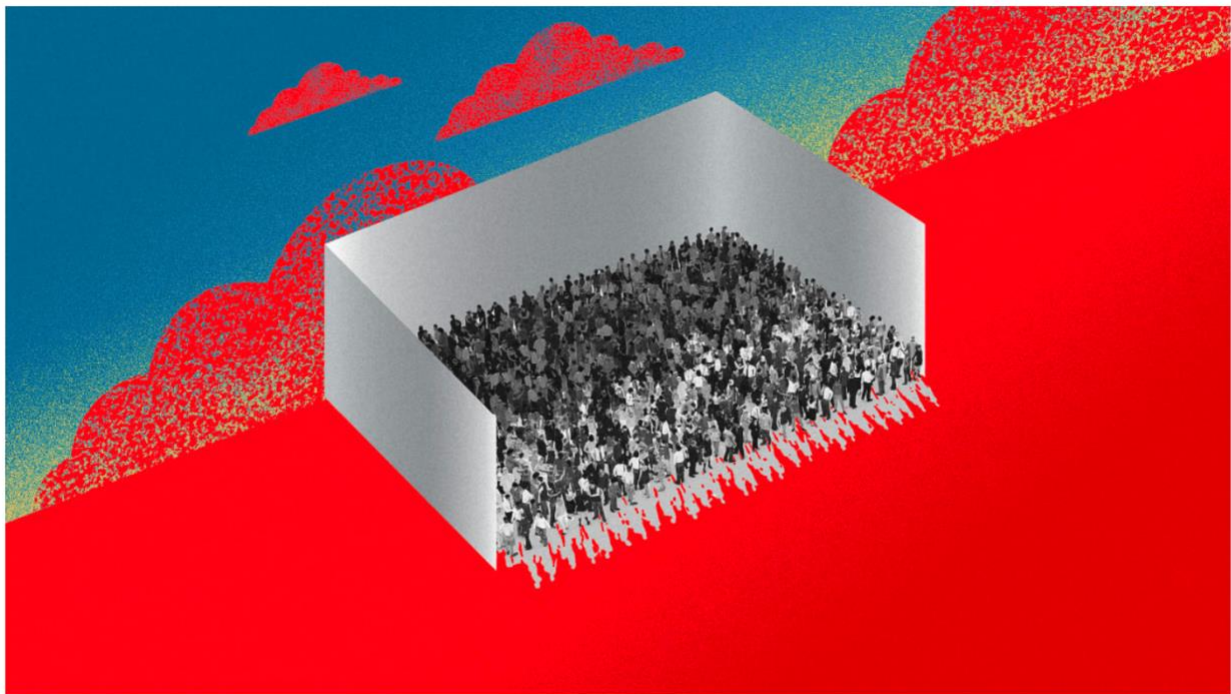


## FAST COMPANY

10-26-21 WORLD CHANGING IDEAS

### What happens when you put 926 random Americans in a room and tell them to solve the climate crisis

The latest installment of America In One Room asked an eclectic mix of voters to come talk to each other until they came to consensus on the best climate policy. Can people's minds be changed?



[Source Image: hkeita/iStock]

[By Talib Visram](#) 7 minute Read

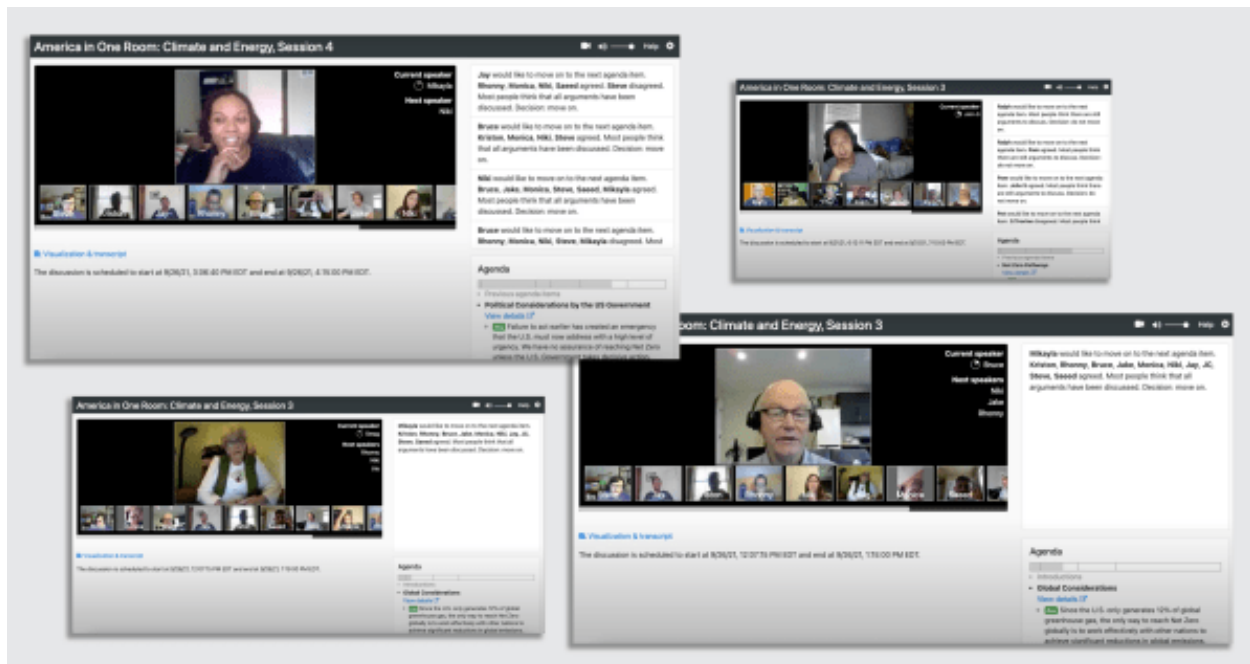
For Bruce Cline, 68, climate change is nothing short of an “existential issue for the world.” A retired federal employee for AmeriCorps who lives in the Denver suburbs, Cline has altered his lifestyle to do as much as he personally can to make a difference—using fewer plastics, eating less meat, and buying used clothes when possible—because he feels individual contributions are

critical. “This isn’t just GM cranking out electric cars,” he says. He fears that “catastrophe” is imminent if the U.S. doesn’t intervene rapidly and do its part in the world’s communal challenge.

The views of Cline, who describes himself as “pretty or very liberal,” are not particularly distinct from others who exist on the same end of the political spectrum. But he doesn’t regularly hear from the people on the other end, and he was curious to comprehend their perspectives. So, in September, he volunteered—and was selected for—a group of 926 citizens to talk in depth through climate policy over the span of 48 hours. The randomly selected group, 54% female, 51% college-educated, 35% from the South and 18% from the Midwest, and scattered across age, race, and political beliefs, would together hash out answers to one of the most critical threats of our time.

This was America’s second-ever showcase of a new forum for “deliberative democracy,” a concept that aims to foster informed and thoughtful discussions about a proposal in order to best gauge attitudes toward it, and help produce policy that’s rooted in nuanced understanding—rather than knee-jerk responses to a political party’s platform. “Most people, most of the time, have little motivation to become really informed about public policy issues,” says James Fishkin, director of Stanford’s Center for Deliberative Democracy, explaining that the idea is to encourage people to think carefully and critically about potential solutions. “The goal,” he says, “is to see what the people would think under the best practical conditions.”

In 2019, the U.S. had its first major taste of the concept with [an in-person gathering in the run-up to the 2020 election](#). Advocates had hoped that the second, which focused on climate policy, would help minimize political division, and restore faith in democracy and fellow citizens during a particularly volatile era in America. The organizers presented the members of the group with a [64-page briefing document](#), laying out pros and cons of possible policies for reaching net-zero greenhouse gases by 2050, including carbon taxes, methane standards, and elimination of fossil fuels. They split into subgroups of 10 to 12 members to discuss the issues for two days, and at the end, joined the entire group to share their results, and pose informed questions to a panel of experts.



[Screenshots: America In One Room] While part of the goal is to thoughtfully decide on sensible proposals, it's also to demonstrate that Americans of all political stripes can come together, even in an era of heightened tension, and have healthy discussions. That was the draw for Cline. He says he wasn't a liberal "lone wolf" in his subgroup, but the team had a wide range of political beliefs. As they delved into climate discussions, he heard the gamut of arguments against climate policies he supported, including concerns about federal government overreach, the burden of taxation, and disruptions that new policies could cause. Still, he heard those opinions, and others heard his. "Virtually all of us came away with a better understanding of not just what people felt," he says, "but why they felt the way they do."

Whether opinions changed, though, was a different matter. Did conservative members of his group bend to join him in his view that we need to communally mobilize to use fewer plastics, eat less meat, and try to go electric or hybrid? "No," he laughs. He was especially dismayed by one woman who continually denied that climate change was a threat. As for those who accepted the threat but disagreed with more left-leaning solutions, he said it was helpful to hear their perspectives, but somewhat disappointing. "We have to make meaningful change," he says, "and I don't think that people are grappling with that reality." Though he better appreciated some of the reasons for contrary viewpoints, Cline says he also didn't change his own attitudes.

But the official results released by Stanford show that the process did help build new perspectives. The organizers polled members before and after the event and compared results with a control group that didn't participate in the deliberation. The results note that the deliberating group changed minds significantly on 66 of the 72 issue propositions toward a greater will to combat climate change. On general views on whether rising temperatures are caused by human activity, agreement shifted from 67% to 76%, including going from 35% to 54% among Republicans. Conservatives also moved from minority to majority consensus on eliminating greenhouse gases from coal, ideally by 2035, and on government incentives to encourage the capture and storage of emitted carbon. Republicans budged less on carbon taxes,

and on eliminating gas-fueled cars by 2035. (Conversely, Democrats moved slightly to favor nuclear power plants being part of the “future energy mix.”)

Cline suggests that the virtual format of the event made it more difficult for people to come to agreements than it would be in person, since it was harder to follow up extensively on people’s comments. This year, the entire event was moderated by an automated system, the [Online Deliberation Platform](#), built by Stanford engineers. The original event, in 2019, was in person, when the plenary session brought people together to “a giant ballroom in the middle of Texas,” says Henry Elkus, CEO and founder of [Helena](#), an organization dedicated to “identify potentially viable solutions to societal problems of any type,” and which financed both editions. That was literally America in One Room—and probably, Elkus says, “the most statistically diverse room in American history.”

That event, in the lead-up to the 2020 election, focused on a broader mix of policy areas. “You saw a huge decoupling from the participants and political party, and political candidate,” Elkus recalls. Most of the movement again was from Republicans, [such as on immigration](#), with results showing they may have started to connect with the human plights of refugees and undocumented immigrants, after listening to perspectives from people they rarely hear. When asked if it was easier to empathize in person, Fishkin says they believe the virtual version was just as effective—and, importantly, that it provides a way to scale up this initiative “to very large numbers of the public.” Even millions.

The Stanford technology is “ready to use” in any number of contexts. “If you’ve got a big problem,” Fishkin says, “the deliberative poll can provide a route to public buy-in.” That could range from the local level of deciding on remodeling a church in Topeka to the Japanese post-Fukushima example. In 2012, Fishkin consulted on one of the earliest examples of deliberative polling in practice, when the Japanese government delegated [285 citizens to rethink its nuclear energy presence after the Fukushima disaster](#); it swayed skeptical participants, and later, wider public opinion—and eventually led to Japan committing to zero nuclear power dependency post-2030. Other countries have used the model recently, including Canada, Iceland, and Chile, which deliberated over structural reforms to the nation’s healthcare and pensions systems. In Mongolia, deliberative polling [is now ingrained into the constitution](#), meaning the government can’t make a major decision without consulting the will of the people.

In the short term, the organizers will be showcasing the climate policy recommendations, garnered from the sessions, to politicians in November at the UN’s Climate Change Conference in Glasgow. They say they have plenty of data that can prove useful to policymakers—and encouraging to those who want climate action—because it was gathered thoughtfully by informed people that those leaders represent. Likewise, it’ll show them any “sticking points” that are concerning to constituents.

Elkus also says deliberative polling should play a role in curating questions for presidential debates to help reduce the tendency in American politics for voters to be enticed by headlines and soundbites, and cults of personality. Cline says it was refreshing that he didn’t hear a single mention of Trump or Biden, rather just substantive debates. “That was really reassuring to me,” he says, “that it didn’t devolve into that sort of cat fighting.”

Even if Cline didn't feel like opinions shifted, he said the experience was "a fabulous opportunity"—and the wider polling supports that sentiment. Ninety-one percent of the partakers said it was valuable, comprising 96% of Democrats, 84% of Independents, and 89% of Republicans. It reduced "affective polarization," says sociologist Larry Diamond, Fishkin's colleague, which is "the emotional, psychological, 'I just hate the other side.'"

"Instead of being manipulated or propagandized," Fishkin says of the participants, "they feel empowered. And, they feel that they have opinions worth listening to."

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