

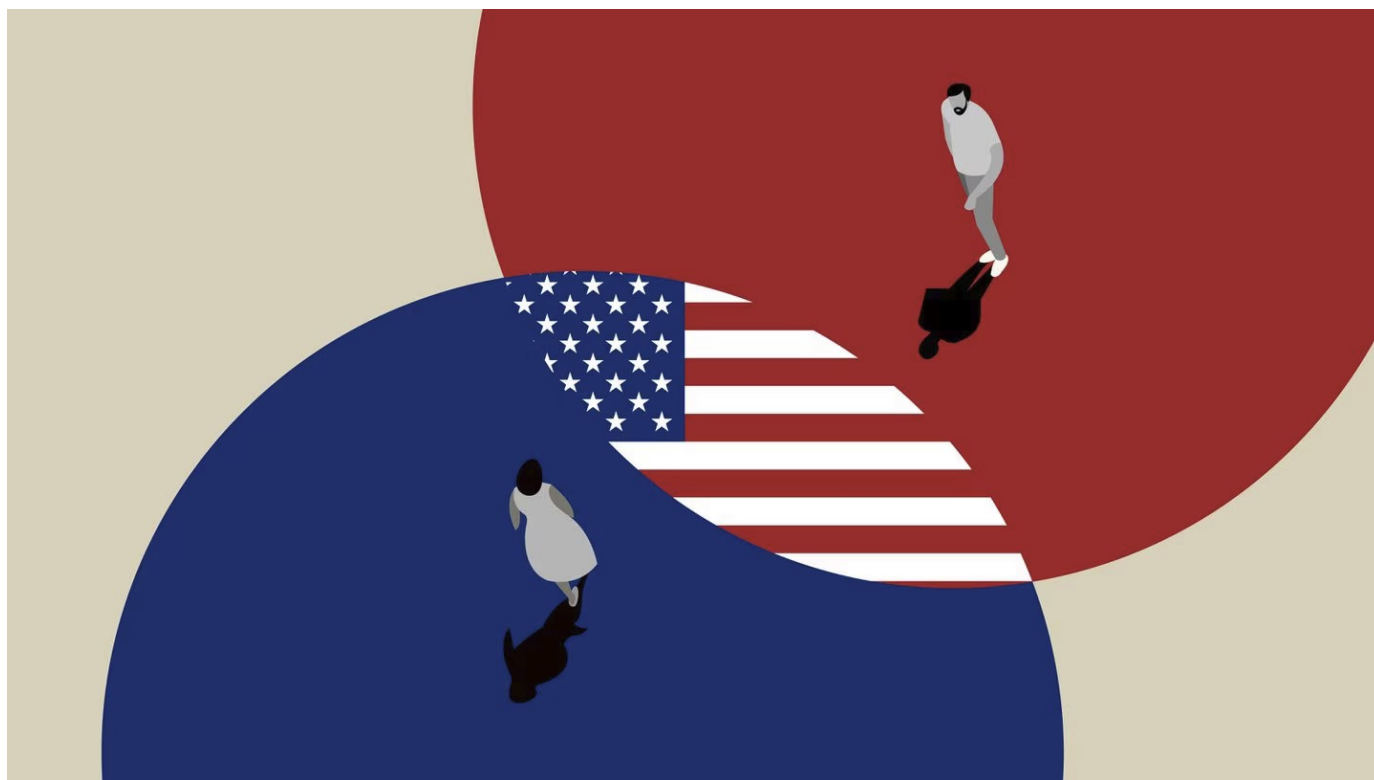
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OPINION

Can deliberation cure our divisions about democracy?

Partisan differences seem immovable, some say even ‘calcified.’ However, in our recent national experiment ‘America in One Room: Democratic Reform’ we find a very different picture.

By **James Fishkin and Larry Diamond** Updated August 21, 2023, 3:00 a.m.



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As we enter the 2024 presidential campaign season, the nation seems to be on the verge of another round of partisan warfare over vote counting, voter registration,

election audits, partisan redistricting, and electoral system reforms such as ranked choice voting.

Partisan differences seem immovable, [some say even “calcified.”](#) However, in our recent national experiment “[America in One Room: Democratic Reform](#)” we find a very different picture. When Americans take the time to talk to each other in a civil, evidence-based way, they learn to listen to each other and often change their views dramatically, depolarizing across partisan divides. This [Helena](#) project shows that Americans’ views are not so deeply entrenched but very much open to reason.

More remarkable is that these discussions took place virtually, in small groups of 10, using a video-based [online platform](#). Participants met for an entire weekend in June (or the equivalent in weeknight discussions). The AI-assisted platform moderated the discussions, ensured equality of participation, intervened if there was any incivility, and helped the participants identify their key questions for panels of competing experts in shared online plenary sessions. The online platform has now been used around the world and makes organized deliberation a practical experience that can be spread widely.

When our nationally representative sample of 600 (selected by NORC at the University of Chicago) deliberated for a weekend about these issues, Republicans often moved significantly toward initially Democrat positions and Democrats sometimes moved just as substantially toward initially Republican positions. The changes were all consonant with basic democratic values, such as that everyone’s vote should count and that our elections need to be administered in a nonpartisan way.

Only 30 percent of Republicans initially supported providing access to voter registration online, but after deliberations, Republicans moved to majority support, joining Democrats (who overwhelmingly supported it at 81 percent). Republicans abandoned their view that “increasing opportunities for voter registration would open up more opportunities for voter fraud.” The percentage of Republicans believing that

dropped 26 points (from 56 percent to only 30 percent). Republicans similarly abandoned their opposition to restoring federal and state voting rights to convicted felons upon their release from prison. Republican support for restoring voting rights for felons increased dramatically, from 35 percent to 58 percent.

By contrast, only a minority of Democrats (44 percent) initially supported the mostly Republican proposal for each state to require its voting jurisdictions to conduct an audit of a random sample of ballots “to ensure that the votes are accurately counted.” However, after deliberation Democrats increased their support by 14 points to 58 percent (joining Republicans who supported it even more strongly at 75 percent). Getting an accurate count was a goal broadly shared, and audits with a random sample seemed a practical method of assuring everyone about the results. The same goal was served by another, initially Republican, proposal “that all voting machines produce a paper record of the vote that the voter verifies and then drops in a ballot box.” Democratic support rose from 44 percent to 55 percent, with Republican support staying at over 70 percent.

Deliberation also generated bipartisan embrace of two additional reforms to diminish possible partisan bias in electoral administration. Overall public support for “Independent non-partisan redistricting commissions to redraw the boundaries for state legislative and federal congressional districts” increased from 44 percent to 60 percent, with Republicans increasing their support from a minority (33 percent) to a majority (55 percent). There was also strong support after deliberation for making the chief election officer in each state (typically the secretary of state) a nonelected, nonpartisan official. Support for this reform increased to 54 percent overall, with Republicans moving from 47 percent to 54 percent.

The deliberators considered a variety of potential changes to our electoral system. The only proposal that consistently reached majority support after deliberation was ranked choice voting. While it did not receive majority support from Republicans, Republican

support for ranked choice voting increased for many specific applications of the system. The proposal seemed attractive to many participants because it would “better reflect the public’s views on all the candidates.” The idea is that instead of just voting for your first choice, you rank all your choices and have your lower preferences counted in an instant run-off if needed to decide the election. This means you don’t have to worry about wasting your vote on a first choice candidate who might not have a realistic chance of winning.

Deliberators were asked about ranked choice voting for primaries and general elections for Congress, state legislatures, and local elections. In all six cases, there was an overall majority in support of ranked choice voting after deliberation. While the weakest support came from Republicans, for most ranked choice voting options at least a third of Republicans were favorable. For the option of “final four or five voting” (using a nonpartisan primary to choose the top few candidates to advance to a general election using ranked choice voting), Republican support increased after deliberation from 32 percent to 43 percent. There was general dissatisfaction both before and after with our current “first past the post” method of conducting elections (after deliberation, only 33 percent of the overall sample wanted to keep it, but that included about 50 percent of Republicans).

Remarkably, the very experience of deliberation created one of the strongest cross-party movements of support for any of the proposals. Participants wanted to “promote opportunities for people of diverse views and backgrounds (including high school and college students) to deliberate with one another on issues confronting their communities and the country at large.” This proposal increased from 63 percent to 81 percent overall with Republicans gaining a surprising 30 points, reaching 82 percent. No less surprising was the dramatic increase in satisfaction with the way American democracy is working. At the outset, only 27 percent of the sample was satisfied, but that increased to 45 percent after deliberation, with Republicans doubling their rate of satisfaction, from 24 percent to 50 percent.

After this intense experience of listening to their fellow citizens and thinking about our collective problems together, the participants seemed to grasp that our polarizing divisions can be bridged through reasoned and mutually respectful deliberation with their fellow citizens.

If this kind of deliberation can be progressively scaled to the broader society (perhaps with the kind of technology we employed), we could take some of the polarizing fever out of our campaigns and foster citizens who will think about the merits of the big issues we face.

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