



Center for Collaborative Democracy

A Strategy to Overcome America's Destructive Politics 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 an effort to 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

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

Overcoming Systemic Dysfunction

Americans left and right, poor and well-off, coastal and heartland, have — for more than two decades — grown increasingly hostile toward one another and embraced opposing political beliefs, values and perceptions of reality.

This document will present evidence that:

Our two-party political system has become an engine of this polarization.

So, whoever wins the presidency and seats in Congress cannot resolve our existential problems in ways that most voters will accept.

Yet several high-profile individuals outside government are equipped to mobilize overwhelming public support for widely beneficial, cost-effective solutions to our gravest troubles.

The evidence for these assertions consists of more than 200 cases in which elected officials had repeatedly failed to resolve multiple issues, until the interest groups involved tried to break the impasse. To that end, each group chose someone in their own ranks to represent them.

These representatives — for labor unions, businesspeople, consumer advocates, civil rights organizations, environmentalists, educators, professional associations, government agencies and so on — then worked out an agreement that all sides perceived as advancing their long-term interests as much as feasible.

When asked how they had resolved conflicts that elected officials could not, these representatives identified the following factors:

Each representative had long worked to advance his/her group's major goals, had thereby earned their trust, and shared their frustration over the political stalemate.

So, the representatives engaged in intense give-and-take over the various issues dividing them — seeking trades by which each side would advance a top priority in return for giving ground elsewhere.

In time, they hashed out an agreement by which each group would attain more top objectives than seemed feasible any other way.

Each representative then persuaded his/her own group that this was far too much progress to pass up.

By analyzing these situations, this document will:

1) Build a case that the American people are so fragmented along social, economic and political lines — and the existential problems of these times are so divisive and complex — that whoever sits in the Oval Office or Congress cannot persuade most voters to support a realistic solution for any of the following issues:

severe income inequality

K-12 schools among the worst in the developed world

the most cost-ineffective health care in the world

unsustainably rising debt

dangerously climbing temperature

decaying infrastructure

an economically destructive tax code

- 2) Present evidence that our country can resolve these problems constructively and equitably — 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) Show that these representatives, like those described on the previous page, would be highly motivated and well equipped to advance their constituents' best interests as much as feasible
- 4) Spell out how these representatives could work out a wide-ranging agreement resolving the above issues to the long-term benefit of every constituency
- 5) Show 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
- 6) Answer each objection that we have heard to this endeavor
- 7) Show how citizens alarmed about our country's extreme polarization can help launch this consensus-building enterprise and marshal the resources necessary for it to succeed
- 8) 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

Who is Equipped to Resolve Intractable Conflicts?

When Congress was deadlocked over nearly every facet of environmental policy in the mid-1990s, 25 prominent advocates for the various opposing sides agreed to meet. They included top executives from General Motors, Dow Chemical, Chevron Oil 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 commerce, energy, interior and agriculture; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

The 25 formed seven task forces to evaluate potential solutions for each area of conflict — and then hashed out a combination of solutions by which each side would significantly advance its top priorities. That included increasing “jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits, knowledge and education,” while reducing “pollution, waste and poverty.”¹ 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 his/her 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 over 200 controversies that we know of, advocates for the various sides agreed on solutions that all sides supported.² And yet elected officials often ignored the result.

¹ See “A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment,” U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

² Examples at www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus

Why Whoever Wins Elections Cannot Resolve Any Critical Problem of This Era

The Constitution was drafted when nearly every American family was tilling crops suited to local conditions, and most of the rest were providing goods or services to nearby families. The nation’s founders predicted that each member of Congress would be representing constituents who shared similar economic interests and could thereby show them how he was advancing their interests, if indeed he was.³

Former lawmakers we have met with have described their situation quite differently. Typical comments:

My constituents included office workers, technicians, laborers, professionals, business owners and the unemployed; high-school dropouts, college grads and PhDs; every age from 18 to 90+; singles, couples, families and empty-nesters. 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 were so hard to satisfy that we often had incentives to assure failure to reach agreement. Each of us could then blame the impasse on the other party.

Most of us, if put under sodium pentothal, would have admitted that we couldn’t keep our jobs by doing what we knew to be right.

What I positively hated about the place and got me to quit was that most of my colleagues believed that, to win reelection, they had to stoke their voters’ hostility toward the other party.

That hostility has steadily intensified since the end of the Cold War⁴ — when voters left, right and center were largely united against the threat of communism. As that threat dissipated, candidates have increasingly

³ James Madison, *The Federalist*, Nos. 56 and 57

⁴ “Key Facts about Partisanship and Political Animosity in America,” Pew Research Center.

won elections by persuading voters that the other party is the main threat to their way of life.

Various broadcast and social media keep amplifying that message — so that most Democratic and Republican voters increasingly see the other as unpatriotic or immoral; clash over basic facts; and embrace fundamentally different values.⁵

Congress further pits Americans against one another by delegating each area of public policy to a different committee, and handing control of each committee to a senior member of the majority party. As a result:

Issues and interest groups favored by one party dominate the agenda at the expense of issues and groups that party ignores or opposes.

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

Committees often reverse the legislation of previous sessions, rendering policymaking incoherent.

Congress is also hobbled by its inability to deal with a basic human trait that behavioral economists call “loss aversion,” meaning that nearly everyone avoids costs far more than they seek equivalent gains.⁶

For example, tax experts have shown that lowering marginal tax rates and eliminating most deductions would benefit the vast majority of Americans. Yet when lawmakers have proposed reforms of that kind, they have faced far more resistance from groups that would lose deductions than support from those who would clearly benefit.⁷

Large blocs of voters have in fact derailed realistic solutions to nearly every critical issue, refusing to bear the costs, such as: higher taxes or a slower rise in entitlement benefits to keep the programs from going bankrupt; high-

er energy prices to slash carbon emissions; more federal spending to overhaul a dysfunctional educational system; and so on.

In sum, most voters are unwilling to pay for solving our country’s long-term problems. At the same time, voters on the left and right, on the coasts and in the heartland, increasingly see each other as enemies.

Each lawmaker intent on reelection thereby has every incentive to vehemently oppose the other party’s ideas and offer simplistic, emotionally charged slogans as remedies for our country’s long-term problems.

How, Then, Can the U.S. Resolve Its Existential Ills?

In the cases cited on the previous page, groups clashing over various issues reached agreement on how each group could advance its top objectives as much as feasible — so that all groups accepted the burdens that agreement would entail.

Could America’s diverse groups reach that kind of agreement? Are there economic, health, environmental, educational and fiscal reforms that — combined — would enhance nearly every American’s quality of life sufficiently for all sectors of our society to support the overall result?

To find out, we looked at how the major think tanks proposed to address America’s main challenges and incorporated their ideas into a “grand bargain” by which voters across the spectrum would likely fare far better than under existing policies.

We then spoke with high-profile activists and analysts whose agendas ranged from far left to far right. To each, we said, in effect, “The policies you have long championed have not gained traction with most of the public. So, how do you think those measures could realistically become law?” The typical answer: a shrug.

We then listed the elements of the grand bargain — starting with the parts that we knew he/she would strongly support — and asked if he would prefer the overall result to the status quo.

⁵ “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,” Pew Research Center, Oct. 10, 2019

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

⁷ See Norm Ornstein, “The Rise and Precipitous Fall of Serious Bipartisan Tax Reform,” *The Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2014.

After some discussion, each said yes, yet most doubted that counterparts in the opposite camp would.

“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, we expect that if we published the elements of this grand bargain — in any order — some readers would balk at the first component, enough so to reject the total package; others would see the whole thing as devised by their ideological opponents; and most of the rest would expect their opponents to reject it.

However, in political conflicts cited at the start, each of the opposing groups chose an advocate they trusted to speak for them. And when he/she presented the agreement he had negotiated on their behalf, they accepted his case that it would advance their interests further than they could by any other means.

So, with the American public more divided than ever in our lifetimes, could the various sectors of our society agree on solutions for our existential problems *without* relying on individuals that each sector trusts to speak for them? We do not see how that is possible.

We therefore propose to:

Give every registered voter an opportunity to identify the individuals outside government whom they would most want to be their advocate

Convene the advocates who draw support from at least 1 percent of the public

Provide these advocates with facilitators who would:

help them evaluate proposals from the major think tanks, so they can piece together a grand bargain that would resolve America’s major ills in ways that each advocate sees as advancing his/her top priorities; and then

use this pact as a benchmark to help the advocates work out a far more detailed agreement resolving our country’s troubles in ways that their constituencies will all far prefer over the country’s current direction

Provide each advocate with expert help in communicating to his/her constituents how the resulting plan would vastly improve the quality of their lives — until each sector of the public supports the entire pact.

The rest of this document will spell out how each of these steps can be implemented — and reach a successful conclusion by the end of 2022.

Who Will Launch This Effort and How Will They Marshal the Resources Needed for It to Succeed?

We will seek out visionary leaders in business, public policy and the media who have publicly voiced alarm about income inequality, climate change, the national debt and/or education.

We will make a case to these leaders that America’s political institutions are far too dysfunctional to agree on fair, sensible, affordable solutions for *any* of our country’s critical problems. Hence, the strategy spelled out above is necessary to resolve our country’s ills.

We thereby intend to motivate these leaders to build a coalition of politically diverse organizations, which will refine this strategy until all are confident it will be far more effective than any alternative approach.

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

Going Public with the Project and Giving It a Name

To draw tens of millions of voters, the coalition could enlist iconic figures in the arts, business and media to broadcast a message such as:

- Our country faces the greatest crises of our lifetimes, yet the members of Congress keep clashing rather than working out realistic solutions.
- So, I believe that we, the American people, need to seek out the men and women we know we can trust to act in our interests, and ask them to work out solutions that will benefit us all.
- If enough of us supported their recommendations, politicians who wanted to keep their jobs would listen.
- I believe in this idea so strongly that I have joined a group that will 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 — 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:

- 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 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 enable voters to get representatives they can trust.

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

Voters drawn to the idea of the Forum are very likely to want spokespeople who explain how they will deliver far better results than Congress does and are therefore unlikely to pick candidates who sound just like politicians.

Some voters will still choose Forum members 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. The result: most lawmakers posture for the cameras instead of trying to bridge their differences.

"The constructive agreements we know of, including the U.S. Constitution, were hashed out in total privacy. Each participant could then talk candidly with the others until they negotiated an agreement. Each one could then show his/her constituents how that deal would advance their interests. Your Forum member will do the same — if we give them enough privacy to work out the kind of agreement that Congress cannot."

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

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

Each Forum member will have a different level of knowledge and expertise in social policy, health care, education, energy policy, entitlements and taxes — making it difficult for them to negotiate among all these issues.

The members will therefore divide into task forces. Each will tackle one policy area by meeting with top experts and evaluating a wide range of reforms on that subject.

Members of each task force will be selected so as to represent the entire Forum as closely as feasible.

Each task force will also have a staff that summarizes the findings, including the benefits, costs and risks of each reform.

Task force members will have opportunities to question the staff about its conclusions until all are satisfied that they understand how much each reform would advance or hinder their own objectives and the objectives of other Forum members.

Each task force will then strive for consensus on which combination of reforms would have the greatest appeal to the most Forum members.

If they cannot agree, we will treat the combination with the most support as the task force's initial recommendation.

We will present these recommendations to each Forum member — starting with the proposed solution for his/her top priority issue.

We will ask, "Does this total package meet your objectives sufficiently for you to far prefer it over the status quo?"

If some members are dissatisfied with the overall result, we will ask them to identify the clauses they most want changed.

Once all these clauses are in hand, the relevant task forces will explore ways to modify them so as to increase the number of advocates who will approve.

Substituting these modifications in the overall package, we will again ask each Forum member whether he/she prefers the result over the status quo.

We will keep exploring modifications until we can no longer increase the number of Forum members who are satisfied.

At that point, we will need to explain to the holdouts that, with the vast majority agreeing on a plan they see as significantly benefiting the public, they are likely to win enough voters' support that most lawmakers intent on reelection will favor the plan as well.

The holdouts would thereby be left pushing measures that are very unlikely to be enacted.

We expect nearly every Forum member to find that outcome unacceptable and therefore do whatever it takes to reach an agreement far better for his/her constituents than Congress can devise.

The final agreement may address issues more timidly than these times require.

Each Forum member will have every incentive to advance his/her priorities as much as feasible. And as the members go through the above steps, we expect each one to realize that the public will strongly support the final agreement only if the other members see it as advancing their priorities as much as feasible.

Many voters are so unrealistic that they will resist any plan, no matter how beneficial.

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 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."

Most of the public has supported many initiatives that have never become law.

The main reasons for this are:

1) Most voters may agree on slogans, but any attempt to turn a slogan about a divisive issue into legislation usually draws enough opposition to overwhelm the supporters.

2) Each lawmaker focuses on what voters in his/her state or district want, not what the overall public wants.

3) If a key bloc of constituents care enough about an issue to vote on that basis, while the majority feel less strongly, the typical lawmaker will cater to that bloc.

In effect, a political agenda becomes law only if a significant bloc of voters or lawmakers make it a top priority.

Much of the American public is leaning toward nihilism or tribalism, while the rest are divided into various opposing camps, giving the nihilists inordinate influence, which the Forum may not be able to overcome.

Americans who favored the Forum's plan could exert the most influence by voting in congressional primaries, which 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, each candidate would have strong incentives to change his/her priorities accordingly.⁸

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

Media that intentionally distort reality are a major reason 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.

⁸ CCD is a 501(c) 3 organization, so advocates we convene could urge followers to vote but not who 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 the existential ills of this era by relying on lawmakers who speak for geographic districts or states, and who are perpetually fixated on winning the next election.

But in hundreds of cases, various groups that had long clashed over multiple issues reached agreements that advanced the long-term interests of all involved.

We propose to apply the same methods on a national scale, by:

- Giving each segment of our society an opportunity 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 our country's gravest problems in time to prevent our society from breaking down? We have posed that question to politicians, academics and heads of think tanks. None offered an answer that addressed the flaws in our democracy outlined here — and that could conceivably be enacted in this political environment.

Our democracy, economy, fiscal health, educational system and environment will therefore continue to decline — until we act on the evidence that our existing political institutions are far too dysfunctional to solve our current problems.

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