



## Center for Collaborative Democracy

# A Strategy to Prevent Our Country from Tearing Itself Apart and Resolve Our Critical 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 America Faces Civil War — Unless . . .

In more than 200 political controversies that the Center for Collaborative Democracy had investigated, elected officials deadlocked, yet the relevant interest groups agreed on solutions that would benefit all sides.<sup>1</sup>

These events show how we can resolve our country's gravest problems despite our dysfunctional political system.

For example, with Congress at an impasse over 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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 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 in this and other cases in which advocates for the appropriate interest groups agreed on solutions for issues that elected officials could not resolve, it was apparent that:

- Each advocate had earned his/her own group's trust and respect, knew what a deal had to include for them to consider it, and understood what they could let go of.
- The advocates then met and engaged in intense give-and-take over the various issues dividing them.
- They looked for trades that would enable each group to advance its top priorities in return for giving ground elsewhere — until reaching 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 the deal he had negotiated on their behalf would advance their interests further than any other option.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples at [www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus](http://www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus)

<sup>2</sup> See “A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment,” U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

**By contrast, none of the former members of Congress we have interviewed could articulate how to resolve any complex problem in a way that would have been acceptable to 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 such different expectations that 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.

That hostility has escalated to the point that most Democratic and Republican voters now see the other as immoral and/or unpatriotic, clash over basic facts and embrace fundamentally different values.<sup>3</sup> Almost half of voters believe that the country is headed for civil war.<sup>4</sup>

The two parties also take diametrically opposing positions, such as:

promoting charter schools versus significantly more funding for public schools  
curbing entitlements to rein in the national debt versus expanding entitlements and the debt  
a flat tax versus a significantly more progressive tax code  
accepting rising income and wealth inequality as the price for an entrepreneurial economy  
versus raising minimum wages and redistributing wealth to low-income families  
letting costs determine energy sources versus curbing fossil fuels and subsidizing renewables

**Furthermore, both parties organize congressional committees so that resolving divisive issues is almost impossible.** For example, lowering marginal tax rates while curbing deductions would benefit the vast majority of Americans, according to economists left, right and center. Yet when lawmakers have considered reforms of that kind, groups that would lose deductions have mounted fierce opposition — enough so to far outweigh support from the many more groups that would clearly benefit.<sup>5</sup>

This imbalance in activism is due in part to a trait that behavioral economists call “loss aversion,” meaning that nearly every person tries far harder to avoid costs than to seek equivalent gains.<sup>6</sup> To overcome loss aversion, negotiators usually bring up additional issues — so that each side gets opportunities to gain enough ground in some areas to accept a net cost in others.

But Congress isolates each area of public policy in a different committee and gives control of each committee to a senior member of the majority party who guards that turf jealously. As a result:

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<sup>3</sup> “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,” Pew Research Center

<sup>4</sup> Zogby Analytics, Feb. 4, 2021

<sup>5</sup> See Norm Ornstein, “The Rise and Precipitous Fall of Serious Bipartisan Tax Reform,” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See Kahneman, Daniel, and Tversky, Amos, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica*, (March 1979).

Interest groups favored by one party gain ground at other groups' expense.

Issues that concern one party dominate the agenda to the exclusion of other issues.

When bipartisan groups of lawmakers negotiate over various divisive issues at one time — seeking a deal by which each side benefits enough for all sides to support it — committee chairs or party leaders intent on retaining power typically reject the result.

**How, then, can our country resolve the most critical issues, including:**

unsustainably rising debt

K-12 schools among the worst in the developed world

the most cost-ineffective health care in the world

four decades of fewer and fewer Americans moving up the economic ladder

increasingly severe droughts, floods, hurricanes and wildfires

an economically destructive tax code

To start answering that question, we looked at how America's top think tanks proposed to resolve each of these issues. From among their ideas, we put together a grand bargain that would resolve all the issues in a way that we thought nearly every American would see the *total package* as significantly improving their prospects.

We then spoke with high-profile activists and analysts whose agendas ranged from far left to far right, but whose favorite ideas had failed to gain traction with most of the public or Congress.

To each one, we described the parts of the grand bargain that we knew he/she would 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, yet most doubted that counterparts in the opposite camp would go along. "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."

From these interactions, it was clear that to win acceptance for the grand bargain, we had to present its elements in the order that reflected the priorities of the person we were addressing.

So, if we published those elements in *any* order, some readers are sure to balk at the first component, enough so to reject the total package. And those who liked the first few components would likely expect their opponents to reject it.

By contrast, in the political conflicts cited at the start, when each of the opposing groups had an advocate they trusted, they accepted that the agreement he/she had negotiated on their behalf would advance their interests further than they could by any other means.

So, with America more divided now than ever in our lifetimes, could the various socio-economic-political sectors of our society agree on solutions for our existential problems *without* each sector being represented by someone they fully trust?

We do not see how that is possible.

**We therefore maintain that to resolve America’s critical problems, it will be necessary to:**

Give voters an opportunity to identify the individuals outside government whom they would most trust to be their advocate.

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 each advocate sees as advancing his/her political priorities sufficiently to support the whole package;

using this result to give the advocates confidence that they can bridge their differences, help them work out a far more detailed grand bargain that would resolve our country’s ills in ways they expect their constituencies to all 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 — until the public supports the pact strongly enough for lawmakers from both parties to 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 obstacles in the way, so that the grand bargain could be enacted before the 2024 election.

**To launch and fund this effort**, we will seek out visionary leaders in business, public policy and the media who have voiced alarm about income inequality, the national debt, climate change, inadequate education and/or threats to our democracy.

We will make a case to these leaders that the strategy spelled out above is necessary to resolve our country’s existential ills. We thereby intend to motivate these leaders to support our forming a coalition of diverse nonprofit organizations that will refine this strategy into an operational plan.

That will include assembling 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 ask the public to select among them.

**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:

- With Congress consistently failing to resolve our gravest problems, we, the American people, need to identify the men and women we would 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 will be 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 know little about the issues and pick Forum representatives by superficial criteria.*

This is inevitable with any selection process. But the one above is designed to 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. Each member's choice will be to negotiate or be ignored by those who want to reach an agreement.

*Some voters will object to private meetings.*

Our response to these voters will be something along the lines of: 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. For Forum members to negotiate and resolve the most divisive issues of these times, they will need to talk far more candidly with one another than they possibly could in public. Which would you prefer: an agreement or a public show?

*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.

*Each Forum member will have a different level of knowledge about social policy, education, health care, energy policy, entitlements and taxes — which will magnify the difficulty of negotiating among all these issues.*

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 until satisfied that he/she understands how much each reform would advance his own objectives and the objectives of other Forum members.

Each task force will then deliberate over which combination of reforms would have the greatest appeal to the most Forum members. If they cannot reach consensus, the combination with the most support will be considered the task force's initial recommendation.

We will present these recommendations to each Forum member — starting with the proposed solution for his/her top priority issue. 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 in the overall package, we will again ask each Forum member whether he/she prefers the result 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 the holdouts will not want to end up empty-handed and that most 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 perceive it as advancing their priorities as much as feasible.

Each Forum member will therefore have incentives to reach an agreement that as many voters as possible see 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 leaning toward tribalism, nihilism or extremism, seemingly indifferent — or even opposed — to resolving long-term problems, a mindset the Forum may be unable to overcome.*

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

Primaries 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, candidates would have strong incentives to change their priorities accordingly.

**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 is impossible and therefore runs for reelection by offering simplistic slogans as remedies and 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 addressed the flaws in our political system outlined here or that could conceivably be implemented in era of extreme polarization.

The individuals and organizations trying to strengthen our democracy are fast losing ground to the forces dividing our country into hostile camps. If our republic is to survive, we need a far more ambitious strategy than any to date, a strategy that can unite most Americans around practical solutions for our existential ills.

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

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