



## 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:**

Lawrence Susskind, vice chair and co-founder of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School

Charles Wheelan, founder and co-chair of Unite America

John Marks, founder of Search for Common Ground

Adi Ignatius, editor of the Harvard Business Review

Jerome Climer, founder of the Congressional Institute

Brandon Arnold, Executive Vice President of the National Taxpayers Union

Marie Margenau-Spatz, founder of Change Works

Rob Richie, founder and president of FairVote

Elisabetta di Cagno, former editor-in-chief of Columbia Business School publications

Larry Spears, co-founder of Policy Consensus Initiative

# 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.<sup>1</sup> Almost half of voters think the country is headed for Civil War.<sup>2</sup>

This document will present evidence that:

The American people are far too divided — along social, economic and political lines — and the U.S. Congress far too dysfunctional to agree on a practical solution for any of our nation's critical problems, 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
- dangerously climbing temperatures
- unsustainably rising debt
- an economically destructive tax code

Indeed, whoever offers a practical solution for any of these ills will face fierce opposition from much of the public.

Yet, several high-profile individuals outside government are equipped to mobilize all sectors of society to support a combination of measures that would resolve these problems to the long-term benefit of all.

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.”<sup>3</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.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,” Pew Research Center

<sup>2</sup> Zogby Analytics, Feb. 4, 2021

<sup>3</sup> See “A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment,” U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

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 this deal would advance their interests further than any other option.

**By contrast, in our interviews with former members of Congress, none could articulate how to resolve any critical national 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 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.

The two parties also stoke divisiveness by taking diametrically opposing positions on critical issues, 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
letting costs determine energy sources	versus	curbing fossil fuels and subsidizing renewables
accepting rising income and wealth inequality	versus	raising minimum wages and redistributing wealth to low-income families
as the price for an entrepreneurial economy	versus	

**Furthermore, both parties organize congressional committees so that bridging the above differences is almost impossible.** 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 when lawmakers have proposed reforms of that kind, the few groups that would lose ground have mounted fierce enough opposition on Capitol Hill to far outweigh support from the many more groups that would clearly benefit.<sup>4</sup>

This imbalance in activism is due in part to a trait that behavioral economists call “loss aversion,” meaning that nearly every person avoids costs far more than they seek equivalent gains.<sup>5</sup>

Negotiators in other arenas (such as those cited on page 1) have overcome loss aversion by tackling various issues simultaneously — so that each side had 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:

Interest groups favored by one party and issues that concern one party dominate the agenda to the exclusion of other groups and issues.

Each piece of legislation can undermine others. For example, tax bills often subsidize activities that other measures are designed to curtail.

### **How, then, can the U.S. resolve its existential ills?**

To start answering that question, we looked at how think tanks on different points of the political spectrum proposed to resolve America’s gravest economic, environmental, educational, health and fiscal problems. Proposals from groups furthest to the right and left — Cato, Heritage, Center for American Progress and the Economic Policy Institute — struck us as impossible to reconcile with one another or ideas from groups in the center: Brookings, American Enterprise Institute, New America or the Niskanen Center.

Furthermore, voters within each party are sharply divided. Indeed, the Pew Research Center has identified nine categories of voters: faith and flag conservatives, committed conservatives, populist right, ambivalent right, stressed sideliners, outsider left, Democratic mainstays, establishment liberals and progressive left.<sup>6</sup>

These categories and the clashing ideas from the top think tanks suggest to us that any practical solution for any critical national problem will face far more public opposition than support.

So, from among the think tanks’ ideas, we put together a combination for solutions for the most critical issues — a grand bargain that we thought would improve nearly every American’s prospects as much as feasible.

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

---

<sup>4</sup> See Norm Ornstein, “The Rise and Precipitous Fall of Serious Bipartisan Tax Reform,” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2014.

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

<sup>6</sup> “Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology,” Nov. 9, 2021.

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 winning acceptance for the grand bargain depended on presenting 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 advances each advocate’s political priorities sufficiently for him/her to support the whole package;
  - use this result to give the advocates confidence that they can bridge their differences;
  - then 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 declining social mobility, climate change, inadequate education, the national debt and/or threats to our democracy.

We will point out to these leaders that the thousands of organizations and millions of people who have tried to strengthen our democracy or resolve our critical problems over the past three decades have steadily lost ground to the forces tearing our country apart.

We will make a case to these leaders that the strategy spelled out above is far more likely than any other to generate overwhelming public support for constructive solutions to our country's existential ills.

With these leaders' backing, we would build a coalition of diverse nonprofit organizations to refine this strategy into an operational plan and then implement it. 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 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.*

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 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 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 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.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> 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 addressed the flaws in our political system outlined here and that could conceivably be implemented in an era of extreme polarization.

The individuals and organizations trying to strengthen our democracy or resolve our existential ills are fast losing ground to the forces dividing our country into hostile camps.

If our republic is to survive, those individuals and organizations need a strategy that can mobilize most Americans to act in their long-term interests.

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

[solerdman@igc.org](mailto:solerdman@igc.org)

212-860-0969