



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 controlled 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 And almost half of voters expect civil war by the 2024 election.³

This document will present evidence that our political system is so dysfunctional, and the American people so divided, that whomever voters elect in 2022 will be unable to resolve our nation's divisions on any critical problem, including:

- Fewer and fewer families moving up the economic ladder
- Most Americans lacking the education and skills to thrive in a high-tech, global economy⁴
- The most expensive, yet least effective health care system in the developed world⁵
- Increasingly severe droughts, floods, hurricanes and wildfires
- Unsustainably rising debt
- An economically destructive tax code

We will also show that 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. These individuals could then mobilize voters to support that wide-ranging pact — enough voters so that candidates who pledged to enact the agreement would win the presidency and control of Congress in 2024.

Our evidence for these assertions starts with more than 200 political controversies in which **the stakeholding groups reached agreement on how to best advance the long-term interests of all sides.**

For example, 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 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 their various areas of conflict simultaneously — by forming 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."⁶ Among its provisions: Major corporations

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 Zogby Analytics, Feb. 4, 2021

⁴ "The Skills Shortage is 2022's Biggest Threat," *Fortune*, April 8, 2022. The article cites a survey of American workers in which just 34 percent feel they have the skills they will need within the next five years.

⁵ "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.

⁶ See "A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment," U.S. Gov't Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

would support much stricter environmental standards if given far more latitude to choose the technologies by which they met those benchmarks.

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 of battling over various issues, had little to show for it.
- So, the advocates engaged in trades by which each group advanced 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 700,000 or more 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.

Lawmakers running for reelection have in fact won 94 percent of the time over the past 25 years, largely by offering emotionally charged slogans as remedies for complex problems and assailing ideological opponents.

Primaries clearly magnify this divisiveness — by drawing voters far more partisan than most and more inclined to choose candidates who refuse to bridge differences.

Our elections have so divided the public that most Democratic and Republican voters now see the other as immoral and/or unpatriotic, clash over basic facts and embrace fundamentally different values.⁷

And the extreme gerrymandering this past year will likely yield the most polarized Congress in our lifetimes.

Who, then, can resolve America’s 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; had every incentive to reach deals advancing their priorities; and knew how to persuade his/her 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, and who are clearly motivated to act in their constituents’ best interests?

We do not see how that is possible.

How, though, could anyone bridge the differences that now prevail among voters left and right, poor and well-off, young and old, white and of color, coastal and heartland?

We see evidence that, while voters sharply disagree on how to resolve each critical issue listed at the top of page 1, the six issues can be resolved together so that voters in each category welcome the outcome.

The evidence starts with a trait that behavioral economists call “loss aversion” — nearly every person’s tendency to avoid costs far more intently than they seek equivalent gains.⁸

Voters who expect a piece of legislation to place a burden on them will therefore oppose the measure more vigorously than supporters will work to enact it. For example, economists left, right and center largely agree that lowering marginal tax rates while eliminating most deductions would benefit the vast majority of Americans. But the few groups that would lose ground on balance invariably threaten to unseat incumbents who support such measures — dooming tax reform on Capitol Hill.⁹

As for the other five issues listed on the first page, when we looked at how think tanks from far left to far right proposed to resolve each one¹⁰ — and then looked at the Pew Research Center’s analysis of nine types of voters¹¹ — each proposal clearly conflicted with the attitudes of at least five types of voters.

⁷ “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,” Pew Research Center, Sept. 21, 2019

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 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.

¹¹ 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.

Still, in the negotiations cited at the start, each of the 25 advocates accepted a net cost in some areas in exchange for advancing his/her group's highest priorities.

To gauge how many Americans might accept such trade-offs among the six issues, we selected what seemed to be the most widely beneficial, cost-effective solution for each issue — and then sought reactions to that combination of solutions from high-profile political activists whose agendas ranged from very liberal to ultra-conservative.

With each activist, we discussed their frustrations about failing to get their agenda 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.

Yet if we published the elements of this grand bargain — in any order — we expect that at least five out of nine readers would balk at the first part, enough so to not read the rest. As for those who read the whole list, we expect most would be skeptical of such dramatic reforms coming from a source they knew little about.

But more than 70 percent of Americans are alarmed about their children's economic prospects.¹² And more than 65 percent see five of the six issues as big problems.¹³

So, if voters on each part of the spectrum were presented with a grand bargain that would advance their top priorities — and they had trust in the presenters — we believe the vast majority would want that deal, enough so to accept the provisions they would otherwise reject.

We therefore propose to build a coalition of non-profit organizations whose mission would be to develop a six-issue grand bargain and win overwhelming public support for it by the 2024 election. We intend to call this endeavor the Forum for Nationwide Prosperity. It would unfold in 5 phases:

1) Identify and convene 25 negotiators who are highly motivated and well equipped to work out a comprehensive agreement resolving the six issues in ways that would advance nearly everyone's long-term interests much further than our hyper-partisan legislature can do.

The negotiators would include top former federal policymakers from both parties — heads of the Congressional Budget Office, cabinet secretaries, congressional committee chairs and so on — who have voiced alarm about our country's increasing polarization and our failure to resolve the most critical issues.

We would help the negotiators form a separate task force to tackle each critical national problem, interview the appropriate experts, and thereby develop a menu of potential solutions.

The 25 would then explore various combination of solutions until finding one that the vast majority of negotiators see as benefiting each sector of society far more than it will cost them. Current policies are so dysfunctional that we believe the 25 could find a combination of reforms all of them can support.

¹² "The majority of U.S. parents are worried about their kids' financial future," Marketwatch.com, July 21, 2021

¹³ "Americans' views of the problems facing the nation," Pew Research Center, April 15, 2021. The tax code was not on this list.

But if there are a few holdouts, the process would still move forward.

2) Once Phase 1 is in full swing, we would identify and convene 50 or so advocates who are highly motivated and well equipped to pitch such a wide-ranging agreement to each sector of the American public.

For that purpose, we would survey voters, asking them which public figures outside government they would most trust to speak for them on the six issues. We would then select the advocates who have support from 1 or more percent of the population.

We would also seek participation from the heads of organizations with the largest public followings: such as the AFL-CIO, the US Chamber of Commerce, AARP, NAACP, National Wildlife Federation and so on.

3) Once the 25 negotiators complete their work, we will present their recommendations to each advocate — starting with the proposed solutions for his/her top priority issues. We will ask, “Would you prefer this total package or the political and economic conditions that exist now?”

If some advocates reject this initial grand bargain, we will ask them what changes they most want.

Once all these proposed changes are in hand, each task force will consider ways to modify its original recommendations so as to increase the number of advocates who will approve.

Substituting these modifications, we will again ask each advocate 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 advocates 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 their counterparts that most of the public is likely to oppose them as well. Part of our message: By supporting this grand bargain, you would not be giving up any objectives you are now pursuing. You could continue those efforts while your constituents reaped the benefits of this deal.

We expect most holdouts will not want to end up empty-handed and will try their best to reach an agreement with the rest.

4) Once the pact is finalized, we would help each advocate tailor a message to his/her constituents, showing them how this grand bargain would improve the quality of their lives — much more so than would any measures our two-party political system can produce.

At that point, some of our institutional partners may want to pitch the grand bargain to members of Congress. We would hope they succeed. But we doubt that Congress could overcome its dysfunction sufficiently to enact such a complex agreement.

5) So, we would 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.

As things stand, 62 percent of voters are so alienated by today's politics that they hunger for a third political party.¹⁴ But for a third-party candidate to win a seat in Congress, he/she has to articulate an agenda that at least a third of voters in a state or district find more appealing than either of the current offerings; have the resources to ensure that most voters hear about it; and get past the legal obstacles to getting on the ballot. Few candidates ever overcome that combination of hurdles.

The Prosperity Forum would circumvent those hurdles by identifying the 50 advocates whom voters most trusted to speak for them. And each advocate would be intent on producing a grand bargain that appealed his/her constituents as much as feasible. We therefore believe those advocates could mobilize a critical mass of voters in nearly every state and district to sign on-line pledges to cast primary ballots exclusively for candidates endorsing the grand bargain.

Just 20 percent of registered voters now take part in congressional primaries. So, if 15 percent signed those pledges, most candidates from both parties would have incentives to fully endorse the pact. And 15 percent of voters would be enough for those candidates to win the vast majority of races. Once in office, they would have the mandate and means to resolve the critical problems that have festered for decades.

We have made the case for this approach 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 were daunted by the cost, scope and complexity of what we propose.

To assuage these doubts, we plan to invite a dozen leaders to join with us in proving that negotiators outside government can achieve what politicians seeking reelection cannot — and obtain that proof at a fraction of the cost that the project described above would entail. The proof would consist of Phase 1 only.

If it succeeds, we will ask each of our institutional partners to present that result to other nonprofits in their network, making a case that our country's gravest problems can be resolved to the long-term benefit of all — but only outside the current system.

We thereby intend to build a coalition of nonprofits with the capacity to raise the funds and marshal the other resources necessary to conduct the other four phases of the Forum for Nationwide Prosperity.

The Forum will clearly face many obstacles on the path to the ultimate goal of winning overwhelming public support for a grand bargain by the 2024 election. The rest of this document spells out how we intend to overcome these obstacles at each phase of the Forum's operation.

Many voters will not know enough about each of the six issues to know who would best represent them.

Even so, if voters have an opportunity to get an advocate they trust, each advocate will be in the best possible position to win his/her voters' support for the final agreement. Whereas if the Forum fails to include such advocates, the vast majority of voters and lawmakers would likely ignore the Forum's recommendations.

¹⁴ "Support for Third U.S. Political Party at High Point," Gallup.com, Sept. 21, 2021

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.

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.

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 to reach agreement.

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.

Some voters will have unrealistic expectations, which the final agreement will not meet.

So, each Forum member will need to be an agent of reality. The gist of the message to constituents 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, if we pass up this deal, we are signing up for political paralysis and zero progress on the issues we care about.

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

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.

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 two-party political system has amplified this trend.

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.

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 peril.

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

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