Honest discussions bring people with diverse political beliefs a little closer.

Talking politics around the kitchen table—even with beloved relatives—can be risky. Imagine expressing your personal, political beliefs with 522 strangers. That’s what a scientific sample of registered voters chose to do last October in a study looking at how deep the nation’s partisanship rift really ran.
The study, “America in One Room,” was organized by Helena, a nonpartisan problem-solving institution; MacNeil/Lehrer Productions’ By the People project; and the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University. Participants were recruited by the social research organization NORC, at the University of Chicago.

The researchers wanted to know if our divisions and polarization are as entrenched as many claim they are. They gathered “an accurate, representative sample of the entire American electorate in all its political, cultural and demographic diversity,” according to a news release.

“We had a hypothesis that the American people are not as polarized as the American political class, not as polarized as our elected representatives and politicians,” said Larry Diamond, a co-leader of the study and a sociologist at Stanford University. All Americans need, the researchers believed, was access to more nonpartisan information and factual discussions.

Participants spent three days last October listening to expert briefings on topics like immigration, health care, foreign policy, the environment, and taxes and the economy; reading booklets vetted by both parties on the pros and cons of these contentious issues; discussing the issues in diverse, small groups; and asking questions of some 2020 presidential candidates.

After the long weekend, the percentage saying American democracy was working well doubled from 30% to 60%.

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Surveys before and after the event showed shifts toward centrist policies among Republican and Democratic voters alike, more than in the control group. For example, support for zero-carbon emissions for vehicles fell from 66% to 55%, while support for using more taxes and market incentives to address climate change increased from 61% to 72%. Support for rejoining the Trans-Pacific Partnership rose from 47% to 74%, while support for increasing the federal minimum wage to $15 an hour fell from 54% to 39%.

“People of all backgrounds discussed the most difficult issues that have pulled us apart as a country. With civil discussion, they came to understand and respect each other,” said Jim Fishkin, co-leader of the study and director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy. “These conclusions deserve to be listened to by policymakers.”

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