



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

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

Our initial Project Steering Committee consists of:

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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 foresee two years of gridlock and hyper-partisan attacks.

To find ways of overcoming this dysfunction, the Center for Collaborative Democracy interviewed participants in over 200 political controversies. In each case, elected officials had deadlocked. Yet representatives for the stakeholding groups then worked out agreements that all sides saw as advancing their long-term interests.³

From these interviews, we concluded that if voters in each sector of our society had an opportunity to identify whom outside government they would trust to represent them on the most serious national problems, these representatives would be far more likely than politicians to resolve those issues in ways that each sector of society would support.

We are therefore launching a project to identify these representatives, help them negotiate a "grand bargain" encompassing the most critical issues, and then mobilize the vast majority of voters to support the result. We thereby intend to motivate most presidential and congressional candidates to commit to enacting the agreement.

The evidence that this endeavor is necessary to resolve our gravest problems starts with one of the 200+ cases cited above: 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 National Wildlife Federation; chair of the African American Leadership Summit; the director of the EPA; the secretaries of energy, commerce, interior and agriculture; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

To tackle their various areas of conflict, the 25 formed 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."⁴ 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 Examples at www.genuinerepresentation.org/consensus

⁴ 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, all too often by blaming ideological opponents for the nation's ills and offering soundbites as remedies.

We are therefore organizing a Forum for Nationwide Prosperity and Opportunity that will:

- Ask voters in each socio-economic-political category to identify whom outside government they would most trust to represent them on the issues that will shape their family's future.
- Identify the representatives with largest followings, convene them, and provide them with the tools to hash out an agreement resolving the most critical issues in ways that voters in each category will support.
- Help these representatives mobilize enough voter support to give presidential and congressional candidates strong incentives to endorse that agreement and, once in office, to enact it.

To achieve these goals by the 2024 election, the Prosperity Forum will unfold in five phases:

1) To generate a preliminary grand bargain that will spark nationwide conversation, we will convene 15 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 failure to address its major ills — enough so that they will commit to bridging their differences.

The 15 will include former directors of the Congressional Budget Office, cabinet secretaries, agency leaders, governors, heads of think tanks and so on.

We will ask the 15 to work out an agreement resolving six chronic problems in ways that 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 economy⁵
- The most expensive and inefficient health care system in the developed world⁶
- Increasingly severe droughts, floods, hurricanes and wildfires
- Unsustainably rising debt
- A 75,000-page tax code filled with perverse incentives

⁵ Just 34 percent of workers feel they have the skills they need. "The Skills Shortage is 2022's Biggest Threat," *Fortune*, April 8, 2022.

⁶ "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.

We chose these six issues for the following reasons:

- Each is hobbling our economy and/or stoking enough voter anger to destabilize our society. Yet voters and political leaders have been far too divided to agree on a practical solution for any of them.
- These issues overlap. Trying to resolve them individually would yield inefficiencies and contradictions.
- We therefore developed a hypothetical grand bargain that would resolve these six issues in ways that the total benefits to each sector of society seemed to far exceed the costs. We then presented the result to political activists across the spectrum. Each agreed that, from their perspective, the benefits outweighed the costs, enough so 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 for this conclusion is in Appendix I.
- By tackling the above issues, which include the subjects most voters see as critical to their future, we intend to unite an overwhelming majority around a positive agenda that will dominate the 2024 election.
- By contrast, various media and candidates are stoking divisions on cultural issues — such as abortion, gun control and immigration — to such a degree that we doubt that these issues can be resolved by 2024.

Yet if the 15 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.

To help the 15 reach agreement, we will 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 15 former policymakers will 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 15 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 will also invite participation from the heads of the 50 or so organizations which are most politically active on the above issues and 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 to complete Phases 1 and 2 by the end of July 2023.

3) We will convene the 100 public and organizational advocates in mid-summer of 2023. To start, 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 they see as far superior to the status quo. But that is just the foundation of this process. You are free to modify it. And the rest of the structure is yours to design.

We will then 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 collapse⁷ — and 85 percent see the country as headed in the wrong direction⁸ — 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.

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 work with any holdouts to satisfy reservations they have about the deal being formulated. 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.

⁷ Quinnipiac University poll, Aug. 31, 2022

⁸ Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll, June 29, 2022

4) At yearend 2023, with the above phase still in progress, we will 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 measures our two-party system has produced. This will include helping each advocate produce a brief video and written material making his/her case.

We will then conduct deliberative polls nationwide to assess and show the level of public support for the grand bargain. We will convene groups of citizens who covered the socio-economic-political spectrum. We will 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 will then discuss their experiences with one another. We expect these events to draw significant media coverage.

5) We will 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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.

⁹ “We See the Left. We See the Right. Can Anyone See the Exhausted Majority?” *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 2021

¹⁰ “Taking the Voters Out of the Equation: How the Parties Are Killing Competition,” *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2022

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 option, 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, winner-take-all elections have intensified this polarization sufficiently to push our democracy to the brink of breaking down.

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.

And at this point, we are just seeking support to launch Phases 1 and 2, which will enable everyone to see whether or not a grand bargain advancing the long-term interests of all sectors of society is within reach.

If that proves to be the case, we expect that will lead to more than enough support to complete the other three phases.

To lay the groundwork for Phases 1 and 2, we have formed an initial steering committee that we are seeking to expand. It currently consists of:

Rob Fersh, founder and former president of Convergence Center for Policy Resolution

David Fairman, managing director of the Consensus Building Institute

Stuart Butler, senior fellow at Brookings and former Director of Policy Innovation at Heritage Foundation

Sol Erdman, founder and president of the Center for Collaborative Democracy

The members of the committee state that, "We have yet to see another actionable plan for grappling with the critical issues that our democracy must confront if the American people are to thrive. We are committed to making this project a reality."

The committee has begun to recruit the former policymakers critical to Phase 1 and to raise the funds necessary for the first two phases. The proposed budget for these phases and the timeline for the entire project are available on request.

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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.”¹¹ 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.¹²

Furthermore, we have looked at how think tanks from far left to far right propose to resolve each problem this project will address¹³ — and then looked at the Pew Research Center’s analysis of nine types of voters.¹⁴ 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 direction¹⁵ — and 70 percent worried about their children’s future¹⁶ — 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.

¹¹ See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica*, (March 1979).

¹² See Norm Ornstein, “The Rise and Precipitous Fall of Serious Bipartisan Tax Reform,” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2014.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ <https://apnorc.org/projects/bipartisan-dissatisfaction-with-the-direction-of-the-country-and-the-economy/>

¹⁶ “The majority of U.S. parents are worried about their kids’ financial future,” Marketwatch.com, July 21, 2021