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## 2 Woodland Park voters part of America in One Room workshop

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In September, a nationally representative group of registered voters gathered in Dallas to talk over some of the big issues driving the 2020 election.

Courtesy of Helena

As the nation becomes more divided and the political line in the sand deepens, more than 500 American voters gathered at a Dallas resort last month to talk about major issues of the 2020 presidential election. Bonnie Sumner and Donnie Beson of Woodland Park were among the participants.

A workshop called “America in One Room,” gathered of 526 voters from 48 states to talk politics Sept. 19-22. Participants were asked to test the theory that people with diverse views when thrust together would soften their positions while actually hearing the views of others.

Registered voters were randomly selected based on their membership with AmeriSpeak, a research panel headed by NORC.

Two scientists from Stanford University proposed the theory and a nonpartisan group, Helena, raised \$3 million for the collective travel/hotel expenses. The participants were selected from a survey of a cross-section of Americans who vote. The event was organized by Helena, NORC at the University of Chicago and the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University.

Their photos, with only first names and hometowns listed, were part of a special section in the Oct. 13 edition of The New York Times.

“Everything we discussed has relevance to Colorado, the economy and taxes, health care, the environment, immigration and foreign policy,” Sumner said.

*The participants were divided into groups of 12 to discuss the issues, which included:*

• **Taxes:** “One of the big a-ha moments was that we kept calling the government ‘they,’” Beson said. “Long story short — we do not trust ‘them’ with money. They are not inspiring us to celebrate a tax cut because as soon as the words come out of their mouths, there’s distrust. A resounding message was that there exists little to no confidence that our government can prudently spend, allocate, invest, etc. the tax dollars ‘they’ collect whether now or in the future.”

• **Minimum wage:** “How can you have the same minimum wage without hurting businesses?” Sumner said. “It was such an interesting discussion because it was real life, about the idea of just slapping down a policy and not thinking about the entire country and how the law will affect the people and the businesses in the country.”

Beson’s group suggested that businesses start raising the wage slowly, beginning with \$10 an hour and then allow each state to decide how that wage fits in.

• **Education:** “We didn’t believe we could ever offer free college,” Beson said. “Where’s the inspiration, the guidance, the value? Well, that starts at home.” Yet Beson’s group agreed that continuing education is necessary in order to strengthen society as well as the country’s global-competitive position. “But there are those who gravitate toward trade schools. Learning comes in many forms as does the application of knowledge.”

• **Federal vs. state policy:** “People seem to saying ‘depends on the issue,’” Sumner said, adding that her group highlighted the paradox of citizens who want the state to have power – unless it conflicts with that they want on the federal level.

• **Immigration:** Some participants were first-generation Americans. One spoke of her father, who, undocumented, had lived in the United States for 30 years, worked, paid taxes and was a model citizen but lived in fear of being deported. “She was practically in tears,” Sumner said.

• But another had a different view. “A woman said there were issues with illegal aliens in the Washington, D.C., area who have committed rape,” Sumner said. “But a woman raised her hand and very quietly said, ‘could we not call human beings ‘illegals’ and ‘aliens.’” Could we say ‘undocumented?’”

The comment was met by silence, she said. “It was an eye-opener in that so many of us don’t realize that, no matter who we are, we demonize other people without thinking about it — until we meet them and hear their stories,” she said.

• **Health care:** Personal stories emphasized the crucial nature of health insurance. Sumner recalled the woman who was depressive, has asthma and takes care of her husband, who also suffers from depression. “The woman said the Affordable Care Act changed her life, that if access to mental-health care went away she didn’t know what she would do,” Sumner said.

On the other hand, others reported significant increases in their health insurance due to the ACA.

In the end, the participants affirmed the theory, even if they had not changed their positions, Sumner said. “By the end, people were hugging and kissing; you just felt so emotional, so close to these strangers talking about challenges that we all have. And is it better to try together and fix these challenges or continue to sit at opposite ends of the table and scream at each other?”

Beson added, “If we keep dividing up this country we’re going to make things more complex,” he said. “I’d like to bring this down to the local level.”

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