



Center for Collaborative Democracy

**How Leaders Outside Government
Can Resolve Our Nation's Fiscal and Economic Problems,
Generate Wide Prosperity and Restore Confidence in Our Future**

The Center for Collaborative Democracy is a non-profit 501 (c) 3 organization that grew out of the MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program.

Our Advisory Board includes:

Lawrence Susskind, co-chair and co-founder of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School

John Marks, founder of Search for Common Ground

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A Strategy to Overcome Washington's Growing Dysfunction

Congress's repeated failures to solve America's fiscal-economic problems have fueled voters' rising anger at government, at our economic system and at one another. Incumbents from both parties have capitalized on that anger — winning reelection 94 percent of the time over the past 20 years, largely by stoking voters' hostility toward ideological opponents, blaming them for America's ills.

Lawmakers who proposed cost-effective solutions have, by contrast, often alienated enough voters to lose their seats. Most incumbents have therefore lost the motivation to find practical remedies for our country's troubles — and, instead, stay in office by stoking voters' anger.

Yet at other turbulent times, several Americans had enough influence on all the competing factions to hammer out a comprehensive agreement that all sides supported. The best-known example: the 55 framers of our Constitution.

Recently, in small-scale parallels to that event, a select group of Americans worked out practical solutions to a host of controversies that elected officials could not resolve. In each case, the groups mired in those conflicts all endorsed the solutions.

The Center for Collaborative Democracy has met with these conflict-resolvers and with former leaders of Congress — gathering evidence that several high-profile Americans are far more motivated and equipped than any lawmakers to work out widely acceptable solutions for our fiscal-economic problems, including:

- most Americans' wages stagnating or sinking
- schools failing to equip most students for this century's economy
- Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security costs rising at rates that ensure insolvency
- a tax code whose 75,000 pages of exceptions favor a select few
- decaying infrastructure that hobbles productivity

Laying out our evidence, this proposal will:

- 1) Identify the individuals best prepared to resolve these problems to the long-term benefit and satisfaction of Americans across the socio-economic-political spectrum.
- 2) Show how these individuals would hash out their differences, agree on optimal solutions and, then, mobilize support for the solutions from voters young and old, left and right, struggling and thriving.
- 3) Spell out how this wide public support would spur lawmakers from both parties to enact these policies.
- 4) Call on business and civic leaders to join with us in initiating the above steps — convening a group of Americans with wide enough influence to resolve conflicts that no one else has been able to and thereby:
 - build consensus on a fiscal-economic plan that will guide our country to broad, sustainable prosperity;
 - enable the middle-class, the well-off and the poor to reach their potential;
 - and demonstrate to all how our country can resolve other issues that now seem intractable.

Evidence Showing Who Can Best Bridge Our Nation's Divisions

Congress's deadlocks over environmental policy in the mid-1990s spurred 25 advocates for the various sides to meet face-to-face. They included top executives from Chevron Oil, Pacific Gas & Electric, General Motors and Dow Chemical; leaders of the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense Fund and Natural Resources Defense Council; the director of the EPA; and the president-elect of the AFL-CIO.

The 25 — frustrated by the years and billions of dollars they had spent battling one another to a stalemate — hammered out a plan to cut pollution, reduce the costs of doing so and generate jobs. The plan proposed to raise environmental standards while letting companies choose the most cost-effective means to achieve them.¹

Each CEO then persuaded top executives in his industry that this plan would meet their needs far better than any politically feasible alternative. Each environmental leader, federal official and labor chieftain likewise won over his/her camp.

"We succeeded," one advocate told us, "because we each understood our own community, what a deal had to include for them to consider it. And we each were trusted by our community, enough for them to buy our case that *this* deal was the best they could do."

In hundreds of conflicts that seemed irreconcilable, advocates that each side trusted have worked out a deal, which each advocate then showed his/her side would advance their interests further than any realistic alternative.²

Evidence that Lawmakers Lack the Will and Tools to Resolve America's Current Problems

Each member of Congress represents 18- and 80-year olds, laborers and professionals, the poor and the well-off, singles and extended families, the unemployed and employers — groups whose economic interests often conflict.

Lawmakers who have tried to reconcile these groups' interests on Medicare, taxes or stagnant wages have angered several groups enough that most such lawmakers abandoned tentative deals or lost their seats.³

At the same time, over 90 percent of lawmakers have won reelection year after year — by stirring voters' animosity toward ideological adversaries, blaming them for our country's major problems.

As a result, voters on the left and right have grown far more hostile toward each other since the 1990s: Most Republicans and Democrats now see each other in a "very unfavorable" light. A near majority fear the other party as a threat to our country's well-being.⁴

Incumbents can easily rouse this hostility because voters' ideology correlates to where they vote — urban areas mostly leaning left, other regions mostly tilting right, as maps of the 2016 election show: 84 percent of counties voted for Donald Trump; the 16 percent with most population chose Hillary Clinton.⁵

Voters are divided geographically and ideologically enough that 90+ percent of House members and 80+ percent of senators have won election after election by stoking voters' animus toward the other side — while rejecting practical solutions for our country's ills.⁶

Voters will therefore grow increasingly angry — and our country's troubles persist — if we leave it to lawmakers to solve our problems.

¹ See "A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity and a Healthy Environment," U.S. Gov't Printing Office, 1996 (available online).

² Examples at www.GenuineRepresentation.org/consensus

³ "Blue Dog Democrats," for example, pushed even-handed tax and entitlement reforms, angering enough voters to become nearly extinct.

⁴ See "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," Pew Research Center. For 45 years, the Cold War largely united our country against an existential threat. As that threat faded, voters apparently grew receptive to seeing ideological opponents as the main threat to them.

⁵ <https://brilliantmaps.com/2016-county-election-map/>

⁶ Both parties have ignored solutions that experts on the left and right have agreed on. For example, liberal and conservative think tanks jointly crafted "A consensus plan for reducing poverty and restoring the American Dream" (AEI-Brookings Working Group, 2015). Rather than back the plan, each party blames stagnant wages on the other.

A Strategy for Resolving America's Fiscal and Economic Troubles to the Long-term Benefit of All Socio-economic-political Groups

We would start by surveying voters in each category, asking: Who would you most trust to be your advocate on the economic issues that most concern you?

We would seek out the advocates whose followings exceed 1 percent of the public, invite them to meet, and help them tackle the problems that economists from left to right deem most crucial to our future, the problems listed on page 1. Solving these problems would lift economic growth — with each 1 percent of annual growth adding \$10 trillion to national income over 10 years, averaging \$30,000 per person.

Yet each solution to each problem would entail burdens that large blocs of voters have refused to bear — such as curbs on entitlements, loss of tax preferences or increased government spending. Voters oppose these burdens so strongly that lawmakers from one party or the other have derailed every effort to date to solve *any* of these problems.

For this reason, the advocates we plan to convene will work out a *combination* of solutions for all of these problems — a combination by which voters of each type reap enough benefits from economic growth to accept the burdens.

This goal, daunting as it sounds, will be within reach because each advocate's priorities will differ. As an analogy, siblings who agree on nothing, and therefore prefer different items in their parents' estate, could divide the items so that each sibling gets some he/she strongly wants instead of a deadlock that yields him nothing.⁷

To find an initial combination of solutions that the advocates all prefer far more than letting America's troubles persist, we will ask the top think tanks on each point of the spectrum to submit their optimal solution for each economic problem.

We will then ask each advocate to rate each solution. One combination of solutions will have the highest total rating.

Yet some advocates may still be dissatisfied. So we will facilitate negotiations between them and the others, working out modifications by which all sides gain enough ground to welcome the result.

The advocates will then surpass this benchmark plan. In subsequent meetings, they will investigate many other reforms to find the combination they rate most superior to the course the country is on now. If some advocates are still reluctant, we will again facilitate negotiations between them and the rest, seeking adjustments by which all benefit enough to strongly support the result.

We will then provide each advocate with expert help in developing videos and other media targeted at voters who back him/her, showing them exactly how this mix of reforms will enhance their lives.

Voters who want the reforms enacted into law could exert most leverage in congressional primaries, which draw just 20 percent of registered voters. So a small determined group can shape the outcome.⁸

Ambitious steps. But other efforts to solve these problems have all failed.⁹ These failures have driven voters to unprecedented anger — at government, at our economic system and at one another. That rising anger threatens our future.

Leaders outside government therefore need to take steps ambitious enough to move hundreds of millions of angry Americans in a more constructive direction.

⁷ By a process called "fair division," described on various websites.

⁸ CCD is a 501(c) 3 organization, so advocates we convene could urge followers to vote but not who to vote for or against.

⁹ The best known failure, Bowles-Simpson, 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 thus oppose. We therefore intend to seek a mix of reforms that all sides see as benefiting them.

Actions to Initiate this Strategy

This endeavor could increase national income by trillions of dollars while costing mere millions to implement — and reverse the tide of public anger at government's failures to solve our economic troubles.

We will make these points to civic leaders who have publicly urged Congress to solve our economic troubles yet who have seen Washington sink even deeper into polarization and dysfunction. We thereby intend to enlist prominent leaders in business, public policy and the media in a coalition that will refine, fund and initiate the above strategy.

The coalition could, in turn, recruit high-profile advocates by making the case to each that: You will achieve far more of your agenda by negotiating with other advocates intent on advancing economic causes than by lobbying lawmakers too fixated on reelection to tackle our country's troubles realistically.¹⁰

To engage voters in this enterprise, the coalition could enlist the most widely known people in the media, arts and business, who would convey to voters — on TV, radio, Internet, print and social media:

- Politicians have saddled our country with \$20 trillion in debt while letting our economy struggle, so that most families earn less than they did 15 years ago.
- But imagine if the men and women that we, the American people, most trust to tackle our economic problems were to sit down together to work out a plan for boosting the long-term prospects of us all.
- If enough of us supported the plan, politicians who wanted to keep their jobs would listen.

¹⁰ We have made this case to activists left and right. To conservatives, we say: Congress keeps failing to simplify the tax code or reform entitlements — because incumbents know that voters losing benefits or tax preferences would come out in force to unseat them in the next election. But your counterparts across the spectrum would consider these reforms if you negotiate over their top priorities. To liberals, we say: Statisticians predict Republicans will control the Senate until at least 2021. So your priorities will be stymied unless you negotiate with advocates elsewhere on the spectrum.

- This is going to happen. It will be called the Forum for Long-Term Prosperity — and we, the American people, will select its members.

- You will get a Forum member who speaks for your economic concerns — we guarantee it — if you visit the Forum's website and follow the simple steps outlined there.

This media campaign would include mailing each registered voter a unique code giving the voter access to the Forum election website, where he/she would be asked to:

- a) fill out a brief checklist of his/her economic values, aspirations and concerns;
- b) watch brief videos of advocates whose priorities match his/her own; and
- c) identify the advocates he/she would most trust: a first choice, second choice, third and so on.

Advocates will be selected by an algorithm that gives 98 percent of participating voters one of their choices — and gives each category of voters representation in proportion to their numbers. The algorithm is available on request.

Obstacles and Objections the Prosperity Forum Will Face in Each Phase of Its Operations and How They will be Overcome

Many voters know too little about economic issues to pick Forum representatives by objective criteria.

Trust determines whether each Forum member can win his/her voters' support for the final agreement. Trust is, in effect, more important than objectivity.

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

Granted, but most Americans deplore Washington's paralysis, which they now cannot stop, because each citizen's one vote rarely affects election outcomes.

As a result, few voters show up for primaries, letting partisan zealots choose the winners.

By contrast, each voter who visits the Forum website will have dozens of potential spokespeople to choose from and be virtually guaranteed that one of his/her choices will become a member. Most voters who participate will likely gravitate to spokespeople who make significantly stronger cases than politicians that they will deliver a tangible result.

Some voters will still choose Forum members who prefer slogans and grandstanding.

For that reason, Forum meetings will be 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, with the result that lawmakers posture for the cameras instead of negotiating with one another, deadlocking on most issues that matter.

"The quality agreements we know of were negotiated in private. No cameras were present. When the work was done, each negotiator showed his/her constituents how the agreement would advance their interests. Your Forum member will do the same — if we give them the privacy they need to get there. Otherwise, we'll be stuck with Congress's handiwork."

Some Forum members will still be tempted to grandstand.

So, before the members first meet, we will advise each one: Our goal is to reach an outcome that you can show your followers will advance their interests and values much further than actions they have taken up to now. And if you stick to our parameters, we guarantee you will get there. If, instead, you argue with 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 outcome they support and can mobilize enough voters behind it,

most lawmakers seeking reelection — including those loyal to you up to now — are likely to favor the result as well. So, if you want to advance your agenda as far as you can, let us help you.

Some Forum members will lack negotiation skills.

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

Forum members will not have the expertise to reform taxes, entitlements, infrastructure and education.

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

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

When that process is complete, each Forum member will be asked to rate each reform. Facilitators will use that data to identify the mix of reforms that would yield the most overall benefits.¹¹

The facilitators will then suggest to the biggest potential winners that, for the reforms to become law, groups across the spectrum will need to support them. The biggest winners would thereby benefit by agreeing to modify the mix of reforms so those who would gain least would gain major ground as well.¹²

The facilitators will strive for an agreement that each Forum member sees as meeting more of his/her camp's priorities than it could achieve by other means.

¹¹ By a process known as "multi-criteria optimization," the subject of many articles available on the Internet.

¹² The framers of the Constitution engaged in this kind of trading. Without it, there would be no United States today.

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

The facilitators will strive for unanimity but not require it, so a few holdouts cannot deadlock the whole process. And if the members who support the outcome can mobilize enough voters behind it, most lawmakers intent on reelection will likely favor the result as well.

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

The Forum's sponsors will need to hire experts in communication to help each Forum member show his/her constituents how the deal she has negotiated is their best option. The overall message could be:

"This deal gives us most of the economic policies we have long wanted but that politicians have never delivered. They promise the moon and blame their failure to fulfill those promises on scapegoats. If we pass up this deal, we are signing up for more political doubletalk, gridlock and economic stagnation."

Some people will still cling to one-sided agendas.

As long as the voters who vocally support the Forum's plan clearly outnumber the voters who oppose it, candidates for Congress would see endorsing the plan as helping them win elections.

Wealthy Americans could see the Forum as a threat to their political influence.

The Forum is designed to produce a plan that significantly boosts economic growth, which would boost stock prices. The wealthy would become wealthier than they will on our current trajectory.

The Forum's plan will face fierce opposition from groups that oppose specific provisions.

Granted, but most politicians will do whatever garners them the most voters. And if the Forum produces a

plan that voters across the spectrum see as advancing their long-term interests, politicians across the spectrum would have overwhelming incentives to favor it as well.

If the Forum were a 501(c)3, Forum members would be barred from urging voters to pressure lawmakers.

True. But Forum members could explain to voters all the benefits of their plan. Many celebrities and opinion leaders would likely advocate it as well. As more voters favored the plan, politicians seeking reelection would feel growing pressure to back it.

In Summation

Many political controversies have been resolved to the satisfaction of each group involved. In every case we know of, each group was represented by an advocate who understood them well enough to know what an agreement had to include for them to support it. Each group also trusted its own advocate enough to accept that the agreement he/she had negotiated was the best they could do.

The Forum will convene advocates that voters on each part of the spectrum trust to advance their economic values and interests.

The Forum will thereby create the conditions necessary to generate a fiscal-economic agreement that advances the entire public's long-term interests and that voters across the spectrum will support vocally enough for both political parties to support it.

We know of no other means to achieve this objective.

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

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Appendix I: Recap of Steps to Develop the Prosperity Forum

Assemble Advisory Board

Enlist Civic Leaders and Nonprofit Organizations as Sponsors

Raise Initial Funds

Recruit Top Staff Members

Develop Full Project Plan

Raise Full Funding

Recruit Entire Staff

Create Forum Infrastructure and Websites

Wage Initial Public Awareness Campaign

Recruit Forum Candidates

Mount Media Campaign Asking Voters to Select Forum Members

Convene Forum Members

Orientation

Sharing Information

Statement of Principles

Working Groups

Refining Alternatives

Negotiations

Finalizing the Agreement

Assist Forum Members to Advocate Their Economic Plan

Enlist Opinion Leaders to Build Public Support for Forum's Plan