

## *America in One Room: Democratic Reform*

### Follow Up Study

We seem to have intractable partisan divisions about how we conduct our elections. However, the latest edition of [America in One Room](#) offers some novel evidence. In three national experiments, *America in One Room* projects have demonstrated that structured, cross-party dialogue conducted on the design of Deliberative Polling® depolarizes across our extreme differences on many contested issues. With deliberation people come to understand the arguments on the other side and they revise their opinions, in many cases, dramatically.

But do these opinion changes last? In the latest case, *America in One Room: Democratic Reform*, a [Helena](#) project in conjunction with the [Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab](#) and [NORC](#) at the University of Chicago, we went back to the 500 plus deliberators who spent a weekend (or weekend equivalent in discussion) as well as a separate control group (which only answered questionnaires in the same period) about three months later to see if the effects had any staying power. We find that within the domain of voting rights, ballot access, the conduct of our elections as well as some proposed reforms to our electoral system, the changes of opinion had significant staying power. The thoughtful judgments arising from what we call “deliberation” in a weekend of cross-party discussion do not just melt away when representative samples return to the heat of political discourse in our campaign environment and in their normal enclaves of media consumption. At least for voting and elections, arguably issues most central to the operation of our democracy, their changes of opinion largely persist (and stand in contrast to the control group). We believe this is an important finding about whether deliberation can bring us together and lessen our extreme partisan differences particularly about the practice of democracy.

The deliberations were based on balanced and vetted [briefing](#) materials expressing the pros and cons of each proposal. The dialogue also brought questions from the small groups to balanced panels of experts in video based plenary sessions. The deliberations were conducted online with video based discussions using the AI assisted [Stanford Online Deliberation Platform](#). As in other Deliberative Polls, the process was not meant to persuade, but only to engage the participants in competing arguments in civil discussion.

Significant findings include:

**Restore Voting Rights for Felons:** Deliberators were asked whether we should “Restore federal and state voting rights to citizens with felony convictions upon their release from prison.” Over the weekend of deliberation, support rose from 50% to 65% for the sample overall, and then three months later, that support was still at 58%, significantly higher than at the start and significantly different when contrasted with changes in the control group (which did not deliberate but just answered the same questions in the same period).<sup>1</sup> Notably, Republicans moved on this question, from a mere 35% support at the start to 57% at the end of the weekend, settling at 48% three months later (a difference from the initial survey of 13 points.)

---

<sup>1</sup> All of the changes for policy proposals reported here are significant from time 1 (initial contact) to time 3 (three months after the deliberations) compared to the changes in the control from time 1 to time 3 (difference in difference analysis available here—insert link).

**Online Voter Registration:** “Allow citizens to register to vote online.” With deliberation, support for this proposal jumped from 45% at the start to majority support at 56%. Republicans moved from 30% to 48% at the end of the weekend, and ended at 38% three months later, a lasting effect of 8 points. These changes were accompanied by a fall in support among Republicans for the idea that “increased opportunities for voter registration opens up more opportunities for voter fraud.” Agreement with this claim went from 57% on first contact to 41% by the end of the weekend, ending at 49% three months later (a difference of 8 points from the start).

**Partisan Challenges to Registration and Vote Counting:** “Allow representatives from political parties and other groups to challenge the eligibility of voters as they cast their ballots at polling places and as officials count the votes at tabulation centers.” Opposition to this proposal obviously expresses a concern about interference with the registration and vote counting process. Opposition to this proposal went from 49% at first contact to 72% by the end of the deliberations and settled at 59% three months later, a lasting gain of ten points. Republicans moved from only 31% opposing to 63% opposing by the end of the deliberations, a dramatic 32 point shift. This settled at 59% three months later.

**Election Audits.** “Have each state require its voting jurisdictions to conduct an audit of a random sample of ballots in each election to ensure that the votes have been accurately counted.” This is a protection for accuracy in the counting which democrats were initially skeptical about but joined republicans in support after deliberation. Overall support rose from 57% to 64% on the weekend and stayed at 64% three months later. Republicans went from 73% to 77% after three months while Democrats went from 43% to 55% in the same period.

**Non-partisan Chief Electoral Officers:** “Have each state make its chief electoral officer (such as secretary of state) a non-partisan, non-elected, professional position.” This is a reform intended to protect non-partisan election administration. Overall support went from 49% to 54% and stayed at 54% three months later. Republicans went from 49% to 55% and settled at 50% three months later. Democrats went from 52% to 59% and was at 60% three months later.

**Including Everyone’s Vote:** “Making sure everyone who wants to vote can do so.” This value-laden goal was shared across the political spectrum and support for it increased significantly from time 1 to time 3. Overall, support for this goal went from 75% to 92% on the weekend, settling at 85% three months later. Republicans went from 72% to 90%, ending up at 81% three months later. Democrats went from 80% to 93% and ended up at 93% three months later.

**Keep current system:** “Keep the current system of electing representatives from single member districts” (also known as “first past the post”) went from 46% at time 1 to 40% at time 2 to 39% at time 3 (three months later). For Republicans it declined from 60% to 53% at time 3. And for Democrats it declined from 37% to 27% at time 3. These results suggest an increasing openness to other designs for electoral systems. The deliberations stimulated interest and support for both Ranked-Choice Voting and Proportional Representation.

**Ranked-Choice Voting** got the most support. The project explained it this way:

*“In this system, voters can rank their choices among a number of candidates. To be elected, a candidate must win a majority of the vote. If no candidate wins a majority of first preference votes on the first ballot, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated and the second preference votes of their supporters are then counted for the remaining candidates. This process continues in a series of “instant run-offs” until a candidate receives a majority of votes. This system has been used in some American cities and recently in two U.S. states. Voters do not have to rank all the candidates. If they wish they can just choose one. Or they can also identify their second choice their third choice, etc.”*

Support for Ranked-Choice Voting increased significantly and persisted (in comparison to the control group) at several levels: for Congressional, state and local elections in the primaries, as well as for general elections at the state and local level. For example:

**Ranked-Choice Voting: “Congressional elections” (primary stage).** Overall, support moved from 44% to 53% at the end of the deliberations, ending at 49% three months later. Republicans moved from 32% to 40%, ending up at 38% three months later, while Democrats moved from 57% to 64% ending up at 62% three months later. Other results are in the tables. There were similar but smaller movements that persisted in support of Proportional Representation.

**What Ranked-Choice Voting Does:** “Ranked-choice voting will better reflect the public’s views on all the candidates.” Agreement with this explanatory variable increased and persisted. Overall agreement went from 43% to 56% after deliberation and ended up at 51%. Republicans increased from 33% to 36% ending up at 39% while Democrats went from 57% to 71% ending up at 60%.

**Efficacy:** “I have opinions about politics that are worth listening to” Agreement with this measure of internal political efficacy increased overall from 65% before deliberation to 75% after and was still at 74% three months later (with similar movements for Republicans, Democrats and Independents). In addition to the changes in policy views, the deliberations seemed to create more engaged citizens.

Overall, the lasting effects suggest that deliberation, even merely over the course of a weekend in an online process can create lasting effects on the guardrails of electoral democracy, our norms of letting everyone register, vote and have their votes counted accurately without partisan interference. Further participants arrived at lasting support for reforms that might better reflect the public views on all the candidates.