



Center for Collaborative Democracy

A Strategy for the Major Democracies
To Avert Economic Ruin and Catastrophic Climate Change
Amidst the Havoc of a Pandemic

The Center for Collaborative Democracy grew out of the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program. We integrate insights from economics, psychology, game theory and conflict-resolution. Our goal is to help resolve societal ills that established institutions are failing to remedy.

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Overcoming Systemic Dysfunction

Politicians in the major democracies have, for decades, focused far more on attracting enough voters to win the next election than on solving their country's existential problems.

With the pandemic precipitating an economic upheaval, elected officials have greater incentives than ever to cater to their voters' current concerns and to ignore their country's long-term ills.

This document will, however, present evidence that, in each country, several high-profile individuals outside government are equipped to mobilize overwhelming public support for fair, intelligent, cost-effective solutions for:

- recovering from the current economic crisis
- severe income inequality
- soaring national debt
- dangerously rising temperatures

Our evidence for this assertion consists of hundreds of times when elected officials deadlocked over various controversies and, yet, the interest groups embroiled in those conflicts — such as, businesspeople, environmentalists, consumer advocates, labor unions, civil rights organizations, professional associations, government agencies and so on — all agreed on the most constructive long-term solutions.

To reach agreement, each interest group had chosen someone in their own ranks to represent them in negotiations with the others. Asked how they reached consensus on issues that had long stymied elected officials, representatives interviewed by the Center for Collaborative Democracy said, in essence:

Each of us knew in our bones what our own group most wanted to achieve — and what our own camp could let go of. We also knew that our own group trusted us to act in their best interests. . . .

Armed with all that, my counterparts and I engaged in lots of give-and-take over the various issues dividing us — until we reached a comprehensive agreement that each of us saw as advancing our own group's top objectives. . . .

We each then persuaded our own group that this deal was far too much progress to pass up.

By analyzing these cases, this document will:

- 1) Build a case that, if voters in each socio-economic-political category were asked to identify whom outside government they would most trust to represent them on the issues jeopardizing their future, these representatives would be far more motivated and better equipped than elected officials to resolve their country's gravest problems to the long-term benefit of citizens in every category
- 2) Show that, while voters young and old, left and right, poor and well-off, are — and will remain — sharply divided on almost every critical issue, if the representatives tackled their country's economic, fiscal and environmental ills *simultaneously*, they could work out a comprehensive agreement that would significantly advance nearly every citizen's long-term interests

- 3) Spell out how the representatives could persuade voters in each category to support that agreement vocally enough that politicians across the spectrum would endorse the pact to aid their careers
- 4) Answer each objection to this endeavor that we have heard to date
- 5) Identify which citizens in each democracy could best organize this consensus-building process and marshal the resources necessary for it to succeed
- 6) Show that, without this enterprise, politicians will continue to fixate on winning the next election and allow their country's long-term problems — class warfare, crushing debt and catastrophic climate change — to grow far worse

We recognize that each country's combination of politics, culture and critical problems is unique. We are therefore developing a separate document for each democracy.

This one will substantiate the above assertions for the United States, and present a step-by-step plan for:

- identifying the individuals outside government that each segment of the American public would most trust to represent them on the issues shaping their future
- convening these representatives
- facilitating negotiations among them until they work out an agreement encompassing the most pressing economic, fiscal and environmental challenges — an agreement by which each socioeconomic group reaps enough immediate and future benefits to support the entire pact

Who is Equipped to Resolve Intractable Conflicts?

When Congress was deadlocked over nearly every facet of environmental policy in the mid-1990s, 25 advocates for the various opposing sides agreed to meet face-to-face. They included top executives from Dow Chemical, General Motors, Chevron Oil and Pacific Gas & Electric; leaders of the Sierra Club, the World Resources Institute, Environmental Defense Fund and the National Wildlife Federation; the director of the EPA; the secretaries of commerce, interior, agriculture and energy; and the president of the AFL-CIO.

By evaluating a range of solutions for each issue that had long divided them, the 25 were able to piece together a plan to significantly advance each side's top priorities: 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 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 voters.

Advocates for the various sides have in fact resolved hundreds of controversies that elected officials could not.² And those officials have 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 the Critical Problems of This Era

In America's early days, nearly every family tilled crops suited to local conditions or provided services to those local families. Each member of Congress's constituents thereby shared similar economic interests. So, each lawmaker could show voters how he was advancing their interests, if indeed he was.

Each lawmaker today represents voters whose economic interests directly conflict: the young, the middle-aged and the elderly; high-school dropouts, college graduates and advanced degree-holders; the struggling, the up-and-coming and the thriving; singles, couples, extended families and empty-nesters.

On every current issue — jobs, wages, health care, taxes, education, climate change, mitigating the economic effects of the pandemic — each of the above groups has needs and priorities that clash with other groups.

Former lawmakers have lamented to us that when they tried to bridge their constituents' differences on divisive issues, many rejected the proposed outcome as unfair to them.³

Unable to satisfy voters ranging from 18 to 80+, from poor to well-off, most lawmakers have learned that, to stay in office, they need to offer incendiary slogans as remedies for voters' troubles and stir hostility toward the other party. Incumbents can easily rouse this enmity because, as recent election maps show, voters in urban areas heavily favor Democrats, while most voters elsewhere pick Republicans.⁴

³ For example, members of Congress who tried to reform entitlements even-handedly have alienated enough voters — left and right, young and old — for the vast majority of those incumbents to be voted out.

⁴ <https://brilliantmaps.com/2016-county-election-map/>
<https://www.outsidethebeltway.com/2012-election-county-by-county/>
Candidates found that they could intensify their voters' animus at the other side — and amplify the geographic/cultural divide to unprecedented levels — once the Cold War ended. That is, in the decades that the Soviet Union loomed as an existential threat, few voters could see the other party as the main risk to their way of life. Since then, stirring fear of the other party has become the most reliable campaign tactic.

Voters' mutual hostility therefore keeps intensifying: from 15 percent of Republicans and Democrats holding "very unfavorable" views of the other in 1994 to 55 percent viewing the other with contempt by 2016.⁵

And 87 percent of voters now worry that our political leaders have lost the capacity to resolve our major problems.⁶

Who Could Resolve Our Current Troubles?

In the cases cited on the previous page, advocates that each side trusted to act in its best interests were motivated and equipped to work out an agreement that advanced each side's top objectives, and to win overwhelming support for that agreement.

Who, then, would voters of each persuasion trust to act in their interests on the issues that have long divided them?

We see just one way to find out: Ask them. We therefore propose to give every registered voter an opportunity to identify whom outside government they most want to be their advocate on the critical issues of these times.

We would convene the advocates who drew support from 1 or more percent of the public.

At their first meeting (electronic, if necessary), we would prove to the advocates that they can reach agreement on how to significantly advance every constituency's long-term interests on the issues that will impact them most.

The proof would consist of:

1) Pointing out that large blocs of voters have rejected every practical solution to the major problems of recent decades — because any realistic remedy would entail burdens those voters refuse to bear, such as: raising the cost of energy,⁷ curbs on entitlements, loss of tax preferences, more federal involvement in infrastructure or education, and/or increased government spending.

Nobel-Prize-winning economists have in fact proven that most people will reject any significant change unless they perceive the benefits to themselves as far exceeding the costs.⁸

And among the practical solutions proposed for the critical ills of recent times, no remedy has met that standard in enough voters' eyes for politicians to enact it.

2) However, resolving the country's economic, fiscal and environmental problems pragmatically, equitably and simultaneously would enhance nearly everyone's quality of life and future prospects far beyond what elected officials have done to date.

3) So, we will show the advocates that they can find a combination of policies by which voters of each type reap enough immediate and future benefits to want the entire combination enacted despite the burdens.

4) To that end, we will have asked the top think tanks on each part of the spectrum to submit a summary of their optimal solution for each problem.

5) We will ask each advocate to weigh the pros and cons of each solution from his/her perspective and, on that basis, assign each solution a numerical rating.

6) We will present the highest rated solutions to the advocates and ask which they prefer: the total package or letting their constituents' troubles persist.

7) If a few advocates oppose some elements sufficiently to reject the overall result, we will facilitate negotiations between them and the rest, modifying those elements until finding the outcome that satisfies the largest number of advocates.

8) To those who remain dissatisfied, we would explain that, in future meetings, they will evaluate many other solutions until finding a combination far better for every constituency than the chaotic future that now awaits them.

⁵ "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," Pew Research Center.

⁶ "Public Sees an America in Decline," Pew Research Center, 2019.

⁷ Climate activists propose to tax carbon emissions and distribute the proceeds so that people who slash their use of fossil fuels would *end up* saving money. However, nowhere in the world have voters accepted a tax high enough to slash emissions. In effect, few people are willing to significantly change their habits and pay higher taxes based on experts predicting that they will benefit eventually.

⁸ Kahneman, D., and Tversky, A., "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, (March 1979), pp. 263-292.

The advocates will develop that optimal combination by a series of steps spelled out in the following sections of this document.

Once they agree on a mix of reforms, we will provide each advocate with expert help in communicating to his/her constituents exactly how the overall plan will significantly improve the quality of their lives.

Voters who want the reforms enacted into law could sign pledges to vote in congressional primaries exclusively for candidates who support the advocates' plan. With primaries typically drawing just 20 percent of registered voters, if 15 percent signed such pledges, those voters could change the priorities of nearly every lawmaker intent on reelection.⁹

Ambitious steps. But other efforts to resolve the critical problems of the past three decades have all failed.¹⁰

Who Will Launch This Effort and When?

This endeavor will require “orchestrators” — people with enough public standing to mobilize nationwide support for a project on an unprecedented scale.

To fill that role, we intend to enlist visionary leaders in business, public policy and the media who have exhorted elected officials to address climate change, stagnant wages, the national debt, and/or the economic disruption the pandemic has precipitated — yet who have seen Washington sink even deeper into dysfunction.

We will make a case to these leaders that the strategy spelled out on these pages is necessary to solve *any* of the nation's major ills. We thereby intend to enlist these leaders in a coalition that will refine this strategy until they are confident that it will be far more effective than anything else they could do.

⁹ CCD is a 501(c) 3 organization, so advocates we convene could urge followers to vote but not who to vote for or against.

¹⁰ The best-known failure, the Bowles-Simpson commission, we attribute to: 1) voters knew too little about its members to trust they had acted in voters' interests; 2) the commission's top goal to curb federal debt ensured a plan that most voters would find painful and were thus sure to oppose. By contrast, we are proposing to work out a mix of reforms that each constituency sees as benefiting them far more than it will cost them.

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 or so individuals whom voters would be most likely to choose as their advocates — and then engage the entire public in selecting among the 50.

We propose to do this right after the 2020 election, when voters for the losing presidential candidate will likely be filled with anger and/or anxiety; the entire public will be in shock over the economic havoc the pandemic has caused; and few will believe that the two parties can agree on a fair, credible plan for recovery.

To fill the void, the coalition could enlist iconic figures in business, the arts and media to do TV spots and Internet videos with a message such as:

- Politicians from both parties have, for decades, fixated on winning the next election rather than on solving our country's long-term problems.
- And now, when we face the greatest crisis of our lifetimes, each party is still offering solutions that half the country rejects
- So we, the American people, need to find men and women we know we can trust to act in our best interests, and ask them to work out a realistic plan for us all to thrive in the years ahead.
- If enough of us support their recommendations, politicians who want to keep their jobs will listen.
- I've joined a group that is launching this effort. We call it the Forum for Nationwide Prosperity.
- And we have organized it so that one or more Forum members will speak for your concerns — we guarantee it — *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:

- a) fill out a brief checklist of his/her values, concerns and aspirations
- b) watch brief videos of advocates whose priorities match his/her own;
- c) 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, while each category of voters will get representation in proportion to their numbers. The algorithm is available on request.

Obstacles the Prosperity Forum Will Face at Each Stage and How They Can be Overcome

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 engender trust.

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

Granted, but most Americans deplore Washington's paralysis, which they feel powerless to change. After all, each citizen's one vote rarely affects election outcomes. Hence, few voters take the time to show up for congressional primaries, letting zealots choose the candidates.

Voters who visit the Forum website will, by contrast, have dozens of spokespeople across the spectrum to choose from and be assured that one of their choices will become a member. Most voters who participate will likely prefer spokespeople who explain how they will deliver tangible results.

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, which motivates lawmakers to posture for the cameras instead of working out constructive deals.

"The quality agreements we know of, including the U. S. Constitution, were hashed out in total privacy. So, the negotiators could talk candidly with one another. At the end, each one showed his/her constituents how the result would advance their interests. Your Forum member will do the same — if we give them enough privacy to work out the kind of deal that Congress never does."

Some Forum members will still grandstand.

So, before the Forum meets, we will advise each member:

"We intend to reach an outcome that your followers will see as advancing their interests and values much further than any other actions could. And if you stick to our guidelines, we guarantee you will get there.

"If, instead, you keep insisting to other members that your approach is right and theirs is wrong, they will likely ignore you for the duration.

"If the vast majority of them then negotiate an agreement that would benefit virtually everyone and that enough voters support, even lawmakers loyal to you until now are likely to favor the result.

"So, if you want to advance your agenda and hold onto your constituents, work with us and the other Forum members."

Some members will lack negotiation skills.

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

Forum members will not have the expertise to reform taxes, entitlements, energy policy, education, health care and so on.

The Forum will therefore divide into task forces that meet with top experts in each area, gathering evidence about the benefits, costs and risks of various reforms.

Each task force will have a staff that will distill the evidence into briefs about how each reform would advance or hinder each Forum member's priorities. Each member will have an opportunity to question the staff about their conclusions.

Following that process, each member will be asked to rate each reform. We thereby intend to identify the mix of reforms that would yield the most overall benefits.

If some members are discontent, the facilitators will ask them to identify the clauses they most oppose and then suggest modifications — until finding an overall result that the advocates all prefer over leaving their constituents adrift, ill-prepared for what lies ahead.

Some advocates may hold out for terms the others cannot abide.

If so, we will remind them that if the rest agree on a plan far better for the public than the status quo — and enough voters support it — most lawmakers intent on reelection will likely favor it as well.

The holdouts would thereby be left pushing a narrow agenda with little chance it will be enacted into law, in effect, accomplishing nothing for their constituents. We therefore expect the vast majority to agree on a plan far better for each group than Congress can devise.

Many voters hold such unrealistic views that they will resist any practical plan.

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 blame failures to keep promises on scapegoats. So, we either support this deal in its entirety, or we are signing up for endless political double-talk and no progress on the issues we care about."

The Forum's plan will face fierce opposition from groups and voters that strongly object to specific provisions.

Granted, but most politicians will do whatever garners them the most voters. And if the voters who see the Forum plan as advancing their long-term interests far outnumber the voters who reject it, politicians across the spectrum would have overwhelming incentives to favor the plan as well.

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

Media that intentionally distort reality are indeed a growing phenomenon.

That is precisely why our nation'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.

In Summation

When President John F. Kennedy called for landing a person on the moon within a decade, the scientific community, according to one physicist, responded: "There were no technical show-stoppers; it would just take a hell of a lot of engineering."

The moon-shot we propose is, likewise, innovative in scale, proven in practice: This document has pointed to hundreds of divisive issues that were resolved to the long-term benefit and satisfaction of all the groups involved. In every case:

Each group was represented by an advocate whom they trusted to act in their best interests.

The advocates tackled various issues simultaneously — enabling them to work out a combination of solutions that advanced each group's top priorities.

Each advocate was then able to persuade his/her own group that the overall agreement would benefit them far more than any feasible alternative.

By contrast, members of Congress who have tried to resolve America's long-term ills pragmatically have nearly all lost their seats to candidates making fanciful or divisive promises.

Lawmakers thereby have strong *disincentives* to work out practical solutions.

Our country's troubles will therefore persist, and voters' anger will escalate — until leaders in business, public policy and the media use their high visibility to mobilize public support for the one method that evidence shows can resolve the kinds of conflicts afflicting our country.

Until then, our democracy, our political stability, our economy, our fiscal health and, ultimately, Earth's capacity to sustain life will be in peril.

To citizens and organizations alarmed about these perils, we invite you to discuss these ideas with us by contacting Sol Erdman at the Center for Collaborative Democracy:

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