Local reporter participates in national political event

by Patty Connolly

What happens when you put people of all different ages, genders, political parties, education levels, races, religions, and income levels from all over the country together and ask them to discuss some of today's hottest political topics? That was the question and moderator drive behind the event called America in One Room, held in Dallas, TX, September 12-15, 2019. Larry Diamond, a sociologist at Stanford University told a CNN reporter that the American people are not as polarized as the American political class, not as polarized as our elected representatives and politicians.

The event was a collaborative effort by Helena, Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy, NORC (National Opinion Research Center) at the University of Chicago, and by the People. The 120 participants were a statistical microcosm of America, a selected random sample. They were then divided into groups of 10 or so to discuss the issues and candidates in the 2020 campaign. This was a reflection of the population of registered voters.

I was one of the 120 people chosen to participate. I have been answering surveys from Ameriprobe for NORC since about April. In early April, Ameriprobe presented the NORC with a rigorous panel solution available in the United States. It is representative of the entire U.S. population. A few months ago, they sent me a survey about the issues and candidates in the 2018 midterm elections. After completing the survey, I was invited to participate in America in One Room. After being accepted, I was then contacted to see if I would be interested in being part of a documentary. Producer Charles Ferguson wanted to make a film about the experiences of some of the participants at the event.

In a video conference with the director, Shimon, I was told they had selected 120 of the delegates to follow. When I arrived at the event, I was dressed in a jumpsuit and a camera crew was nearby filming everything that I did. I was asked to fill out a survey that covered the two categories of representatives, who I am and what I think. I was also asked to give a separate survey about the contents and candidates in the 2020 campaign.

The groups were then divided into smaller groups of 12 and rotated randomly from the whole number of delegates, which is what we were called. They weren't necessarily balanced, but that is a reflection of how people are distributed in the country, for example, one group had all middle-age Republicans and one young Democrat. During our first session, on Thursday evening, one topic was brought up about whether everyone in my group seemed to have the same opinions. Several people in the group admitted that that is. During our meeting, I was not comfortable in expressing my dissenting opinion. The whole purpose of the event was that everyone should share their thoughts. Still, I was afraid that I would be the outcast of the group.

Friday was similar, but when I expressed a point of view that went against the group's apparent consensus, I was not met with respect, and we were able to discuss why we all believed what we did. I found that I was not alone in that, while we might not agree on issues, we weren't as far apart as the media and politicians would have us believe.

The five main topics discussed during the event were health care, foreign policy, environment, economy, and taxes. A few times each day, we had plenary sessions with the entire group during which we had the opportunity to have questions submitted by the small groups answered by policy makers from all over the country. We also had a few presidential candidates on hand to answer questions.

The presidential candidates who appeared via video feed were Michael Bennet, Julian Castro, Mark Sanford, Joe Walsh, and Bill Weld.

Before going our separate ways on Sunday, each delegate was asked to complete the same survey that they had filled out before being invited to the event to see how much we really changed as a result of our experiences during the weekend. Initial reactions indicate that the hypothesis was correct.

Henry Elias, CEO of Helena, the group that owns Ameriprobe, was in One Room said in a CNN report, “It’s good to see your mind open up in which people use facts as a grounding for discussion was coming to me in such a beautiful way. And if this can be extended to the rest of society, this is the kind of tool that can affect change down the road.”

Whether this experience can somehow be transferred to larger population remains to be seen. It was very effective in most of the groups there, however, as many were seen taking groups photos and trading contact information to stay in touch. If only our politicians and media personas could go through a similar experience, we might be able to accomplish something without so much division.

In the meantime, the lesson is that if we want the time to understand why others have the positions they do, maybe we’ll find out that we aren’t so divided after all.