



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.

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Why Our Republic Will Continue to Break Down, Unless

Whoever has been president or had seats in Congress in the past three decades, Americans' animus toward one another has intensified on their watch.¹ By now, more than 80 percent of Democratic and Republican voters see the other party as a "clear and present danger" to our democracy.² Almost half of voters want the red and blue states to divide into separate countries.³ And almost half expect civil war by the 2024 election.⁴

This document will present evidence that:

The American people are so divided, and our political system is so dysfunctional, that whomever voters elect in 2022 or 2024 will be unable to resolve our nation's differences on any critical problem, including:

- Fewer and fewer families moving up the economic ladder
- Most Americans lacking the skills to thrive in a high-tech, global economy
- The most cost-ineffective health care system in the world
- Increasingly severe droughts, floods, hurricanes and wildfires
- Unsustainably rising debt
- An economically destructive tax code

Yet several individuals outside government are equipped to work out a comprehensive agreement resolving these issues to the long-term benefit of all sectors of our society.

A subset of those individuals could mobilize voters across the spectrum to vocally support that agreement, enough so that lawmakers from both parties would have strong incentives to enact it.

Our evidence for these assertions starts with more than 200 political controversies in which each of the **interest groups involved chose someone** in their own ranks to represent them. And these representatives — **for businesspeople, consumer advocates, labor unions, environmentalists, civil rights groups and so on** — **hashed out an agreement that all sides saw as advancing their long-term interests further than they could by any other means.**

For example, some years ago, with Congress at an impasse over environmental policy, 25 advocates for the various opposing sides sought to break the impasse. They included top executives from Dow Chemical, General Motors, Chevron Oil and Pacific Gas & Electric; leaders of the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund, World Resources Institute and the National Wildlife Federation; the director of the EPA; the secretaries of energy, commerce, interior and agriculture; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

The 25 tackled all their areas of conflict — by dividing into seven task forces, each of which interviewed more than 60 experts and thereby developed a menu of potential solutions.

¹ "The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider," Pew Research Center

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

³ Ibid.

⁴ Zogby Analytics, Feb. 4, 2021

From among the task forces' recommendations, these 25 long-time adversaries put together a detailed grand bargain for significantly reducing "pollution, waste and poverty" across the country, while increasing "jobs, productivity, wages, capital, savings, profits, knowledge and education."⁵

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.

From our interviews of these advocates and hundreds of others who worked out constructive solutions for issues that elected officials failed to resolve, it was apparent that:

- Each advocate fully understood his/her own group's needs and expectations — and had earned their trust.
- Each was also frustrated that his/her group, after years battling the others over a range of issues, had little to show for it.
- So, the advocates worked out a series of trades by which each group would advance a top priority in return for giving ground elsewhere.
- They thereby agreed on how each group could attain more top objectives than seemed feasible any other way.
- Each advocate then persuaded his/her own group that this deal was by far their best option.

By contrast, nearly every former member of Congress we have interviewed has acknowledged that it was almost impossible to represent his/her 750,000 diverse 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 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.

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 the surest way to win reelection was to stoke their voters' hostility toward the other party.

⁵ See "A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment," U.S. Gov't Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

Lawmakers running for reelection have in fact won 94 percent of the time over the past 25 years, largely by offering emotionally appealing slogans as remedies for complex problems and assailing ideological opponents. Primaries clearly magnify the divisiveness — by drawing voters far more partisan than most and more inclined to choose candidates who refuse to bridge differences.

The divisions have grown so intense that most Democratic and Republican voters now see the other as immoral and/or unpatriotic, clash over basic facts and embrace fundamentally different values.⁶

How, then, can America resolve its existential ills in time to avert the breakdown of our democracy?

In the political conflicts cited at the start, each interest group was represented by someone who had earned their trust; understood their needs; had every incentive to reach deals advancing their priorities; and knew exactly how to persuade his own group that the deals he had negotiated were their best option.

So, can the various sectors of our society — more divided now than ever in our lifetimes — agree on solutions for our country's existential ills *without* each sector being represented by people they trust, who understand their needs, and are clearly motivated to act in their constituents' best interests?

We do not see how that is possible.

We therefore propose to organize a Forum for Nationwide Prosperity that would:

- Conduct nationwide polls to identify the individuals outside government whom voters would most trust to be their advocate on the economic and environmental issues most jeopardizing their future — the six issues listed on the first page.
- Convene the advocates whom 1 percent or more of the public support.
- Simultaneously convene representatives from the organizations with largest public followings: such as the AFL-CIO, the US Chamber of Commerce, AARP, NAACP and so on.
- Provide facilitators who:
 - will help the advocates and other negotiators form a separate task force to tackle each critical national problem, interview the appropriate experts, and thereby develop a menu of potential solutions;
 - from among those solutions, work out a detailed grand bargain resolving our country's gravest ills in ways that the vast majority of negotiators expect will advance their constituents' long-term interests much further than would any measures that our two-party political system can produce.⁷
- Provide each negotiator with expert help in communicating to his/her constituents how this grand bargain would vastly improve the quality of their lives.
- Create a separate organization that would mobilize constituents to vote in primaries and general elections exclusively for candidates who pledge to enact the grand bargain in its entirety.

⁶ "Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal," Pew Research Center, Sept. 21, 2019

⁷ The Forum will strive for consensus but if there are a few holdouts, the rest will still move forward.

As things stand, less than 25 percent of registered voters participate in primaries. So, if 15 percent cast primary ballots for candidates endorsing the grand bargain, those candidates could win the vast majority of races, giving them the mandate and means to resolve the critical problems that have festered for decades.

Furthermore, we have gathered evidence that a grand bargain resolving the six issues listed on the first page could win much wider public support than a pact resolving any one issue.

The evidence starts with behavioral economists' proof that nearly every person avoids costs far more intently than they seek equivalent gains.⁸ Voters who expect a piece of legislation to place a burden on them are therefore likely to oppose the measure more vigorously than potential beneficiaries will work to enact it.

For example, lowering marginal tax rates while eliminating most deductions would benefit the vast majority of Americans, according to economists left, right and center. But whenever lawmakers have proposed such reforms, the few groups that would lose ground have threatened to unseat those incumbents — which has been sufficient to doom tax reform on Capitol Hill.⁹

Indeed, when we looked at the Pew Research Center's analysis of nine types of voters¹⁰ — and then looked at how think tanks from far left to far right proposed to resolve each of the six issues¹¹ — each proposal clearly conflicted with the attitudes of at least five types of voters.

Still, each of the 25 negotiators cited at the start was able to advance his/her group's highest priorities enough to accept a net cost in other areas. All 25 got there by resolving their various areas of conflict simultaneously.

With that outcome in mind, we selected what seemed to be the most widely beneficial, cost-effective solution for each of the six issues. Then, to gauge how the public might react to this combination of solutions, we met with high-profile political activists whose agendas ranged from very liberal to ultra-conservative.

With each activist, we discussed their frustrations about their agendas failing to get through Congress.

We then described the elements of the grand bargain we expected him/her to strongly support. Next, we asked: If you could achieve all that, would you accept the other parts, including those you'd otherwise reject?

After some discussion, each said yes.

As for how voters might respond, consider that: More than 60 percent of Americans see a third political party as necessary¹² — in effect, believe that the two-party system no longer functions.

⁸ See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, (March 1979).

⁹ See Norm Ornstein, "The Rise and Precipitous Fall of Serious Bipartisan Tax Reform," *The Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2014.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Jeffrey Jones, "Support for Third U.S. Political Party at High Point," *Gallup.com*, Sept. 21, 2021

More than 70 percent expect their children to have harder lives than they have had.¹³ More than two-thirds of Americans see five of the six issues as severe to moderate problems.¹⁴

So, if voters had advocates they trusted to speak for them, and each advocate presented his/her constituents with a grand bargain that he was confident would advance their families' interests further than Congress ever will, we believe the vast majority of voters would accept the deal.

We have made this case to leaders of various nonprofit organizations and then asked: Do you see any other way to mobilize enough public support for constructive solutions to these issues that Congress would enact them? None of the leaders offered a practical alternative.

Yet most of them were daunted by the cost, scope and complexity of our overall strategy. So, we are inviting their organizations to join with us in proving the concept at a relatively small cost.

To that end, we would select seven widely known former federal policymakers — from far left to far right — who have voiced alarm about our country's failure to make progress on the most critical issues.

We would invite the seven to sit down together to work out a detailed grand bargain resolving the six issues in ways that they see as advancing nearly everyone's long-term interests much further than they expect Congress will ever do.

Based on our experience with political activists across the spectrum who welcomed our preliminary grand bargain, we believe the former policymakers are likely to reach a detailed agreement that they all perceive as far superior to what our current political system can produce.

If so, we will use that result to make a case to other nonprofits trying to resolve our country's gravest problems that their long-term objectives are within reach — but only by nontraditional means.

We thereby intend to build a coalition of nonprofit organizations that would raise the funds necessary to launch the Forum for Nationwide Prosperity described on page 3, recruit staff, and initiate the other steps necessary to win overwhelming public support for a grand bargain by the 2024 election.

We will clearly face a range of obstacles in reaching that goal. The rest of this document spells out how we intend to overcome these obstacles at each phase of the Forum's operation.

Among the advocates whom 1 percent or more of 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 the members will have no audience or cameras to grandstand to. And members who decline to negotiate will likely be ignored by those who want to reach an agreement.

¹³ "The majority of U.S. parents are worried about their kids' financial future," Marketwatch.com, July 21, 2021

¹⁴ "Americans' views of the problems facing the nation," Pew Research Center, April 15, 2021. The tax code was not on this list.

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. For Forum members to resolve the most divisive issues of these times, they too will need to talk candidly and in private.

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, “Would you prefer this total package or the status quo?” 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 try 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.

And even if some holdouts remain, the other Forum members will have strong incentives to reach an agreement that as many voters as possible perceive as advancing their interests.

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, fail to keep them, and then blame that failure on scapegoats. So, we either support this deal in its entirety, or we are signing up for political paralysis and zero 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* voters get an opportunity to identify whom they would most trust to speak for them. Those trusted individuals, and they alone, could persuade most voters to ignore the lies and distortions.

Many Americans are turning to tribalism, nihilism or extremism, and the Forum is unlikely to change their attitudes with reasoned arguments.

Americans favoring the Forum's plan could outmaneuver extremists by voting strategically in primaries.

Congressional primaries typically draw just 20 percent of registered voters; presidential primaries about 30 percent. So, if enough voters signed on-line pledges to vote in primaries exclusively for candidates who support the Forum's plan, candidates across the spectrum would have incentives to change their priorities accordingly.¹⁵

In Summation

The enemies of American democracy have been gaining ground for decades by dividing right against left, heartland against coastal, poor against well-off, and so on.

Congress has, on balance, amplified this trend, at least in part because each member speaks for people with sharply conflicting interests, including every age group, income bracket, education level and type of family. Most lawmakers therefore try to court voters by stoking their anger toward others.

By contrast, there have been hundreds of cases in which various groups clashing over multiple issues have reached 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.

¹⁵ CCD is a 501(c) 3 organization, so advocates we convene could urge followers to vote but not whom to vote for or against.

- 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.

We have asked political reformers of many kinds to suggest simpler ways of resolving America's gravest problems in time to prevent the most extreme voices from tearing our society apart. None offered an answer that could conceivably be implemented on the scale and at the speed necessary to avert a constitutional crisis and widespread violence around the 2024 election.

Those of us aiming for wider prosperity, a more sustainable economy, more fiscally responsible government or a more democratic society cannot succeed if, as the enemies of democracy hope, we remain divided.

We need to unite around a strategy formidable enough to overcome the forces putting our society in grave peril.

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

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