

Middle American – My Experience with American in One Room
Hannah Hodges Rivera
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At some point in recent American history, “moderate” has become a bad word. You’re surely either one or the other – conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat, a realist or an idealist...a patriot or a bleeding heart.

Choose one. Be one.

But what if...you’re neither?

Well, then, you must be uneducated. Uninformed. Uninvolved.

But what if...you’re not those, either?

I grew up in Eastern Kentucky. I registered Republican at age 18 because I honestly did not know any Democrats. It was a bad word, really, to be one in my hometown. And if you were one, it was only because the union saved your or your daddy’s job...not because you believed in abortion or taking away people’s God-given guns or communism (all things associated with the D-word).

I left my quiet, rural hometown for college in the most urban city in Kentucky – Louisville...a place people from my neck of the woods rarely ventured, if ever. That was the appeal for my eighteen-year-old self. At the University of Louisville, I was accepted (after three attempts) in the prestigious McConnell Scholars Program during my junior year. Yep, *that* McConnell...as in Senator Mitch McConnell. Founded in 1991, the McConnell Center at the University of Louisville is a *nonpartisan program* for Kentucky residents who have “demonstrated outstanding leadership potential and are committed to the principles of scholarship, leadership and service.” The program has produced more than 200 successful alumni, including elected officials, doctors, grassroots activists, attorneys, and—surprisingly – some of the most passionate, active liberals you will ever meet.

The program was life-changing for me. I shook the late Ted Kennedy’s hand. I read the book, “Crunchy Cons: The New Conservative Counterculture and Its Return to Roots” and for the first time thought, “Huh, this is what I believe in right now.” I spent six weeks in China learning about their government and culture and cried when I returned to American soil. I debated with brilliant minds and listened to philosophers, authors, and everyday American heroes. I learned both sides can be intelligent, knowledgeable, understanding, bias, vile, and crooked...both sides can be all the things.

During my college tenure, I also did an internship with a lobbying firm at the state capitol and for the first time saw first-hand what goes into passing bills (hint, it often involved after-hour discussions and bourbon). I worked in Senator McConnell’s field

office, too, where I took calls from constituents who “just wanted to thank the good Senator for his recent vote” or, more often than not, wanted to see how many cusswords they could spew about his stance on this or that before I could say, “Thank you, I’ll be sure to relay the message.”

In 2007, I graduated with a double-major in Communication and Political Science and a nearly 4.0. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. Not to mention some of my most driven and intelligent friends were having a really hard time finding jobs post-college. I decided on a whim (with my parents’ overjoyed support, as I would be the first in the family) to apply for law school. My education, to that point, had been a breeze. Might as well prolong entering “the real world.”

I was accepted to the University of Kentucky Law School. It took me about 3 months to realize I had made a grave mistake...I was no longer the smartest person in the class. I had to study, hard, all the time. Oh, and I had not taken into consideration that my personality was never really cut out for the courtroom – in fact, I hated confrontation and would go to great lengths to avoid it. Getting called on in class to argue why Jim should only be convicted of manslaughter rather than murder was a complete nightmare for me (and, alas, poor Jim). I was going to, for the first time in my life, give up and drop out. The real world couldn’t be worse than law school.

But then it was 2008. And the real world, was in fact, worse. Not only were people not finding jobs, but they were actively getting laid off. It was the worst recession in our history.

Up to my eyeballs in student loans, I had no choice to trudge through the next three years and hope the economy rebounded. Hope that I could actually find something to do with my new shiny degree that didn’t involve yelling at Karen, the opposing counsel. Law school reaffirmed for me that both sides can be all things. The most important thing I learned was how to look at a case – or issue – from all sides. After all, how can you really argue for something if you do not understand the argument against it?

I graduated in 2010. I practiced law for a few years. I was right – it sucked. Eventually, I made my way into higher education and state governmental affairs. I’m now the Chief of Staff to the President for Kentucky’s Community and Technical College System. It’s a career I truly love because if there is one thing I believe in, it’s the transformative power of education (having a grandmother who never made it past eighth grade and raised six daughters, including my mom, in a holler in one of the poorest counties in America – education was the only thing she insisted on and, sure enough, it pulled all six of them out of poverty). Education is, in this country at least, the great equalizer.

So, you see, I’m not uneducated.

Most evenings, my husband and I watch the evening news with Lester Holt. I listen to NPR some mornings on my way to work. When I visit my parents’ house, I sit with my dad and watch Fox News – the only news channel he will watch. I still pick up real magazines in the store checkout line; magazines are a love that I’ve had since childhood

when my mom would let me read *Time* from cover to cover at the dinner table. I have over 1,500 Facebook friends – from my hometown, college, law school, far-flung corners of the world...I read about their interests, concerns, and lives (and have only had to block a handful for their radical postings).

So, I'm also not uninformed.

There were a few years after law school where I was really struggling – financially, mentally, emotionally. I hated my job, I was suffering through a bad breakup, and barely making my loan repayments. A quarter-life crisis, if you will. One day, I Googled something like, “how to make money on the Internet.” Word of caution: don’t Google “how to make money on the Internet.” Serendipitously, after scrolling past a few unmentionable results, I found something called, “AmeriSpeak.” It was a simple, but intriguing, platform. Apparently, if I qualified for an invitation, I could share my opinions anonymously online about things like health care, finance, and society and get paid for it. Sign me up! I was invited to join. I started taking surveys. I felt as though my voice mattered, that my opinions were being heard in a time in my life where that was rarely the case. Oh, and the monetary rewards....those were nice, too.

I’ve taken AmeriSpeak surveys for years now. The platform is operated by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) based out of the University of Chicago. “NORC is an objective and nonpartisan research institution that has been conducting impactful research for over 75 years. NORC studies inform government, business, and nonprofits to help them understand important topics related to society, education, employment, human development, and finance.” I have commented on everything from my thoughts on scooters in urban areas to e-cigs to certain political candidates. At a time when there is so much political rhetoric, so much hateful ideology, so much that divides our country, I like to participate in this small way, hoping that my views (which are more often than not middle-of-the-road) somehow inform far more important people’s decisions.

I vote. I pay taxes. I watch national debates. I call my legislators when something really gets my goat. As part of my work, I meet with state policymakers, legislators, and the Governor’s staff.

I am certainly not uninvolved.

So, when AmeriSpeak contacted me about a new thing...an experiment...an attempt to find out what Americans really think...I was in. I jumped at the chance to participate in the four-day event in Texas, from September 19-22, 2019, called “America in One Room.” Before leaving, I took a survey about five key issues: immigration, taxes and the economy, health care, foreign policy, and the environment.

I then mentally prepared myself for who I would undoubtedly encounter at the event: conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, realists and idealists, patriots and bleeding hearts.

And there I would be, somewhere in the middle. A lonely place to be these days. Or, so I thought.

The four days involved hearing from 2020 presidential candidates and nationally known experts. Most fascinating to me, however, were the numerous small group meetings led by a moderator in the cold and cowboy-themed hotel conference room. My group of fifteen contained the following individuals:

- A middle Eastern man who served in the American military, but whose father was on our country's no-fly list;
- A woman who lived just 45 miles away from me in Kentucky and disclosed that she receives Medicaid and her husband receives Medicare and she can't work because she is the sole caregiver of her family;
- A quiet Midwest gentleman who didn't reveal much other than he worked for the federal government and has a special-needs grandchild;
- An African American woman from Indianapolis who considered the event one of the "milestones of her life";
- A gay man from Pittsburgh who was kind enough to ask everyone to join him for a drink at the bar after a long day of meetings;
- A woman from California deeply concerned with providing the employees of her small business affordable health care.

And these were just a few of the people I was expected to converse with for hours upon hours. I know what you're thinking – talk about a way to start a war, right? How could we ever see eye-to-eye? I bet just reading the short description of these individuals, you already associated them with a partisan side, right? I did. So, where was I supposed to fit in with these "one or the others"? After all, I fly an American flag on my porch *and* recycle. I go to church regularly *but* believe in church and state separation. I refuse to say if I am for or against abortion, believing that it is just not that simple. I was no doubt in for a long four days, to be caught in the midst of heated battles by extremists. And how would these conversations change any of their opinions, if at all?

At the end of the four days, we took the same survey as we each had taken prior to the trip to see how these conversations affected our opinions. According to the published results of the experiment, after the four days,

“There were dramatic changes of opinion. The most polarizing proposals, whether from the left or the right, generally lost support, and a number of more centrist proposals moved to the foreground.”

Read that again.

I had to.

The results are hard to explain, really. It defies the rhetoric that politicians and media outlets would have you believe – that we are a divided country. It defied what *I believed* – that everyone, except for a few of us stuck in the middle, was one or the other. I truly

thought that Americans like me (whether you call us Independents or neutrals or wafflers) had lost our neutral ground to stand on....it had been consumed by big fracking companies endorsed by the Republicans or roped off by Democrats to protect endangered species, take your pick. To be moderate was simply not possible in today's polarized America. Until America in One Room proved everyone differently.

What I found was that most of these people...these people of different races, religions, genders, socioeconomic classes...were far more middle of the road than you could ever expect. Sure, some of them came in with strong ideas or opinions, but they weren't unswayable. They weren't deaf to personal stories and verified statistics. They weren't unwilling to change their minds, given the time and space to do so. Only two of the group even ever disclosed their party affiliation. And while I could maybe guess as to what some of the others were, I do not know for sure, because what I heard were a lot of opinions that fell somewhere in the middle.

Fifteen Americans that spanned all race, gender, class, education, socioeconomic backgrounds...in one room for four days. We talked, explained, and discussed in a civilized and polite way – no name calling or yelling, no zealot rehearsed speeches or evangelizing. For those four days, we helped each other to become more educated, more informed, more involved. And, shockingly, we did not have to choose a side. In fact, we found ourselves somewhere in the middle, together, as Americans.

I will forever be grateful for the experience of America in One Room, for it helped me to discover that I'm not alone. I can be a Middle American – dare say “moderate” – without reproach and just maybe there's a lot more of us than politicians and mass media would have you believe.