



Center for Collaborative Democracy

A Project to Resolve the Problems Threatening Every American's Future

The Center for Collaborative Democracy is a non-profit 501 (c) 3 organization that grew out of the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program. We strive to develop innovative methods for resolving societal ills that established institutions are failing to remedy. To that end, we integrate insights from experienced practitioners in conflict resolution, behavioral economics and game theory.

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Why Our Democracy Will Continue to Break Down, Unless

Whoever has been president or controlled Congress in the past three decades, our country's divisions have intensified on their watch.¹ By now, 80 percent of Republican and Democratic voters see each other as a "clear and present danger" to our democracy.² And the 2022 election left the public and Congress so divided that commentators across the spectrum are predicting two years of gridlock and partisan attacks.³

Yet this document will present evidence that several individuals outside government are equipped to hash out a "grand bargain" that would resolve our most critical problems to the long-term benefit of all sectors of our society.

These individuals could then mobilize voters to vigorously support this wide-ranging pact in 2024 — and thereby motivate presidential and congressional candidates to commit to enacting that agreement.

Our evidence for these assertions starts with more than 200 political controversies in which **elect**ed officials deadlocked, yet the stakeholding groups reached agreement on how all sides could advance their long-term interests.⁴

For example, some years ago, with Congress at an impasse over nearly every aspect of environmental policy, 25 advocates for the various opposing sides met to break the stalemate. 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 the National Wildlife Federation; the director of the EPA; chair of the African American Leadership Summit; the secretaries of energy, commerce, interior and agriculture; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

The 25 tackled their various areas of conflict simultaneously — by forming seven task forces — each of which interviewed more than 60 experts in order to develop a menu of potential solutions.

From among the task forces' recommendations, these 25 long-time adversaries put together a detailed grand bargain for significantly reducing "pollution, waste and poverty," while increasing "jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits, knowledge and education."⁵ Among its provisions: Major corporations would support much stricter environmental standards if given far more latitude to choose the technologies by which they met those benchmarks.

¹ Based on two reports from the Pew Research Center: "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," Oct. 5, 2017; and "As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration with the Two-Party System," Aug. 9, 2022

² "New Initiative Explores Deep, Persistent Divides Between Biden and Trump Voters," UVA Center for Politics, Sept 30, 2021

³ "Political Gridlock is Poised to Return," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 17, 2022; "The Democrats' Not-So-Terrible Midterms: But Brace for more Insanity," *Businessweek*, Nov. 14, 2022; "Winning May Have Been the Easy Part," *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2022.

⁴ Examples at www.genuinerepresentation.org/consensus

⁵ See "A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment," U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996; https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/PCSD/Publications/TF_Reports/amer-top.html

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 from both parties rejected the plan, saying that members of their caucus could not sell such a complex agreement to their diverse voters.

Indeed, of the former lawmakers we have interviewed, nearly all acknowledged that if they had tackled the country's chronic problems more realistically, key blocs of voters would have tried to unseat them.

Incumbents have in fact won reelection over 94 percent of the time in the past 25 years, largely by offering soundbites as remedies for the nation's ills and assailing ideological opponents.

By contrast, from our interviews with more than 200 advocates for stakeholding groups who worked out constructive solutions when elected officials would not, it was clear why the advocates persevered until they succeeded. Each:

- had worked to advance his/her group's interests for enough years to have earned their trust
- fully understood his/her group's needs and expectations
- was frustrated that his/her group had long battled others over various issues, with little to show for it
- was therefore ready to engage in trades with long-time adversaries — trades that would advance his/her group's top priorities in return for giving ground elsewhere
- eventually realized that his/her own group would make progress only if the others did as well, motivating each to work toward an agreement that would benefit all sides as much as feasible
- knew precisely how to persuade his/her own group that deals he/she negotiated were their best option.

So, with various politicians and media constantly stoking divisions and outrage among the diverse sectors of our society — so that we sharply disagree over basic facts and government's purpose — how do we bridge our differences sufficiently to prevent our democracy from breaking down?

We need to convene a group of advocates such that each sector of society trusts at least one to speak for them on the most critical national issues.

These advocates would then be far better equipped than anyone else to hash out an agreement resolving these issues in ways that each sector of society would support. This would, in turn, give presidential and congressional candidates every incentive to endorse that agreement and, once in office, to enact it.

To achieve these goals by the 2024 election, we propose to organize a Forum for Nationwide Opportunity and Prosperity. It would unfold in five phases:

1) To generate a preliminary grand bargain that will draw nationwide attention, we would convene 25 former policymakers who have earned wide respect; have broad experience with the most critical national issues; are diverse, politically and otherwise; and are alarmed by America’s hyper-polarization, enough so that they will commit to bridging their differences.

The 25 would include former directors of the Congressional Budget Office, cabinet secretaries, agency leaders, governors, heads of think tanks and so on.

We would ask the 25 to work out a comprehensive agreement resolving six chronic problems in ways that will benefit all sectors of society. Those problems are:

- Fewer and fewer families moving up the economic ladder
- Most Americans lacking the education and skills to thrive in a high-tech, global economy⁶
- The most expensive and inefficient health care system in the developed world⁷
- Increasingly severe droughts, floods, hurricanes and wildfires
- Unsustainably rising debt
- A 75,000-page tax code filled with perverse incentives

We chose these six issues by the following criteria:

- Each is hobbling our economy and stoking enough voter anger to destabilize our society. Yet voters have been far too divided to agree on a practical solution for any of them.
- These issues overlap. Resolving them individually would generate inefficiencies and contradictions.
- So, we developed a hypothetical grand bargain resolving these six issues in ways that we thought the overall benefits to each sector of society would far exceed the costs. We then presented the grand bargain to political activists across the spectrum. Each agreed that, from their perspective, the benefits exceeded the costs sufficiently for them to far prefer it over the status quo. That gave us confidence that a detailed agreement acceptable to all sectors of society is within reach. Further justification is in Appendix I.
- By contrast, various media and candidates are stoking divisions on cultural issues — such as gun control, abortion and immigration — to such a degree that resolving these issues by 2024 strikes us as undoable.
- But by tackling the above economic issues that most voters see as critical to their future, we intend to unite an overwhelming majority of voters around a positive agenda that will dominate the 2024 election.

Yet if the 25 former policymakers discover in their deliberations that it will be easier to reach consensus by adding or removing issues, that will ultimately be their decision to make.

⁶ Just 34 percent of workers feel they have the skills they need. “The Skills Shortage is 2022’s Biggest Threat,” *Fortune*, April 8, 2022.

⁷ “How Does the Quality of the U.S. Health System Compare to Other Countries?” Peterson Health Institute, Sept. 30, 2021; “How Does Health Spending in the U.S. Compare to Other Countries?” Peterson Health Institute, Jan. 21, 2022.

To help the 25 reach agreement, we would form a separate task force for each of the six problems, and staff each with experienced researchers who would collate existing proposals (from think tanks and the like) so as to identify three or more widely beneficial, cost-effective solutions for each issue.

The 25 former policymakers would then explore various combinations of these alternative solutions until finding a combination that they see as benefiting each sector of society far more than it would cost them.

Given that a hyperpolarized Congress is very unlikely to make significant progress on any of the six issues, we expect the 25 will find a combination of reforms they all see as far superior to any politically feasible alternative. But if a few negotiators withhold approval, the process will still move forward.

2) Once Phase 1 begins, we will conduct exhaustive nationwide surveys to identify which public figures outside government whom voters would most trust to speak for them on the six issues.

The 50 people who draw the most support we will invite to participate in the Prosperity Forum as the public's advocates.

We would then invite participation from heads of the 50 or so organizations politically active on the above issues and which have the largest public followings: such as the AFL-CIO, National Federation of Independent Business, AARP, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, NAACP, National Wildlife Federation and so on.

We expect it to take six months to complete Phases 1 and 2.

3) Before convening the 100 public and organizational advocates in mid-summer of 2023, we will interview each about the issues that most concern them and ask what they see as feasible in the regular political process. We will explain that our purpose is to far exceed that benchmark.

We will also explain that, to reach that goal, we must get most of the way before yearend 2023, so that the resulting agreement will be the main issue in the election the next year. Our pitch would be:

We will do our best to come up with an agreement all of you can rally around. In the interest of time, a diverse group of former policymakers have put together a starting point that strikes us as far superior to the status quo. The policymakers are just infrastructure in this process. You are the heart. They built a foundation, which you can modify. The rest of the structure is yours to design.

To start, we will ask each public and organizational advocate to evaluate the preliminary grand bargain.

Given that 67 percent of Americans fear that our democracy is in danger of collapse⁸ — and 85 percent see the country as headed in the wrong direction⁹ — we expect most of the advocates to prefer this initial package over the country's current trajectory.

We will also ask each advocate what changes they would most want.

⁸ Quinnipiac University poll, Aug. 31, 2022

⁹ Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll, June 29, 2022

Once all these proposed changes are in hand, the advocates will form six working groups, one for each issue, to consider ways to modify the original proposal so as to increase the number of advocates who are satisfied. Each will get help in that effort from the task force that supported the policymakers in Phase 1.

Once those modifications are ready, each working group will choose two co-chairs who will meet as a Group of 12 to integrate the changes into a complete package encompassing all six issues. We will again ask each of the 100 advocates to evaluate whether he/she prefers the total package over the status quo and, if not, what further changes they seek.

With those changes in hand, the above process will be repeated one more time. We are confident that by then more than 80 percent will prefer the result over what they could possibly get on Capitol Hill

By November 2023, we will need to make a case to the holdouts that the measures they want are unpopular enough among their counterparts that most of the public is likely to oppose them as well. Those measures would, in effect, be out of reach. Part of our message: By supporting this grand bargain, you can keep pursuing your other objectives while your constituents would reap the benefits of this deal.

We expect most holdouts will be discontent with the country's current trajectory, will not want to end up empty-handed, and will therefore try their best to reach an agreement with the rest.

4) At yearend 2023, with the above phase still in progress, we would help each advocate tailor a message to his/her constituents, showing them how the key elements of the grand bargain would improve the quality of their lives — much more so than any measures our two-party system can produce. This would include helping each advocate produce a brief video and written material making his/her case.

We would then conduct deliberative polls nationwide to assess and show the level of public support for the grand bargain. We would convene groups of citizens who covered the socio-economic-political spectrum. We would ask each to rate various proposals for each of the six issues and, based on those responses, show each the relevant pitch for the grand bargain. They would then discuss their experiences with one another. We expect these events to draw significant media coverage.

5) We would then create a separate 501 (c) 4 organization to mobilize constituents to vote for candidates who support the grand bargain.

As things stand, polls identify more than 60 percent of voters as an “exhausted majority,” who feel shut out by the current political process and care mostly about economic problems.¹⁰ These voters feel powerless now, which they are, because: 1) they disagree among themselves about how to resolve each major issue; and 2) in 90 percent of congressional districts and 85 percent of states, one party is so dominant that candidates can win just by catering to the most partisan voters.¹¹

¹⁰ “We See the Left. We See the Right. Can Anyone See the Exhausted Majority?” *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 2021

¹¹ “Taking the Voters Out of the Equation: How the Parties Are Killing Competition,” *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2022

To motivate the exhausted majority to turn out in record numbers, each Prosperity Forum advocate could explain to his/her constituents:

You at last have the power to get politicians to act in your families' best interests. You just need to sign an online pledge to vote in primaries exclusively for candidates who support the grand bargain.

Just 20 percent of registered voters now take part in congressional primaries. So, if just 15 percent of voters in a state or district sign those pledges, candidates would have overwhelming incentives to support that pact.

And 15 percent of voters would be enough for those candidates to win. Once in office, they would know that failing to enact the grand bargain would cost them their seats at the next election.

We will also enlist support for the grand bargain from political commentators, media figures, national good government organizations and local civic groups.

We will clearly face many obstacles to winning overwhelming public support for a grand bargain by the 2024 election. Below are some of those obstacles and how we plan to overcome them.

Many voters will not know enough about each of the six issues to know who would best represent them.

But most citizens can name individuals they trust to speak for them. And those spokespeople will be in the best possible position to win their voters' support for the agreement. Whereas if we do not enlist such advocates, most voters and lawmakers will likely ignore the Forum's recommendations.

Among the 50 advocates whom the public supports, several will prefer divisive slogans and grandstanding rather than negotiating with ideological adversaries.

For that reason, Forum meetings will be held in private, so that the members will have no audience or cameras to grandstand to. And members who decline to negotiate are likely to 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 unless they too can talk candidly and in private. At the same time, we will provide periodic public briefings using language agreed on with the participating advocates

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

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

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

Media spreading disinformation will keep undermining our society *unless* voters get the opportunity to name whom they trust to speak for them. Those trusted individuals, and they alone, could persuade most voters to ignore the lies and distortions.

Some voters will have expectations that the final agreement will not meet.

Each Forum member will need to show constituents how the pact is their best alternative, with a message such as:

This deal gives us the policies we have most wanted but that politicians never delivered. They make huge promises, which they fail to keep, and blame that failure on scapegoats. So, if we pass up this deal, we are signing up for political paralysis and zero progress on the issues we care about.

The Forum's reasoned arguments are unlikely to change the attitudes of Americans who have turned to tribalism, nihilism or extremism.

Granted. But Americans favoring the Forum's plan could outmaneuver extremists — by voting strategically in congressional and presidential primaries, where the turnout is just a fraction of the total electorate. So, if enough voters pledge to vote in primaries only for candidates who support the Forum's plan, most candidates would be likely to change their priorities accordingly.

In Summation

The enemies of our democracy have been gaining ground for decades by dividing right against left, heartland against coastal, poor against well-off, and so on. Our current two-party political system has intensified this polarization.

By contrast, various groups clashing over multiple issues have reached hundreds of agreements that advanced the long-term interests of all involved.

To produce equivalent results on a national scale, we propose to:

- Convene a group of representatives such that nearly every American sees at least one as a spokesperson they trust.
- Provide these representatives with the incentives and resources to work out a combination of reforms that will advance their constituents' long-term interests as much as feasible.
- Help the representatives mobilize their constituencies to vocally support the result.

Ambitious, yes. But when we have asked political activists or heads of think tanks to suggest simpler ways to bridge our nation's differences on the most critical issues, none have offered a practical alternative.

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

solderdman@igc.org

212-860-0969

Appendix I: Why Advocates Can Resolve the Six Issues While Congress Cannot Resolve Any

Behavioral economists have proven that nearly every person avoids costs far more intently than they seek equivalent gains, a trait known as “loss aversion.”¹² So, voters who expect a piece of legislation to place a burden on them usually oppose it far more vigorously than supporters work to enact it.

For example, economists largely agree that Americans would nearly all benefit if Congress lowered marginal tax rates while eliminating most deductions. But the few groups that would lose on balance invariably threaten to unseat incumbents who support such measures, dooming tax reform on Capitol Hill.¹³

Furthermore, we have looked at how think tanks from far left to far right propose to resolve each problem this project will address¹⁴ — and then looked at the Pew Research Center’s analysis of nine types of voters.¹⁵ Each proposal clearly conflicted with the attitudes of at least five types of voters.

Yet we found evidence that the six problems can be resolved together so that voters in each category would benefit enough to accept the overall costs. To get there, we selected what seemed to be the most widely beneficial, cost-effective solution for each issue — and then sought reactions to that mix of solutions from high-profile political activists ranging from very liberal to ultra-conservative.

To each activist, we described the parts of our grand bargain that we expected him/her to strongly support. We then asked: To achieve all that, would you accept the rest, including the parts you would otherwise reject?

After some discussion, each said yes.

So, with 85 percent of Americans fearing that the country is headed in the wrong direction¹⁶ — and 70 percent worried about their children’s future¹⁷ — we expect that if advocates that voters trusted were to present them with a detailed grand bargain that would significantly improve their families’ prospects, the vast majority would prefer that deal over the country’s current trajectory.

Furthermore, when various stakeholders meet, none make progress unless nearly all agree on an outcome. So, each negotiator is motivated to look for a mix of solutions that will benefit the other sides enough for them to support the result.

Our two-party elections deprive most politicians of this motivation: they can win just by blaming the other side for America’s ills, offering sound bites as solutions, and catering to a few well-organized groups.

¹² See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica*, (March 1979).

¹³ See Norm Ornstein, “The Rise and Precipitous Fall of Serious Bipartisan Tax Reform,” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2014.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ The nine types: faith and flag conservatives, committed conservatives, populist right, ambivalent right, stressed sideliners, outsider left, Democratic mainstays, establishment liberals and progressive left. “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” Nov. 9, 2021.

¹⁶ <https://apnorc.org/projects/bipartisan-dissatisfaction-with-the-direction-of-the-country-and-the-economy/>

¹⁷ “The majority of U.S. parents are worried about their kids’ financial future,” Marketwatch.com, July 21, 2021