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Presidential candidates advance by being divisive. We can do better than that.

Five candidates spoke to our America In One Room group and skipped the red meat. They all had stronger appeal afterwards across the political spectrum.

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What if we had a better way to select presidential nominees, one that didn't reward appeals to the most ideologically committed voters and donors in each party? What if we weren't trying to excite the already convinced — to vote, to contribute and to volunteer on campaigns? This pulls each party toward more militant postures and deepens polarization. What if we prized substantive dialogue across the partisan divides over intense mobilization within them? Would it make a difference?

"America in One Room" was an experiment to find out. Over a long weekend in September, we brought a national sample of registered voters to Grapevine, Texas, to discuss in depth the issues facing the country. This group from 47 states was representative of the U.S. electorate in all its diversity. The 526 participants discussed policy proposals on five big issues — immigration, health care, the environment, taxes (and the economy) and foreign policy.

When this sample of ordinary citizens talked to each other about the issues in small groups under good conditions — with balanced and carefully vetted briefing materials, trained moderators who impartially facilitated the discussions, and questions to panels of competing experts representing different points of view — their opinions changed dramatically. The policy proposals farthest on the right lost support (often substantially) among Republicans, while the proposals farthest on the left lost significant support among Democrats.

Candidates skip partisan rhetoric

The delegates also had the opportunity to question five presidential candidates. With Republicans, Democrats and independents deliberating together in civil fashion, the candidates avoided polarizing partisan rhetoric. Instead, they were incentivized to address the full range of interests and concerns in the electorate. As a result, we observed a startling shift in the nature of the campaign discourse.

Let's talk: Join our conversation about these issues

Five candidates spoke live by video link to America in One Room: three Republican challengers to President Donald Trump — former Massachusetts Gov. William Weld, former Illinois congressman Joe Walsh and former South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford (who has since suspended his campaign) — and two Democratic candidates, former Housing Secretary Julian Castro and Sen. Michael Bennet of Colorado. Each appeared individually to answer the participants' questions.

Our results enable us to see who gained in support (in the overall sample, and broken down by party), and on which issues. Strikingly, each of the five candidates had stronger appeal afterward, not only to members of his own party (and to independents), but also to members of the opposite party (and on all the five issues).

In fact, the support levels for each candidate (as measured by a score of 6 or higher on our 0 to 10 scale) were at least 15 percentage points (and in some cases as much as 30 points) higher than those among the control group that did not deliberate and hear the candidates. The candidates of both parties knew they were speaking to the entire country “in one room.” Hence they avoided partisan triggers and attacks on other candidates or the other party. The name “Trump” was rarely mentioned. Instead, they offered substantive and reasoned answers on the five issues.

Walsh, a former Tea Party ally, affirmed the rights of immigrants to receive due process in their asylum claims. Weld referred to Emma Lazarus in praising the role of immigrants in American society. Democrat Bennet questioned whether a one-size-fits-all approach was appropriate to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. On immigration, Castro argued for a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented who had committed no serious crime. We need immigrants, he argued, to maintain “a young and vibrant work force” to keep the Social Security Trust Fund solvent in the face of a declining birth rate and a coming wave of retirements among Baby Boomers.

Respect shown to opponents

When the other party was mentioned, it was invoked with respect. Walsh argued that health care was an issue “where the Democrats clearly have an opinion, and we should respect that opinion.” Worrying about how we would pay for “Medicare for All,” he argued instead for universal “catastrophic coverage.” Bennet argued for universal coverage but with a public option in order to maintain choice and allow those who liked their current private insurance to keep it.

In contrast to two of the three Republicans, the Democrats had been in the race long enough to enable us to measure change in their support levels before and after deliberation. Overall support improved from 30% to 57% for Castro and from 14% to 58% for Bennet, in part because those with no opinion of the two candidates sharply declined.

Bennet finished with the strongest cross-party support (of all Democrats): 73% among Democrats, 57% among independents, and a third among Republicans. Castro scored higher among Democrats (82%) but weaker among independents (53%) and Republicans (24%). Although it is difficult to compare candidates who spoke to the sample with those who did not, former Vice President Joe Biden, Vermont

Sen. Bernie Sanders and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren are by now well known to Americans. Bennet proved to be more appealing to Republicans and independents than any of the three better-known candidates.

What about intensity of support? It is thought that most Republicans will still walk through fire for Donald Trump, but our data suggests otherwise. When our delegates were interviewed before deliberating, two-thirds of Republicans had a strongly favorable (8-10) view of the president. On leaving, only 54% did. The percent giving Trump a perfect "10" fell from 47% to 31%.

Imagine if dialogues like this, with random samples of the whole electorate deliberating on the issues, became the norm at this stage in the primary season. Without partisan triggers, people might actually consider issues on the merits and the candidates might actually address them.

Might we learn more about where the candidates stand? And wouldn't we learn more about their general election prospects, which depend in part on attracting independents and even members of the other party? Campaigns can do more than just mobilize the already convinced. Why not test candidate positions with the whole country in the room?

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America In One Room is a collaboration among the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford, a new nonpartisan organization called Helena, NORC at the University of Chicago, and By the People Productions. In addition to the 526 participants who traveled to Texas, a separate representative sample of 844 Americans answered the same questionnaire but stayed home, so we could better determine how the process of deliberating affected those who came.

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