

# How a weekend of discussing politics shifted the views of these Americans

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Updated 12:00 PM ET, Wed October 2, 2019

**(CNN)** — If you spent the weekend talking politics and policy with a roomful of people who thought differently from you, how might it change your views of American democracy?

According to an experiment called [America in One Room](#), that experience moves Americans toward a rosier view of how American democracy works.

"People do not think their voice matters, and they talk to the like-minded, and they are dispirited and inattentive," said Jim Fishkin, director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford and one of the creators of this research method. The difference between that attitude and the outcome of deliberative research suggest experimentation in democratic institutions is needed, he said in an email.

"We are in a time when reform and experimentation is needed for democracy. It is under threat around the world. It seems to yield mostly deadlock and division. A democracy that incorporates more public deliberation will, in my view, achieve greater legitimacy because it will be seen to respond to the public's priorities and key concerns."

More than 500 participants from 47 states gathered in Grapevine, Texas, for a weekend to experiment, deliberate and, ultimately, compromise.

## How does it work?

The project used a technique known as deliberative polling. Researchers selected a representative sample of Americans to come to a single location and spend four days discussing the merits of five issues at the heart of American politics today: health care, immigration, the economy, foreign policy and the environment. They answered survey questions about their views on those topics, and on the major party candidates running for president in 2020, both before and after their weekend of deliberation.

Overall, the share of those who participated in the event who felt that American democracy is working well rose from 30% before the event to 60% afterward. Participants also became less skeptical about the motivations of those with different political views: The percentage who thought people who disagree strongly with their policy views have "good reasons" for their positions rose from 37% to 54%, while the percentage who thought their political opposites were "not thinking clearly" dropped from 51% to 33%. Further, 95% agreed that by participating, they had "learned a lot about people very different from me."

A breakout group at the America in One Room gathering in Grapevine, Texas.

The kumbaya vibe of findings like these seems to stand in stark contrast to the polarized public and social media conversation on politics and policy.

The findings on policy could provide fuel for presidential candidates arguing for more moderate positions on the most controversial issues being raised in the campaign for the White House.

Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford and one of the researchers behind the project, sees a clear desire for moderation when voters are given the time to consider the issues and their merits.

"If you study the movement on the issues and the movement on the candidates in our survey together, it suggests there is significant national sentiment to see less polarizing (more moderate) candidates," he said in an email. "But this is increasingly hard to get because candidates are chosen in low-turnout party primaries, where the most ideologically committed disproportionately turn out to vote."

## What about policy?

In addition to deliberation among their peers, participants were given briefing materials laying out arguments for and against each of the policy proposals they had been surveyed about before the event.

Participants' shifting views on health care -- an issue which consistently ranks at the top of voters' priority lists for 2020 -- demonstrates how participants moved away from proposals at the far ends of the ideological scale and gravitated toward compromise positions.

While support for automatic enrollment in "a more generous version of Medicare" lost support after deliberation, dropping double-digits among Democrats and independents, support grew for a proposal in which "everybody should be able to buy a public plan like Medicare, the current plan for seniors over 65," including a 12-point increase in support for such a plan among Republicans.

Proposals centered on the repeal of the Affordable Care Act lost support, with more saying they opposed repealing it outright or repealing it and replacing it with grants to state governments to create their own systems, including steep increases in opposition to such proposals among Republicans.

Participants gather for America in One Room in Grapevine, Texas.

The pattern held across each of the other four issue areas tested, with policies at the far ends of the ideological scale generally losing support among the partisans most apt to favor them while policies closer to the middle gained backing from prior opponents. Republican backing for a plan to reduce the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the US dropped more than 30 points, while GOP support for a

plan to increase the number of visas for low-skilled workers grew by 35 points. Democrats became less likely to favor increasing the federal minimum wage to \$15, as Republicans grew less apt to favor lowering the corporate tax rate. Republicans grew more likely to support recommitting to the Iran Nuclear Agreement, as Democrats increased their backing for enhanced military presence to prevent aggression by China. Republicans increased their backing for the Paris Climate Agreement, as Democrats softened on requiring zero carbon emissions for cars, trucks and buses.

## Meet the participants

10 of the more than 500 participants shared with CNN their biggest takeaways from the event.

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