

Could deliberative democracy depolarize America?

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Over a long weekend in 2019 – just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit – over 500 American voters from across the country gathered to discuss some of the most pressing issues of the 2020 election. Credit: Helena

As Americans grapple with how to tackle some of the country's most pressing problems, coming together to address those challenges is critical. But in an atmosphere where partisan tensions run deep, is that even possible? Under the right conditions, Stanford scholars James Fishkin and Larry Diamond think so.

Fishkin and Diamond have been refining a method called Deliberative Polling, a technique that Fishkin first started exploring in 1988 as a fellow at Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. The approach brings people from varied backgrounds together for a moderated discussion about issues that members of the general public say matter to them. Participants are asked to put their political labels aside and to instead consider the different sides of an argument—a practice that is rare in today's current climate, said Fishkin.

"Left to our own devices, most people either don't pay much attention or if they do, they tune into their favorite news sources or their social media feeds and they only hear one side of the argument that is most congenial to them. That's part of what's been driving us apart," said Fishkin, the Janet M. Peck Chair in International Communication in the School of Humanities and Sciences.

Fishkin has found that Deliberative Polling, which ensures a judgment-free environment, is one way for people to listen and learn about competing viewpoints.

"Most citizens don't take the time to become anything like ideal citizens or informed citizens. So in a way, this is a way of asking, "What if they did? How would democracy be different?" It turns out it would be very different," said Fishkin, director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy (CDD).

So far, Deliberative Polling has been used over 110 times in 30 different countries. Bulgarians turned to it to inform policy-making about supporting the country's marginalized Roma population; in Northern Ireland, it was used by a local community to help bridge the divide between Protestants and Catholics so they could talk about the future of schools in their district. And residents in the Zeguo Township in Zhejiang, China, found the technique so helpful in their annual discussions about the government budget that they have used it for some 15 years. It is even being used at Stanford to seek faculty input on proposals for the structure, composition and areas of focus for the proposed school of climate and sustainability.

Bringing people together

In 2020, in collaboration with Helena, a non-partisan institution devoted to identifying and solving societal problems, Fishkin and Diamond brought together the largest, most representative sample of the U.S. electorate for a deliberative polling experiment they called America in One Room.

Just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, over 500 American voters, recruited from across the country by NORC at the University of Chicago from across the country, were brought together for four days at a conference center in Texas. The Helena project's goal was to have the group discuss what a previous national sample had identified as the most pressing issues of the 2020 election: immigration, health care, the economy, the environment and foreign

policy. This is one of the foundational concepts to Fishkin and Diamonds' approach: agenda topics are informed by the people, for the people.

Participants, or as they were called by the America in One Room organizers, "citizen delegates"—because "you want to convince people that their voice matters and that they will be listened to," Fishkin said, —engaged in moderated, small-group conversations to discuss these issues from their own perspectives. Participants also attended plenary sessions with opposing politicians and experts.

To inform their discussions, attendees were given background analysis of nearly 50 policy proposals put forward by some of the presidential candidates running in the 2020 election. Included in these materials were balanced arguments for and against each proposal—all vetted by an advisory group.

Notably absent from much of the literature, however, were words that could suggest a "tribal" political identity, said Diamond.

"In the briefing materials and as much as possible, in the discussion, we very consciously avoided the following four words: Democrat, Republican, Trump, Obama. We tried to get people just to talk about the issues without stereotyping themselves or one another," he said.

Citizen delegates stayed in the same group throughout the weekend, which allowed them to build personal connections with one another. For some, it was the first time they interacted extensively with people far removed from their own daily lives. Conservative professionals talked with homeless people and low-income people engaged with corporate executives, Diamond described.

"People began to see one another as human beings," Diamond said.

"They got to know one another and they began to develop something that is so rare in our hyper-polarized society: empathy."

As people learned how others would be personally affected by a proposed policy change, attitudes shifted.

Before participants took part in America in One Room, they were asked to rate their support (or opposition) for some 49 policy proposals they would be discussing. The researchers found extreme partisan-based polarization between Democrats and Republicans on 26 of the proposals. But after a weekend of deliberation, the two parties moved closer on 22 out of the 26 proposals and in 19 of those, movements were significant, Fishkin and Diamond reported in a paper presented at the Sept. 2020 meetings of the American Political Science Association.

In addition to surveying attendees, the researchers also administered similar questionnaires to another 844 American voters who stayed home and did not participate in the deliberative polling experiment. This control group showed little change in their opinion, the researchers reported.

One of the most polarizing issues was the deportation of undocumented immigrants. Before deliberation, 79 percent of Republicans supported the proposal "undocumented immigrants should be forced to return to their home countries before applying to legally come back to the U.S. to live and work permanently." After deliberation, the number was halved: 40 percent said they supported the policy.

While no undocumented immigrants participated at the America in One Room event, their stories were told by their family members or acquaintances who were in attendance. These perspectives ultimately persuaded some Republicans who learned about the plight of refugees and asylum seekers to hold a more sympathetic view of immigrants, the

researchers report.

Republicans were not the only ones who changed their mind; Democrats were also swayed. For example, 70 percent of Democrats supported the policy that "people should be automatically enrolled in a more generous version of Medicare." But after deliberation, it dropped to 56 percent.

"If you have a moderated discussion with diverse others, you open up to people from different socio-demographic backgrounds and different points of view, you learn to listen to them as well as speak to them. If the discussions are in-depth enough, people will depolarize," said Fishkin, noting that this effect was not the scholars' intention when they developed the exercise. "We did not design the deliberative poll with the aim of depolarizing, although it has turned out to have that effect."

The researchers also found that people came to like each other more. After deliberation, dislike between the two parties diminished: Democrats' "feeling thermometer" ratings of Republicans rose 13 points with deliberation. Republicans' ratings of Democrats went up 14 points.

Bringing deliberative democracy to scale

Fishkin recognizes that engaging the public with Deliberative Polling requires organization and infrastructure; one of its main criticisms is that it is costly and timely to administer.

That's why Fishkin and Alice Siu, the associate director at CDD, are working to scale the method more broadly. For example, they have collaborated with Ashish Goel, a professor of management science and engineering, and his team [to build a digital platform for facilitating discussion](#). In lieu of a human moderator, a chatbot regulates the conversation. Through online automation like this, there is no limit to how many Americans can get involved—but only if they are willing,

Diamond emphasized. "You need intentionality," he said.

Another way Fishkin and Siu are spreading their approach is through schools. They've developed a toolkit to help teachers incorporate [deliberative democracy](#) into civic studies curriculum that includes research assignments and discussion exercises that aim to simulate an environment similar to that in America One Room where students can discuss issues with one another with mutual respect.

"It's actually a more effective form of civic education we believe than conventional civic education because anything very active is better than something passive and," Fishkin said, pointing to evidence from one study and another nationwide experiment with over 300 [high schoolers](#) that tested the Stanford Online Deliberation Platform.

What deliberative democracy reveals

Fishkin and Diamond contend that deliberative democracy does more than just uncover what people believe—it also reveals why people think the way they do. Understanding what motivates people's beliefs and assumptions can be a useful tool to inform and advance public policy, the scholars believe.

"Knowing what arguments resonated and the reasoning behind certain arguments can be very helpful to policymakers in understanding if they want to bring the people along on an issue," Diamond said.

The scholars hope that the public, including policymakers, will take notice of what their approach reveals about their fellow Americans.

"One of the most important misconceptions about political polarization in the United States is the assumption that people and society are hopelessly divided and that the root cause of our political paralysis in

Washington is that we all hate one another and across party lines and have these unassailable divides," said Diamond.

Diamond and Fishkin say it is critical to find opportunities to incorporate deliberation into politics and the political system, such as changing the incentive structure of primary voting. Typically, only highly-motivated voters—who tend to be more extreme in their views—turn out to vote in a primary election. This leads to more extreme candidates being nominated and a feeling among elected officials that they shouldn't deliberate because they can't afford to politically, Fishkin said.

"We have to institutionalize ways which will get the public voice on a more regular basis of what they would think. That, I think, is the way of ending the uncivil war that we've been finding ourselves in lately," Fishkin added. "There is value and even joy in listening to one another and thinking about arguments and life perspectives that we haven't thought about before."

Provided by Stanford University

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