America in One Room

By Steve Brawner

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What happens when more than 500 diverse Americans are brought together to discuss politics in an informed, civil manner? People can actually change their minds about the issues, each other, and the American political system.

That’s what Stanford professor James Fishkin found through his project, “America in One Room.” He scientifically chose 500-plus Americans – five from Arkansas – to reflect America’s vast array of political viewpoints. They were flown to Dallas and spent Sept. 19-22 learning about and discussing five important issues: immigration, health care, the economy and taxes, the environment, and foreign policy.

He discussed his findings in a conference call Nov. 14 organized by Fix US. That’s a project by the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget meant to bridge the distrust that makes solving problems like the national debt impossible.

Fishkin believes traditional polling techniques don’t offer valuable information. Most citizens don’t have an incentive to be very informed about particular issues. They’re busy with their responsibilities and only have one vote anyway out of millions, so they form only a “vague impression from sound bytes and headlines,” he said. When a pollster interrupts their dinner and starts asking questions, they offer “phantom opinions” rather than admit they don’t know the answer.

Instead, Fishkin’s project let participants dive deeply into those five issue areas, hear from competing viewpoints, participate in small group discussions, and, most importantly, engage with flesh-and-blood Americans who disagree with them. That’s an entirely different dynamic than sitting at a keyboard and shouting at people online.

One finding was that, on some issues, many participants changed their minds or moved toward the center – Republicans from the right and Democrats from the
Before the sessions began, 79% of Republicans supported forcibly deporting illegal immigrants to their countries of origin before they could apply to return. By the end, it was 40%. The percentage of Republicans favoring the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program – which protects immigrants brought to America illegally as children – increased from 36% to 61%. Support for recommitting to the Iran nuclear deal increased from 24% to 45%, while support for rejoining the multi-country Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal rose from 23% to 62%.

Meanwhile, some Democrats moved away from the left or otherwise changed their opinion on some issues. Democratic support for requiring employers to use the E-verify system to confirm immigrant workers’ eligibility increased from 58.5% to 69%. Support for a $15 federal minimum wage dropped from 82.5% to 59.4%. Support for a baby bond proposal – given to you by the government when you’re born so that you can redeem it when you turn 18 – dropped from 61% support to 21%. The percentage of Democrats who agreed that “Medicare for all” would increase the national debt to “impossible levels” rose from 20% to 38.5%.

Opinions on other issues moved in different directions. But here’s what also changed – people’s hardened attitudes about people they disagree with. The percentage of participants saying people with different viewpoints have good reasons for their beliefs increased from 37% to 54%.

This experiment wasn’t about moving people from wrong opinions to right ones. Often, there isn’t a “right” one, but instead just different winners and losers. Some of these issues are really hard. I don’t know what to do about Iran.

The more important question is, can Americans stop yelling at each other long enough to craft reasonable solutions to difficult problems? Because we really do need strong borders, but we really aren’t going to forcibly deport 10 million people.

Fishkin says we can.

“The public is divided, but they’re not intractable,” he said. “They are open to discussion. And this treatment, where they are intensively discussing with
diverse others in an atmosphere of civility under ground rules of mutual respect and actually listening to each other and getting their questions answered, produced dramatic change.”

Perhaps the most important finding was this: By the end of the weekend, the percentage saying American democracy is “working well” doubled from 30% to 60%.

That’s what happens when you participate and deliberate rather than sit behind a keyboard and complain.

*Steve Brawner is a syndicated columnist in Arkansas. Email him at brawnersteve@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter at @stevebrawner.*