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Polarized electorate can get along, polling study finds

By KATHRYN EASTBURN The Daily News 11 hrs ago

TEXAS CITY

College of the Mainland Professor Shinya Wakao recently spent four days in a hotel ballroom in Grapevine, Texas, helping facilitate America in One Room, a national polling project designed to reflect what Americans would think about heated political issues if they focused intentionally and informed themselves while respecting one another's opinions.

That's the basic premise of deliberative polling, an invention of James Fishkin, a former University of Texas at Austin professor, now at Stanford University heading the Center for Deliberative Democracy.

The event, staged in late September, brought together 523 randomly selected registered voters from across the United States to spend four days deliberating major issues in the upcoming presidential election: the economy and taxes, healthcare, the environment and immigration and foreign policy.

A poll administered before and then after four days of informed discussion, facilitated by briefings on opposing sides of issues and small group discussions, showed that opinions of a highly polarized electorate can be changed through informed dialogue, a key finding for what is generally agreed to be a seriously ailing democracy, according to posted results from the center.

"It was awesome," Wakao said. "I worked behind the scenes collecting and sorting data collected during the four days and putting it into a database." Now, Wakao and others will help analyze the data.

Wakao met many of the polling participants during lunchtime and dinnertime, and observed many of their small group discussions. He found the organizers had assembled a group that accurately reflected the diversity of the American population in 2019.

"They were housewives, students — the youngest was 19 and the oldest 87 years old — professors, farmers, people with a wide variety of experiences from different racial and ethnic backgrounds," Wakao said.

For him, the most surprising thing was how informed the participants were, based on their own experiences as well as by what they learned while interacting with others and studying the issues.

"We just don't normally have that kind of environment," he said. "Many people don't really get news, just one-sided information from social media or cable news networks, but when the founders created the Constitution, they thought we needed deliberations and discussions to reach agreement about what kind of nation we wanted."

The social and educational experiment, touted widely in the American press as a sign of hope for the democratic process, was just one of 21 similar events Fishkin and his team have conducted across countries deliberating difficult issues.

Wakao, who earned his doctorate in American Politics at University of Texas, worked with Fishkin before in his native country, Japan.

In 2012, the Japanese government sponsored a deliberative polling project to help assess public opinion on how to create a new energy plan for the country in the wake of the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear disaster. A graduate student then, Wakao participated in the process.

Now, he's taking what he learned at America in One Room back to his students at College of the Mainland, in his classes on government in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

"They already know the basics of how researchers measure public opinion," Wakao said. "Now they can see the uniqueness of this event, this big picture of what America is and how these people are all Americans, they all have their issues, but they can share their experience in a unique environment like this and learn from it."

Polarization of public opinion has driven Americans to fear conversations about politics or to even approach someone with opposing opinions, Wakao said.

"I think what I want them to learn, based on my experience at the event, is maybe we are too worried about that, about disagreeing," Wakao said. "Once we respect another person's opinion, we can start a conversation."

"Even though our opinions and ideas are different, everybody contributes to a democratic society."

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(1) comment



Bailey Jones Oct 15, 2019 10:43pm

I think that when people attach themselves to principles, rather than parties or politicians, there is always some common ground that can be found. At least that's been my experience.

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