



## Center for Collaborative Democracy

# A Strategy to Resolve Our Country's 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.

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## Overcoming Our Destructive Politics

Americans left and right, poor and well-off, young and old, coastal and heartland, have — for decades — increasingly embraced opposing political beliefs, economic perspectives and basic values.

This document will present evidence that:

Our elections intensify this polarization 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 equitable and comprehensive solutions to our gravest troubles.

The evidence consists of more than 200 political controversies in which various interest groups pursuing opposing agendas were sufficiently frustrated by seemingly endless conflict that they 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 we asked how they were able to do this, the 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 — seeking trades by which each side would advance 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 Congress or the Oval Office cannot possibly win most voters' support for a realistic solution to *any* critical national problem, including:

- the economic havoc precipitated by the pandemic
- severe income inequality
- dangerously climbing temperature
- K-12 schools among the worst in the developed world
- 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 negotiate with one another in the same way as the representatives described above — striving to advance their respective objectives as far as feasible — until they worked 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 consensus-building enterprise
- 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

## What Does It Take 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.

By evaluating potential solutions for each issue dividing them, the 25 were able to find a combination of solutions that would significantly advance each side's top priorities: reducing "pollution, waste and poverty," while increasing "jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits, knowledge and education."<sup>1</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.

"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 hundreds of controversies, advocates for the various sides have agreed on solutions that all sides supported.<sup>2</sup> And yet elected officials have often ignored the result.

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<sup>1</sup> See "A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment," U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

<sup>2</sup> Examples at [www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus](http://www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus)

## Why Whoever Wins Elections Cannot Resolve the Critical Problems of This Era

In America's early days, nearly every family tilled crops suited to local conditions or provided services to nearby families. Voters in each region thereby shared similar interests on the economic issues of that time. Each member of Congress could, in turn, show voters how he was advancing their interests, if indeed he was.

Today, each lawmaker represents a much wider array of voters on a much wider range of issues. Former lawmakers have lamented to us that they could not bridge their constituents' differences on health care, income inequality, climate change, taxes or education.

A typical comment: "Whatever I proposed, various groups in my district complained that it didn't meet their needs, clashed with their beliefs or placed too heavy a burden on them. My constituents did, after all, include the young, the middle-aged and the elderly; high-school drop-outs, college grads and PhDs; singles, couples, families and empty-nesters; the struggling, the up-and-coming and the thriving."

Knowing they cannot satisfy such diverse voters, most lawmakers have stayed in office year after year by:

offering emotionally charged slogans as remedies for America's long-term troubles;

pushing legislation benefiting the organized interest groups that support them while imposing the costs on the rest of the public; and

stirring voters' hostility toward the other party.

Incumbents get away with these tactics because our elections give 90 percent of voters no real choice: they can either accept the candidate they know a majority of their state or district will elect — or the candidate with virtually no chance to win. Specifically, residents in urban areas heavily favor Democrats; while most people elsewhere lean Republican.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Which is evident from maps of recent elections:

<https://brilliantmaps.com/2016-county-election-map/>

<https://www.outsidethebeltway.com/2012-election-county-by-county/>

This geographic and cultural dichotomy keeps intensifying: Whereas 15 percent of Democratic and Republican voters held “very unfavorable” views of the other in 1994, 55 percent viewed the other with contempt by 2016.<sup>4</sup> In ensuing years, this mutual animosity has escalated.<sup>5</sup>

### **Who is Equipped to Resolve Our Current Challenges?**

In controversies cited on the previous page, advocates that had earned their own group’s trust were able to do what elected officials could not: work out agreements that advanced the top objectives of all sides and, then, persuade each group to vigorously support that pact.

Who, then, would voters of each persuasion trust enough to heed their recommendations on the most divisive issues? We see just one way to find out: Ask them.

We therefore propose to give every registered voter an opportunity to identify whom outside government they most want to be their advocate on the issues that will shape their future.

We would convene the advocates who drew support from 1 or more percent of the public.

At their first meeting (electronic, if necessary), we would prove to the advocates that, by working together, each one will advance his/her agenda much further than he can on his own. To that end:

**1)** We would point out that large blocs of voters have rejected every practical solution to each major problem of recent decades, refusing to bear the burdens that realistic remedies would entail, such as: curbs on entitlements, raising the cost of energy, loss of tax preferences, a larger federal role in education and/or increased government spending.

Nobel-Prize-winning economists have in fact proven that most people will reject any change unless they perceive the benefits to themselves as far exceeding the costs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016,” Pew Research Center.

<sup>5</sup> “Public Sees an America in Decline,” Pew Research Center, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Kahneman, David, and Tversky, Amos, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica*, (March 1979), pp. 263-292.

And for decades, no one has been able to change the public’s perceptions sufficiently for a clear majority to agree on a practical solution for any critical national issue.

**2)** How, then, can any advocate hope to win enough voters’ support for his/her agenda to become law within the next decade?

**3)** Yet, we will show the advocates that they can reach a comprehensive agreement addressing America’s major challenges in ways that they and the vast majority of voters will see as enhancing their lives and future prospects far more than it will burden them.

**4)** To prepare for that demonstration, we will have asked the top think tanks on each part of the spectrum to summarize their optimal solution for each major economic, environmental, health, educational and fiscal problem.

**5)** We will distribute these summaries and ask each advocate to weigh the pros and cons of each solution from his/her constituents’ perspective and then assign each solution a numerical rating.

**6)** We will identify and distribute the highest rated solutions, asking each advocate, “Which do you prefer: the total package or the existing national policies that have let your constituents’ troubles persist?”

**7)** If a few advocates reject the overall result, we will ask them which elements they most oppose. We will then facilitate negotiations between them and the rest, modifying those elements until finding the outcome that satisfies the largest number of advocates.

**8)** To those who remain dissatisfied, we would explain that, in future meetings, they will evaluate many other solutions until finding a combination that every constituency will perceive as far better than the chaotic future that now awaits them and far better than any legislation a dysfunctional Congress could produce.

The advocates will develop that optimal combination by a series of steps spelled out later in this document.

Once they agree on a mix of reforms, each advocate will be provided with expert help in communicating to his/her constituents exactly how the overall plan will significantly improve the quality of their lives.

Voters who want the reforms enacted into law could sign pledges to vote in congressional primaries exclusively for candidates who support the advocates' plan. With primaries typically drawing just 20 percent of registered voters, if 15 percent signed such pledges, lawmakers intent on reelection would have overwhelming incentives to change their priorities accordingly.<sup>7</sup>

Ambitious steps. But, for three decades, simpler efforts to resolve our critical problems have all failed.<sup>8</sup>

### **Who Will Launch This Effort?**

This endeavor will require “orchestrators” — people with such high public standing that they can mobilize nationwide support for a project on this scale.

To fill that role, we intend to enlist visionary leaders in business, public policy and the media who have frequently exhorted elected officials to address income inequality, climate change, the national debt and/or the current economic crisis.

We will make a case to these leaders that the strategy spelled out above is necessary to reverse our country's extreme polarization, overcome decades of political dysfunction and resolve *any* of our country's major ills.

We thereby intend to enlist these leaders in a coalition that will refine this strategy until they are confident it will be far more effective than anything else they can do.

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

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

<sup>8</sup> The best-known failure, the Bowles-Simpson commission, we attribute to: 1) voters knew too little about its members to trust they were acting in voters' interests; 2) the commission's top goal to curb federal debt ensured a plan that most voters would find painful and were thus sure to oppose. By contrast, we intend to work out a mix of reforms that each constituency sees as benefiting them far more than it will cost them.

The next step would be to conduct nationwide polls to identify the 50 or so individuals whom voters would be most likely to choose as their advocates.

The coalition will then need to engage the entire public in selecting among the 50.

### **Going Public with the Project and Giving It a Name**

We propose to do this in early 2021, when voters for the losing presidential candidate will likely be intensely angry or anxious, and voters will see once again that the members of Congress cannot agree on fair, sensible, affordable solutions for our country's growing troubles.

To draw tens of millions of voters, the coalition could enlist iconic figures in the arts, business and media to do TV spots and Internet videos with a message such as:

- Lawmakers from both parties have, for decades, fixated on winning the next election rather than on solving our country's long-term problems.
- And now, when we face the greatest crisis of our lifetimes, each party is still offering solutions that half the country rejects.
- So we, the American people, need to seek out men and women we know we can trust to act in our best interests, and ask them to work out a realistic plan for us all to thrive in the years ahead.
- If enough of us support their recommendations, politicians who want to keep their jobs will listen.
- People who believe in this idea, including me, have formed a group that is going to 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 — we guarantee it — *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:

- a) fill out a brief checklist of his/her values, concerns and aspirations
- b) watch brief videos of advocates whose priorities match his/her own;
- c) 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, while each category of voters will get representation in proportion to their numbers. The algorithm is available on request.

### **Obstacles the Prosperity Forum Will Face at Each Stage and How They Can be Overcome**

*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 engender trust.

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

Granted, but most Americans deplore Washington's paralysis, which they feel powerless to change. After all, each citizen's one vote rarely affects election outcomes. As a result, few voters take the time to show up for congressional primaries, letting partisan zealots choose the candidates.

Voters who visit the Forum website will, by contrast, have dozens of spokespeople across the spectrum to choose from and be assured that one of their choices will become a member. Candidates who explain how they will deliver the results that voters want are likely to draw more voters than candidates who cannot.

*Some voters will still choose spokespeople 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, ensuring that lawmakers intent on reelection will posture for the cameras instead of trying to bridge their differences.

"By contrast, the U. S. Constitution — and the other constructive agreements we know of — were hashed out in total privacy. So, the negotiators could talk candidly with one another. At the end, each one showed his/her constituents how the result would advance their interests.

"Your Forum member will do the same — if we give them enough privacy to work out the kind of deal that Congress never does."

*Some Forum members will still grandstand.*

So, before the Forum first meets, we will advise each member:

"We intend to reach an outcome that your followers will see as advancing their interests and values much further than any other actions could. And if you stick to our guidelines, we guarantee you will get there.

"If, instead, you keep insisting to other members that your approach is right and theirs is wrong, they will likely ignore you for the duration.

"If the vast majority of them then negotiate an agreement that would benefit virtually everyone and that enough voters support, even lawmakers loyal to you until now are likely to favor the result.

"So, if you want to advance your agenda and hold onto your constituents, work with us and the other Forum members."

*Some members will lack negotiation skills.*

Forum meetings will be led by facilitators experienced in helping representatives with diverse skills to negotiate agreements they can all support.

*Forum members may lack the expertise to reform energy policy, health care, education, entitlements and/or taxes.*

The members will therefore divide into task forces that tackle each subject by meeting with top experts, evaluating a wide range of reforms and assessing the benefits, costs and risks of each one.

Each task force will have a staff that summarizes how each reform would advance or hinder each Forum member's priorities. Each member will have an opportunity to question the staff about their conclusions.

Following that process, each member will be asked to rate each reform. We thereby intend to identify the mix of reforms that would yield the most overall benefits.

If some members are dissatisfied with the result, the facilitators will ask them to identify the clauses they most oppose and then suggest modifications — until finding an overall result that the advocates all prefer over leaving their constituents ill-prepared for what lies ahead.

*Some advocates may hold out for terms the others cannot abide.*

If so, we will remind them that if the rest agree on a plan far better for the public than the status quo — and enough voters support it — most lawmakers intent on reelection will likely favor it as well. The holdouts would thereby be left pushing a narrow agenda with little chance it will be enacted into law, in effect, gaining nothing for their constituents.

We expect the vast majority of Forum members will find that outcome unacceptable and therefore agree on a plan far better for all than Congress can possibly devise.

*Regardless of how much the final agreement would benefit the public, many voters hold such unrealistic views that they will resist any practical plan.*

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 blame failures to keep promises on scapegoats. So, we either support this deal in its entirety, or we are signing up for endless political double-talk and no progress on the issues we care about."

*The public strongly supports many initiatives that have never become law.*

That is because members of Congress lack incentives to care what the overall public wants. What each lawmaker does care about is what most voters in his/her state or district want. And while those voters may agree on slogans, any attempt to turn a slogan about a divisive issue into legislation inevitably draws fierce opposition.

By contrast, the Forum is designed to produce a detailed, comprehensive plan that will draw strong support from each segment of our society.

*The Forum's plan will still face fierce opposition from groups and voters that strongly reject specific provisions.*

Granted, but if voters who see the Forum's plan as advancing their long-term interests far outnumber the voters who reject it, politicians seeking reelection would have overwhelming incentives to favor the plan as well.

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

Media that intentionally distort reality are indeed becoming more prevalent.

That is precisely 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.

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

With this concern in mind, we put together a “grand bargain” addressing America’s major challenges in ways that we thought political activists across the spectrum would strongly support.

We then spoke with ideologues at five think tanks whose agendas ranged from far left to far right. To each one, we said, in effect, “The policies that you have championed for the past decade have not gained traction with most of the public. Given how polarized the country is, by what means do you think that those measures could realistically become law?” The typical answer: a shrug.

We then read the grand bargain — starting with items 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 opposite them on the spectrum would. “But,” we responded, “they are in the same position you are. And those we’ve spoken to have said yes.”

From these interactions, we expect nearly every Forum member to realize that, to significantly advance his/her top priorities, he will have to help the other advocates advance theirs just as far.

Each advocate will then need to make that same case to his/her voters.

### **In Summation**

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

Congress has indeed proven itself incapable of resolving the critical problems of the past 25 years. Every major piece of legislation was enacted by one party or the other, while drawing at least as much public opposition as support.

Lawmakers who have tried to resolve our long-term ills even-handedly have in fact nearly all lost their seats to candidates offering simplistic slogans as remedies and stoking voters’ hostility toward the other party.

America’s troubles and voters’ anger will therefore keep escalating — unless we identify individuals who *are* equipped to resolve our country’s gravest problems. As this document has shown, that means:

- Each segment of our society would need to identify whom they would most trust to speak for them and represent their interests;
- Each of these representatives would then be highly motivated to advance his/her constituents’ top objectives; and
- To do so, the representatives would need to evaluate a wide range of solutions for each existential problem — until they found the combination benefiting their respective constituencies as much as feasible.

This strategy is based on hundreds of contentious issues that were resolved to the long-term benefit of all the groups involved — whereas no one we know of has identified a simpler way by which our highly polarized country could resolve its gravest problems to the public’s long-term benefit.

So, to citizens and organizations alarmed about our democracy, economy, educational system, fiscal health or our planet’s capacity to sustain life, we invite you to discuss these ideas with us.

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