



Center for Collaborative Democracy

A Strategy to Save American Democracy

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 order to help resolve societal ills that established institutions are failing to remedy.

Our Board of Advisors includes:

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Why Our Republic Will Continue to Break Down, Unless

Americans' hostility toward one another has been escalating for three decades, so that most Democratic and Republican voters now see the other as immoral and/or unpatriotic, clash over basic facts and embrace fundamentally different values.¹ Almost half of voters think the country is headed for Civil War.²

This document will present evidence that:

Our two-party political system will continue to divide Americans against one another, so that whomever voters elect as president will be unable to bridge our country's divisions, and whomever voters elect to Congress will be unable to resolve our critical problems.

Indeed, voters left and right, poor and well-off, young and old, coastal and heartland, with college degrees and without, have such different needs and perspectives that most voters are very unlikely to agree on a solution for *any* of our existential ills, including:

- Fewer and fewer families moving up the economic ladder
- K-12 schools among the worst in the developed world
- The most cost-ineffective health care in the world
- Increasingly catastrophic climate change
- Unsustainably rising debt
- An economically destructive tax code

Yet, several individuals outside government are equipped to work out a combination of measures that would resolve these problems to the long-term benefit of all.

Some of those individuals have sufficient influence to mobilize voters across the spectrum to support that combination — strongly enough to motivate lawmakers from both parties to enact it.

Our evidence for these assertions starts with more than 200 political controversies that the Center for Collaborative Democracy has investigated. In each case, elected officials deadlocked, yet representatives for the **stakeholding groups agreed on how to best advance the long-term interests of all sides.**

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

In a series of meetings, these long-time adversaries hashed out an agreement that would resolve the major environmental controversies of that time — by significantly reducing “pollution, waste and poverty,” while increasing “jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits and education.”³ All 25 signed the agreement.

¹ “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,” Pew Research Center

² Zogby Analytics, Feb. 4, 2021

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 colleagues in government.

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.

From our interviews of these and other advocates who worked out constructive solutions for issues that elected officials could not resolve, it was apparent that:

- Each advocate had earned his/her group's trust and respect, fully understood their needs and expectations, and was frustrated that they had spent significant time and resources battling the other groups — with little to show for it.
- When the advocates met, they engaged in intense give-and-take over the various issues dividing them, looking for trades by which each group would advance a top priority in return for giving ground elsewhere.
- They thereby reached agreement on how each group could attain more of its top objectives than seemed feasible any other way.
- Each advocate then persuaded his/her own group that this deal was by far their best option.

By contrast, among the former members of Congress we have interviewed, none could articulate how to resolve any critical national problem in a way that would have been supported by most of his/her constituents — who included high-school drop-outs, college graduates and advanced-degree holders; office workers, technicians, laborers, professionals, business owners and the unemployed; the struggling, the up-and-coming and the thriving; every age from 18 to 90+; singles, couples, families and empty-nesters.

Among the comments that former lawmakers have made to us:

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

Our voters had expectations we could not meet, so my colleagues and I often had incentives to deadlock and blame the impasse on one another.

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.

Former lawmakers have also acknowledged to us that party leaders exacerbate Congress's inability to resolve divisive issues by delegating each area of public policy to a different committee, assigning committee seats to lawmakers who can best exploit the positions to win reelection, and giving control of each committee to a senior member of the majority party who guards that turf jealously. As a result:

³ "A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment," U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

- Each piece of legislation can undermine others. For example, tax bills often subsidize activities that other measures are designed to curtail.
- Issues that concern one party dominate the agenda to the exclusion of other issues.
- Interest groups favored by one party benefit at most other groups' expense. And once benefits are embedded in legislation, the beneficiaries fight so hard to preserve them that reformers rarely succeed.

For example, economists left, right and center largely agree that lowering marginal tax rates while curbing deductions would benefit the vast majority of Americans. Yet groups that would lose deductions invariably threaten to unseat incumbents who support reforms of this kind, dooming its chances on Capitol Hill.^{4,5}

By contrast, the negotiators cited on page 1 averted deadlocks by tackling various issues simultaneously — so that each side had opportunities to gain enough ground in some areas to far outweigh a net cost in others.

But with congressional leaders isolating each area of public policy in a different committee, lawmakers who try to negotiate multi-issue deals are usually ignored by most leaders and by most of the rank-and-file.

How, then, can America resolve its existential ills in ways that most voters will support?

To start answering that question, we looked at the Pew Research Center's analysis of voter attitudes, which grouped voters into nine categories: faith and flag conservatives, committed conservatives, populist right, ambivalent right, stressed sideliners, outsider left, Democratic mainstays, establishment liberals and progressive left.⁶

We then looked at how the top think tanks from far left to far right proposed to resolve the major economic, environmental, educational, health and fiscal problems.⁷ For each issue, we selected what seemed to us to be the most widely beneficial, cost-effective solution. Yet each solution seemed to conflict with the attitudes of at least five of the nine types of voters.

So, we tested how much support those solutions would draw if combined into one grand bargain. To that end, we asked members of our Advisory Board to introduce us to high-profile colleagues whose political agendas ranged from far left to far right, and whose favorite ideas had failed to gain traction with most voters or Congress.

To each one, we described the parts of the grand bargain that we expected him/her to strongly support. We then asked if, to achieve all that, would he accept the parts he would otherwise reject.

After some discussion, each said yes.

⁴ See Norm Ornstein, "The Rise and Precipitous Fall of Serious Bipartisan Tax Reform," *The Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2014.

⁵ The many groups that would benefit from constructive tax reform have, in fact, been less aggressive in pushing for it than opponents have fought against it. This imbalance in political activism is due in part to a trait that behavioral economist call "loss aversion" — nearly every person's tendency to avoid costs far more intently than they seek equivalent gains. See Kahneman, Daniel, and Tversky, Amos, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, (March 1979).

⁶ "Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology," Nov. 9, 2021.

⁷ The think tanks were Brookings, American Enterprise, New America, Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, Cato, Heritage, Niskanen, Center for American Progress and the Economic Policy Institute.

But if we published the elements of this grand bargain — in *any* order — we expect that at least five out of nine readers would balk at the first component and likely reject the total package.

By contrast, in the political conflicts cited at the start, when each interest group was represented by an advocate they trusted, he/she knew how to persuade them that the agreement he had negotiated on their behalf would advance their priorities further than they could by any other means.

So, could the various socio-economic-political sectors of our society — more divided now than ever in our lifetimes — reach agreement on solutions for our country’s existential ills *without* each sector being represented by someone they fully trust?

We do not see how that is possible.

Indeed, the thousands of organizations and millions of people who have, in recent decades, tried to resolve our critical problems by relying on *any* aspect of our two-party political system have steadily lost ground to the forces tearing our country apart.

We therefore maintain that, whomever voters elect, our country’s chronic ills will continue to grow worse — until each sector of our society can choose a representative they have solid reasons to trust.

For that purpose, we propose to organize a Forum for Nationwide Prosperity that would:

- Give voters an opportunity to identify the individuals outside government whom they would trust to be their advocate on the issues most jeopardizing their future.
- Convene the advocates whom 1 percent or more of the public support.
- Provide facilitators who,

in their first meeting, will help the advocates evaluate proposals from the major think tanks so that they can put together a combination of reforms that advances each advocate’s political priorities sufficiently for him/her to support the whole package;

use this result to give the advocates confidence that, despite their different values and beliefs, they can reach an agreement far better for all than the status quo;

then help them work out a far more detailed grand bargain resolving our country’s ills in ways they expect their constituencies to far prefer over America’s current trajectory.

- Provide each advocate with expert help in communicating to his/her constituents how this grand bargain would vastly improve the quality of their lives.
- Help each advocate mobilize his/her constituency to support the pact vocally enough that lawmakers from both parties would see that enacting it would be in their best interests.

The rest of this document spells out how we propose to implement each of these steps and overcome all the potential obstacles to enacting the grand bargain.

To launch this effort, we are seeking support from visionary leaders in business, public policy and the media who have voiced alarm about declining social mobility, climate change, failing schools, the national debt and/or threats to our democracy. We are making a case to these leaders that:

- No one in public life has yet offered a practical way to avert the violence and constitutional crisis that seem likely to occur around the 2024 election.
- Even if our republic survives the election, our two-party political system will remain incapable of bridging differences among America's diverse socio-economic-political groups.
- The above strategy could mobilize voters across the spectrum to back the reforms our country needs to thrive. Candidates who pledge to enact those reforms could then win decisively enough to forestall a disputed election.

When enough thought leaders support our effort, we would build a coalition of diverse nonprofit organizations to develop a full operational plan, raise funds, and assemble the staff and resources necessary to launch this endeavor.

The coalition would then need to conduct nationwide polls to identify the 50 to 100 individuals whom voters would be most likely to choose as their advocates.

The public would then select among these candidates. To engage tens of millions of voters, the coalition could enlist iconic figures in the arts, business and media to broadcast a message such as:

- Congress has consistently failed to resolve our gravest problems.
- So, we, the American people, need to identify the men and women we most trust to act in our interests — and ask them to work out solutions.
- If enough of us support their recommendations, politicians who want to keep their jobs will listen.
- This enterprise is starting now. It's called the Forum for Nationwide Prosperity.
- It is being organized so that every registered voter can get an advocate they trust to speak for them — by visiting the Forum website and following 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 will pick Forum representatives by superficial criteria.

Granted, but the selection process above would maximize the odds that each voter gets a representative they trust, so that each representative will be in the best possible position to win his/her voters' support for the final agreement.

Some voters will choose spokespeople who prefer divisive slogans and grandstanding over negotiating with ideological adversaries.

Forum meetings will be held in private; so the members will have no audience or cameras to grandstand to. Members who decline to negotiate will likely be ignored by those who want to reach an agreement.

Some voters will object to private meetings.

Every constructive agreement among political adversaries that we know of, including the U.S. Constitution, was hammered out behind closed doors, so that the participants could talk candidly with one another. Forum members cannot possibly resolve the most divisive issues of these times in front of an audience.

Some Forum members will lack negotiation skills, including some who will be too aggressive.

Forum meetings will be led by facilitators experienced in helping people with diverse temperaments reach agreement.

Most Forum members will lack the expertise to negotiate an agreement encompassing social policy, education, health care, energy policy, entitlements and taxes.

The members will therefore form a separate task force to analyze each policy area. Each task force will:

Be composed of members who represent the entire Forum as closely as feasible.

Meet with top experts and evaluate a wide range of reforms on its designated subject.

Have a staff that will summarize the benefits, costs and risks of each reform.

Each task force member will have opportunities to question the staff about its findings.

Each task force will then come up with a recommendation of which combination of reforms would have the greatest appeal to the most Forum members.

We will present these recommendations to each Forum member — starting with the proposed solutions for his/her top priority issues. We will ask, "If the choice were between this total package or the status quo, which would you prefer?"

If some members reject the package, we will ask them to identify the changes they most want.

Once all these proposed changes are in hand, the relevant task forces will explore ways to modify their original recommendations so as to increase the number of advocates who will approve.

Substituting these modifications, we will again ask each Forum member whether he/she prefers the total package over the status quo.

We will keep exploring modifications until we can no longer increase the number of Forum members who are satisfied.

At that point, we will need to make a case to the holdouts that the measures they want are unpopular enough among other Forum members that most of the public is likely to oppose them as well.

We expect most holdouts will not want to end up empty-handed and will try their best to reach an agreement with the other members.

The final agreement may address issues more timidly than these times require.

Voters will strongly support the agreement only if they see it advancing their priorities as much as feasible.

Each Forum member will therefore have incentives to reach an agreement that as many voters as possible perceive that way.

Some voters will have unrealistic expectations, which the final agreement will not meet.

We will hire experts in communication to help each member pitch the Forum plan to his/her constituents. The gist of the message could be:

This deal gives us the policies we have most wanted but that politicians never delivered. They make huge promises 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.

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

Media that spread disinformation will continue to exacerbate America's ills *unless* each segment of the public gets an opportunity to identify whom they would most trust to speak for them. Those trusted individuals, and they alone, could persuade each segment to ignore the lies and distortions.

Many Americans are turning to tribalism, nihilism or extremism, and the Forum is unlikely to change their attitudes with reasoned arguments.

Americans favoring the Forum's plan could outmaneuver extremists by voting strategically in primaries.

Congressional primaries typically draw just 20 percent of registered voters; presidential primaries about 30 percent. So, if enough voters in each state and district signed on-line pledges to vote in primaries exclusively for candidates who support the Forum's plan, the vast majority of candidates would have strong incentives to change their priorities accordingly.⁸

⁸ CCD is a 501(c) 3 organization, so advocates we convene could urge followers to vote but not whom to vote for or against.

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 our country's existential ills by relying on lawmakers whose job is to speak for all socioeconomic groups in their state or district.

Nearly every member of Congress knows that task is impossible and therefore runs for reelection by offering simplistic slogans as remedies and/or stoking voters' hostility toward others.

By contrast, various groups that had long clashed over multiple issues have reached wide-ranging agreements that advanced the long-term interests of all involved.

We propose to apply the same methods on a national scale, by:

- Enabling each segment of our society to identify whom they would most trust to represent them.
- Providing these representatives with the resources to:
 - evaluate a wide range of solutions for each critical problem;
 - work out the combination of reforms that best advance the interests of all; and
 - mobilize their constituencies to vocally support the result.

Are there simpler ways to resolve America's gravest problems in time to prevent the most extreme voices from tearing our society apart? We have posed that question to political reformers of many kinds. None offered an answer that could conceivably be implemented on a scale and quickly enough to forestall the constitutional crisis and widespread violence that almost half of voters expect by the 2024 election.

The enemies of American democracy have been gaining ground for decades, largely by uniting around a strategy of dividing right against left, heartland against coastal, poor against well-off, and so on.

Those of us who want wider prosperity, a more sustainable economy, a more fiscally responsible government, a more democratic society — or any combination of these — cannot succeed if we continue to go in different directions. We need a strategy that can move us all toward our respective goals.

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

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