



Center for Collaborative Democracy

A Strategy to Overcome Our Country's Destructive Politics And Resolve Our Existential Problems To the Long-Term Benefit of All

The Center for Collaborative Democracy grew out of the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program. We integrate insights from game theory, behavioral economics and conflict resolution in an effort to resolve societal ills that established institutions are failing to remedy.

Our Board of Advisors includes:

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Preventing the Breakdown of Our Democracy

Americans left and right, poor and well-off, young and old, coastal and heartland, have increasingly adopted opposing political beliefs, values and perceptions of reality.

This document will present evidence that:

Our elections intensify these polarizations to such a degree that whoever wins the presidency or seats in Congress cannot bridge our society's divisions or resolve our existential problems.

Yet several high-profile individuals outside government are equipped to mobilize overwhelming public support for widely beneficial, cost-effective solutions to our gravest troubles.

The evidence consists of more than 200 political controversies in which various interest groups clashing over multiple issues agreed to negotiate directly with one another. To that end, each group chose someone in their own ranks to represent them.

These representatives — for environmentalists, businesspeople, consumer advocates, labor unions, civil rights organizations, educators, professional associations, government agencies and so on — then worked out long-term remedies that all the groups supported.

When asked how they resolved long-standing differences that elected officials could not, these representatives answered, in essence:

Each of us knew in our bones that our own group trusted us to act in their best interests.

Each of us also knew what our own group most wanted to achieve — and what they could let go of.

So, the other representatives and I engaged in intense give-and-take over the various issues dividing us. We made scores of trades by which each side advanced a major goal in return for giving ground elsewhere. In time, we hashed out an agreement by which each group would attain more top objectives than seemed feasible any other way.

Each of us then persuaded our own group that this was far too much progress to pass up.

By analyzing these situations, this document will:

1) Build a case that whoever sits in the Oval Office or Congress cannot possibly win most voters' support for a realistic solution to *any* of today's critical national problems, including:

the economic havoc precipitated by the pandemic
severe income inequality
K-12 schools among the worst in the developed world
dangerously climbing temperature
the most cost-ineffective health care in the world
unsustainably rising debt
an economically destructive tax code

- 2) Show that our country can resolve these problems constructively and equitably, if — and only if — voters in each socio-economic-political category are given an opportunity to identify whom outside government they would most trust to represent them on the issues jeopardizing their future
- 3) Present evidence that these representatives would be highly motivated and well equipped to advance their constituents' best interests — by working out a comprehensive agreement resolving the above issues to the long-term benefit of nearly every citizen
- 4) Spell out how the representatives could persuade voters in each category to support this agreement vocally enough that politicians across the spectrum would endorse the pact to aid their careers
- 5) Answer each objection that we have heard to this endeavor
- 6) Show how citizens alarmed about our country's current trajectory can help launch this enterprise and marshal the resources necessary for it to succeed
- 7) Show that, without this endeavor, voters and whomever they elect will remain far too divided to agree on solutions for our existential problems, including: increasing class warfare, crushing debt and catastrophic climate change

Who is Equipped to Resolve Intractable Conflicts?

When Congress was deadlocked over nearly every facet of environmental policy in the mid-1990s, 25 advocates for the various opposing sides agreed to meet. They included top executives from Dow Chemical, Chevron Oil, General Motors and Pacific Gas & Electric; leaders of the Sierra Club, World Resources Institute, National Wildlife Federation and Environmental Defense Fund; director of the EPA; the secretaries of energy, commerce, interior and agriculture; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

The 25 formed task forces to evaluate potential solutions for each area of conflict — and then hashed out a combination of solutions by which each side would significantly advance its top priorities: increasing “jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits, knowledge and education,” while reducing “pollution, waste and poverty.”¹ All 25 signed the agreement.

Each CEO then persuaded other industry executives that this plan would meet their needs far better than any politically feasible alternative. Each environmentalist won over other environmental groups. The labor leader sold the plan to other unions. And each federal official enlisted his/her colleagues in government.

“We succeeded,” one advocate told us, “because we each understood our own community well enough to know what a deal had to include for them to consider it. We got the deal done because the alternative was a status quo we all hated. And we each had enough history with our own community for them to trust our case that this deal we had negotiated on their behalf would advance their interests much further than their other options.”

Yet, congressional leaders rejected the plan, telling the advocates that most lawmakers would not give up the environment as a campaign issue in return for a solution too complex for them to sell to their diverse voters.

In over 200 controversies that we know of, advocates for the various sides agreed on solutions that all sides supported.² And yet elected officials often ignored the result.

¹ See “A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment,” U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

² Examples at www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus

Why Whoever Wins Seats in Congress Cannot Resolve Any of Today’s Critical Problems

The Constitution was drafted when nearly every American family was tilling crops suited to local conditions or providing goods and services to nearby families. The nation’s founders therefore predicted that each member of Congress would understand his constituents’ needs and could show them how he was advancing their interests, if indeed he was.³

Today, each lawmaker’s district includes white-collar workers, laborers, technicians, managers, professionals, business owners and the unemployed; high-school drop-outs, college graduates and advanced degree-holders; singles, couples, families and empty-nesters; every age group from 18 to 90+.

Former lawmakers we have interviewed have described their relationship with constituents quite differently than the founders did. Typical comments:

Whatever I proposed on health care, jobs, the environment, taxes, trade or education, various blocs of voters objected that I was ignoring their needs or placing an unfair burden on them.

Our voters were so hard to satisfy that we often had incentives to assure failure to reach agreement. Each of us could then blame the impasse on the other party.

Most of us, if put under sodium pentothal, would have admitted that we couldn’t keep our jobs by doing what we knew to be right.

What I positively hated about the place and got me to quit was that most of my colleagues believed that, to win reelection, they had to stoke their voters’ hostility toward the other party.

That hostility has been rising for 25 years, so that most Democratic and Republican voters now see the other as immoral, close-minded and/or unpatriotic.⁴

³ James Madison, *The Federalist*, Nos. 56 and 57

⁴ “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,” Pew Research Center, Oct. 10, 2019

Congress further harms the public by drafting legislation in each policy area in a different committee — which helps well-organized interest groups in each area dominate the agenda at the expense of the hundreds of millions of Americans who lack the means to organize. Agriculture Committees pit farmers, groups concerned about food security and the food industry against one another; Energy Committees pit fossil-fuel companies against renewable sources and environmentalists; and so on.

In each committee, several sectors of our society fight for advantage, often shortchanging most other sectors.

Congress is also hobbled by its inability to deal with a basic human trait that behavioral economists call “loss aversion,” meaning that nearly everyone avoids costs far more than they seek equivalent gains.⁵

For example, tax experts have shown that lowering marginal tax rates and eliminating most deductions would benefit the vast majority of Americans. Yet lawmakers who have proposed reforms of that kind have faced far more resistance from groups that would lose deductions than support from those who would clearly benefit.⁶

On every critical issue, large blocs of voters have refused to bear the costs that realistic remedies typically entail, such as: a slower rise in entitlement benefits or higher taxes to keep the programs from going bankrupt; higher energy prices to slash carbon emissions; more government spending to overhaul a dysfunctional educational system or rebuild decaying infrastructure; and so on.

Given all the above and the current political environment — voters on the left and right living in alternate realities; the House and Senate controlled by fragile majorities; each party feuding internally; and each party strategizing about how to defeat the other in the 2022 election — we predict that Congress will find it impossible to resolve any critical national problem in a way that most of the public would support.

⁵ See Kahneman, Daniel and Tversky, Amos, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica*, (March 1979).

⁶ See Norm Ornstein, “The Rise and Precipitous Fall of Serious Bipartisan Tax Reform,” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2014.

How, Then, Can the U.S. Resolve Its Existential Ills?

In the cases cited on the previous page, groups long hostile to one another over a variety of issues reached a wide-ranging agreement that advanced each group’s top objectives sufficiently for all groups to accept the burdens that agreement would entail.

Could America’s diverse groups reach that kind of agreement? Are there economic, health, environmental, educational and fiscal reforms that — combined — would enhance nearly every American’s quality of life sufficiently for all sectors of our society to support the overall result?

To begin answering this question, we looked at how the major think tanks proposed to address America’s biggest challenges and incorporated their ideas into a “grand bargain” that we thought would benefit voters across the spectrum far more than existing policies.

We then spoke with high-profile activists and analysts whose agendas ranged from far left to far right. To each one, we said, in effect, “The policies you have championed for the past decade have not gained traction with most of the public. So, by what means do you think that those measures could realistically become law?” The typical answer: a shrug.

We then listed the elements of the grand bargain — starting with the parts that we knew he/she strongly supported — and asked if he would prefer the overall result to the status quo.

After some discussion, each said yes, yet most doubted that counterparts in the opposite camp would. “But,” we responded, “they’re in the same position you are: no realistic way to get their ideas enacted. So, those we’ve spoken to did say yes.”

However, from these interactions, we expect that if we published the elements of this grand bargain — in any order — some readers would balk at the first component, enough so to reject the total package; others would see the whole thing as devised by their ideological opponents; and most of the rest would expect their opponents to reject it.

With Americans Left and Right, Poor and Well-Off, Coastal and Heartland Disagreeing on Basic Facts, How Can They Possibly Bridge Their Differences?

In political conflicts cited at the start, each of the opposing groups chose an advocate they trusted to act on their behalf. And when he/she presented the agreement he had negotiated, they accepted his case that it would advance their interests further than they could by any other means.

So, with the various segments of our society more divided than ever in our lifetimes, could they agree on how to resolve our existential problems *without* relying on individuals that each segment trusts to speak for them? We cannot see how that is possible.

We therefore propose to:

Give every registered voter an opportunity to identify the individuals outside government whom they would most want to be their advocate

Convene the advocates who draw support from at least 1 percent of the public

Provide these advocates with facilitators who would:

help them evaluate proposals from the major think tanks so that *they* can piece together a grand bargain resolving America's major ills in ways that each advocate sees as advancing his/her top priorities; and then

use this pact as a benchmark to help the advocates work out a far more detailed agreement resolving our country's troubles in ways that their constituencies will all far prefer over the country's current direction

Provide each advocate with expert help in communicating to his/her constituents how the resulting plan would vastly improve the quality of their lives — until each sector of the public supports the entire pact.

The rest of this document will spell out how each of these steps can be implemented — and reach a successful conclusion by the end of 2022.

Who Will Launch This Effort and How Will They Marshal the Resources Needed for It to Succeed?

We will seek out visionary leaders in business, public policy and the media who have publicly voiced alarm about income inequality, climate change, the national debt and/or the current economic crisis.

We will make a case to these leaders that America's political institutions are far too dysfunctional to agree on fair, sensible, affordable solutions for *any* of our country's critical problems. Hence, the strategy spelled out above is necessary to resolve our country's ills.

We thereby intend to motivate these leaders to build a coalition of organizations covering the political spectrum, which will refine this strategy until all are confident it will be far more effective than any alternative.

The coalition will then need to assemble the staff and resources necessary to launch this endeavor.

The next step would be to conduct nationwide polls to identify the 50 to 100 individuals whom voters would be most likely to choose as their advocates — and then engage the entire public in selecting among them.

Going Public with the Project and Giving It a Name

To draw tens of millions of voters, the coalition could enlist iconic figures in the arts, business and media to broadcast a message such as:

- Our country faces the greatest crises of our lifetimes, yet members of Congress keep blaming one another rather than working out realistic solutions.
- So, I believe that we, the American people, need to seek out the men and women we know we can trust to act in our interests, and ask them to work out solutions that will benefit us all.
- If enough of us supported their recommendations, politicians who wanted to keep their jobs would listen.

- I believe in this idea so strongly that I have joined a group that will make it happen. We call it the Forum for Nationwide Prosperity.

- And we are organizing it so that one or more Forum members will speak for your concerns — if you visit the Forum website and follow the steps it lays out.

This media campaign would include mailing each registered voter a unique code providing access to a website where the voter would be asked to:

- fill out a brief checklist of his/her values, concerns and aspirations;
- watch brief videos of advocates whose priorities match his/her own;
- identify the advocates he/she would most trust: a first choice, second choice, third and so on.

Advocates will be selected with an algorithm by which each voter who follows the website's instructions will get one of their choices, and each category of voters will get representation in proportion to their numbers. The algorithm is available on request.

Obstacles the Prosperity Forum Will Face and How We Propose to Overcome Them

Many voters know too little about the major issues to pick Forum representatives by objective criteria.

No selection process can force voters to be objective. But trust will determine whether each Forum member can win his/her voters' support for the final agreement. So, most of all the selection process needs to enable voters to get representatives they can trust.

Some voters will choose spokespeople who refuse to negotiate with ideological adversaries.

Voters drawn to the idea of the Forum are very likely to want spokespeople who explain how they will deliver far better results than Congress does and therefore unlikely to pick candidates who sound just like politicians.

Some voters will still choose Forum members who prefer divisive slogans and grandstanding.

For that reason, Forum meetings will be held in private — with no media or audience to grandstand to.

Many voters will object to private meetings.

The Forum's sponsors could explain the need for privacy this way: "Congress and its committees meet in public. The result: most lawmakers posture for the cameras instead of trying to bridge their differences.

"The constructive agreements we know of, including the U.S. Constitution, were hashed out in total privacy. Each participant could then talk candidly with the others until they negotiated an agreement. Each one could then show his/her constituents how that deal would advance their interests. Your Forum member will do the same — if we give them enough privacy to work out the kind of agreement that Congress cannot."

Some Forum members will lack negotiation skills.

Forum meetings will be led by facilitators experienced in helping representatives with diverse skills, outlooks and temperaments to negotiate an agreement they all can support.

Each Forum member will have a different level of knowledge and expertise in social policy, health care, education, energy policy, entitlements and taxes.

The members will therefore divide into task forces. Each will meet with top experts in one policy area and evaluate a wide range of reforms on that subject. Members of each task force will be selected so as to be as representative of the entire Forum as feasible.

Each task force will also have a staff that summarizes the findings, including the benefits, costs and risks of each reform.

Each Forum member will have an opportunity to question the staff about their conclusions until satisfied that he/she understands how much each reform would advance or hinder his/her objectives.

Forum members may feel overwhelmed by all that information.

An abundance of information and options made it possible for the negotiators described at the start to reach an agreement that significantly benefited all sides.

So that the Forum members will reach an equivalent outcome, we propose the following steps:

We will ask each member to evaluate the various reforms identified by each task force and assign each reform a numerical rating.

We will identify the mix of reforms that the members have rated the highest.

We will present this combination to each member — starting with the reforms that he/she rated the highest — and ask, “Does this total package meet your objectives sufficiently for you to far prefer it over the status quo.”

If some members are dissatisfied with the overall result, we will ask them to identify the clauses they most want changed.

Once all these clauses are in hand, we will explore ways to modify them so as to increase the number of advocates who support the entire package — until all prefer the result over the status quo, or the few who do not are demanding terms the others cannot accept.

In that case, we will need to explain to the holdouts that, with the vast majority agreeing on a plan they see as far better for the public than the status quo, they are likely to win enough voters’ support that most lawmakers intent on reelection will favor the plan as well.

The holdouts would thereby be left pushing measures that are very unlikely to be enacted.

We expect nearly every Forum member to find that outcome unacceptable and therefore do whatever it takes to reach an agreement far better for his/her constituents than Congress can devise.

The final agreement may be filled with compromises that address issues more timidly than these times require.

As the Forum members go through the above steps, we expect each one to realize that he/she will advance his priorities as much as feasible only by striving for an agreement that the others perceive as advancing their objectives just as far.

Many voters are so unrealistic that they will resist any plan, no matter how beneficial.

The Forum’s sponsors will therefore need to hire experts in communication to help each member show his/her constituents how the Forum plan is their best option. The gist could be:

“This deal gives us the policies we have most wanted but that politicians never delivered. They promise the moon and then blame failure to keep their promises on scapegoats. So, we either support this deal in its entirety, or we are signing up for the political paralysis of the past few years and no progress on the issues we care about.”

Most of the public has supported many initiatives that have never become law.

The main reasons for this are:

1) Most voters may agree on slogans, but any attempt to turn a slogan about a divisive issue into legislation usually draws enough opposition to overwhelm the supporters.

2) Each lawmaker focuses on what voters in his/her state or district want, not what the overall public wants.

3) If a key bloc of constituents care enough about an issue to vote on that basis, while the majority feel less strongly, the typical lawmaker will cater to that bloc.

So, a political agenda gets through the legislative meatgrinder only if a significant bloc of voters or lawmakers make it a top priority.

Much of the American public is leaning toward nihilism or tribalism, while the rest are divided into various opposing camps, giving the nihilists inordinate influence, which the Forum may not be able to overcome.

Americans who favored the Forum's plan could exert the most influence by voting in congressional primaries, which typically draw just 20 percent of registered voters.

So, if 15 percent of voters signed on-line pledges to vote in their state's and district's primaries exclusively for candidates who supported the Forum's plan, each candidate would have strong incentives to change his/her priorities accordingly.⁷

Various media will likely spread conspiracy theories about the Forum and distort its recommendations.

Media that intentionally distort reality are a major reason why America's ills will grow far worse *until* we convene individuals that each segment of the public trusts. They, better than anyone, could persuade each segment to ignore the lies and distortions.

In Summation

This document has presented evidence that America's 330 million people — divided along social, economic and ideological lines — cannot possibly bridge their differences on the critical issues of this era by relying on lawmakers who speak for geographic districts or states and who are perpetually fixated on winning the next election.

Every major piece of legislation of the past 25 years has in fact been enacted by one party or the other, while drawing at least as much public opposition as support.

America's ills will therefore continue to escalate — unless:

- Each segment of our society is given an opportunity to identify whom they would most trust to speak for them and represent their interests
- These representatives are given the resources to evaluate a wide range of solutions for each of our existential problems
- work out the combination of reforms that would benefit their constituencies as much as feasible
- mobilize their constituencies to vocally support the result

Groups long hostile to one another have, by similar steps, resolved hundreds of contentious issues to the long-term benefit of nearly all involved. And when we have asked experts at top think tanks to suggest a simpler way for our hyperpolarized country to resolve its gravest problems, none have offered a credible answer.

Our democracy, economy, educational system, fiscal health and our planet's capacity to sustain life are all in peril — and will remain so until we adopt methods that can resolve the controversies of these times.

We invite readers to share their thoughts with us. Please contact Sol Erdman at the Center for Collaborative Democracy:

solerdman@igc.org

212-860-0969

⁷ CCD is a 501(c) 3 organization, so advocates we convene could urge followers to vote but not who to vote for or against.