (recruited by the University of Chicago’s [National Opinion Research Center](#)) from around the country in one room to have a civil, political discussion. Voters were joined by moderators and policy experts, who led discussions and education sessions on five specific areas: immigration, health care, the economy, the environment and foreign policy.



(Helena)

For some, this may sound like a recipe for disaster. But the weekend instead proved that even our most extreme divisions are not immune to deliberation.

The “America in One Room” project showed that, after education and deliberation, Republicans and Democrats tend to abandon polarizing positions at a dramatic rate—and find workable solutions to vexing public problems they can agree on.

*Ms.* was on site to observe the proceedings.

## Immigration

The discussion on immigration in particular seemed to be one where Republicans dropped or softened more extreme views. For example, after deliberation, support among Republicans for “reducing the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the U.S.” dropped an astounding 31 points: from 66 percent to 34 percent. Overall, those in favor of cutting the amount of refugees dropped from 37 percent to 22 percent.



Republican support for increasing “the number of visas for skilled workers” to enter the country also jumped 21 points, from 50 percent to 71 percent. Overall, this number grew eight points over the weekend, up to 57 percent from 49 percent at the start. Similarly, support for “[increasing] the number of visas for low-skilled workers” more than doubled among Republicans, from 31 percent to 66 percent, with 60 percent of overall support at the start of the weekend up to 80 percent by the end.

Overall support for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) started high and ended higher: from 65 percent to 79 percent. Among Republicans, support increased by 25 points. In the same vein, support for forcing “undocumented immigrants ... to return to their home countries before applying to legally come to the U.S.” dropped from 45 percent to 25 percent overall, and Republican support dropped by nearly half: 79 percent to 40 percent.

## Health Care

At the beginning of the weekend, support for the repeal of the Affordable Care Act clocked in at 35 percent, but dropped to 25 percent. This drop can be largely attributed

to Republicans: 68 percent advocated for the repeal of Obamacare at the onset, and only 48 percent supported it by the end.

Support for specific subsidies within the Affordable Care Act that help the poor rose from 55 percent to 60 percent, and extending those same subsidies to the middle class rose in support 12 points, from 60 to 72 percent. Overall, a staggering 97 percent of voters in the sample supported the idea of ensuring health insurance for those with pre-existing conditions.



Support for “Medicare for All” proposed by some Democratic presidential candidates eroded, declining to 40 percent from 48 percent, with the drop coming mostly among Democrats. Democratic support dropped 14 points, from 70 percent to 56 percent.

## The Economy

Many weekend attendees, especially Republicans and independents, supported extending the Earned Income Tax Credit—a refundable tax credit for low- to moderate-income working individuals and couples, particularly those with children—to “more middle class workers,” with support jumping up to 81 percent from 73 percent overall.





(Helena)

When it came to the economy, though, the largest movement in policy positions was from Democrats. Enthusiasm for covering the cost of college for low-income students fell slightly (47 to 43 percent), with Democrats waning from 72 percent to 61 percent.

Support for increasing the federal minimum wage to 15 dollars an hour also declined from 54 to 39 percent, as debate focused on problems different localities might face in adapting to a one-size-fits-all federal minimum.

### **The Environment**

Not only did the weekend's participants show support for rejoining the Paris Agreement —up six points overall, ending at 70 percent—but also the group pushed for the U.S. to go further, with support for “more significant cutbacks in greenhouse gas emissions” increasing from 63 percent to 68 percent. Increases could be attributed mainly to Republicans, who were largely skeptical initially.



(Helena)

Using taxes and market incentives to reduce greenhouse emissions increased in support, from 61 percent and ending at 71 percent—with support increasing among both Democrats and Republicans, but especially the latter.

## Foreign Policy

Republicans also showed a lot of movement on the topic of foreign policy. Participants overall reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to defend any NATO ally attacked by a hostile actor—by the experiment’s end, 83 percent reaffirmed this pledge, up from 72 at the start. Republican support jumped more dramatically: 18 points. Republican support also increased by 21 points in regard to recommitting to the Iran Nuclear Commitment, with overall agreement shifting from 51 to 67 percent.

The weekend saw agreement for strengthening diplomacy, too: The concept of “using diplomacy and financial support to promote democracy and human rights” worldwide jumped from 59 percent to 72 percent overall, with Republican support up 19 points (43

to 62 percent).



After an “intense” weekend of debate and deliberation, 95 percent of attendees agreed they “learned a lot about people very different than me—about what they and their lives are like.” More importantly, they expressed a desire to stay more informed: a good sign for *Ms.* and for all media outlets alike.

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ABOUT KATHY SPILLAR

Katherine Spillar is the Executive Editor of *Ms.*, where she oversees