TIMES INSIDER

Capturing a Portrait of the Electorate

Over three days in Texas, the photographers Chad Batka and Celeste Sloman photographed a representative sample of American voters.

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Times Insider explains who we are and what we do, and delivers behind-the-scenes insights into how our journalism comes together.

When we heard that political scientists at Stanford University were planning to bring together 500 American voters from all over the country for a weekend of political discussion in Grapevine, Texas, just outside of Dallas, we knew we wanted to photograph every person.

The project would be really difficult, Stephen Reiss, a photo editor at The Times, initially said.

But, eventually, we managed just that, with the cooperation of the study’s organizers and the subjects themselves (some of whom pointedly told us they did not read The Times).

As a group, the resulting 519 portraits, taken by the photographers Chad Batka and Celeste Sloman, are a mirror of the American electorate. The images were published online and appeared in an eight-page special section in The Times on Sunday.

The Texas event, called “America in One Room,” was designed to bring together a group of adults representative of all registered voters by age, race, gender, education and geography. Roughly a third of the group identified as liberal, a third as conservative and a third as “middle of the road.” The voters spent the weekend debating policy ideas in small groups and asking experts questions. Then they were surveyed to see if all this time together might shift their views (and for some, it did).

At the Upshot, a desk at The Times that sets out to examine politics, policy and everyday life in new ways, we have tried to emphasize that polls are simply a structured way of talking to real people. During the 2018 midterms, we ran a live polling project where we tried to visualize real phone calls taking place in real households, in real time. For another project, we called undecided voters who had participated in polls and asked them if they had since decided, and how.

The voters who participated in “America in One Room” gave us an opportunity to push on this idea more. What better way to show that polls reflect the views of actual people, we thought, than to meet, and photograph, the poll respondents themselves?

To do this, Mr. Batka, Ms. Sloman and four photo assistants set up portrait studios inside the Dallas-area resort
where the event took place, just steps from where participants were checking in. The line grew long, and there was barely time for water breaks. Each portrait session lasted only a minute or so. But in that time — and in the conversations we had as they waited, and in interviews we conducted throughout the weekend — these voters became more than data points in a survey.

Christy from Headland, Ala., couldn't stop laughing. Judy from Middletown, Pa., told us she had never previously been on an airplane.

Jacqueline from Kingwood, Texas, described being a nurse's aide, and supporting a family on minimum wage. Jennifer from Longview, Texas, brought her service dog, and Mr. Batka took a portrait of the dog, Tinkerbell, too. John from Menomonie, Wis., was the last person photographed on that first hectic day. He has been a bricklayer his whole adult life.

“I just tried to record who they are,” Mr. Batka, the photographer, said.

In total, 526 voters attended the event. The Times photographed all but seven of them.

Ms. Sloman, the other photographer on the project, said she didn’t want to just take pictures of people who attended the event.

“There’s a difference between just lining someone up and taking a picture of them, and engaging them and getting them to give you something a little more interesting, a little more fire in their eyes,” Ms. Sloman said.

Most people were photographed as they arrived which meant we watched them encounter one another for the first time. Many subjects seemed to have formed friendships by the time they stood in front of our cameras. They would not learn, until later in the weekend, during discussions about the border wall or Medicare for All, who identified as liberal and who was more conservative.

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