Bullhead City woman takes part in event to reach across political divide

KANE WICKHAM, News West  15 hrs ago

Evelyn Sierra-Mynk, 34, of Bullhead City, was chosen to attend a national political event called “America in one Room,” sponsored by Stanford University and the University of Chicago. The event was held Sept. 19-22 in Grapevine, Texas. Contributed

BULLHEAD CITY — Ask yourself this: 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?
A Bullhead City woman found out when she was selected to participate in a national political event hosted in Grapevine, Texas late last month. Evelyn Sierra-Mynk, 34, was selected to be one of 523 participants to attend a meeting on political discourse in America and the upcoming 2020 elections.

According to an experiment called “America in One Room,” that experience moves Americans toward a rosier view of how democracy works. The event was created by the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University.

One of the event’s founders, Jim Fishkin, is director of the center. He explained his opinion that in America today, “people do not think their voice matters, they talk to the like-minded people, and they are dispirited and inattentive.

“The difference between that attitude and the outcome of deliberative research suggest experimentation in democratic institutions is needed. 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.”

America in One Room was conducted by the Center for Deliberative Democracy and NORC (formerly the National Opinion Research Center) at the University of Chicago. The surveys conducted as part of the project by NORC included interviews with 523 registered voters who took pre- and post-event surveys and participated in the event itself, as well as interviews with a random sample of 844 registered voters who did not participate in the event and served as a control group. Respondents were selected from NORC’s AmeriSpeak Panel, which is recruited using probability methods.

The 523 participants came from 47 states to gather for a weekend. Ultimately, many found compromise. Sierra-Mynk, who is a nurse and small business owner in Bullhead City, was among those. She said that the attendees were separated into groups of 15 people, consisting of five Republicans, five Democrats, and five independents, and were given a list of topics which included 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. Changes in their opinions, if any, were measured by the researchers. The results were
surprising.

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.”

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, said he 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.”

Regarding some of the most recent policies coming out of Washington, the 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 — demonstrated 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.

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 U.S. 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.

After the sub-groups had deliberated, they were brought back together as a whole to meet and ask questions of some of the contenders in the upcoming 2020 presidential race. Among them were Republicans Joe Walsh, Mark Sanford and Bill Weld and Democrats Julian Castro and Michael Bennet. They were asked spirited questions by the attendees.

After participating in the event, Sierra-Mynk said, “Overall, this was an interesting, enriching, immersive experience. ... I was completely saturated in political discussions during the event. Now I can’t ‘turn it off,’ and I can’t get enough. I was always one who was quiet with her opinions, but now probably not so much. It’s too important.”