



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 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, over 80 percent of Democratic and Republican voters see each other as a "clear and present danger" to our democracy.² And half of voters expect civil war by the 2024 election, with more than a third prepared to use force to save "the traditional American way of life."³

This document will present evidence that the American people are so divided, and our political system so dysfunctional, that whomever voters elect in 2022 will be unable to resolve any critical national 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 by wide enough margins to forestall a constitutional crisis and the breakdown of our democracy.

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

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 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 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.

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 "Half of Americans Anticipate a U.S. Civil War Soon, Survey Finds," *Science*, Jul 19, 2022.

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.

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 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 others over various issues, had little to show for it.
- So, the advocates engaged in trades by which each group would advance a top priority in return for giving ground elsewhere.
- By the end, they had 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.

⁶ 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 charged slogans as remedies for complex problems and assailing ideological opponents.

Primaries clearly magnify this divisiveness — drawing voters far more extreme than most and more inclined to choose candidates who refuse to bridge differences. Indeed, 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.⁷

Our elections have so divided voters that most Democrats and Republicans now see the other as immoral and/or unpatriotic, clash over basic facts and embrace fundamentally different values.⁸

What, then, will it take to 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 — 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 and who knew how to persuade his/her own group that the deal he had negotiated was 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?

We do not see how that is possible.

We also see evidence that none of the nation's most critical issues can be resolved on its own.

That is, when we looked at how think tanks from far left to far right proposed to resolve each of the six problems listed at the top of the first page⁹ — and then looked at the Pew Research Center's analysis of nine types of voters¹⁰ — each proposal clearly conflicted with the attitudes of at least five types of voters.

Furthermore, 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. Behavioral economists have in fact proven that nearly every person avoids costs far more intently than they seek equivalent gains, a trait known as “loss aversion.”¹¹

For example, economists largely agree that the vast majority of Americans would benefit if Congress lowered marginal tax rates while eliminating most deductions. But the few groups that would lose ground on balance invariably threaten to unseat incumbents who support such measures — which has been sufficient to doom tax reform on Capitol Hill.¹²

⁷ “Taking the Voters Out of the Equation: How the Parties Are Killing Competition,” *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2022

⁸ “Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal,” Pew Research Center, Sept. 21, 2019

⁹ 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.

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 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.

Still, in the negotiations cited on page 1, after years of conflict on various issues, each side accepted costs in some areas in exchange for advancing their top priorities elsewhere.

So, can America’s gravest problems be resolved so that voters in each category would advance their top priorities enough to accept the burdens that the solutions would entail?

To see if that was possible, we selected what seemed to be the most widely beneficial, cost-effective solution for each of the six issues listed at the top of page 1 — and then sought reactions to that combination of solutions from high-profile political activists ranging 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 our grand bargain that 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, our grand bargain lacked enough detail to be enacted into law. And, if we published it, we expect most readers would be skeptical of such dramatic reforms coming from a source they knew little about.

But 85 percent of Americans are alarmed about the country’s direction.¹³ And more than 70 percent worry about their children’s economic future.¹⁴

So, if voters were presented with a detailed grand bargain that would significantly improve their families’ prospects — and they genuinely trusted the presenters — we believe the vast majority would want that deal, enough so to seek out candidates who vowed to enact the deal into law.

We therefore propose to build a coalition of high-profile Americans and non-profit organizations that would marshal the resources necessary to put together a widely beneficial 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 five 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, agency heads and so on — who have voiced alarm about our country’s increasing polarization and our failure to resolve the most critical issues.

¹³ <https://apnorc.org/projects/bipartisan-dissatisfaction-with-the-direction-of-the-country-and-the-economy/>

¹⁴ “The majority of U.S. parents are worried about their kids’ financial future,” Marketwatch.com, July 21,2021

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 combinations of solutions until finding one that the 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 will find a combination of reforms all of them can support.

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

2) Once Phase 1 is in full swing, we would survey voters, asking which public figures outside government they would most trust to speak for them on the six issues.

Those who drew support from 1 or more percent of the population we would invite to participate in the Prosperity Forum as the public's advocates.

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

3) Once the 25 negotiators complete their work, we will present their recommendations to each public and organizational 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 reap 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) In January 2024, while the above phase might still be in progress, we would help each advocate tailor a message to his/her constituents, including a brief video, showing them how the key elements of the grand bargain would improve the quality of their lives — much more so than any measures our two-party political system can produce.

5) We would simultaneously create a separate 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.¹⁵ These voters lack power now because: 1) they disagree among themselves about how to resolve each major issue; and 2) in the vast majority of districts and states, one party is so dominant that candidates can win just by catering to the most partisan voters.¹⁶

To motivate the exhausted majority to turn out in record numbers, each Prosperity Forum advocate could point out to his/her constituents:

Just 20 percent of registered voters now take part in congressional primaries. So, if just 15 percent of voters signed online pledges to vote in primaries exclusively for candidates who support the grand bargain, 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.

So, signing that pledge would at last give you the power to get politicians to act in your families’ best interests.

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 if these six problems continue to fester, voters’ hostility toward government, our economic system and one another will keep escalating, until our society tears itself apart.

Even so, most nonprofit leaders have been daunted by the cost, scope and complexity of what we propose.

To assuage these doubts, we plan to prove 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, identifying and convening 25 high-profile former policymakers to hammer out a preliminary agreement, and part of Phase 2, identifying the most appropriate public and organizational advocates (but not convening them).

If the result is a grand bargain that would clearly advance the long-term interests of all sectors of society, we will use that agreement to make a case to other nonprofits that our country’s gravest problems can be resolved to the long-term benefit of all — but only outside the current system.

¹⁵ “We See the Left. We See the Right. Can Anyone See the Exhausted Majority?” *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 2021

¹⁶ “Taking the Voters Out of the Equation: How the Parties Are Killing Competition,” *New York Times*, Feb. 6, 2022

We thereby intend to build a coalition of nonprofits with the capacity to raise the funds and marshal the other resources necessary to conduct Phases 2, 3 and 4 of the Forum for Nationwide Prosperity. Phase 5 would entail a separate fundraising effort.

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.

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 only for candidates who support the Forum's plan, candidates across the spectrum would have incentives 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 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 much wider prosperity, an environmentally sustainable economy, a 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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